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# Oral history interview with Mindy Weisel, 2001 September 2-November 1

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mindy Weisel on September 21, 2001 and November 1, 2001. The interview took place in the artist's studio in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Anne Louise Bayly Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Weisel has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

[Recording Note: Throughout the interviews there are several noises from a busy street outside Weisel's studio. Many buses, sirens, and traffic sounds can be heard throughout the interviews.]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, I am here with Mindy Weisel on the 21st of September 2001 in the artist's studio in Georgetown. I will have you start talking about your background and your family because I know it's very central to all of your work.

MINDY WEISEL: It's central to my work in the sense of the legacy that my mother—I'll close this. I think with my background—my—I was one of the first children born in Bergen-Belsen, Germany, which was a displaced person's camp after the war. My mother and father were cousins, and they were so happy to find each other alive, they got married. They lived at this place for three years waiting for papers to come to America. And my mother was sitting at her family Friday night dinner table, and the Nazis knocked on the door. They took her away, and she never saw her sisters again, or her parents again. She was a very elegant woman from Hungary. Both her parents owned a beautiful patisserie there—a Hungarian bakery there.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And she was how old?

MINDY WEISEL: She was 21. And she never saw her parents or her sisters. She'd lost all her sisters, a couple of her brothers survived the camps with her. My father was from 11 children—very poor family—and nine of his siblings survived the war. Which was amazing—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's phenomenal.

MINDY WEISEL: —They were in hiding. But, I was named after both my grandmothers who were killed in Auschwitz. And they were in their 40s when they were killed, like 48, 46. Um, and my mother spent her entire life, not talking about the horrors of the war at all, but trying to keep the beauty that she knew at home as a young girl alive for me. [00:02:01] So like, when she came to this country—here she had a three-year old—they had to cross on a boat for almost three weeks, a crowded boat, to get to America. It was 1949 when we came, and my mother insisted on coming with some European porcelain— a porcelain tea service that my father got her on the black market—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: —Because she said, "I have to come with something beautiful from Europe like the kind of things I was raised with." So she came with two oriental vases and this beautiful tea service, which I now have and have treasured my whole life. And—but, that was my mother. She made me believe that things of beauty were of value.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, that really then fostered—

MINDY WEISEL: I had to be—I really had to—I mean, I would have had to have been blind in my home not to feel this necessity for beauty, and the belief that beauty could be comforting. So, fresh flowers were, you know, there were rose gardens; there was needlepoint; there were European fabrics; there was always fresh fruit. There were things that we take for granted in life, but for me it became symbols of survival, of the appreciation for the daily-ness of life. And really—my own desire to create beauty around me. I mean, this week with this tragedy that's gone on in this country, my husband walked home—and this, like, is moving forward to what I'd like to do now. My husband couldn't get out of his law-firm building downtown because they closed everything. So he walked home—but the next day September 12 was our 36th wedding anniversary, so he walked home and on the way home stopped and got a dozen yellow roses. And those yellow roses—Annie, I'm serious, like, sustained me all week with the tragedy I was watching on television. It's not like you take roses, you just put them in a bowl, you look at them, you smell them, you feel them, you think they're has to be a god if this is here. [00:04:09] There is evil and there is good. And I realized that the beauty of these yellow roses—watching them

open all week as all this tragedy was unfolding on television with the World Trade Center collapsing, I'd go to the roses, and I decided that I'm finally going to do a series that I wanted to do two years ago called "Beauty as Consolation."

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's a wonderful concept. Comforting.

MINDY WEISEL: I think that beauty—beauty can—like, last night we're driving home from Chicago and there was this concert at Carnegie Hall—it was the opening season of the National Philharmonic, and they played Brahms' Requiem. And every cent that they earned at the concert was going to go for the firefighters and the victims of this tragedy. And, the request of the director of the symphony was that everybody leave—nobody clap—and everybody leave in silence. It was the first time in the history of Carnegie Hall that a symphony was played and everybody left in quiet. And I think the message was, you felt this music, leave quietly with it, it will nurture you. I would like to believe that that's what art is. You know people make art for all kinds of reasons. Some they have—they're conceptual artists. They have ideas. Some are political. When the AIDS virus broke there was all this AIDS work. You know, there's all these reasons. My—I can't find any other way to make work except in response to something like feeling. And my first attempt at really expressing myself genuinely from deep inside myself was in 1979 when I took—I had finished a graduate—I had done graduate work in American University, and my professor Helene Hertzburn who was brilliant and a wonderful teacher. And she said, "Paint from yourself." [00:06:01] And I didn't really understand what that meant until one day in my studio, I realized I wanted to use the number that was tattooed on my father's arm from Nazi Germany—his concentration camp number—in my work. And I did a series of beautiful paintings—beautiful, colorful, full of life and light, and blackened them out. I was dealing with the destruction of beauty as well as the survival of beauty.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Beauty coming through, kind of—

MINDY WEISEL: —To my surprise, every work had light in it. And it wasn't anything that I had intended. I was almost like a vehicle to writing—I start each painting by writing what I'm thinking and feeling. And in some paintings—I'll show you—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Directly on the—

MINDY WEISEL: Directly on the work, right. I write what I'm thinking and feeling. And then I start painting, and sometimes the words show, and sometimes they don't show. As of the last few years, they don't. But earlier, the need to let the words show was stronger. Um, and that was my first, you know, using the reality of my background, that I was born into such sadness that—and then the next series—so that was the Holocaust paintings in 1979, then in 1981 out of all this dark work I did work full of color. There was no black. It was a series called *Lily in Blue* which was my mother's favorite color, which is why all my work has that cobalt blue. When I was 10, and she was 35, she had a photograph taken of her on her birthday in this cobalt blue dress. And that color stayed with me, and on my 35th birthday I started using it really seriously.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. And that's when I did the *Lily in Blue* series, on my 35th birthday. And then, after the—so I dealt with my father's story with the number, dealt with my mother's love of beauty with the *Lily in Blue* then went to a series called *Black Gifts* because I felt emotionally—my life has always been a tremendous struggle emotionally. [00:8:02] Like, I love life, but I—with my background I have tremendous anxiety, and I do everything I can to control this overwhelming anxiety. So there's kind of always this push-pull. And I thought that that series *Black Gifts* where I let all the writing show—and I'll show you a painting from there before you leave. But, that was what my life felt like. My life felt like. I was born into such blackness that my life was such a gift. And I feel that to this day. You know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, do you feel that those pieces were more um—I guess were away for you to comfort yourself, or do you feel that you were also comforting your parents, or?

MINDY WEISEL: I—that's a very good question. I don't think my parents understood at all my desire to be a painter. I don't think—I mean I never knew an artist, Annie. I mean I was raised in an Orthodox—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —That's funny because of your mother's interest in beauty and creating beauty.

MINDY WEISEL: —Yeah, but they were immigrants from Europe. They had to learn the language. They had to learn—they became very successful working very hard in their own bakery business. And they, you know, were busy with their customers and baking. My father got up at three o'clock every morning. And every morning from three o'clock until 3:30 I used to be up—I still wake up at three o'clock in the morning praying that my father get safely to his bakery. In fact, I don't know if you saw the style section in the *Washington Post* had an article April 27—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, I did.

MINDY WEISEL: —because that talks about that experience of still waking up in the middle of the night.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, it's now about your children, not about your father

MINDY WEISEL: —children, right. Just praying for everybody's safety. I don't think myparents understood what it meant, my desire to be a painter. I don't think I understood. I thinkthat I had a near nervous breakdown when was 28. I went into ther—I majored in art in college. [00:10:02] I always seemed interested in art. I was always fascinated by it, but I had no role

model of living that kind of life. And I got married at 18. I'm still married to the same man 36 years later.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, that's wonderful. It's conflicting with—

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, the idea of living a traditional Jewish life. And, we're observant and spiritual and then, coming alone—leaving my kids and being in the studio. And it was just very foreign, but I went to a wonderful doctor Berl Mendel and he made me realize that my life would feel like it had meaning if I could put my feelings down almost like a universal language. That we all feel this. It's not like I have a market on sensitivity. It's we all feel the need for beauty. We all feel the despair that life doesn't last forever. We all have our worries. Um, but you can make your life beautiful while you have it. I think that's been a thing for me always, to this day.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And he—now this is the same doctor that prompted you to create the series It's okay—?

MINDY WEISEL: Right. It's in the presence of—my doctor's last words to me were—what happened was I had talked to him a few weeks before he died and he could barely speak. He was a brilliant man; I saw him for 20 years. And he was really my dearest advisor and counselor, and really believed in me as a painter and as a person who was entitled to—I hate that word entitled because it's such psychobabble but—who was allowed to have a separate life. When you're a survivor's child your whole life is lived for your parents. Your whole life is to make them happy, to make—to be perfect so that you'll try to make up to them what they've lost, what they've endured, what they've been through. You know, if you're everything—you know, there's no such thing as adolescent rebellion for survivors' children. You couldn't aggravate your parents. [00:12:02] You know, you couldn't aggravate your parents. I can't even cry to this day. It's very hard to cry because if you cried they were anxious about you, you didn't want to make them anxious. Also, what did you have to cry about? Were you in Auschwitz? Were you freezing? Were you starving? Was your family killed? So, my therapist now had a wonderful sentence. She said, "The bar for coping is very high." It's like, I have to cope until I'm ready to drop because gee, how could I get tired, how could I be hungry, I've got—you know. So, it's, kind of, like that. But um, I think that in my therapy, I took the need to paint seriously. And then, of course, it just started to have its own life. I started painting, and it started exhibiting, and then people started—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —And you started when you were about 28 years old?

MINDY WEISEL: My serious painting started at 28, and I had my first serious exhibition in 1979. I was 32.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Okay. So, you must have felt so much better after it all—

MINDY WEISEL: I did. I couldn't believe my life. I felt like, oh my God I'm a painter. You know, like I would pinch myself, I'm really a painter. Once I asked my doctor, what does it mean to be a painter? And he says, "A painter paints paintings." So now, right now as I'm speaking to you I don't feel like a painter because I haven't been painting.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: When was the last time you—

MINDY WEISEL: About eight months ago, and when I finished the *Ella Fitzgerald* series, um I put a lot of myself in there. And I find that the drive and the discipline is not the same now as when I was younger. Where I was very disciplined. And, in a way, having three children was marvelous because I didn't have time to waste. So I would drop them off at school, or I would have the sitter, and I'd go to my studio, I'd put in my four hours knowing there would be no later, and I'd get my work done. And also, I think maybe after 25 years of painting I've expressed a lot already— [00:14:00]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —you've gotten so much out—

MINDY WEISEL: —I've gotten so much in response to what I was living, what I was feeling about my history, about my beliefs. And I think now— now I want to paint for the first time in a long time in response to this terrible tragedy last September 11th.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, how long had you worked on the *Ella Fitzgerald* series?

MINDY WEISEL: I worked for about four months where I—I work in themes. And when I get an idea—like when I get the title, you know it's like I go—for example, NASA commissioned me to do a piece called *Celebrating Women in Space*—this was about five years ago, six years ago—I went to the archives at NASA. I looked at all the photographs, as many as I could I'm sure not all, but as many as I could of what the women astronauts brought back. And I tried to do a piece that showed the incredible majesty of what they were photographing from space, you know? So I did a piece called *Celebrating Women in Space*, and it was all in squares. So there was a volcano in one, there was wind in another, because I'm an abstract painter, so there was sun in another. There was color representing different black holes. So—but I immersed myself in it. So when I did the *Ella Fitzgerald*, I bought, I think, 18 CDs; I read her biography, saw the documentary of her life, put her pictures up over my studio, and she became Ella the Muse, and that's how that series got that title.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, you really immerse yourself in everything—

MINDY WEISEL: —Right. And with my doctor, the series—my last conversation was with him he asked me how I am, and I said, I'm okay, but I miss you telling me, "It's okay, kid" because we used to end our sessions with him reassuring me. And, his last words to me were, "It's okay, kid." [00:16:02] So, I went to his widow, and I asked if I could photograph the chair he sat in for all these years in my therapy sessions. And I had the chair photographed, and then I took it and had it made into a print, then I painted over these prints of his chair, writing "It's okay, kid," having pictures of his library in it. You know, just—it was more conceptual than usual layers and layers and layers of color. And the series was called *A Place for Memory* because it had a double meaning, that art is a place to put memory, but his office was also a place for memory, where I could deal with memory.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, that's great.

MINDY WEISEL: So, that's, kind of—there's always a double—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —meaning to a lot of the—well, sort of, like you're—it's

almost like you have two—a double life or a double—I mean even though they're so intertwined. As an artist and then as a daughter of survivors, and as a mother—

MINDY WEISEL: —and a wife, right—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —and a wife, sure. How would—now when you were much younger, when you came to this—I'm sure you don't remember when you were three, but was there a time when you started painting, or started drawing?

MINDY WEISEL: My first memory of really drawing was after the Sabbath my father would light a candle and say this is—it's a tradition that to light [a candle at the start of the –MW] a new week [after the Sabbath –MW]—and I wasn't allowed to write on the Sabbath because you're not allowed to do any work, but after sundown and the Sabbath was over, I would immediately grab a pencil and write all over the newspapers in the house. And that was my first memory. I could see it like it was yesterday. Just writing "A" you know, kind of all over everything. I'm sure I was learning the alphabet, but it was very—I can remember the feeling. It was marvelous.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It seems like it would stay with you.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes, it was marvelous writing that, you know. And then when I was 11 I started drawing a little bit. I've never been one of these artists who carries a sketchbook, who—and I've told this to my students in teaching, I think the reason being that when I'm living life, I'm really living life. [00:18:10] I don't want anything between me and the experience. I don't want to be drawing the rose, I want to be smelling the rose. When I come back to the studio I talk about my memory of the rose, or what it felt like, or what it looked like.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's really great. I think that's why it gives you such, like, an understanding of the things from your life that you're painting because you really did experience it, and were not thinking of how to transfer it to something else.

MINDY WEISEL: Right. Exactly. It's very immediate. I've always felt guilty that I don't keep sketchbooks, and I think maybe I'm lazy, but I think no, it's just now how I live. I live very much there. I never take sketchbooks on travels. Like, when I went to Venice with my mother before she died I came back and did all of these torn down walls, did all this turquoise paint, this kind of allover—Venice feels turquoise and gold to me, you know. And I came back and did all of these turquoise and gold paintings.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, you didn't need to take a sketchbook.

MINDY WEISEL: I didn't know that that's what I would do. I never know what I'm going to do. If I knew, I don't think I would do it. I think I'd be too boring.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So now, your art—to go back a little bit, your art education—formal art education, I guess, started in college, or did it start in high school?

MINDY WEISEL: Right. I was 17. Well, in high school—that's a good question—in high

school I was 14 years old, and I had a teacher Mrs. Rose who said, "I think you should be doing this." You know, and it felt right. And I flunked science, and I'd be getting A's in literature and art history and any of the liberal arts. And, don't forget, I'm a first-born American—I'm not even American-born, but first-generation educated-in-American person, so who knew? I mean, I was supposed to get married and have children, and this was 36 years ago, and you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, did you parents make it known to you what they hoped you would be doing?

MINDY WEISEL: No. [00:20:00] I was just supposed to just live a traditional life, but my mother did make me believe that I could do whatever I wanted to. That she would support me, and she was very supportive. So, when I was 14, I had a teacher who made me feel that I should be working. And then when I started college at 17 I declared art as my major, but I cried for the first three years. I cried and cried and cried. I was frustrated, I didn't know what they wanted. I didn't understand. And what amazes me now looking back—and if I could give a message to young people it would be, if you feel you need to do this, just cry your way out of it, but just get through it. It's like, the fact that I kept going back to these classes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's amazing, despite crying and being so upset.

MINDY WEISEL: I was so upset. I would drive—I was living in LA; I was going to California State University in Northridge and driving on the Beltway and the freeway, and I might be crying that the professor didn't like my piece. He was so hard on me; he was so tough. He was—only later did I realize that they're tough on you when they believe in you. But, it took three years to even survive my own major and all. You know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I don't know if I know of anyone who's cried through their—

MINDY WEISEL: Oh, my God. I tell my students at the Corcoran all the time, like, be prepared, it's hard, you'll feel frustrated. It's not going to be easy—if you can survive this struggle. And there's a great quote by Robert Henri which says um, "The work of—a work of art is a trace of a magnificent struggle." And I think that's what a work of art really is, the trace of a magnificent struggle. So I majored in art in college, but I didn't do college traditionally. I did it over 16 years because I was having children, and I would go to school at night. And I finally got a BFA at GW, George Washington University, with—when it had a joint program with the Corcoran School of Art because the Corcoran then didn't offer BFAs. [00:22:06] Now it does. So I did both programs and got a degree.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Where along the line did you get married?

MINDY WEISEL: When I was 18 years old. I had a year of college, and my husband and I had been high school sweethearts. And we were from traditional families. There was no such thing as, like, the freedoms my daughters enjoy of living with anybody. You got married, and he went to law school, and I worked while he was in law school, and then after we were married six years I had my first daughter. And then I had a daughter every five years. So I kind of had a daughter, I painted; I had a daughter, I painted; I had a daughter, I painted. And here I am now an empty-nester.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Aw. Well, how did you find working—especially after your first daughter which, you know, was the first time you were a mother—did you have a hard time balancing that with painting? I mean, how did you—

MINDY WEISEL: Well I didn't start painting seriously until after I had children. I don't know what I was doing until then. I guess I was working. I was going to school. I didn't graduate college until I was 30. Um, it took me 16 years because I was doing so many other things. So then, I think when my daughter was 5, yeah, I had my own studio already. And I was very disciplined about it: these were my hours. It was my freedom, also. I didn't like being at home only. So, it was my freedom. I got to go to my studio, and I had to prove that I was serious about this because—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: To yourself?

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, I was—well, yeah because I didn't want to feel guilty. I was spending money on rent. You know, I wanted to prove that it's worth spending this money, and that I would dedicate my time and my energy,

and that I was serious about this. And I had to prove it to everyone around me so that I would be taken seriously. I couldn't bear the thought of not being taken seriously. [00:24:00] That, to this day, I mean would—I think if a women—anybody—man, woman—anybody does anything, anything, whatever they do—they should do it well and completely and—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —and most want to be taken seriously.

MINDY WEISEL: —want to be taken seriously, yeah.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, you didn't—were you working in other fields up until that time? Or you're just dealing with school and being married?

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. Yes, school and married, and I worked when my husband when in law school at UCLA in their business office. And had jobs, and you know, nothing glamorous. When I was 17, I did work as an assistant in an art gallery, which I thought was very precipitous that, you know, looking back. Because I love just being around art.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, did you—when you started painting after you became a mother, did you feel that that had—that was perhaps the reason why your art, kind of, in some of the series went back to your mother?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, that's a very interesting question.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Did you find a link?

MINDY WEISEL: That's a very interesting question. That's a very interesting question. No, I don't know if that's the case. I think it's more that I had a lot of emotional—I had a lot of emotion, and I didn't know that—I mean there was no room for my feelings growing up.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Because you couldn't express them to your parents.

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, yeah. There was no room. They had been—they had suffered. My mother lost her people.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right. And they wouldn't talk about it much to you?

MINDY WEISEL: My father talked a lot about the camps. My mother didn't. My mother talked more about what life was before the camps, and that's why my book *Daughters of Absence*—that just came out—the subtitle is "Transforming the Legacy of Loss" because I tried to show in this book that these people had lives before Auschwitz. It's not that they were just survivors, you know, they had a life before. They had a life after. What did their children do with their lives, you know. [00:26:00] I think it was more a very complicated emotional life that felt a tremendous satisfaction in putting it down with marks. You know, it was physical. It was emotional. It was honest. It was really feeling. I have a friend who used to say that I stir things up when she looks at my work. And the word talent means responsibility. And I think every artist—I tell my students, what is your talent as a painter? I think my responsibility—my talent was for feeling it, surviving the feelings, getting it down on work, and then having somebody else feel it. So I would hope when you look at the *Ella Fitzgerald* you feel music. I hope when you look at *A Piece of My Father's* Number you would feel like, look, Hitler didn't win. Look, she's here, this was her father's number, he survived.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And you survived the emotions of that.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly. Exactly. And when my mother died seven years ago, I was—my mother and I were inseparable. My three daughters used to worry terribly what—how I would do if my mother was gone, and when my mother was dying a doctor came in and said to her, "Lily, let's dance." And I love that. And her name was Lily Deutsch. L-D, and "let's dance." So I wanted to honor that I told her that I was going to do a series called *Lily, Let's Dance*. What I ended up doing there, was I took her dresses—my favorite of her dresses—went to a factory where they make handmade paper, and I had the dresses ground down into paper, and then I used bits of the dressed that were left, and working them into this wet paper I did a whole series—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And this was at Pyramid Atlantic?

MINDY WEISEL: Right, exactly Pyramid Atlantic. And I did a whole series called *Lily, Let's Dance*, where my mother's fabrics and dresses are very visible. [00:28:04]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And you helped—did that help you, sort of, calm—

MINDY WEISEL: Yes, it was a real celebration of my mother's life. And it was interesting because my mother had died about six months before—I was working on it. I had a lot of support there. I had four assistants. And it was

really a wonderful experience, and I didn't cry at all. When I went to go title them, and I realized I couldn't. They were just going to each have to be Lily—*For Lily*, *For Lily One*, *For Lily Two*, you know. That's when I really broke down, when I completed the work. It was like almost this relief.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right. So do you think that it was hard for you though as

your using the pieces of her dresses in the paper that you're making, do you think one of the reasons that you perhaps didn't cry, and weren't as emotional as you were later was because there were assistants there and you hadn't worked with assistants before? Or do you think it was just the process and—?

MINDY WEISEL: —well, I was just going to say Annie that I think when I'm working I don't cry, but that's not true because there have been times where I'm working and I'm just crying, and there are times I'm working and I'm dancing, and there are times I'm working and I'm just full of joy. I mean, my work is really all about human emotion. There's not—I can't pretend that it's about an idea, or a concept, or even what I'm seeing. It's more really an interior landscape, an emotional response to life as I experience it, believing that everyone experiences life this way.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Sure, well, perhaps we should end now for the day.

MINDY WEISEL: Okay.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: We will pick up later, but thank you very much.

MINDY WEISEL: Okay, great. Well, Annie, you've asked great questions.

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ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Test, test, test.

MINDY WEISEL: Annie, I can't tell you how funny it was because I woke up and then I fell back to sleep, and I was still driving the car up the Capital steps. It's like it didn't leave me alone.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That is so funny. Okay.

MINDY WEISEL: We went to see a good movie. Did you see *Life as a House*?

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ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: This is Anne Louise Bayly [Berman] on the first of November 2001 interviewing Mindy Weisel for the Archives of American Art. We're in the artist's studio in Georgetown, and this the second installment of the interview. Um, we spoke last time about your childhood and your studying art in high school, and I wanted to go back again and discuss that a little bit more. And, um, ask you—I read in an article that you were inspired as a teenager by a drawing your father did after the liberation of Auschwitz. And I wanted to know if you could talk a little bit about that.

MINDY WEISEL: Um, what's interesting about that particular drawing is—is this going to be too loud?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I'm going to move this up like that.

MINDY WEISEL: What's interesting—do you want me hold it or anything?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, no that's okay. I just didn't want it shake on me.

MINDY WEISEL: What's interesting about that drawing is how life affirming it is, number one because here my father just survived the camps and he had never had an art lesson—[siren]. Hold on a second. This is definitely an urban studio.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes.

MINDY WEISEL: He never had an art lesson in his life. He never met an artist. I mean, he didn't know anything about art, and yet he was compelled at the age of twenty after he survived Auschwitz to ask for a pencil, which he didn't have, and an old piece of, like, brown paper that he found and did a drawing of the farm that he saw in the distance and the sun coming up behind it. And, to me, when I was 14 I found this drawing—first of all I was stunned when I realized my father had made it. I mean—what, you know, he didn't know anything about drawing.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: And, it was so beautiful, and so I—since I was 14 years old that drawing has lived with me. I won't—I've been asked many times to give it to museums and I really won't. I can't. I want it to stay in my family and with the kids.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Of course.

MINDY WEISEL: And, it's signed on the bottom. All it says is "1946." [00:02:02]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Wow.

MINDY WEISEL: So, it's very life affirming.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, did he continue to draw after this, or this was just a—

MINDY WEISEL: No. He opened a bakery, and he used to decorate the cakes and all of that. So, I suspect that I have my creative bent from him. Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well it's amazing too is that, um, either knowing it—I don't know if you knew it, or perhaps subconsciously he, you know, sort of, dealt with sorrow and loss by actually finding the beauty in something and celebrating it through art, which is exactly what you're doing.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly. I never thought of it that way, but it's true.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: It's true.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's really amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: And, you know Annie it's interesting because when I just—you asked, you

know, did he ever do drawing—you wonder about these people who didn't have the opportunity for education, and opportunity for choice, and opportunity to find what they—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —the luxury of what could come.

MINDY WEISEL: —what they wanted to do. You know, he had a business, and he was—did well in it, but who knows?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Though I think, like you said, decorating the cakes and doing baking things like that must be a creative—

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: You know, where he was able to show his creativity. Well, were there other artists that influenced you, either seeing exhibitions as a child, or art professors or even, you know, colleagues of yours in the years since you've been working as an artist?

MINDY WEISEL: Since I've been working as an artist?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Either since you've been working as an artist or before.

MINDY WEISEL: Well, before I became a serious painter, and serious to me just means a commitment to it. I think anybody that's painting and is doing it year after year after year is serious about it. It doesn't say how—I don't know what it means to be a good artist anyway. I think, what is a good artist? I think you have to be serious and committed and be honest. I think a good artist is an honest artist.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MINDY WEISEL: Honest in the sense of not looking around you at what other people are doing, but really painting from your very own heart, your very own self, in your own language, and believing in that language even if nobody else does. [00:04:06] But, as far as before the age of 17, what's interesting when I reflect on it is that I didn't know any artists but I was always attracted to art situations. Like, my first part-time job at 16 was in an art gallery, it was 16, 17. Then, I would go—there was a street in Los Angeles called La Cinema Boulevard, and they'd have art galleries, and I'd once had a major crush on this French artist that was exhibiting there, you know. And I was always finding ways—and then, when I was in high school, I had my art teachers always tell me, you know, "You should really do this." And then when I was 17 and I started majoring in art in college, I didn't think I should be doing it. I cried all through college.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, you said that.

MINDY WEISEL: I told you that. I was frustrated. I didn't know what they wanted. I didn't understand that you had to learn the techniques of painting the way you have to learn any language. For me, it became a language of the heart, and I needed to learn how to express that.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So for you it was more difficult for you in school to learn

how to get what you wanted to say out rather than it was to master a technical—

MINDY WEISEL: Right, I could never do the technical. I wasn't interested in it. I once said to my doctor years ago that I didn't have patience for something. And he said, "There's no such thing as patience, there's only interest." And I think it's really true. When you're interested in something you have phenomenal patience, and if you are not interested you're just not patient. You just don't care.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right, so I can see how you wouldn't be.

MINDY WEISEL: There's a great quote that Matisse, "If the heart"—I have it in—I'll have to get a few before you leave, but it has something to do with that if the heart doesn't care, you just don't care.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's wise.

MINDY WEISEL: You can't talk yourself into caring.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: It's not something you can really talk yourself into.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right. [00:06:00] So, you would say then that you found more of the art situations, or, um, the feeling of other people doing art or showing art rather than necessarily being struck by one artist or feeling an affinity to?

MINDY WEISEL: I was struck—well I was struck by the Abstract Expressionists from early on. I remember being 14, 15 years old in Greenwich Village, and finding postcards of the Abstract Ex—you know, they'd have these racks, and I never was attracted to the still lifes, or the Impressionists, or the Renaissance, or the Madonnas, you know. I was really attracted to the color and the emotion into the abstract painters. Um, I remember having a postcard by Klee, Paul Klee, and—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes.

MINDY WEISEL: —and Van Gogh, and de Kooning, and collecting those when I was very young.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So that's [inaudible].

MINDY WEISEL: And then I—when I came to Washington I was in my twenties, I think the day I walked into this bank in Maryland and saw the paintings up of Helene Herzberg, who—I mean my heart just sang. I tracked her down and she became my professor for three years at American University.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, that's wonderful.

MINDY WEISEL: And I teach—the nine years I've been teaching at the Corcoran it's really

been her method of teaching, of really not worrying about style, and repeating yourself, and consistency, but more how—where are you today, and how can you keep your art and your emotion honest and fresh.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right. How did you begin teaching at the Corcoran?

MINDY WEISEL: I was asked to critique a class for Annette Polan, who was inviting artists to do critiques for her.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And when was this?

MINDY WEISEL: This was in the early 90s. And I critiqued her class, and she was very impressed with how I handled the work the students—and the whole thing, and then she became the chairman of the open program, the painting department, and asked me if I wanted to teach. [00:08:03] So, I started in the early 90s and taught for nine years, until just now.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, wonderful. And, are you, um, you've been teaching undergraduates, and continuing education, and—?

MINDY WEISEL: Graduate, yes. It's kind of its own master class. You know, abstract works on paper, and whoever—my feeling is it's self-selective because the catalogue says if you have a desire to express yourself. So, nobody who wants to be an architect, you know, that way.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Is coming to come in there [laughs].

MINDY WEISEL: Or, with math or anything, you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Do you find that your students have a lot of—go through a lot of the same issues that you did trying to express you know—or maybe not even knowing that they're—what it is exactly that they're trying to deal with or trying to get out?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, I think the art—the—why would somebody put themselves in a room with a blank piece of paper and want to pull it out of themselves, you know? It's hard. It's hard to—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: I think the need—what I understand of those students is their need to do it. And I encourage the need more than I teach anything else. So that I pay attention to—is this somebody who's very tight, but wants to be open? Is this somebody who's very open, and wants to tighten up? Is this—so I work more with, how can this person best express themselves with the least frustration? And I think I identify with that in them, and I think then they're surprised that I understand them so well, but I do because I've been there, you know. My foot's asleep from all that driving. [Laughs.]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, no.

MINDY WEISEL: No, that's okay.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Do you want to get up and walk around?

MINDY WEISEL: You know, I do. I need to walk for like a half a second. I sat in one car for 12 hours Thursday, then again 12 hours Monday, then Tuesday got an in a car and drove to Delaware. So my foot is not the same.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It's amazing that you do all of this and go back and forth.

MINDY WEISEL: Okay.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And in Delaware you were—you were saying that you—? [00:10:01]

MINDY WEISEL: I spoke on the *Daughters of Absence* book to 140 women, and it was very moving.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I was going to ask you about that.

MINDY WEISEL: I love speaking.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well that makes for a wonderful—

MINDY WEISEL: Public speaking.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, public speaking. It makes for a wonderful speaker, one who—I've always found—loves to do it more than just—

MINDY WEISEL: I love to do it, yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, I guess it's what makes you a great teacher as well.

MINDY WEISEL: Oh, thank you.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I was going to ask you about, um, some of your books, but perhaps we should do that in a bit. I'm actually going to go back to—you had your first exhibition at 32, is that right?

MINDY WEISEL: I was 32 years old.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And it was in Washington.

MINDY WEISEL: Right. My very first exhibition was in ‘77, so I was 30, at the Diane Brown gallery, but she didn't believe in me much as a painter. In fact, I had introduced a friend of mine Agnes Jacobs, who was then my friend. We haven't stayed close or in touch at all, but um, I introduced her to Diane Brown. And, Diane Brown

after my exhibit said, you know, "Bye," and kept her and didn't' feel that I would have collectors and all this kind of stuff. Um, I think I had a certain innocence that she thought wouldn't serve me well, what little did she know, but for 10 years I was hell-bent on—well, I'll show you Diane Brown. [They Laugh.]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, I know you've been working in and showing in Washington at Diane Brown, and Addison Ripley, and Troyer Gallery, and Jack Rasmussen—

MINDY WEISEL: You said, and Baumgartner for many years.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, of course at Corcoran and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. What, um, is your, sort of, take on galleries in Washington and an art's community in general because a lot of people will say, well, especially not from Washington, will say, "Well it doesn't seem that there's as much going on as in other places?" [00:12:09] But I see that to be a very untrue statement.

MINDY WEISEL: But I agree with that. I think unfortunately it's not a big enough community. So that, I once read the artist R.B. Kitaj saying that he never met an artist who felt like they got the right slice of the cake. And, this is such as small piece of cake here, and to get a slice you have to work so hard. And, so I have found people are—it's not a supportive art community, and my friends are not mostly artists. I have found the writers, the art historians, the curators, the collectors—I've just been so grateful for their support of my work, but it's been lonely. So I've—for many years I would go every Thursday to New York just to look at the galleries to see the art.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, wow.

MINDY WEISEL: Now, Washington is blessed with a fabulous museum scene, so you have the Smithsonian, the Hirshhorn, the Corcoran, the Phillips, the National Galleries. Um, it's a very exciting place to live as an artist to go see art, but as far as exhibiting your own art I feel like it's nothing short of miraculous that I've been carried by a gallery all these years, and have exhibited, and sold, and reviewed, and all of that, in a city that—really, uh—I don't know. It just feels miraculous that I've had it.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It's funny because there are some really amazing artists inWashington who are working—

MINDY WEISEL: There are.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —and have been working here so long, but yes it's such a small—

MINDY WEISEL: Very small.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN; Do you interact a lot with other artists—and I'm sure your colleagues at the Corcoran, but—

MINDY WEISEL: Well, I like certain artists as people. You know, like, I like Bill Christenberry. I don't really know Sam Gilliam. I love this artist Madalyn Marcus. No, it's not a community of—I'm trying to think—the artist Barbara Kern—you know, she's in a book group that I started, and. [00:14:08] But, no, it's not a very generous community, which by my own nature is one of, like, I'll get slides and I'll show it to somebody, and I'll get an exhibit for somebody, and I'll put shows together. And I use my art for a lot of charity in Washington, I mean a lot. It raises a lot of money.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: The last time I was here I think you were meeting with—

MINDY WEISEL: The Columbia Hospital—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —the Columbia Hospital for Women.

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And you do that every year?

MINDY WEISEL: Every year, right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And you design—

MINDY WEISEL: What I do is—the last seven years now, I guess—I will give them a painting that they use on their invitation and their brochure, and then they auction off the painting, and the money that comes in goes to—I don't get any money—it goes to the low-income mammography program. So that people who can't afford mammograms—and I do this in memory of my mother. And, I always make hand-painted ceramics for them that they can give as gifts to their—the people they're honoring, so that they don't have to spend money on that. So I

do that. And then, the Washington Area Lawyers for the Arts, I've done posters for so they could raise money for that. The Smithsonian, I did a silkscreen, so they could raise money for the silkscreen, a silkscreen called *Flowers for a Country*, after the Persian Gulf War. It's in the Smithsonian Associates' [inaudible].

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes.

MINDY WEISEL: And—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, what about with the Washington Lawyers? What have you been doing—how are you—?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, I used to be on the board, and I used to—mainly I did an original silkscreen that they could then sell and get money for, but I'm not somebody who belongs on boards. I don't have patience for meetings, and you know, and it takes a certain kind of money to keep supporting. So, whenever I can I give my art, like I've done for Amnesty International. I gave them a painting to raise money for human rights. [0016: 03] Any way that I can help an organization with my painting. Now I just finished with the *Ella Fitzgerald* for the Ella Fitzgerald Foundation.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right, right.

MINDY WEISEL: A series for that.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's *Ella the Muse*?

MINDY WEISEL: *Ella the Muse* series. Yes, I love—I love that the art can be out in the world, not just as a commercial venue.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Sure, so it seems like your art—your art's community is more than just the community at large?

MINDY WEISEL: Large—that's right—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Not necessarily an artist's community.

MINDY WEISEL: That's right. That's a very good way to put it Annie, very.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Though, speaking of artists' community, I was going to ask you about the Virginia Center for Creative Arts when you were there, which is when you did the series *Touching Quiet*, and came from that your book, *Touching Quiet*.

MINDY WEISEL: Right. That was an incredible experience.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Which is very different—I guess the subject of a lot of your work there was the quiet, which um is very different from your studio here.

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Which, as you can hear, is not quiet—

MINDY WEISEL: Well, what happened was, I live a very traditional life, and in fact when I teach I try to show that you don't have to be some crazy artist. I mean, I never had the luxury of eight, ten hours in my studio. I had to carpool. I was raising daughters. I was married to a lawyer, but I loved making my work, or I didn't love it, I hated it a good part of the time, but I brought myself to my space where I felt—let's put it this way, if I was in my studio even if I did horrible work that day, or that month, my life had meaning because this is where I felt I needed be. Um, and, when I was raising my daughters I felt like I wanted so badly to have somebody take care of me, and give me the space and the time to use my energy totally for the painting. So, when I got the fellowship, I went for a month. But when I got there, I just didn't know what I would do with all that quiet. [00:18:02]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And how old were your daughters at this point?

MINDY WEISEL: They were all away for the summer. They were all old enough where one was traveling, one was in camp, one was doing a college course. They were all old enough, and it was my first free summer in, like, 20 years, like that. And my husband would meet me on the weekends. And, I—I was very homesick the first few days, and I didn't know really, what would I do here for a month. There was no phone. There was no TV. There was no car—I didn't have a car. I felt in a way stuck, and I thought, you know, you have to be careful what you ask for, but then I realized that this was a gift. This quiet was a gift, and for me, with the painting, it's very important to understand what is that I want to say. And, usually it's in response to that moment, to the urgency

of the emotional life going on inside me during that moment. And, I realized that this quiet was a great gift, and I never knew this kind of quiet. It's six hundred acres of nothing. It's quiet.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: No children, no buses, no—

MINDY WEISEL: No nothing, no. No, there's no phone, there's one payphone for 23 fellows. You have this little monastic, kind of, bedroom, which I adored. And you share this bathroom, and everybody is very respectful of each other's space. And, I shared it with the weaver, and you know, you could hear the writers on their typewriter then, or some I'm sure used their computers, or by hand. But everybody was in their space, and somebody would leave lunch at your door, you know. And—and I realized that, to me, the most interesting thing of this experience was the quiet. And how did I fit into this quiet, and how did this quiet fit into my life? And I did 23 paintings in a month that I think are probably the strongest, most immediate paintings also that had a very strong landscape aspect because there was no way not to be influenced by the landscape. [00:20:00] It was Virginia countryside. It was hot. It was quiet. The work really was a combination of out there and inside me. Whereas very often the work in the past was really coming out more of a response from me, just internally, like my memories, my sadnesses, my joys, but this was a response to the outside.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: To something totally—so this was the first time you were really using landscape as a subject with the quiet and surroundings.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And how often—how many hours a day were you painting there?

MINDY WEISEL: I was painting a lot. And I was—I fell into—first of all, in the first week I slept more than I ever slept in my life. And, we talked about—a lot of the fellows told me that that was very normal that you don't—it made me aware of how hard my life is trying to be—not that I've had a hard life, I've had a very blessed life, but how hard it was physically to really try to be a painter, and a mother, and a wife, and a friend, and a daughter, and a sister, and everything.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Sure.

MINDY WEISEL: Because when you strip it all away and you just need to be the painter you have this incredible energy, but first you have to sleep. I mean, like, I had to kind of recover from my life here before I could go into that painter mode there. And I slept a lot, and then I got into a routine of having breakfast, going to the studio in the morning, having—they bring you lunch, and then I'd sleep—they had a bed—they always had a cot in your room. And I'd nap for about an hour or two, and then I'd work more. The most unusual part of that experience was that I worked at night, because at home I never worked at night. I always had my family, or I was tired, or it was my reading time, but there I had the great luxury of wonderful lighting, and quiet, and nobody needed me for anything. And I'd go sit and see what I'd do during the day, and be excited to get up again the next morning and go right back into it. [00:22:04]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Did you find that from that time on you wanted to continue working at night?

MINDY WEISEL: Mm-mm [negative], no.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Did you ever look for that quiet again, or were you—so

that's what you need and then—?

MINDY WEISEL: I mean, people have said, "Look you should go do that again because you were so productive." But, no, I don't think I can repeat anything again. You know, especially I wouldn't go in the summer, maybe I would go back, let's say, in the dead of winter and see what would happen in the dead of winter there, but this was a very—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It'd be a different experience.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: What were the other artists—did you find a lot of support and a lot of feedback or help from them?

MINDY WEISEL: Yes, I think everybody's insecure so everybody is, you know, from New York and from all over the country and kind of insecure. And so everybody is trying to prove to everybody else that they're serious about what they're doing, which is kind of self-explanatory or we wouldn't have gotten there.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right, of course.

MINDY WEISEL: But I became very close to a poet named Marilyn Kallet and a weaver Ann Schumacher. Those—so I had two close friends, a weaver and poet. We would walk and we would have our meals. And it was nice. And at night you do readings, and I had an open studio, and the response was marvelous, and, you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So it's very different from your day-to-day working experience where you don't have—

MINDY WEISEL: And people your language.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: The language of someone who's creating something.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Which, must be much, much easier to—

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. Especially in Washington where very few people speak your language.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, I'm sure. And your first—now, when you first exhibited the series from this time, it was here in Washington at—

MINDY WEISEL: Right. Troyer Gallery.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Troyer Gallery. And, how did you feel the response to that was?

MINDY WEISEL: Oh, it was phenomenal. It was phenomenal. I got a great review in the *Post*, and the, uh—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yeah, I read that it was wonderful.

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, it got great reviews. Every piece sold before the opening. The response was just amazing. [00:24:00]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It's so funny that something—a time of yours that was so quiet and alone was really—

MINDY WEISEL: I know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Says that—your work says so much and speaks to so many people—

MINDY WEISEL: I know it's amazing to me.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —who weren't there. I wanted to ask you next about um, sort of, in your work and with your work the idea of image and text together, since I know your process is writing your thoughts down, sort of, on the canvas first. But then, also, you've illustrated Harry Rand's *The Beginning of Things*. And um, it seems that text keeps coming up in your work. And in a show, a few years back, at the Jewish Community Center here in Washington had poetry displayed with your work.

MINDY WEISEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Do you look for that, or does it just, sort of, happen?

MINDY WEISEL: I think—it's interesting because in myself I think it takes turns. I need language, and then language isn't enough and I need paint, and then paint isn't enough, and then I need language. And I—I find that I'm just as interested in reading and poetry. It inspires me. And usually when I'm not painting I look to read more. I—it's very—it's very connected for me.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Do you feel that—

MINDY WEISEL: And also I'm articulate, which is unusual for a painter. And I don't know it's like all—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes.

MINDY WEISEL: —very. I don't know, it's seamless.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you find—when you sit down to begin a piece—I know you do—you know, you often write on the canvas, and things like that. Does it just sort of—you come into your studio and it just of comes out?

MINDY WEISEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Or, do you sometimes, um, either read something and have to rush to the studio, or do you sit down and say, you know, I'm going to look through this or read this just for some—not inspiration, just, sort of, saying to, like, jog your thoughts? [00:26:02]

MINDY WEISEL: Right. Well, that's a very, very, interesting question, Annie, and it's worked in different ways. Um, it's worked in so many different ways. And all have worked for me. For example, when my mother was diagnosed with cancer I was given a fellowship to the Middle East to paint for a month in Jerusalem. And I didn't want to go, and my mother said, "No, you have to take advantage of this." And so I went for the month. And every morning I—I ended up doing a series called *Psalms for my Mother*. And I would read a psalm—really as a form a prayer, just very quietly, read a psalm, and then I'd get the title somewhere in there, and then I'd want to paint. And the paintings I did then were not grief—full of grief at all. They were really trying to make her feel better almost, make myself feel better. They were full of joy. And then one year I had a crush on a poet. You know, I've been married since I'm 18 to the same person, so all you can have is crushes, you know. [Laughs.]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: You have to put it somewhere. So I read his poetry, and that inspired a whole series called *Passions and Appearances*. In fact, I—we became friends and I used one of his poems in the invitation.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And which poet was this?

MINDY WEISEL: Mark Redman, who, you know, was darling, and our families are friends and stuff. But then when I first met him, I just loved his poetry, and he has a real New York sensibility. And so that inspired work. Um, sometimes I read something and that'll make me want to come to the studio, but lately I don't know what it is, I don't feel the urgency like I used to. I just don't. And I don't know—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: The urgency to paint or the urgency to read?

MINDY WEISEL: Both. All of it. I don't know if it's that, I'm going to be 55 in January and I have done a lot, a lot of painting. But I never knew I did a lot of painting. I never felt like it was enough.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: Which is sad now looking back I think, God, you know, all of these 25 years I worked and worked and worked, I never thought it was enough. [00:28:05] I mean, what was wrong with me? I mean, I never thought it was enough and I've had 25 one-person shows, but it wasn't enough.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right. Do you think that comes from your—um you said before your, sort of, being a daughter of survivors. You feel like it's never enough, you know?

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Even far exceeding what is enough, it's never enough.

MINDY WEISEL: I know. I know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, I guess that's something—

MINDY WEISEL: And maybe I've gotten healthier, you know. Maybe in reality—I've worked very hard with therapists and coming to terms with being—having that legacy of being a survivor's daughter, and trying to make everything up for their loss. And, you know, now I just think I kind of want to live my life. I don't want to rush as much. I don't want to work as hard anymore. And I also, kind of, feel like I earned this quiet. My daughters are grown. But I also feel that, in truth, part of me is feeling very lazy because I'm looking at these canvases behind your shoulder, and I know what a struggle it is, and how hard it's going to be to do them. And my husband and my art dealer Sally Tribe, and my very dear painter friend Madalyn Marcus, all of them said, "I think it would be a good idea for you to spend a year or two, kind of, underground. Not exhibiting, not doing books, not anything. Just coming to your studio and painting." But, I'm so goal-oriented I don't know if I can do that. You know, so we'll see.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, how was your time in Jerusalem? You were—is that where you were doing your fellowship?

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah. I'm very disciplined when I do a fellowship. I love the routine. I love routine and discipline and schedules, and I love it.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Structure.

MINDY WEISEL: Structure. Exactly.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: For, very, sort of, unstructured work.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly. People are under—people really are under a misconception about—for example, if you're an artist who has no structure in your life, and you drink, and you do drugs, and you this, or you that, or whatever, or anybody, not only an artist, but anybody, it works against you because you're not being disciplined. [00:30:13] And, I have found that in my life personally, being married, having children, having a family, having a stability, gave me the freedom. I used to think I should be alone in SoHo, and just free, never realizing that I probably never would have made any work because I would have been too wild, or something. I don't know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Easy to be too free.

MINDY WEISEL: Free—yeah, and too much time—too much, and but the structure and stability of my personal life allowed me the stability and the security to then come into my studio and feel things that maybe I would have been too frightened to feel if the rest of my life wasn't that stable. You have to really feel when you're making a painting. If you don't feel it, nobody can feel it.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So you, sort of, felt safe having sort of these very strong and deep motions, but in moderation, in sort of, in a safe environment.

MINDY WEISEL: Right. My feelings were never moderate. [Laughs.]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, I mean, you could go back—

MINDY WEISEL: But I could go back

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —it was easy to go back to the warmth of your family—

MINDY WEISEL: It was a great comfort, right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: and your parents, and your daughters.

MINDY WEISEL: Unfortunately, my feelings have never been moderate. I've been either—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's what it seems.

MINDY WEISEL: —you know, just everything is always so intense. In fact, my children make fun of me and say, you know, "You're exaggerating." And I think now that they're adults they finally are recognizing that it never was exaggeration. That's how loud it came in.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: You know, if I said, it was this. It really felt like that.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: I wasn't making it up, you know. To somebody else, it just was processed differently. For me the intensity of the emotions, exhausting. And one of the things I did learn through seeing a doctor for many years is that I really do rest every day. [00:32:02] I have to. My own emotional life would just eat me up alive. So, I rest.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, I'm sure that, um, you know, since a painting is such a part of your emotional life that it's—

MINDY WEISEL: That's right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It helps you not let yourself be eaten up.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly. Yeah, you could let it out.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: All the emotions. Um, with the fellowship in Jerusalem, who did—how did you, um, come about this? Who was it through?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, I've had some very interesting experiences as a painter. I have a friend who—Susan Goodman—who's been the chief curator at The Jewish Museum in New York. She's been my—she's the first person who put me in an exhibit in 1981. She, like, discovered me, and put me into a contemporary American artists' exhibition—[coughs] excuse me—in New York. And, uh, she had recommended me in '82 I think. I became an Artist-in-Residence at Haifa University in Israel and had Arabic and Israeli students in all cultures. It

was fascinating. So I taught painting there, and then I had learned about this place in Jerusalem called Mishkenot Sha'ananim. And, like, Philip Roth the writer went there when I was there. Bronfman the violin—the pianist was there. Yefim Bronfman and Isaac Stern, and all these brilliant creative people had fellowships there. So I was just ecstatic to have a month to paint there. So, it was something I wanted to do, and I applied. And then I did the Virginia Center. I'm trying to think, what else. I've done a lot of one week, being invited somewhere to do a painting workshop. I love that kind of thing. Now I'm actually—I was invited to go to Yale in June. I'd like to do an exhibit called *Tikkum ha'Olam* which means to repair the world. So, its *Tikkum ha'Olam*.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: How do you spell that?

MINDY WEISEL: T-I-K-K-U-M [00:34:03] Tikkum means to repair. And then, the next word Ha is H-A-apostrophe-olam, is the world, O-L-A-M. And, its *Tikkum ha'Olam: Meditations in Blue*. And what I would like to do is, 25 years of paintings in which the consistent thread would be light coming out of darkness, and mostly the palate beings blues. Do an exhibition in memory of a friend of mine who just died, a very incredible human being named Dr. Donald Cohen, who was the head of psychiatry at Yale, and was the discoverer of how to treat autism and Tourette's syndrome. And he just died at the age of 60. And his wife teaches at the medical school at Yale, and we've been working together. And he owned a painting of mine called *Tikkum ha'Olam*, and he really believed in repairing the world. He was somebody who was Jewish and would travel to the Middle East and get Palestinian doctors and Israeli doctors and get the whole community—medical community united. And he's been honored around the world. So now—and there at Yale—their affiliation was with Yale, so I was invited to do something in June, where different people in different fields that have affected Donald Cohen's life are being invited to do something at Yale.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, that's wonderful. With this, um, *Meditations in Blue*—blue is such a—it seems be a very central part of your work.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, I know, um, with your mother's—the series—

MINDY WEISEL: *Lily in Blue*?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: *Lily in Blue*.

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Your mother's blue dress. Do you think—is blue—I guess what it keeps coming to?

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. I understand blue. I mean, I don't understand yellow. [Laughs.] It's like—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Somehow I knew you were going to say yellow? [00:36:00]

MINDY WEISEL: [Laughs.] I don't understand it, I mean. I understand red. I understand black. Um but blue, just uh. I'm so satisfied when I used it. I'm so—I just feel like it's saying who I am. It's reflecting back to me, and blue has a lot of significance. Spiritually, it's the color of protection, and that's why so many cultures—in Morocco they paint their doors blue. In Mexico City their doors are painted blue. There are many cultures in which blue is used as that symbolic protection. But, it's—to me it just feels right. It feels honest. I love it. I love how many blues you can get into a blue painting.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, I heard—I was told that at a time—I guess it was a colleague of your husband's at work, came to him with a magazine and showed a picture and said, "Oh this looks like one of your wife, Mindy's, paintings."

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And it turned out that in fact it wasn't a painting of yours, but it was a photograph of—I guess—a gas chamber at Auschwitz, which is somewhere you've never visited or seen a photograph of, but they—the similarities was so striking.

MINDY WEISEL: This was phenomenal. This—did you see the CNN tape? Did I give you the—?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: No, I didn't see that tape.

MINDY WEISEL: Oh, I have to give it to you because in the CNN tape they show the painting and the article. This was one of the most phenomenal experiences as a painter, which made me really feel that a painter must be some kind of vehicle. The painting—in 1979 I became truly obsessed with this palette of blues and blacks in

squares, and with my father's number, and light coming through all the work. [00:38:00] And, it was all very unconscious, and that became *Paintings of the Holocaust* in '79. And it was talking about the destruction of beauty and the light coming through was the survival of beauty. Well, this photograph of this gas chamber was done by a Chinese-American photographer in 1996 who went back to Auschwitz, photographed the interior of the gas chambers, and came out with these photographs that looked like the paintings I had done in '79. And what the photographs were—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: —was the oxidation of the breaths, you know, the oxidation of what

happened at those gas chambers 50 years later.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: So, it was amazing to me. I mean, I didn't do it browns. I didn't do my series in earth tones, or reds for rage, or black, it was these indigo blues. And it was just an amazing experience, so when CNN did this—they had a program on Sunday nights called *Impact* and they did a 15 minute segment of my art and life. In fact, your mother's in the video. Your mother—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Really?

MINDY WEISEL: Your mother is in the video because she was in my class then. She'll remember CNN coming. You'll have to talk to her about it.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I know the video, but I haven't been able to find it.

MINDY WEISEL: I have to get it to you—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —oh, wow. I'll have to look at it and show it to her.

MINDY WEISEL: —I have to get a copy. Yeah, she's in it. I think I showed it in class—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —oh, that's so funny.

MINDY WEISEL: —so she knows she's in it, in fact, quite prominently in it because they were interviewing my class, and she's right in and front listening to the lecture and stuff. Isn't that funny?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, that's so funny.

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's really funny. It's amazing, though, I think everything does point to you having um—sort of, being this vehicle for, you know—

MINDY WEISEL: Things happen daily. I mean daily. Annie, just daily. It's so bizarre, and if I didn't have witnesses. Even the September 11th thing, I—my level of anxiety was at its all-time high. [00:40:01] I bumped into a friend of mine at this Georgetown Safeway September 9, an older woman friend of mine Lois Adelson and I said, I'm feeling so vulnerable I can't bear it. The week before I had gone to see a therapist. I hadn't in years been in therapy. I told her, I can't bear my anxiety level. I just feel, like, this impending doom. I can't take it. The morning of the 11, it was a gorgeous day, as everyone knows. And I—where I live in this gated community of Georgetown called Hillandale there is a pool class on Tuesday mornings, and I was in the pool class, and the sky was gorgeous, and I went over to this woman that did the pool class with me and I said, Lynn I'm so anxious. I feel like I'm going to explode. And this was between 8:30 and 9:30.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, my gosh.

MINDY WEISEL: And then went into the house, and heard about the World Trade Center being hit. And, ever since then I haven't been anxious. So, it's been, like, almost a—and if I didn't—my husband always says, "Min it's a good thing you always have witnesses or nobody would ever believe you." I mean, I will say I had dream, or I thought, or I—or, you know, I wonder why, and then I'll get a call, or I'll get a card, or I'll get a—you know. Or, language, or—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It's—I guess—

MINDY WEISEL: I mean even yesterday.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —you truly get a feel.

MINDY WEISEL: Yesterday in Delaware I was with my friend the poet Miriam Nathan and we—she had just done this fellowship at the Virginia Center, and she said—um, we were talking about being the most ourselves. Where are we the most ourselves? And we walked in the post office to get stamps, and they came out with this new Frida Kahlo stamp, and on the front of it—on the side of it on the panel it said, she was most herself. She painted because in her paintings she was most herself. And both us, like, almost gasped because we had just used that sentence. You know, and then to walk into the post office and see it in print. It's kind of like that. By being very open, very aware of color, of language, of sound, of smell, of feeling, of—just so aware that you could really have a nervous breakdown. You know [00:42:10].

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes. [They laugh.] Well, with the September 11th thing, I was here last year—it was just a few days afterwards and I know everything was still so—everybody was, you know, sort of, on edge—

MINDY WEISEL: Did I not tell you about this September 11th anxiety the last time we spoke?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: You didn't tell me about that, but you told me that September 12th was your anniversary—

MINDY WEISEL: —anniversary and with the yellow flowers.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, and, your husband had brought you roses.

MINDY WEISEL: That's right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, they, sort of, got you through that week.

MINDY WEISEL: That's true.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And you had been interested in, sort of—

MINDY WEISEL: —beauty as consolation.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, beauty as consolation, and I was wondering how

that, sort of, has developed in your mind, just, sort of, over time, but also because in the past few weeks we haven't seen one another so much has happened, the bombing of Afghanistan, with the Anthrax in the mail—

MINDY WEISEL: I know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: How are you, um, processing that, and—

MINDY WEISEL: I'm just, well, I'm—I still believe that the only antidote we have is to every day—[Sighs.] You know, Annie, I am somebody who spent my entire life, since birth, worrying about my mother. Spent my entire life. I didn't know she'd live until I was 47. I mean, I said to her jokingly, I said, Mom, if I'd would have known that you'd be okay, I wouldn't have spent my life worrying. So having lost her at 47 and realizing that all my worrying was for nothing. I didn't protect her. It's useless to worry. I don't worry anymore, since my mother died. So, it's not—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —that's amazing.

MINDY WEISEL: —I don't want to worry, and I won't allow myself worrying. But that doesn't mean that I'm not hit by moments of tremendous anxiety, as I was before September 11th.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: But, I still, you know, I feel like I will go to my grave holding roses. [00:44:02] You know, kind of, believing in beauty, believing in the light, the gloriousness of a good day, wanting to make—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —I think you have to—

MINDY WEISEL: —a good day. Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, has this—has that series, or your thoughts on that progressed at all? Or have you thought anymore?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, I'm feeling very guilty that I'm not in the studio doing it, but it takes—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —oh, my questions make you feel guilty. [They laugh.]

MINDY WEISEL: But it takes a certain frame of mind to be able to come in here, and let go, and do it. I don't know. I'm happy for life's interruptions right now. I'm happy that I'm planning a wedding. I'm happy my daughter is having a baby. I'm happy I have book signings. I'm happy I'm busy with life. Uh, it's almost like I need to get everything else in order and then come back here, but now having said that, the truth is, if I was dying to paint something none of that would've mattered. I'd be in here. So, I think it's the combination of not having anything that is urgently needing to be expressed because even this beauty as consolation, it's something I can share more on a personal level with friends. It's something I can fill my house with, it doesn't have to be put in a painting—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —it could be you looking at something—

MINDY WEISEL: —looking at something, right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —or you enjoying something else.

MINDY WEISEL: Exactly.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, I was going to ask—you have so much going on with your new book, and with your daughters, and everything just day-to-day that you're doing, like, we were talking before, you're not necessarily, you know, in an artist commune or anything. But—and that seems so much part of your work, and at the same time it kind of keeps you when you want it to—

MINDY WEISEL: Right, right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —from doing your work, which is—

MINDY WEISEL: And, I have a lot of things to do now. I mean, really do. First of all I had a book published in 1980, where I made up this diet based on color.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right, I was just going to actually ask you about—

MINDY WEISEL: And my publisher and I had a lunch yesterday on my way back from Delaware. We met here, and—um, I literally had just walked in, and we're going to re-issue the book—[00:46:03]

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And it was called *The Rainbow Diet*?

MINDY WEISEL: It was called *The Rainbow Diet*, but we're going to change it—it's a diet based on color that I had made up when I was in graduate school. And Simon & Schuster loved it and published it, but it was really before it's time. And now, in fact, um, a doctor came out with a book proving that the colors of foods have certain—so it's like 19—year 2000, so I can't wait to write my—in 1980, when I first had this idea, you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Oh, sure, well, when I—

MINDY WEISEL: So—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —I heard about it, I was like, this, I'm surprised that this—this was just not too long ago, in 1980, but that, oh, you know, it seems like this is something that people would really like now. So that's wonderful that you're—

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. So, I'm going to reissue it, so the manuscript has to be in in September, and it'll come out in March 2003. A year from March. So, that gives me time, and then I have to do slides, which I'm terrible at doing, but I have to do slides for this Yale exhibit that I'm trying to do—the *Tikkum ha'Olum*. And travel with the book still. And you know, so.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: You know, how—in addition to *The Rainbow Diet*, which

is basically advocating—recommending that food that's rich in color, kale, and red peppers, and yellow peppers, and things like that is, am I getting it right?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, yeah, well, what the diet is—and it's not a diet. I hate that word diet because I don't think any of us should be dieting. We should be eating—if we ate well we wouldn't' have to diet.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Exactly.

MINDY WEISEL: But it's an eating program based on the white foods, which the core is white food. So, every day

you have this core of white foods, selection of chicken, eggs, white fish, mushrooms, grapefruit, uh, anything white, skim milk, cottage cheese, that's the core. Then, on red day, let's say your fruit would be a red apple, or a red plum, or red watermelon, and your vegetable would be a red tomato, a red pepper, and then there're recipes in that for that day. [00:48:03] You know, and then every day. And then, the seventh day you eat from all of the colors, and you find that by the seventh day—first we've had a lot of fun eating, second of all, you really do lose weight because you're eating very carefully, and third, you, um, become so aware of the beauty of colors, and your plate looks so different, and by the seventh day when you see the colors combined— and there's a French artist Sophie Calle who now went ahead and did—I couldn't believe it. I thought she must have read my book because I wrote the book in 1980, and she just had an exhibit where she had, like, colored meals, and photographs of colored meals. And in fact, she has a book out now with those colored meals in it, which I'm upset about. But—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well now, were hers just uh—

MINDY WEISEL: C-A-L-L-E.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —from, sort of, an artistic perspective, or—?

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, no, she's an artist, and she—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, hers had no nutritional—

MINDY WEISEL: —oh, no. Oh, no, no. She just came up with the idea of this character eating colored foods, and so she did photographs of the colors of the day. You know, but—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So, yours is every day you have the white foods, and slowly you add until you get —-

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —up to color.

MINDY WEISEL: Right. So, on orange day, your vegetable would be carrots, orange peppers, your food would be cantaloupe, or orange—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Sounds like a perfect—

MINDY WEISEL: —Carrots.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —eating plan, rather than diet.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes, it is. It's a very—heightening your awareness and consciousness of healthy eating.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And in addition to that you have—if you want to talk a little about your illustrations at the *Beginning of Things* by Harry Rand.

MINDY WEISEL: Right.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And then, um, your, just this year, your book *Daughters of Absence*, which is a compilation of—

MINDY WEISEL: Right. I can show you the, um, how I did the *Beginning of Things,* Harry gave me his poetry, which was based on the seven days of creation, and I took the text and laid it all out on one big board—flat board, and day one I'd read. [00:50:01] And, let's say it said, "God created, you know, the earth was unformed and reeling." So, I would—and I limited myself to black and white watercolors, and small, and how can I express the earth unformed? And, really. And—and I was so nervous about him being happy with my work that I did something like 80 watercolors for the eleven that he needed. Then—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's like with your—was it with your *Ella the Muse* series you had to do one poster, but you did 30 watercolors.

MINDY WEISEL: Right, right. I feel like I have to spend the idea until I've really given it everything, and so that I won't feel like, that I held back, or that I have to judge as I'm going along. Once I've done 80, I'm sure that the 11 that I like that he can have, you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: So, it's kind of a self-protective measure [laughs] more than anything else.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, and what about, um, *Daughters of Absence*, whichis your most recent work? You had edited a compilation of different essays from the daughters of Holocaust survivors.

MINDY WEISEL: That came out—originally I had wanted to make a documentary film called *In the Presence of Absence*, and then I ended up doing an exhibition of paintings called *In the Presence of Absence*. And I was very aware that I was raised in the presence of absence, that there were no—there was very little surviving family, I never had grandparents. I was raised in the absence of a totally whole mother because she had endured so much loss, and so I had parents who had a lot of damage done to them. So, there was a lot of loss in my life—absence—a hole, and I was always trying to fill that gap—that emptiness—that hole. And I think the paintings served to do that very well. I think my family—I think love—beauty—I think all that has helped to fill it. [00:52:01] I tried—I actually spent a lot of time in New York. I met a few filmmakers. I interviewed. I looked at grants and stuff, but I realized I didn't want to spend my time and energy raising the $300,000 it would've taken to do a film. And Idealized that really, a book would be fine. And it just was, kind of, miraculous how the publisher heard about me and it was—downstairs I offered to do a book party for Diana Tran's Vietnamese cookbook.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Yes, I went to that. It was great.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes. And through her I met the publisher who had known about my work, and then I told her about the *Touching Quiet* journal, and she loved that and published it. And then she asked, "Do you have any other ideas for books?" And I said, actually I've done a proposal for this book, which would be all these 12 daughters of—only daughters to survivors—and what they've made of their life. And the desire for the book was very strong after my mother died in the sense of, my mother—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Had you wanted to do it before your mother died?

MINDY WEISEL: No, no. It was—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Or, it was—the entire project came about afterward.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes, came—yes, it really came up after. I—my mother felt so strongly about keeping the memory of beauty in her life alive, and I wanted to do something that showed that she had a life before Auschwitz, and a life after Auschwitz. That life wasn't just Auschwitz. And all these books that had been written about survivors were all about the horrors that they went through. What about the beauty that existed before the war? What about the beauty they created after the war? What about the beauty that their children created in their lives?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Certainly.

MINDY WEISEL: So that became the focus of the book.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And, how did you choose the different essays, or the different daughters?

MINDY WEISEL: Well, let me just backtrack for a second, Annie. The—in fact, that's why the book is called *Daughters of Absence: Transforming a Legacy of Loss* because I didn't want to just be known as somebody who dealt with loss, but I was transforming this legacy into one of beauty. [00:54:06] And the, women—I wanted a woman who was a poet, a woman who was a photographer, a woman who was a filmmaker, a woman who was raising six sons on a kibbutz in Israel who turned out to be my sister-in-law, you know?

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Her essay in there was—they were all phenomenal.

MINDY WEISEL: Aren't they wonderful? A woman who was a comedian, you know? Hadassah Lieberman, who's my very close friend, what it was like being a politician's wife and going to Auschwitz for the congressional record. And, you know, so it was—

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Hers was so earnest, too. They were all really phenomenal.

MINDY WEISEL: Oh, I'm so glad, good.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I wanted to give that book to everybody.

MINDY WEISEL: Aw.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: And just be like, you've got to read it. It really was, um—I think all of the essays captured what you were—

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah. And what life felt like. Like, Helen Epstein's essay "Normal," I loved it when she describes going back to Germany on a train, and what was normal for her. And you know, we come from such a tragic background where things are so skewed that, in a way, the world is feeling it now. They're feeling how I felt my whole life. This kind of anxiety, and impending doom, and things can happen any minute. I felt it—have been feeling it since birth.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Maybe that's why now you're able to—

MINDY WEISEL: I'm kind of relaxed.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: —yeah, you're relaxed and I guess that'll help other people sort of—feel—

MINDY WEISEL: Yeah, I'm relaxed. Yeah, that's interesting, but it wasn't only the Holocaust. I witnessed a lot of trauma in my life. When I was eight years old, my mother—we moved into a new house in New York, in Brooklyn, and the electrician thought he smelled gas. And my mother was on the ladder with him, and he lit a match and the house exploded. I was—my mother started screaming, "Get your brother." My brother was six years younger. And I was eight, he was two. "Get your brother out of the house." My mother was in flames, and a wonderful Italian Catholic woman next door, Maria, came and wrapped my mother in a blankets. And then she was taken to the burn unit, and I didn't see her for over a month. [00:56:00] So, I was eight years old. So that was like, things can happen in a second. So, being born to survivor's, then witnessing this, and then my mother—I guess because of the trauma her body endured in Auschwitz between—the reason there are six years between myself and my brother—um, she gave birth to a stillborn baby. You know, she gave full-term, and this baby died. You know, so my mother—and I was old enough to know my mother's sorrow and disappointment. So there was a lot of heartache, but she always—she always picked herself up.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: It's amazing she—that someone can withstand so much.

MINDY WEISEL: So much. Lost her entire family in the camps, survived a fire, survived breast cancer.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: To lose a baby.

MINDY WEISEL: To lose a baby. Survived a lot, and managed to live to 92, and have a great laugh, you know.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: That's—

MINDY WEISEL: A great laugh. And I'm full of love and joy and laughter. I mean, I love life.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Right.

MINDY WEISEL: I love it.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: So with this book, do you think it was—was it more—do you think for you and for the other daughters—or was it sort of like a tribute to the mothers?

MINDY WEISEL: You're very well prepared. You're asking wonderful questions. You're wonderfully prepared. It's a pleasure to talk to you. Yes, it was a real catharsis I think, and a place to really put a tribute. And, it's interesting because when I wrote the—when I did the book, I had a real vision of each woman having her own book within the book, so that I had a dedication—each woman had her own dedication page, and her own—it was like her own tribute. I didn't want just a general—each woman had who her chapter was dedicated to, a picture of her family.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: I thought that was very moving and wonderful.

MINDY WEISEL: Yes.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Well, it's been wonderful talking to you.

MINDY WEISEL: Thank you.

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: Thank you so much for so much about yourself. [00:58:01]

MINDY WEISEL: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]