



BE REAL #5: Expressing the Inexpressible

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"If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more."

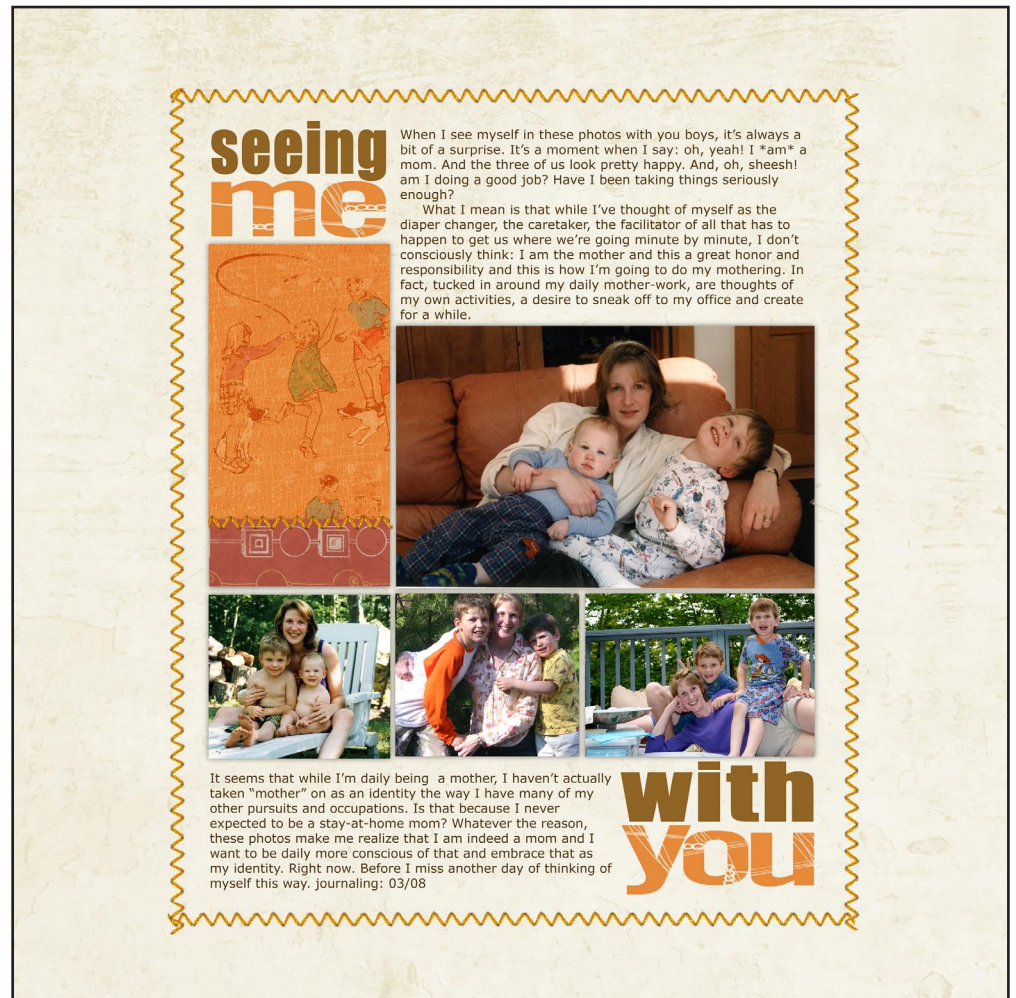
-- Jane Austen from Emma

INTRODUCTION

This is about getting those feelings that are hard to articulate in words onto the scrapbook page. Do you ever have a moment when you stop -- when you almost understand something or you have a fleeting idea but it's gone in a second? You have a feeling it's meaningful--but you need to pursue it farther to know. How do you stop and figure out and express thoughts that you can barely grab on to let alone explain in a clear cut way? Read on and try the following ideas.

GETTING HARD-TO-EXPLAIN FEELINGS ONTO THE PAGE**1. Explore fuzzy notions.**

When you have one of those "gasps" -- one of those moments in which you feel you're understanding something new or maybe only almost understanding it, follow that impulse with pen and paper. You probably won't be able to write through it at that moment, but make a note to yourself of what was going on and what your "fuzzy notion" is. You may not even realize you have a fuzzy notion you want to pursue until it's tapped at your consciousness a couple of times. That's what happened to me when I had the original seed for "Seeing Me With You." I would see attractive mothers with their children -- looking like ideal, pretty, competent, lovely mothers. Then I would think: *Oh my goodness! Imagine how I must look!* And then I thought: *How do I look?* And, what's more, I thought: *How am I doing as a mom?* And finally: *Why haven't I made this more important? What am I missing out on?*



When you do have time to write -- just start writing. Don't censor yourself. Don't worry about where it's going. When you get thought after thought after thought onto the page, you can get to bigger understandings in a way that's not so easy to accomplish in your mind. You've got a written trail to follow.

How I explored a fuzzy notion in "Seeing Me With You:"

- ◇ Journaling. The initial writing I did around these thoughts was messy and much longer. Most of the time, I write on the computer because it's faster for me and I can easily pick out the parts I want to save for the final journaling. You should choose the best method for yourself--perhaps pen and paper. Understand that you'll revise after you've followed what might be a long path to your final comprehension.
- ◇ Photos. I used the photo browser on my computer to look through photos and pull up a few (spanning several years) of myself with my boys. I wanted to show and see in print the thing I'd been writing about: how do I look in my role of mother.
- ◇ Design. I used patterned paper with images of childhood to support my theme.

JOURNALING for "Seeing Me With You:" When I see myself in these photos with you boys, it's always a bit of a surprise. It's a moment when I say: oh, yeah! I *am* a mom. And the three of us look pretty happy. And, oh, sheesh! am I doing a good job? Have I been taking things seriously enough?

What I mean is that while I've thought of myself as the diaper changer, the caretaker, the facilitator of all that has to happen to get us where we're going minute by minute, I don't consciously think: I am the mother and this a great honor and responsibility and this is how I'm going to do my mothering. In fact, tucked in around my daily mother-work, are thoughts of my own activities, a desire to sneak off to my office and create for a while.

It seems that while I'm daily being a mother, I haven't actually taken "mother" on as an identity the way I have many of my other pursuits and occupations. Is that because I never expected to be a stay-at-home mom? Whatever the reason, these photos make me realize that I am indeed a mom and I want to be daily more conscious of that and embrace that as my identity. Right now. Before I miss another day of thinking of myself this way. journaling: 03/08

2. Tell it slant.

Pay attention to the first two lines and last two lines of Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" shown here. Think about how you can apply this to telling your truths on the scrapbook page. Consider coming at one of your inexpressible feelings from an angle other than straight on. Consider the impact on the reader/viewer when they comprehend your intent from a gathering of images and words that are not obvious representations of your message.

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant---
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind---*

Emily Dickinson

When you're "telling it slant" think about all you have at your disposal for creating a page including images, photos, colors, words, and design.

Journaling for "10 Years Past:" Joshua, Here you are with John who is 2 years old and you are 12 years old. I see this photo and remember when we moved here and all the hours we spent--as John and his mom do now--at this neighborhood spot. He is where you were and you are where he is going and, yet, you are both in the same place. May 2008



How I “told it slant” in “10 Years Past:”

- ◇ Embellishments. The embellishments on this page include images of growth and change: a measure, trees, the words “grow and learn,” and an image on patterned paper of an adult man with a boy that echoes the older and younger boys in my photos.
- ◇ Photo. Tree stickers are placed right on the photo as if they were a part of the woods.
- ◇ Journaling. It’s not long or necessarily clear, but it makes sense to me and triggers the feeling I’m after.
- ◇ Title. The title, which not a clear descriptor but rather a phrase open to interpretation, sits at yet another angle to the journaling and images on the page.

3. Accept complexity.

When you're scrapbooking and journaling feelings you're not able to clearly express, it will not be all clean and clear and tidy. This is not like writing an essay in which you lay out your arguments and then sum them up in an easy way. Everyone doesn't have to "get" everything all the time. Think about the song lyrics that fans contemplate and try to interpret. When asked about the meaning of the lyrics in "American Pie," Don McLean said, "You will find many 'interpretations' of my lyrics but none of them by me... sorry to leave you all on your own like this but long ago I realized that songwriters should make their statements and move on, maintaining a dignified silence."

If you like the page and it "means" to you, then accept it as a record of what it is to be you.

How I accepted complexity in "Been There:"

- ◇ Journaling. This journaling is written as if to my nieces, yet there's no formal greeting or closing to the letter. I'm not sure it's even really to them -- but rather the



feeling I was trying to express had to do with what I might tell them.

The journaling rambles in an almost stream-of-consciousness style, moving from my childhood quickly through to today and how the land was a part of me on either end of that life so far.

Basically, it's not tidy.

- ◇ Title. Because the journaling and my message are a little muddy, I used a more straightforward title that tells you how I feel about the subject.
- ◇ Photos. I used the photo of my nieces that was the trigger for these thoughts alongside photos of the land that's at the core of this page's meaning.

JOURNALING for "Been There:" The sight of you three takes me straight back to my days of sunning next to hayfields on this farm in upstate NY. Oh, the indulgence of sunning oneself as others labored nearby -- the bravura involved in attempting a sun-tan in a place that has as many overcast days a year as it does sunny. I'm quite sure my brothers (one of them your dad) and my own dad thought I was a little addled and that I certainly didn't "get" their lives. And I didn't. I planned to go to college for international business and get a job making lots of money so that I could hire someone to watch my children and do my housework. Oh--and I would be living in a city.

Yep. I'm pretty sure I had (and voiced) those plans. And I did go to college. And I did go off to Washington DC. And I had some international relationships and I worked a lot and commuted and ate at nice restaurants and travelled on business so much I was doing my laundry at hotels. And it was good for a while.

But you guys know where I ended up. In fact, the life I live now is the life you've always known me living. I live in the country in a small college town in New Hampshire and I'm a stay-at-home mom to your cousins and I do all the dishes and I don't make a lot of money,

AND . . . I love to come visit you and I love to see my boys playing with you and I love seeing all of you BE on this land as I once WAS on this land

4. Springboard from the ordinary.

I have said this in almost every one of the lessons for this class, but I'll do it one more time. When you begin with the ordinary, concrete details surrounding the experience you're trying to express, you are on your way to understanding more.

The short story writer Alice Munro is known for her ability to "say the unsayable" in her stories, and in "Lives of Girls and Women," her character Del is a writer and says of her writing, "What I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting."

I love that idea of "radiant and everlasting."



How I used ordinary details in "Fortunate:"

- ◇ Photos and journaling. I collected photos of my husband and son together from three different times and I wrote the ordinary details of each of those times.

These three instances are my evidence that let me add that final journaling that sits at bottom right on a tag. This is where I sum up my understanding of the fuzzy notion I began with.

- ◇ Title. There is summation and judgment in this title. You are cued from the beginning that this is a happy story.
- ◇ Design. The colors and motifs here all add to the sense of good fortune and happiness.

JOURNALING for "Fortunate:" Durham Day. September 2007. Neil had been working the grill and speaking and generally busy with town stuff. Toward the end, we all came together as a family at the event. When Joshua saw Neil, he moved naturally to him and hugged him hard -- a big old boy hugging his Dad in the middle of a festival.

August 2008. This was the end of the first day back at school for the boys--the first day of 7th grade for Joshua. The neighborhood parents had a little party ready for the kids as they got off the bus. Neil waited on taking a bike ride until both boys were home and then stayed to chat with the neighbors and kids. The younger ones were running around eating sweets and talking about their day. Joshua was tired, maybe a little stressed, and he leaned very comfortably and peacefully on Neil.

New Year's Day 2009. Museum of Science in Boston. We'd gone to see the special Mythic Creatures Exhibit and this was at the end of the day as we were taking in a few of the older stuff exhibits that we often take for granted. Joshua spent a lot of time looking at models of ships and then engines. I took this photo from a distance and have no idea what they're talking about but LOVE their faces.

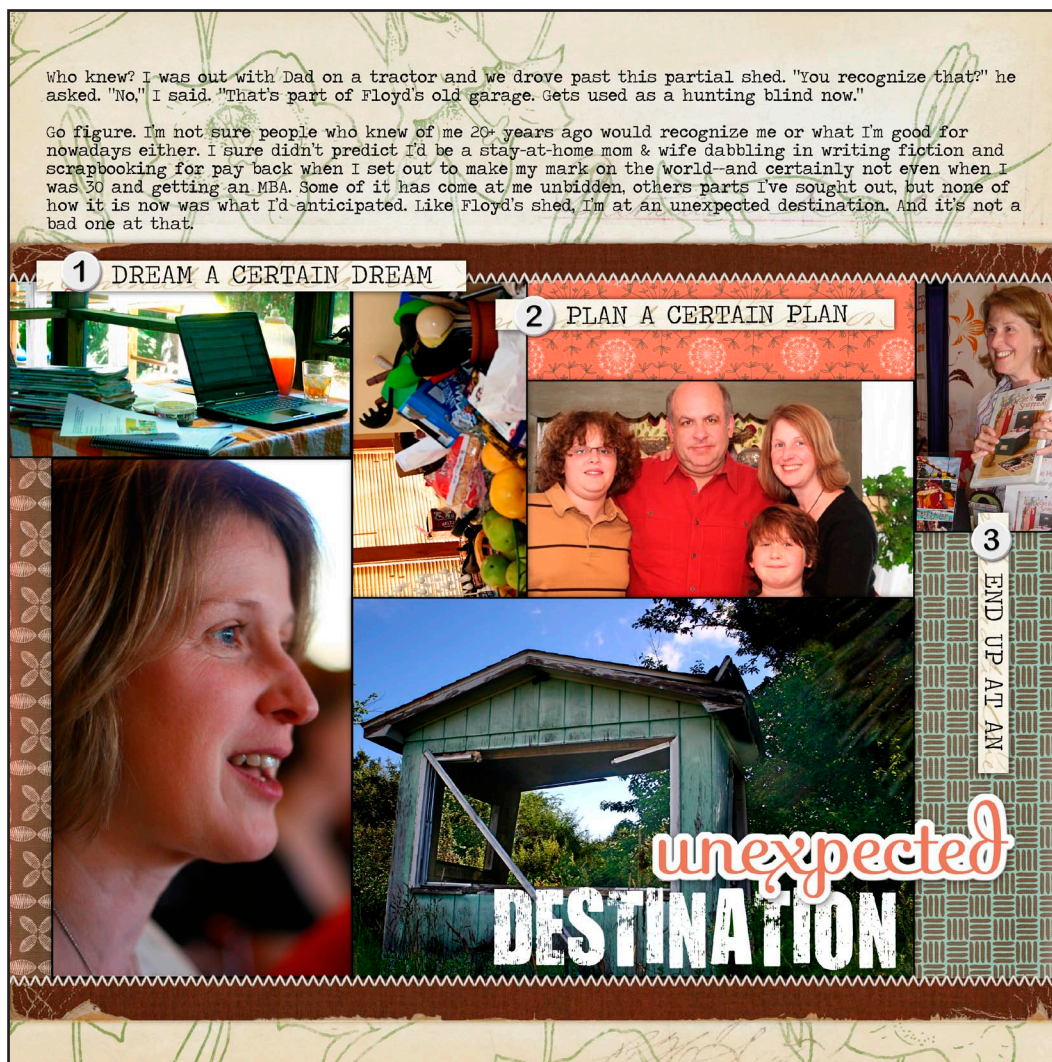
Neil, what does Joshua's generous, uninhibited way of loving do for us? What does it do for you? Sometimes when I see you two together, I think: wouldn't it be nice if this sweet love now could heal early hurts and fill up any of your glasses that are still half-empty. XO, Debbie

5. Use a central metaphor.

Photograph (or find an image of) the trigger for your moment of insight. Put it on the page, and use it as a metaphor for a key part of your story. It was a neighbor's-shed-turned-hunting-blind that triggered the thoughts I journaled on "Unexpected Destination."

JOURNALING for "Unexpected Destination:" Who knew? I was out with Dad on a tractor and we drove past this partial shed. "You recognize that?" he asked. "No," I said. "That's part of Floyd's old garage. Gets used as a hunting blind now."

Go figure. I'm not sure people who knew of me 20+ years ago would recognize me or what I'm good for nowadays either. I sure didn't predict I'd be a stay-at-home mom & wife dabbling in writing fiction and scrapbooking for pay back when I set out to make my mark on the world--and certainly not even when I was 30 and getting an MBA. Some of it has come at me unbidden, others parts I've sought out, but none of how it is now was what I'd anticipated. Like Floyd's shed, I'm at an unexpected destination. And it's not a bad one at that.



How I used an item in a photo as a metaphor for the feeling I was trying to express in "Unexpected Destination:"

- ◇ Photos. I am using a shed's unexpected final destination as a metaphor for my own landing spot in life at this point. I included a photo of the shed alongside photos that show me and represent the important parts of my life right now: family, housework, writing, my book.
- ◇ Journaling. I begin with the story of the shed and then clearly connect that to my thoughts of how my life might relate to that of the shed.
- ◇ Title. The title is the metaphor that I'm working with on the page--and it comes from one of the last lines of the journaling.

TRIGGER for exploring fuzzy thoughts

For the next week or several days:

- Carry a pencil and bit of paper or pad OR a small recording device with you. Make it a point to jot down notes whenever you have a thought--something that pricks at your feelings but that you don't totally understand--that you'd like to pursue. (If you like doing this, you can continue it indefinitely).
- Every night, put the thoughts on individual slips of paper and put them in a jar or bowl.
- Pay attention to your days and figure out when would be a good time to work in a daily 10 minutes of writing.

After several days, set aside 10 minutes per day to free-write from these slips:

- Use a journal that you can keep all of these writings in.
- Draw out a slip of paper.
- Copy what you wrote on the slip of paper at the top of your page and then for ten minutes:
 - ◇ don't stop writing;
 - ◇ don't censor yourself;
 - ◇ don't plan;
 - ◇ don't worry about grammar or punctuation.
- Use these writings to spur scrapbook or art journal pages. How you do this will depend upon you. You might find you want to scrap or journal a subject immediately. You might find you want to leave your writings unread for several days or longer. However you use these writings, know that if you do them, you'll have an unending source of satisfying personal subjects to scrapbook.