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Healing loss through art... an altered book



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Colleen Attara is an eco-artist who uses reclaimed materials to create 'joyful' art. In this article she describes how she turned to the medium of the altered book to create a very personal piece of art reflecting on her mother's life and death.



Me and my Mom

My mother passed away quietly in the night four years ago.

She was sick for a very long time. At first it seemed like it happened gradually, almost in slow motion.

But looking back, it was as if she was sliding downhill on a sheet of ice, a fast decline that lasted for years.

I watched her descent, sometimes covering one eye, sometimes both. And it was hard to watch. She started out in a retirement village, moved to assisted living, and eventually a nursing home. She arrived after a long hospital stay for rehabilitation and never left. She loved her doctor, the nurses and her aide, but it was a bleak environment with a bleaker outcome.

We reached a point when my mother was completely bedridden and it was easier to use other people's words than our own. I visited almost daily and began reading to her. The first book I read out loud to her was *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd (2002).



Cover of the altered book

Each day, we both looked forward to what was going to happen next in our story. Sadness was replaced with anticipation. The words of Sue Monk Kidd became our words and the world through the eyes of 14-year-old Lily Owens became our world. Sometimes, I would visit at night just before my mother fell asleep and read because we couldn't wait until tomorrow to see what happened next.

This same book became the canvas for an altered book I started creating just before my mother passed away. A year before, I saw an altered book at an art show that had inspired me and I wanted to experiment with this art form that has been around for centuries. I choose *The Secret Life of Bees* to alter because I had actually read this book to my mother. Every single word of it had left my lips and filled her imagination. It was also about love, loss and acceptance. It was about healing and I so needed healing myself.

As an artist, I had been creating artwork and teaching for years, but this altered book was the first piece of art I had ever created that was just for me. In it, there was no right or wrong. It became my journal; a place I could say anything because these pages were safe. Grammar did not matter so much. Self-expression was key, both visual and written.

As my mom deteriorated, it was an honest place for me to write what I was thinking but was afraid to say out loud.

'Where did you go? I don't think you are coming back.'

I used my own words alongside selected words of the author to create an artistic journal that told my story on handpainted pages. It mimicked the way I dealt with my mother's illness; my own words and feelings mixed in with the author's as I read safely aloud. Pages and pockets were sewn in with brightly colored thread keeping together my thoughts on painted over pages.



My 12-year-old self

Above a photograph of my 12-year-old self that was taken with family and friends at the beach, I wrote:

'I look through boxes of photographs and see pictures of you, each hair sprayed into place, wearing sweaters

on the beach, on the boardwalk...sweaters stacked in neat piles. These same sweaters we put in bags and gave away. We couldn't save everything and we barely saved anything.

Like all your things, you are disappearing.'

Just below my words are the author's words'...and that is how I fell asleep, lying there with my mother's things.'

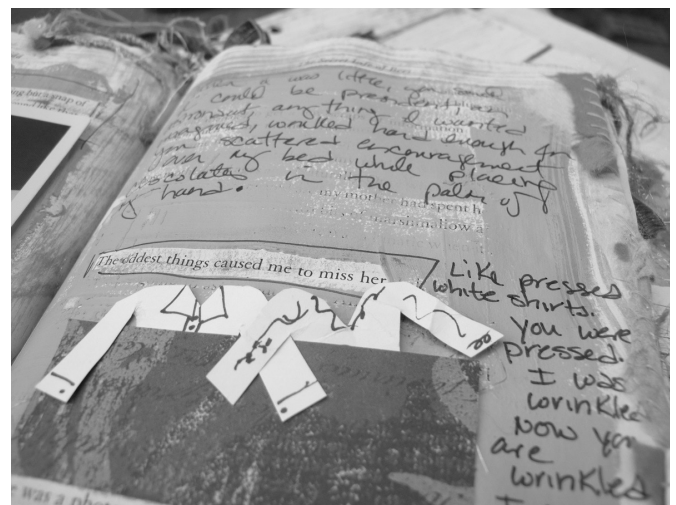
On another page, I remember my mother tucking me into bed each night as a child.

'When I was little, you said I could be president, an astronaut, anything I wanted, imagined, worked hard enough for. You scattered encouragement over my bed while placing chocolates in the palm of my hand.'

On this same page, I painted around the words of Sue Monk Kidd. *The oddest things caused me to miss her.*

Just below, I put two little white shirts cut from copy paper in a little pocket on the page. The shirt that represented my mother was flat and crisp. The shirt that symbolised me was doodled on and I crinkled it to make it look wrinkled. These shirts illustrated the differences between my mother and I. To the right of the shirts, I wrote:

'Like pressed white shirts, you were pressed and I was wrinkled. Now you are wrinkled and I am pressing your shirts. I am still wrinkled but tired and SAD.'



Pressed shirts

On other pages, I used some of the words in the book as prompts to explore my own feelings more deeply. Sue Monk Kidd quoted books on insects at the start of her chapters. One chapter from the book started with a section on how dark the beehive was and how our eyes would have to adjust.

I wrote: **'Lets talk about darkness and how our eyes adjusted to the light. You, so surprising. Picturing Paige**

reading your favorite poem at your funeral mass.
Appreciating the sights and sounds of children when
you could no longer dance and talk in barely a whisper.
Content to simply be'.

Right below these words I inserted the author's words from another page: *'It was the oldest sound there was. Souls flying away.'*

Then in my own voice I wrote: **'We found peace in a scary place. I read every word of this book to you and you held on to each one. There is so much wisdom in these words. They were our words when we had nothing more to say. When we couldn't talk about tomorrow because there wasn't any.'**

I also used this altered book to document things my mother said that struck me as profound. Once, when cutting her hair in the nursing home, I asked, 'do you trust me?'. 'I have to', she replied, 'you are the one holding the scissors'.

One of the painful things I wrote about after her death was what I called 'my sugar tears'. Over time, as my mom stayed in the nursing home, she became institutionalised and began hoarding sugar. I saved some of these sugar packets and later sewed them into this book, inside a teacup I stitched. I attached one of the sugar packets I saved and sewed in 'tears' spilling out, into the cup, then wrote:

**'Three sugars. You took three sugars in your coffee.
Common knowledge for the staff and your caregivers.'**



My sugar tears

I remember a day so long ago (two years ago) when I realized you were completely institutionalized. You were hoarding sugars and it broke my heart. My perfectly coiffed mother was hiding sugars as if she was hiding diamonds. I have mourned a long time for you. But the woman who hid sugars was easier to "just be" with'.

It was hard to admit that the mother that I knew so well had changed; her priorities shifted. And harder still to admit that sometimes this woman who was secretly saving sugars was easier to be with.

When her doctor called to tell me there was not much time left, I hand wrote on painted pages,

'Seven to ten days. That is how long I have until you stop talking. I don't know how to process that information. The first thing I did was make my hair blonder. It is the quickest and easiest way I know to feel immediately better. Usually. I don't really feel any better right now. I am blond but I am empty inside. Completely worn...'

Right below my hand-scripted words were the words of Sue Monk Kidd:

'In the dark she looked like a boulder shaped by five hundred years of storms. I lay back and closed my eyes.'

Then I continued **'...from trying to save you and for watching over the past year as you went down a solitary path of no return.'**

Right after my mother died, I scripted: **'You can rest now. Hopefully I can too. I can go forward and take all the good and you can rest peacefully'**. Then a few words from the author: **"Day one of my new life," I said to myself. "That's what this is"**

Then my words again: **'Knowing I am okay and becoming whole-completely me...free, like you.'**

I worked on this altered book often in the month after my mother's death. Then I packed up all of my art supplies and went away for three days by myself to a quiet bed and breakfast so I could finish this book. I made sure that my room had a small adjoining room that would be become my art studio. I watched movies, sometimes listened to music, but mostly, I painted in silence, sewed paper and threads, collaged and experimented with different mediums to get my altered book to have the look I wanted. I went through lots of pictures, and used a hole puncher to attach threads and ribbons so they could be easily be pulled out of the sewn pockets in the book. I attached pieces of paper that my mom had written on to frame some of the old photos I had sewn in the book. Her handwriting was so recognisable to me.



Handwriting

When I page through this book, as I do several times a year, I love how as the book comes to a close, the pages are a bit brighter. Colorful art works fills more of the pages. As I turn them, I can see the process itself that helped heal me as I tried to make sense of my mother's pain and passing.

I never told my mom I was working on this book. I do not know if I was conscious of that decision but I was very clear in my own head that this book was for me and that was how I could be so honest in it.

I felt I had already shared this book with my mom in the most amazing way ever. Reading this book to her was a turning point for us, when we used Sue Monk Kidd's story to fill our days and conversations.

I feel so lucky to have been able to express my grief and begin to heal through art and words. If the thought of altering a book is difficult for you, keep in mind that the very first altered books were Palimpsests, from the Greek word palimpsestos, which means 'scraped again'. They would 'scrape' or wash over a manuscript, so that they could rewrite over the existing words. Often the other manuscript would still show through. Although altered books are an art form, you could still use this same healing process with a journal and photocopy pages you want to add.

For someone considering altering a book to honour a loved one, here are a few thoughts:

- It is best to use a book that you are very familiar with and has a special meaning to you. A hardcover book is best.

- You will only be using about ten per cent of the pages. I used only 28 pages in the book I created in honor of my mother, plus the inside covers. I carefully choose the pages I wanted to alter and gently pulled out the others.
- I separated certain pages I wanted to sew back into the book, but I kept all the pages I took out near in the creative process in case I wanted to use them after all.
- I used acrylic paints that dried quickly for the first coat, but I embellished using watercolors, colored pencils and markers. I also like to use gesso to thicken the pages and then paint and stamp on them.
- I first painted the pages in a dry paintbrush, changing the colors every couple of pages. I let a few pages dry before painting the next ones. I would put something between the pages so that they could dry.
- Sometimes the pages you are painting will get stuck. When this happens, gently pull them apart and allow them to dry. I like this effect, even though it is unplanned.
- Write down your thoughts quickly. If you make a mistake, glue a piece of paper over it and rewrite the word correctly. It will give your altered book more character and look as if it was an artistic choice, not a mistake.
- Whenever I sew, I leave long threads hanging that I can tie things into later. The threads seen hanging from the pages of the book added to its' beauty and aesthetic. I sewed paper and threads on the side of each page.
- Be aware of bits and pieces of things you save as they may play a major role in your altered book. For example, on the cover and on the page of my sugar tears, is the label of a candle that I saved for years. I have no idea why I saved it for so long, but I cannot imagine my book without it.

In the end, my own words saved me. And they continue to comfort me. I still put written notes to her in between the pages and into the sewn pockets. Sometimes I write thoughts down I wish I could share with my mother. Other times I tuck things into this book that I come across that meant something to her, like a key to her car or her library card.

There is rarely a day I do not think of her and how art and words comforted both of us in unexpected ways.

Monk Kidd, S (2002). *The Secret Life of Bees*. London: Headline.