

SWEET AUBURN

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A HEALING AND MEDITATIVE LANDSCAPE

THE HEALING LANDSCAPE: *A Source for Creativity and Renewal*

BY MEG L. WINSLOW, Curator of Historical Collections

*I rush to the Dell
In this large wooded amphitheater
An audience of one
To hear the owl's dusk crooning
To find sense in the trade I'm to
make*

Excerpt from "A Trade"
by Nancy Rappaport



"The work that the staff do here at Mount Auburn is sacred. They create what psychiatrists call a holding environment, a space where people can come with parts of their soul to find a deeper meaning."

— DR. NANCY RAPPAPORT

STANDING ON A TABLE IN THE NAVE of the chapel, Nancy Rappaport is performing her one-woman play, *Regeneration*. As the play begins, we hear an owl calling and are transported through her words to the deep, natural setting of Consecration Dell.

A child psychiatrist and author, Nancy wrote and produced this play about her journey through breast cancer and how, unexpectedly, she found hope and courage at Mount Auburn Cemetery. A performance that weaves together monologue, poetry, and audio with remarkable candor and humor, *Regeneration* premiered at Mount Auburn in October 2016 and went on to reach a wider audience at the United Solo Theatre Festival in New York City.

In the summer of 2016, Nancy came to Mount Auburn to tell me of her illness. As we began walking the Cemetery grounds with no particular destination in mind, we both sensed that the landscape would give us the room and space to



*Who could design it better?
Frogs in frozen ponds
Alive*

Excerpt from "By Design" by
Nancy Rappaport

process our thoughts. As someone who works at the Cemetery, I am profoundly familiar with our mission to bury and commemorate the dead, comfort the bereaved, and inspire the living in a landscape of exceptional beauty. It reminds us of what is so often overlooked at Mount Auburn—that it is as much about living as it is about dying. In the ensuing months of Nancy's surgery and recovery, I would witness this firsthand.

After surgery, and once she began to regain her strength, Nancy and I took regular walks in Mount Auburn. A marathon runner, cross-fit trainer, skier, and swimmer, Nancy wanted to connect with the sublime feeling that an athlete feels on a hike in nature. We always relished the sensation of being outdoors. As we walked through the Cemetery landscape, we would stop at a monument that caught our

*Angels in flight in stone
Move after life-
An eternal dance beyond time
Bringing borrowed wisdom.*

Excerpt from “A Trade”
by Nancy Rappaport



eye—often an angel or sculpture of a child— read the inscriptions, and discuss the symbolism and the stories.

Increasingly, these monuments would move Nancy to write. She began taking notes and asking questions. I showed Nancy my favorite places as well as other destinations to seek out on her own: Alice Fountain, the Dorothea Dix monument, the Magoun monument. What Nancy discovered was a sense of solace from the extraordinary integration of funerary art and horticulture. It was a different feeling than a hike in the woods, and this difference surprised her.

Returning time and time again, Nancy began to experience the transformative power of Mount Auburn. She began to write about the landscape, the monuments, and her experience in the Cemetery, often in poems or verse. I soon learned that she was creating a narrative that would become her first play, *Regeneration*.

The American journalist Ellen Goodman recently described Mount Auburn as “*an extraordinary example of life co-existing with death.*” In our walks together, Nancy sensed the sacredness of the landscape, that it is a place of great emotion, where, like Nancy, visitors come to courageously work through the complex emotions of grief and loss.

Thankfully, Nancy has fully recovered and cancer is in her past. She has given us the gift of her play, which she calls a love letter to Mount Auburn Cemetery. Thank you, Nancy. As someone who has devoted her life to helping others, she recognizes that when we visit Mount Auburn, we leave the better for it. In the words of Justice Joseph Story, we leave the Cemetery feeling “*purser, and better, and wiser, from this communion with the dead.*”

Dr. Nancy Rappaport is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a child psychiatrist at the Cambridge Health Alliance. For twenty-three years, she has worked with at the health center of the Cambridge Public Schools where she specializes in developing concrete strategies for struggling students and offers professional development for teachers.

In 2009, Dr. Rappaport published In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother’s Suicide (Basic Books), for which she was awarded the Julia Ward Howe Book Award from the Boston Authors Club. Dr. Rappaport is also co-author of The Behavior Code (Harvard Education Press, 2012), a book for teachers offering concrete strategies to work with children displaying oppositional, anxious, sexualized, or withdrawn behavior.



Meg Winslow (r) with Nancy Rappaport (l) standing next to the statue of Hygeia, Goddess of Health and Hygiene, commissioned by Dr. Harriot Kezia Hunt (1805–1875) for her lot (2630 Poplar Avenue) at Mount Auburn, and carved by Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907).