In her essay, Julianna Hein profiles her grandmother, Mummi, and shows the complex role weaving plays in Mummi’s life. In Mummi’s weaves, Hein can see her Finnish heritage, her grandmother’s battle with cancer, and her devotion to her faith, all of which combine to create a well-rounded view of Mummi. Do you know anyone who is defined by a specific activity or hobby? Are you? In order for the reader to better understand Mummi, Hein includes images of her grandmother. How do these images shape your understanding of Mummi? Could more written description be just as useful, or do the images bring a new dimension to the written word? In addition, Hein chose not to use captions with her images. Would captions have been useful to you as a reader? What captions would you have written?

The Woman Behind the Weave

Julianna Hein

My grandmother emigrated to the U.S. from Finland when she was only nineteen years old. For as long as I can remember, I have called her by the name of “Mummi” which is Finnish for grandmother. Mummi stands at a height of 5’3” and has two big blue eyes, which sit behind a pair of thick glasses. She has an adorable little accented voice and is the most amazing chef I know. Mummi was raised on a small farm in Finland and explained to me how “everything was produced in the home.” This makes perfect sense because almost everything in my grandmother’s home, including the actual home itself, has been created by my grandmother or grandfather. Every pillow, curtain, blanket, and decorative wall hanging is a product of Mummi’s love for the art of weaving.

Growing up, I didn’t understand much about weaving. My sister Elise and I would constantly play in the basement where all of Mummi’s weaving takes place. With an entire wall covered in brightly colored yarns and two large wooden looms and a spinning wheel, it was almost like being in a fairytale land. We would play hide-and-seek inside of the looms and have contests to see who could pick out the prettiest colors. It wasn’t until I grew older and Mummi began teaching me how to weave that I started to really appreciate what my grandmother does.

Weaving is a very slow and tedious act. It takes planning and precision and a lot of creativity. Before each masterpiece, Mummi sketches out her “plan” and figures out what design or pattern she will go with. She then prepares the large wooden loom with a “warp.” Mummi explained to me “the warp is what gives the weaving structure and holds it together.” After the loom is ready to go, she prepares the yarn by transforming it from a ball of yarn to a spool of yarn. This way, the spool can be sent back and forth quickly and easily. From then on it’s basically just a lot of repetition of pedals and changing colors. Mummi and I agreed that the most important part is creating the design because that’s where you can really get creative.

Mummi has designed many pieces in all her years of weaving. One of her greatest pieces is a giant wall hanging
she made for her church. Mummi felt that she wanted to give back, and she created a weaving for her church similar to the ones inside of Finnish churches. It is magnificent. The giant masterpiece is about ten feet across and bears a Christian symbol along with wheat as a representation of the Eucharist. It is all you see when you walk into the church with its rich purple, red and gold. When I asked her if religion affected her weaving, Mummi replied, “The piece [for the church] took a whole year, and a lot of prayer.” I think what she meant was that without God’s help, she couldn’t have made such a beautiful piece of artwork. She truly is blessed with a gift, a gift that she is very generous with.

After she first learned how to weave, Mummi decided she wanted to share weaving with as many people as possible. She opened a yarn shop in 1972 as a way of importing high-quality yarns from Finland. She explained to me that she met a lot of friends through having a shop of her own. It was also a very good way to network with other weavers as well as acquire clients for her artwork. To this day, many people have her make custom blankets and wall hangings and she is quite well known in the “world of weaving.” Her favorite color to use in her artwork is any shade of blue, or as she says “Finnish colors.” She mainly describes her style as “colorful and textural” and I would agree. She brings items that would usually be ordinary, such as blankets and pillows, to life with bright color combinations and patterns.

Two years ago, Mummi was diagnosed with cancer. This came as a huge shock to her, as well as the whole family. I took it very hard, but I knew that if anyone were strong enough to battle cancer it would be Mummi. She was one of the healthiest people I know and always forced us grandchildren to eat healthily. The issue of her illness is a sensitive subject for her to talk about, so I didn’t ask too much about it in the interview. She did, however, tell me that weaving is a way for her to escape problems. She said, “Weaving gives me something to do, so that I don’t dwell too much on life’s problems.” She also told me that weaving has “enriched [her] life.” Since her diagnosis, Mummi has weaved almost every day. She is producing more blankets, rugs, and artwork than ever. I am glad my grandmother has an outlet that helps her to feel better and live life to the fullest.

Mummi has created numerous items for me, but my favorite is my big blue blanket. As I examine the beautiful blanket given to me on my last birthday, I study the intricate pattern and find a hidden story. Each thread, so small, is so intricately placed. Each thread however is part of a bigger picture—a grand piece of artwork. Not just any artwork, but artwork with a story and background. My grandmother’s whole life has been quite eventful. Between moving here from a small farming community in Finland when she was my age to go to school, to learning English and then opening a yarn shop of her own, she has been an example of just how much some creativity and hard work can do. My grandmother is always doing something, whether it is cooking, weaving, sewing, cleaning, or lecturing us grandchildren. In the midst of all this, she somehow makes order. She is the glue that holds the family together. Just like the “warp” threads in the blanket she wove me. Mummi is small and intricate, but her impact in the bigger picture is great.

There is a unique bond shared between the artist and the person that actually receives the artwork. By weaving art to fit the wishes of the consumer, my grandmother communicates
with her customers. She uses visual language—colors and patterns to reveal a message. This message takes her a long time to create and may not always be seen by all, but it is there. It can be a friendly message, a message of love, or even a message glorifying God. These tools that Mummi has mastered with her artwork evoke emotions that will last a long time. Because of this, weaving is one way that my grandmother is leaving behind a legacy that will last forever.

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