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## Waking Up: Windows of Encouragement

Alison Bates

*Grand Valley State University*

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## Waking Up: Windows of Encouragement



**Alison Bates**  
McNair Scholar

### **ABSTRACT:**

*Waking Up is a three-dimensional installation that uses the stories, opinions, and messages of others addressing their reasons to live. These submissions are collected through a website created for this project and integrated with my own interviews and photographs. The photographs used in this project vary in format, size, and media. The physical piece is both ready for installation and available to a larger audience via a virtual gallery on the project website. The text and images built into the project allow the viewer to reflect on his/her own understanding of the feelings associated with suicide and recovery. My project's effectiveness hinges on its ability to communicate (through collaboration and exhibition) across psychological, social, and artistic boundaries.*



**Anthony Thompson, M.F.A.**  
Faculty Mentor

*"May you live everyday of your life."  
Jonathan Swift*



Waking Up is inspired by the world I live in. People around me are suffering from a general dissatisfaction causing them to question their lives and reasons to live. Friends turn to me, as a survivor of attempted suicide, and ask me how I did it. Why did I choose to wake up every morning?

The fact is I made a choice. I chose to look at my life and decide what was good about it, and change what was bad about it. The hospitals, therapists, psychiatrists and medications could only take me so far. These things often helped me find a productive space in the midst of my madness; however, realizing that something was wrong and finding the strength to change was up to me. There is power in making a life-altering choice. I needed inspiration to carry me through each day, but each day I was met by new success, not just surviving, but also thriving. This choice and this inspiration is what Waking Up is all about.

My purpose as a photographer is to communicate. As an artist, I work in response to the world I live in. I create art to reflect the zeitgeist and find new ways to solve old problems. This is the ultimate purpose of making art, and it informs how we view art. It is through art that I am able to share my strength with others.

In creating this project, I asked others to tell me, and all those who suffer, what is good about their lives. I created a website which included a guest book to collect their personal stories and opinions, so that anyone could contribute and share their message of encouragement.

I translated this material into text and photographs. Originally, the project was conceived as a two dimensional, 7' by 7' wall mounted collage. However, in materializing this project, I began to realize how complex the guest book submissions and personal interviews were. People had an understanding of the complexity of their own lives, and were able to identify the themes that kept them living and moving forward. Acknowledging this complexity became part of my creative process, ever evolving to communicate my intentions most effectively. Every aspect of the project became very intentional, from



the use of images, the color of the paint, and the use of symbols.

The total size of the final installation is 8' by 6'. The artwork is completely functional; the stairs are intended for stepping up and all the windows open. I chose white paint as a symbol of purity. The white canvas does not necessarily indicate innocence, but an untainted view with the ability to create from a clean slate. Our pasts are part of who we are, and while it is important to learn from our past, it is equally important to not let the past hold us back. This notion of future vision was expressed over and over again by many of the people who chose to submit their stories to the project website.

Part of surviving depression and suicide is about overcoming obstacles to happiness. The stairs represent this aspect in their function of moving the viewer up in order to engage the project images. Climbing the stairs also requires the viewer to make a choice to be active in the work, just as we must choose to be active in our lives. Walking up the stairs is symbolic of the first step to recovery from depression and suicide. Recovery is not just a function of those who suffer. Each of us live in settings where we are surrounded by desperate people, often characterized by feelings of uselessness, meaninglessness, purposelessness, and hopelessness. This project not only serves those who are suffering this plight, but the communities that form them. By raising the awareness of suicide, we can work to save lives. Everyone must take these steps.

The center image serves as a visual representation of choice and life. I used symbolism in this image to interweave these two main concepts of the work. As one approaches the center, they are confronted with a collage of images. The collage operates as an acknowledgement to the variety and basic differences in everyone's everyday life. Using a collage



helped to make this image apply to anyone.

The pier within the collage represents a position of limbo leading to choice. A choice to enter the water, return to land, or stay in limbo. This choice embodies both outward and inward contemplation. The pier overlaps both the ground and water, which epitomizes the here and now. While the water can be taken to stand for the river Styx, it was not my intention to have the pier represent the choice between life and death.

The land, grass and tree characterize the ground in this image. The land is symbolic of the body, consciousness, origin, and home, while the grass and tree represent harvest, growth, family, and stability. Together, these concepts illustrate the importance of order and reaping the seeds you sow. The water collage consists of rivers, oceans and lakes. Water as a whole signifies the mind and soul as well as the subconscious. The river is the journey of

life, which must be contemplated. The ocean is water in its vastness, while the lakes are simpler, more local feats.

Between the tree and the water lie the sky, clouds and sun. New energy and positivism are the collective ideals of these elements, more specifically, hope, future, looking up, mystery and imagination. These ideas are important in inspiring new mindsets for overcoming depression and suicide. Hope is the theme that was most prevalent among the guest book entries. Hope for today, hope for tomorrow, and hope for all people.



The culmination of this project exists within the windows of encouragement. The windows themselves are visions of the soul. We are able to reflect in their glass, catch glimpses of our transitions and transformations, and see a whole new world. We do so actively, by opening the windows to view those reasons to live. Within the windows is

the text and photographs collected from the website. People from many parts of the world chose to dedicate their attitudes on life, living and helping others.

“It is not enough to have thought great things before the work. The brush stroke at the moment of contact carried inevitably the exact state of being of the artist at the exact moment into the work, and there it is, to be seen and read by those who can read such signs, and to be read later by the artist himself, with perhaps some surprise, as a revelation of himself.”

*The Art Spirit,*  
Robert Henri, Harper and Row,  
NY 1923 PG 15-17

Waking Up has become larger than my life experience. I have relished every moment of my encounters with this project and everyone who helped it come into existence. My most basic goal was to change someone's life. I had no idea how many people this project would touch or how much it would change me.

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