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Building Bridges Through Meaningful Occupation

Abstract

Mary Block, MS, OTR/L, an occupational therapist and artist based in Illinois, provided the cover art for the Summer 2017 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). *Generations* is a sculpture made from concrete that measures 240 x100 in. (6.096 x 2.54 m). The piece was commissioned by Mary's home town, the Village of Deerfield, IL. Mary always knew she wanted to be an artist. When competing paradigms altered Mary's career path, the field of occupational therapy helped her to shape a new worldview. In uncertain times, meaningful occupation empowered Mary to start over again where she originally began.

Keywords

occupational therapist, occupational therapy, sculpture, paradigm, client-centered, pediatric, school-based practice

As the field of occupational therapy commemorates its 100th year anniversary, considerable attention has been given to the history that shaped the paradigm of the profession. A paradigm represents the knowledge base, values, and worldview on which an individual or group can agree through shared experience (Cole & Tufano, 2008). Over the last century, the field of occupational therapy has experienced two major paradigm shifts. Kuhn (1970) observed that when new problems emerge that cannot be solved under the old paradigm, a scientific revolution produces a new worldview. Many would argue the profession of occupational therapy has returned to its roots in occupation by simply starting again where it all began.

Born at the peak of the baby boom, Mary Block entered the world a triplet alongside her two identical brothers. Mary's father was a chemical engineer, and her mother was a travel writer, who also wrote scripts for television. Growing up on the North Shore near Chicago, IL, Mary was exposed to cultural experiences at an early age. "My parents were constantly taking us places in the city. The theatre, museums, the ballet. We had a wonderful childhood," she said. Mary always knew she wanted to be an artist. She started with drawing and progressed to painting before transitioning to sculpture. In high school, her portfolio was selected by Montgomery Ward for a college scholarship. Mary began taking college art classes during her junior year of high school. At the time, she was attracted to painting. This medium seemed to be the perfect occupational fit until she entered college. "We were expected to come up with a theme for

something we wanted to paint for the next few years. I was young and had no idea what to choose," she said. Feeling frustrated, Mary decided to take a sculpture class. She learned how to build with clay, use hand tools, and cast metal. Mary found a just-right challenge that freed her expressive skills. She enjoyed the class so much that she changed her focus to sculpting.

Mary's big break into the professional art world occurred when she was 18 years old. One Sunday afternoon, Mary and her brother stopped at one of the premier art galleries in town to see an exhibit of popular artists from New York. The gallery owner greeted Mary at the door. "I had stars in my eyes. I told him when I grow up, I want to show my art in your gallery." He invited Mary to show him a sample of her work. She just happened to have a piece of sculpture with her in the trunk of her brother's car. Mary retrieved a small plaque with a sculpture of a woman's face. On viewing it, the gallery owner replied, "You're in!" Mary's sculpture sold in just 2 days. A few days later, the gallery owner asked, "When can you bring me more?" Mary did not have any more. "I literally had to go back to school to make more sculptures!" she said.

In 1974, Mary earned a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Illinois. After graduation, she immediately started working on her master's degree at the University of Iowa. Mary soon realized this program was not the best fit for her. Mary was awarded a grant to return to the University of Illinois, but this time Mary entered the Engineering Program. She completed a query-based research project but decided that engineering

was not for her. Mary returned home and began working in her family's industrial supply store. At the same time, she was invited to teach at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD). Mary divided her time between helping at the store and teaching art classes at MIAD. It was not long before Columbia College wooed Mary and she transferred to teach at the Chicago campus.

Meanwhile, Mary worked her way up at the store, beginning with driving a delivery truck and eventually learning the business. Mary enjoyed learning about the customers who came into the store. "Factories are the entry point into American life for many immigrants. People came to our store from all over the world and speaking different languages. You got to know a lot about them. It was wonderful!" Conversations would often start with, "Well, I have this machine and..." Customers did not come in just to buy things; they wanted to hang out. "Some of the older machine parts were not available any longer so our customers were always jerry-rigging things to get the gears to work," she said. Mary enjoyed the problem solving that took place in the store.

The late 1980's brought a paradigm shift that made it difficult for factory owners to stay in business. "You would see acres of empty factories. Very few survived," Mary said. Factory workers had to reinvent themselves in a different vocation or risk losing everything. Mary's family did everything they could to make ends meet during the tough times. Ultimately, they came to the realization that they could not ride this out and decided to close the store.

Closing the family store altered Mary's career path. At the time, Mary and her brothers were in their early 40's. She didn't want to go back into business life, and she needed a break from teaching in higher education. "I was ready for something different, but had no idea what I wanted to do," she said. One day, Mary's mother reminded her how much she enjoyed interacting with a therapist who once treated her father. Mary considered both occupational therapy and physical therapy. "I chose the field of occupational therapy because every OT I spoke with still loved their job after 35 years," she said.

With an undergraduate degree in fine art, Mary had to complete several prerequisite courses. With approximately 15 people competing for each seat, getting in would not be easy. Mary took her time and earned the grades she needed. Mary credits her experiences working in the family store as helping her get into the Occupational Therapy Program at Rush University. During her interview, Mary was asked several difficult questions. "Some of them made sense to me, others did not," she said. One of the questions was related to diversity. Mary shared a story about meeting a man named Domingo at the industrial supply shop. Domingo came to the store looking for hard copper pipe. His English was very broken and he did not have confidence in his ability to communicate. He pulled out the lengths of pipe he needed and suddenly leaned over and blew air into the pipes. "He started playing Christmas carols from the Baroque era!" Mary exclaimed. Domingo was a phenomenal musician, but he had fled his country with his family because of politics. "He let go of what he

wanted to do in order to focus on the things he had to do. His family was where his heart was, and his family came first,” Mary said. “As Americans, we do what we want to do. What happens when you no longer have that privilege?”

Graduate school brought another paradigm shift for Mary. “It was a big change, but it went along with the changing world around me,” she said. Mary continued to teach and sculpt while she was enrolled in graduate school. She enjoyed her fieldwork experience working in a hand therapy clinic. Mary completed her master’s thesis on complex regional pain syndrome. She was interested in becoming a hand therapist.

In 1999, Mary graduated from Rush University. The tough job market did not provide a lot of options. Mary’s first job as an occupational therapist was director of a home for people with dementia. Working in administration did not allow her the client-therapist contact or the work-art balance she desired. Mary acknowledged that some people start out in one career, then transition to another one while giving up the first life. “I have seen people lose continuity with their first love over time. Fifteen years later they try to go back, but never do,” she said. Mary believes you cannot regain past years lost; however, you can continue building knowledge and humanity. She said, “Sculpture is what I love doing. It’s part of who I am. I wanted to add to this part of my life rather than lose it.”

Mary has experienced many wonderful opportunities to share her art with the world. Over the last 10 years, she has created several commissioned sculptures for both public

organizations and private homes. In 2006, Mary was approached by a committee from her home town of Deerfield, IL, about designing a sculpture for the newly renovated town hall. She knew just what to propose. “You look for a fit. It’s not a matter of plopping a piece of sculpture onto a lot. Everything in Deerfield was built around family,” said Mary. During the interview, Mary presented her idea for a sculpture of a family. The figures were tall and lean, with a tree-like quality. Mary was awarded the job. Although the original timeline for completion was 1 year, it took 3 years to complete the piece. “Working with a community committee and an engineering department is the ultimate experience in team work,” she said. “That in itself is an art.” Mary insisted the committee be involved in discussing the modeled project, participate in casting, and negotiate installation of the sculpture. Installation required a crane and thoughtful engineering. The finished piece, entitled *Generations* (see Figure 1), serves as the cover art for this issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (see Figure 2). It is made from concrete, measures 240 x 100 in. (6.096 x 2.54 m), and weighs nearly two tons.



Figure 1. *Generations* by Mary Block

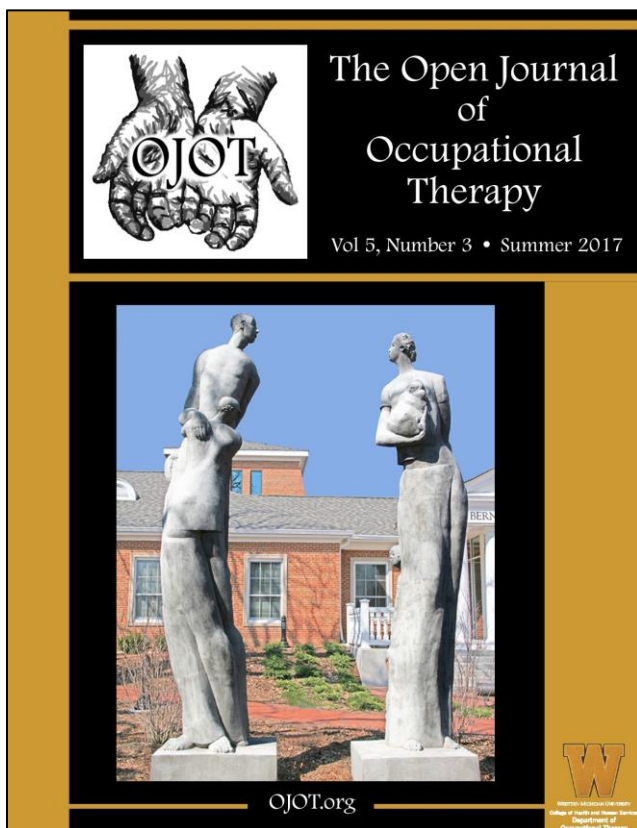


Figure 2. Summer 2017 cover of OJOT

Mary's occupational therapy job search continued until she was offered a position working with children in grades K-12 in a school-based setting. She had no prior experience working with children, so the role required her to shape a new worldview. "It was trial by fire at first, but I love the job." Mary's new schedule afforded her time to sculpt in her home studio. It also allowed her to open a private clinic, School-Ready Therapy, 3 years later. She initially focused on providing clinical pediatric services. Mary converted her garage into a small therapy gym, complete with swings suspended from the ceiling. "A lot of things fell into place," she said. Working from home allowed Mary to address activities of daily living, such as cooking, mental flexibility, and other life skills. Mary's clinic empowered her to learn, grow, and build her practice. Over time, parents and neighboring school districts began to ask Mary to provide comprehensive school evaluations. "I became good at describing how the clinical piece and technology integrated to make learning easier at school. Evaluation requires a lot of task analysis as I determine what the school is and is not providing, and what the child needs to do his [or her] job," she said.

Mary believes occupational therapy has so much more to offer school-based practice than handwriting intervention. "Occupational therapists have the tools to change the systems we would not typically access. We have the opportunity to use special education as a venue to become shapers of a complete community's access to academic curriculum. It's up to us to advocate," she said. Mary believes we need to look at the whole child to

determine the issue. Kids these days need to learn how to organize their thoughts. They also need opportunities to learn life skills.

To address these issues, Mary founded Sculpture Bridge, an occupation-based program to help older children who have outgrown clinic-based services. The program enables older children to explore their interests through experiential learning. The idea for Sculpture Bridge came from a clinical medium problem. Occupational therapy services tend to drop off after elementary school for most children. “Kids these days need opportunities to learn life skills and occupations. They have limited exposure to real media,” Mary said. The program exposes youth to job skills through structured projects. “Kids are there to learn how to team with others and do someone else’s work. These are skills you need to get a job,” said Mary. The program also provides a place to learn where it is okay to make mistakes. When project planning, Mary considers the strengths, needs, and interests of each child. She treats each of her clients as an individual. “Many kids grow up having to do work

they are not interested in. There is a missing piece there.”

When competing paradigms altered Mary’s career path, the field of occupational therapy helped her to shape a new worldview. Through it all, sculpture has been a constant in Mary’s life. As another school year comes to an end, Mary finds herself standing before another paradigm shift. Retirement from school-based practice. Mary plans to continue creating new opportunities for the clinic. Although several sculpture projects are calling for her attention, Mary is always open to new experiences. She values flexibility. Mary does not know where she will go next, or what she will do. Only one thing is certain; in times of transition, Mary can rely on a meaningful occupation, such as sculpture, to start over again.

References

- Cole, M. B., & Tufano, R. (2008). *Applied theories in occupational therapy: A practical approach*. Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Incorporated.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
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Additional Information

- To view more of Mary Block’s work, visit the Occupation and the Artist Gallery:
http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/
- For more information about Sculpture Bridge, visit:
http://www.maryblocksculpture.com/Sculpture_Bridge/Sculpture_Bridge_Home.html
- To learn more about Mary Block, visit her website:
http://www.maryblocksculpture.com/Mary_Block_Sculpture/Mary_Block_Sculpture_Welcome.html
- For more information about Mary’s private clinic, visit:
<http://school-readytherapy.com>