

MY JOURNEY OF HEALING
EMPHASIZING
A ROLE FOR ART IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE:
HEALING AN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

DAVID LEE MYERS
120 COMMERCIAL STREET
ASTORIA, OR 97103
MyersDL@pacifier.com

© 1994-2011 David Lee Myers

MY JOURNEY OF HEALING

In April 1993 my first wife, Elaine Serrell Myers, was on her way home from an evening class on payroll accounting. A drunk driver, Susana, crossed the center-line and collided head-on with Elaine, killing her instantly. Elaine was a passionate promoter of year-round organic gardening and manufactured a Garden Clip Greenhouse™ to support that. She had had a twenty year career as a fine studio potter making table and kitchenware. Elaine continually questioned the activities and values of our society, and after conversations with her, friends often found themselves thinking deeper about such issues. I had been married to her for twenty-seven years, after meeting in high school—we went to the Senior Prom together. Graduate school at Berkeley, backpacking in the Sierra Nevada. Moving to the very rural Washington coast and learning new skills to get by. Lives in pottery, gardening, photography, oral history, community politics, college teaching. Growing up together in so many ways, from teen-age to middle-age.

AN ARTIST'S APPROACH

Artwork played a major role in my healing process, and exhibit of art contributed substantially to community health. Art was a more effective tool for me because I also had the support of many other aspects of healing.

In coping with my wife's death, I used many methods that I have learned and practiced in my work and play in the arts:

- Uncover thoughts and feelings from beneath the surface, probing as deeply as possible, to discover more than the common ones.
- Express my ideas forthrightly and fearlessly.
- Use good craftsmanship so that others will want to pay attention.
- Follow the process—actually making something stimulates my thoughts to go further, to think of the next things to make.
- Reach out to an audience. Artwork is a gift of human passion, a gift from the artist to an audience. The audience completes the work by receiving it into their being.

In my healing story I have benefitted from both the giving and the receiving roles, in many media:

- Visual, which is my profession, as a producer—and yet also as a receiver who gained strength from many other peoples' works.
- Theater, in the funeral, in which I was both giver and receiver.
- Writing, which for me has been a largely private activity, but one still enriched by an artist's approach.
- Music, in which I have been mainly a recipient, an amateur performer.

Something In Me Was Lost the night my wife died, even though I was physically safe, the man I had been came to an end. Certain energies were gone, even some that superficially didn't seem directly dependent on Elaine.

My main photographic work had been in ancient forest remnants, making black and white prints. That stopped. I could not continue it. I had no desire to. Finis.

Artwork About Elaine's Death. I made two collages. *Drunk Driver's Target* shows a vivacious picture of Elaine working on pottery, with a big red target painted over her. *Autopsy* shows Elaine looking very well, then the ten pages of her autopsy report, detailing her destruction organ by organ, and finally a picture of her dead, bloody face—the last veiled with a black bridal lace, so the viewer can choose whether to lift the veil and look, or not. I showed these at the Lower Columbia College Faculty Show in 1994. A major newspaper article was written about them, and the show was very well attended. The pieces were discussed in letters to the editor and in a comment book at the show. They got a lot of people thinking. And they expressed things others had felt but not said.

I feel satisfied to have made the pieces, but did not want to make more about loss and destruction, did not want to exhibit more about loss and destruction, I became more interested in using my art as a health-building tool.

Photographing Butterflies & Forests. In 1994 I was ready to begin ambitious photographic work again. But I still could not pick up where I had left off: Needing different energies, I undertook work with very different methods than I had used before. I took up a highly mobile, spontaneous Canon 35mm instead of the "tripod and meditation" Hasselblad I once used, and worked in color instead of in black and white. A year later I settled on a major new project: Butterflies. Perhaps their beauty, their mythological (Greek) association with Psyche, and their thought-provoking metamorphosis entrained my soul. I also went back into the forests, this time in 35mm color.

I photograph butterflies and forests because I am in love with them and with light. I want to help other people fall in love with them and begin to care about them. Having such a project helped me turn towards my present and future, letting my painful past slip from the present into my history book. These projects gave me goals to work for and also great sensual and emotional satisfactions from my moments of success.

MY HEALING PATH

Each person's Healing Path is different. Mine grew out of my own experiences and resources, and will be only suggestive to others who need to draw on their own selves and surroundings. I began with a determination that I wasn't going to let my wife's death kill me too. I would find a way to resume living, to resume finding joy and doing good works.

POLICE NOTIFICATION

On that first, dreadful night, the Wahkiakum County Sheriff Gene Strong, Deputies, and Prosecutor Fred Johnson took care of me in the warmest, most caring way possible: Near midnight they gathered up two of my close friends Steve Puddicombe and Meg Benedec to accompany Deputy Dan Kistler—a neighbor—when he knocked on my door. He sat patiently for several hours while I tried to absorb the indigestible shock, he explained what had happened in the crash, and reassured me that Elaine had died instantly without suffering. When he left, my friends remained to comfort me through the night. This support by a caring community helped me believe from the very beginning that as awful and difficult as my loss was, that I would have help and could come through it OK.

The next day the Prosecutor encouraged me to go to the funeral home and view Elaine's dead body. I was too shaken to drive, so Jessica and Sunrise Fletcher took me and joined some of Elaine's family to view Elaine and her car. Yes, it was very challenging to so

vividly encounter the mangled death of Elaine's face. Doing so answered a lot of questions, and it sure left me with no way to slip into denial of her death. Later the Prosecutor helped me read through her autopsy, another batch of awful information. In the end I felt much better because of these two experiences with the details of Elaine's death: As bad as the facts were, they were easier to stabilize in my heart and soul than were the wild runnings of my imagination and fear.

FUNERAL

Elaine's funeral was far more expressive than the normal American one. Several of us close to Elaine conducted it ourselves, in a community hall. Friends, family, and I took turns telling what we had loved in her and what we had lost. We cried, we wailed. At the end of the service we handed out little packets of her ashes for her gardener friends for their gardens. We dug her grave with shovels, put in her remaining ashes and bloody clothes, and using our hands, put the dirt back.

Elaine's funeral was designed to be very forthright and emotionally expressive. Friends, family, and I took turns telling what we had loved in her and what we had lost. We cried, we wailed. At the end of the service we handed out little packets of her ashes for her gardener friends for their gardens. We dug her grave with shovels, put in her remaining ashes and bloody clothes, and using our hands, put the dirt back.

A year later many of us gathered again to place a gravestone—a collaborative work of art by the extended family. We started with words by pottery friend Trudy Woods and gardening colleague Nancy Rausch—which the family edited, and my mother adapted a vine design from one of her father's. The white granite is part of the Sierra Nevada where backpacking trips deepened our love.

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Mother and Dad stayed two weeks taking care of me as though I were a needy child—which I really was for a while. My parents helped me bridge the financial gap left by loss of my business partner, which Elaine was—enabling me to focus on a long-term recovery instead of having to just struggle to get by.

Dozens of friends hugged me, fed me, listened to my troubles, massaged me. I tried to lean on enough different people to not wear out my welcome.

Mike and Trudy Woods took me in to live with them part time—Trudy and I worked together in the Lower Columbia College art department and also in the cooperatively run Broadway Gallery. They provided a family and home for me for several days each week. Often this family was enriched by the presence of Sandy Brown or Irina Kabatskaya (now Albig), two young women Mike and Trudy welcomed into their home and treated as daughters. Mike and I played music together in the evenings. They remain best friends, and Mike was Best Man at my wedding.

COUNSELING AND DIARY

It was wonderful to have a counselor who had helped Elaine and me a few years earlier, so he knew our marriage, and what I had lost. Walter Collins and I could get right to work with my feelings and experiences. His wife Barbara Coffman, a massage therapist and also a counselor, used magical hands to help release difficult feelings that I was holding in my body. During an especially intense workshop they were assisted by Dana Anderson, another person magical at helping people feel sense possibilities and connections that are normally inaccessible.

I find that I tend to repeat thoughts, to get stuck going over the same ground, often generating more heat than light. By writing out my thoughts and feelings I clarified them and freed myself to move on to a subsequent stage. I wrote several hundred thousand words.

EXPERIENCING ANGER

I cried, screamed, pounded pillows to exhaustion. Over and over again until I had been so angry so much that I knew from the inside that I had felt it all. Such anger couldn't fix anything in my life. My anger hurt me and could destroy me. I learned to withdraw energy from it.

When I'm angry—

- I forget to do things I've planned
- I overlook opportunities
- I break things clumsily
- I snarl at people
- I hurt my stomach with indigestion
- I get toothaches from clenching my jaws
- I pull muscles in my back and neck

In other words, when I'm angry I feel bad, I perceive less, and I operate clumsily. In anger I my awareness is deadened, I Do I need any more motivation to let go of anger? Do I have a right to my anger? Of course! Do I gain by pumping energy into that righteous anger or do I lose?

I honor my anger initially, it alerts me to a problem, here are actions/behavior to reject, here are hurts and losses to acknowledge and fully experience.

Then I honor my life by withdrawing energy from anger and putting it into living, a technique learned in meditation.

Another method I use when I am overcome by anger, is to look behind my anger for fear, to look within my fear for hurt, then to look for acceptance and eventually for compassion. I often don't make it through all five steps, but even going one or two steps and feeling fear or hurt.

P.S. If I have a lot to say about anger it's because I have a lot of experience with it, I'm not the least bit saintly.

CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

I started out with feelings of cruel anger towards the other driver. Acting them out would have totally violated my own values. It was a great relief to me to know that the Prosecutor and Court would figure out what to do to her, I could let go of that. Susana Cooper gave me a great gift when she accepted reality and pled guilty to vehicular homicide instead of contesting it.

Victim Impact Statement for the Court. I wrote my heart out, experiencing and expressing what Elaine had lost, what the community lost, and what I lost. I was very specific and thorough. My Victim Impact Statement may be the most powerful few pages I had ever written. Once done, I felt free to move on.

MEDIATION GAVE ME MY FUTURE

After Elaine's death I was stunned, my consciousness was narrowed to simple emotional survival. I felt a lot of anger, pain, and just plain disorientation—this was not at all the life I expected.

My father-in-law Peter Serrell first proposed mediation with Susana Cooper, facilitated by Marty Price, a national pioneer in victim-offender mediation and restorative justice. My response was "It fits my values, I'll give it my blessing, I'll cooperate with any legal aspects, but I don't know if I can participate in person—I'm still too angry and too hurt." Six months further down my healing path I was ready to participate. At the same time Marty Price was working with each potential participant to nurture their comfort with the forthcoming encounter and prepare them to deal with the issues. I will forever be deeply glad for Peter's proposal, for Marty's guidance, and for my participation.

For mediation, Marty gathered us all together in a hotel meeting room. Elaine's parents Peter and Kathleen Serrell, her sister Barbara Clark and brother-in-law Dave Hansen, her sister Elizabeth Menkin and niece Aileen Menkin, myself, Susana Cooper, her lawyer Ed Putka, and a friend. Though others in the family could not attend, their strong expressions of support reinforced our courage—Elaine's sister Beverly Serrell, Betty's husband Bill Menkin and other daughters Nora and Josie, my brothers Fred and Lee, and sister-in-law Cathy, and niece and nephew Scott and Michelle, and my parents Jan and Larry Myers.

I sat just a few feet from Susana, looking into her eyes as I recited my Victim's Impact Statement. Watching her tears, I saw that she really did know the horror of what she had done, and that it appalled her as much as it did me. Susana showed courage in coming to this voluntary meeting. I could see every quiver, read every nuance of authenticity when Susana said "I'm sorry." Later she told us how she had been rethinking her behavior. She showed dismay as she told of her old friends continuing drunkenness and driving in spite of her own crash—she realized she was going to need a different kind of friends. With these observations, her promise to work against drunk driving seemed reliable.

The next morning after mediation I awoke with renewed vitality. At a business meeting my mind was simultaneously expansive and detailed. Walking down the street my body felt nimble and powerful. Wow! I hadn't acted this way all year. This turnaround launched another year's healing including, to be honest, much trouble, by the end of which I was ready to live well.

Would the primary victim have approved of the mediation? Elaine looked for practical solutions to problems, she wanted things to go better for people. Faced with trouble, she'd ask "What is the loving response here?" I am confident that our mediation with the woman who killed her, and our efforts to help that woman establish a successful life for herself and her son and daughter is a fulfillment of Elaine's values.

Mediation gave me the gift of a major milestone in my healing: Before, my view looked backwards, as I tried to swallow the one indigestible, horrid fact of Elaine's death; Afterwards I shifted to a forward-looking present. "It has come to this. We are all here, now. How are we best to go on from here?"

Results of Mediation and other aspects of Restorative Justice. After mediation, our family continued substantial contact with Susana. Peter and Barbara visited her several times in prison. A number of us corresponded at least a few times with her. We made a court appearance to reduce her monetary restitution to us—figuring that she had little way to earn money and needed what she could get for her own family, whereas we all had enough.

Susana made presentations to various community, school, and offender groups, helping raise community awareness of the hazards of driving drunk.

Results of this process have been excellent for me, for my family, and for the community as a whole. In a case like this where the damage to the primary victim is so severe—death—that she cannot be restored to well-being, at least her values were carried on in the family and community response to her death. Unfortunately the process hasn't healed Susana's life yet. Her efforts to avoid alcohol, drugs, and behaviors that hurt others have been largely successful—and considering her past, that is a real tribute to her good intentions and her desire to do well. But normal jobs, relationships, and family life have eluded her. Personally, I'm ready to let go of thinking about her progress. Perhaps becoming free of involvement with us will give her one more opportunity to establish a good life for herself and her family.

Background (Just for the Record). Our case was one of the early homicides to be mediated. Many of the participants in this pioneering case had personal backgrounds that specially oriented them towards mediation.

Peter Serrell is Elaine's father and the guiding force behind our family's effort. In the early 1950s he and his partner in an engineering firm doing wind-tunnel work in Pasadena, California had up to eighty employees. When staff relations grew troublesome, Peter went

to a management consultant who connected him with the psychologist Tom Gordon. As Peter told Tom what was going on in the firm, he realized that Tom was listening to him in a way that he had never been listened to before. Tom was a disciple of Carl Rogers, original proponent of “Unconditional Positive Regard” including Active Listening. Peter said that the new communications skills he learned were not able to save the firm from its troubles (which also involved changing markets) but made a huge difference in his relations with his daughters. I know from them that they developed a deep, abiding trust in and affection for him. In the 1970s Elaine and I were having difficulties getting along together, and Peter saw to it that we started learning how to examine and change our communications patterns to make them more effective.

Peter says “My mother planted the idea that holding anger is destructive.”

All four of Peter’s daughters went out into the world to become thoughtful and persistent change agents. Barbara ended up in politics as Portland’s elected City Auditor, working to get politicians and bureaucrats to negotiate to win/win positions. In retirement she is doing couples mediation and counseling. Beverly revolutionized the country’s museum labels, making them effective for a much larger cross-section of the population. Elaine was a passionate promoter of year-round organic gardening and of a spiritual connection to gardening and the land. Betty, an M.D., has pioneered a whole system of humane hospice care within the medical bureaucracy of Kaiser.

I had been an elected Public Utility Commissioner of my local electric and water utility for thirteen years. When I started working with our state association, we voted on policy positions for lobbying for state and federal legislation and regulations. The association lobbied the winning position, and the losers, who were sovereign public officials in their own right, went and lobbied their opposing views, undercutting the association’s strength. I fomented a major reform, drawing on recent business and political science developments and arranging training for us in consensus politics. We learned how to get everybody’s needs on the table, and became imaginative in figuring out a way to get those needs met.

WHAT ABOUT FORGIVENESS?

The word “Forgive” has powerful and wonderful meaning to most people—actually a rich variety of meanings reflecting the range of people’s emotional structures and religious and philosophical beliefs. So, do I forgive Susana Cooper, do I forgive her for getting drunk, driving, and killing my first wife? Do I or don’t I? Rather than say “yes” or “no” with my voice to your meaning of forgiveness, I prefer to just discuss what I believe:

I accept her as as a legitimate, full member of society.

I respect her for accepting reality and responsibility by pleading guilty to vehicular homicide. I respect her for her positive attitude in prison, seeking education and other opportunities.

I am grateful for her mediation with us, for her other contacts with our family, and for her cooperation with us in publicizing restorative justice.

I respect her for her brave work in the community to encourage people to not repeat her mistake. She had the courage to tell her story to high school assemblies in her home town, and to offender programs.

I still abhor what she did that dreadful night—and I don’t dwell on it. That night remains a part of her life story but does not define her.

I release her from any special responsibility to me—the rest of her life is for herself, her family, her God, her community—just like everybody’s is. As far as I’m concerned, she has paid her debt as much as is possible within the human realm.

I wish her well.

SPIRITUALITY

To keep my balance in the emotional turmoil of my loss and ensuing life adjustments, I relied heavily on my strong sense of connectedness of life and physical energies in the universe, and of the sacredness of people’s engagement to that, both as individuals and within communities—something I think of as “spiritual humanism.” I believe that most strong spiritual or religious beliefs would be similarly valuable—at least those involving substantial love, generosity, and commitment to life on this earth.

My path went through different territory than most people’s, starting with a childhood in a family steeped in intellectual analysis oriented towards practical application, always informed with the values of generous love and peace-making from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Next I added very personal epiphanies. In the Mojave desert I learned to feel the shape of the earth and its motions. While studying science at Berkeley I learned to feel myself made up of atoms interacting through chemistry and quantum mechanics. Also at Berkeley I learned to accommodate both the ineluctable truths of mathematical logic and the stunning theorems establishing limits to the knowability and completeness of mathematical knowledge. Later I encountered Yoga thought and Buddhism, learning from them about control of awareness and state of mind—a nice follow up to the classical western philosophy I had studied in college. In a lifetime working in art, I have learned the malleability of perception, and learned how to access a state of awareness in which all is connected, vivid in intense detail and in encompassing breadth—which everywhere it looks sees “this too is a face of the divine.” I know all of this is outside of the box for most people—I don’t ask that it work for you, I only ask that you accept that it works for me.

Spiritual Basis for Restorative Justice: Many different spiritual beliefs and disbeliefs came together in our mediation and restorative justice case, and we worked together very well—though we tell the story very differently. For instance, Peter and Kathleen are atheistic Unitarian Universalists. Betty is very Jewish and Marty quietly so. Susana is Baptist. And I have my spiritual humanism. Each of these world views provided substantial support for restorative justice. I suspect the process was richer and more successful because of the fullness of perspectives which we brought to it.

CONSCIOUSNESS

I have come to experience in myself and in people close to me, that by attention to what and how we think, to what thoughts we encourage and put energy into and which we discourage and withdraw energy from, that we can influence our consciousness. We can influence what comes to our attention and what does not, even what our feelings are—especially what color of light floods the stage of our dramas.

Editing my thoughts. When I'm off-balance emotionally and say something hurtful to myself or others, by observing what I'm thinking, I can invent a replacement thought which fits my values better. For instance, "Life wasn't supposed to go this way" puts me in a whiny sour mood. "I never expected it to go this way" helps me feel in charge of my attitude while still acknowledging my hurt and sadness. With repeated practice such new replacement thoughts become patterns and the basis for emotions. Here are some more examples:

"I want Elaine" asks to be told "No, you can't have her, she's dead." Instead, by saying "I miss Elaine" I invite validation like "Yes, that sounds realistic." Or I can say "I want myself," always a healthy goal, or "I want to remember Elaine lovingly" another great idea.

If in anger I burst out with "Fuck everybody, I hate the world," I can replace that with "I've been really hurt," and, looking at something beautiful, continue "What beautiful _____. I do love this world, I love being alive."

For a while I'd catch myself saying "I'm broken hearted". I didn't want to take the chance that my body would take that literally and actually produce a physically broken heart. So I'd replace it with "I've been badly hurt and I'm lonely, my heart is strong and loving."

Every morning at the end of my shower, I say a prayer of gratitude, standing still with my hands together as if to say "namaste," I say "I am grateful for my health. I am grateful for my physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health." I said that all the years that I was single. Now that I am married, it's "I am grateful for us, for my life with Alex. I am grateful for our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health. I am thankful that we have each other."

When I left Berkeley, with years of education in the family home and formal schools, and two degrees behind me, I had great intellectual depth but very little awareness of my own consciousness and of possible alternatives. I had looked in the mirror just enough to suspect that if I met me, that I wouldn't like myself. That problem opened my mind to future change and growth.

- Robert Gilman, a Berkeley dormitory friend and later founder of *In Context*, introduced me to yoga thought and awareness and control of one's state of mind.
- Then Peter Serrell—and his daughter, my wife, Elaine—got me thinking about and reading books about communications patterns and how to change them to influence one's own thoughts and feelings—as well as responses of others.
- Sebastian Collupy taught me the dialectic for replacing un-welcome, negative thoughts with more constructive alternatives.
- Elaine and I went to Warriors of the Heart workshops with Danaan Parry and his Earthstewards organization, to learn many aspects of conflict resolution, including an aikido model for engaging and transforming hostile energy, a transformative question in the midst of conflict "What is the loving thing to do?", and reassurance that "the center of the conflict is the safest place to be."
- Walter Collins reinforced all of this and helped me have the steadiness to apply it, and helped me learn more about being aware of, expressing, and releasing emotions.
- While preparing to lead my PUD Association reform I studied both business leadership and political science books: Fisher and Ury's *Getting to Yes*, Irving Janus' *Group Think*, and Jane Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. Then the PUD Association hired Washington State University professors Kelsey Gray and Dwight Pace to teach us consensus techniques. For many subsequent years I was chair of a committee to write consensus resolutions—policies that every Commissioner could live with. Several ideas, and techniques for implementing them, stand out: learning enough about each other's situations to invent a way to meet everybody's needs, and using words and concerns from as many as possible, so that everyone feels ownership in the result.
- In my experience, Everyone has a part of the truth, and no one has all of the truth. It's worth it to build a community truth bigger and more workable than any our individual truths.
- Elaine found Barbara DeAngelis' books and many others, and was a full partner in these journeys.

ART EXHIBITS AND MEDIA WORK

My hurts are easier to bear when I believe that I am making a valuable contribution to society and that I am, in fact, responding well to circumstances. At best this can provide a degree of comfort and grace even when I would never choose or approve of the situation.

- My exhibit in the Lower Columbia College Faculty Show, and again later in a forum on drug abuse. Gallery Directory Trudy Woods managed a deft installation of this very difficult material. She deserves enormous credit for making this work.
- I was interviewed for articles by Cathy Zimmerman in Longview, Washington's *Daily News*, and by Spencer Heinz in Portland's *Oregonian*. Both showed sensitive understanding and comprehensive articles were published.
- Elaine's sister Betty wrote an article *Life After Death* published in the San Jose *Mercury News* which I illustrated, and with which we were all well pleased. But Ladies Home Journal chose drama over accuracy and badly misquoted Betty in a title.
- Several of us did TV shows—*Carnie Wilson, Save Our Streets*, and *ABC 20-20*. Carnie worked live, and ran out of time to do what she intended. *Save Our Streets* showed a satisfying part of our healing attitude, but did not convey the crucial role of mediator Marty Price. Jeff Diamond and Minda Allarde, with anchor Tom Jarrell of *ABC 20-20* quickly conveyed enough understanding, sensitivity, and humanity for me to trust them and tell things I had always held back—and their final program rewarded my trust. But their interview segments with Marty Price and Betty Menkin were bumped at air time by coverage of the Columbine High School massacre.

Was it worth it doing mass media? Absolutely. Over and over again we were able to tell parts of the stories of mediation, of healing, and of restorative justice as an alternative to vengeance, as well as of the horror and waste of a drunk driving killing. Millions of people were reached. The value of that makes it easy to withstand the accompanying disappointments.

- A 1994 M.A. thesis in museum studies, *Exhibiting the Unexhibitable: An investigation of design techniques used to guide, orient, and inform visitors in controversial exhibitions*, by Jennifer Morgan at JFK University in San Francisco studied my Drunk Driving Death works. The University of Alaska English Dept.'s award for best undergraduate research paper went to Avenue Marie Campala for *Terministic Screens and Being Seen: Visual Rhetoric Looking Back at You*, in 2009.
- The works were shown at Victim Offender Mediation Association national conventions in Fort Worth, Texas, 1196, and Portland, Oregon, 2001-the latter accompanied by my presentation *A role for Art in Restorative Justice*.

VIEWERS' COMMENTS — LOWER COLUMBIA COLLEGE ART EXHIBIT

By exhibiting the works, I stimulated people to think more realistically about drunk driving death and about their own behavior. Some people wrote in a comment book that they were re-evaluating their behavior. A few objected to the exhibit.

“David,

Very powerful stuff. I'm having a difficult time searching for the words to say. I'll have to think about this for some time I guess, that's just the point isn't it?

—Tim Karnoski” March 1994

“David,

I am so proud of you to show this art piece to the public. I miss Elaine very much and I share in your grief. It's a struggle to go on with life after such a great loss. I too have made art concerning my son's murder, but not yet brave enough to show it. Thanks for giving me courage through your sorrow. This display will always be with me.

—Bonnie Long Lindsay” March 9, 1994

“David,

Words are really cheap... Thank you for sharing your agony. It's very personal and healing to anyone who has experience grief, all of us. [The three dots are the writer's expression, not my editorial elipsis.]

Joe Hobson” (?) March 1994

“Dear David,

Thank you for sharing. thank you very much. You have helped me with my grief and anger over Elaine's death.

—Leslie Johnson (a Master Recycler/Composter)” March 8, 1994.

“David,

I am so sorry that you have to go through this pain. I understand your need to get through this and heal. It has been a year since my brother Roger Buton Jr. and his wife Michelle were killed by a drunk driver. I find myself feeling the same way you do. Sometimes I feel that I can't go on but people like you give me hope that I'm not the only one fighting this war against drunk driving. Keep your head up and remember you're not alone. You have a lot of courage! You're in my prayers. God Bless You

—Love — Kim Leile” (names ?)

“I am a young man who occasionally drinks and I have friends who drink. Your art has influenced me in such a way that I will give more thought about what I do on the weekends. And I will help my friends with the decision to do something else than drinking. I am very sorry.

—Student” March 8, 1994

“I am profoundly affected.

I feel like I share this grief and will be different than I was before I read this autopsy. I know that I'll be talking to people about preventing tragedies and changing the way I think when I get behind the wheel.

—Mary Altenheim” March 3, 1994.

“David,

I am so sorry for your pain & loss. I am also thankful that, as you said in your own words, this is a healing process. My wish is that *your* healing process can be used to help others also. To stop this senseless pain by getting people to know and understand what they do to others, (and themselves), when they get behind the wheel of a car (or anything) drunk. I was warned of the gravity of your work, and made a decision to view it anyway. It has been a very sad and enlightening experience. I am sorry for your loss, you obviously loved her very much.

—A stranger but a friend, Renita Misner” February 23, 1994.

“I am sorry for your loss, however you were not the only victim. The drunk driver who killed your wife has two young children and a family who were also affected by this tragedy. Those children will be grown women possibly with their own families someday and they will not know their mother. I’m not excusing what she did, however, your article in the newspaper has caused a lot of needless grief and suffering for her family. Especially the two young children. Perhaps you should keep that into consideration.

You were not the only victim.”
 —[unsigned] March 9, 1994

“No matter how many times I encountered the word, I could not convince my mind that “tears” meant “tares” and not “teers.”

So often I have wondered, and been unable to comprehend, how death actually occurs in a car accident; what radical tearing and wrenching goes on, beyond the imagination of the survivors. We are a society too *distant* from the untimely deaths that we cause by our shortcomings, and I thank you for having the courage to loosen your protective, reflexive grip on the details of your wife’s death to share the grim reality of it with the living.

Thank you—you have made a real difference already. Also, I love the black & white portrait of Elaine—she was and is a model human being.

It was very appropriate to lead up to the autopsy photo with the entire report, with all of its garbled, distancing words in medical jargon.

The image is golden at, from every direction
 —Peace, J. White, Kelso” March 1994

“This is a very necessary and moving expression.”

—Judy Faulkner, Mental Health Therapist & Piano Teacher” March 1994

“I think it’s a good wake up call. People need to see this. I had a drunk friend stabbed to death in Mint Valley Apartment Complex parking lot. His aorta was severed. The morticians put so much makeup on him, that it flaked off, and he was blue. When he was stabbed his blood alcohol level was 0.2. I hope I never have to see this again, but I know I will, whether it be a drunk driver, murder victim, or domestic violence.

—Andréa Gregg” March 10, 1998

“Thank God I don’t drink anymore. Hearing from Barbara Morris and remembering that I drove drunk a few times makes me so grateful I stopped. I haven’t touched a drop in 18 years. Learning to deal with problems is much better than drowning them.

—Sherry” March 10, 1998

SO MANY THINGS HELPED —

Insurance Money really does help. The fondest dream of my life was taken from me. Substantial settlements allowed me to pursue long-term goals without worrying about the moment’s expenses. I was given the means to live in pursuit of other dreams.

Job. I was teaching photography part time at Lower Columbia College. It was so wonderful to have a job I could thrive in for a few days a week, just to have some normal, healthy life. In the following year my students produced the most significant and boldest work ever done in my class, inspired in part by my collages on drunk driving.

Elaine Myers Garden Company. Elaine left a fledgling business making garden bed covers to extend vegetable garden seasons by protecting them from cold weather. It has been very fulfilling to continue Elaine’s dream working side by side with a wonderful business associate.

Music and Dance. I found sensual and emotional satisfaction, and the pleasures of sensitive teamwork, playing violin and viola with friends, or just by myself. Taking up contra dancing was pretty great, too.

MY LIFE TODAY

In 1998, after five years alone, I wrote: “Most of the time I feel very well. I live a privileged life in pursuit of my dreams; working, yes, but at two small businesses I do as much for love as for the potential of earnings. Much of my time goes into professional and amateur arts. I have had some lovely times with women friends, though I have not established a permanent relationship. I don’t have to cry very often now or for very long, though I suspect I will never quite reach the end of my tears for Elaine. I have lost an innocence in which simply being together with my soul-mate made the world just right. Most days being alone hits me hard for a moment—often triggered by coming across something I want to share—by now it’s about my life, and only very occasionally specifically about Elaine. I hurt for a moment, and then step forward into my new life.”

I’ve returned to my photographic work celebrating the earth and life, with a series of notecards of butterflies—nature’s wonderful expression of freedom, beauty, and transformation.

In 1999. I have come to totally accept what happened to me, my life plans, and my life—along with continuing to abhor what was done to Elaine—there’s no need to ever accept that.

My steady relationship of the last few years fizzled out—we just couldn’t develop enough rapport, especially regarding photographic art and musical activities.

By the year 2001, my life is totally transformed: I have found a woman who is just right for me, and we have been married for a year and a half. Alexandra is a fine choral conductor and pianist—we met as I played under her baton. She understands art and the process of performing or making it. I have moved into her home and put my old one and the Elaine Myers Garden company on the market. We are delighted to have a brand new 15 year old daughter—an exchange student from Russia. We play chamber music most weeks. I continue to build momentum in the new chapter of my photographic art. Life is good.

Early in my widowhood when I was just beginning to move beyond suffering, Dell Gossett gave me a phrase “To gladly accept opportunities I would never have willingly chosen”. With Elaine’s death many doors were closed to me, doors along my expected life path. In the next few years other doors, some of them quite wonderful, were opened—and I have gladly walked through them:

- A community better suited to my interests such as performing classical music,
- a location closer to more friends and suppliers,
- the opportunity to leave behind some of the messes, failures, awkwardnesses of my earlier years,
- the opportunity to become known as who I am now rather than remaining pigeonholed as who I was twenty or thirty years ago as a young man, when many people in my previous community took their first impressions of me,
- and finally, there are some things I like better about my second marriage, and about the person I am able to be within that marriage.

Even while acknowledging the major disaster of losing my first wife, I feel that I have been a very lucky man, fortunate in circumstance and blessed with strong, wise, and loving family, friends and associates. If I have had anything to give to the world, it is simply a reflection of how much has been given to me. “The gift must always move.”

The best preparation for death is the same as the best preparation for life: Love as well as you can. Love yourself, love other people, love the earth and all life.

David Lee Myers

AFTERWORD, 2009

Alexandra and I have a fine life, with the promise described above developing nicely. Thank you, Astoria.

It has been many years since I’ve heard news of Susanna Cooper, and that last news was of continuing struggle in her life. I know that her life and her family may not have been salvaged, though I still hope they were. I still feel very sure that her mediation with Elaine’s family and her presentations in the community were effective for the family and the community. Perhaps that’s all that was realistic.