Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on April 15, 2013.

Margie Bleyer Lieberman grew up in a family of survivors: Her parents, Hungarian Holocaust survivors, emigrated to Montreal, Canada, after World War II. Their philosophy was to work hard and play hard—to enjoy life. They retained their rich cultural heritage, and Lieberman grew up with a European sensibility toward the arts and culture. Her mother took up marble sculpting in her 40s, while her father, now 90, draws, sketches, and paints, studying regularly at a local community center.

Lieberman’s own engagement as an artist lay dormant for many years. As her daughters were growing up, she involved them in various crafts, but it wasn’t until after recovering from breast cancer that, wrestling life back, she decided to take an art class. Watercolor classes weren’t available, so she turned to clay sculpture. She notes, “Clay is a dynamic medium that initially challenges the novice. The senses—smell, texture, visual, and auditory—are immediately engaged, and yet these sensory qualities change as the clay dries. Breakages are common, so working with clay also requires an ability to let go.”

Her figurative work has focused on three main themes: dancers (her daughters studied dance extensively), soldiers or warriors, and couples. She describes the couples as emerging from a single mound of clay. She experiences this emergence as happening organically, as part of an unconscious process. Soulmates, the sculpture on this month’s cover, is an “integration of my life as a psychologist, sculptor, mother, wife, and even the diagnoses.” It represents, says Lieberman, “losses, enduring love, support, resilience, and most importantly, life.” The piece itself has scars etched in the clay, and the color was achieved by applying multiple layers of ceramic stains, slips (clay particles, thinned out by suspension in the color was achieved by applying multiple layers of ceramic stains, slips (clay particles, thinned out by suspension in water), glazes, and acrylics.

The photograph of the sculpture shows a shadow off to the left. Lieberman sees that as a further, Jungian, reference to the unconscious and perhaps to the darker elements of our lives.

We all will die, of course, but some of us live with more consciousness of this fact than others. And this is Lieberman’s experience: She notes that cancer “has played . . . a huge part in my life for the past 16 years.” In 1997, 10 years after she, her psychologist husband, and their daughters moved to Toronto, she was diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer. She subsequently founded the Canadian Centre for Psycho-Oncology, a not-for-profit charitable organization designed to increase public awareness around the cancer–psychology interface. As she notes, many survivors of cancer want to “give back” in some way. The Centre provided a structure for services, writing, and speaking in public forums. In 2006, Lieberman was given the Ontario Psychological Association’s Public Education Award, “in recognition of [her] leadership in advancing the public’s awareness of the psychological impact and needs of cancer victims and their families.” The irony—one of many that she points out—was that she was unable to be present for the award ceremony: She had just been diagnosed with glioblastoma, an end-stage brain tumor.

Although rare, glioblastoma is the most common—and most malignant—type of brain tumor, and the average life expectancy of those with such a diagnosis ranges from four to 15 months. (The late Senator Edward Kennedy was one of its victims.) Following surgery, radiation, and multiple chemotherapy trials, Lieberman has now survived for seven years. Her speech and right-hand functions were severely compromised.

After a year of palliative care, Lieberman fired her team. She decided that, despite the odds, she would live. As only a psychologist might, she comments wryly, “I had outlived the mode, the mean, and the median.” She returned to her psychotherapy practice and to sculpting—this time, with her left hand.

Lieberman’s return to work—initially after breast cancer and subsequently after her brain tumor—has, to her mind, been a vital aspect of healing: “I pushed and fought to regain aspects of my life that cancer took away, while understanding that I had to create a life that would be lived day to day in a fluid way. I have regained speech functions. I still suffer the effects of having had a glioblastoma, yet my disabilities are not at all obvious to others. I am back in my practice working as a psychotherapist, which is my normal. Work that is cherished feels normal and even healing.”

As an undergraduate, Lieberman studied psychology at McGill University, intrigued especially by the neurological aspects of the brain. One of her professors was Donald O. Hebb, renowned brain researcher (and APA president in 1960). While obtaining a PsyD at Wright State University, Lieberman interned in neuropsychology and wrote her dissertation on brain injury and treatment. In yet more irony (or preparation), on her return to Canada, her initial work in the corporate world was focused in particular on trauma. Subsequently, one of her specialty areas has been working with traumatized military personnel.

Lieberman describes herself as living in three-month intervals, from one MRI to the next. She does so vibrantly, appreciating the miracle of her recovery and, more broadly, of being alive. The words of Storm Jameson, a British journalist and author, seem most fitting: “The only way to live is to accept each minute as an unrepeatable miracle, which is exactly what it is: a miracle and unrepeatable.”

Kate F. Hays
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