

**ABOVE:** *December Dusk Triptych #1*, 2005. Handwoven, hand-dyed; silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton; 44 by 48 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

**LEFT:** Artist Rebecca Bluestone. Photograph by Douglas Merriam.

# The Creative Journey:

## Listening to Your Intuition

I grew up in rural Oklahoma, and when I was about five years old, I developed an early interest in being an artist. I don't know where this came from, as I had not had much exposure to art. But I think I came into the world with this intense desire to create and to communicate. Our family lived on big ranches as I was growing up, since my father was a ranch hand. We had an old horse that my parents would sit me up on and I would go riding by myself. I had these amazing experiences when I would ride of entering a world without boundaries—full of possibilities and connections where the barriers between nature and myself would disappear.

In grade school art classes, I was told that I had no artistic talent because the emphasis at that time was on illustrative skills, which I do not have. If you could not draw something that looked exactly like what you were seeing, then you were not considered an artist. I have always seen the world in an abstract way—in terms of shapes and colors. Without encouragement or confidence, I turned away from art.

by Rebecca Bluestone

*Artist Rebecca Bluestone presented a keynote address about her creative journey, intuition, and the process of making art at HGA's Convergence 2004 in Denver. The response to her message was so overwhelming, she was asked to retell her story here.*

I learned how to weave in 1984 in a professional studio in Camden, on the coast of Maine, when I was thirty years old. I had been a waitress, somewhat adrift, and not able to find my place in the world. I came home one day and realized I could no longer keep selling my soul doing something that I hated doing. I lived alone, had no other source of income and was totally dependent upon this job in a popular tourist town where there were many more people wanting to work than there were jobs. I sat down one evening, had a dark night of the soul, and came to the conclusion that I would rather starve to death than continue life as it had been. The next day I quit my job.

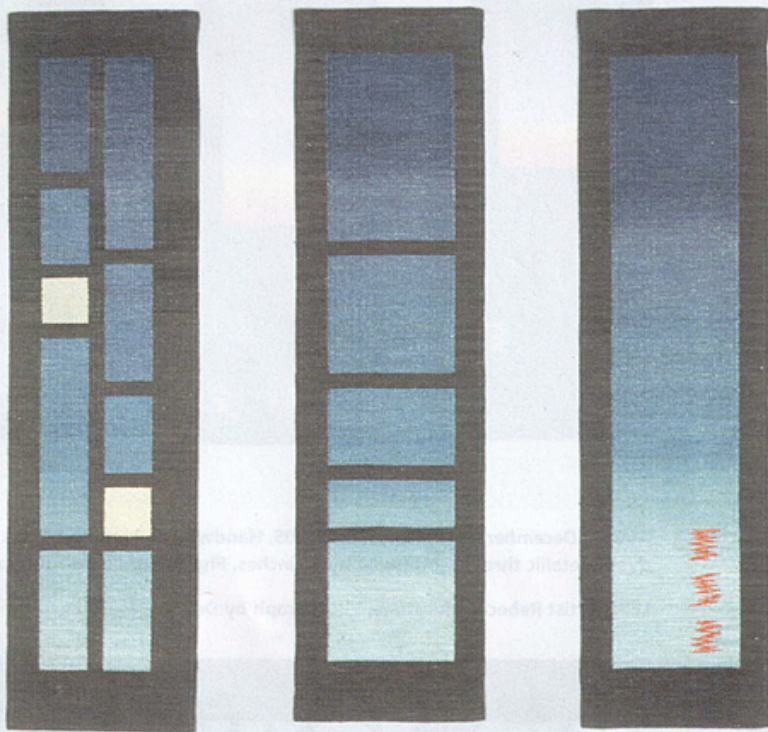
A friend who knew that I was looking for a job called me a couple of days later to say her friend who had a weaving studio needed someone to do packing and shipping. Somewhere in the recesses of my being I had an interest in weaving. I don't know where that came from—I had never had any exposure to it—but since childhood, I had always loved constructing things with my hands which, interestingly, were usually made of fiber.

The studio, owned by Nancy Lubin of Western Maine Weavers, was a production studio producing mohair scarves, shawls and throws where I did the packing and shipping and in exchange, she taught me to weave. I sat down at a loom a few weeks later and felt like I had come home. It was as if I already knew what to do. I realized very quickly that this was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life—this was a

vehicle for me to communicate finally all of the things that I had been trying to say verbally. I have not worked at anything else since. It is what I am meant to be doing.

In 1986 I felt driven to go into unknown territory when my mother became terminally ill with breast cancer. She was alone; the rest of the family was in denial that she was dying. She and I had had a difficult relationship, and I think subconsciously one of the reasons I was living in Maine was that it was as far away from Oklahoma as I could get and still be in the United States. Again, my intuitive sense was telling me I needed to be with her, while my mind was telling me not to go. Once again I took that leap of faith and quit my job, loaded my loom and my dog into my truck and drove to Oklahoma. When she died six weeks later, our shared experience was the most profound time we had ever spent together. She was at home until the last three days of her life, and we spent twenty-four hours a day together. It was one of the greatest gifts a daughter could have received from her mother. I began to understand the meaning of unconditional love and of grace—a state that transcends relationships and personalities. I returned to that same place I had found at the age of five—the world without boundaries, full of possibilities and connections.

I stayed on in Oklahoma to tie up my mother's affairs until September of that year. I thought I was headed back to Maine, yet I knew that everything in my life had



*Triptych #5*, 2004. Handwoven, hand-dyed; silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton; 43 by 48 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

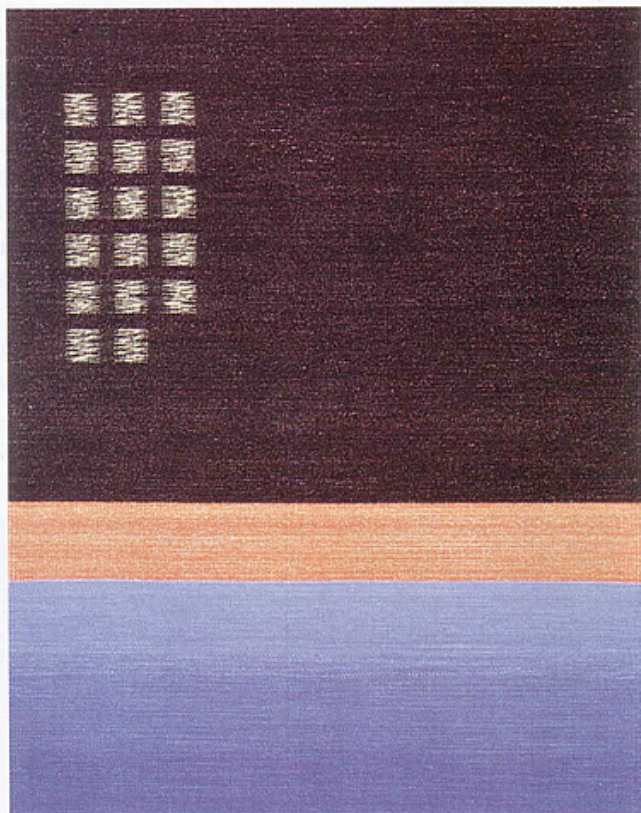
changed as a result of finding this “state of grace.” I happened to see an advertisement for a Navajo weaving class in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I had always had a fascination with the Navajo style, the clean geometry and the subtle beauty, so I decided to take the workshop and then go back to Maine.

Ramona Sakiestewa, the well-known contemporary Hopi artist, taught the class. One of the women in the class invited me to her house for dinner where I met another guest, Robert Bluestone. After one date, we realized that on some deep level we already knew each other, and we have been together ever since. Ramona became my mentor, and I worked with her for ten years in her studio. I never left Santa Fe, and I began my career as an artist.

The new 650-square-foot studio that is attached to our house in Santa Fe is an incredibly beautiful, pastoral and inspirational place to live and work. I am probably one of the few weavers that have only one loom—a six-foot Cranbrook that I love and I know will outlive me. The studio includes my loom and the hundreds of colors of silk yarns that I have dyed, walls with lighting to display work, a large worktable for doing finishing work, an area to meet with clients, my office, and a space where I do all of my drawings. I am not directly involved in selling my work, since it is sold through galleries. But I spend a certain amount of time every day at my desk, sending out slide portfolios, making phone calls, answering emails, and doing the work of keeping my art exposed and out there in the world. I have found that if I apply the same kind of creativity to my career that I apply to my artwork, then the career development is much more fun and successful. They are really all part of the same whole.

Before I sit down to weave, I do a complete scale drawing of a piece. The drawing phase is a very intuitive process for me. I let a concept move around in my unconscious for as long as it shifts and changes. As soon as it stabilizes, I then start to put it down on graph paper, doing sketches and working towards a final drawing. I have spent a lot of time exploring the idea of right and left brain thinking. In order to talk about it, I simplify it in terms of the left side of our brains being the thinking, analytical part of who we are. The thinking part of ourselves knows only what we have been taught or have already seen or heard; it has no spontaneous knowledge. We don't intuitively know math or science or how to drive a car. However, that other part of our brain, the right side, is the intuitive subconscious part of us that “knows things it doesn't know it knows.” The creative spark comes from that part of ourselves. That is how we end up with a Van Gogh, a Monet or a Beethoven symphony—artwork that no one has ever seen or heard before. We draw on that part of ourselves where thinking does not penetrate—that part of the human experience for which there are no words. We do not “think up” creativity; we access what is already there within us.

I truly believe that each person has a special gift—a unique skill to offer. I think we come into this physical manifestation with these attributes. The information is stored in our organism, and our job is to discover it and release it. Sometimes the things that are the most familiar to us, that are the easiest for us, are where our gifts lie. We think because we easily understand or see something

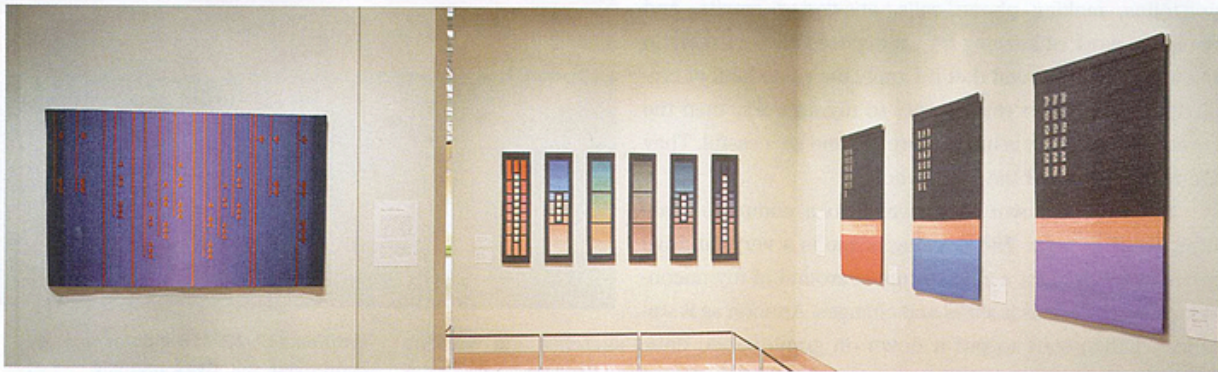


*Untitled #87, 2002. Handwoven, hand-dyed; silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton; 50 by 40 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.*

that it must be obvious to everyone else. That is simply not the case. It is easy for us or familiar to us because that is what we are supposed to be doing. We always think that the answer to what we are supposed to be doing in life is outside of us, while in fact just the opposite is true. People already have all of that information inside of them. They just need to allow it to unfold.

I developed my first body of work and started showing it in 1988 at Rachel Brown's Weaving Southwest in Taos, New Mexico. For the longest time I really wanted to work in simple color gradations, but I kept censoring myself. The thinking part of my mind kept saying, "That's too obvious—people won't like that. Anyone could do that." Finally, I overrode my internal "thinking" about what I was doing and followed my intuition, which was an intense desire to work with gradations of color. As soon as I did this, my work began to be noticed in a new way. I realized that the way I saw color was not obvious to everyone else, and it taught me an important lesson about the inappropriateness of "shoulds" and "oughts" in the creative experience. How I "see" is not the same as how everyone else sees, and I have to trust that seeing and knowing part of myself.

Some of the major influences in my work are color, music, the Fibonacci sequence, and nature. I do not have a photographic memory for anything except color. If I was given any gift as an artist it is this intuitive relationship with color. I can see a color anywhere and accurately reproduce it in my studio. For me color is its own vast language. I believe visual art is about reaching those aspects of being human that we cannot communicate in words—creating a non-verbal language that goes beyond words.



*Woven Harmony—The Tapestries of Rebecca Bluestone* exhibition in 2002 at the Denver Art Museum, Neusteter Textile Gallery. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Art Museum.

Music is another language unto itself. My husband, Robert, a classical guitarist, is an immense influence in my life and work. We collaborate on a residency, exhibition and performance called *Woven Harmony*, where we bring together the visual and performing art worlds and attempt to break down the barriers between them. After all, we both work on tightly strung, handmade wooden instruments, and our artwork is created by the interaction of our fingers and strings. The classical guitar is considered a color instrument with a broad range of tone color at the artist's disposal when interpreting a particular piece of music. Aesthetically, our work is very similar in that we both explore creativity in a non-verbal way in order to access the innermost part of who we are and how this has relevancy in our everyday lives.

The Fibonacci series is the unending sequence of numbers (1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21...) where each number in the sequence is the sum of its two predecessors. The golden mean is the distance between the numbers in the sequence after the first few numbers. When dividing the lower number into the higher number, it becomes a ratio approximating the golden mean, or 1 to 1.618. Shapes based on the golden mean are said to be the most pleasing to mankind. This is not an intellectual concept, but

something that we "know" deep within our bodies. I like using this sequence because it embodies that sense of mystery and wonder in life that is an essential part of our feeling alive. When we start to lose our relationship to these states of being, an important part of us begins to die.

The most profound of my influences is the ongoing and transcendent inspiration of nature. I do not work directly from photos or from what I see. I don't work directly from anything. It is a constant process to focus my awareness on what I experience in any given moment, taking that in, and then attempting to put that sense into my work.

In 2000, Alice Zrebiec, the textile curator at the Denver Art Museum, offered me a solo exhibition that would open in June of 2002 and run through November 10th of that year. It was a huge honor for me to be asked. This was my first solo museum exhibition and also the first time the textile gallery at the museum was to exhibit a living, contemporary textile artist. For the twelve-year overview, there would be eighteen pieces in the show, eight of which were borrowed from collections and ten of which would be new pieces that I would create for the exhibition. This was a very exciting time for me in my career and my life. My work was finally being shown as fine art, which had been a long-time goal. Robert and I were touring around the country with our *Woven Harmony* collaboration and that was being very successful. I was forty-seven and I had never felt better!

In June of 2001, through a routine medical exam, I was diagnosed with Stage 1 ovarian cancer. I immediately went through major surgery and began six months of chemotherapy. I had a full exhibition and traveling schedule planned, including the Denver Art Museum exhibition. Robert and I sat down and started to cancel everything, because we were not sure where all of this would end up or how much of my regular work schedule I would be able to maintain. The one thing we really didn't want to cancel was the Denver exhibition. I felt a responsibility to Alice not to leave her hanging in case I couldn't complete it. I called her to explain the situation and offered to give up the exhibition rather than risk being unable to finish it. It was the one thing left on my schedule, and I was able to weave eight pieces from the time I started chemotherapy in July 2001 through December 2001. I was not really able, physically or mentally, to do much of anything else, but sitting at the loom a few hours each day was very comforting and healing. I finished the pieces for the Denver Art Museum show, and it became a symbol to me of the power of art in the healing process.



I have completely recovered now, and at this point I cannot say that I wish the cancer had never happened. I gained so many gifts from the experience. It was a very humbling time for me, for even though my mother had died of cancer, I was in denial that this could happen to me. It is a huge lesson to learn that no matter what our best efforts are, we don't always control what happens in life, but we do have control over our responses. In any given moment we can make a choice: are we

*Fibonacci and the Divine Proportion #1*, 2005. Handwoven, hand-dyed; silk, dyes, metallic thread, cotton, wood; 13 by 85 by 2 inches. Photograph by Herb Lotz.

going to let this be a "constructive" experience or a "destructive" experience? In this way adversity can be viewed as just another way to learn what it means to be truly human. I have a renewed passion and commitment for using my artwork as a means of communicating the most important things in life to others.

What an artist strives to do is to "see" truly and understand what it is she is seeing. There is a wonderful Zen saying that says something like, "There is a mountain; there is no mountain. There is..." In other words, initially we name what we see: "Oh, it's a mountain...", then we begin to see all the elements that make up the mountain, thus we lose sight of the fact that it is a mountain. Then finally we are able to see the mountain and all of its many facets simultaneously.

The answers to "Who are we?" and "What are we supposed to be doing?" do not lie outside of ourselves; they exist already within us. All we have to do is uncover them. When we are anxious, depressed or bored on a regular basis, it doesn't necessarily mean there is something wrong with us—it means we are not doing what we are "supposed" to be doing. Creativity is the key to unlock the authentic self. By embracing change, by being alert to the moment, and by allowing ourselves to take constructive risks and live examined, contemplative lives, we are able to manifest our inner landscapes before the public through our art and our actions in the world.

*Rebecca Bluestone is a full-time studio artist living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She and her husband, classical guitarist Robert Bluestone, will lead a weekend retreat at their home and studio this summer on the theme, Engendering Creativity. For more information contact: <rebeccabluestone@aol.com>.*

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