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The Road to Resilience: Traveling the Path Less Followed to Realize What is Possible

Jennifer Fortuna
Western Michigan University - USA, fortunje@gvsu.edu

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The Road to Resilience: Traveling the Path Less Followed to Realize What is Possible

Abstract

Dr. Bernadette Mineo, PhD, OTR/L, an occupational therapist and mixed media artist based in Portland, Oregon, provided the cover art for the Winter 2019 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The piece, titled "Paper Dolls" (2009), consists of 37 individual paper doll sculptures made from mixed media. Dr. Mineo believes that being an artist is about connecting with one's creative heart. Her art is about being playful, challenging oneself, and setting up experiments. Engaging in a daily creative art practice has brought joy to Dr. Mineo's life. Art has empowered her to take risks, build resilience, and discover what is possible. By sharing her daily art practice with others, Dr. Mineo aims to promote creative solutions and hope in the face of challenging situations.

Keywords

occupational therapy, occupational therapist, occupation, art, creativity, resilience, well-being, health promotion

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, MS, OTR/L

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Life has a funny way of making us believe there is a straight and narrow path for everyone. We set systems in place to avoid making mistakes, such as taking a wrong turn. In reality, however, there is no straight and narrow path. Life consists of a long and winding road with unexpected bumps and sharp turns along the way. Overcoming the unexpected requires creative problem-solving. “Through creativity and imagination, we find our identity and our reservoir of healing” (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010, p. 261). In life, the journey we trek is uniquely our own. Traveling the path less followed builds resiliency and resourcefulness. By exploring the possibilities, we realize what is possible.

Bernadette Mineo, PhD, OTR/L, an occupational therapist and mixed media artist, based in Portland, Oregon, provided the cover art for the Winter 2019 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). The piece, titled “Paper Dolls” (2009), consists of 37 individual paper doll sculptures made from mixed media. Dr. Mineo believes that being an artist is about connecting with one’s creative heart. Her art is about being playful, challenging oneself, and setting up experiments. Mindful engagement in a daily art practice has brought joy to Dr. Mineo’s life. Art has empowered her to take risks, build resilience, and discover what is possible. “Art can help us find creative solutions and hope to move forward when faced with challenging situations,” she said. The accumulation of media she has produced over the last decade provides tangible proof. “My art provides a sanctuary and restored sense of hope when the going gets tough.”

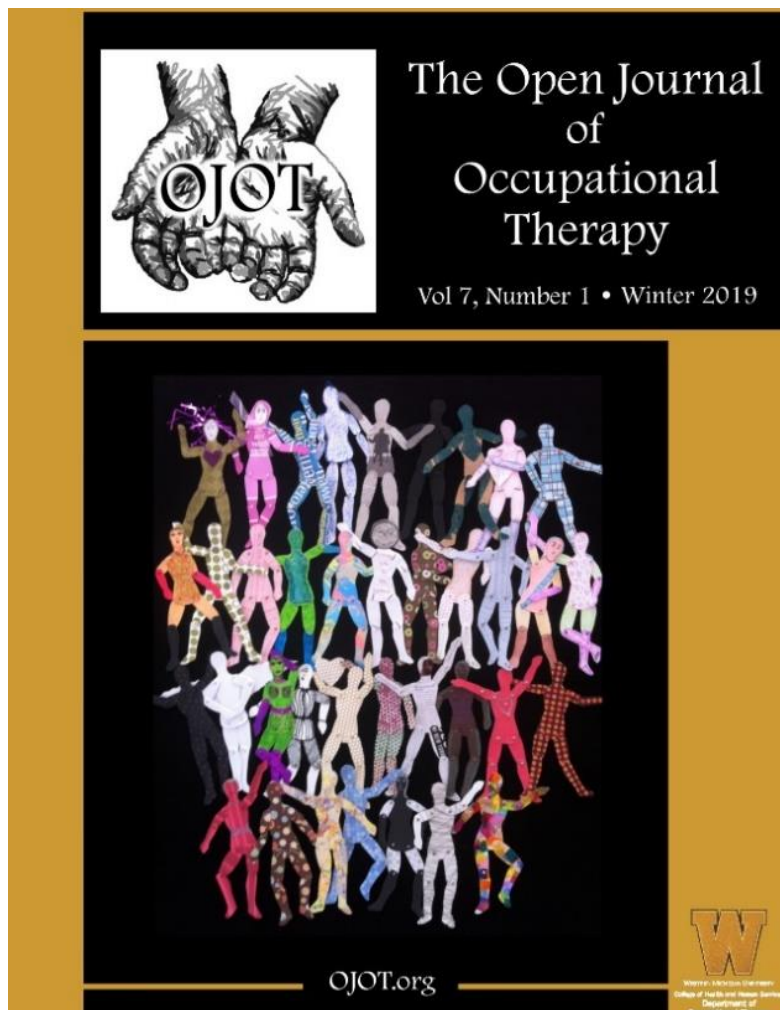


Figure 1. Cover art for OJOT, Vol 7, No 1, Winter 2019.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Mineo came from humble beginnings. “Neither of my parents finished high school,” she said. In the 1960s, Dr. Mineo’s family owned and operated a small luncheonette on the corner. “My dad always encouraged me to go to school,” she said. “There was always this notion that getting an education will make you a better person.” During her childhood, Dr. Mineo loved crafting, but she never considered art as a viable career option. In high school, Dr. Mineo decided to pursue a career in physical therapy. One afternoon, she visited the school library to research her future profession. Dr. Mineo opened a book on health professions. “Occupational therapy was featured on the page before physical therapy,” she said. Curious about the role of an occupational therapist, Dr. Mineo began reading about the history of the profession. She became intrigued with the Arts and Crafts movement. “The roots of occupational therapy really spoke to me,” she said. “I loved the combination of art and science.” That day, Dr. Mineo changed course and decided to pursue a career in occupational therapy. “It felt like such a perfect fit for me.”

Dr. Mineo was accepted into the occupational therapy program at New York University (NYU). “I was a serious student,” she said. “I expected the program to be vigorous.” To devote more time to her studies, Dr. Mineo moved into student housing in the East Village of Manhattan. It was there that she met her roommate, Judy, a film major. “Judy connected me to a network of people from the arts community at NYU,” said Dr. Mineo. Unbeknownst to Dr. Mineo, this new network of friends included her future husband. “He is a musician and filmmaker turned physical therapist,” she said. During their senior year, Judy invited Dr. Mineo to enroll in a documentary film class. At that time, she was volunteering with a program for children with autism. Dr. Mineo decided to create a documentary depicting the everyday struggles of a family with a child diagnosed with severe autism. The video, produced in 1980 in black and white, was titled “Janine: A portrait of a child with autism and her family.” Dr. Mineo’s instructor, a documentary filmmaker and parent of a child with special needs, saw the value in her film. “He began promoting it,” she said. Dr. Mineo’s documentary won several awards and an interview with *American Film* magazine. Creating the documentary opened Dr. Mineo’s mind to the possibilities of experimenting with media. “The experience taught me to use media arts to advocate for others,” she said. “I would have never thought to pursue this before.”

In 1980, Dr. Mineo earned a Bachelor of Science degree in occupational therapy from NYU. In early practice, she gained clinical experience in the child and adolescent inpatient psychiatric unit at Kings County Hospital. She provided services to children with psychiatric conditions in a day treatment program before transitioning to school-based practice and eventually to home-based intervention with children from birth to 3 years of age. Creating the documentary film remained a pivotal experience for Dr. Mineo. “The film allowed me to combine my interests in art and science,” she said. The experience also sparked her interest in exploring the power of communication.

Dr. Mineo decided to pursue a master’s degree in media studies at The New School for Social Research (NSSR), housed today at Parsons School of Design. “The New School was started by people who were promoting intellectual thought,” said Dr. Mineo. The works of philosophers Karl Popper and Marshall McLuhan were fundamental to the theoretical foundations of the program. As she completed her courses, she remained active in clinical practice. “I have a pragmatic side, but also love *doing*,” she said. Dr. Mineo provided home-based occupational therapy services in a publicly funded early intervention program for young children living in downtown Manhattan and Long Island. “In the same day, I went from providing services in a beautiful penthouse to a beat-down apartment in the projects,” she said. “I loved it.”

For Dr. Mineo, school was therapeutic. After completing her master's degree in 1986, she immediately returned to NYU to pursue a Doctorate in Philosophy in Media Ecology in the Department of Culture and Communication. "The program combined anthropology, sociology, and psychology to study how media and other dominant forms of communication affect the way people think, act, and interact with each other," she said. Dr. Mineo wanted to study connected education. The focus of her doctoral research was online education. The fundamental beliefs of occupational therapy provided a philosophical base for her dissertation; however, Dr. Mineo realized she did not have a "why" to finish her work. After learning about the first online master's degree program, the aim of Dr. Mineo's research came into focus. She went on to complete an in-depth case study to explore how virtual interactions impact personal communication. Her dissertation, titled "Computer Conferencing and Online Education: Uncovering the Assumptions," was completed in 1998.

After Sept. 11, 2001, Dr. Mineo's family relocated from metro New York to Chandler, Arizona. Dr. Mineo provided home-based early intervention services until June of 2005, when she accepted a position as chair and associate professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at A.T. Still University (ATSU) School of Health Sciences. In this role, Dr. Mineo led both the residential and online Master of Science in Occupational Therapy programs. She also started the online post-professional doctorate program. Dr. Mineo decided to step down from her role as chair to focus on online education. In 2014, she transitioned to professor and program director for online post-professional programs. In this role, Dr. Mineo's combined knowledge and expertise in occupational therapy, media studies, culture and communication allowed her to develop meaningful virtual learning communities for her students.

When Dr. Mineo was a doctoral student at NYU, Dr. Henry Perkinson, professor and educational historian, introduced her to the powerful notion that we all learn from our mistakes. The concept, also shared by theorists Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and B. F. Skinner, was the basis for Dr. Perkinson's scholarship as an education historian. He states, "Just as the species evolved through trial and error elimination, so with knowledge. We make conjectures or try out our theories and ideas, and then improve them by eliminating the mistakes and errors they contain. In short, we learn from our mistakes," (Perkinson, 1979, p. 40). "Dr. Perkinson believed as humans we are imperfect, and everything we do is imperfect," she said. This concept was very freeing for Dr. Mineo. "Life makes you believe there is a straight and narrow path, but it does not really work this way," she said. "We get better by figuring out what our mistakes are so that we can learn from them and make improvements," she said. Dr. Mineo applies Dr. Perkinson's concepts to her art and teaching through service to others.

In 2018, Dr. Mineo launched "ABD Dissertation Coaching," a doctoral dissertation coaching service providing Doctor of Philosophy and other doctoral candidates support and resources to finish their doctoral degrees. "Completing a doctoral dissertation is a huge undertaking," said Dr. Mineo. "Without the deadlines and structure of coursework you feel like you are on your own. It can be overwhelming." Dr. Mineo also created a related Facebook group, titled "From ABD to Doctor PhD/EdD." The group provides a virtual space for doctoral students to network, find inspiration, and set weekly goals. To ensure ongoing communication, Dr. Mineo moderates a daily discussion thread schedule. For example, on "Tools & Tips Tuesday," group members are encouraged to share resources related to research and scholarly writing. "Murphy's Law Thursday" is for sharing struggles and the inspiring actions used to overcome them. Dr. Mineo also moderates video conferencing sessions for face-to-face networking and question and answer sessions. The group serves as an example of how Dr. Mineo uses her creativity and expertise to serve others.

Over the last decade, Dr. Mineo has participated in a daily creative art practice she developed after reading *Life is a Verb: 37 Days to Wake Up, Be Mindful, and Live Intentionally*, by Patti Digh (2008). In the book, Digh describes what it was like to care for her terminally ill stepfather, who passed away just 37 days after receiving a cancer diagnosis. The book culminates in a framework of core practices and exercises that challenge readers to live intentionally. “I took the book to heart,” said Dr. Mineo. She began developing daily art challenges that could be completed in 15 to 30 min each day. “Each challenge has a specific form and structure,” she said. The form involves selecting the specific art media she will use. The structure requires identifying a tangible product she will produce from the materials. “The form I select provides a structure that enables me to show up each day,” said Dr. Mineo. “The set of constraints and parameters I decide to work within paradoxically sets me free by promoting a playful state of experimentation.” The final component requires Dr. Mineo to commit a specified number of days (e.g., a week, 52 days, an entire calendar year) to explore the myriad possibilities using the same form and structure.

In 2009, Dr. Mineo initiated her first creative art challenge. She committed to making one paper doll every day for 37 days. Each doll began with the same basic form but varied in color, materials, and embellishments. “My creativity pushed me to challenge myself to see what else I could create,” she said. “To think of yet another possibility, and another.” Engaging in a daily practice forced Dr. Mineo to expand her creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. “I had to come up with multiple solutions and explore new possibilities, so I never get stuck on one thing,” she said. Dr. Mineo enjoyed engaging in the process of making things with her hands. After completing the paper doll challenge, she was hooked.

Over time, Dr. Mineo has participated in several daily art challenges. Several of her challenges have spanned the course of an entire year. “Each year is metaphorical in some way,” she said. The year of her 52nd birthday, Dr. Mineo completed seven challenges lasting 52 days each. The following year, she completed 52 seven-day challenges. In 2012, Dr. Mineo completed a full year of mandalas, slightly changing the media used each month. For instance, for the mandalas of May 2012, each unique design was created with paint and then air blown through a straw. “Anyone can do this,” said Dr. Mineo. “For me, it’s about being playful. You take something, play with it, and see what it can do to spark your creative heart.”

On January 1, 2015, Dr. Mineo began a project titled “Inch by Inch” (see Figure 2), a 20” x 20” mosaic made from mixed media. Each 1” square tile, or “inchie,” was pre-cut from recycled mat board. Dr. Mineo decorated the tiles with markers, gel pens, and found objects. The focus of her designs alternated between texture and words. “Each word represented something that happened that day,” she said. Dr. Mineo placed the first tile in the center of the board and worked her way around, adding one new tile each day. “At the time, we had just relocated to Oregon and did not have a permanent home,” she said. “I had to make the project small and doable. Completing one small tile every day helped me get through it.” As Dr. Mineo worked her way toward the edge, she transitioned from four-letter words to four-word self-help statements. For example, “play and have fun,” and “live in the moment.” Adding one tile each day provided a safe place for Dr. Mineo to take risks and make mistakes. “There is no right or wrong way to do it,” she said. “If I do not like what I make today, there will be another opportunity to try again tomorrow. Eventually, you will make something you really like.”

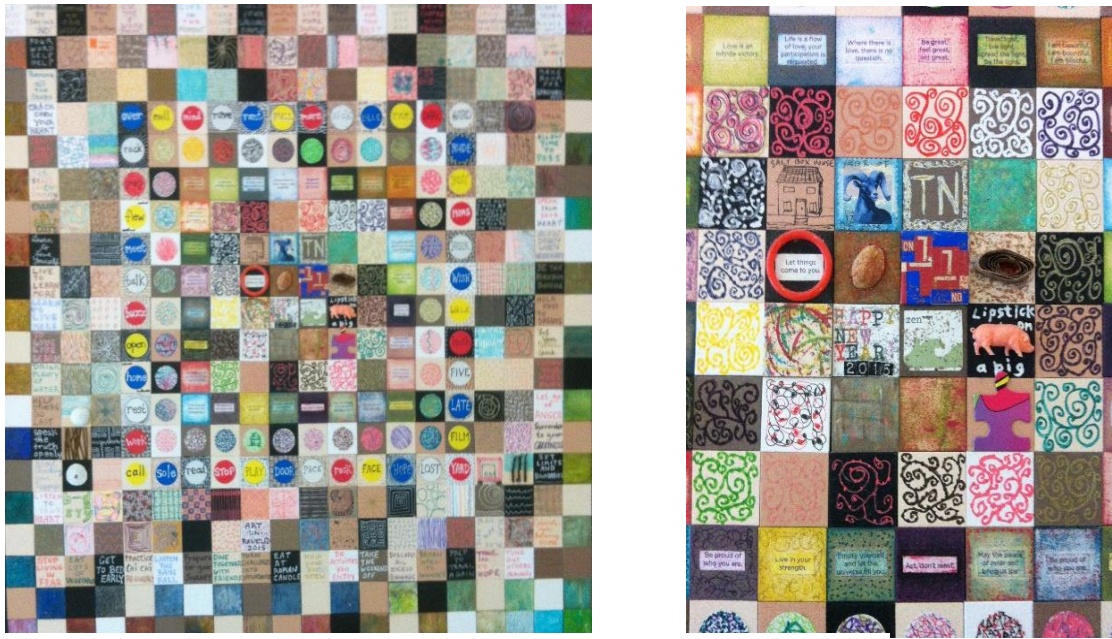


Figure 2. "Inch by Inch" (2015), by Bernadette Mineo.

Dr. Mineo branded 2016 the year of textures. Her creative works were made from recycled items, including paper bags, Washi tape, and Lego bricks. To sustain her interest, Dr. Mineo incorporated interesting materials into her projects. For 2019, Dr. Mineo is preparing for a two-part challenge. Part 1 will involve making something playful every day from recycled paper envelopes. Part 2 will consist of using the Zentangle method of drawing to create detailed designs in tiny paper books. "We are all creative beings," she said. Dr. Mineo believes creativity and well-being are connected, and that we all need opportunities to foster this relationship. "In the digital age, people may actually find more of a need to engage in the process of making (i.e., a return to making), even though things can be easily and readily purchased ready-made."

There is a growing body of evidence to support the relationship between art-based interventions and health outcomes (Davies, Knuiman, Wright, & Rosenberg, 2014; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Research by Davies, Knuiman, and Rosenberg (2016) found evidence of an expressive arts and mental health relationship. According to the study, engaging in 100 or more hours of recreational arts-based activities per year may have the potential to enhance mental well-being in the general population. The results of the study suggest the dose, or time spent engaged in creative activities (i.e., at least 2 hr per week), may be an important factor for obtaining mental health benefits. If a causal relationship does exist between recreational arts and mental well-being, the authors suggest there may be potential for new and innovative art-based interventions. In the United Kingdom, "Arts on Prescription" programs are gaining in popularity as an adjunct to conventional therapies. There are a variety of approaches, settings, and creative mediums; however, the main idea is that active participation in the creative arts can promote improved health outcomes and mental well-being (Bungay & Clift, 2010).

Over time, Dr. Mineo's daily creative challenges evolved into a well-being practice. "I get a lot of joy from this practice, which is something I think most artists and craft persons do," she said. "Challenging myself to show up every day has created a sense of self-discipline and increased my capacity to care for my own spiritual and creative needs while living a life of service," she said. "I had to

learn how to take care of myself, so I could take care of others.” Building on the benefits resulting from her own practice, Dr. Mineo has begun the process of developing a well-being program that will be offered by subscription. The program, titled “Creatrix Spark”, aims to facilitate health promotion through regular participation in arts-based activities. Each month, participants receive a box filled with everything they need (i.e., art supplies, mixed media, and creative prompts) to spark their creative hearts. “This program is a gift that I wish to share with others, so they too may develop a creative expressive outlet of their own design that will promote well-being.”

Mindful engagement in art-based activities has enhanced Dr. Mineo’s well-being in several ways. Careful selection of form and structure inspired a playful state of experimentation. Challenging herself to “show up” each day enhanced Dr. Mineo’s sense of self-discipline and capacity to care for herself. Daily participation made it easier for Dr. Mineo to take risks and make mistakes. Through her daily practice, Dr. Mineo has developed resilience and resourcefulness to move forward when faced with unexpected challenges. Dr. Mineo has grown to appreciate the organic path. “We do not always have a straight and narrow path in life,” she said. “It is quite all right, and we need to embrace this.” Dr. Mineo believes there are benefits to traveling the path less followed. “Through creativity and imagination, we can explore new possibilities,” she said. “Art can help us find what is possible.

Resources

View the OJOT Gallery: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/25

Visit the ABD Dissertation Coaching website: <https://www.abddissertationcoaching.com>

Connect with “From ABD to Doctor PhD/EdD” on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1866199973448007>

Learn more about Creatrix Spark Box: <https://creatrixspark.lpages.co/creatrixsparkcomingsoon/>

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