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The Creative Link: Creativity, Resilience, Connection and Story

Elisha Stasko

Syracuse University

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection between the theories of Campbell's 'The Hero's Journey,' Brown's 'Rising Strong,' and Catmull's 'Creativity, Inc..' and the experiences of various photographers who have undertaken projects on motherhood. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes books, interviews, blog entries, documentaries, articles and artist statements to identify patterns and themes. The study finds a consistent pattern of challenge, risk, vulnerability, and struggle, resulting in growth and connection. It concludes the creative process has parallels to patterns of resilience and the narrative arc and can facilitate connection with self and others. By recognizing this pattern in a variety of spheres we can be more aware, intentional, and hopeful about our personal outcomes.

The Creative Link: Creativity, Resilience, Connection and Story

by

Elisha Stasko

B.A., SUNY Polytechnic Institute, 2005

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Science in Photography

Syracuse University

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To Jerome,

Thank you for nurturing in me a love for
photography, learning, connection and love.

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Introduction

The creative process refers to the steps or stages the creator goes through when developing and bringing a new idea, project, or work of art to fruition. While there are many, many variables, and the process is not always linear, Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar, identifies some core elements of the process including inspiration, iteration, and implementation. (Catmull & Wallace, 2014)

This process closely aligns with research on resilience by Brené Brown. Resilience is the ability to recover from setbacks and move forward after challenges. She identifies three stages to the process which she calls the reckoning, rumble, and revolution. (Brown, 2015) It also aligns with the hero's journey as defined by Joseph Campbell. Campbell's three stages are the departure, initiation and return. (Campbell, 1949) We can see factors such as risk, vulnerability, and struggle, lead to results such as empathy, growth, and connection.

This pattern can be observed in photographers who have created bodies of work themed around mothers or motherhood and have reflected on the work and process. The study looked at a variety of photographers but the discussion will look specifically at the creative work and journey of Celine Marchbank and Branislav Jankic. Their processes are especially well documented and their projects represent different approaches. At the outset, Marchbank is very close to her mother and Jankic is very distant. They demonstrate and document the struggle and growth which leads to a greater sense of connection with one's self and others.

The pattern is helpful to identify because it allows us to put struggle into context and anticipate the connection and growth that can come from the process. Recognizing that there are so many others who have traveled the same road allows us to be more empathetic as well as more hopeful about our own process. It also allows us the great gift of learning from others farther down the path, not just from our own struggles.

Literature Review

Three main processes were compared for this study: Campbell's narrative arc 'The Hero's Journey', Brown's practice of resilience, 'Rising Strong,' and Catmull's creative process in 'Creativity, Inc..'. The analysis focused on exploring how their perspectives on storytelling, resilience, and creativity intersected. In addition, this study included a review of various photographers and their projects on motherhood.

Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' is a narrative framework that describes the common elements of many stories. (Campbell, 1949) The framework consists of several stages that a hero typically goes through on their journey of transformation and self-discovery. This framework has been widely used in literature, film, and other forms of storytelling, and is often seen as a useful tool for analyzing and understanding the underlying structure of a narrative. (Masterclass, 2023)

The hero's journey is broken into three main sections: the departure, the initiation and the return. The departure involves the hero's decision to embark on the journey, their initial reluctance or fear, and the assistance they receive as they enter the unknown world. The initiation includes the hero's encounters with challenges, obstacles, and enemies, as well as their growth and transformation as they face these challenges and emerge stronger and wiser. The return focuses on the hero's journey back to the ordinary world, their final confrontation with a life-threatening challenge, and their return with newfound knowledge or abilities that they can use to help others or improve the world around them. (Campbell, 1949)

's "Rising Strong" explores the key practices of resilience. Brown argues that falling and failure are an inevitable part of life, but that it is possible to use these experiences as opportunities for growth and transformation. Drawing on research, Brown outlines a three-part process for rising strong: The reckoning, the rumble and the revolution. The reckoning is the initial recognition and acknowledgment of an emotionally charged situation and examining the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences. The rumble is asking questions, self-reflection and challenging the assumptions and beliefs that underlie these stories that we tell ourselves.

Finally, the revolution involves using our new insights and understandings to change our attitudes and actions.(Brown, 2015)

Catmull (2014) breaks down the creative process into four stages based on his Pixar production team's process: Inspiration, collaboration, iteration, and implementation. First, inspiration: the starting point of the creative process, where the initial spark or idea is born. Collaboration: once the idea is conceived, gathering a team of diverse individuals who can bring different perspectives and skills to the project is important. Iteration: this is the process of refining the initial idea through a series of experiments, prototypes and feedback. Implementation: the final stage involves executing the idea, bringing it to life, and sharing it with the world.

Catmull spends significant time developing the idea that between inspiration and implementation, there is substantial challenge and work. It is where the task seems daunting or even overwhelming. The artist or person facing the struggle may feel underqualified and unsure of how to achieve success. Often they must go beyond what they thought would be required or what they previously felt capable of. They must try various solutions until, through trial and error, they find what works. He emphatically states that you can not skip this part of the process. (Catmull, 2014)

In this study, the creative processes and self-reported outcomes of numerous artists who undertook photography projects on motherhood were compared. I analyzed artists who photographed their own mothers, other people's mothers, themselves as mothers and motherhood as a general theme. The artists included Celine Marchbank, Branislav Jankic, Jacob Moscovitch, Tierney Gearon, Anuj Arora, Charlie Engman, Jessa Fairbrother, Paloma Tendero, Niko Giovanni Coniglio, Cheryle St. Onge and Melissa Spitz among others.

While there were consistencies in their experiences, the study focused most closely on Jankic and Marchbank. Their creative approach and work is very different but both artists emphasized the importance of personal connection and the emotional significance of their work.

Both artists reported similar emotional outcomes, including feelings of catharsis and a deeper understanding of themselves and their subjects.

Figure 1

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Catmull	Inspiration: The initial spark or idea is born	Iteration: Refining the initial idea through a series of experiments, prototypes, and feedback	Implementation: Executing the idea, bringing it to life and sharing it with the world
Brown	Reckoning: Initial recognition and acknowledgment of an emotionally charged situation. It involves intense vulnerability to see and not avoid something painful.	Rumble: Owning your place in the story. Assessing underlying beliefs. Alligning with core values and new truths.	Revolution: Allowing the process to change your attitude and actions
Campbell's Hero's Journey	Departure: The hero is presented with a challenge or a quest. Leaves for the unknown	Initiation: Confronts the challenge and undergoes a transformation	Return: Returns to the ordinary world with a new understanding or perspective, and uses their experience to benefit others
Marchbank	Deciding to do a project on her mother- embracing the challenge of the emotional journey ahead	Grief after death more than what she had anticipated. Decides to continue the work and process the emotions	Makes a second project and finds the process cathartic. Moves on to a life without her mother while still honoring her and feeling her closeness
Jankic	Stops avoiding his mother and his emotions	Learns about the women he is photographing and grapples with the emotions. Develops empathy	Reconnects with his mother but stays in the tension of loving her but not forgiving her

Research Process

A mixed-methods approach was used in this research, which involved comparing various sources of data including books, interviews, blog entries, articles, documentaries and artist statements. Concepts were identified from these sources using the qualitative technique of content analysis.

During this study, artists who had completed photography projects on motherhood were identified and their interviews, books, blogs, artist statements, documentaries and articles were reviewed. It became apparent that these projects were transformative for the artists, having a deep personal impact. Meanwhile, the literature on the hero's journey, resilience, and the creative process was also reviewed. Through this analysis, a pattern emerged, in which a challenge was faced, followed by a struggle and wrestling, resulting in wisdom, growth, and connection. This pattern was found to be applicable to the photographers studied, leading to the development of themes and patterns in the data.

Based on the limited sample of artists I studied, I observed a consistent pattern in their work. I analyzed artists who photographed individual mothers and motherhood as a general theme, those who had a close relationship with their mothers, and those with a strained relationship. However, it is important to note that my research only focused on a relatively small group of artists who have explored the theme of motherhood. The majority of those artists focused on their own mothers and their relationship with them.

Discussion

The analysis revealed there were notable similarities between Campbell's hero's journey, Brown's pattern of resilience, and Catmull's creative process. For instance in the first stage of each process, Campbell's departure, Brown's reckoning, and Catmull's inspiration, common themes were identified, including being curious, taking risks, and accepting a challenge. These

elements appear to be integral components of the initial stages of the narrative arc, the development of resilience and the creative process.

Next, let's look at the initiation stage of Campbell's Hero's Journey, Brown's rumbling stage of resilience, and Catmull's iteration stage of the creative process where there are significant overlaps. Specifically, we see the themes of embracing vulnerability, identifying and/or affirming values, feeling overwhelmed and doubting oneself, yet trusting and persisting in the process, and working collaboratively with others. This stage is the critical juncture of the creative process. It is here that the intensity of the situation amplifies, requiring individuals to confront their most significant challenges.

The final stages of Campbell's hero's journey, Brown's pattern of resilience, and Catmull's creative process also showed similarities. An overarching theme was applying the lessons learned in the previous stages to the present and future circumstances, decisions, and actions. This brought about growth, transformation, meaningful change, accomplished goals and closure. The analysis showed a particularly close alignment between Campbell's return and Brown's revolution, where the protagonist gains a new understanding and perspective and applies it to benefit others or strengthen meaningful connections with others.

There are many questions that emerge. Is this a pattern that can be observed in various creative endeavors, or is it especially consistent within creative work about motherhood? What are the differences between corporate and personal journeys? Does the practice of creativity make an individual more resilient? Are resilient people more creative? To what extent is the creative process cathartic versus transformational?

One element that set the artists' patterns apart from those presented by Campbell, Brown, and Catmull was the concept of collaboration. Although the artists could be seen as collaborating with their mothers, the authors discussed collaboration in greater depth as involving multiple forms of interaction, interdependence and exchange with others who were engaged in a similar process. While some of the photographers, such as Spitz and Engman, went on to engage in

long-term creative collaborations with their mothers, the other artists tended to collaborate on a more limited level.

Based on the artists reviewed, it was surprising to find a consistent pattern in their experiences. Initially, they embarked on their projects with little understanding of the extent of effort and challenge involved. As they progressed, they found themselves struggling through the process, with many experiencing unexpected changes in the timeline and increased levels of involvement. At this stage, they had to evaluate the purpose of the project and whether it was worth the cost, ultimately deciding to continue based on their values. These artists had to confront their own vulnerability and uncomfortable emotions, often resulting in a new perspective on their mothers or themselves. Despite the struggles, they emerged from the experience with a deeper connection to their mothers and a greater sense of self-awareness and growth. Celine Marchbank and Branislav Jankic are two photographers who have provided especially thorough insight into their creative process as they produced works that were inspired by their personal relationships with their mothers.

Celine Marchbank

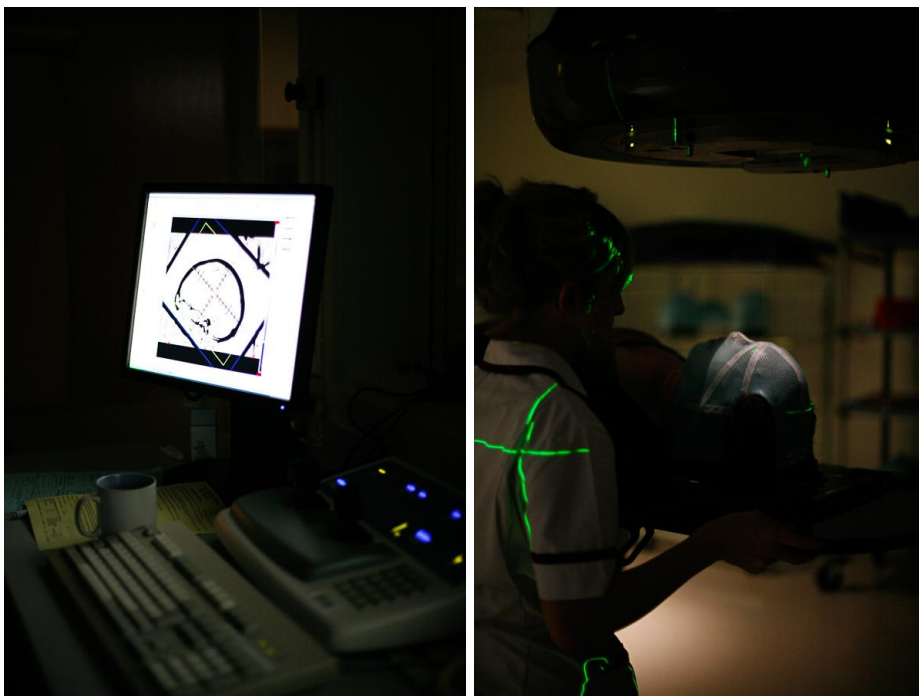
My mum was brought up in LA and New York... My grandparents moved to America when she was 7 years old...Coming from post-war Britain, at a time when rations were still in force, she spoke fondly of the mass of fresh and abundant food on offer. I remember my dad describing her, when they first met in London, as the girl with the American accent and cowboy boots, who liked to pile her food up high. Marchbank, C. (2011, January 24)

Marchbank's mother, Sue Miles, was a renowned chef who worked in some of London's top restaurants in the 1980s and 1990s. She was known for her creative and innovative approach to cooking and her ability to combine different cuisines and ingredients. She was one of the first chefs to embrace the idea of "fusion" cooking, which combines elements of different cultural cuisines into new and exciting dishes. But in 2009, Sue was diagnosed with lung cancer and a

brain tumor. (O'Hagan, 2010) A photography student, Marchbank recorded her experiences and images from that time.

As an ongoing project of my mum's cancer treatment, I have been trying to document all her medical care. ... I find this a very hard project to do, it's one I really want to do but when you see someone in your family in distress or pain the last thing you think is 'Oh what f-stop shall I use?' or 'Should I just move round a little to get more of the nurses head in', your first response is shame, shame that I can pick up my camera and photograph my mum who is lying there being fitted with an acrylic mask stuck to her face and then having her head clamped to a table, shame that I should even want to do this project. I am her daughter first and a photographer much later than that, but I think this is an important project to pursue, one she and other family members can look back on. I just need to find a way to do it and not feel like I'm exploiting her pain.

Figure 2



Everyone must leave the room and go into the control room next door. They watch her in the treatment room through the two tv screens on the wall, and simply set the dose amount and time on the control pad and turn a key to release the radiation, then 30 seconds later they rush back into the room and unclamp her from the table. Marchbank, C. (2010, March 13)

Initially, it was a short-term project, but then, as Marchbank reckoned with the truth of her mom's condition and her own personal priorities and beliefs, she embraced it as a more significant body of work.

Figure 3

As her mobility declines, Mum stays in her room more and more. Her windowsill becomes a substitute for the garden. (Marchbank, 2016)

I have chosen to document my mum's fight with cancer. Since she was diagnosed I have been documenting it, but initially, I had decided not to do this as my final project. But as things went on and I tried to start the other project I realized how could I possibly put any more emotion, thought and time into any other project right now? I wanted to do something with my mum, and it is something we can do together, and hopefully, both get things out of it.

She is an amazing chef, and I want her to teach me all her recipes. This time last year she was running around a restaurant kitchen bossing all her staff around and now everything is changed, I know she really misses cooking and so hope we can do lots together for the project, and for us. We shall see. Marchbank, C. (2010, August 20).

Figure 4

(Marchbank, 2016)

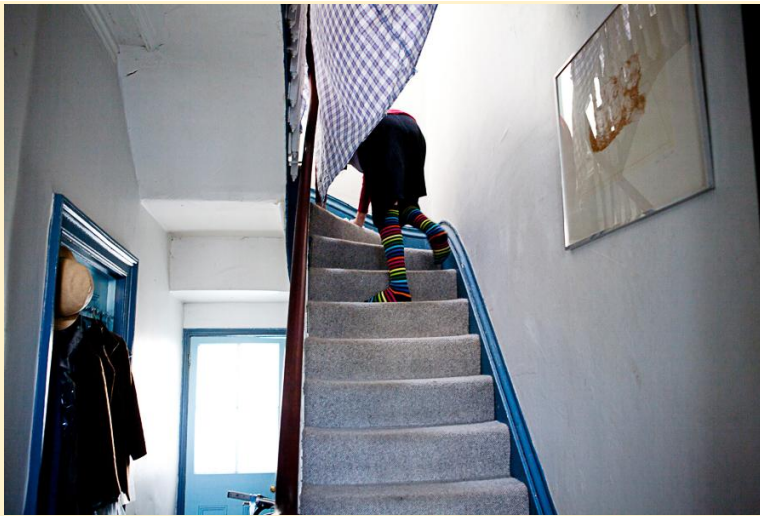
Marchbank saw the project as a way to spend time together and make something good from a bad chapter of life. While these things were true, it was not as she had imagined. Watching her mother suffer was very difficult for her. But recording the truth and beauty of those days was a gift to her mother and herself in a much more profound way than she could grasp in the moment. She was still hopeful that they would be able to create this project and look back on it together.

Figure 5

My Mum has the most beautiful blue eyes. (Marchbank, 2016)

Figure 6

(Marchbank, 2016)

Figure 7

Mum never really asks for help, in fact, she refuses it. She was determined to try and do as much for herself as possible and never lets on how hard it is for her. (Marchbank, 2016)

But on October 1st, just a few short months after Marchbank began her photo project, her mother was admitted to hospice. Marchbank, C. (2010, October 1)

Figure 8

She slept a lot today. It was nice to just be in the room with her today, and see her being so relaxed. It's so difficult leaving her there, though I think the hospice is the best place for her right now...until she is stronger. (2010, October 1)

Figure 9

I picked her some of our Nasturtium from home.
Marchbank, C. (2010, October 1)

Figure 10

Last night we were told Mum only has a week to live. Today I looked at tomatoes we planted together and wondered, will she ever see them ripen? Marchbank, C. (2010, October 7)

Figure 11

My Mum died last night.
Looking out of her bedroom window, I realize this is the start of the first day of my life without her. (Marchbank, 2016)

After her mother's death, Marchbank continued to photograph as a way of processing her emotions. She created tender and vulnerable images here and there paired with blog posts.

Creating images and reflecting on what she created became a cathartic process for Marchbank.

Despite the heartbreaking journey of caring for her mother and losing her, Marchbank's grief became even more intense after the loss.

Three weeks and three days since my mum died, it is starting to sink in, kind of. Grief is a weird thing, the only way I can describe it is like a grey cloud above your head. Sometimes it is a tiny little cloud in the corner of your head, like a nagging doubt at the back of your mind... Then other times it is this huge storm cloud filling your whole head, covering your brain and over your eyes, it's like you can not see anything else. Sometimes it comes on really quickly and unexpectedly, just like a hail storm. Like the other day, I was sitting on a train and it just started, tears were pouring down my face, it felt like a rain storm, just only out of my eyes rather than the sky. Marchbank, C. (2010, November 2)

Grief, to me, is a whole mixture of emotions: anger, sadness, loneliness, isolation, confusion. All mixed up and fighting with one another. Marchbank, C. (2010, November 2)

Although this is a very painful time for me I think it is important to record it in some way. I am now supposed to be a documentary photographer, so I have the need to document everything now, like some kind of magpie, but collecting thoughts rather than shiny things. So as I get back into my photography work, editing pictures, trying to make a book out of the project on my mum, I think it has become a part of the grieving process. It does bring up sad moments, things that I documented and have forgotten, things we shared. Though in other ways it's nice, I'm sharing more time with my mum. Marchbank, C. (2010, November 2)

Nothing prepares you for losing a parent, especially your mum, and especially just before Christmas. I always hate Christmas but this year, even more. It is just some horrible massive reminder, like I needed one, that she is not here and she never will be. It shouldn't make that much of a difference, as every day is just as painful as the rest, but it does. ..I don't want to celebrate it, I don't want to celebrate anything right now, and what I really really don't want to do is pretend everything is fine. Lots of people have invited me to spend it with them, but I really don't want to. I think sad emotions are not things that should be suppressed. There is a reason for them. Recently quite a few people have commented on how well they think I am doing. I find that weird. How would they know? Yes, I am able to carry on with a 'normal' life at the same time as feeling like I am dying inside... The world does not stop, I know, people have their own lives and life carries on and all that, just not for everyone, unfortunately. I don't really know what I'm saying, just thought I should continue to write about it, as it does really help to get it all out of my head. It's getting quite full up there. Marchbank, C. (2010, December 28).

All I really know is I miss her so much, and so much more every day. I wake up with memories of her in my head, following the bad dreams I have every night and the instant projectile crying that happens whenever it wants, and this feels like it is only just scratching the surface. I can feel the pain buried so deep inside ... It's strange and

horrible but, in a weird way, kind of comforting. Whatever this is, she is causing it, and so I can kind of feel her. Marchbank, C. (2010, December 28).

I wish we could have just ten minutes together now so we could talk. I could tell her the things that I'm really sorry about. I wish we had had time to say these things before she died, but we never got the chance to, as it all happened so quickly at the end of her life. I don't even know if she knew she was dying; in a way, I hope she didn't. Marchbank, C. (2010, December 28).

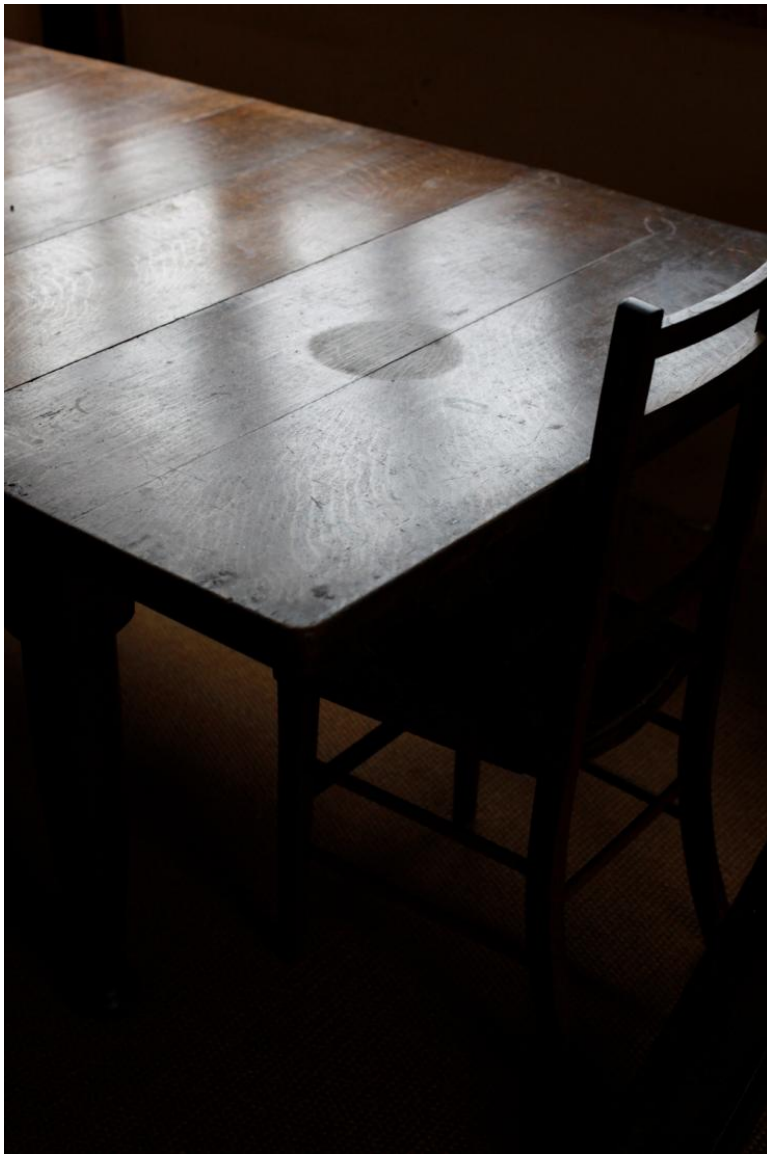
Today we had to clear out my mother's house in Suffolk, where she had been living for the last four years before she was diagnosed. ...It was perhaps saddest going there for me, more than her Camden house, as there are only good memories in Suffolk... I just see this lovely place she was living in and surrounded with all her friends, and it makes it all more upsetting and unfair that she has gone. Marchbank, C. (2011, January 28)

Figure 12



I've tried to start shooting what's going on in my head. Like every morning when I lie on my bed staring out the window or ceiling thinking about her, perhaps the only 'quiet' time I get in the day. Yesterday I tried to shoot the emptiness I feel inside. Today I took some shots at my mum's place. Marchbank, C. (2011, January 28)

Figure 13



There are traces of her everywhere. I wondered what dish of hers had made this mark.
Marchbank, C. (2011, January 28).

The creative process became intertwined with her personal process of grieving and rising strong. In 2016 she released a book of the images taken during the time surrounding Sue's

passing. Tulip is titled after her mother's favorite bloom, paying homage to Sue's love of flowers and highlighting their metaphorical role in the book. Years later, she followed it with another book, *Stranger in My Mother's Kitchen*, where she explored the grieving process by cooking her mom's favorite dishes. (Marchbank, 2023)

Whilst my mother was sick we made images together...It was my way to try to make sense of the tragedy happening in our lives. After she died, I needed to make sense of this new life I had been forced to have, a life without a mother. I wanted to feel that warmth you feel when you eat your mother's food, that feeling of being nurtured and cared for. So I used her recipes to cook her food. I taught myself the things we hadn't got around to, and I photographed the process. (Marchbank, n.d.)The project wasn't a cookbook, it wasn't about pretty plates of food, it was my journey through grief and rediscovering my mother's life. I revisited places we lived together, places she grew up, places we went together, and others we never got the chance to. (Fleur & Arbor, 2018) The plates of food were haunted with memories but the smells and tastes took me back to moments we shared like nothing else, and the more I did it the more I felt closer to my mother. (Marchbank, 2023) I like the work, I feel my mother would have too. It's about her but it's also about me. The work became my way to explore grief, to distract but to also face up to it, to work with it and come out at the other end in this new life..." (Fleur & Arbor, 2018)

Through her photography, Marchbank spent time with her mother, documenting and her life. After her mother passed she used photography to document her inner landscape and pay tribute to her mother's life. Through the process, she was able to connect with herself and feel the deep connection of her mother's life with her own.

When Marchbank began the process, she thought it would be a singular project within a larger body of work. She took on the challenge to be uncomfortable with her emotions and create her art. She wrestled with whether that was ethical and decided to use it as a way to connect with her mom more deeply. Marchbank, C. (2010, March 13) This was the beginning of her hero's journey, the inspiration point of her creative process and where she reckoned with the hard truth of her mom's declining health. When her mom passed away, Marchbank felt lost and conflicted in the creative process. She felt a desperate need to record everything and also the futility of documentation to change the situation or in some cases do her emotions justice. Marchbank, C.

(201, January 28, February 29, March 1) The rumbling part of the process was long and difficult, full of all the struggle of conflicting and sometimes overwhelming emotions as she tried to understand how to adapt to her greatest challenge, living without her mother. In the end, it turned out to be a 10-year creative project which she felt was both about her mother and herself.

(Marchbank, 2023) Through her two books, *Tulip* and *Stranger in My Mother's Kitchen*, she expressed her own story and paid tribute to her mother. She experienced a deeper connection with her mom even after the loss and a kind of inner healing through her creative body of work.

(Fleur & Arbor, 2018)

Branislav Jankic

In August 2013, Branislav Jankic had an idea. A trip across the states, photographing mothers and their children. Not all mothers, ones that shared his own mother's journey and could maybe illuminate the struggle she was engulfed in throughout Jankic's life.

He would accompany the portraits of these mothers with letters to their own children...

There are so many things I want to tell you if only you could hear me. Chelsey (Jankic, 2016, p.30)

To be a mother is my pride and joy. ~ Lenor (Jankic, 2016, p.42)

There is not a day that goes by that I do not think about how my drug use has affected the two of you. I feel so guilty that I chose drugs over you... ~ Debbie (Jankic, 2016, p.90)

In my relapse, I was taking life and you for granted. I knew you deserved more than I could give. ~ Chris (Jankic, 2016, p.106)

I regret that there were times when I wasn't there for you. I regret that it became more important to me to numb my feelings than to be sober and present with you. Honesty and admitting I'm not perfect doesn't stop me from trying to be the best mom to you that I can be. ~ Holly, (Jankic, 2016, p.102)

I'm sorry for not being the mother I would have liked to be. ~ Terry (Jankic, 2016, p.78)

My using and drinking were only symptoms of my disease, my mind has always been my worst enemy. ~ Tabatha (Jankic, 2016, p.22)

I never wanted this to happen. Mommy just realized that she has a disease that can be life-threatening to her. Mommy's behavior was no longer acceptable. Putting you and myself through misery was uncalled for. I never realized how much pain I caused you, and for that, I apologize. ~ Valene (Jankic, 2016, p.178)

Let's talk about dirty words. Do you know what isn't a dirty word? Alcoholic. Do you know what else isn't a dirty word? Addict...But you see, I didn't know that back then. I thought I was weak. I was scared to ask for help because I thought people would look down on me, and they would think I was a bad person. ~ Ellie (Jankic, 2016, p.34)

I was faced with a question - 'Are you willing to go to any length to achieve sobriety?' My answer was yes! ~ Lisa (Jankic, 2016, p.26)

I want both of you to hear this message too. As much as I would like to shield you from suffering, I know that you have your own lives to live and that you will have to learn and do hard things. What I hope I can pass on to you is the faith that no matter what the painful experience is, it can help you to learn and grow and be useful and compassionate towards others.... You don't have to go through life's challenges alone. You are loved, and you are cherished. You belong in this world – and have so much to offer. I am blessed to be your mom. ~ Jo (Jankic, 2016, p.38)

Direct light, solid white backgrounds, and eyes looking directly into the camera. The black and white portraits are raw, honest, and unflinching.

When Jankic found out that his mother was terminally ill, his relationship was very strained, and he had not seen her in years. He struggled to deal with the strain on the family caused by his mother's addiction "My dealing with this was ... running away," (Davis, 2017) But this time, Jankic decided to turn towards the difficulties. That's when he had the idea for the project.

I'm reminded of a portion of the documentary "Darkness and Light" about photographer Richard Avedon, and I sense the same "quest" in Branislav's work...

[His photographs] kind of give these people the dignity they deserve and allows you to see more into them. I think, ultimately, what you see more into, though, is inside his head. It's like, um, it's like reverse photography. It's like light is coming out of his vein, through his eyeballs, and he's shining it on the people and what he's photographing ...

Again I am reminded of Avedon and the photos of his father on his deathbed. Critics debate, and even Avedon asks himself if the images bore witness to a sacred moment or were an act of disrespect and hostility. I imagine that both Avedon's portraits of his father and Branislav's of his mother are a series of questions they are searching for answers to through their creative medium...

[The photos] are about everybody's dialog with their mother and their father until the end of their life. Do you love us? Did you always love us? What is it all about? Can you give me any last piece of advice before you go on your way? Didn't I get it right at all? Tell me something. (Whitney,1996)

Figure 15



(Jankic, 2016)

Jankic is looking to understand his mother. He is looking for her humanity and love in the woman he is photographing. Through them, he comes to understand his own mother more deeply.

I wrote her that I'm sorry for all the clashes we had because of her addiction. That I'm sorry that I was ashamed of her and that I'm sorry that I ran away from her when she needed me the most. I wanted her to know that now I understand her. (Frank, 2016)

Jankic created the work in 2013, and his mother, Mila, passed away in 2014. But he never came to the point of giving her the letter he had written. Despite his deepening empathy, Jankic confessed that he could not forgive her for some things. But through this process, he found that he was not isolated in the experience of pain and shame brought on by his mother's addiction. He traveled through six states and documented forty women and, when possible, their families. (Jankic, 2016) Ultimately he wanted to help families like his own, torn apart and suffering from addiction. He wanted to help replace the resentment and pain with understanding and facilitate communication, empathy, and connection between family members and between the broader society and the struggling families.

My mother, all of these women, all of their children -- they are beautiful. There is not one face of addiction. The women I chose are not defined by their disease, but by their motherhood. It can affect anyone; addiction doesn't discriminate. It was important for me to make that point -- to show these women's faces with the ultimate goal to make the conversation around addiction an open one. It doesn't need to be and shouldn't be hidden by shame. (Frank, 2016)

In his undelivered letter, Jankic wrote to his mother, "Until now I didn't understand that our hearts are the same." (Jankic, 2016)

It is the hero's journey, the messy middle, the reckoning, rumble and revolution.

Conclusion

Part of why I was drawn to this topic is because of my own experience of motherhood and how the creative process helped me engage the rumble. I experienced a pregnancy loss, but my identity as a mother and my love for my son are hugely shaping elements of my life. Initially, my grief was profound and difficult to navigate. The immense emotions were difficult to express, especially because people in general had no idea I was grieving. I used photography to help find my way through. I nurtured my soul by intentionally observing beauty and natural processes of transformation. I grieved, and as I did I documented it and expressed it with my images.

I found that under all that pain was profound and immeasurable love, and I carried it with me at all times. It was often repressed because of the intertwined grief, but I found beauty in ashes as I allowed that to unfold. I embraced Rumi's words, "Seek beauty among ruin." My deepest connection to self and others came from love, and my most profound experiences of love came from what I received from God and what I held for my child.

Knowing and owning our stories helps us empathize and connect. That is such a life gift. That is why I believe there is value in understanding how these concepts are interwoven, and how they can apply to each of us. We all will encounter the messy middle at times, but it helps when we recognize we are there. We can embrace the process and allow the transformation.

Figure 16 *Trapped*



(Stasko, 2023)

Figure 16 *The Cry*



(Stasko, 2023)

Figure 16 *Funeral Flowers at Sunrise*



(Stasko, 2023)

Figure 16 *Transformation*



(Stasko, 2023)

Appendix

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Curiosity	Risk	Vulnerability	Struggle & Challenge	Core Values	Collaboration	Sharing Results	End Goal
Catmull	Inspiration: The initial spark or idea is born	Iteration: Refining the initial idea through a series of experiments, prototypes, and feedback	Implementation: Executing the idea, bringing it to life and sharing it with the world	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Brown	Reckoning: Initial recognition and acknowledgment of an emotionally charged situation. It involves intense vulnerability to see and not avoid something painful.	Rumble: Owning your place in the story. Assessing underlying beliefs. Aligning with core values and new truths.	Revolution: Allowing the process to change your attitude and actions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Campbell's Hero's Journey	Departure: The hero is presented with a challenge or a quest. Leaves for the unknown	Initiation: Confronts the challenge and undergoes a transformation	Return: Returns to the ordinary world with a new understanding or perspective, and uses their experience to benefit others	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Marchbank	Deciding to do a project on her mother- embracing the challenge of the emotional journey ahead	Grief after death more than what she had anticipated. Decides to continue the work and process the emotions	Makes a second project and finds the process cathartic. Moves on to a life without her mother while still honoring her and feeling her closeness	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Jankic	Stops avoiding his mother and his emotions	Learns about the women he is photographing and grapples with the emotions. Develops empathy	Reconnects with his mother but stays in the tension of loving her but not forgiving her	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	

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Vita

Elisha Stasko is an independent photographer and videographer whose passion is to tell stories that inform, empower and bring to light our shared human experience. Partnering with nonprofit and fair-trade organizations, she has traveled to more than a dozen countries over the past decade to discover and document stories that connect us all, with her most notable work focusing on Ghana, Ethiopia, Jordan and Syracuse.

Deeply invested in her local community as well, Stasko especially enjoys working one-on-one with photography students of all ages to help them develop their vision and hands-on skills. To that end, she is a mentor for the academic photo programs at several Syracuse high schools and regularly offers workshops for students and the community as well as courses and workshops at Light Work, a nationally recognized center for photographers.

Stasko's most recent clients have included Three Roots International, a community and economic development group; From the Earth, an international fair-trade organization that works with farmers and artisans; and Hopeprint, a Syracuse nonprofit focused on helping resettled refugees thrive.

Besides her work, Elisha loves her family, kayaking, exploring all things creative and rocking her role as aunt to her 10 incredible nieces and nephews.