My father, Ron Partridge, was 17 when he went to work for photographer Dorothea Lange. He packed her bags, cleaned and fixed her cameras, and spent long hours in the darkroom developing and printing her photographs. In return, she fed him, paid him a dollar a week, and immersed him in her unique way of seeing the world.

My father already knew Dorothea when he apprenticed with her. His mother, Imogen Cunningham, and Dorothea were close friends. Both photographers, they were married to artists and were part of the lively, free-spirited San Francisco bohemian art scene. Imogen had three sons, Dorothea two, and the boys were in and out of each other's homes growing up. When Ron decided he wanted to be a photographer, Imogen taught him all she knew, then sent him to work with Dorothea.

It was 1936 when Ron first jumped behind the steering wheel of Dorothea's Model A Ford. Dorothea was photographing for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), documenting the appalling rural conditions created by the Great Depression, and she relied on Ron to drive her up and down the back roads of California.

"I'd be going twenty miles an hour," Ron recounted, "and she'd say, 'Slow down, Ron, slow down.' Her eyes would go from one side of the road to the other, taking in every little thing. When we saw something—a broken car, a camp of migrants, a field boss—we would stop."

Ron watched as Dorothea gained the trust of the migrant workers. She told them she worked for the government and wanted to take photos so the people back in Washington could see what their lives were like. Only after slow, patient explanations would Dorothea take out her camera. Often, she began by photographing the inquisitive children clustered around her. Once the migrant families were comfortable with her and her camera, she moved freely around the camps and fields.

By the end of the day, Dorothea and Ron were both exhausted, but Dorothea's dry humor was still intact. One evening they went into a motel to register. They made an odd looking pair. Dorothea was in her 40s, with clear gray eyes, short-cropped hair, and a limp from childhood polio. My father was tall and gangly, with wild red hair and a fast, kinetic way of moving. The
clerk's eyebrows shot up when he saw Dorothea and the young man carrying her bags. "Dorothea just looked at him," Ron said, "and she took the pen and wrote down: Dorothea Lange and Fancy Man!" Without another word, they walked into the motel room. When they returned from a trip, Ron and Dorothea went straight to the darkroom to develop her film. It was easy to lose track of time in the warm, pungent-smelling darkness. Sometimes Ron stayed for hours after Dorothea went to bed, developing the rolls of film and hanging them up to dry.

By the time Ron was working with Dorothea, she was divorced from her first husband and married to Paul Taylor, an economist at the University of California-Berkeley with views similar to her own. Ron began spending more and more time with Dorothea's two sons and three stepchildren. Gradually, he became part of the complex, quarrelsome, earnest group that made up her family.

When my father married my mother at 24 and they had their first child, Joan, Dorothea designated Joan her "goddaughter" to honor the bond between the families. One by one, the rest of us five kids came along—all part of Dorothea's family, and yet not quite family. We lived across town from Dorothea and her husband, Paul, spending Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Fourth of July with her children, stepchildren, and grandchildren. Dorothea loved the holidays and put everything aside to celebrate them to the fullest. When we arrived on Christmas Eve, a huge fire burned in the living room fireplace. A delicious blend of smells filled the house: beeswax candles, mulled wine, and Dorothea's sandalwood scent mingled with the crisp smell of the Christmas tree.

While the adults talked and prepared dinner, we pulled off our shoes and slid on the freshly polished hardwood floors, played hide-and-seek upstairs, and vigorously cheated at Parcheesi. After dinner, Paul disappeared, and a few minutes later Santa squeezed in through the tall window next to the fireplace. He handed us presents and huge, sweet oranges, then disappeared out the window, shaking an old metal yak bell he had somehow picked up in Tibet.

But Christmas and Thanksgiving became more complicated as I grew older. I began to feel the undercurrents of tension running through the magic. In the kitchen, as the women basted the turkey and unmolded the cranberry salad, they spoke in hushed, fragmented whispers of their difficulties with Dorothea. They told stories of Dorothea's iron will pressing into the fabric of their married lives. There was a feeling of their bitter-tasting obedience as they came up, again and again, against her unyielding nature.

In some mysterious way these tensions made me cautious of Dorothea. I began to keep a small distance from her so that I would not find bitterness in my heart as the women did. Dee, stubborn and courageous, was the only grandchild who would stand up to Dorothea. Once, smelling distress in the air, I rounded the top of the stairs to discover Dee, flushed and tear-streaked, staring angrily at her mother. Why does Grandma Dorrie hate me?" Dee rubbed at the strands of fine blonde hair stuck to her moist face. "Oh, Dee, she doesn't hate you," said her mother. "It's just that you're both so strong-willed." I turned and fled downstairs. I didn't know how Dee had angered Dorothea, I only knew that I was made of softer stuff.
In August 1964, Dorothea was diagnosed with an incurable cancer of the esophagus. She decided to use her remaining time to put together a lifelong retrospective exhibit of her work at the Museum of Modern Art.

A hushed, quiet intensity filled her house those last months. Assistants and art curators came and went, photographs were pinned up on the long white wall of the living room, then came down and were replaced by others. On October 11, 1965, just weeks after choosing her last photograph, Dorothea died.

I was 14. Till that moment I had taken her presence in my life for granted. With her death I understood that there was an end to those whose lives were woven in with mine. I cried so inconsolably at the memorial that my mother finally led me out to the hall and wrapped her arms around me till I was cried out. I didn't know how to say that I had lost not only Dorothea, but a world in which I would always be surrounded by wonderful, difficult, imperfect adults who loved me.

**Telling Dorothea's Story**

In the late 1980s my sister Meg made a film on our grandmother Imogen Cunningham. Imogen was known for her photographs of plants and nudes, and Meg made a intimate, lyrical film about her. Wanting to follow it with a more complex film on Dorothea, Meg asked me if I would help. Three years later, we finished a one-hour documentary, Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life, and a book for adults by the same title, published by the Smithsonian Institution. Shortly after A Visual Life was published, I received a call from children's book editor Jill Davis at Viking, asking me if I would write a biography on Dorothea for kids.

To do these projects, I flew to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., slipped on a pair of thin white cotton gloves, and worked my way through the metal filing cabinets full of the original FSA photographs. Back in California, I spent months in the Oakland Museum library, where most of Dorothea's work is archived. Page by page, I made my way through the heavy black binders that held all of Dorothea's proof sheets-sheets of photographic paper covered with small prints of each negative.

I found it an amazing, uncanny experience to stand where Dorothea had stood and look at the world through her eyes. I trudged with Dorothea through the ruined pea fields of California and saw the starving migrant workers, dull-eyed and listless in front of their tents. I drove with Dorothea in the sweltering heat of the South and saw the tenant farmers chopping cotton, their bare feet thick with dust. I stood beside her and watched the deathly quiet evacuation and hasty internment of the Japanese Americans during WWII. I flipped quickly through the nearly empty binders following the war years, as Dorothea, in and out of hospitals, struggling for her life, rarely picked up a camera.

When I reached Dorothea's last decade of photography, I was delighted to see familiar images: the swirl of hair crowning grandson Gregor's head; the massive oak trees arching over Dorothea's house like a cathedral ceiling; Paul's hands clutching his ancient briefcase.
I read and reread Dorothea's letters and journals, her oral history, and her quickly scribbled notes. In her journal I found a quotation from Dürer, "I draw from the secret treasury of the heart," followed by Dorothea's plaintive query, "I could do this. Why do I not do it?" I wondered what impossibly high standards she held herself to. If she wasn't photographing from the "secret treasury of the heart," who was?

"I would like to have one year," Dorothea wrote, "just one, where I would not have to take into account anything but my own inner demands. But I can't." I began to understand the tensions in Dorothea that had made me so cautious of her as a child.

During this time, my father and Dorothea's son John were asked to speak at an exhibition of her photography. I sat in a middle row, inconspicuous, full of curiosity. Who was Dorothea to these two men? And what would they be willing to reveal?

My father talked about Dorothea's photographic technique and what she saw and taught him to see. He talked of her restless urgency, how they stayed out on the streets shooting all day, how she then would send him into the darkroom in the evening to develop the day's work. Some nights he finished so late that the streetcars were no longer running. Not wanting to disturb the family, he would curl up in the dry leaves in the yard and sleep like a cat.

John spoke quietly, reaching way back for childhood memories of his mother. He told us about the vast house he lived in as a young boy, with his mother's darkroom upstairs, far down a dark hall. He spoke briefly of being boarded with other families, starting at the age of three, so that Dorothea could go on long photography trips. He talked about his mother photographing a fistful of daisies he once offered her, rather than taking him into her arms. And always, as far back as he could remember, her hands smelled of chemicals from the darkroom.

**Sharing the Story**

What I didn't anticipate when I started these projects was that I was entering into a whole new relationship with Dorothea. I came to her as an adult, bringing my life experiences of being married, having two sons of my own, struggling and watching the world struggle. Dorothea welcomed me as an apprentice.

As I went through her photographs and writings, I slipped into a permeable, fluid place where I was living in two realities. One was solid, everyday, and present, the other was back in time with Dorothea. Somehow they moved along concurrently, neither more real than the other.

I dropped in at my parents' house frequently to ask my father questions, to read him new quotations I had turned up, to get his opinions and stories. One day I turned impetuously to him and said, "I'm having my darkroom time with Dorothea."

My father was startled at first, then put an arm around my shoulder in understanding. I could feel his remembering, and a tender yearning for his own times with Dorothea. I took all this information and love and tangled feelings-my own and my father's-and began the biography Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange.
I wasn't sure what to put in, and what to leave out. How should I untangle the complexities of Dorothea's life, and show kids the struggles of being a woman artist, and the price both she and her family paid for her to do her work? I needed to make sure readers understood the times that shaped Dorothea, and that she in turn helped to shape. What would kids today know about the stock market crash of 1929? Working in the fields? Virulent anti-Japanese feelings during the war?

Mostly I worried about Dorothea. Would I be able to evoke her presence faithfully? I decided to take my cues from Dorothea herself. When she photographed someone she tried to tell that person's truth, simply and plainly. She often cropped her photographs close, leaving her subjects startlingly full of impact, then added captions to strengthen the photograph.

I tried to tell the truth about Dorothea, close to the bone. The truth as I saw it, of course, but I searched deeply to find her truth. I captioned her photographs with her quotations, to show what inner imperatives sent her out again and again, camera in hand, to capture and celebrate the strength of the human spirit. I filled in the times, the social and political forces at work, trying to give enough information without getting boring.

For the afterword, I wrote about how I had known Dorothea, focusing on one Thanksgiving. All of the details came flooding back to me as I sat at the computer: Dorothea greeting us in the tall, arching doorway of her home, murmuring "Hello, Bitsie" to me as I ran inside, her floor-length skirt brushing against my legs. All of us crowding around the long table running down the middle of the living room, our rough terra-cotta plates heaped with food. Paul standing at the head of the table, beginning our prayers with Charleston town records of 1630, followed by Abraham Lincoln's entire Thanksgiving proclamation of October 3, 1863. I remembered listening, impatiently, as my food cooled in front of me. And, everywhere, I felt the strength of Dorothea's presence.

I invited my father over to my house to read what I had written. He sat on the couch, reading slowly and intently, one finger resting on his lower lip. I hovered nearby, uncertainly.

"You know, Bitsie," he said when he finished, "something like this could really make a guy cry." He flipped the manuscript up in front of his face and sat, shoulders shaking, papers trembling in front of his hidden face. When he lowered the manuscript, his cheeks were wet and soft, his eyes red. "I still miss her," he whispered.

Then I knew I had brought Dorothea back, just for a moment, just for my dad.

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