

Wildflowers

by Theresa Malphrus Welford

In the fall of 2017, I did something I never envisioned myself doing: I walked into a tattoo parlor. Sitting on a bench out front was Ross Craven, the owner of Ivory Tower Tattoo Studio, who sported ear gauges, a ZZ Topp/Duck Dynasty beard, and larger-than-life tattoos of Lucille Ball and Jed Clampett and other 1950s and 1960s sitcom icons.

When I asked Ross about his tattoos, he said, “Oh, I’m full-body.” Then, when I described my own plans, he said, “Yep, the backs of the legs are going to be painful, especially the ditches. The ditches always hurt.”

The ditches.

I was on a quest to rebrand myself, and at that moment, it became clear that I’d be learning all kinds of things along the way.

Inside the tattoo parlor, black leather couches hug the walls. On the flat-screen TV, adults pull juvenile pranks, then snicker like Beavis and Butthead. In one small room, Jack Torrance from *The Shining* pushes his leering face through a hole that he’s supposedly chopped through the door with an axe. *Here’s Johnny!* Orange and black flames adorn the bathroom walls, along with a painting of a big-breasted woman sporting horns and fangs. She’s faded to shades of pink and blue, like bad art from the 1980s. A muscular demon who could be the twin brother of Urizen, from William Blake’s painting *The Ancient of Days*, squats above the doorframe, pointing down at something that I can’t see. He’s wearing a loincloth and sporting a ZZ Topp / Duck Dynasty beard of his own, along with a WWJD tattoo. Next to the sink, there’s a sign specifying which items—including unwanted Christmas gifts and annoying children—should not be flushed down the toilet.

Based on recommendations from several colleagues, I chose Ryan Bray as the artist who would help me rebrand myself. In the room where Ryan works his magic, the walls are decorated with Bettie Page pinups from the 1950s and skulls and superheroes and a Redneck Brand Tattoo Kit consisting of several permanent markers and a birthday card sending monster-sized hugs to the world's best daddy. Hardbound comic books, Lego vampires, and neatly organized bottles of tattoo ink cover the shelves and tables. Ryan keeps a spray bottle filled with cool water and a supply of soft paper towels ready so that he can periodically dab the stinging tattoos-in-progress. The playlist on the purple iPod consists of Blondie, The Carolina Chocolate Drops, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Monkees, Pearl Jam, Johnny Cash, a death-metal rendition of "Ride of the Valkyries," a sarcastic rendition of "Afternoon Delight," and a serious rendition of "Avé Maria." A black vinyl bed/couch takes up much of the space.

On my first visit, that place was entirely unfamiliar to me. Here I was, a gray-haired academic—albeit with purple highlights—immersing myself in a new world, surrounded by tattooed and pierced people decades younger than I was. I cringed when Ryan told me to go ahead and change into shorts while he got his studio ready. For more than thirty years, I was ashamed of my legs. Now, after ten sessions in Ryan's studio, those legs are covered with glorious bouquets: sunflowers, daisies, poppies, morning glories, hollyhocks, honeysuckle, coreopsis, Indian blanket, and lantana.

Finally, at sixty-two years old, I have rebranded myself.

I chose wildflowers because of what they are and what they represent to me. They can be cultivated, but they also grow completely on their own in nature. They add color to the roadside. They sprout up in abandoned fields. They push their way through concrete and asphalt and rock. In Ecuador, lantanas are so common that people use them as fencing.

For many people, wildflowers are nothing but weeds, but to me they represent beauty, determination, self-sufficiency. They felt right for my new brand: I may not be beautiful, but I am determined (aka stubborn), and I strive to be self-sufficient.

Paradoxically, my glorious wildflowers also represent shame. Living with it. Being held back by it. Hiding because of it. And, ultimately, figuring out a creative way to vanquish it.

In Rome a few years ago, I was wearing a red and white polka-dotted dress with white capri-length leggings. The summer day was so hot that I went into a café bathroom, stripped off the leggings, and stuffed them into my purse. Then, minutes later, I walked back downstairs, locked myself in the bathroom, and put the sweaty leggings back on. I couldn't talk myself into going out in public without them.

Why?

Because I was the Woman with Purple Veins Spiderwebbing Her Pasty White Legs, and I hated her.

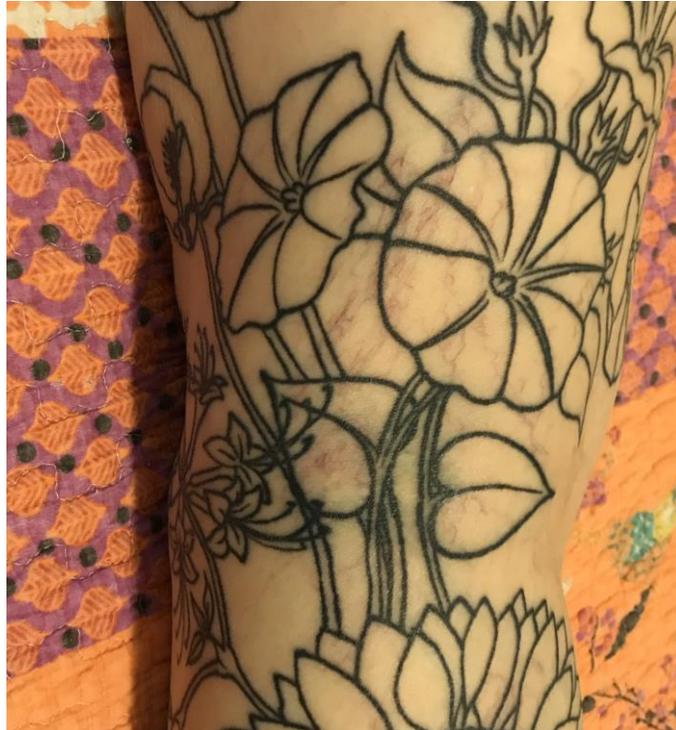
Look at that man: a varicose vein as thick as a garter snake threatens to burst from his lower leg, but he's wearing shorts. Look at that young woman: she has cellulite dimples from her ankles to her thighs, but she's wearing a sassy striped minidress. Look at that old fellow: he looks nine months pregnant, but he's happily strolling the beach in his black swim trunks.

They are wearing what they enjoy. They are comfortable. They are brave.

I've heard the arguments: "Get over yourself. No one is looking at you."

I know. I know. No one cares about my legs. My husband loves me exactly as I am. Other people have worse problems. But my self-consciousness is (was) like the tattoos adorning the owner of Ivory Tower: larger than life.

I was always so embarrassed by my legs that I don't have any "before" photos without tattoos to contrast with my "after" photos. But I do have this one, taken after my first session at Ivory Tower:



As the photo shows, my rebranding process had a long way to go, but it was already starting to have the desired results.

After I'd gone to a couple of sessions at Ivory Tower, a colleague stopped me on my way to the water fountain at work and complimented me on the "fancy tights" I was wearing.

I was wearing tights that day, but I pointed out that the pattern she was seeing was, in fact, tattoos.

"Oh, my word!" she said, in her posh British accent. "They're beautiful!"

When I explained that they were there to cover "uglies" on my legs, she said, "What a clever idea!"

At one marathon-length session (four hours!!), Ryan said that working on my legs had been gratifying because it reminded him of why he went into tattooing in the first place. I was happy to learn that my quest was helping him remember his own brand: The Talented Guy Who Covers the Canvas of Someone's Skin with Art.

Several hours into that long session, a second tattoo guy popped in to say good night. He checked out the work-in-progress and said, “Whoa. Back of the leg! She’s tough.”

“Indeed she is,” Ryan said.

So, in addition to embellishing my legs with beautiful art, covering my veins, helping me overcome my shame, and encouraging me to come out of hiding, my tattoos also reveal that I am, at long last, a bit of a badass: The Woman Who Pushes Through Pain.

My mom was a life-long, hard-core, hellfire-and-brimstone, fundamentalist, evangelical Southern Baptist, and I figured she’d be appalled if she ever saw my tattoos. She often wondered why I didn’t share her views about most things, and in recent years she often said, “I just don’t understand how you turned out to be so different from me and your daddy.” Back in the 1980s, when she was unhappy about my choice to become a vegetarian, she told me, in a sanctimonious tone, that Jesus ate meat, as if that tidbit would instantly make me change my mind. I was twenty-nine years old at the time.

In the 1990s, she was shocked when I got a second hole in my left earlobe. “*Terry*,” she said, italicizing my name with her voice, as disapproving parents do when their prepubescent offspring do something naughty. I was thirty-five.

When I stopped going to church in 1995, she branded me as the Daughter Who Kept Her Awake All Night Because She Couldn’t Help Envisioning Me in Hell. To make matters worse, she told me a few years ago that my father and my grandmother would be disappointed in me because I didn’t go to church. Although I found that remark deeply hurtful, I also found it absurd: they’ve been dead for more than two decades, and they’re *still* disappointed in me?

My tattoos would have pushed her over the edge, I thought, making her pull out her Bible and flip furiously to the verse in Leviticus that says tattoos are an abomination unto the Lord. It’s right there with the verses that prohibit

homosexual behavior and mixed fabrics and bowl-shaped haircuts. (Insert eye-rolling emoticon.)

Tattoos, I have learned, penetrate the epidermis and lodge permanently in the dermis. Ironically, they last a long time because the body thinks they're invaders. In an effort to rid the body of the dye, immune-system cells called macrophages eat up as much dye as they can. Then the macrophages and the dye bond with each other and hang out together, just below the surface of the skin.

As for my relationship with my mom, I'm sad to say that the issues went much deeper than a tattoo needle. She loved me, and she told me so. Still, it would have been nice if she'd *accepted* me.

The thought of having to deal with my mom's disapproval didn't make me hesitate to get the tattoos, but it did make me do my best to conceal them from her.

Update #1: When visiting my mom at her home last spring, I wore sweatpants to cover my tattoos. However, while trying to deal with a sudden itch, I absentmindedly pulled up one sweatpants leg, revealing a couple of poppy blossoms. Her only comment was, "Is that a tattoo?" When I explained the purpose—to hide spider veins—she seemed satisfied. I was, and still am, officially gobsmacked.

Update #2: In early October, I flew back home to visit my mom in the hospital. Although she was unconscious by the time I got there, I made sure my tattoos were covered.

Update #3: I covered my tattoos for her funeral.

Ryan, the guy who helped me rebrand myself, is an artist and an expert: he has been tattooing for nearly twenty years, and he came highly recommended.



Ryan Bray

He wanted my ideas, but he knew which ones would work, which ones would not, and why. I initially went to him with an image of a colorful stack of books, thinking they'd be perfect for me.

"Won't work," he said. "What else do you like?"

If I wanted coverage, he said, I needed images with lots of details, like fish or flowers or birds. I eventually understood that I also needed images that could wrap around my legs like vines and extend to all the places marred by spider veins. For the reasons that I described earlier, I went with wildflowers.

At one session, I told him I'd thought about getting spiderweb tattoos to cover my spider veins.

"That would have been *awesome*," he said.

Yeah. It would have. Spiderwebs and skulls and Shakespeare quotes, maybe. "Though she be but little, she is fierce": I seriously considered that one, because I am little and because I am occasionally fierce.

In my quest to rebrand myself, I became a bit of an expert, too. I'm an expert on taking forever to rise above my self-consciousness, and I'm an expert on finally mustering the moxie to push through fear and pain.

I also became an expert on tattoos. Not on giving them, of course. But I learned that tattooing has its own lingo ("ditch," "linework," "leg sleeve,"

“cadaver,” “closer,” “Michelangelo,” “blowout”). I learned that certain parts of my legs are far more sensitive than others. I learned that pain in the crease behind my knee (“the ditch”) could radiate all the way up to my lower back, much like a mild electrical shock. I learned that lying on my belly and propping myself on my elbows for hours hurt almost as much as having ink injected into my legs. I learned that it’s possible to think of things to talk about even when both the tattoo artist and the client are nerdy introverts (superheroes, horror movies, memes, music, the criminal justice system, dysfunctional families). I learned that walking backward with hands extended is an effective way, more or less, to keep an enthusiastic dog from jumping on freshly tattooed legs (RIP, sweet Murphy). I learned how to get through the healing process: when the itching woke me up at 2:00 a.m., icepacks and antihistamines were a big help.

Of all the things I learned, this one is the best: once I made up my mind, it was surprisingly easy to start fresh and to overcome decades of shame. I still have quite a few spider veins, especially around my ankles, but they have lost their power to humiliate me. My wildflower tattoos have yanked them off the stage and out of the spotlight.

One afternoon, as I waited at the checkout counter in a grocery store in Statesboro, Georgia, a young man tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Excuse me, ma’am. I just wanted to tell you that your artwork is beautiful.” A man who was probably about my age called out across the local mall parking lot, “I like your tattoos!” In 2018, I taught in a Study Abroad program in Lucca, Italy. When I tried on dresses in a clothing shop there, several young salesclerks gathered around to look at my legs and said, “*Wow! Bella! Bella!*”

Sure, some people stare, like the woman in Lucca who nearly tripped and fell because she was glaring at me rather than watching where she was going. But I’d rather have a disapproving look than a pitying one, which is what I always expected when I was the Woman with Purple Veins Spiderwebbing Her Pasty White Legs.

In a sort of tattooed facsimile of nature, sunflowers, poppies, morning glories, honeysuckle, and coreopsis spread wildly over my left leg, winding vinelike around it and covering a surprising amount of terrain. Hollyhocks, lantana, daisies, and Indian blanket do much the same on the right.

Other people probably don't pick up on the nonconformist attitude that this deliberate asymmetry represents to me, but it's definitely there in my mind. Also, on a practical level, the asymmetry is an inevitable result of my main goal in rebranding myself: to cover the veins that I've hated for thirty-plus years. Ryan purposely hunted down as many "uglies" as he could and tattooed over them, wherever they happened to be, all while creating cohesive and beautiful patterns.

My tattoos also represent my way of thumbing my nose at aging. I don't mind getting older, but I do mind the expectations that are often placed on us as we age. We're supposed to vote a certain way, get sensible haircuts, dress in conservative clothing, drive fuddy-duddy vehicles, and fade into the background.

Nah.

Very few people expect someone of my age to get inked. I never expected to do such a crazy thing. But I did, and I'm rather pleased with myself.

Hell, one morning last spring, I got fitted for hearing aids, and that evening I went back to Ivory Tower to get the linework for my coreopsis and Indian blanket tattoos.

Shortly after I embarked on this quest, the yeah-I'm-getting-older-so-what attitude underlying my tattoos made an appearance at a doctor's appointment. My podiatrist admired my new artwork, then asked if I'd have to have the colors touched up at some point. (Because I spaced out my tattoo sessions to coincide with my monthly paychecks, and because I skipped some months, the tattooing process took quite a long time. I was nearly sixty-two by the time the tattoos were finished.)

I said, "Well, I'm sixty years old, so I don't foresee needing many touchups."

"That's pretty morbid," he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

We both laughed.

Then I told him what my in-laws have always said when they spend money on something expensive like a fridge or a car or an array of solar panels for their house: “It’ll see us out.”

I like that way of putting it: My tattoos will see me out. This short little sentence captures the spirit I was looking for when I started this whole rebranding process: confident, irreverent, and no longer apologetic about myself.

So. This is the new me. I am no longer the Woman Who Hates Her Legs. I am the Woman with Wildflower Tattoos.



Theresa Malphrus Welford, who grew up in a small working-class town near Savannah, Georgia, has published poetry, creative nonfiction, book chapters, and scholarly articles, as well as three books: *The Paradelle*, *The Cento* (Red Hen Press), and *Transatlantic Connections: The Movement and New Formalism* (Story Line Press). She and her husband, Mark Welford, happily share their home with countless rescued animals (cats and dogs).