

Beyond the fridge: Opening zones of agency with young artists

Nicole Bauberger

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Résumé de l'article

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Beyond the fridge: Opening zones of agency with young artists.

Nicole Bauberger

Covid introduced constraints into art and art education programming which challenged art programmers and educators to consider the art of the possible. I will draw on my art and teaching practices during that time as well as my stint as emerging curator of the Yukon Arts Centre Youth Gallery to consider how working locally and outdoors, with a view to future use of the artworks made, shaped successful programs. I will share images and reflections from the Winter Garden, the Monster Parade, and interactive works in the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery, considering the following questions: How does making artwork that has a plan for use in public presentation change the art learning environment? What new levels of unanticipated meaning occur when student artwork encounters its wider community? What opportunities did Covid-related constraints open for us, and what should we make sure and carry with us into the future?

Keywords: *artist-teacher, community, elementary, locality, outdoor presentation, Yukon.*

The COVID-19 pandemic restrained art programming and practice, challenging us to bring increased creativity to connect to the uncertain future. I am an artist of settler heritage who works in many modes and disciplines and embraces collaborations. My teaching is part of this work. I follow bell hooks (2004) in championing a resistance to the hierarchical and arguably colonial duality that separates one's "real" art practice from the teaching one does to pay the bills. As much as possible I teach from and back into my own art practice. I strive to treat the students and teachers as fellow artists. In this article, I draw on my art and teaching practices during the time of COVID, to consider how working locally and outdoors, with a view to the future use of the artworks made, shaped programs that danced with the difficulties of the COVID period. I found that considering how to lean into bell hooks' (1994) notion of "education

as the practice of freedom," opened possibilities in a situation that often seemed impossible. I will be discussing my interactions with two schools around the area of Whitehorse, Yukon. Both schools have significant First Nations populations, and Indigenous language is taught at both schools. Elijah Smith Elementary School is located less than one kilometer from my house, in the territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwächän Council. The J.V. Clark School in Mayo, about 400 km north of Whitehorse, is in the territory of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation.

I offer a two-handed telling, in a spirit of Freirean praxis. In italics, I will tell a version of the ongoing story of our Monster Parades projects (and relevant projects that feed into them and spin-off of them) in the present tense. They are meant to bring the reader



Nicole Bauberger

Nicole Bauberger is an artist of settler heritage who has made her home in the traditional territories of the Tagish Kwan people, also known as Whitehorse, Yukon, since 2003.

Her art practice includes painting, sculpture and installation, as well as storytelling, music and performance. She embraces collaborations with other artists of all ages, and sees teaching as part of this. Bauberger opened the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery in the woods behind her house when all the galleries closed due to Covid in 2020. She goes on installing new works there, listening to people encounter what they find.

See more at www.nicolebauberger.com, #baubergernicole, and @DaltonTrailTrailGallery.

into the thinking that happens in the midst of my teaching practice. They illustrate how my teaching and my art practice intermingle, respond to the unexpected, and sometimes result in unexpected outcomes, partly due to empowering other people's imaginative gestures toward the future. Between the anecdotes, I will discuss these questions in more theoretical terms. How does making artwork planned for use in public presentation change the art learning environment? What new levels of unanticipated meaning occur when a student's artwork encounters its wider community? What opportunities did COVID-19 related constraints open for us, and what should we carry with us into the future?

It's March 17, 2020. All the galleries are closing. But I have a body of work, small ceramic dresses, that are tenderly and insistently asking me to exhibit them. They have been fired to cone 6, and so can weather the freeze-thaw cycle of a Yukon spring. I hang them among the scrubby trees off my back yard, which fronts onto a public trail in green space. Trails come together there, so there's room for people to view the gallery and pass each other, safely distanced and outdoors. No need to gather there – the art awaits them when they happen by. Amid my doom scrolling, I create a Facebook page for the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery. Suddenly we are the only open art gallery in Whitehorse¹.

I am a teaching-artist, I teach as an artist, and I am always drawing from my art practice². I think of my art practice in part as the work I do, whether or not I'm getting paid for it³. I teach in many different ways: in schools through the Artists in Schools program in Whitehorse, in museums, and in the context of realizing my art projects and bringing them to their audiences. I love bell hooks' (1994) notion of "education as the practice of freedom," partly because it's an idea to live with rather than to understand completely. How can the education of today be called the practice of freedom given

its constraints, its rules, its institutions, and its damaging history of residential schools and colonialism? How's that for a question worth inhabiting?

It's February 2021. I have received a small amount of funding to use the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery as a laboratory to experiment with Covid-resilient programming. I run into Jill Potter's Grade 6 class from Elijah Smith Elementary School with their kicksleds out on Paddy's Pond. They enjoy playing with the sound installations on the islands. I invited local sound artist Jordy Walker to make, and come back the next week to install and deinstall "leave no trace" drawings in the trees using lines they have chain-stitched from yarn for this purpose.

The workshop is spontaneous. The moment doesn't seem right to run it through the Artists in Schools program, especially as I'm getting some subsistence for my work in the gallery.

I come home one night in May to the thank-you banner the class has crafted for me in felt, unexpectedly installed in the gallery.

The spontaneous workshop described above arose from the month's subsistence funding to experiment with COVID-resilient arts programming in the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery. It was teaching that happened as part of the art practice I just go ahead and do, the same impulse that led to creating the gallery in the first place. It was part of my own practice of freedom, inseparable from the way I go on, educating myself.

Over the past ten years I have taken a diploma in Northern Studies at Yukon College, as well as other courses from the First Nations Governance program, their first homegrown Bachelor's degree as a university in their own right. In this theoretical context, and in many others, I encounter various forms of the "R's" to guide good practice in Indigenous contexts, these concepts are usually found in groups of 3 to 5

"How can the education of today be called the practice of freedom given its constraints, its rules, its institutions, and its damaging history of residential schools and colonialism?"

¹To learn more about the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery, visit: <https://whatsupyukon.com/arts-entertainment/yukon-visual-arts/dalton-trail-gallery/> here, as well as https://www.insea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/RelateNorth9_WEB.pdf

² I would suggest that many people who might not consider themselves artists have elements of "practice" like this in their lives. It can be good to know what they are so we can cultivate them. They can be sources of resilience in difficult situations.

³ I acknowledge that my privilege in being a homeowner makes this more possible for me than others, but I would also suggest that it is commonplace to do work at some distance from the money economy, and it might be liberating for people to consider their own work in this light.



Figure 1. All 48 students from the J. V. Clark school in Mayo paraded their monsters down to the River on one of the first fine spring days of April, 2021.

(Tessaro et al, 2018). The ones I'm most familiar with are Respect, Relationship, and Reciprocity. Like "education as the practice of freedom," these concepts, in my opinion, open sites of lifelong learning. I mention this here because this moment, closer to a gift economy than work paid by the hour, enhanced my relationship with Elijah Smith School, and set the preconditions for the story to come. I would also note that bell hooks often threads the concepts of respect, relationship, and reciprocity through her writing, both explicitly and in the way she includes dialogues with other thinkers to illustrate the thinking that occurs within their relationships, such as her dialogue with Ron Scapp (pp. 132-165) in *Teaching to Transgress*.

It's September 2021. Creating work for a gallery exhibition called RavenMonsterDress in Peterborough Ontario, originally scheduled for October 2020, has sustained me through the isolation of the pandemic. I'm planning to drive, not only to ease

the logistics of shipping glass and ceramic artwork from the Yukon, but also to maintain a more careful control of my own microbiome. Laurel Paluck, director of the Ludmila Gallery, also has an active community arts practice, and the two of us have been scheming up community and school-based Monster Parades to complement the show.

I'm looking at the breakouts of the Delta variant across the country and thinking that the last thing a teacher would want, would be for me to come into their classroom after having just driven across Alberta. As I get off the phone, having decided to postpone the show yet another year. I'm surprised how broken-hearted I feel. This feeling drives me to get to work building the first monster puppet prototype I have envisioned. My heart needs to fulfill this promise in some way.

I reach out to Elijah Smith Elementary School. I walk my ten-foot-tall cardboard monster puppet through the woods to Elijah Smith Elementary. Amanda Bartle, the school's art teacher, tested the

⁴In a climate crisis it's also apt to think of what we can do closer to home. While I am keen on my artwork reaching new audiences, the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery reinforced for me how much I value children as part of my audience. Every year that audience grows, whether or not I ship work or get myself onto an airplane.



"The monster puppets divert cardboard for at least a short while from the recycling stream. But they also aren't made just to hang on a wall or a fridge for a while and then to throw them out. They have a future to live first, making them more COVID-resilient than an indoor art gallery show."



prototype, and we began making monsters with her classes.

I think we should hold onto the value of "locality" post-COVID. I was at home to undertake these projects partly because I wasn't running all over the country trying to maintain the "national or international" profile that is required to qualify for most advanced artist funding⁴. Also, locality supports flexibility. So much of what happened in the anecdotes I relate here hinge on the fact that Elijah Smith School is a short walk from my house. It made teaching possible because the impacts of being flexible with my time were gentler. COVID was sending classes home at the drop of a hat. If a class was suddenly canceled, I could walk ten minutes home and work on my own projects there.

Schools have a strong impact on our societal relationship to time, and the future. Their schedules and holidays shape how families work and travel. Events like graduations mark important stages in our young people's lives. Amid the constraints of COVID pandemic, many of the promises built into the temporal structures of education could not be fulfilled. Students didn't get to celebrate their graduations. The ability to make a plan and fulfill it builds the trust on which schools' authorities rest. It seems to me it became increasingly important to make any kind of project with the resilience to deliver,

to fulfill a promise, in the face of so many disappointments. How do we make resilient plans? What are the preconditions for artistic projects that can weather the unexpected? Locality can play an important part in this.

Having a future in mind with student art projects can lead us towards a more circular economy. Many children's art projects embody the "take-make-waste" pattern critiqued by many working towards more circular economies (Brydges, 2021, for example). The monster puppets divert cardboard for at least a short while from the recycling stream. But they also aren't made just to hang on a wall or a fridge for a while and then to throw them out. They have a future to live first, making them more COVID-resilient than an indoor art gallery show.

It's October 29, 2021. The night before our first Monster Parade, someone had broken into the school and set off fire extinguishers. It was useful to get a bunch of the students outside, especially to do something positive and distracting. The students and their monsters appear on the front page of the Whitehorse Star.

Outdoor programming can be more resilient in the face of the unexpected than indoor programming. Those involved are already dealing with the unpredictability of the weather, and so more mentally prepared to



Figure 2. October 29, 2021, Elijah Smith Elementary School, student-made monsters mounted on backpacks await the parade.

⁴I model these distinctions from adrienne maree brown's (2017, 2019) work.

encounter the unexpected. While risk avoidance is understandably built into school culture, realistic responsibility requires an ongoing negotiation with risk. When, due to COVID, the indoors became the place of higher risk, the seasonal, weather-based risks of the outdoors became an easier obstacle to choose.

It's March of 2022. The J. V. Clark School in Mayo reaches out to me. There has been a series of deaths in their small community. They would like me to undertake an art project that would hold a healing space somehow between the community and the school. They suggested a kind of mural painted on large rocks near the school.

After protesting that I am an artist not a therapist, I suggested that something ephemeral might be better than something permanent for an expression of grief. I proposed a few ideas drawn from my own art practice including Monster Parades, which they selected. After the parade, one student asked me a couple of questions about how to get bamboo poles. Then he looked at me and said, "I'm gonna make a thousand monsters!"

There is space inside the monster. That's why they're so hungry, a friend replied.

One of the ways that the Monster Parade embodies education as the practice of freedom is the way it holds space for each monster-maker's sovereignty. For each student, their monster is a zone where their imagination holds power. There are no ways they can get it wrong. Even if they just scribble, it's a monster-ish mark. It is uncorrectable, incorrigible. I find that very quickly young artists develop a clear vision of what they want to make and what they need to make it.

I need green paint, they tell me, and I get it for them.

It seems to me that art projects are one of the easiest places for us to pursue education in the practice of freedom in the school environment. Creating a structure that is simple enough to leave room for individual expression opens doors toward freedom for the students. It is also helpful in figuring out a way to keep instruction as brief as possible as the effectively simple can take some time to design.

Outside the monster there is also open-ended space. In this project there is room for other artists – teachers, students, or community members – opportunities to add music, choreography, shadows, and even possibilities for altruistic gestures like collecting food for the food bank. All of these things have happened during our Monster Parades. I have a barely contained ecstatic Yes! for almost all additions to the project. This adds resilience. If it snows – yes! – we are monsters in the snow. If we have kazooos – yes! – we are monsters with kazooos. I say 'almost' because I have had to respond one "yes, and..." and one 'hard no'⁵.

These two reservations are tied to the monsters and the meanings that were given to them. This is where a more theoretical understanding of the artwork and meaning can be important in how we parade with our monsters towards freedom. I find that Danielle Boutet (2008) puts it well:

...artwork is "meaningful" in that it generates a "field of significance," somewhat like a quantum field, made of probabilities of meaning...we know it is meaningful, but the interpretation of its meaning varies from one person to another and even from one viewing, or listening session, to another. (p. 5)

I respond with "yes, and..." to allegorical uses of the monsters that make them mean just one thing. Teachers often like to use the monsters as allegories to talk about mental health curriculum. Yes, the monsters can be seen this way. If I am present in these dialogues, I open the spaces for monsters to also be seen in other ways, gently and without undermining the teacher's authority in the classroom.

My hard no is "overcoming" the monster. I will accept risk to the monsters, and damage due to their use, but not demonization and violence towards them. This is not a battle. These are our own created cardboard demons, drawn from the delightfully surprising brilliance of children's imaginations. I love these monsters. I will not participate in demonizing them, still less in some kind of ritual murder.



Figure 3. Playing with scale: miniature monsters made on chopsticks allowed us to experiment with parading in video format, and to adapt the project to different ages and time frames. Elijah Smith Elementary School, October 2021.

"For each student, their monster is a zone where their imagination holds power. There are no ways they can get it wrong. Even if they just scribble, it's a monster-ish mark. It is uncorrectable, incorrigible."



Figure 4. Hundreds of monsters at a variety of scales from a variety of schools amassed into a lively installation in the Atco Electric Yukon Youth Gallery in the Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse, May 2022. Many of the monsters paraded as part of the Midnight Sun Moppets Children's Festival on the Yukon Arts Centre grounds on May 29.

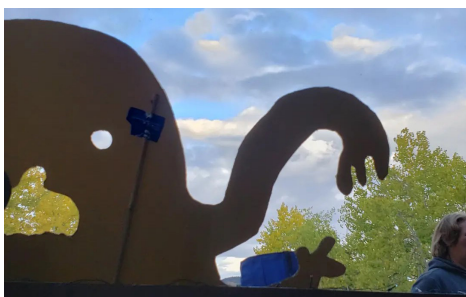


Figure 5. Adult-made monsters hang out at the Yukon Women in Music Cookshack Session after a parade through the Twin Lakes campground, September 2022.



Figure 6. Shadow puppet monsters in the Instagram booth at the Nakai Theatre Puppet Path at the Wondercrawl Festival, Shipyards Park, Whitehorse, September 2022.

It's May of 2022. With permission of the students from J. V. Clark School in Mayo, I bring their monsters down to Whitehorse. They join the Elijah Smith Elementary School monsters in an installation at the Yukon Arts Centre Youth Art Gallery. Casey Prescott, the CEO of the Yukon Arts Centre, observes that it's the liveliest installation he has seen in the youth gallery. The Monsters parade, accompanied by a honk band (with a sousaphone! to my utter delight) were part of the Midnight Sun Moppets Festival. A class of about twelve students from Mayo on a field trip to Whitehorse see the installation.

Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding among the organizers, some of the participants in the parade take some of the students' monsters home. I do my best to recuperate what I can.

When I return the monsters to Elijah Smith Elementary School, I reflect on the project with the students. The school is planning to make the Monster Parade part of their annual school culture, so knowing what they liked and what they might want to do differently is useful. I tell the students about how some of their Monsters went home with other people, acknowledge my part in this mistake, and ask them how to make it as right as I can. The grade two class considers it carefully. After our discussion, one student comes up to me and reaches out a hand for a handshake. He looks into my eyes, and says, "If you did your best, it will be okay."

Writing in Teaching Community: A pedagogy of hope, bell hooks (1994) quotes Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in defining true dialogue:

In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside – not only within – our own group... We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves... (pp xv-xvi).

When I asked the students what I needed to do about the lost monsters, I was honestly asking their advice, taking responsibility for something that had gone wrong, and willing to adapt my plans based on their insights. As an artist in the classroom, I rely on the teacher's classroom culture, presence, and knowledge of their students in maintaining a good working environment. I think it might be

interesting even for teachers doing the work of holding the space of the classroom to watch for those moments when the students can teach us, where the adults can ask the students for help. This helps set up the preconditions for a reciprocity where help can go both ways, allowing students to feel seen and so creating a willingness to receive what teachers can offer.

It's August 2022. The Mayo monsters were not picked up at the end of June, so they are tarped in my backyard.

Nakai Theatre is taking part in the Wondercrawl, an outdoor art festival along the Yukon River in downtown Whitehorse that takes place in early September, when the dark comes back after the overwhelmingly bright summer. This began as a Covid adaptation of the Wonderhorse Festival of emerging artists, and it's in its third year. Nakai Theatre has been working with emergent theatre artist Susie Anne Bartch to make "The Puppet Path," a labyrinth of Christmas lights on the ground. Nakai instigated the building of large puppets in family pods at the beginning of Covid, and last year these puppets paraded with the public through the labyrinth, with a band playing in the middle.

Nakai Theatre's summer students are working with me in my backyard to repair the Mayo Monsters for inclusion in the parade. Jacob Zimmer, Artistic Director of Nakai Theatre, comes up with the idea that on exiting the labyrinth, people can bring their puppets to an Instagram-oriented photo booth shadow setup.'

In The Mushroom at the End of the World, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) weaves the ideas of contamination and collaboration together.

We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival... This book argues that staying alive – for every species – requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die. (pp. 27-28)

The monsters were meant to return to Mayo. This promise to the students was important

to me. We failed to do this. And instead of just keeping them tarped, I put the monsters at risk. As they paraded in the hands of new audiences during the Nakai Theatre's Puppet Path event, they lived in the imaginations of a wider audience than the students who made them imagined, as well as gaining meaning through the work of the other artists involved in The Puppet Path. To me, this is the purpose of art. This is what the circular economy asks of us - to use our imaginations, our creativity, and our work to put what we have to use.

It's March 2023 I receive an email from J. V. Clark School. They saw my workshop description for Shadow puppets on Zoom as a Covid-adapted workshop – could I come back to Mayo and do it in person? This is a teaching challenge for me on many levels, but oddly appropriate given what their puppets had been up to in Whitehorse.

I borrow the lamps from Nakai Theatre that had been purchased for the Monsters' shadow play at Wondercrawl.

I ask questions. Do we make up the stories, as in the workshops as written, or are there elders or knowledge keepers who would like to tell Na-Cho Nyäk Dun stories that we illustrate with shadow puppets? Can we incorporate Northern Tutchone language into the plays? An artist friend in Mayo, a citizen of Na-cho Nyäk Dun First Nation, suggests she would love to work with me as an assistant on this project, and I do my best to set this up with the school and the First Nation.

I get to the school with what I have left of their puppets, some missing, many much the worse for wear. I have given myself some time in the school on Easter Monday, both to figure out where we can realistically create shadow puppet plays, and where we can settle into the space and the ideas. I realize that I owe the students the story of what their monsters did, with images.

That night I work hard on the slide show and show it to them in the one break during the following day.

Respect, reciprocity, and relationship apply here, as well as accepting my imperfections in applying them. We did not get the monsters back to Mayo the previous June. I had no way of establishing consent with the young artists for using their puppets in the Monster Meridian. I was in a state of debt.

Reciprocity opens the possibility of redressing this kind of situation. I owed the story of what their monsters got up to, to the students. They didn't have to accept that as a complete restoration of balance; fortunately, we are still in the middle of the story. But I needed to bring the balance closer, to put this work in from my side, to set the preconditions for possibly working well together.

Like "education as the practice of freedom," and "respect, reciprocity and relationship," Jacob Zimmer writes about living with words in his theatre practice in the article "All statements are insecure questions: Eight words towards a Theatre" (2004, revised 2006). His last words in the article read, "I fail these words everyday. I keep trying" (p. 4). One of his eight words is "obedience." He keeps it, despite and because of the fact that the word makes him uncomfortable. How does obedience fit into education as the practice of freedom? How does it work in a school in the communities where power dynamics are complicated both by small class size and the heritage of residential schools? As I meet the students in the gym and we work towards being able to do the theatre games together in order to build the cooperative mentality that makes performance possible, I realize that obedience is much more at play in working towards a performance than it is in most of my visual arts workshops.

An open-ended reciprocity helps me find my way through this. I reflect that I can give my obedience as part of my own freedom if it feels right to me. I look for opportunities to obey the students. After school, the students are doing soapstone carving with a volunteer instructor. I am curious. One student indicates just with a tilt of the head that I should come see what they were doing. In obeying this cue, I felt that I was moving towards a relationship where reciprocal obedience might be possible.

April 13, 2023, Mayo

I get to the school early on day 3 of our 4-day shadow puppet creation process. We have a lot to accomplish today to be ready to perform tomorrow.

When the coordinating teacher arrives at the door, she tells me the school is closed today due to a sewage leak. I could stay and we could just do what we can on Friday. Or I could go and return

in May. We sit down to drink tea and consider options. In a spirit of respect for the students' work so far, I have to come back later and give them the time to work.

I sort out our work in progress and share where we've gotten so far with the teacher. Light dawns on her face as she exclaims, "I can use this in my writing work!"

This is another story of obedience. In being obedient to the principle of respect, applying a kind of flexibility I practiced at Elijah Smith Elementary School, I'm going to have to commit two more days of driving to this project. I am clear that this is the right decision. I am treating the students and our relationship and our work together with respect. In addition to feeling hope for what the teachers and students will do in my absence, this delay makes time for the logistics to get worked out about my Mayo artist friend coming into the project as an assistant, which hadn't panned out earlier.

It's May 4, 2023. Jill Potter calls me from Elijah Smith Elementary School. Her class has created

a banner in felt for Red Dress Day, and they would like to ask me if it would be okay to display it in the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery. I am more than delighted that her class wants to make use of the space this way. I ask if it would be okay to write about it in this article, and she says "Absolutely!" They walk over in the cool spring morning before the leaves. They pet my dog Itsy.

Relationships set the preconditions for surprising futures. I loved getting this phone call in the middle of the first draft of writing this article. Their banner hangs next to "Finding Our Way," the interactive community art piece in the form of an orange dress of flagging tape that has occupied a central place in the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery since July of 2021, in response to our national coming to terms with all the unmarked children's graves found at the residential school in Kamloops, B.C. Saying yes to the students' request is an easy act of supporting their artistic agency, and a moment built of our previous interactions, our relationship. Their putting the Trail Gallery to work as a place to display their red dress banner and statement in response to Red Dress Day affirms

Relationships set the preconditions for surprising futures...Saying yes to the students' request is an easy act of supporting their artistic agency, and a moment built of our previous interactions, our relationship."



Figure 7. On Red Dress Day, May 5, 2023, students from Elijah Smith Elementary School in Whitehorse install their felt banner and poem in the Dalton Trail Trail Gallery. Relationships between the artist and the school opened up the possibility of them using this space to express themselves.

the work we've done together. Their use of the Trail Gallery feels like success to me. At the very least, it's a place along the way.

It will be May 14, 2023 soon. I will be driving back up to Mayo to finish the shadow puppet plays with the students. I wonder what will happen next.

I leave you here in the middle of the story, because the middle of the story is a place full of possibilities. I hope there are at least a few words in here that might be of use to you. I can't wait to see what all of us do.

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