

CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND SPIRIT OF ISABELLE SCOTT

BIRTHDAY

AN EXHIBITION BY SCOTT ROSENBERG

OCTOBER 16 – 28, 2012

OPENING RECEPTION: OCTOBER 16, TUESDAY, 6 – 8 PM

SATTERLEE HALL, ST. ALBAN'S PARISH
3001 WISCONSIN AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20015

WWW.BIRTHDAYEXHIBITION.ORG
INFO@BIRTHDAYEXHIBITION.ORG

*This is my miracle birthday.
It is glorious.
It is perfect.*

— Isabelle Scott, October 16, 2010

THE BIRTHDAY STORY

One morning in mid-April 2010, as I was sitting at the computer in my apartment in New York, I received an e-mail from my mom:

Dear Scott,

I love you. I am making a significant change in my life, and I would be grateful for your help. I want to share this change with you before I tell anyone else in my family. You and Charlotte are the closest family I have, and my love for you is forever.

Please come as soon as you can.

Love always,
Mom

When I arrived at her home in Washington, D.C., the next day, the “significant change” turned out to be far more significant than I had anticipated. My mom had an incurable form of leukemia.

She had known about her condition, she said, for a few years without telling anyone, including me or my daughter, Charlotte; but now the disease had struck with full force. Her doctors estimated that she had only a few days to live—maybe a week or two at the most. She had decided to spend that time staying at home and surrounding herself with love.

As the days turned into weeks and, remarkably, the weeks turned into months, my mom settled into a quiet, restful routine, which included lots of loving time with me and Charlotte. Although she was very weak, my mom and I collaborated on a number of creative projects, including publishing a book-length poem, *Persephone, Child of Springtime*, which she had been working on for many years. We also made a special-edition print of her watercolor painting of a wild rose. But mainly we sat and shared the love and intimacy of a mother and son.

My mom's doctors were "amazed" that she was alive and in her own way flourishing. Her oncologist said that it was "inexplicable . . . just keep doing what you're doing."

In early October, I began to consider the possibility that we would actually be able to celebrate my mom's seventieth birthday—a half year after the devastating news. From the beginning, her doctors had made it clear that my mom could die at any moment, without warning or any visible signs of decline. Yet she was now only days away from a landmark celebration. I got right to work.

A formidable list of requirements was taking shape in my mind. Her birthday would have to be a joyful and monumental celebration that would somehow fit into her unique approach to life—both before and after the illness took hold. The birthday would have to be demonstrative and beautiful, yet low-key and distilled; imbued with my mom's love of color and language, and also spiritual and deeply personal; simple and manageable, and alive beyond the material. It would have to involve her scores of dear ones, yet be accessible, direct, and coherent. But more than anything else, the celebration would have to honor a lifetime.

There was no way I could accomplish all of this on my own. So I made a simple request of all my mom's friends and family members. Knowing how important roses were to her, I wrote, "Please send a rose petal along with three words that you feel embody my mom." I explained that, with the petals and words, I planned to present my mom with the constellation of her "flower of friends and family" and their extended "haiku of Isabelle Scott." I didn't know what that would look like, but I followed my instincts.

As the words and petals—often accompanied by extraordinarily beautiful and heartfelt birthday wishes—started streaming in, I was overwhelmed by their majesty and beauty. Wanting to see the words all together, I began to assemble them in a long list. A few people sent in short phrases, from which I culled the three words I found most descriptive. Many people lamented having to limit their offerings to only three words. One friend wrote:

Three words that embody your mother?? Just three??? It would take a thesaurus, an unabridged dictionary, to begin to do her justice.

Opening the notes that had been dropped through my mom's mail slot—many delivered by hand—I was overcome with excitement. As the list grew to well over four hundred words, a distinct word portrait of my mother was forming. It was powerful, magnificent, and deeply intimate. Interestingly, the individual words seemed to say as much about the particular gift-giver as they did about my mom. But fundamentally they revealed the essence of the deep relationships that my mom had with so many people.

The words were coming together nicely, but I was unsure how to use the rose petals, which in some instances had been plucked from blossoms that had grown in the gardens of friends. As I studied the list of words on my computer screen, I decided to integrate the colors of the petals with the words themselves. For example, as I came upon the word *Grace*, I looked at the collection of petals—which had grown considerably, since many people had sent in more than one—and intuitively selected a color for it. I then increased the size of the colored-in words, and the effect was delightful. “Painted” with the hues and tones of the fragrant petals that had been carefully tucked into the folds of notes and cards, the words leaped from the screen.

My mom's seventieth birthday present was taking form. Now the question was, how would I present it to her? Because she was always drawn to light, I had a hunch that the small, clean format of the iPad, with its vivid, luminous colors, would appeal to her. Since midsummer, she had been enjoying looking at pictures and video messages from Charlotte by viewing them on an iPad that I had bought for her specifically for that purpose. When I opened the document of colored words on that device, the images were striking. Nine beautiful words—composed of three people's submissions per page—rich with rose-hued colors, were centered vertically on the screen. When I scrolled down, new words appeared as the previous ones disappeared. The effect was magical, and I knew my mom would love it.

When I arrived at my mom's house on her birthday and explained the basic idea of her present, she was intrigued and eager to see it with her own eyes. I held the iPad for her as she carefully scrolled down the list for the next half hour. My mom always had an uncanny ability to quickly and deeply absorb words, as if they took hold within her the instant she saw them. As she reached the bottom of the list, I asked her if she wanted to look through the words again.

She smiled and said, "I've got them." After a few more moments, she looked up at me and, with long, poetic pauses between each sentence, said:

This is my miracle birthday.
It is glorious.
It is perfect.

She soaked in her stream of colored words like warm rays of sunshine. As more words trickled in over the following days, I added them to the celebration. Although my mom had absorbed the words and radiant colors—holding them in her heart—she enjoyed scrolling through them every few days. The new additions were like a second and third helping of birthday cake.

Her friends and family had reflected to my mom a lifetime of love, appreciation, understanding, tenderness, and connection, and she was able to fully receive these wonderful gifts. All the love and passionate outpouring of care and closeness from her dear ones coursed through her being every time she viewed her birthday gifts.

I think my mom's utterance of *miracle*, *glorious*, and *perfect* was her way of submitting her own three words of gratitude and joy for the collective birthday gift from all of her friends and family. When I suggested turning the celebration into an art book and an exhibition, complete with explorations of the colors, my mom was overjoyed that the gift would recycle back through all who knew her and loved her.

So, here it is—the celebration continues!

— Scott Rosenberg

THE BIRTHDAY EXHIBITION

While viewing and enjoying her birthday words, my mom and I agreed that an art exhibition would be a wonderful way for her friends and family to share in the manifestation of the extraordinary gifts they had given her for her seventieth birthday. As I was completing the scores of artworks that would compose the exhibition, I contacted St. Alban's Parish in Washington, D.C., to discuss the idea of having a show there.

St. Alban's, just a few blocks from my mom's home, was the first parish that she joined after converting to christianity in 1993. She eventually became a member of the neighboring National Cathedral congregation, but St. Alban's remained a happy and comforting place for her, and she continued to maintain close relationships with fellow parishioners whom she had met during her many years there. (My mom had attended the National Cathedral School as a child, and her return "home" to the Cathedral community in her fifties gave her an extended family and a deep faith that sustained her for the rest of her life.)

The rector at St. Alban's, Rev. Deborah Meister, was excited about the idea of an exhibition, and suggested that we use Satterlee Hall, a large space adjacent to the church, where countless community activities take place, including free weekday lunches for senior citizens in need of a hot meal. The hall is also used for rehearsals by the city's Choral Arts Society, an organization that was dear to my mom's heart. Rev. Meister and I agreed that bringing the uplifting spirit of the birthday words and colors to those who use Satterlee Hall regularly might be an exhilarating and powerful experience for them as much as for exhibition visitors.

The color compositions and accompanying narrative for the exhibition revolve around the *Birthday Words*, charting my mom's extraordinary journey over her last seven months. Opening on October 16, 2012, the Birthday exhibition will give my mom's dear ones—and others who may not have known her but may be inspired by her story—the chance to celebrate the life and spirit of Isabelle Scott on the second anniversary of her miraculous seventieth birthday.

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Words

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Rose

Petal

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Friends

And

Family