

Imaginative Fields

A Companion to Action



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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Methodology	4
Introduction	5
Story of Self	6
Story of Us	19
Story of Now	33
Epilogue	53
Additional Information	60
In Gratitude.....	61
Literature Review	62
References	63

Abstract

This creative nonfiction essay uses public narrative framework (story of self, story of us, story of now) to intertwine cultural sustainability leadership theory with a practical case study of community organizing through the arts in a rural Minnesota town. The main topic explored in this essay is the Fergus Falls State Hospital (or "The Kirkbride Building"), a century old, abandoned mental institution that closed in 2006 and has faced the wrecking ball for the last eight years.

Using Cantwell's concept of an "imaginative field," where it is possible to "exercise our cultural rights," this paper explores the role of community participation in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, and how artists, preservationists, mental health advocates and activists have come together on an initiative called "Imagine Fergus Falls," funded by the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program, to bring the significance of the Kirkbride Building to the front and center of preservation and redevelopment conversations.

In addition to providing a model of creative placemaking and its role in historic preservation and economic development, this paper combines personal, environmental and community development narratives to capture a small moment in cultural sustainability as an emerging field. The result is a candid narrative of West Central Minnesota, and of the delicate balance of personal and community transformation.

methodology

This “companion to action” was created alongside of my full-time job as Program Director for Springboard for the Arts’ rural office in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. For the last three years, my professional life has been deeply intertwined in my academic life, and the opportunity to use my practical work as a way to tell explore cultural sustainability allowed me the unique opportunity for critical reflexivity that is often overlooked in the busy life of a nonprofit leader.

As my work at Springboard is about the role of art and creative expression in helping individuals and communities live more healthy, authentic and sustainable lives, it was important to me that this process was in and of itself a form of my own creative expression. The most important component of this process was regular journaling, which on some days was a time to reflect, document and analyze my work at Springboard for the Arts, particularly the partnership dynamics and community reactions to our projects. On other days it was an opportunity to write about my family, my childhood, and my connection to Minnesota.

Through the last year I have been very open with the individuals I work with about the fact that I was writing my capstone project about my work at Springboard, The Kirkbride, my family, and my community. When I was planning this project, my hopes were to create something that was first and foremost for them, because there were stories happening here in West Central Minnesota that I was worried wouldn’t otherwise be told. In finding a balance between this critical reflection and something that could be accessible to a diverse audience – my community, my family, my cultural sustainability peers, and my nonprofit network – I settled on the framework of public narrative, originally developed by Marshall Ganz at Harvard University, and of which I first learned of at the National Rural Assembly in June 2013.

Public narrative methodology operates on the notion that storytelling is a crucial step in inspiring courage for action. According to Matt Lewis, this framework is a tool to “guide the storytelling process to more mindfully attach the art of storytelling to the sometimes-difficult task of leadership.” Public narrative is meant to be divided into three sections – story of self, story of us, and story of now. I found that using this framework was exactly what I needed to explore what moved me towards action in the last three years, to be accountable to my community, and to encourage my readers towards a strong sense of self-awareness in the work they do.

introduction

Beyond the cultural inventory lies the conditions that fostered it; beyond achieved culture in all its elements lies the range of capabilities of which it is the expression; beyond cultural rights lies the imaginative field in which it is possible to exercise those rights.

— Robert Cantwell, *Folklore's Pathetic Fallacy*

This capstone project could have been many things: an ethnographic study of a Minnesota town in significant transition, a toolkit for artist-led community development, or an exploration of the role of narrative in rural issues. But the inner life of an abandoned mental hospital in a small town guided me elsewhere, to explore how our personal stories are intertwined to form a public narrative, and how the arts can help illuminate these patterns to create the conditions of cultural sustainability.

The only way to do this was to find a meeting place between radical honesty and trust with myself, and with the people that make up my life today. I hope that this series of meditations, photos and documents is a source of ease and space for other cultural sustainability leaders, particularly those in my generation, looking for guidance/meaning/place/connection in a world that is barreling forward towards systems that have no “body or metabolism¹.” It is a humble attempt to consider Cantwell’s “new human ecology,” and to map out the intentional creation of “imaginative fields,” of cultural sustainability in my own personal life and my life of community action, with the hopes of providing support to other cultural sustainability leaders through candid storytelling. And it is also a call to re-imagine rural communities as places of wild possibility— where we identify, prototype and share solutions to some of our world’s toughest problems.

....Or maybe it is none of this, and instead a happily failed attempt to get me closer to one or more of the above.

¹ Ruth Little explores the concept of body and metabolism in terms of art, culture and stewardship. In her catalog essay on Anne Hamilton’s “Landscapes of Emergency,” she writes, “*The life of the body, birth, death and illness, has vanished from the private sphere into professional seclusion; the production of the conditions of life has disappeared from view too, with energy and materials that come from what is no better known than nowhere...the interior of metabolism, the exterior of sustenance — have been lost.*”

story of self

To acknowledge “the world as one’s ‘kin’ and ‘twin’ is to see that a change in one’s condition is coextensive with a change in the condition of the world.

— J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A feminist project of belonging for the anthropocene*



standing on otter tail lake, November 2011

Fergus Falls, a town of 13,600 in West Central Minnesota, was on the periphery of many of my childhood memories in the Midwest, but not home to any of them. I never pictured a life here, let alone a life of action. Otter Tail County, with its rolling hills, gentle prairies, brutal winter storms and pristine lakes, represented the opposite of action for me — retreat, rest and stillness, a place that cultivated my imagination on summer and Christmas vacations, a place to write and reflect, but not to disturb. To simply let be.

For the 11 years that I lived in Portland, Oregon from age 18 to 29, I romanticized this region, its deceptive gentleness and simplicity. Our family cabin on Lake Lizzie represents my romantic view most clearly. Formerly my great grandmother's home, it was a place where time stood still for my family, and where we were closest to our minds, bodies, spirits and nature. It was a place that all generations took care of collectively, where we gathered without the hierarchy of "hosts" and "guests." If our family was a small town, the cabin was our public square, our "time out of time,"² festival grounds where relationships and plans and hopes and dreams were negotiated based on the collective impact of our actions.



Left: My sister (Kate), grandmother (Lucy) and me trying on old clothing at our cabin on Lake Lizzie, 1987



Right: Mom and strawberries, Lake Lizzie, 2005

² Alessandro Falassi unravels the liminoid experiences of festivals all around the world in his book, *"Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival"*

As I reached the end of my twenties, my career in Portland was taking off, but several things started to both distort my romantic view of this region and to lure me back. A relationship ended badly and with that I was sure I had lost one of my best friends. My older sister Kate was trying to leave an abusive relationship, and was lying about her addiction problems in order to avoid losing custody of her ten-month old son. Our cabin was torn down after the walls were discovered to be rotting, leaving an empty phantom lot where our bedrooms, the dining table and the piano used to be. Meanwhile I was 1600 miles away and the writings of Lewis Hyde, Robert Cantwell, Hannah Arendt and Wendell Berry were both making the world as I knew it dissolve before my eyes, and its possibilities become more vivid.

...from the front lines of what seems like a big mess that may never end, I feel this immense responsibility for creating a climate in whatever community I inhabit where we discover meaning and connections in everything that happens... good or bad. (1st MACS residency reflection, January 2011)

I was studying the role of art in family life in grad school, and suddenly life made no sense — to be musing on the need to make space for expression in order to strengthen relationships across generations — and not to simply be home where these thoughts, ideas and skills would actually have context and meaning, was like a cruel joke I was playing on myself and my family. As one of my first commitments to the field of cultural sustainability, I began to put the intention in my heart to find a way to move back to Minnesota.



I will never forget how some of my friends and colleagues in Portland reacted when I told them I had applied for a job in Fergus Falls. “What’s the population?” they’d ask. “About 13,000.”

“Oh... wow. Ok.”

This was the first of many experiences I had of the stigma that exists for people in their late 20s and early 30s if they move “back home,” especially if home is a rural town. Assumptions of the possibility that something must have happened. Or someone must be sick. Or there is trouble finding work. Even though these friends knew my unique circumstances, I think they were truly concerned about me. And I guess I kind of understand. I had had such a turbulent year, that maybe it seemed drastic and impulsive. At my going away party at Ethos, the community music school I had worked in for six years, several of my musician friends said they hoped I’d be back after I had some “healthy time” away from the city and with my family and that it would be a good “experiment.” I was surprised at the subtle judgment I was feeling from them about what my new life would be like. That’s when my move started to turn into a protest of sorts, a defense that there is a place for creativity in rural communities, perhaps even more so. As my moving date got closer and closer, one friend asked me tentatively how I felt now that it was really happening. My answer? “I feel smart.”

The truth is I did feel smart, mostly because of a pretty exciting career move, to open Springboard for the Arts’ first rural office. But driving away from my little green duplex and 11 years worth of the closest friends I had ever had was one of the scariest things I’ve ever done. My tears lasted for a few hours, until the Columbia River Gorge finally starts to flatten out into the eastern Oregon desert and you remember that the whole world is not grandiose and colorful and lush and jubilant and that there’s more to life than all of that — there is struggle and imperfection and desolate landscape that is also home to gorgeous and resilient life.



Somewhere in Eastern Oregon, June 2011

That grit might be what I was afraid I was losing by living in Portland, I'm not sure. I knew that in Portland, I wasn't who or where I wanted to be, despite the city's reputation for being a creative mecca, and my background in the arts, my love for communities, placemaking and alternative lifestyles. The rising rent costs relative to my salary were just a small factor of not seeing a sustainable life for myself. I just physically felt *off* on a daily basis. Maybe it was the fact that after 11 years, the moss, the rain, the mountains and the...whimsy of the neighborhoods despite their charm and freedom and beauty just felt like a piece of clothing that didn't quite fit. I missed the lakes and prairie, the seasons, and especially the people — the strange, stoic melancholy of Minnesota men; the playful warmth and shy generosity of its women. The *sparks* of play and creativity.... instead of wildfires of it.



It's true I was sort of "going home," but also not really at all. Contrary to many assumptions that I still have to correct today, I didn't grow up in Fergus Falls, which is about three hours Northwest of the Twin Cities in Otter Tail County, and an hour south of Fargo. I grew up in Dundas, a much smaller community of 450 people in southeastern Minnesota, 45 minutes from "the cities" (Minneapolis-St. Paul).

Dundas was more or less the “misfit” town adjacent to the much larger and lovely but somewhat pretentious Northfield — home of Carleton and St. Olaf College—where we did our shopping and went to school. My dad was the mayor of Dundas when I was in middle school, and I sometimes attended meetings with him just for fun. My mom wrote news articles about our town for the Northfield paper on her gigantic, noisy IBM typewriter. I actually bragged about how important my parents were to my fellow classmates in Northfield and didn’t understand why they didn’t really care. Dundas was a non-place to them. But for me it was a microcosm of a world I hoped for — one where we can shape the place we live in and actually see beauty unfold through our small actions.

When I think about my childhood in Dundas, I see so much influence from my Dad’s creative community leadership that I practice today in Fergus Falls. Especially in recent months, as I have purchased my first house and have had him tinkering with the place nearly every day (and testing my patience with his surprise visits), I notice his desire for places and people to be the best they can be — to live to their potential and to be cared for — whether that is the walls and floor of a house, a savings account, or the infrastructure of the community. My dad was and is definitely the first “placemaker” I met in my life. I secretly absorbed his processes and romanticized his leadership without ever really telling him I cared or was interested. I fantasized about imaginary cities and strange communities when I was little, where everyone was playful and happy. I also fell in love with the abandoned buildings in my town, like the ancient Archibald flourmill and the crumbling old high school. I frequently imagined these rural ruins overtaken by stories, performances, and paintings.

My dad’s biggest gift to the community was turning a run down, trashed city park into a beautiful baseball field for our town ball team, the Dundas Dukes, who won several state championships during my childhood. I believe I heard a few people in the region describe the story of our ball field as the Minnesota version of “Field of Dreams.”

I remember when the ball field first opened up and how it made the town feel.... like a *town*. For the first time. From anywhere in the community you could hear the announcer, sometimes even the crack of the bat and the cheers from the crowd. My sister and I were the bratty mayor's daughters that got to sit up on the scoreboard in left field, change the big heavy wooden number plates, and chase foul balls. We'd fight and cry over who got to chase the home runs and who had to stay and keep score. Chasing the home runs would sometimes leave you gone for a good half hour as you trekked through the forest behind the ball field and searched the shallow waters of the Cannon River. I would always delay my return, even after finding the ball, and stick my feet in the river, or lay down and listen to the game, and wonder if anyone was wondering when I'd be back.



Dundas will always be home, a place where I learned how the world works. But Otter Tail County was a different sort of place, a place where I learned how to breathe.

My grandmother Lucille was raised on a farm just outside of Fergus Falls on the Otter Tail River, the same land that her family, the Deunows, settled when they came from Germany. That land is now portioned off into a few different properties: a waterfowl refuge named after the Deunows, the original house and farm buildings, and two parcels of land on a hill by the river, one owned by my 97-year-old great uncle Eddie. The adjacent lot was purchased by my parents after my dad retired from his 30-year air traffic control career. He and my mom built a house on a slope above the river in 2005 and moved back to the area after more than 30 years away.



First winter living on the river, December 2006

My parents both grew up in separate towns northwest of Fergus Falls. When Interstate 94 was built between Moorhead and Albany in the early 1960s, both sides of my family – the Andersons in Rothsay and the Austins in Barnesville, were forced to sell their farmland, their lives forever changed by being split off from their farmland, and the sounds of junebugs and crickets and frogs being drowned out by a permanent hum of traffic speeding by. As if that wasn't hard enough, my dad's parents owned a Phillips 66 gas station and restaurant on what is now known as the "old highway," which had previously connected the area to the Twin Cities, and were forced to close it as they lost more and more customers to speed and convenience. My mom once told me that this sale sent my grandmother into a severe state of depression that lasted for the rest of her life, and inspired her to be a strong, stubborn advocate of small farm owners throughout the region.

From my perspective though, this region full of lakes and grandparents and no homework and holidays was what many metro area Minnesotans thought of it: "Vacationland" – a place with very few rules and worries, a place that took four heavenly hours of daydreaming in the car to my parents' favorite music -- Crosby, Stills,

Nash & Young, the Rolling Stones and Roy Orbison to arrive to. A place to escape, and to experiment with your identity.

I know my grandparents loved our visits but I can't help but wonder how this idyllic view affected them as they saw their family become more and more dispersed throughout the country.



All of my best memories of home, and the ones that have guided me towards positive paths throughout my life, stem from my relationship to place, and specifically a deep understanding of how things got to be the way they were. The harder times — like when my father's perfectionism would weigh on me so much that I couldn't come out of my room to face him, how scared I would get during the significant amount of alone time I had when both parents went to the bar at night and my sister locked me out of her bedroom, my dad's ominous bout of cancer — had an invisibility to them and were not rooted in any place in particular. Unlike the physical world we shaped every day, the inability to understand our relationships with one another in a form or body hinted at a dangerous missing loop in our ability to form intangible self-improvement, relationship and spiritual health into some mode of expression, that is, culture.

As it turns out, no matter how much magic you invest in the physical essence of a place, we can still miss steps in building ourselves and our own relationships with one another. In some ways, we are all fragile, misshapen structures of other people's imagination.

In August 2011, the third month I was getting settled into Fergus Falls — cold-calling people in the phone book, presenting at early morning service club meetings, and putting together IKEA furniture— I walked with heavy feet two blocks south of my office on Mill Street to the Otter Tail County Jail, several times a week, where my sister, Kate, was serving an initial 30 days for a bewildering number of DWIs and probation violations. Sitting across from her, talking through the phone and dirty plexi glass, she looked like a deflated balloon.

I wondered how any of us could even start to pick up the pieces between here, the Otter Tail County Jail, and that scoreboard in left field back in Dundas, not to mention the Otter Tail River—on which our family had literally come full circle. A century of our history with the land, economy and social climate had led us to that moment, frozen in complex personal and societal transition, with very few words or even feelings. Neither of us recognized each other.

In the article, “No one brings you dinner when your daughter’s an addict,” Larry Lake discusses the stigma of mental illness, and the isolation that families go through when trying to cope with it:

Friends talk about cancer and other physical maladies more easily than about psychological afflictions. Breasts might draw blushes, but brains are unmentionable.

As much as I felt alone throughout my sister’s illness, and even hated her at times for not being there as my big sister when I needed her, the days that I tried to step back and see what we could make of my sister’s situation were days of rare clarity. Was her addiction a sort of protest that had hijacked her body, to everything that had happened to make her that way, to make our culture this way? A dissent towards just accepting things, and playing the game, like everyone else? Was she that in touch with her body that she couldn’t disguise any of her brokenness from the world?



On weekends that summer, I reluctantly set out to explore the social terrain of my new home. One of the first people I met in Fergus Falls was Haley Honeman, who walked up to me at a storytelling festival hosted by the Otter Tail County Historical Society and our local theater, A Center for the Arts. She stood out as one of few young people at the festival, wearing colorful second hand clothes, and asked, “are you Michele from Springboard?” I found out that she was a theater artist and writer. Our conversation lasted for about an hour on a rickety picnic table. We were immediately kindred spirits.

When young, creative minds meet for the first time in a small rural town like Fergus Falls, the conversation goes pretty quickly from polite formalities to the comparison of the strange personal circumstances and plot twists that brought us here. We often expand into philosophical musings on rural life as an intentional resistance against the status quo of people our age. Haley was incredibly open with me about why she was back in Fergus Falls. She had been living in Mexico up until the late fall the previous year, with her boyfriend, Isaias. Something had opened up in her while navigating this new cultural context. She experienced what a psychiatrist later speculated was an acute psychotic episode. However, she described her experience to me as an alternate consciousness that was a pure expression of the love and beauty, a wide-awakeness that she felt for the world, and the beginning of a deep healing process.



Haley.

Haley was the perfect person to meet upon my arrival back in Minnesota. She was brutally honest and challenged me, something that I had been looking for in Portland and was worried I wouldn't find in an even smaller town, especially surrounded by the sometimes comforting, sometimes perplexing "Minnesota nice" culture. She was one of few people that I told about my sister's situation in the beginning. We hiked one day in Maplewood State Park, and talked endlessly about mental health stigma and how

alternate forms of consciousness in particular were perceived as threatening and dangerous to society, when in fact the people that experienced them might have important information for us about our society.

Haley had a way of tapping into the energy in a situation quickly, and radiated light towards situations with a gentle, cleansing kind of tension, always asking, “why does it need to be that way?” She taught me how to do a sage cleanse on my house when I first moved into it, and helped look at things from my sister’s perspective when I was most upset and frustrated. She courageously made herself vulnerable for the sake of others’ growth by getting to the heart of matters in any conversation.

Wondering what it was about mental “illness” that was following me, I told Haley of my good friend, another artist our age, who had also had been diagnosed with a psychotic episode just before I left Portland. It happened when we were staying in a beach cabin in Yachats, and I had to make the difficult decision to take him to the hospital, where he stayed for two weeks. I felt like a traitor doing this, because like Haley, my friend also seemed to have this uncontrollable awe of the beauty in the world and its fragility. Haley and I talked about how desperate certain situations in the world were getting — climate change, paradigm shifts in relationships and family structures, and wondered if this cycle of creative people having mental health crises could tell us something deeper about the world.

I didn’t even know that Fergus Falls had an abandoned mental hospital at this point. Strangely, it had not come up in my conversations with Haley, with my family, or with any community leaders. I didn’t know that my aunt Kathleen, my mom’s sister, had been hospitalized there in the 60s, or that my grandmother Lucy had been a dishwasher there after the gas station closed. Driving or walking in town, you couldn’t see the hospital if you weren’t looking for it, even though it was less than five miles from the heart of downtown. The Kirkbride Building was tucked away behind a canopy of trees, and a busy traffic intersection, a discarded memory.

Now, no matter where I go I can spot the administrative tower peaking above the canopy of trees that surrounds it, a symbol of so many conversations this world needs to have, and Fergus Falls the reluctant home of the possibilities they might unfold.

story of us

We cannot know the subject well if we stand only in our shoes. We must believe in the subject's inner life and enter with empathy into it, an empathy unavailable to us when we neither believe in nor cultivate an inner life of our own. When we deny or disparage the knower's life, as is the objectivist habit, we have no capacity to intuit, let alone inhabit, the inwardness of the known.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*



Laurie Mullen, Chair of the Friends of the Kirkbride next to the "pest house" (quarantine unit)
at the Fergus Falls State Hospital, November 2013

During the first few months of opening Springboard's Fergus Falls office, I did the things I thought I was supposed to do. I visited artist studios, theaters, art centers, and businesses, took pictures, asked questions, shared my own stories, and listened. I was excited and humbled by the challenge of transposing Springboard for the Arts' mission in the rural communities of the Lake Region.

A 23-year-old community and economic development organization for artists based in St. Paul, Springboard's mission is to cultivate vibrant communities by connecting artists with the resources and skills they need to make a life and a living. Springboard's organizational culture operates on the movement-building potential of recognizing the role that artists play in building vibrant communities, and is just as much about providing support to individuals artists as it is about building reciprocal relationships between artists and their communities. Most recently, Springboard for the Arts has become a national leader in the creative placemaking movement by focusing on leadership development for artists and giving them the tools to foster innovative cross-sector solutions to place-based challenges and opportunities.

The idea of the rural office had come about at Springboard serendipitously in January 2011 (likely around the same time I attended my first grad school residency at Goucher College). At the same time the Springboard staff was exploring how to respond to increasing national attention and demand for our way of working with communities, Maxine Adams, the Executive Director of the Lake Region Arts Council, was looking for innovative ways to better support artists in her 9-county region. Maxine was the one who contacted Laura Zabel, Springboard's Executive Director, to find out if we would consider opening a satellite office in Fergus Falls, and offered to pay our rent for a storefront office adjacent to hers.

The partnership was initially set to be a two-year experiment. I was lucky to go into the job with no particular agenda from either organization, and was encouraged to build a unique identity for the rural office, rather than a cookie-cutter replica of our St. Paul location.

I held a visioning session and open house, met with several, and helped a few refine their ideas towards their first grant applications. The artists ranged from highly trained sculptors, writers and painters to people who had used art to express something important to them on a whim, and now hoped to share, and possibly make a living. I had equally fascinating discussions about “what is art,” with a taxidermist, a tattoo artist and a gun enthusiast (separately, though this discussion as a group would have been even more interesting).

My phone didn’t ring very much. I didn’t spend a lot of time at my little office in the River Inn Building, overlooking the water downriver about 25 miles from my parents, because I wanted to orient myself with the region and visit as many places as possible. I observed the subtle changes in the region’s identity from town to town — the whimsical, nature-driven New York Mills, the calculated ambition of Breckenridge/Wahpeton (sister cities on the border of Minnesota and North Dakota), and all of the little dots of expression on the empty roads in between.



Puppet pageant, New York Mills



Red Door Art Gallery, Wahpeton (North Dakota)



Wayfinding signs for Art of the Lakes Studio Tour



Sculptures made from lawnmower blades by Ken Nyberg, Vining, MN

For a few weeks, I played phone tag with someone named Laurie Mullen, who had left several messages on my phone in a sing-songy voice, always to the same time signature, “Yeah! Hi, Michele! It’s Laurie Mullen!” Her messages were a mysterious part of my day, as she never identified her affiliation when she left messages, and when I called back her, the voice mail would reach an organization, Western Area City County Coop, where it seemed that she was the only employee.

Laurie and I finally met at an info meeting convened by the Blandin Foundation about their Community Leadership Institute, where we unknowingly sat by each other and finally introduced ourselves at the end. We talked right away about the solitude of working alone. Laurie asked if I had heard of a place called the Kirkbride Building and I said no. She explained that it was an abandoned state mental institution slated for demolition, and that, aside from her role as Executive Director at Western Area City County Coop (WACCO), she was the chair of the Friends of the Kirkbride, a grassroots organization that had been advocating for preservation and adaptive reuse for nearly ten years.

Laurie quickly described her own personal attachment to the building, which would later expand into a novel-worthy story with every conversation we had over the following years. She had grown up at the foot of the state hospital, and her family’s house had been an unofficial drop-in center for patients that had the free time to make their own schedules and walk through town. Patients would sit on her front porch and talk to her family, use their phone, or make snacks in their kitchen. I wouldn’t find out until much later that one of these patients, Lily, was legally adopted into Laurie’s family so that she could be released from the hospital after over 20 years of being institutionalized for post-partum depression. Lily died just last year, and was like a second grandmother to Laurie, who first met her when she was only 4 years old.

When there is a critical issue in a community, and we have a personal stake as well as a vision for the community, we fall into patterns with one another. As we take on roles, our own unique talking points enter and exit conversations like leitmotifs in an opera. If the Kirkbride’s saga was an opera, Laurie would probably be one of the lead characters.

That was the first day I heard Laurie say her “lines” to me that I would hear year after year in different settings, lines that came out like second nature after so many rehearsals in so many settings, lines that gave me chills, hopeful for possibilities that were to come. Sometimes weary tears would accompany those lines, other times a fiery and optimistic passion.

“I can just picture the activity up there. Failure is not an option.”

She went on to tell me why she had been trying to contact me in the first place — she had a vision of collaborating with artists to design projections of words and lights onto the building in order to foster interaction and reflection on the its significance, and imagine what was possible for its future. She had been planting many seeds for many years, but had planted this one in just the right place for something to take root.



aerial view of the Fergus Falls State Hospital, or “Kirkbride Building,” 2008 (provided by The Friends of the Kirkbride)

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With all its distinguishing features, insanity has nothing about it to prevent its being ranked with other diseases. A functional disorder of the brain, it belongs to the same category as those of other organs. Prevailing at all ages, among all classes of civilized men, without regard to talent, fortune or profession, there would seem to be no sound reason why the institutions specially provided for its treatment should have names different from those that are prepared for the relief of the sick suffering from other maladies.

— Thomas Story Kirkbride, *“On The Construction, Organization and General Arrangements of Hospitals For The Insane”*, 1854

For over 100 years, the labyrinthine history of institutionalized mental health treatment evolved within five miles of the heart of Fergus Falls’ downtown. This treatment took place on the sprawling, beautiful campus of the Fergus Falls State Hospital, built in 1890 under the design plan of Thomas Story Kirkbride.

Kirkbride was a psychiatrist from Pennsylvania, a Quaker, and was one of many pioneers of “moral treatment” for the mentally ill³. Known by his peers more as a stubborn idealist than a visionary, he founded the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutes for the Insane in 1844, and wrote his groundbreaking “On the Construction, Organization and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane” in 1854. More commonly referred to as “The Kirkbride Plan,” the defining characteristic of the institutions Kirkbride envisioned was a grand Victorian building with its outer wings organized “en echelon,” which meant that the building had the staggered shape of a horseshoe or bat wing, allowing for each patient room to receive an equal amount of sunlight.

For Dr. Kirkbride, *place* was the main prescription for healing mental health illness: *“the building should be in a healthful, pleasant and fertile district of country; the land chosen should be of good quality and easily tilled; the surrounding scenery should be of a varied and attractive kind, and the neighborhood should possess numerous objects of an agreeable and interesting character.”* He insisted that every hospital for the insane

³ Conceptualized in the 18th century, and put into practice in the 19th century, moral treatment is associated with the emergence of the asylum system in Europe and was developed as a humane response to the “insane” being viewed as animals and treated as such.

possess at least one hundred acres of land, for farming and gardening purposes, which would provide exercise, labor and occupation to the patients. He also described the importance of 30 — 50 acres worth of “pleasure grounds,” with ample shade and a park-like atmosphere. Kirkbride also emphasized the public benefit of this green space — *“extensive walks and drives on the hospital premises offer so many advantages...It is hardly possible under any circumstances, for such an institution to control too much land immediately around it.”*

While the building was tucked away and easy to miss if you weren’t looking for it, the impact on everyday life in the community, even today as it sits empty, cannot be ignored. Former hospital workers still gather annually to remember their lives in this self-sustaining community, which had its own auto shop, beauty salon, underground tunnels, and parades. A patient-staff orchestra named the Happy Ramblers led weekly outdoor dances on the tennis court, performing on instruments donated by people in the community. Many former nurses have expressed to me how important the arts were to the patients. One remembers a regular saying of one of her patients: “I’m going to kill myself... but first I’m going to the dance!” This patient would dance his heart out and drench his shirts in sweat—possibly the most important therapy he needed to get through each week.

It is hard to meet someone in the region that does not have some kind of emotional connection to the Kirkbride through family, or who does not have a memorable story about an interaction with the patients, some of whom were allowed to go out on their own and spend their free time in the community’s cafes, library and other public spaces. One can only imagine the strange vibrancy the patients added to the community — I learn about a new individual with every conversation, like Wally, who drew colorful marker drawings and rode his bike back and forth through downtown, smoking a cigar. Other patients were well known only by the nick names community members themselves gave them, like “Popeye” who stood and saluted the American flag for hours, and “Chester the Molester,” who was not a molester at all but had the unfortunate nickname coined by the young women in town because of his uninhibited, flirtatious character.

Today, northeast of the building, about a twenty-minute hike through prairie grass, a cemetery of almost 3000 unmarked graves rests virtually unnoticed on the edge of town. Patients that were still hospitalized at the time of the building's closing in 2006 are now dispersed throughout town in privately owned group homes. Healthcare is still Fergus Falls' primary economic driver – in the last five years Lake Region Healthcare nearly doubled their employee base with the opening of a new Cancer Center. The arts have played a key role in attracting and recruiting these employees, particularly with the local theater, A Center for the Arts, and The Kaddatz Gallery. Gene and Maxine, the elderly couple who founded The Friends of the Kirkbride with Laurie Mullen, give their dynamic two-hour tour, a work of art in itself, every Friday in the spring and summer. Younger residents in the Fergus Falls area have developed a fascination with the building, some driving from as far as an hour away to break into it and “chase ghosts,” paint graffiti or snag souvenir bricks, ornate door hinges or leftover papers.

From storied experiences that defined community members' lives, to fleeting moments of rebellion, to tourists pondering the complex history of mental health treatment, the Kirkbride has developed a sort of “embodied cultural energy,” a place that represents the community's memories and imagination all at once.



Beyond these community perspectives and their informal modes of expression throughout the years — some of attachment and identity and others of possibilities wrapped in mystery and adventure — there are the systems, resources and leaders that are positioned to both preserve the building's past and determine its future, and the potential for an “imaginative field” in which the community can exercise their voice in the matter.

When the state of Minnesota handed the building over to the City of Fergus Falls in 2006, they set aside \$8 million in grant funds to either be used for demolition, maintenance or repurposing. Through legislative action, the deadline to use those funds

has been extended twice in the last 8 years, with a current sunset of December 2014. Used to market the building to developers, and general upkeep, approximately \$4 million of this money is left.

\$8 million is not enough to restore a 500,000 square foot building, but it can go a long way in making it possible, and connecting the dots of collaboration necessary to make such an ambitious project a reality. However, instead of being framed as a source of possibility, the state grant funds have hovered over the city like an impending storm.



City Council meeting discussing the fate of the Kirkbride, standing room only, May 2012

While I have only been entangled in the fate of the Kirkbride for the three years I have lived in Fergus Falls, and am hyper-aware of my own naivety and idealism as a newcomer, I have been fascinated less with the majesty of the building than with the animation of voices that the Kirkbride inspires. When I first got involved with the conversation, perhaps because I am more interested in human relationships than I am with the built environment, I quickly shied away from imagining the *physical* landscape without the building, but instead imagined the community without the *conversations* and *relationships*, both positive and negative, that the building had fostered. Picturing

this, the future of Fergus Falls looked bleak. Attending standing room only council meetings month after month, I imagined the apathy that would result in the city moving forward without paying attention to the grassroots engagement this building had sparked.

Throughout the years, several highly qualified developers have shown significant interest in redeveloping the building. Potential development plans have included a Chinese Immersion School led by North Dakota State University, a Veteran's Rehab center, and a biotechnology office building — however, the looming deadline and the City Council's doubt in each developer's ability to successfully rehab the place without walking away has frequently paralyzed the city into fear of losing the funds completely, left to manage a monstrous vacant building with the taxpayer's money. This fear, while legitimate, has been toxic, and even sometimes corrupt, driving potential investors and developers away from Fergus Falls.⁴

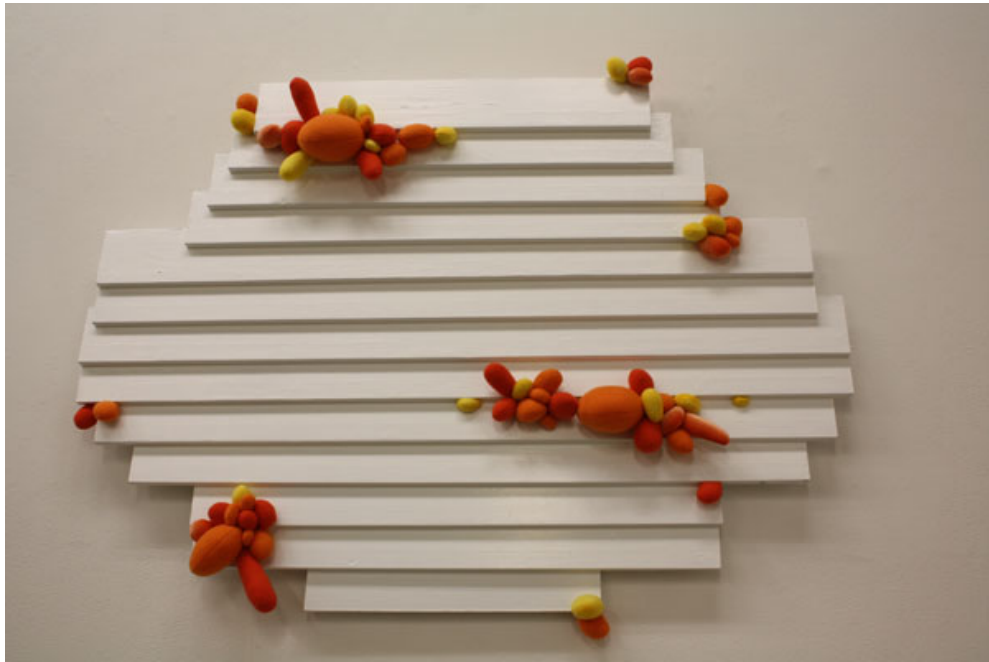


I had met Naomi Schliesman, a mixed media installation artist who had recently returned home, a few times, and felt a different kind of affinity with her than with Laurie and Haley. In Haley I had found a sort of spiritual guide, in Laurie, a person who I wanted to support however I could because of her incredible vision and resilience. In Naomi, I saw someone that I could get sh*t done with.

One day Naomi came into my office to say hi and I asked her what her take was on the Kirkbride. She told me her own story of growing up in Fergus Falls and how when she was in girl scouts she would visit the patients with her troop and make art with them. She also had fond memories of her school choirs performing for the patients during the holidays. Naomi's artwork, large, brightly colored, and imposing, were partly inspired by

⁴ There is currently speculation that the city administrator in Fergus Falls deliberately posted incorrect information about the building when the city was marketing to developers, including phone numbers and emails that didn't exist, making it impossible to contact the city. One developer, Atul Wahi, was also slandered in the Fergus Falls Daily Journal for receiving a speeding ticket and for being evicted from an apartment, without thorough fact checking – these allegations were significantly exaggerated and misled the community to stop trusting Wahi immediately.

one of the patients she bonded with over the course of many years, who ate so many Cheetos each day that her fingers, and everything she touched, were stained with the bright orange color. That color is the basis for many of Naomi's large scale works.



"Vigil," sculpture by Naomi Schliesman

We talked about how the town's profound weariness was not because of a shortage of ideas, but that there was not a space to simply express these ideas outside of formal public forums, where ideas cannot take on a life because decisions are expected to move forward in these settings. With a city council meeting coming up that was being framed as a crucial turning point and a possible move towards demolition, we sat and thought about what we could do.

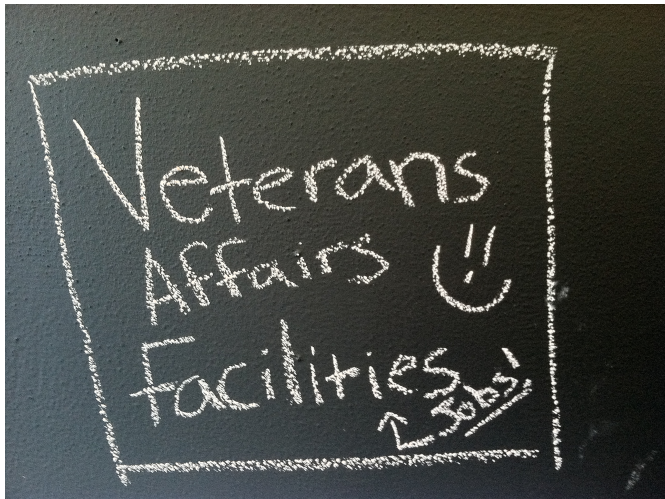
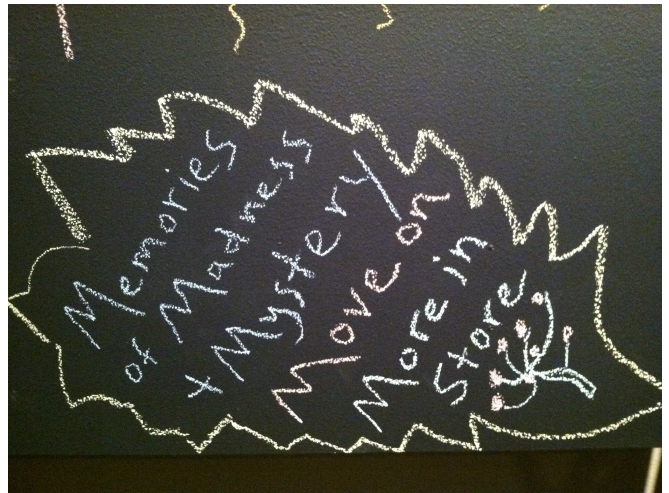
My office at the time still had empty white walls and we stared at them during this conversation. Naomi began describing an idea of building a silhouette of the building. "What if we made it out of chalkboard?" I asked, thinking of the amazing simplicity of artist Candy Chang and her "Before I Die" chalkboard project.

Our first project together was decided, just like that, in a 20-minute conversation. A week later Naomi arrived at my office with a sixteen-foot wide chalkboard silhouette of

the building, and installed it on the large blank wall in my office. We made a Facebook event page inviting people to come and share their ideas and memories of the building.

We titled the piece, “What Else is Possible?” The chalkboard was our humble gift to a community in need of interaction. But it also helped establish the identity of Springboard’s rural office, and through the years, I believe because of this project, the office has been less a resource center specifically for artists than a creative resource center for the entire community, a sort of think tank where artists and leaders can meet, using play and creativity as a place to explore challenging conversations.

We didn’t know what the response would be, but soon the Otter Tail County Historical Society requested that we move the chalkboard to their exhibit about the hospital, “The State Welcomes You.” Then, this little board took on a life of its own. We crammed it into my dad’s pick up truck at the request of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota for their annual “anti-wrecking ball” exhibit in Minneapolis. The Friends of the Kirkbride fastened it to a flatbed trailer for their float in Fergus Falls’ annual Summerfest parade. Lastly, Naomi washed off the chalk ideas and incorporated the silhouette into an installation at the Kaddatz Gallery in downtown Fergus Falls.



"What Else is Possible" chalkboard project, May 2013

story of now

Every action becomes a chain reaction where every process is the cause of new processes ... the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.

— Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*



Creative Placemaking Action Workshop, February 2014

For the first time in years, the public narrative in the community had shifted away being primarily about the bricks and mortar of the Kirkbride, which had eclipsed the significance of this building's inner life and its effect on Fergus Falls' identity. Through art, we had started to create the conditions to ask what else was possible in a community with a unique capacity for compassion for the mentally ill, and what else was possible if we viewed at this building as an opportunity to reinvent our community during a time when rural towns are fighting to set themselves apart.

I believe that there is not enough value in taking on an intuitive, "see what happens" approach in the nonprofit world. But we were lucky to have a unique capacity for experimentation given our circumstances. Because Springboard was just getting off the ground in Fergus Falls, we had some leeway to experiment and make mistakes. Because Naomi and I were both fairly new to Fergus Falls, we had a certain capacity to ask more naive questions than someone who has lived in a community for decades. It was also as simple as the two of us just wanting to do something together, being among the few young, contemporary artists in the community.

But we didn't really anticipate that the chalkboard activity would organically set the stage of what would later become a deep collaboration between organizations that wanted to foster the conditions for a more innovative take on the Kirkbride's development potential, one that focused both on the cultural significance of the building, and the economic potential of the community's most unique physical asset. The chalkboard had allowed certain individuals to bond over the conversations its participants started. Specifically, we began regular visioning sessions with the Otter Tail County Historical Society, Friends of the Kirkbride, the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota and the Fergus Falls Economic Improvement Commission about what we could do together.

As a group, we began to brainstorm how more artists could help to foster interaction, and how interaction was necessary for any permanent solution that would also be authentic to the community. Throughout these conversations, I was careful and persistent to express that the intention at this point should not be that artists would

“save” the building, but that they would actively prevent community division from any of the possible outcomes demolition and redevelopment was likely to create.

These five organizations worked together to apply for a \$75,000 National Endowment for the Arts “Our Town” grant in January of 2013, with Springboard as the lead organization. With the uncertainty of the building’s future during the time of the application, we had to be creative about how a project could position artists as leaders in both the best and worst case scenarios. I encouraged the group to open up to the possibility that artists could lead the community through transition of the city’s “dual paths,” — redevelopment or demolition. There was tension in these conversations, as the partners saw this grant as a one time shot for a permanent arts-focused solution. Part of this tension was wrapped up in how we defined success and failure as a group — was our story a success if the building was saved, but purchased by a wealthy prince charming who didn’t bother getting to know the community? Was our story a failure if the building was demolished, but in the process the community had experienced the transition as a sort of deliberate renewal and reinvention? As hard as it was to be the one trying to dismantle these assumptions, I truly believed we needed to face the hard reality of what our strengths could best deliver at that point in time, and that was in community engagement. There were so many ideas — artist studio space, a folk school, sculpture gardens—that we needed to invent our own type of “feasibility plan” which didn’t hone in on one of those possibilities yet but instead focused more on community voice and participation, connecting the dots, and charting the constellations of our stories.

It’s important to point out that a few artists were already independently doing projects related to the building, and hoping to build visibility, such as photography exhibits, and yes, horror movies. Some of these projects were well thought out and had great success, while others strained relationships in the community and the reputation of artists. A horror movie titled “The Control Group,” starring Brad Doufir, the voice of the famous “Chucky,” was particularly problematic, because of the damage the crew left behind in the building (i.e. fake bloody handprints on the walls, screens cut out of windows). Several movies had been filmed in the Kirkbride at this point, but The Control

Group was blamed as responsible for ending Fergus Falls' brief era of being a horror movie set.



"Geist," one of several horror films produced at the Kirkbride from 2011 to 2014 (photo provided by Eric Daniel Dunn)

Despite the blind spots of some artists groups in recognizing the sensitivity and complexity of the Kirkbride situation, it was also possible that the city council was seeing the effect of activity at the building in promoting more awareness, and that they took the first opportunity they could to make it harder for the community to treat the building as a public space and plan creative activities in and around it. In fact, there was constant resistance from the council towards community voice of any type, and I learned that this was not a new thing in any local issue.⁵ It made participation all the more important to focus on, as this was just a symptom of a larger underlying problem in civic engagement.

We wondered whether we could provide artists with more tools in community engagement, and specific knowledge and contacts about the building's history and redevelopment situation. Our theory of change was that if artists produced *stronger* participatory projects, in collaboration with other stakeholders, then we could position

⁵ In early 2011, the city was accused of "ram rodding" a bond to fund a new ice arena despite petitions and general public disapproval.

artists at the table as legitimate partners in the future of the building. They could create a sort of liminal space for the community, bridging conversations between our past and future. We also believed in the power of many small projects because of the spectrum of ideas and perspectives, and the potential to scale up from small successes, involving more people as we progressed, just as the chalkboard had demonstrated. Finally, the potential of helping artists strengthen their community engagement skills as a whole and to see themselves as a resource to the community would in turn strengthen their leadership skills and their potential to be involved with other community development issues in the future—ultimately affecting their career and wellbeing.

To do this, Naomi and I, along with Jun-Li Wang, Springboard’s artist community organizer, and Laura Zabel, developed the idea of a “creative placemaking action workshop,” where we would spend a day with artists and community members interested in the Kirkbride Building. Upon completing the workshop, we would provide a pool of small project support funds for them to implement the ideas generated in the workshop. We already had a creative placemaking curriculum that was being used in St. Paul for our Irrigate project at the time, and began working with partners to customize this workshop specifically for the community. We also felt it was important to incorporate community storytelling component into the grant, in order to facilitate more sharing across generations that demonstrated the building’s significance.

Below is our vision statement for the Our Town grant, which we were officially awarded in July 2013:

*The vision of this project is to **foster community interaction in Fergus Falls through innovative arts programing**. Specifically, Springboard for the Arts will customize its popular creative placemaking curriculum for artists in and around Fergus Falls, MN, by working closely with economic development and cultural partners to combine intergenerational arts engagement with historic preservation, oral history, and economic improvement. These topics will be synthesized by training a network of artists of all disciplines and career levels to produce participatory art projects that draw attention to the importance of story, sense of place and social imagination in both celebrating the past and building a stronger and more innovative Fergus Falls community. Through this project we will also develop a national model for other rural communities to draw upon in building their own creative placemaking capacities as they relate to bridging historic preservation and economic improvement conversations.*

The announcement of the NEA grant was one of the most challenging times for me personally, as a leader. The same week the news of this major funding came out, it was announced to the public that after a last marketing push (which the city was pressured into by an ad-hoc task force), Ray Willey of Historic Properties had submitted a letter of intent, had been chosen over another local developer, and was entering into an exclusive agreement with the City for redevelopment efforts. There was a media frenzy that I wasn't quite prepared for. Everyone wanted to know how Willey's plan would affect our project and vice versa – and I hadn't even met him yet. It was amazing how quickly the public eye jumped to assumptions based on what they hoped for – a quick and permanent solution. I spent a lot of that summer correcting people that we had not been funded to start artist studios, and also that we hadn't "saved" the building by luring Ray Willey to Fergus Falls with our work. Many people even thought that the community engagement piece we were offering was irrelevant now that there was a developer. I argued that if anything, it was more important, because they still had a year of negotiations ahead of them, and that he needed to learn about what was important to us and we needed to maximize the public benefit of redevelopment. After a few frustrating conversations and botched messaging in their articles, I certainly gained a new respect for how powerful the media can be, and how important it is to proactively engage with them – to tell your story before someone else tells it for you.

Another challenge, before we even started programming, was that creative placemaking was a new concept to the region, and Springboard's way of doing creative placemaking – focusing on small, artist led projects – was already different from the general national narrative. The ambivalent public reaction showed us that people were skeptical of why this work could help and how it was going to benefit the community. At that point, we hired Naomi Schliesman to help coordinate the Our Town grant, and her perspective, as a native Fergus Falls resident, was priceless. She suggested that before we did any workshops with artists, we had to demonstrate the type of participatory art that we had in mind, and the project needed an identity that loosened our organizational grip and opened itself up to being owned and shaped by the community. So, we held a kick-off

event in September 2013, and titled the entire initiative “Imagine Fergus Falls,” the name of which was a suggestion from Laurie Mullen.

The city cooperated with us on using the grounds of the Kirkbride for our Kick Off Event, but they didn’t go above and beyond with any extra support or promotion, nor did our partners, much to our surprise. It was a test of our patience, and a lonely time, but Naomi, Laurie and I vowed to each other to enter into whatever path Imagine Fergus Falls had with radical trust. All we could do was make the space for an opportunity for people to see themselves in the project.

As we planned the event, more and more people asked to be involved. The Lakes Area All-Stars, a community jazz band, performed sheet music from the files of the Happy Ramblers (the Kirkbride’s resident band), a photographer set up a “friend and family photo shoot” with costumes, and a collage artist facilitated a beautiful community history photo transfer collage (featured on the cover of this paper), which included photos of some of the chalkboard contributions. Despite the rain that day, about 250 people attended— not quite the festival atmosphere that we hoped for but enough to help plant the seeds of what arts engagement about the building could look like, and why this sort of interaction was important.



Imagine Fergus Falls kick-off event, September 2014



Imagine Fergus Falls kick-off event, September 2014



In the meantime, I was asking Harold Stanislawski, the executive director of the Economic Improvement Commission, for meetings with Ray Willey and the Historic Properties team. Harold had always been supportive of me from the beginning of my time in Fergus Falls, but like many of the older male leaders in the community, he treated me more like a daughter than a colleague. I was frustrated that my organization was the only one besides the city at the moment that had cold hard cash to spend on the building, that the EIC was technically a partner, and that I still wasn't being taken very seriously. Harold cautiously told me that he didn't want to "bombard" the developers with information about the community yet. This didn't compute in my head as the correct action of someone with role of an economic improvement leader. All I could do though was continue to ask, and again, be patient.

When the developers came to town for one of their visits in January 2014, I finally got a text message that said Harold would bring Ray and his partner Bob over to my office to chat but that they would only have 15 minutes. When they walked into my office, Harold said playfully, "Well, Michele, we only have one question for you. How much square footage do you want?"

Moments like this baffle me, make me laugh, and make me thankful for whatever patience was passed down from my mother to me, so that I can deal with the overly calculated actions of city leaders, and perhaps model openness, trust and experimentation. Harold was changing, it seemed. Maybe the community was too. Maybe people weren't used to working with, or being led by, young women like Naomi and I. Maybe they were even threatened by us. Our city council was, after all, made up completely of men in their 40s and 50s, and the leadership across the business sector in Fergus Falls looked exactly the same. Maybe we were breaking ground on much more than one single preservation issue.

I had over-prepared for the meeting, putting press clippings into plastic sheets, writing out my talking points, dressing more professionally than my usual cardigan and jeans,

and cleaning every square inch of the office. Historic Properties' plan was to turn the building into a luxury hotel, surrounded by restaurants and other guest facilities. Apparently they had access to celebrity funders, including NFL players. By this time, having done this before in so many settings in Fergus Falls, I prepared for the worst possible reaction, and what I was getting all too used to – an “oh, that’s nice,” sort of fatherly response to my ideas.

The meeting swung in a pendulum from one extreme to another: Business, money. Culture, people. Business, money. Culture, people. My plan was to talk to them about ideas we had for animating the process of redevelopment. Mr. Willey wanted to know whether we could just lease an entire wing for artist studio space, how much space we would need and when we could secure funding to start programs there. I explained that our mission with this project was about something than just making use of the space, but was instead about mobilizing artists to unite the community in the building’s redevelopment – something that felt crucial to its success. He seemed intrigued when I suggested he think of us as a community engagement/marketing partner more than anything. The meeting lasted over an hour while we cordially tried to find a place to meet in the middle. While we didn’t come to any conclusions, when they left my office I knew that I had introduced concepts that had not yet been taken into account. He was particularly excited to research Maker Spaces and Co-working models, which I mentioned when I reluctantly spoke of what I could picture in the building. It was a small success, and trust was built. Unlike my previous experience with business leaders in the area, he had treated me like an equal and challenged me—instead of listening politely. I had also gained a better understanding of the complexities a businessman deals with when making a case to purchase a historic property from a city – and had much more sympathy for both entities than before.

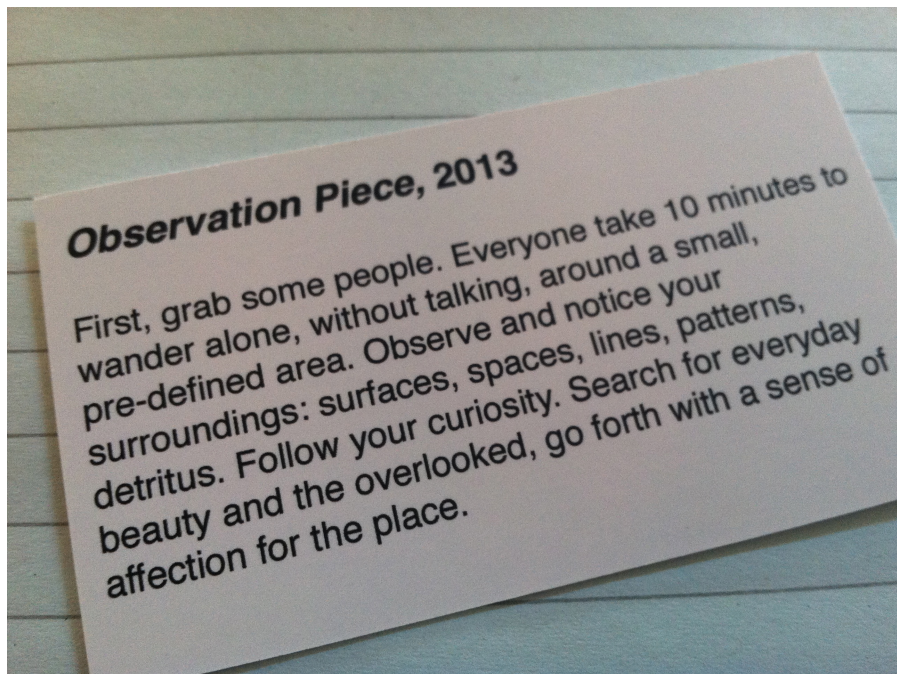


We held our creative placemaking action workshop on a brutally frigid day in early February at The Spot, a popular downtown café/wine bar, owned by Mike Loreno, a former behavioral psychologist whose wife, Mary, had worked at the Kirkbride as a nurse. Our goal was to bridge conversations about creative placemaking and its role in the Kirkbride's past and future, and for artists to leave with the opportunity to apply for project support. About 30 people attended, filling the meeting space to the brim. Several people showed up who didn't register, including the Mayor, Hal Leland and some young artists who we had never met before. By this time we had also joined up with another partner, PlaceBase Productions, a theater duo who were starting their first weekend of oral history interviews with community members that they are currently working into the script of a play that will take place at the Kirkbride on September 6, 2014.

Sometimes the best thing you can do for a community is just provide a reason to be in the same room. It was amazing to look out and see the intergenerational conversations that were about to happen. Harold Stanislawski was sitting at a table with Bethany, a young theater artist who had just moved to Fergus Falls from Saskatchewan partly because she had heard about the arts opportunities here. Mayor Leland looked surprised and thrilled when he found out the people he was sitting with had driven from St. Paul and Fargo for the workshop. Harold later told me that he wished he could sit for another hour with each of the artists he met, because their perspective had helped him think different about economic improvement, especially for the younger generations that he and his colleagues were so concerned about losing.



creative placemaking workshop, February 8, 2014



observation tour instructions

We spent the day, from 9am to 5pm, listening to presentations by three key stakeholders – Chris Schuelke, the Executive Director of the Otter Tail County Historical Society, Laurie Mullen of Friends of the Kirkbride, and Harold Stanislawski from the city. After each of their presentations we facilitated a panel between the three of them, asking them to speak specifically to the role of art in preservation and economic

development. The second half of the day was focused on participation and ideation. After giving a short presentation on creative placemaking, we headed outside to do an “observation tour,” an activity that practices appreciative inquiry of a place, and mindfulness. When we returned, Ashley and Andrew of PlaceBase Productions led a “story swap,” and facilitated a dynamic conversation that ranged from pragmatic suggestions of creative reuse to some very personal accounts of struggles with mental health, family, and identity.



Story Swap

Place postcards on the floor with the image facing up. Ask participants to walk among the postcards in silence and choose an image that speaks to them. Go around the circle and describe why that image spoke to you.

Mysterious	Narrow	Technology	Spinning	Passion	Protest
Celebration	Childhood	Future	Bright	Gorgeous	Parody
Agenda	Anguish	Blue Sky	Green Trees	Advances	Dignity
Respect	Grandmother	Ignorance	Unknown	Big	People
Connecting					

That night we also opened an exhibit in the gallery space at The Spot, entitled, “Essence of Memory and Space,” which Naomi Schliesman curated. We had held a call for art in January and received over 50 pieces of all mediums, ranging from pastels made by a former nurse and well-loved local artist, Kirk Williams, to a quilt sewn as a gift to Gene and Maxine Schmidt, to actual works by former patients.



“The Key,” by Kirk Williams, 1982



marker drawing by Wally, former patient

Over 100 people crammed into the little restaurant for the exhibit opening. I wish I had taken a time-lapse video of the exhibit reception, to show how people moved from conversation to conversation and table to table that night, some former employees reconnecting after years, community leaders asking artists questions about their processes, and kids coloring pictures of the iconic administrative tower.



essence of memory and space exhibit at The Spot, February 2014
(photos by Holly Diestler)

The exhibit was so popular we extended it an extra month, and had a closing reception. Ray Willey and his partners were able to attend, and I invited Ray to speak after I welcomed the group. This was his first time speaking to the community outside of council chambers, and for the rest of the night, community members were buying drinks for him – he was suddenly human instead of an intimidating California businessman, and the community was suddenly a crucial partner to his success. A popular local band called the Explosive Rockats was playing in the backroom, performing covers of Roy Orbison, the Beatles and Buddy Holly. Towards the end of the night I found myself dancing to “Hang on Sloopy,” with Ray, Harold, Bethany and a few others that had had a little too much to drink. I’ll never forget the release of tension I felt emanating in the room, and the amount of expression I was seeing as people danced together, occasionally chatting about their appreciation for each other and excitement about working together in the future.

This coming August, most of us are hopeful that the deal between Historic Properties and the City will be finalized. In early September, our play with PlaceBase Productions, called “The Kirkbride Cycle,” will take place on the grounds with the cast made up entirely of community members, the script unveiling the themes and patterns that have been revealed in PlaceBase Productions story swap and interview process, of which nearly one hundred people from a variety of perspectives on the Kirkbride have participated. Inspired by photos of the parades the hospital would put on each year, and a well-loved panoramic picture of a motorcycle club in front of the building, community members will be encouraged to ride their bikes, or sit on a hayride, moving from scene to scene around the entire circumference of the building.



an Imagine Fergus Falls event presented by PlaceBase Productions, Springboard for the Arts, Otter Tail County Historical Society and Friends of the Kirkbride
www.imaginefergusfalls.com

While we only planned a slightly larger scale event than our Kick-off day, we are already working on making a weekend of this event as more people learn about the project. The organization Remembering With Dignity will have finished marking graves in the state hospital cemetery this summer and has asked to have their memorial dedication on the Sunday morning after our play. The organization PartnerSHIP 4 Health is organizing a mental health awareness bikeride on Saturday morning, and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota is considering facilitating a field trip for members of other communities in the state working on preservation issues. The Historic Properties team have agreed to be in the final scene of the play, entitled, "the future holds out her arms to us."

The deadline for artist project funds was just yesterday, and we received proposals ranging from making and selling charm jewelry with mental health patients in local group homes to decorating bikes for the mental health awareness ride. Projects will take place this summer and fall, and we will combine our documentation of the artwork collected with these to make an online exhibit about the Kirkbride Building.

Fri, Feb 28, 7:34 PM



We have official jewelry now

Umm. Awesome.

Seriously, that's gotta be some kind of measure of attachment to community.

My hesitation of being involved with permanent space solutions has begun to soften. Building off of our hope to keep artists involved with the next phase of the Kirkbride and the transition the community will experience whether development happens or not, Springboard is currently a finalist for a \$500,000 grant from ArtPlace, to pilot an artist residency program called Hinge Arts at the Kirkbride. Below is our artistic statement for this program:

Hinge Arts is a place where artists and communities gather to explore themes of community transition, connection, and innovation. Our name is inspired by our belief that artists play a key role in connecting our past with our future.

Located on the campus of the former Fergus Falls State Hospital during a time of significant transition, Hinge Arts hosts artists from all over the country to explore these themes. Artists partner with the community of Fergus Falls by incorporating salvaged building materials, personal stories and the built environment into site-specific arts experiences that honor past connections and create new memories at the building.

A deliberate response to the word “unhinged” as it relates to mental illness, activities will have a special focus of using art as a way to illuminate the many perspectives behind the history of mental health treatment as well as preservation and economic development in small towns.

Whether the development agreement goes through or not, we plan to lease space in one of the outbuildings of the Kirkbride campus, the former nurse’s dormitory, which is owned by local developers and being converted into apartments this summer. With windows overlooking the main administrative tower of the building, we hope to create a place of exchange both for the community and for artists, and to make a physical space for these conversations to continue during whatever type of transition we face over the next year. The Historic Properties team has already told us they would love to have temporary installations move throughout the building, leading the path of construction and keeping the space vibrant and meaningful while the community waits to see what unfolds.

epilogue

A community comes into being through exchange. The resources of any community are immense; they include its local knowledge base, its natural environment, its traditions and stories, its crafts and skills. Communities need to see successful models of arts practice, with positive outcomes for participants, but those outcomes don't only lie in performance, in the moment of release. They're in the nature of the connections established throughout the process and beyond – the sometimes hard narrative of participation. We need to develop the support structures in the making of new work so that it is not only rich, complex and confident in expression but influential and affective in its impact on others from the beginning of the process to its end (and there should be no end, only another beginning). That means developing the narratives around projects to include the full process and the possible, not the prescribed, legacy.

--Ruth Little

Last November, my sister graduated from DWI Court, a truly unique recovery program that was the alternative of going to jail for 9 additional months⁶. At the ceremony, they had a beautiful cake, and her AA/NA friends gave her flowers and cards. I felt silly that I had nothing to give her. I didn't know this strange ritual, this community she was now considered a leader in, where she spoke in public, organized events and chaired a women's group. She has now been sober for two and a half years.

Otter Tail County is one of few counties in Minnesota that has the DWI Court Program. In a way, this program is evidence of our region's history of drug and alcohol dependency, but it also carries on Fergus Falls' quiet legacy as a home of holistic, human-centered, participatory mental health treatment, a vision not unlike Kirkbride's that was unfortunately interrupted by decades of electric shock treatment and lobotomies and now, heavy drugs, psyche wards and imprisonment. The DWI court program represents the idea of the adjacent possible, perhaps even the conditions that promote cultural sustainability – as Ruth Little describes it, the “leaps and sparks

⁶ According to the National Center for DWI Courts, “Community outreach and support is a vital component of a DWI court program. This is because DWI courts normally represent a dramatic departure from routine criminal case processing. Any such program instituted without community input and advice is liable to lack public support and subsequently be short-lived. One overriding concern is paramount in the selection of a target population: community impact. Taking this one concern into account means accepting those offenders into the DWI court program who are having the most negative impact on the community, and who are seen as wanting to alter their impaired driving behavior to achieve more positive results.”

between unlike domains;” in the DWI Court’s case, a place “where justice meets treatment.”

As it turns out, many years ago, Laurie Mullen was the one to advocate for this program to be piloted in Fergus Falls. In some ways, Laurie’s actions years ago saved my sister’s life.

We are all connected. And yet, as we navigate our public and private roles in the world, we live at what seems to be an irreconcilable intersection of radical *self-care*, and martyr-like *action* to sustain and reinvent the very conditions that make our well being, and our connectedness possible. This translates to the local and global effect of our actions as well. Too far in one direction and we are paralyzed, unable to act. Too far in another and we neglect our own personal wellbeing, the very reason we are acting. For my generation in particular, life seems to be a fragile tightrope walk between the two, and it’s our complicated relationship with *place* - the built environment, the nature and the people in our communities - that helps or hinders our balance.

There is a lot of work and dialogue across professional fields about the importance of place – how it defines us as individuals, as community and as a society – but is there enough about how it connects us and what inspires stewardship? Some would say yes – the last few years have brought an exponential rise in organizations and initiatives taking the lead on this conversation, including Project for Public Spaces, Art and Democracy, the National Endowment for the Arts “Our Town” program, ArtPlace, and many more. With the launching of the Citizen’s Institute of Rural Design (CIRD), the National Rural Assembly and Art of the Rural in the last five years, even more momentum has developed lately about the future, narrative and identity of rural communities.

While many of these conversations have focused on livability as it relates to the physical character of communities, there is new momentum everyday exploring the conditions of vibrant social character, and particularly the role of art in shaping this vibrancy. However, I’m not sure if we really know what we mean when we say vibrancy. Across

sectors, there is an invigorating focus on the intersection of place and civic engagement, resulting in a frenzy of creatively facilitated workshops and conversations intended to tap into the collective intelligence of the community by inviting everyday citizens to help plan everything from sidewalk improvements to public art to responses to climate change. Narrative has been an enormous focus of these conversations, which is why those of us working in the arts need to think deeply about how creative expression and culture affects the stories we tell about ourselves, our communities and the world.

These place-based models of action take on many forms – including but not limited to creative placemaking, tactical urbanism, “lighter-quicker-cheaper,” art of hosting techniques, and open source ecology. Each of these are hopeful counterparts to the warnings in Reid and Taylor’s book, “Recovering the Commons,” which explores the concept of the body~place~commons and our society’s “structured inattention” to it. We can go further to connect these models to Cantwell’s call for a “new human ecology,” or perhaps more specifically, to cultural sustainability – the fourth pillar that gives us the space to talk about how our modes of expression shape the other three pillars – economic, environmental and social sustainability. I certainly have had all of this in mind in planning, managing and evaluating our programs related to the Kirkbride Building.



In my personal and professional life, when asked what cultural sustainability is, I find myself explaining more about what it *isn't*. Cultural sustainability is not about preserving the past in a defensive stance, nor is it about a defiant destruction of systems to make way for something new. Cultural sustainability is an “imaginative field” between reflection and action, past and future, public and private, local and global, and between the intimately personal and the unconditionally connected. It is not a tangible political structure, a certain type of leadership, or a formula for engagement, nor is it an ethnographic process. It is an intuitive, challenging and wildly creative intersection of fields, the main ingredient of which is trust in ourselves and that our solutions reside mainly within our collective local knowledge and creativity.

If cultural sustainability is an imaginative field where we can transpose other sectors' models onto our own work in order to help us achieve our goals, and step to the edges of our world to find common visions, the work of cultural sustainability leaders, no matter whether they are folklorists, spiritual leaders, artists, entrepreneurs or community organizers, is that of nurturing, sustaining and inventing those imaginary fields. Cultural sustainability leaders must be fluent connectors, like Laurie, gentle disrupters, like Haley. The biggest challenge, however, is to be highly self-aware and reflexive of how their actions affect others, and able to let go of prescribing outcomes in order to make room for collective ownership and impact. Therefore, we need to look for the places where we are allowing that self-awareness to transpire, and if we can't find them, to create them, sometimes first within ourselves.



It seems appropriate, as this companion to action has been about “imaginative fields,” to consider the metaphor of a field in the natural world. Springtime in Minnesota is a time of controlled burns of our prairie grasses, performed in order to reinvigorate the native plants such as savannah oak, and drive out invasive species like buckthorn, and box elder. Since moving here, I’ve learned that the prairie is a deceptively complex ecology that our entire nation’s ecology relies on. Looking out at its gentle golden sway on a summer day, it looks beautiful in its simplicity and repetition. But underneath are intricacies as vibrant as a rainforest. Currently Minnesota only has about 1% of its prairie left.



recent controlled burn in Otter Tail County, photo by Deb Wallwork

As cultural sustainability leaders, we often ask ourselves what we can learn of nature and we use metaphors such as “cultural ecology” when talking about the opportunities in a community and its modes of expression and participation. Too often this comparison of ecology is about life and survival, without confronting the death and destruction that is often necessary to give birth to diverse, beautiful and resilient species. Storms, fires, and other natural disasters are essential to life – what can we learn from this as we move forward in the world as cultural sustainability leaders? In a way, aren’t we trying to speed up slow knowledge? There are systems disturbing what comes natural to us, and challenges too urgent to let time play itself out, so we must find ways for those relationships to spark wildfires of action against what is harming us from living to our full potential.

Only a year after I met her, Haley moved back to Mexico. Her last church service at the Unitarian Church in Underwood, a small town adjacent to Fergus Falls happened to be the same service where I was invited to speak about cultural sustainability. She and I performed what I now think of as a cultural sustainability anthem, a song by Portland songwriting Laura Veirs. Haley was leaving because she felt she could not be herself in Fergus Falls, especially as an artist. As an arts leader and her friend, I couldn't help but feel that I had not yet been able to create the conditions that might make her stay. She and I quietly dedicated the song to the hope that more people could make meaning of their experiences, their communities and their relationships in a world that wants efficient and permanent solutions.

*I wanted to make something sweet
The blood inside a maple tree
The sunlight trapped inside the wood
Make something good*

*I wanted to make something pure
Emerald field of steer manure
A wild-eyed child in a moonlit room
Make something good*

*I wanted to make something strong
An organ pipe in a cathedral
That stays in tune through a thousand
blooms
Make something good*

*I wanted to make something built to last
A bottled ship with a golden mast
And through the squall the course stays
true
Make something good*

*It's gonna take a long, long time
But we're gonna make something so
fine*

*It's gonna take a long, long time
But we're gonna make something so
fine*

If we are to truly commit and practice cultural sustainability leadership, I believe we need to find those opportunities of controlled burns, as fleeting or expansive as they are, as personal or public. Different than a leap of faith, a controlled burn is an act of intention, a belief in the undergrowth and an appreciation for the noble decomposition of the species who are overriding it.

If I could do one thing differently in the last year, I would ignore my emails and phone calls for a day, and just sit in one of the rooms in the Kirkbride with Laurie, Haley, my sister, and Naomi in silence, breathing in what had come before this and what was next. To actually take the time to feel what it was like to be on the inside of a blank canvas,

looking out, after so much action, and still, nothing yet created in the actual space that had moved us to come together as women, as artists and leaders. Somehow, we had succeeded in sparking a controlled burn, and now it was time to wait to see what would appear beneath the weight and clutter of a community divided over varying fears of permanence. Maybe when we try to sustain culture we are afraid of something as simple as that – our stories coming to a close.

Additional information

For more information, including media coverage, about Imagine Fergus Falls:

www.imaginefergusfalls.com

For accompanying documents, such as grant proposals, planning documents and PR materials:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/8x59zho79nvquof/AAD5er1M_onTaLg4b9TfIhPva

For additional writing I have done about this topic:

<http://www.mnpreservation.org/2012/05/07/a-call-to-stewardship-restoring-the-legacy-of-the-fergus-falls-rtc/>

<http://blog.artsusa.org/2013/04/16/does-your-community-know-its-story/>

<http://blog.artsusa.org/2014/02/23/young-artists-in-small-towns-contexts-of-creativity/>

<http://blog.artsusa.org/2014/02/20/historic-buildings-embodied-energy-and-placemaking/>

In gratitude....

The stories of Haley, Kate and Laurie and their names were used in this narrative with love and permission. Each of these individuals was allowed to read this narrative for accuracy and to request changes.

There is no way to tell an entire story, and so many key characters are missing from this one, but I think of them as the ones behind the stage that made it possible to even begin. Laura Zabel, Naomi Schliesman and the rest of the Springboard staff. Rory Turner, Robert Baron, Max Lannon, Anna Ralph, Lena Shrestha and all of the amazing MACS faculty and fellow students. Rural arts colleagues that I met around the country serendipitously and because of whom I will never be the same, Matthew Fluharty, Savannah Barrett, Whitney Kimball Coe. Portland friends, Scott Brazaiel, Abbey Gaterud and Dan Mangan. Fergus Falls friends and colleagues, Laurie Mullen, Bryce Barsness, Haley Honeman, Chris and Nancy Schuelke, Gene and Maxine Schmidt, Patrick Hollister, Hal Leland, Daphne Van Veen, Maxine Adams, Bert Whitcomb, Jake Krohn. The amazing healers of my life Anna Schaum and Wendy Billie. And of course my family- Mom, Dad, Katy, and Payton.

You all deserve to have pages and pages written about you and all of the gifts you have provided for the world. I am so lucky to know you and am inspired by you every single day.

Literature Review

Through the Cultural Sustainability program at Goucher, one of the most influential essays for me personally was Robert Cantwell's "Folklore's Pathetic Fallacy." His call for a "new human ecology," was most relevant to me as a student, since I was more interested in thinking about "emergent culture," and the conditions for creativity as it related to the role of artists in community and economic development.

Ruth Little's lecture, "Stewardship, connections and ecology: contexts of the development of talent," is a lecture that I return to on a regular basis. Filled with refreshing perspectives on the importance of exchange as it relates to place, slow knowledge, and the importance of creating contexts for artists to create new works, this essay has helped me to step out of some of the popular rhetoric of my field as an arts administrator and to look at it with a more critical, place-focused eye.

Lewis Hyde's "The Gift," while it is not directly referenced in my essay, opened doors for me about the mysteries of value in our world, and the dance of reconciling intangible cultural resources with the real and important work of economic development. Likewise, John Hawke's "The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability," showed me how to tell this story in more accessible, down to earth language, and to show how critical our work is in developing strong communities.

I couldn't have begun to be the advocate I am for arts-based community development without some of the works of community and economic development leaders, including Manfred Max-Neef, Anne Markusen, Caron Atlas, John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight, Richard Florida, and Ben Winchester.

Arlene Goldbard's work on cultural democracy, and Alan Lomax's "Appeal for Cultural Equity," both helped me to think deeply about the role of participation in a community as it relates to challenges of all types, and the relationship with participatory art.

Finally, while it is not made explicit, this essay was very much a story of feminism, and the challenges of being a young female leader in a small rural town. Works of Hannah Arendt, J.K. Gibson-Graham and Rebecca Solnit gave me the courage to follow my intuition at the times when I was feeling most drained from working against the current of progress and efficiency.

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