

McFee Acceptance Speech

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This is quite an honor. My thanks goes to Mary Stokrocki for nominating me, and support letters from Karen Keifer-Boyd, Paul Bolin, Doug Blandy, and Elizabeth Delacruz. Thanks to Pat Stuhr for chairing the committee and all of the committee members who selected me. I am most grateful.

A few of you may recognize the necklace that I am wearing. It is not something I would ordinarily wear, but I wear it today with great pride. It is June McFee's necklace. As some of you know from the celebration we did of her life two years ago, June gave this necklace to her collaborator, colleague, and dear friend, Rogena Degge a few years before she died. June asked that it be passed on and Rogena gave it to me during June's celebration event. I was as humbled then as I am today to have something so defining of June's character to wear on this special occasion. As many of you know, June was not a fussy dresser. I never saw her in anything but pants, mostly neutral colors. When a formal event took place, June dressed in black and put on this necklace. Otherwise, most everything else about her remained the same.

As many of you know, June McFee was my mentor, the chair of my dissertation, and the reason I went to study at the University of Oregon. In the late 1970s, after teaching in inner city schools in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, at the Milwaukee Art Museum, in the maximum security jail in Milwaukee, and a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed

girls who already had a child or were at risk for a premature pregnancy, I knew I needed to study folk art. I desperately wanted to find ways to better connect with the students I cared the most about—those who were often overlooked and neglected by our educational systems. Guy Hubbard, my mentor at Indiana University for my masters work, suggested that I study with June McFee. He felt she would embrace my ideas far more readily than other doctoral programs in art education. And he was right. In the 1970s and early 1980s, folk art was considered quaint, unsophisticated, childlike, and naïve. It wasn't a reasonable research topic for someone who wanted to do doctoral work in art education. June (we all called her by her first name) was not only accepting, but she was enthusiastic. She recognized the link between the ways in which people are valued and the art they make.

This short, bubbly, and highly intelligent woman mentored me in ways that addressed art content and context. She also taught me about the political difficulties of academic life. What many people don't know is that, as a woman, she did her work in often-troubled spaces at both the University of Arizona and at the University of Oregon. But she never let a contentious environment define her. I used to wonder how she did it. The answer, of course, was not simple. Her loving and supportive husband Malcolm (Mac) McFee was surely one good answer. In a 1994 Christmas letter, a few years after the death of her husband, and many years after her retirement, June wrote: "These have been growing years for me. One of Malcolm's most central attitudes was to always look forward, and not backward." June's positive attitude was also clearly rooted in her strong Christian Science faith, which she was hesitant to share until late in her life. And then there was the

fact that June was firmly rooted in her values. In 1979, she wrote about being a woman in what was then male-dominated university systems:

The stereotype is that there are many kinds of valued men, unique and different, but there is only one ideal woman, and all others are categorized as variation away from that norm. Those women who vary from the norm too much if they excel are thought of as manlike and always lesser than a man. (p. 208)

Gratefully, due in part to organizations like the Women's Caucus, this statement is not as true as it once was. What this kind of mentoring from June did, was to inform me that I would be moving into highly charged political spaces once I secured my first full time teaching position.

At the time that I went to Oregon, I had just turned 30. Just before that, I was working in a very difficult job heading a school in a residential treatment center. I felt pressured by others to leave this job that often had me sitting in emergency rooms in the middle of the night with suicidal girls and working with the police to find runaways. There were times that I wanted to retreat and live a more quiet life, attend to a family, and perhaps hold down a less stressful and demanding job. However, these moments were always fleeting and I ultimately decided to plunge more deeply into my two passions: education and art. And, fortunately for me, I was able to do my doctoral work with strong feminist role models. June created a family atmosphere among her graduate students. She wanted us to support each other, share ideas, exchange resources, and succeed, not in spite of, but because of each other. It was her lasting legacy. My Oregon friends, Laurie Hicks, Paul Bolin, Anne Calvert, and many others, are my family. On several occasions, UO

graduates would gather to honor our university teachers, such as they did at Vincent Lanier's retirement party in the early 1980s. I should mention here, with great admiration, that Vincent Lanier also was one of my mentors. He was also a great inspiration, both professionally and personally.

I study folk art, partly because I am a child of my times. I did my undergraduate work in the late 60s. I was a painter, but the real work of those years was in the streets, and for me those streets were in Chicago. In 1969, my husband-to-be was a community organizer in Chicago, working with the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots. (Much to my mother-in-law's quiet objections, David and I never really got engaged because I always thought that was unnecessary. I didn't ever want to own a diamond ring, and I certainly didn't want my picture in the paper for having "gotten" a man.) My parents had been active in the Civil Rights movement. As children we were responsible for helping integrate the swimming pools at the military bases. Consequently, what was happening in Chicago in the late 60s only solidified my desire to work for social justice. It was never a late in life revelation. Folk art and social justice happen, for me, in the same breath.

I was born in Boston. My father, the child of Swedish immigrants, like his two brothers, was raised to be a good student and a good citizen. An Annapolis graduate, he was working on his masters in electrical engineering at MIT when I was born. I was the second of six children. My mother is the youngest of numerous children in a mixed family from rural eastern North Carolina; it is a now accepted story in my family that the

exact count of the number of step and half siblings cannot be determined without detailed explanation. I grew up knowing that a cousin could also be an aunt. Family, therefore, for me, was always rather fluid. Our trips to rural North Carolina to the small farms of numerous relatives were wonderful. I learned about gardens, fresh foods, southern hospitality, neighborhood stores, what it was like to live without a bathroom or a how exciting it could be when someone got a new stove to bake the perfect pie. I learned that baseball ruled the lives of my male cousins and uncles; cooking, sewing, and crocheting occupied the lives of women. My mother, the youngest in the family as it was described, left home when she was 17 to become a secretary. She was the renegade. She was an ok cook, a struggling seamstress who made mother/daughter dresses from McCall's patterns, and a bright intellectual. She was attractive, well-read, and "the good Navy wife." Everyone said my father was being groomed to be an admiral; he had been at Pearl Harbor when the war started; was sent to graduate school at both MIT and Johns Hopkins, did work overseas, and later, worked at the Pentagon. When we lived in London for three years, my father helped develop NATO. We traveled throughout Europe and my bother and I were taken care of by a nanny.

Being in a Navy family, you move a lot. Midway though my first year of school, we moved to Norfolk, Virginia. My father was the captain of several ships and he traveled three months at a time, mostly to the Mediterranean. He brought back huge trunks of gifts for each of us. I usually got dolls dressed in traditional costume, and sometimes I got jewelry. When I received jewelry, my father would give me two pieces of the same item, demonstrating to me that you could have more than you needed. I was told to keep

one and give the other to a friend who might not be as fortunate as I was. I loved doing this as my school had students in it from varying backgrounds. One friend in particular, was in foster care. She received several pieces my jewelry.

When I was about to turn six or seven, my parents asked me whether I would like a small birthday party with six to eight friends or a huge birthday party with all the girls from a local orphanage. If I chose the girls from the orphanage, I could not invite any close friends and I would not get any presents. I would be celebrating my birthday by giving. I remembered this being a very difficult decision to make; I also remember that there was really only one right answer. It was a rather sad birthday for me—everyone was in my room playing with all my dolls and I was left totally alone. I was given a card from one of the girls who came that day, which I have received. It was one of the best lessons I ever got from my parents. But I didn't really learn it well until much later. At the time I held onto a feeling that I had somehow been cheated of a real birthday party.

In the late 1950s, my youngest brother died of SIDS, a condition that was all the more terrifying at the time because it had no name and therefore no one understood why he had died. In 1960 my father died in a plane crash coming home from one of his trips to the Mediterranean. My youngest brother was born three months afterwards.

After this time, life got difficult. Money was tight and growing up got more difficult. My brothers, in time, all earned scholarships to go to military boarding school where they had the intellectual challenge they needed. My sister eventually went to a private school

as well; I was the only one to graduate from public school. Several years after my father's death, my mother returned to work, eventually developing the library at Virginia Wesleyan College. She returned to school there and graduated with a degree in religion. She then went to Harvard and earned a Masters of Divinity, graduating cum laude and becoming one the first women Lutheran ministers. Everyone in my family has multiple degrees. We are not an easy bunch, as our energy often floods a room with a far-reaching need for creative space. We all know how to focus, whether it is on the interpreting the Dead Sea Scrolls, creating artificial intelligence, designing energy efficient houses, gardening to the extreme, ministering to the ill or poor, teaching German, working with PETA, or maintaining the mental health of a community; we all tend to overdo. Even my sister's book sales to keep her local marine history museum afloat are legendary. Focusing on goals is, as we often say to each other in our more sane moments, our blessing and our curse.

I was married in 1970 in the now famed Hyde Park area of Chicago in a house with a chapel that also functioned as a homeless shelter. Sunday is my fortieth wedding anniversary. My husband David has always supported my work, my intensity, and my need for space, actually building me a 1,000 square foot studio/study behind our house where I do most of my work. His Ph.D. is in Applied Social Sciences from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. It's a mental health administration degree. He has worked in alcohol and drug abuse and prevention programs, child abuse and neglect, and various mental health programs. He currently heads a mental health center that serves a

three county area in central Florida. He is my rock, or from a Chinese perspective, he's a good pig to my rat.

I met Doug Blandy when we were both assistant professors at Bowling Green State University. It was 1983. Our research interests and our need to laugh a lot made for a quick friendship. In just a few years we transformed the art education program at BGSU to focus on diversity, an orientation toward social justice, and lots of folk art content. In 1987 after the continued objections of several art faculty, we launched an exhibition (with state funding) that was to be the lynchpin of a proposed new graduate program in the art department. *Boats, Bait, and Fishing Paraphernalia* (so named because neither of us were fishers and we couldn't think of the word gear), was exhibited in the art department gallery in the spring. It was a wild success if you measure that by local and national press and number of visitors, which broke all records. It portrayed the local fishing aesthetic and posed fishers as artists. While many administrators and art faculty, most of whom fished, were delighted with the attention to both the university and the local community, several other art faculty thought of it as a disgrace; it was, they said, red-neck art, and worse. It tainted their status as artists and labeled their art department as something lowly and crass. We both left BGSU that Spring. I knew it was time to hightail it out of the mid-west. The sky was too low for my liking. Florida, however, while having it's own special kind of problems, doesn't so easily scorn new ideas. Anything wild and unsuspecting can flourish in my current home state. This isn't to say that everyone agrees on much of anything, but Floridians are generally tolerant people. This is perhaps partially why we have so many crooks and renegades. Many people

come to the Sunshine State for a new start, a utopian dream, and a new start. Florida gave me a new playground. From a position in the Art Department at the University of Central Florida where I developed a community art program, I moved to head the Art History program. From that position, I sought a joint appointment with Philosophy where I began teaching aesthetics and courses in multicultural studies. When I had an offer to join the Film department, I moved my tenure to Film from Art and kept a joint appointment with Philosophy. A year ago, after tiring of faculty meetings and administrative responsibilities in two units, I moved my tenure to Philosophy. For the last seven years I have also directed the Cultural Heritage Alliance, a partnership program that celebrates traditional art in central Florida, often with a media-based component. I have been somewhat of a roving professor, an art educator, folklorist, art historian, philosopher, and humanities professor. Maybe I'm an art educator, posing as something else. I baffle others with my new identities, but I rarely worry about it. I feel lucky to have been able to easily make departmental moves. Mostly, I like the ambiguity, as it has given me a certain kind of ease in playing with ideas. I am fortunate to be in a department that welcomes diversity and celebrates odd fits of professional backgrounds. With twenty full time faculty in philosophy and degrees in humanities, religious studies, and cognitive science, as well as philosophy, my department embraces diverse perspectives and odd-ball ideas. I enjoy more freedom in this space than I have in any other departmental positions. It may have to do with the breadth of ideas covered in our department, where so many of us have specialties others don't fully understand. Mostly, I think it has to do with being with open-minded people. The quality of the people you work with is important.

My friends and I often take trips together when we come to art ed conferences.

Sometimes we come a day early or stay a day late. Sometimes we sneak out for a day during the conference. Paul, Doug, Laurie, and sometimes, John White and many others accompany us. Renee, Marilyn, Graeme Chalmers, others. . . Here are a few recent trips:

Kenny Hill's environment south of New Orleans.

Dr. Charles Smith's environment outside Chicago.

The Bottle Ranch in the California desert.

And Dr. Evermor's sculptural environment near Baraboo, Wisconsin

And not to leave a somewhat embarrassing picture of Laurie out, here she is trying on boots at Fredricks of Hollywoods during an LA NAEA conference.

It would take me a very long time to show you all the places we have visited on our "field trips" attached to conferences. These trips make me very happy. They are the stuff that makes for good traveling and terrific stories. Travel often makes for the best collaborations.

Most recently Doug and I (faculty and students at our universities) have been working on a partnership project with several organizations and universities in China. Our project, ChinaVine.org, aims to educate English-speaking audiences about Chinese traditional culture. We travel to various parts of China, document traditional aspects of their arts, and place the information on the Web in text, video, photographs, and animation.

ChinaVine.org is now becoming interactive and will soon have curriculum that can be used individually or in art settings all over the world.

Two weeks ago, I co-curated an exhibition titled, *Requesting Miracles: Votive Offerings from Diverse Cultures*. A partnership project with the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida, UCF, and Crealde School of Art, it included votives from Brazil (wooden body parts), Japan, Mexico, Italy, Haiti, and the United States. Students, artists from the community, and everyday people contributed their wishes for medical miracles and wishes that ranged from fast cars to world peace. Prayers could be heard at the altar space and ribbons with text sent messages of hope into the wind.

My work is rooted in friendship, community experience, and the kind of knowledge base that is often deeply rooted in tradition. (This is a picture from one the Women's Caucus Luncheons--1994.) I have had numerous people come into my life that have helped me understand the power of people coming together. My thanks goes to all of you who have shown me the way, way too numerous to name.

Thank you all.

Reference

McFee, J. K. (1979). Educating women in the visual arts. In J. Loeb (Ed.), *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (pp. 201-229). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.