The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

She brought kids joy with her ‘magical’ toys. And hid her own misery until it became unbearable.

Melissa Bernstein drawing in her “toy lab,” located in her Westport, Conn., home. (Jackie Molloy for The Washington Post)

By

Ellen McCarthy

April 27, 2021 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Melissa Bernstein creates toys intended to delight and comfort children. They’re seemingly simple, no flashing lights or blaring noises. We’re talking about metal tea sets. Astronaut costumes. Farm-animal magnets. Wooden puzzles. Puppet theaters. The kinds of toys that today’s grandparents would’ve loved when they were children. The

kinds of toys that bridge generational gaps, that evoke a feeling of getting back to something.

Bernstein, 55, estimates she has designed more than 6,000 of these toys — a new one every day-and-a-half, on average — since she and her husband started their toy company in 1988. By 2008 Melissa & Doug's annual sales surpassed $500 million, and the company was racking up awards from retailers and industry publications. Bernstein continually pumped out products that became favorites of pediatricians and early-childhood educators and parents desperate to preserve their children's attention spans in a world overtaken by screens.

An official-looking first-aid kit, the better to play doctor with. A toy pizza with toppings made of felt, for the preschool restaurateur. Christine Osborne, owner of two toy stores in Charleston, S.C., says her favorite example of Bernstein's toymaking genius is a play kitchen that dispenses plastic ice cubes, mimicking modern refrigerators. "She takes these timeless, classic toys," Osborne says, "and puts this magical, twinkling spin on them."

But there is nothing so simple or delightful about the mind of Melissa Bernstein. The irony of the toymaker's story is that she has spent most of her life mired in relentless anxiety and depression.

For the first year of her life she cried and screamed with such ferocity it was terrifying to be around her, she recalls her mom telling her. "As a 3-year-old I can remember having this overwhelming sense of powerlessness. I didn't understand why I was here," Bernstein says. "It was like everybody was headed in the same direction and I was somehow going the opposite way. And it felt like there was this itch that couldn't be scratched, no matter what I tried to do, because it was so deep inside."

In those early years, her creativity ran to the intangible: She wrote poems. Short, fully formed rhyming verses ran through her head, uninvited, "like a ticker tape," she says. The words that came to her were dark, and she would extract them from her mind with a sense of urgency — scribbling words on toilet paper or other scraps and hiding them under her mattress. In 1970, at age 5, she wrote about how painful it felt to be alive:

The burden of myself
Has grown impossible to bear
Although rather than slip further
Down this mountain of despair
I will simply cry for help
And hope an angel hears my plea
Or I'll not survive much longer
And succumb to misery.

As an adult, Bernstein created what is now a $500 million empire of toys meant to make children happy. She became rich beyond her wildest imaginings, traveled the world, got married, stayed married and had six children. But her own happiness wasn't that

simple. As the Bernsteins ascended in the world of adult delights and comforts, Melissa continued sliding down that mountain of despair she described as a child. She battled eating disorders, exercise addiction, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, a nagging sense of worthlessness, doubts that life had any meaning or purpose, and the routine emergence of suicidal thoughts.
“The beauty and the pain of the world are unbearable for me,” she said in a recent interview from her Westport, Conn., home. “It makes it really hard to be in the world.”

“The beauty and the pain of the world are unbearable for me,” Melissa Bernstein says. The toymaker put up a false front for years to hide her anxiety and depression. (Jackie Molloy for The Washington Post)

If there was one thing Bernstein understood about what was happening in her head as a child, it was that she shouldn't share it with anyone, that her feelings wouldn't be considered welcome or acceptable. So, she created a type of permanent costume, advertising perfection and cheery self-sufficiency.

Privately, Bernstein tried to bury the dark thoughts, but that only seemed to make them multiply. By junior high she’d learned how to starve herself. In high school, she obsessively chased two urgent goals: popularity and academic excellence. She wanted an A-plus on every test and assignment. She was small and dark-haired, but wanted to be a leggy blonde. Though her passions were poetry and music, she enrolled at Duke University with the intention of becoming a lawyer — the choice she thought would elicit the most approval from others. By her senior year in college, she’d given up every

creative pursuit. She'd also dwindled to less than 90 pounds, suffered a mental breakdown and seriously considered suicide. She ditched the law-school plan after having a panic attack during the LSAT, and ended up at a Manhattan investment bank. Her mental ticker tape was dire. She struggled to get out of bed.
By then she was seriously dating Doug Bernstein. While not as despairing as Melissa, Doug was uninspired by his New York marketing job, and together they plotted an escape. "We were like, we've got to get off this treadmill or in 30 years we'll look back and not know where our lives went," Melissa says.

They both loved kids, and had educators as parents, so the two homed in on the children's market. One day, on a long drive, Bernstein was talking to Doug about one of her favorite childhood books, "Pat the Bunny," praising its varied textures — the soft fur on the rabbit, the sandpaper feel of the daddy's whiskers. She wondered why puzzles couldn't be layered with similarly pleasing textiles. With that germ of a question, their first product, a "fuzzy puzzle," was born.

And a flame that Melissa Bernstein had spent her life trying to extinguish was instantly ignited.

"It was this incredible epiphany. Because for years the creativity channeled through me, like it was not in my control. I was almost a victim of it," she says. "But just by accident I realized I was able to actually take that exact same darkness and channel it into light through making these toys that were bright and colorful and had the ability to spark children's imaginations."

"It was," she says, "like I was able to breathe fresh air for the very first time."

Melissa Bernstein getting dressed up in the "costume corner" of her toy lab. (Jackie Molloy for The Washington Post)

For Bernstein, the act of creating new toys bordered on euphoric. And for the first time she felt that her life had meaning. Flashes of it anyway — approximately once every day-and a half. But that left plenty of time for misery.

In conversation, Bernstein is lively and loquacious, qualities that can mask so much silent suffering. She says she concealed it in front of everyone — her friends, her kids, her husband, even herself. "I didn't know what it meant to be happy. I didn't know what it meant to even feel," she says. "All I knew was what it meant to say that things were great and to make it so and to prove to myself and others that everything was great." When the company was young she proved it by cold-calling independent toy-store owners and convincing them they needed to carry Melissa & Doug products. Before long the company was one of the fastest-growing U.S. toymakers. And Bernstein remained its creative engine even as her other responsibilities grew to include overseeing foreign manufacturing operations and caring for six children.

"She was always putting others in front of herself," says Osborne, the toy-store owner, who has known Bernstein for 30 years. "When I needed her I'd email and she'd respond. She was physically available."

In fact, Bernstein says she purposely designed her schedule to be so overloaded that she'd never have the chance to wallow in bed. She was determined to be a model mother, attending to her every child's every need. Even as teenagers, if one of her kids mentioned feeling thirsty, she'd jump up to get them a glass of water. But inside, Bernstein was convinced that people only wanted to use her. She started hoarding designer clothes and handmade crafts. She resumed an old habit of compulsive exercise, "even running in place when seated at the table for a meal or working at my desk," Bernstein writes in her new memoir, "LifeLines: An Inspirational Journey from Profound Darkness to Radiant Light." She didn't seek therapy; that would mean acknowledging things weren't perfect.

Her anxiety was hidden, but not contained; Bernstein began to extend her exacting expectations to her children. She recalls worrying, when attending her kids' sporting events and concerts, that they wouldn't stand out. "It was imperative for them to be the very best athletes, brightest students and most popular of their peer group to ensure my sense of wholeness," she writes, rather than — as she puts it — "choosing to be average." The toys, at least, remained in her control. She set rigid quotas, sometimes requiring herself to conceive up to three new toys a day. "I was aware that her mind was very busy and very active with a lot of thoughts. But she was highly functional with it all," says Doug Bernstein, who led most of the company's business operations. "She didn't miss a single thing — ever."

But she did miss something: a fundamental understanding of why she was the way she was. Why no quota reached, child reared or award received seemed to satisfy what she'd come to think of as a demon thrashing inside her.

“I was aware that her mind was very busy and very active with a lot of thoughts,” says Doug Bernstein of his wife’s mental health challenges. “But she was highly functional with it all.” (Jackie Molloy for The Washington Post)

“She takes these timeless, classic toys,” says one toy-store owner, “and puts this magical, twinkling spin on them.” (Jackie Molloy for The Washington Post)

Bernstein rarely just drove or just walked. She listened to podcasts, often at 1½ times the normal speed so she could consume more of them. One of her favorites was "The Good Life Project," hosted by Jonathan Fields, who frequently talked up 20th-century neurologist Viktor Frankl's classic book, "Man's Search for Meaning."

Bernstein knew she had a copy somewhere around the house, so in the fall of 2017 she pulled it off the shelf and encountered a word she swears she’d never seen before: existentialism.

“When I read the definition, that is what changed my life,” she says. “I remember almost falling to the floor and hyperventilating.”

She contacted Fields and asked to be on his show. And in the course of one interview she revealed to Fields and his audience of listeners all the secrets she’d spent her life hiding. “Why is something wrong with me that doesn’t allow me to ever feel free?” she wondered.

When the podcast aired the following March, her disclosures came as shock to friends and relatives. And they prompted hundreds of people to email Bernstein.

“You have said all the words that I have felt my entire life,” one wrote. “I couldn’t believe how similar our minds are,” wrote another.

“They were like drops of gold from the heavens raining down,” Bernstein says. Because they meant she was not alone.

By then Bernstein had already thrown herself into researching philosophy and psychology. And she finally started working with a therapist, who helped her unravel the roots of what she’d come to understand as existential depression. Loredana Trandu, the counselor Bernstein began seeing, says existential depression often appears in older adults grappling with midlife crisis and trying to figure out why they were put on this planet, but for Bernstein it seemed inborn.

“The way she learned to survive . . . is to try to become perfect. It’s an exhausting way of being and it’s creating what’s called a pseudo-self,” Trandu says. “I think it’s so poignant that she went into creating something so jubilant and so childlike. Because it was that child inside her that was not heard, that was not seen, that was always afraid that needed a voice.”

Bernstein learned that people who suffer from existential depression also tend to be highly creative and sometimes suffer hypersensitivities in five areas: intellectual, sensual, emotional, psychomotor and imaginational. It was like a detailed description of Bernstein’s life. “I always said I felt like my tuning knob was off, like my life was an amplifier and someone took every one of those switches and threw them all the way up,” she says.

Confronting her affliction and disclosing the truth of her experience to friends and family was a deeply painful process. “I had to stare despair in the eye,” she says. “That was a really dark time. And I almost didn’t come out of it.”

But when she did Bernstein was able to stop hiding — and hating — so much of herself. “My therapy has been in accepting the paradox that light doesn’t come without dark and highs don’t come without lows,” she says. “That if I want to be creative to the extent I am, then it’s going to have a dark side. And it does.”

The Bernsteins sold a majority stake in Melissa & Doug to a private equity firm for an undisclosed amount in 2017. They have a new company, LifeLines, that aims to be an online community for people grappling with self-acceptance or trying to find meaning in life. While the site’s content is free, Bernstein still has the blood of an entrepreneur: Later this year the company will launch a line of “sensory engagement products.” The Bernsteins won’t reveal many details, though Melissa says she’s hoping the products create what she calls a “sensephony” that can help customers get out of their own heads by focusing, for instance, on what they’re smelling.

She also wrote a memoir, and, per usual, held tight control of the project, publishing the book herself without the help of a professional editor and using mostly her own nature photography to color the pages. The result: a 640-page, stream-of-consciousness meditation that includes hundreds of her poems, including her earliest ones — the sketches of childhood despair she used to hide under the mattress.

These days, Doug Bernstein says, “everything is better.” His wife is the same person she’s always been, but a little less frenetic, more authentic. “Our relationship is deeper, stronger, more dimensional. She’s never been closer and tighter than she is now with our children.”

And the shadows are still there, Melissa Bernstein says. It’s just that Bernstein doesn’t run from them. The burden of herself is still a burden, but it no longer seems impossible to bear.

Ellen McCarthy
Ellen McCarthy is a feature writer for Style. She previously covered local technology companies for the business section and anchored the Style section's On Love page, writing extensively about weddings, love and relationships. She is the author of “The Real Thing: Lessons on Love and Life from a Wedding Reporter's Notebook."