VASHON-MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER

Suzanne Hubbard hand-weaves her tree tapestry. (Juli Goetz Morser Photo)

Weaving: a silent oratory and metaphor for life

By Juli Goetz Morser

Wednesday, February 7, 2018 2:37pm | ARTS

Outside Suzanne Hubbard's light-filled studio stands a grand Douglas fir, impressive in size, unusual in its multi-trunked, many-armed form. Inside stands a grand Swedish fir floor loom, impressive in size, unusual in its rarity. Between the numerous strands of the white weft, Hubbard hand-weaves the warp of colorful wool threads, a year-long process to create an abstract expression of the tree. Yet for Hubbard, the final tapestry will be as much about the weaving itself as it will be a visual meditation on the fractal patterns she sees in nature, in the wholeness of life.

Weaving, she says, is a language, a silent oratory that transcends linear thinking, "a process with a concern for the shared, larger whole." After almost 45 years of weaving, Hubbard is finally giving voice to what she's learned from her non-verbal, hands-on experience through a recently published book, "Silent Oratory, A Weaver Speaks" and an upcoming workshop called "The Art of Life-Weaving."

Hubbard, 66, and her husband, Sandy Brown, moved to Vashon three and a half years ago from Takoma Park, Maryland, a suburb just outside of Washington, D.C. Over a cup of tea in the kitchen of her old farmhouse, Hubbard's lithe form became animated as she described her "amazing migration" from one Washington to the other.

"It was a gut impulse, I make big decisions intuitively," she said with a laugh, her brown eyes lighting up beneath a cascade of white curls. "In the D.C. Beltway, I felt like a creature who suffered from habitat loss. My love of weaving, mothering and gardening didn't measure up by the Washington standards. People here embrace those fields. Vashon is a self-selective place; it seems people are more whole-oriented here. There is a feeling of being in the dance between our lives and nature."

Once here, Hubbard made a decision not to "pick up where I'd left off." She gave herself time to acclimate to the island and found herself "bonding" with the large fir that "anchors her property, the mother tree." The alchemy of island ecology and the mother tree sparked inspiration for a new, nine-piece tapestry series. One weaving, "Metamorphosis," is currently on display in Bremerton and was selected out of 900 museum-quality entries in the statewide competition "The 2018 Collective Vision Gallery." Her 70" by 58" tapestry is an example of Swedish Bildvavnad weaving and took six months to complete. She calls the entire series "Foreground and Background are the Same."

"The background is the natural fabric of life, and the foreground is what emerges out of it — which could be this wonderful tree or it could be us," Hubbard explained. "The theme of each tapestry is like a fractal pattern of the larger theme. There is so much wisdom below the surface at the roots of the tree, then the tree (grows) up, and it is like a fractal of a spiritual understanding of the beauty and wholeness of life."

To capture the image of the tree, Hubbard drilled down on the details. She began with a painting, then traced it, chose the colors and next transcribed it onto paper rolled up on her 500-pound, 10'9" wide by 5"6" deep loom. To prep the warp, she invited friends over to hold it as she tied on the 900 warp threads made from 2-ply, tightly-spun worsted wool. The weft yarn, hand-dyed by a couple in Taos, New Mexico, is made from 2-ply tapestry wool. With two large pedals locked into place, Hubbard then began weaving by hand, not using a shuttle, so that in the process, all the threads interconnect — an apt metaphor for the artist cum philosopher.

Hubbard's award-winning tapestry "Metamorphosis." (Courtesy Photo)

"I present weaving as a process-based language. As new patterns come in, I re-adjust my order (of weaving). It is not linear and rigid. You are always present with what needs to happen. The process is very conscious, you can't go on automatic," she said. "Some people say it's terrifying to see me weave because of the detail. I realize that is the difference between something being whole and not being whole. People say details are not essential, but they are."

Like an infinity loop circling from the microcosm to the macro and back again, the words Hubbard uses to describe the insights she's gained from a life of weaving move between opposites — the solitary to the community, the individual plant or animal to the whole of nature, the non-verbal to the verbal, the threads to the tapestry. What unites the duality is the experience of weaving, the interconnectedness that makes a whole fabric, something she intends her workshop to convey.

Hubbard will introduce the classes with a potluck scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 24, as the potluck "is a weaving, and will be an experience of what the class is about." In the class, participants will weave eight strands that symbolize their life "and experience them from the process-based perspective, which "changes your view and does something to your heart when you see none of the strands gets dropped, they just change order," Hubbard said. "With the insights, we might ask what can change in government or education ... because once you start to think from a place of wholeness, you know how much things have to change."

Hubbard comes by her existential inquiries naturally. Her mother, Barbara Marx Hubbard, is an author, public speaker and co-founder of the Foundation for Conscious Evolution. Her father, Earl Wade Hubbard, was an artist and often "asked what is the meaning of being human?" Hubbard spent her childhood in rural, idyllic Lakeville, Connecticut, where in her house "unusual, big life questions were the daily conversation."

Nonetheless, she said, while it's taken a long time to distill and verbalize the wisdom she's learned from weaving, "speaking about it always falls short of the experience of what it is to weave threads together."

"The Art of Life-Weaving" will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, March 9, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 10, at Vashon Intuitive Arts. The potluck dinner will be from 4 to 6 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24, at VIA. For more information and to register, visit suzannehubbard@me.com.