

## Be Real #1: Discovering Meaning

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*Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken.*

-- Jane Austen in *Emma*, 1816

### INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first of five “Be Real” workshops that are a part of the Sense and Sensibility Scrapbooking Symposium. Our goal in all of these lessons is to make pages with our everyday life and event photos that have more meaning. This first lesson is about understanding what meaning on a scrapbook page is and how you can achieve it.

Making sense of and recording your life through scrapbooking is immensely satisfying. A huge part of that has to do with managing memories—with adding to the ongoing story that is your life. We tell ourselves our stories, and then we tell other people our stories, often with changes. These stories can be entertaining,



*Journaling for “Puzzling” is on page 9.*

self-serving, inspired. They can change depending upon when in your life you tell them. But somewhere behind these stories is something called the truth. Scrapbook pages that matter are working to get at and record some pieces of that truth—with an understanding of where the diarist-archiver-storyteller behind the message (you!) is in life right now.

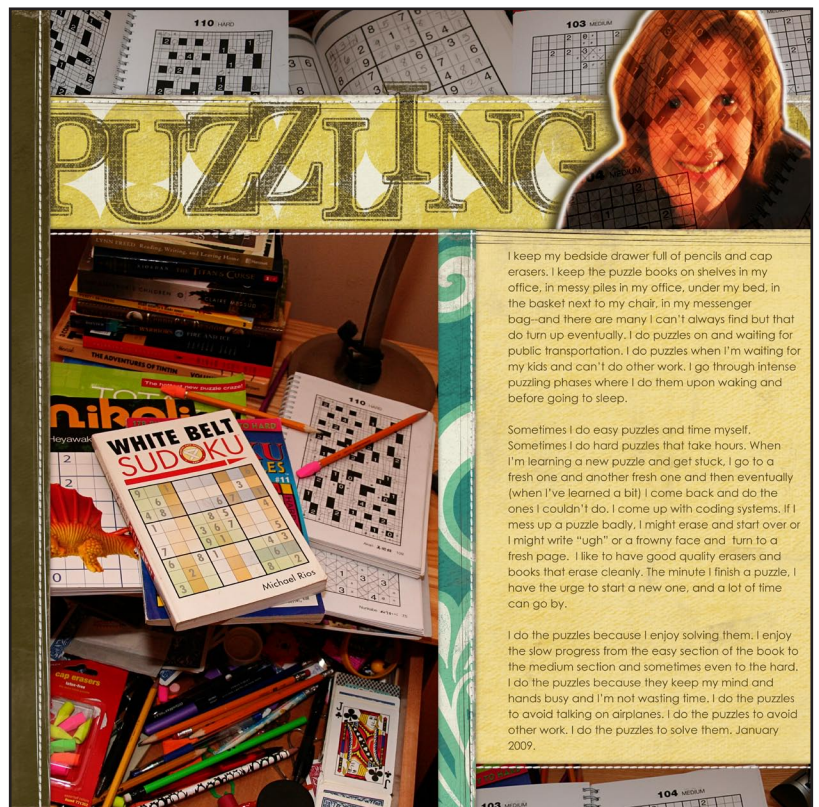
Another thing that meaningful pages do is to go beyond the obvious, to make clear the bits we can't figure out from looking at the photos and integrating our own knowledge of the world. On a page about a fall outing to an orchard we know that apples can be sweet and crunchy, and if we see a photo of someone at the orchard biting into one, we make that connection without being told. What we don't know is that the high-schooler in the photos had to be begged to come along on the outing. Let your photos show the obvious. Use your journaling to tell us what we don't know. Use your design choices to create a mood that supports and expands upon the tone of your subject and stories.

## WAYS TO GET MEANING ON YOUR PAGES

### 1. Use concrete and significant details.

Meaning doesn't have to be a grand epiphany. In "Puzzling" I scrapbooked an activity that's a regular part of my life: doing number and logic puzzles. I began my journaling by listing the physical items --books, pencils, erasers-- and then moved on to my behavior and preferences. The result is a page that shows I'm a little obsessive and unmoderated about this -- without ever using the word "obsessive."

**Concrete details** are those of images that can be sensed (seen, heard, touched, smelled, even



I keep my bedside drawer full of pencils and cap erasers. I keep the puzzle books on shelves in my office, in messy piles in my office, under my bed, in the basket next to my chair, in my messenger bag--and there are many I can't always find but that do turn up eventually. I do puzzles on and waiting for public transportation. I do puzzles when I'm waiting for my kids and can't do other work. I go through intense puzzling phases where I do them upon waking and before going to sleep.

Sometimes I do easy puzzles and time myself. Sometimes I do hard puzzles that take hours. When I'm learning a new puzzle and get stuck, I go to a fresh one and another fresh one and then eventually (when I've learned a bit) I come back and do the ones I couldn't do. I come up with coding systems. If I mess up a puzzle badly, I might erase and start over or I might write "ugh" or a frowny face and turn to a fresh page. I like to have good quality erasers and books that erase cleanly. The minute I finish a puzzle, I have the urge to start a new one, and a lot of time can go by.

I do the puzzles because I enjoy solving them. I enjoy the slow progress from the easy section of the book to the medium section and sometimes even to the hard. I do the puzzles because they keep my mind and hands busy and I'm not wasting time. I do the puzzles to avoid talking on airplanes. I do the puzzles to avoid other work. I do the puzzles to solve them. January 2009.

Journaling for "Puzzling" is on page 3.

tasted). Including details gives your image specificity. "Creature" is a vague word. "Animal" is more specific but still leaves a lot to the imagination. " But tell us about your "long-haired Persian cat with a wide face" and you're getting specific.

**Significant details** are those that matter to the story. You don't need filler. A significant detail suggests an abstraction or feeling like beauty or stress or joy **without** using that abstract word. When you write the detail rather than the abstraction you've got a more compelling piece.

#### How I used details in scrapbooking a simple thing in my life in "Puzzling:"

- ◇ Photos. I took photos of the items that are a part of my "puzzling" activity: the books, the pencils, those all-important cap erasers that I buy in bulk, and some individual puzzles.
- ◇ Design. The focal point here is the enlarged photo of my puzzle books, pencils, and erasers on my bedside stand. Photos and strips and blocks of paper are blocked in a way that mimics the grid layout of many of my puzzles.
- ◇ Journaling. The journaling begins with the details of the items I use and where I keep them. It moves on to describe how and when I do puzzles. The accumulation of concrete and significant detail conveys that I'm a little extreme about this activity without saying "obsessive" or "extreme." With this much evidence, you can draw your own conclusions.

#### **JOURNALING for "Puzzling:"**

I keep my bedside drawer full of pencils and cap erasers. I keep the puzzle books on shelves in my office, in messy piles in my office, under my bed, in the basket next to my chair, in my messenger bag--and there are many I can't always find but that do turn up eventually. I do puzzles on and waiting for public transportation. I do puzzles when I'm waiting for my kids and can't do other work. I go through intense puzzling phases where I do them upon waking and before going to sleep.

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## 2. Tell a story with narrative and scene.

Take the time to tell the full story of a small incident. The most successful story writing uses a combination of narrative and scene.

**Narrative** is writing that tells and summarizes.

**Scene** is writing that puts your subjects "on stage" speaking and/or interacting with one another. A concise and relevant scene is a fabulous way to break up narrative and keep it from getting dull. The journaling for "It's a Big Memory" is on the next page and begins with narrative that introduces the situation. The scene begins with the discussion of the bear's purchase. Including dialogue gives you a chance to convey more about the personalities of the players.

### How I scrapbooked the story of a small incident in "It's a Big Memory:"

- ◇ Journaling. I used dialogue to convey both the details of how the story progressed AND (because you can understand the tone of many of the lines) the subjects' personalities.
- ◇ Design. All black and white product choices support the idea that the page is all about the panda.
- ◇ Title. The title plays with a piece of dialogue in the story: "I wanted him to have a memory of our day." The word "big" is large and has dimension--just like that bear.



Journaling for "Puzzling" is on page 5.

**Tips for writing dialogue**

- ◇ Do not include every little “yes,” “well,” “hmm” that was said. It’s not necessary and it slows things down.
- ◇ Look to see where you can remove “he said” and “she said.” The speaker is often evident from the flow of your story.
- ◇ If you can’t remember exactly what was said, just be true to the underlying intent and meaning.

**JOURNALING for “A Big Memory:”** I have these photos because Neil said he wanted me to post them on my blog and write about my bad attitude.

On August, 30, 2008, I took Joshua to his first ever Anime convention. It was strange. We left Neil and Isaac on their own and then came home to find out it had been a strange day here, too. I say strange because my frugal husband did several uncharacteristic things. He and Isaac went to Hilltop Fun Center (a place I never thought Neil was going to venture) and they splurged and got all-day passes to ride go-carts and play laser tag and mini golf. It gets better, though.

On the way home they passed a garage sale with a huge panda bear. Isaac loves pandas.

“What’s more,” said my very frugal husband, “It was only \$25!” He continued to tell me that the woman they bought it from originally paid \$400 for it and she had it dry-cleaned and she was soooo happy to see it go to someone who would love it. I don’t know if it was a bargain or not, and it wasn’t the cost I was complaining over. “It’s HUGE and HEAVY.” I said. “Isaac’s room is so small already. Where are we going to keep it?”

“It can sit on his bottom bunk. I wanted him to have a memory of our day.”

I refrained from saying that maybe we could put the bear with the white leather ottoman that had also been a final sale purchase of Neil’s.

Neil said. “Iz, tell mom what you named your panda.”

“Kung-pao Panda!”

“You know we’re never going to be able to get rid of this bear,” I said. “We’ll be taking care of it when Isaac goes to college.”

And that’s when Neil told me to go pose with the bear so he could take photos and I could blog and scrapbook my bad attitude for all time. And I did it gladly, knowing there would be many who would hear my story and nod their heads with sympathy.

### 3. Combine images, color, and words to express a feeling.

Are there stories that are compelling you but that you don't feel comfortable putting onto a scrapbook page? Is a straightforward telling out of the question? When you're in this situation, consider making an "art-journal" page for your scrapbook. Combine images, photos, words, and color to express what you're feeling.

I made "I Believe in Consequences" when an incident was dogging me, not leaving my mind, and just generally annoying me. I was totally convinced that I was in the right and I felt good about the role I'd played in the incident.

How I scrapbooked a story I didn't want to tell straight-on in "I Believe in Consequences:"

- ◇ Design. Because I felt strong and right and even a little happy about my behavior, I used bright colors. I used images of a caged woman and a gossipy bird because they represented parts of the story. The compass is about me finding my way.
- ◇ Photos. I took two photos with my webcam, contrasting a muzzled me with a smiling me, and I positioned them in diagonally opposite corners.
- ◇ Journaling. The journaling here is a series of statements that express how I was feeling.
- ◇ Title. The title is really one more piece of the journaling enlarged.



#### 4. Zoom in and examine individual parts of an event.

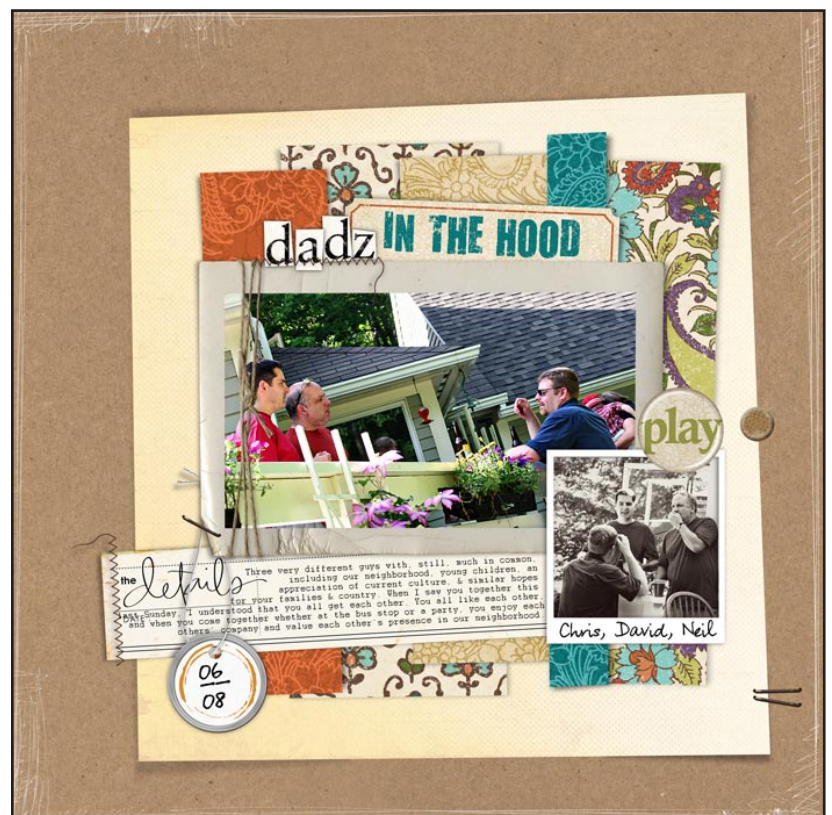
The meaningful parts of an event are the relationships and interactions that play out at the event. As you're looking through your photos (or taking photos) pick one and imagine it in slow motion. Ask yourself what's going on beyond the obvious and let that be your guide to creating a page.

The photos from "Dadz in the Hood" were taken at a neighbor's graduation party. I have many more photos and several other pages from the event. For this one, though, I recalled to myself the specifics of what these three men were talking about and how they were behaving that day and then extrapolated that to what it means about their relationship in general. I've captured a portrait of these three in one of their roles in life at a specific point in time.

**JOURNALING:** Three very different guys with, still, much in common, including our neighborhood, young children, an appreciation of current culture, & similar hopes for your families & country. When I saw you together this last Sunday, I understood that you all get each other. You all like each other, and when you come together whether at the bus stop or a party, you enjoy each others' company and value each other's presence in our neighborhood.

#### How I scrapbooked a small moment from a party:

- ◇ Design. The design is crooked and layered and playful, which I hope reflects the playful tone of the party as well as the unusual angle at which I was considering my subjects, both in my lens and in my mind.
- ◇ Title. The title describes the role these men are in at a neighborhood party -- and implies they have other roles.



## 5. Zoom out and consider your subject in a larger context.

You'll understand and tell different stories when you're looking at your subjects close up then you will when you pull back and consider the context in which a scene is playing out.

**Collect related photos from different times.** In "All Told" I gathered photos from throughout a school year to consider my oldest son's 6th grade experience in retrospect. Any one of these photos has their own story, but they tell yet another story when collected and considered as a whole.



**JOURNALING:** How do you take the measure of a school year? By its high points, lowpoints, the combination of those points? By your feelings throughout or your overall feelings at the end? Joshua, your 6th grade year found you, once again, the first one out of the house each morning, often in the dark. Your teachers were tough. REALLY tough. Mr. Parsons, Ms. Becker, Ms Fontaine, Mr Mac. Math sucked. Science rocked. You were worried a lot. You had hours of math homework every week, sometimes every night. You climbed a mountain in freezing rain and had the lead in Aladdin and hiked the entire NH seacoast. You loved band and Mr. Nasberg -- in fact starting every day with band while the others were in advisory. Your teachers were not especially warm. It took them way too long to get to know you. You learned to keep track of things and assignments. You enjoyed several friends. You learned a lot. You had major accomplishments. I like to say you earned your "Phoenix Chops." And when I said that to the principle, I was told that THAT was why your old team of teachers had been disbanded. Now that it's done you and your teammates take a lot of pride in all you did and endured. And I know there are parts of it you wouldn't trade away. I think you would go through it again. The lows sure were low, and the highs were extraordinary.



***Use photos from one incident/outing as a springboard to considering their larger context.*** In "It's Measure" on page 1 of this lesson, I used photos from one particular beach outing while my journaling considered the entire summer and how I thought it compared to others.

**JOURNALING for "It's Measure:"** When I look back at any particular summer, I takes its measure by several guides and one of them is the character of our beach outings. This summer of 2008 it was all about Jenness. When we weren't travelling and it wasn't raining, this was our preferred spot. Our company: the Mangans and the Waters -- the family of Joshua's new friend Charlie. A few others made cameo appearances, many promised to show but didn't, and so these friends predominated. Other memories: we got a rolling cooler, the wagon started is falling apart, Elaine always brought doughnuts, we began using an umbrella instead of the pop-up tent, I was often in pain or sick (tooth & ears, we usually parked in the \$10 lot across from the meters, and our meeting spot was 4 houses down on the non-lifeguard side.

How I scrapbooked photos from several points in time to examine the bigger picture in "All Told:"

- ◇ Title. The title indicates that a reckoning or summing up is being done.
- ◇ Photos. I gathered photos from throughout my son's 6th grade year. Two 4x6 portrait photos bookend the series. On the left is a photo of him on the first day of 6th grade and at far right is a photo of him on the last day of 6th grade.
- ◇ Journaling. I tried to enumerate the high and low points of the year in attempt to say whether it was overall good or bad -- a judgment I never end up making in my journaling. That's really for my son to decide and I think his decision will be different at different points in time.

**MEANING TRIGGER**

**1) Pull out one photo that compels you.**

**2) What are the concrete details around this moment when the photo was taken:**

items

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activities

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behavior

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dialogue

---

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other

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**3) What were you feeling?**

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**4) Which details can you use to reveal this feeling without actually saying what you were feeling?**

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