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We Learn to Walk by Falling: Portraits and Wisdom from Women

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Jennifer Townsend

August 5, 2016

Reflections on *We Learn to Walk by Falling*

It has always seemed to me that there is a long tradition, going back to the beginning of history, of the women being the true, if largely unacknowledged, head of the family. The women pass on the real wisdom, the true secrets of the universe and how to live in it. This project was conceived out of this belief. My goal was to combine my way of telling a story – visually, photographically – with the concept of oral histories and put them together for my daughter in a way that would last her lifetime, and hopefully her daughter’s lifetime. I wished to photograph all of the women in our family that I could and ask them to offer their advice to future generations of women in general, or my daughter, Wednesday, in particular.

I sent a letter of invitation to all of the women in my family that I would logistically be able to photograph. The letter (included at the end of this piece), explained the project concept, and asked that they also each write a brief – one page or less – letter or essay offering up words of wisdom, the things they’ve found to be important in life, the things they love and hate, their hopes – all for the younger generation and future generations of women in our family.

Despite asking for a response on participation either way, yes or no, there were several women that I never heard from. This was disappointing, but I suppose a certain degree of non-response was to be expected. Although, to be honest, I had hoped that by emphasizing that this project was ultimately a gift for Wednesday, more people would be encouraged to participate than might otherwise have done so.

I needed my “studio” to be mobile, as I would have to travel to photograph almost everyone, so I threw together a budget rig. I used an adjustable piano stool that folds mostly flat, a faux fur throw blanket as a backdrop, a couple of clamps from the dollar bin at the hardware store, the world’s cheapest tripod, and my dying Canon 40D. I traveled from person to person or family to family, as far north as Traverse City. I tried to group as many women together as possible, both to make it a little easier to shoot, and because it was a nice way to

get family together. I was able to shoot everyone outside in natural light – even a few during a particularly chilly November afternoon in Otsego – except for my mother, my sister in law, and my niece. Shooting the three of them included complications and in the end I had to rig some lighting in my living room to mimic natural light as closely as I could. Unfortunately, I was not able to duplicate it exactly and those three images are, I think, a little warmer than the rest. I don't think it is particularly noticeable to the average viewer, however.

I decided that all of the portraits should be black and white for both aesthetic and practical purposes. I knew that I would be photographing the women over a long period of time and that though I shot almost all of them in natural light, the shoots would take place at different times of day during different seasons. By converting them all to black and white I would have a measure of continuity and consistency that I would not be able to maintain if they were all done in color. Not having a personal studio made shooting this project in color a non-viable option. Additionally, black and white has really always been my personal preference for portraiture. Color can be distracting, I think, while black and white focuses you on the subject and the details.

The women were generally very nervous at first. There is that discomfort in sitting for a formal portrait that I think unnerves people. They are tense, awkward, and sometimes just feel silly. Happily for them, I didn't want a formal portrait. I wanted the portraits to be of THEM. The real them—the relaxed, happy, down to earth, *who sits for formal portraits in this world?* them. The trick was to get them to relax so I could get to those moments, so I got them to talk. I invited them to tell me about something good that had happened to them that week. I asked them to tell me a favorite story. I told stupid jokes. And I pressed the shutter button the whole time. Almost always the weirdness immediately fell away. They told stories about travels around the world, good books they'd just finished, plans for the summer, finishing school. I also heard a few sad stories. Stories of best friend betrayal, work woes, and disappointments that hit harder than usual.

I won't say it was a profound spiritual experience, but I do think that there was connection there, though interestingly, it wasn't an overt connection with me. They rarely

spoke directly to me. They spoke to the women waiting behind me for their turn in front of the lens. It almost seemed like I was just an impartial observer. This felt especially true to me when I shot my step-mother, step-sisters-in-law, and step-nieces. When they were all done they wanted a group photo with Wednesday, but did not ask me to be in the photo with them. I make this point only because I thought it was interesting. They knew the project was ultimately for Wednesday, and it made perfect sense to take a photo with her, but it struck me that though I, too, was a woman in this family, I had to remain in the role of the photographer recording the day. I was both, but in this situation, could not be both at once.

The essay or letter aspect of the project proved to be more difficult to convince people to follow through on, even with reminder requests. I realize now it was probably a lot to ask, but it still frustrated me. I had made it clear that this was part of the project, and that there were two aspects to the participation – the portrait and the essay. I am grateful that many of the women who sat for a portrait also took the time to write down their thoughts. If I were to do this project again, I think I would make this more of a true oral history piece and interview the subjects and transcribe their thoughts, rather than asking them to write them down. I had chosen to ask *them* to write their words of wisdom so that they would be in their own voices and words.

I really expected overtly female-centered responses from these women, but the things they said seem more universal than that. I appreciate that more, I think, than had they been specifically female-oriented. I wonder if it would have gone differently had I done this project with the men in my family for my son. (And though I briefly entertained the idea of doing just that, I quickly disabused myself of the notion.) What also surprised me was the prevalence of God in many of their lives. I am firmly agnostic, and Wednesday has stated on many occasions that she is an atheist, and so I find I'm quite often taken aback at others' professions of faith and how important that faith is in their daily lives.

Originally, I had planned to have a sort of gallery exhibition of the portraits in the Lee Honors College as a portion of the project. Ultimately I decided that this was not the way to go. Certainly the fact that I could not financially afford to print and hang a show played a part, but

more importantly, the portraits would not work in this environment and in this context. It would have seemed out of place. It almost seemed too intimate a collection to hang there, but that isn't quite what I mean, because I can envision these portraits in a gallery space. Maybe it is simply too uncomfortable an intermingling of my personal, private life and my work space.

Ultimately I think this project made me very sad. One person that I wish I could have included passed away in September of 2011 – my mother-in-law. She and Wednesday were very close and we all still miss her every day. I did select two photos of the two of them together from Christmas time of 2010 to include in the book. I think it's important that she be present here even if the photos stand out as being wholly different than the rest of the portraits. I wish I had thought to start this project earlier so that I could have included her more directly, even though she hated having her photo taken.

If I could do this project over, I would invite all of the women to join me in one place, at one time. I would make it a big party and sit them all down, one by one, and shoot them all then and there. Later I would follow up with the interviews; however, I would likely not have better equipment, and would still choose black and white over color.

But upon further contemplation, if I could do this project over again, I don't think I would do it at all. While I think the book that ultimately came of these sessions is beautiful and something Wednesday will someday treasure, and while I am proud of the final result, I have to admit that the whole experience was too much of all the wrong things emotionally. I really had expected wholly different reactions from many of the women who chose to either ignore some or all of my request.

My hope is that my daughter does, in fact, treasure this collection someday. I hope that she will pass it on to her children and they, too, will enjoy looking through the pages and hearing Wednesday's stories about each of the women smiling out at them there. By passing this book on, she, too, will be participating more directly in the project, her own epilogue, of sorts, and carrying on the tradition of the women who came before her.