Perpetual cycles

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PERPETUAL CYCLES

BY

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Life is nothing if not transition. The demise and re-creation of the self — and all the emotions that go with it — form a wheel that will spin through all the days of your life. Remember that what you see at any given moment is not the sum total of your existence, but merely a tiny piece of the whole.

Kathleen Wall, *Lights of Passage*
INTRODUCTION

I have always been apprehensive about getting old. I feared the speed with which the years pass and felt time would run out before I truly understood the rapture of life. I also tended to focus on the physical deterioration of our bodies as we age. Engaging in conversations about the past did not invoke spirited feelings in me, but instead only reminded me that I am getting older. Furthermore, the ubiquitous youthfulness in media and fashion combined with stereotyping the elderly as burdens only enhanced my fear of the inevitable aging process. I could not appreciate the idea that we experience "advantages and privileges" with age because my fears paralyzed my ability to understand the elusive concept.

I wanted to change these fears into an understanding and appreciation of the aging process. I wanted to understand what we gain as we age and how we gain it. Gail Sheehy, in her book New Passages believes that we become "better, stronger, deeper, wiser, funnier, freer, sexier and more attentive to living the privileged moments" as we get older. This made sense to me because it is only with age that we achieve this superlative state of being. We could not possibly possess these traits without the knowledge and experience we gain as the years pass. However, I needed to engage in a personal and active investigation before better understanding these 'gifts' and wanted to use my thesis as the force behind this personal journey. I planned to view life in a linear manner that progresses through the stages of life including childhood, adulthood and old age. I would use jewelry as my vehicle of

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2 Gifts of Age portrayed thirty-two women over seventy years in age whose lives were enriched with age. The book was inspirational in my desire to look closely at aging as a process of non-physical beauty. Charlotte Painter, Gifts of Age, with photographs by Pamela Valois (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985), viii.

expression as I investigated the progression of these stages. I was hoping that my questions would be answered and my fears would dissipate as I explored, in-depth, the stages of life.

Unfortunately, while conceiving and fabricating my first series of pieces -- the birth and youth stages of life -- I realized that identifying and representing the stages of life would not change my perspective on aging. Instead, I focused even more on the physical changes that occur as the body ages and the fact that there is an end to life's progression. Furthermore, there was no mystery to what appeared to be the obvious stages of life -- we are born, we are children, we are young adults then older adults, we enter our later years, we live our last days.
STATEMENT OF INTENT

With the recognition that my original thesis premise would not provide the avenue for my enlightenment, I began exploring the more invisible, spiritual nature of our existence. Our spiritual self is essentially everything we can not physically see or know about who we are and is found deep in the center of our hearts. Looking for, finding and nourishing this center makes us unique and valuable. It soon became apparent to me that by allowing ourselves to understand and nurture our inner, spiritual side, we could recognize the gifts of age as defined by Ms. Sheehy. Although she defines these gifts as specific adjectives describing who we are, I saw them more generally as an ability to continually grow and mature as we age. Charlotte Painter refers to this growth and maturity when she summarizes the attitude of her female subjects towards aging and death in her introduction to the Gifts of Age. She states that the women see

\[ \ldots \text{living [as] part of a cyclic process and death [is] a part of that cycle of life. There [as] a feeling of a spiral toward knowledge and of wholeness, completion, the way a circle is complete.}^{4} \]

These women see aging as an accumulation of knowledge, culminating in death. Death is merely the end of the quest for knowledge, signifying they have completed the task of living.

Knowing and understanding our spiritual selves requires us to look below our surface and reflect on our essence. This act of introspection can mean different things to different people and the possibilities are limited only by imagination -- one might meditate, listen to music, read a book, learn to sing, help less fortunate people, or walk in the woods. If we allow it -- and we will need to -- our introspection will ultimately lead to our own transformation as we react, change

\[^{4}\text{Painter, 1.}\]
and evolve with our new discoveries. It is the changes we allow in ourselves that bring us the gifts of growth and maturity.

The process of introspection and transformation is a cycle which continually repeats itself as we live our lives. This transcends the linear phases of my earlier explorations and focuses on a deeper, more fascinating level of our existence. My thesis evolved into an exploration of the idea that aging is about a cyclical, life-long process of self examination and transformation resulting in our receiving the gifts of continued personal growth and maturity.
BACKGROUND

We embark on a long and never-ending journey of self-discovery as we learn about ourselves and change with new discoveries. We begin this journey at birth with a vague blueprint which is a map of the path of development we will follow. This blueprint is shaped, in our earlier years, by parents, family, teachers and other role models. From these people we learn, among other actions, how to respond to different situations, how to interact with others, and how to express ourselves. At some point, we become less influenced by our role models and begin a more individual journey of self-discovery. From here, we have the responsibility of continuing on our journey to examine and transform our earlier established blueprint. This responsibility is not something consciously added to a 'to-do' list but is incorporated into our everyday lives. More importantly, the map we follow is found in our heart, not planted in our heads by someone else.

I use the words continual, life-long and perpetual because our journey of discovery ends only when the journey of life ends. We do not stop growing and maturing. We do not make a decision as to who we think we are without ever revisiting that choice. Instead, we live a perpetual cycle of readjusting, breaking-down and rebuilding ourselves. We need to keep moving on our journey as we enter into and leave each stage of life to receive the gifts age will give us.

While exploring the idea that growth and maturity accompany aging, I saw that individual empowerment is necessary to enable examination and transformation of the self. An empowered individual is a secure and disciplined individual and uses that security as the catalyst for self-examination. Furthermore, he takes advantage of his ability to make choices and chooses to embrace change instead of avoiding it. An empowered individual is not afraid of introspection, what he may or may not find or the pain he may experience during his journey. He knows, as Benjamin Franklin said, “those things that hurt, instruct.”
Based on the premise that the never-ending cycle of self-examination and transformation creates increasing growth and maturity, I proceeded with conceiving and creating the body of my thesis. However, I had to address the issue of the already complete Building Blocks (Fig. I, II, III), my first series of pieces about birth and youth. The series, viewed as originally intended, represented the earliest stages of life but did not add dimension to my premise. However, viewing these same pieces as descriptions of the nature of our earliest years -- the potential with which we are born, our earliest vulnerabilities and the creativity and exploration done so exquisitely in our youth -- they are able to provide insights into our life-long journey of discovery. The following section further explains this idea.
BUILDING BLOCKS

Building Blocks I (Fig. I) referred originally to the first breaths of a newborn. The sphere symbolized the beginning of life's journey just as the rising sun marks a new day. The container would hold the endless potential of new life and was to be worn at the level of a mother's womb, reminding us where we begin. The surface markings left from the fabrication of the sphere represented the process of birth and the vision of a newborn infant. The inside surface of the spherical container was imprinted with a textured hammer to symbolize our earliest blueprint.

Viewing the sphere as not only the beginning of our journey, but as the beginning of any journey we take within ourselves, there are striking similarities. We will cross into uncharted areas as we explore and examine who we are just as a newborn does with its first breath outside the womb. The possibilities of discovery are endless if we keep an open mind and ignore our preconceived notions of life. just as a newborn begins life with only an elemental blueprint, devoid of any firm instructions.

Building Blocks II (Fig. II) originally referred to the vulnerable and fragile state of a young child. A primitive cradle influenced the form of the brooch worn close to the breast of the wearer, mimicking the way a mother holds and protects a child. The elements forming the 'cradle' were connected delicately yet haphazardly, conveying the fragile yet often confusing nature of our youth. Fragile because a child is totally dependent on his parents for all his needs; confusing because a child is bombarded with so much new information (we experience our greatest growth through learning before age three⁵) yet is easily influenced by all of it.

At the beginning of any potential transformation of ourselves, we are vulnerable to what we may discover. We fear the confusing and potentially painful

outcome of a journey because we may or may not like what we find. We may desire a sense of protection like our parents provided to us as children. We may not be sure down which road our journey of discovery will take us. These are feelings as children we take for granted but as adults we find difficult to accept. However, we should accept the feelings as natural and not allow them to interfere with our journey.

Building Blocks III (Fig. III) was originally about all those great things we did as children and the attitudes that preceded those actions. Children playfully and creatively approach life as they begin to figure out who they are. They try on different hats and clothes, pretend to be grownups and play a variety of pretend games in an effort to discover themselves. Children step outside the boundaries of behavior with no inhibitions because they do not yet know there are boundaries. Teenagers rebel against the boundaries they are beginning to recognize but not ready to accept. The body mobile was a step outside the parameters of typical jewelry. The piece was created to resemble building blocks which have endless potential uses in the eyes of a child. The blocks are not simply blocks of wood, they may also be battleships for a game of war or teacups for an afternoon tea. Joseph Campbell describes the wonders of childhood when he writes: "As children, we knew when to be still and watchful, so as to bring just the right people and creature towards us. It was easy, and the magic was everywhere."\(^6\)

This 'young' attitude is, unfortunately, something that many of us leave behind with our childhood. We lose our youthful approach to life as our teachers, parents and other role models bombard us with what is right and wrong, thereby creating parameters of acceptability. We loose our youthful ability to create without inhibition, pretend, play and experiment as society's system is imposed on us. We operate under increasingly more constraints as we age and become more aware of the pressures to live within certain parameters and rules of the community.

As we travel on our journey of self-discovery, we need to return to the simple magic of our childhood, leaving behind what we can of the baggage accumulated over the years. We may then take the necessary risks to instigate change just like a child fearlessly ski’s down a slope or climbs a tree. We may be more willing to try on different or unusual ‘hats’ looking for an answer to our questions about who we are. We may be more likely to see the building blocks as the tools we may use on our journey; tools that can take any form, limited only by our imagination. We may have fun and play to alleviate the stresses we experience with increased responsibilities. Adult fun may be cycling or stamp collecting instead of Barbies, GI Joes, or Nintendo but play will help open our eyes to the possibilities in our lives, unmuddled with the stresses of our day. Our childhood spirit will be shaped by the maturity we gain as we age. However, we can learn valuable lessons by retaining our youthful attitude or returning to some of our young ways.

Not only does the Building Block series provide a youthful framework for our journey of self-discovery, the series inspired me to carry a young spirit with me as I traveled on my personal thesis journey. I left the security of the known and instead made up my own rules of the game. I did not let my established parameters of what constitutes wearable body adornment hinder the creation of my thesis. If a piece was not inherently wearable, comfortable and complimentary to the body -- my own strict parameters -- I made it anyway. The important thing was to let the concepts of my thesis guide the creation of the pieces. While working, I also reminded myself of the way time passed in my childhood -- an hour seemed like a day, a day seemed like a week and summer seemed like a lifetime. This allowed me to playfully and creatively wander through my explorations. I walked down paths I may have missed if I had hurried through my thoughts and experiments.
The next two series of my thesis, Singular Assimilation and Enlightenment, are a result of my efforts to better understand the gifts we receive as we engage ourselves in a perpetual cycle of introspection and transformation. More specifically, I explored how the need to know our inner-self though introspection conflicts with the realities of our day-to-day existence, requiring us to find an acceptable balance between them. The Singular Assimilation series of arm cuffs (Fig. IV, V, VI, VII), explore how we achieve this within our community. Our community is the world around us and includes our family and friends, our peers at work, and the people living in our town or city. Our daily life includes responsibilities within our community such as job, family, mortgage payments or rent, grocery bills and the like. Essentially, this is the 'real world.' Oftentimes, these responsibilities preclude us from attending to our inner needs. However, our spiritual self can not afford to be forgotten or ignored. As Joseph Campbell believes: "We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about." If we ignore this side of ourselves, the outer value that we spent so much time achieving will be rendered meaningless and unfulfilling. Conversely, if we have given our inner-self enough attention, it can act as our guide to find contentment in our daily responsibilities. Both aspects of our personal development are vital to our continued ability to grow and mature as we age.

Throughout our existence, we have formed communities in order to ensure survival of the individual. Communities fulfill our basic needs of companionship, food, procreation, religion, and other necessities. Communities also assist in balancing the fortunate with the less fortunate as the strong take care of the weak.

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7 Campbell, 6.
Unfortunately, our community is also a double edged sword in that it fulfills our basic human needs but at the same time imposes its values on the individual. This puts us in the situation of 'can’t live with it and can’t live without it.' Fortunately, we have the capability of choosing how to incorporate the community's system into our lives without becoming its slave. For example, most of us have to work to make money. We can choose to work in a job requiring long hours for a lot of money, even it we do not enjoy our work. We may do this because society tells us that money equals success. Or we can choose to pursue a career for less money but one that provides daily joy and allows us to be successful within ourselves. Our task is to find a way to live on our own terms while remaining a contributing member of our community. This balancing act requires constant attention as we proceed on the journey of life.

Satisfaction in our relationship with the community requires us to change and evolve as our community does the same. Our world changes in a multitude of ways, including population increases, new jobs created by new or expanding businesses, jobs lost as companies close their doors or reduce their workforce, rising levels of crime, and continually evolving social values. These transformations force us to choose a new career, increase our need for personal safe-guards or rethink our values. Not only does our changing community affect us, but we may need to instigate change in ourselves regardless of the state of the community. We can either choose to face the challenges of change or choose to avoid them. However, as M. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, states, "It is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we learn." Our personal growth and maturity depends on our decision to face the challenges. We have to evaluate how these challenges affect us, then adjust, fine-tune and/or transform ourselves to maintain our relationship with and establishment in the community. This constant evaluation engages us in the perpetual cycle of introspection, transformation, growth and maturity.

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The three cuffs in the Singular Assimilation series visually explore our efforts to balance our inner needs with the systems imposed on us by outside forces. This is accomplished in the interaction between the linear elements and the walls of the cuff. The walls are the systems others try to impose on us and the linear elements represent the way we take an active role in finding harmony within ourselves despite these systems. Viewed together, the overall impact of the cuffs is one of swirling activity. The linear elements are searching, circling inside and outside the walls of the cuff while the walls remain strong and stable. The circular nature of the cuffs, both in the form of the walls and the swirling elements, reference the perpetual nature of the balancing act we perform as our community and its systems continually evolve.

Viewed separately, each cuff represents an element of this endless balancing act. The first cuff, Singular Assimilation I (Fig. IV), explores the power we believe in when making decisions about ourselves in relation to the world in which we live. We can be anything and do anything and there are no rules to follow. We do not see the system of obstacles placed in our path by the community or ourselves. The linear elements strongly surround the walls of the cuff in a show of power because we rightfully think we can accomplish anything and approach living with that very attitude. We do not see the difficulties in finding a job, sending our children to school, or paying the rent. We do not see the prescriptions society has written for us. We do not believe in the fixed roles and defined terms of the community. We know to follow, not the path of others, but our own unique path found within.

Singular Assimilation II (Fig. V), the second cuff in the series, represents our awareness of the constraining system our world attempts to impose on us. As we try to find happiness in our daily life, we eventually run into the obstacles of this system and have to decide how to embrace them without becoming "part of the machinery."9 Joseph Campbell refers to this conflict when he writes "It is very difficult to find in the outside world something that matches what the system inside

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you is yearning for."\textsuperscript{10} There is a struggling interaction between the walls and interior elements of the cuff. The walls of the cuffs seem insurmountable -- solid, strong and unforgiving -- as they surround the linear elements which swirl inside, trying to get free (Fig. VI). This interaction conveys the darkness we must experience before we find a home in our community.

The last cuff, Singular Assimilation III (Fig. VII), represents the light we begin to see as we find our balance. The linear elements peacefully coexist within and around the walls as we realize our power of choice over the system and figure out how to accept it. We see how to embrace the necessary rules and discard the rest to avoid becoming a working part of the machinery. We listen to ourselves and learn to balance our inner voice with the systems and demands of the real world.

\textsuperscript{10} Osbon, 63.
ENLIGHTENMENT

Unlike our outer-self which has the to deal with the imposed system of the community, our inner-self knows only our own bounds. Singular Assimilation explored the balancing act we have to perform with our outer-self on one end and our inner-self on the other. Both sides need to be on-stage for our life’s performance. However, “the privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.” The series of books entitled Enlightenment (Fig. VIII, IX, X) explores our efforts to find privilege in knowing and being who we are.

The book was chosen as an metaphor for this inward journey because reading a book is a personal, intimate experience. Reading allows for private observation and contemplation through a personal dialogue with the subject matter just as discovering our spirituality is, in essence, a personal dialogue with ourselves. Furthermore, a book contains information and/or has a story to tell just as our inner-selves have much to tell us. We simply have to read the book to access the information.

The progression of the three books in the series explores the nature of our personal dialogue with ourselves as we search for an understanding of who we are. The first book, Enlightenment I (fig. VIII) is just opening, referring to the beginning of this inward journey. Our curiosity is piqued by what might be discovered about our inner-self just as we are excited and curious with anticipation about the contents of a new book. The piece has almost no detail because very little has been discovered in the early stages of our journey. The lack of detail in Enlightenment I further emphasizes the mystery of our journey -- there is obviously something on the book’s pages but the markings are not clear. There is also a ‘bookmark’ ready to

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11 Ibid, back cover.
mark an intriguing page requiring closer reading, when a rest or the beginning of a new transformation is needed.

The second book, Enlightenment II (Fig. IX), is wide open for reading and conveys the careful investigation we undertake on our journey. Specifically, the book is full of layers, and both obvious and subtle patterns and textures. These details are intriguing because they are vague, varied and abstract. The intrigue compels the viewer to examine more closely the potential contained within the piece. The book is asking to be explored and then understood just as our spiritual self needs to be continually examined, understood, transformed and then reexamined. We look for clarity, revelation and understanding of ourselves just as we look for these things when we read a book.

The third book, Enlightenment III (Fig. X), appears old and worn, representing the many 'readings' of ourselves we undertake throughout our lives. We re-read our inner book many times just as we might read a beloved book over and over. Elena Mary Siff, an artist who creates art books, conveys this when speaking of her own work: "it's better to read one book one hundred times than one hundred books one time."12 Reading a really good book once is not enough to uncover all its potential; we need to read it again and again to uncover further subtleties of the story. Likewise, each time we read and re-read the chapters of our inner book, we gain a greater understanding of who we are, thereby enhancing our continued personal growth and maturity. That is, each reading fuels the wheels spinning on our journey of self discovery.

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CONCLUSION

The last book in the Enlightenment series (Fig. X) is torn, wrinkled and discolored, indicating the passage of time. The passage of time, however, has neither taken away the beauty of the book nor the knowledge contained within. Just as the passage of time brought a new kind of beauty to and understanding of the book, it is only with the passage of time that we can truly understand ourselves and achieve the wholeness of life described by Charlotte Painter. Wholeness is the culmination of our growth and maturity. In order to receive these gifts, we have to let the hands of the clock continue to tick. We have to age. Halting the clock of aging would surely stop our physical decline but we would not be able to understand the world around us or ourselves with the continually increasing level of knowledge and maturity we gain as we age.
FINAL REFLECTION

Although I would still love to stop the clock of aging, or at least slow it down, I now can at least deal with my inability to do so. However, I will continue life following my unique path as I attend to my inner and outer existence. Most importantly, I will keep the wheel of discovery turning in perpetual motion.
Fig. 1 Pendant, Building Blocks L, silver, 2” x 2” x 36”
Fig. III. Body Mobile, Building Blocks III, silver, wood, stainless steel, 22" x 12" x 28"
Fig IV. Arm Cuff, Singular Assimilation I, silver, 3.5" x 3"
Fig V. Arm Cuff, Singular Assimilation II, silver, 3.5" x 3"
Fig VI. Arm Cuff, *Singular Assimilation II*, silver, 3.5" x 3"
Fig VII. Arm Cuff, Singular Assimilation III, silver, 3.5” x 3”
Fig VIII. Pendant, Enlightenment. Silver, copper, 3.5" x 5.5"
Fig IX. Pendant Enlightenment II, silver, copper, 14k gold, 3.5" x 9"
Fig X. Pendant, Enlightenment III, copper, silver, 7" x 4"
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