

How emotions can influence creating a medal and raising awareness in society

Jeanne Stevens-Sollman



Fig 1. Stevens-Sollman studio and sculpture garden, 2021

We humans are indeed complicated creatures living with a plethora of emotions, both positive and negative. Today only a few of these emotions will be addressed in creating my medals: enjoyment, anxiety or fear, and grief.

My husband Phil and I are fortunate to live in the Appalachian Mountains of Central Pennsylvania, a place that is not only quietly beautiful, but also inspirational; a place where we built our home and studio with the rocks gathered from the mountain side (fig. 1); a place where

we can walk in nature and observe its wondrous wildlife like the ruffed grouse (fig. 2) and wild ducks. It is a place where enjoyment overrules everything. Creating art here is at its optimum. *Quack*, a happy little medal, was inspired by the training ducks we kept for our Labrador, Cooper. It was a definite surprise to us when the ducks grew faster than the puppy.

The celebration of my father's 75th birthday (fig. 3) was my first human portrait in the peace of our valley. It took



Fig 2. Ruffed grouse, 1992
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 78 x 74 x 12 mm



Fig 3. Le colombophile, 1994
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 85 x 85 x 10 mm

a year for his image to be just right; not dog, not rabbit. Ernest was a pigeon fancier like his father and grandfather. Racing his homing pigeons all his life until the age of 84, living 9 more years with memories of those races.

Then a dark cloud settled over our bucolic valley. The 2016 US Presidential Election took place. Anxiety crept in where enjoyment lived. *Archimedes* (fig. 4) emerged, an image of wisdom and power, a symbolic figure for democracy. Yet something lurked behind it as he flew over the populace. The reverse says it all, 'Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid'.

A meeting of the US administration with North Korea intensified the message of the *Archimedes* reverse. As citizens we were concerned about the future of these meetings. I am not a political person. I don't usually protest openly, but now here is a reason to say something in this small but powerful medium, the medal. This medal is called the *Korean peace talks*. On the reverse is a field

of flowers. The text reads 'Where have all the flowers gone?....Gone...'.

Walking by my stream in 2019, I found the footprint of a bear at the edge of the marsh. It was perfect, a perfect device to express the looming presence of Russia in our midst. On the obverse, the torn pieced flag on the foot of the bear represents democracy being stepped on. The interior of the two-part medal proposes an unwelcomed future with bombs dropping on the landscape. On the reverse the bear walks quietly through the forest. Think about this. It is an unsettling concept.

Meanwhile humanity is being neglected. Immigrants are being assaulted and jailed. A wall is being planned on the border of the US and Mexico. People are living in squalor through no fault of their own. A box (fig. 5) becomes a home, newspapers become blankets, and dogs live with their masters in their disposable 'home'.



Fig 4. Archimedes / Be afraid, be very afraid, 2017
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 186 x 158 x 15 mm



Fig 5. Shelter from the storm, 2017
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 80 x 77 x 16 mm

In the spring of 2015, many frogs visited our pond. A joyful time of meeting and greeting, these amphibians glutted on insects, pirouetted on the stone walls under the Japanese maples and became the subject of the medal, *Froggie went a' courtin* (fig. 6). However, in 2017 when problems arose on our southern border with Mexico, the title changed to *If you build a wall, we will find a way*. Any wall can be breached with determination and cleverness.

Through all this strife there are historical events to commemorate such as the centennial of women's right to vote. The suffragists led this movement, Alice Paul being in the forefront. She suffered starvation, as well as imprisonment. Her cell number was 12. Because of her and others like her, we women in America can vote. Hopefully loudly with remembrance of the toil and abuse our predecessors experienced while ratifying the 19th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.

The giant Asian wasp, *Vespa velutina*, known as the murder hornet, invaded the north western part of the United States from Asia posing a huge threat to the honey bee population. In the center of a hexagon sits this giant wasp. On the reverse is the text 'Bee Safe or Bee Gone!'. Can they be stopped? It is a small issue compared to the before mentioned political issues, but it is important none the less.

To balance this crisis, *Change* was created. The monarch butterfly signifying climate change (fig. 7). On the obverse is a monarch chrysalis. On the reverse is the monarch hovering above a flower.

As violence grew with the negative actions of the governing US administration, tension in racial communities escalated. The murder of George Floyd burst through the tranquility of my mountain refuge. The news media carried this terrible event nonstop. Here is where anger emerges, when some type of injustice rears its ugly head.



Fig 6. Froggie went a' courtin, 2015
(title changed in 2017 to: If you build a wall we will find a way)
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 110 x 105 x 25 mm



Fig 7. Change, 2019
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 109 x 112 x 8 mm

Injustice did indeed occur on May 25, 2020, when *George Floyd* (fig. 8) was brutally murdered by police officers. People employed to serve as an instrument of law and order just careened into hatred. How to address this issue as the media continued to replay this injustice? Again, medals came to my rescue: a concrete thought to pass on to another person who can hold it in front of herself and contemplate a solution. Black lives matter.

Just as I was finishing the *George Floyd* medal, another horrific incident took place. Another murder, and a murder it was. A senseless loss of life of a person not even awake! *Breonna Taylor* (fig. 9), a nurse by vocation, was sleeping in her apartment when the police barged in to assault her boyfriend on drug related charges. Another medal... *Say her name...* do not forget this injustice. I chose a clinched fist for the shape of this medal. Black lives do matter.

Then quickly after Breonna's death, yet another racial tragedy struck. A gentle soul, *Elijah McClain* (fig. 10), going out for milk at his local convenience store was gunned down. A mistake in identity they say. 'Law and Order' again failed to protect the unprotected. This young man of 23 taught himself to play the violin. He would practice at the local animal shelter to comfort the cats living lonely lives in cages. Now his music is silenced, no longer heard by his feline friends or his family. Black lives matter.

All this happening during the pandemic lockdown. Anger is an exhausting emotion. In these months of anguish more was happening in our world to upset its natural beauty. The pandemic began in 2019. What to do? Isolated, quarantined, with no contact with friends or family, no social events in our lives. The garden has always been a restorative place. This little four-part interlocking puzzle, *Be safe* (fig. 11), was a calming choice to express the



Fig 8. George Floyd, 2020
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 97 x 100 x 18 mm
(in the collections of the British Museum and
the American Numismatic Society)



Fig 9. Breonna Taylor, 2020
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 92 x 115 x 18 mm

pandemic restrictions. On the tiles are written: 'Keep a safe distance', 'Stop fiddling around', 'Have courage', 'Be safe'.

Is it fear, sorrow, anger that lives in our minds beside loving thoughts? On my table my resting tools beckoned me to say something after the death of Senator *John Lewis* (fig. 12), who was revered for his social commitments, who was a leader in the civil rights movement, who walked the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1963, who was bludgeoned by 'law and order' for trying to raise awareness of racial inequality on that day, yet he fought for equal justice his entire life. His death is a great loss for us all. On the obverse is a portrait of Senator Lewis. On the reverse is the text: 'Make Some Noise, Get in Good Trouble and Necessary Trouble'.

Dr. Anthony Fauci who led us through the pandemic kept the citizenry aware of the progress and development of

COVID-19. He was there to calm a frightened populace, to bring them through the confusion of vaccinations, to keep them abreast of the dangerous spread of this new and unknown disease. The medal was intended to honour all those on the front lines of this battle of life and death. For all those nurses, doctors and caregivers who risked their lives to help those who were worse off than themselves. It was a joyous occasion when Dr. Fauci took the time and liberty to throw out the first pitch for baseball's D.C. team the Washington Nationals in 2020.

In calmer intervening moments, other issues are addressed like the centennial anniversary of the death of *Harriet Tubman*, a freed slave, and abolitionist. She led 70 enslaved souls to freedom through the underground railroad, as a conductor or overseer delivering these individuals to safehouses along the route north to Canada. The reverse of the medal depicts blocks from quilts hung on porch railings to guide the slaves north and to the next



Fig 10. Elijah McClain, 2020
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 117 x 117 x 20 mm



Fig 11. Be safe, 2020
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
4-part interlocking medal, bronze, stacked,
70 x 52 x 63 mm; opened, 110 x 115 x 30 mm

safehouse. A code in patterned images like the bear paw, a symbol of Canada, the monkey wrench which turned the wagon wheel, the Greek cross (the peaceful cross) being the crossroads on the journey, and the large star of the North. Follow the North Star to the next safehouse. The Shoo-fly image showed the travelers who and where the helpers or 'railroad workers' were.

2022. What can we say when a whole country is blown to bits. Say something! Do something. Ukrainian tanks plowing their way through sunflowers to take over the enemy. There will be more medals.

And then there is grief, an emotion that cuts the heart into pieces, pieces that seem to be so broken a breath can't even be drawn. Sometimes talking helps, but making an image



Fig 12. John Lewis, 2020
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 110 x 110 x 10 mm



Fig 13. Rio di Santo, 2011
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 83 x 23 x 60 mm

of those lost beings is a healing process for us. Your dog is part of your family or it should be (fig. 13). *Rio di Santo* left us way too early in his life. At six years old he suffered a cranial aneurysm. To us he was a saint, intelligent and loyal. The reverse of the medal has the image of 3 whistles. In hunting, the dogs are taught to come to the handler at 3 peeps on the whistle. Rio responded always remarkably well to Phil's 3 peeps.

Our Cooper, who was the subject of many medals during his hunting career with Phil, was immortalized in the 10-piece interlocking puzzle *Dog house in the wind*. He had an incredible launch into the water where he would

retrieve bumpers or ducks. He loved this game so much we think he never really dried out from one launch to the next.

In June of 2022 Phil's brother (fig. 14) suddenly passed away leaving yet another hole in our hearts. This last holiday season was the first without him. In January to dispel the misery of grief, Phil and I sat down together to create his portrait. A difficult project as we only had photos of frontal views with a happy smiling face. It took weeks to bring him into our presence. Yet doing so left us feeling complete to celebrate his memory.



Fig 14. Rich, 2023
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 93 x 98 x 15 mm



Fig 15. Brookgreen Gardens, 2021
Jeanne Stevens-Sollman
Bronze, 75 x 10 mm
(in the collection of Brookgreen Gardens)

And lastly a time of creating medals with pleasant topics. The medal for *Brookgreen Gardens* (fig. 15) was struck in 2021. This was a totally enjoyable commission for me as dogs were the chosen subject matter. Angus, the Scottish deerhound, is the current mascot of the Gardens. Anna Hyatt Huntington, sculptor, and her poet husband Archer founded Brookgreen Gardens, a Botanical Sculpture Garden and wildlife preserve in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina in 1931. Her love for her hounds is depicted on the reverse of the medal.

Eyes on the Prize was commissioned by the Medal Collectors of America. On the obverse is an octopus peering over a treasure chest filled with coins. Its arms gripping the chest as one grabs a coin. On the lid is the text 'Medal Collectors of America'. On the reverse is the

full octopus with bits of the chest peeking through the enveloping arms. Its undulating shape fits snugly in your hand.

These are just a few emotions explained in the creation of my medals. Sometimes it is a roller-coaster, sometimes it is a smooth glide over the water. Wishing you smooth waters in a turbulent world.

Photos: Jeanne Stevens-Sollman