

Sidewalk Stories & Philosophical Musings: A Photo Essay
by Terry Scott

What is it about Fall, this season of winding down? It brings on so many melancholy feelings, yet it is undeniably my favorite time of year.

More than 30 years ago, an old woman told me that, contrary to what she expected to feel, she was not ready to die. When she was younger, she imagined that when her time came, she would be at peace with it. She'd lived so many days, but as they began to dwindle and seem more finite, she felt each day was more precious to her than the previous. She wasn't ready to let go of her life. Another old woman, who is very dear to me, is currently struggling with multiple health problems. She's a realist and has begun preparing for her own passing. She tells me the opposite: "I don't want you to be sad. I have no 'bucket list.' I've done *everything* that I wanted to do in life— and more! I have no regrets." I hope that I can say the same one day. But, still, *each day is precious*. If we can only slow down enough to be conscious of it and savor it.

I have been thinking lately about what we leave behind when we are no longer here. Last summer my husband and I traveled to Italy and saw two of Michelangelo Buonarroti's masterpieces— the "David" statue and the Sistine Chapel frescoes— still wowing appreciative sightseers 500 years after he created them. Going back even further, we wandered the ruins of the Forum and Colosseum in Rome, and tried to imagine how those ancient citizens felt as they walked on those same paths. I was amazed to learn that 25 feet of dirt has piled up on top of Rome since the time of the ancient emperors. Wow!!! Where does that much dirt and dust come from? We were told that one of the reasons the metro system in the center of Rome is so limited is because almost anywhere you dig, you uncover ruins. To create a network of subway lines under the old city would require digging to profound depths to build tunnels below the ruins— an incredibly expensive and technologically challenging endeavor. So we walked and took buses as we explored the city. It was only afterwards that this thought occurred

to me: How clever of the ancient rulers of Rome to build the Colosseum on a hill! It is now about the same level as the current city.



I imagine this must be pure coincidence— is there any way they could have anticipated that so much dirt would accumulate and raise the level of the surrounding area? As I sit here writing, I can look out my window and, with a whole new level of appreciation, see the dust accumulating on the wood railing of my own front porch.

While I love the sense of history I feel whenever I'm in Europe, I live on the other side of the world in a small California beach town with a much shorter memory— at least memory which contains discernable human activity. How different it feels to walk on the streets of this “new world.” In my hometown, which is just over 100 years old, the oldest streets are made completely of cement. The newer streets are of asphalt, which has a bit more “give” to it and is easier to patch. My family history here winds back 90 years and 4 generations, something of a rarity for California, where most people come from someplace else.

As I think back to the streets of Italy, I don't recall seeing any scratchings in cement. True, the oldest streets are made of cobblestone and it might be difficult to leave your mark there. But in my hometown, within a stone's throw of my front door, I can find numerous missives from an earlier era. I decided one day to take my camera along and do an informal inventory of street messages—sidewalk stories—left for future generations to read and wonder about. It seems they fall into several categories.

One of the most basic is simply writing your name. First of all, as kids, most of us had the idea drilled into us that you're not supposed to deface public property. Is it only the bolder kids or adults who cross that line and write something in a freshly poured sidewalk? What is it about that new patch of cement that is so alluring? If you scratch your name, do you write just your initials, or just your first name, or your last name, or your full name? Do you date it?





While the weeds are partially covering the sidewalk so that this last name looks like “Arias 72,” I know that it really is “Farias” and that it was written by a cute surfer boy with long dark hair whose first name was Joe. We went to high school together, and I’d never think of him now except for the fact that I see his name in the sidewalk each time I walk home from grocery shopping at my local Vons store.

One of my favorite categories includes various body impressions. Of course, the most famous examples of this type are the foot and hand prints of the movie stars located outside Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood. I dare you to go there and resist the temptation to try to fit your hands and feet into those indentations made by the celebrities. Just down my own block, there is a family portrait of this same type: man, woman, and dog—the family unit immortalized forever in cement.



Did their family ever grow? Did other dogs— or cats— share their household? Were there children at a later time? Did they feel left out because their prints were not included? Do they ever come back to this house that they inhabited so long ago to gaze at their prints and recall their former selves? *(I know for a fact that the house has been sold since these prints were made.)*

I also love the accidental footprints. In the alley behind our house are several prints left by a dog that walked across the street when the concrete was newly poured. I don't know what kind of dog it was, but from the prints, it looks to have been fairly big.



There are examples of different foot attire too: No shoes/barefoot (what a high arch!), tennis shoes, and sporting shoes (cleats).



There are scratchings that contain messages, both positive and negative: “Mike loves Terry.”



I think it is so cool that this one contains my name, and it even has the same spelling, but it wasn't me who was the object of Mike's long ago love.

There are the friendly greetings to cheer you as you step over them.



There are the “bad words” (Shit! Fuck!) designed to shock or insult you.



What power those kids must have felt when they wrote these words in cement for all eternity! Do they ever see them now, and would they claim ownership if they did?

There are impromptu memorials...



There are advertisements: “Eat at the Spot.”



For a bit of trivia, The Spot is a vegetarian restaurant located on 2nd Street in Hermosa Beach. Paul McCartney, who is himself a famous vegetarian, used to have The Spot cater the backstage food when he would come to L.A. on tour with his band Wings during the 1970's. I know this because there are photos of him (and the catered food) hanging on the wall inside the restaurant.

There are even official messages from the city.



I hope everyone heeds this warning.

And, even though it isn't permanent in the same way as the missives scratched into cement, as an activist at heart, I have to include this sticker message which I noticed on the street. I display the normal view and the close up view in case you can't decipher it.



Finally, there is the group effort:



I imagine there was some thrill in creating a lasting memento with your friends and siblings, and also probably some comfort in knowing that if you got in trouble for writing on the sidewalk, at least you'd all be in it together and it wouldn't be on your head alone.

More than 50 years ago, as a young mother, my mom pressed her handprint and wrote her initials (“MC”) in a patch of fresh cement at the property line between my childhood home and my grandparents’ home next door. My baby handprint used to be there too, but it has since been covered over by the new owner of my grandparents’ house, an artist who creates beautiful handmade tiles. After she moved in, she installed a tile border along the driveway. Although the tile covered up my tiny handprint, the memory is immortalized in a song I wrote about my grandmother and the house my grandfather built: “*My handprints are pressed in the driveway outside, guess I must have been about 3. And inside are pencil marks on the wall to measure my brother and me...*” Luckily, from my standpoint at least, my mom’s handprint is still there. The other day I went over and swept away the dirt that was covering it just to be certain.



And, sure enough, my hand fit *perfectly* inside my mom’s handprint. Almost as if it had been my adult self who created that impression in the cement. It’s a comfort to me that my mom, dead now more than three years with her ashes scattered in the Pacific Ocean that she so loved, has this small physical reminder on the earth, nestled at the edge of the driveway outside the house she was born in.

What will people remember when I am no longer here? I'm no Michelangelo but in my own small way, I am creative. Perhaps a song I wrote? I'd better get busy recording them. Maybe some photographs that I took? If you looked at them after I was gone, would you be able, even briefly, to see the world through my eyes?

I think of my dear friend Rosa, three months younger than me, and now gone much too soon. She died last summer from cancer and is buried in her hometown, high in the mountains of Guatemala. I hold her in my heart, and I hope that when I'm gone, there will linger some good memories in the hearts of my children and friends. But from a purely whimsical standpoint, perhaps I should keep an eye out for some freshly poured cement... If it were you, what would you write?