

A Single Drop of Blood

Susan Reid Danton remembers Dorothy Canning Miller

I refuse to believe that there is anything truly original in this world; everything said, done or dreamed up has to have originated, in some prior fashion at some earlier time. That being said, my own life is a culmination of 57 years of personal experience as well as myriad influences from the people I've encountered along the way and from whom I descended. In the latter instance was a remarkable woman, Dorothy C. Miller, the first curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), whom I knew for a short period in mostly my formative years, whose blood I carry and whose legacy I aspire to protect and pass forward. As it turns out, she was and is my own greatest muse, and what follows is a personal narrative of love and thanks.

The title of this essay implies one of two things: Either that's all there is or that's all it takes. Family legacies can be touch and go depending on a range of dynamics, but in Dorothy's case I really don't want to fail her for to do so would, I feel, inevitably fail me. While she was a monumental *tour de force* in MoMA's earliest three and a half decades, she was also my beloved great-aunt Dodi and, likewise, a monumental source of professional inspiration for me that endures to this day.

Dodi's influence on me began in earnest, oddly enough, with two deaths; hers in 2003 and my father's in 2007. For several years after Dodi was gone, I saw only darkness in her stead, doubtlessly due to the fact that my contact with her occurred mostly before the tender age of eleven. The event of her passing effectively eclipsed everything I held dear about her, as it seemed those eleven years were "all there is." It wasn't until I acquired a certain cataclysmic insight immediately following my father's passing that I realized that the light she bestowed in me was still burning.

After my father's life support systems were terminated, a profound silence remained, one that appeared to originate from within his lifeless form. Lifeless -- or so I thought. Then, an epiphany was at hand: a dual realization, starting with the understanding that the body lying there was not my dad, swiftly followed by a simple question. *Where did he go?* At a time when I should have been wracked with grief, I instead felt as if this man's life, which was largely a source of terror for me, instantly made sense and was, therefore, a profound blessing. I did not grieve in the traditional sense for my father. Instead, I began a process of active reconciliation to the fact that his soul was still very much alive, a fact evidenced by the opening of my heart. The process of reconciliation as applied to my brief relationship with Dodi encompassed those formative years in a way I'd not seen before, eventually convincing me that "that's all it takes." Thus began a very steep learning curve in understanding how legacy, whether for "good" or "ill," survives from generation to generation and ultimately thrives in the one who takes responsibility for it or, in fact, owes the debt for it.

A FAMILY CONNECTION

Our narrative identities typically begin with our earliest memories of childhood. Rather than faithful reenactments of the past as it actually was, these distant memories are more like mythic renderings of what we imagine the world to have been and guide us in the development of our ideals. Dodi gave me a sense of wonder that would endure most of my life and, at a time when I was least aware of it, she challenged me to find my place in the world. Again, those early years were "all it takes."

By the time I was born in 1959, Dodi was already in her final decade at the museum and at the height of her career. By the time I was ten years old, she had moved on to consulting work full-time. She was solidly in her power, and this was not lost on me. When Dodi walked into a room, nothing else mattered other than her extraordinary beauty, elegance and a laugh that could stop your heart.

When I think of her, I mostly remember holding my breath, fearing that I would miss something in her voice or her manner. She was captivating in every way and formidable, to boot.

I looked forward to the family summers on Nantucket that, in my case, only lasted until I was eleven years old. My grandmother, Alice, who was Dodi's sister and my mother's mother, occupied the cottage in Polpis that she and my grandfather built. My family rented either in Sconset or Wauwinet, until my own father built a summer home on the approach to Wauwinet. Dodi would breeze onto the island for two weeks, usually with her dear friend, the actress and philanthropist Sidy Wilson, and would typically stay at the Wauwinet House. Her arrival was the absolute highlight of my summer.



Late 1970s - Dodi on the left and her sister, Alice, my grandmother, munching a chicken picnic on Wauwinet Beach, Nantucket, MA. They loved the sun, swimming, eating al fresco, and each other.

My family spent the 1970s in the United Kingdom and I saw Dodi only twice more after that, once during the summer of my junior year in college at her summer home in Stockbridge, MA, and then at her 91st birthday at her apartment in New York City. The Stockbridge visit followed my summer internship at Parsons School of Design and allowed me an opportunity to show her my portfolio of drawings and paintings. We sat in the sunny kitchen pouring over my freshman attempts at apparel design and she thrilled me with her critique and encouragement. At the time, I watched her beautiful aging face, soft and powdered, with her bright eyes dancing over the pages. She was so funny, generous and loving. The final visit, in 1995, to her birthday party in the city was a different story. She had begun a global decline into dementia and did not know who I was. I was midway through graduate school for a master's in expressive arts therapy by then, my father was engaged in a vicious battle with cancer, and life was cruising by at its customary 90 miles per hour. In 2003, she was gone.

One might think my own life's demands would render any influence of Dodi's to a place of subordination. Not so. That single drop of blood was yet there, feeding a dream. Her influence was never to dictate the logistics of my life. I am and will always be the ultimate agent of the choices I set in motion. It was far subtler than that, more like a homing signal to help me navigate the decades of challenges to realizing my dream, and I consider her to be an indelible part of my narrative identity.

The interesting part of that for me is, that the narrative became increasingly coherent once I actively let her in.

THE VERY REAL DIFFERENCES

While Dodi and I both earned Bachelors in art, hers in history and mine in studio practices, we shared very little in terms of other influences. While I went on to become a fairly skilled artist, she herself was not one. Her first and only career was in the art industry while I enjoyed careers in finance, law, mental health and education before opening a gallery -- Miller White Fine Arts (a nod to Dodi and my darling mum, her niece, Edith Canning White) -- at age fifty-one. Most significantly, Dodi never became a mother. I did, also late in life, to an extraordinary child with special needs. Plainly, our lives followed vastly different trajectories.

For example, I reentered the art world in 1993, one year before graduate school, to make up for years away from the studio and to prepare an entrance portfolio. I studied with an arts therapist, Jo Rice, on Martha's Vineyard, herself a creator of breathtaking images using photographs and paint. Throughout graduate school and the coincident deterioration of my father's health through cancer, I continued to make art, ostensibly to understand the concerns of those whom I was in training to serve but more so to navigate my own emotional health. These many personal concerns, and more, found their way onto an already crammed curriculum.

My graduate school images, whether figurative or abstract, became major players in my narrative identity, both as a human being and an arts professional. If I weren't in so much emotional pain throughout, I would say it was the ride of my life. The end result of my graduate school tenure was the understanding of the relevance of art to a good life. I learned firsthand that, relative to the linguistic capabilities of the image-maker, the human story unfolds through art, perfectly and elegantly, for review, analysis and celebration. I learned firsthand that art is so important to a good life that nothing can take its place. It is like a macronutrient for the soul; without it, one's life is little more than a brittle shell. This understanding steadfastly informs all aspects of my standing in the art world. Indeed, from the first time I organized a show in the gallery, I was resigned in awe to the fact that I was caretaking soul expressions in image form. It is absolutely my professional platform, and where my and Dodi's philosophies of art start to converge.

A HOMING SIGNAL

A blunt analysis of my commitment to the arts reveals several things that mirror Dodi's own experience at MoMA. We share a passion for art and artists. My passion for making art and running a gallery is my own unique expression, however, my obligation to the artists I serve, the fact that it is all so much larger than just me and that I get paid absolutely nothing for it is perfectly aligned with where Dodi's career in the arts led her. Where she "went" is where I am, right now. These sorts of passions are deeply rooted, lending me the notion that my own calling is in the blood.

This was not traditional mentoring. There was never a contractual relationship between Dodi and me, nor any other demonstrative steps taken to rally my dream of a life in the arts. Instead, we lived our lives utterly oblivious to the effect she had upon me, the one who chose to follow her. That a bond of blood could occupy so much of my narrative identity, even while unacknowledged, remains a mystery that I hope to ponder and enjoy for the rest of my life.

A CHAMPION OF WOMEN

What happened in Dodi's early life that informed her decision to debunk so many well-established systems regarding women's work and the art world? We are all "lied to" from birth; how did she figure that out and capitalize on it? Perhaps it was her moral principles or her early onset ideals that kicked in, that it was far better to be true to herself than blindly follow the establishment. Or perhaps she discovered that all formative influence is useless, and potentially dangerous, if it does not compel one to service. There is no middle ground; how that energy is directed must be impeccable or else misdirected. Indeed, Dodi rose to prominence and commanded extraordinary power while at MoMA, transformed into service to the artists she adored and their eventual collectors. It is extraordinary that she put that riddle to good use while breaking ground in the modernist art movement.

She, along with MoMA's first director, Alfred Barr, and her husband, Holger Cahill, was an insightful reformer in the world of art. But, there was one thing that secured that urge to reformation: an underlying appreciation for prior influences. As a team, they were bringing fresh ideas and different ways of looking while remaining entirely respectful of the artistic influences that preceded Modernism. Forerunners, such as European folk art and African art, were included in MoMA's collections as foundational aspects of the Modernist movement. The evolutionary basis for modernism was, in view of this aspect, quite organic and it is a shame that so many critics took so long to understand that Modernism did not come out of a void.

Nevertheless, I have often wondered whether she had a secret need to be unorthodox, out of the box, a closet rebel. If she did, I would not be surprised. Both as gallerist and artist, I have flirted with unconventionality but prior to that, I was inordinately concerned with living a life typical of my peers. By way of a peculiar catalyst, raising a child with severe special needs gave me a clear choice, namely that I could force a conventional lifestyle upon my own family or I could imbue my strange life with the dreams necessary to thrive and set about making those my reality. I chose the latter, taking me fully half my life to arrive into a place that is filled with untapped potential and making me all the wiser for understanding how the world works. Breaking free of the mold opened the channel to Dodi's inspiration, but rather than me burning up in a solo journey into Prometheus' fire, her influence opened me up to the voice of the collective. In other words, knowing myself, my creative sensitivities may well have led me into a world of self-imposed alienation. Her influence brought such clarity to my own excessively abstract life that, absent it, I would not have been led into service of other artists. Birthing the gallery in 2011 was my first true act of personal liberation, a vivid break from creative dis-ability and a surge in spiritual awakening. It is Dodi's voice that keeps the gallery's fire, and my own studio practice, to a steadfast and immensely satisfying burn.

THE PROFESSIONAL INFLUENCE

There are several major practical influences of Dodi's that defined my professional relationships. One is that many of Dodi's choices involved a break with consensus and following her intuition regarding what constituted exemplary art and design works to represent the American modern art scene. This approach was the absolute basis of her consulting practice both at the museum and with private clients. More to the point, she made it okay for me to operate my gallery differently than many in the traditional Cape art scene. For example, certain individuals consulted along the way would have had me thinking that destination galleries are failures waiting to happen, that I was crazy not to circle the wagons in a tight neighborhood of other galleries. Nothing could be further from the truth. The one vital task is to create something unforgettably charismatic, and Miller White is compelling in this regard.

Another is the studio visit, perhaps when I feel Dodi's presence the most. Her friendships with the artists she worked with were legendary and, almost invariably, they began in the studio. When I am invited into the artist's inner sanctum, I could swear that she is right there with us. The immensity of my joy and awe can't be of my own making. It is too big and too beautiful, and I simply know that she is there, crystallizing and sanctifying the moment and then leaving us to work out in real time what may follow. I truly believe the studio visit is the closest one can get to the originality and core values of the artist under scrutiny. I wouldn't know how to properly represent an artist in the gallery without prior access to the place where his or her works originated. This certainty is the main reason I vehemently oppose the online marketplace. It is soulless and devoid of regard for the deeply transcendent experience of interacting with art and one's own true feelings. Connecting with others through art is the absolute joy of an aesthetic life. I feel strongly that Dodi would agree. In my opinion, galleries, like museums, are, more than anything else, centers for social and cultural accountability. First, I must agree that accountability is a valid socio-cultural goal. Next, I must consider how that goal is both attainable and effective. Finally, the means have to justify the ends. Cultural mores simply cannot be effectively transmitted via the Cloud; to achieve viability, they must be shared within a human context.

Of paramount importance was Dodi's respect for the relevance of details to a project; she never lost the connection between the daily grind and the larger goals. She used the eyes she was born with as her greatest source of inspiration and discernment; indeed, her eye was also legendary. And, human connections were everything. She knew whose life she influenced and remembered that in every moment. I am constantly wondering if the lives I am now influencing are the better for it and, after I'm dead and gone, will that influence endure on a positive and life-affirming note. As an artist, I believe that it is my responsibility to others to lighten their darkness. My depths can raise their heights and those very depths are a worthy price to pay to better the world to come, long after we leave the earth.

My further hope is that the same is true for the work of the gallery. I see that it is my job to take a staggering number of risks, both creative and fiscal. Much of the gallery business is handling the proven and the unproven, the empirical and the intuitive, the concrete logistics and the ineffable. It is a bewildering riddle that is always a long game, itself a work of art in progress with an uncertain outcome. On the other hand, I believe my most elevated role as a gallerist is to function as a catalyst in a sort of group initiation. I absolutely believe that the steps I take are evolutionary in their influence on both the artists I represent and the people who visit the shows. My confidence, skills and strength of commitment are all passed forward to those who depend on me. Dodi would agree with this premise, and would witness the state of the art "market," where passion, reason and leadership are largely missing in action, with unbridled horror.

Plus, running a gallery often carries the burden of extreme loneliness. While the external reality abounds with myriad influences and is, hands down, the most intellectually and aesthetically stimulating world to participate in, it is also true that the internal reality, where I am the ultimate arbiter, is one where I am forever individuating, searching for my own power that pulls me forward. The memory of Dodi alleviates this strain of birthing new life into a world dominated by a fickle mob. Merely the thought of her is a beacon, urging me toward my next step.

Had I not opened the gallery, I would never have discovered the true extent of Dodi's influence. However, the gallery itself is a key player in the evolution of my personal and professional dreams. Being related by blood was a gift that was only realizable through my own manifestation; never a given, merely an opportunity. Far subtler than that, she was more an emblem of what my own ideal woman would be. It is no surprise to me that this would manifest in the second half of my life, when I'd seen enough and done enough to find the will to banish the extraneous bullshit from my life and get busy with something important – art. The extent to which I have realized my calling, thus far, mirrors the degree to which I have found myself approximating the ideal that Dodi was.

A final consideration that seems essential to this narrative concerns the origination and production of my first museum show. In the summer of 2016, I conceived and organized *At the Crossroads: Six Narratives and the Intersection of Identity and Community* at Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, Massachusetts. The show celebrated the museum's 35th anniversary, and was a major feat in my curatorial arsenal. The curator's statement on the show may be found at MillerWhiteFineArts.com to provide the full context. The show's concept was deliberately designed to appear circumspect until the visitor brought his or her own mind, questions and answers to the table. Only then did the six exhibits each feel practical and grounded within the larger context that the entire show provided. A handy booklet provided some of the tools but, to get the benefit, the visitor had to do the work. My goal was to start a conversation that would endure so long as human beings were inclined to meet each other, face to face, and learn where each other began and ended. The magnitude of this experience was so vast that the only way to determine its effect on my professional development was to dedicate it to Dodi's memory and the future of our sons and daughters: one to a legacy of a mighty groundbreaker in the world of modern art, and the other to the groundbreakers yet to come.

THE REAL LEGACY

In the brief time that we knew each other, Dorothy Miller managed to change my life, even though neither of us was aware of how or when her influence would eventually reveal itself. The growth of Miller White Fine Arts is no less than the evolution of a longstanding dream of many parts, making my most cherished aspirations so much more than simply achievement objectives. In the constellation of what art has made of the gallery, Dodi is the star of truth and beauty. Whenever I am blind to my purpose, the memory of her instantly repairs my confidence and inspires me to stay the course. Most importantly, my belief in the relevance of art to aid a world in need, I owe to her, underscoring my conviction that my own creative evolution is fundamentally intertwined with that of untold others. As a collective, we all bring gifts to the world and, if effective, the world will mirror that back to us in ways we can only imagine. There is no inherent risk to this understanding, only complete freedom.

When I hear the name of Dorothy Miller, my heart still leaps with joy and I am so grateful for that single drop of blood. However, in the past six years, she has ceased to be the mythical creature I once perceived her to be. The memories have morphed beautifully into concrete reality. She now speaks to me through every conversation, artist or collector, and through every artwork I look at, urging me to always use my best ear and eye. And, when I falter, as I often do, I am privileged to ask, "What would Dodi do?" The answer to that question is another story, altogether.



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The beautiful and
iconic portrait
of Dodi...
Photograph by
Soichi Sunami
Archives of
American Art, 1938

