

This is Who I Am:

*Stories of Older Adults Returning to College*

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*To Sarah and Michael*

*To Aunt Norma*

*for helping me reclaim my past*

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## *Beannacht*

On the day when  
the weight deadens  
on your shoulders  
and you stumble,  
may the clay dance  
to balance you.

And when your eyes  
freeze behind  
the gray window  
and the ghost of loss  
gets in to you,  
may a flock of colors,  
indigo, red, green  
and azure blue  
come to awaken in you  
a meadow of delight.

when the canvas frays  
in the curach of thought  
and a stain of ocean  
blackens beneath you,  
may there come across the waters  
a path of yellow moonlight  
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,  
may the clarity of light be yours,  
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,  
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow  
wind work these words  
of love around you,  
an invisible cloak  
to mind your life.

~ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*

## *Introduction*

We ended our interview at the outside table of a local strip-mall coffee shop. Semi trucks zooming past were an irritating constant throughout the interview as they entered the freeway ramp nearby. I hopped into my car with my digital recorder and notebook after saying goodbye to Janice, a woman of 40, who had to go pick up her children from school. As I headed out of the small town in which we both live, strangers to each other until that afternoon, the lake and trees came into focus around the bend and my sobs began. Pulling over to the side of the road and prying my hands from the steering wheel, my mind raced with thoughts of all the things I hadn't done in my life, all I longed to do if I only knew how, and doubts about my chances to realize these dreams at the age of 50. This had been the first interview for my undergraduate honors thesis. And Janice's frankness triggered this reaction by reminding me of what was missing in my life and what I longed for.

My proposed thesis research consisted of interviewing a population of older adults returning to college, and was intended to analyze socioeconomic status and its

impact on the decision-making process. My strong emotions after the interview were completely unexpected. I felt doubt and then anger. The topic of socioeconomic status and the task of interviewing for research or for data felt inconsequential when a tragic story and a heart had been handed to me. I had become the “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1996) in the witnessing of another’s life story. Even though issues of class and inequality have always been important to me, I now wondered whether personal adversity and the meaning people found apart from social status were more essential to living a satisfying life than material comforts. I felt a sudden impulse, an epiphany, to know the people’s stories, how they felt about their lives, change, and their transforming moments. It shifted everything in me. I struggled all weekend to come to grips with this. I no longer had any idea of what my project would be. I was distraught and could not sleep with worry that I would disappoint my advisors, my classmates, and myself. I could not stop asking myself what I was doing and where I was going in my life and if this project had a role in it. The interview had cast me into the unknown.

I am, myself, an older adult who returned to college after being laid off from my long-term project management position at an advertising firm. I raised two children as a single parent for 17 years. How had I arrived *here*? At this age, isn’t a solid career, a successful marriage, a home, regular vacations, and a nice retirement nest egg the expected life path, the “American Dream?” Or is it just something we buy into? For me, everything had changed with two shoulder surgeries and the economic downturn, and now college was my survival. My life had been split in two. One dominated by children and work, and the present one dominated by college and the uncertainty of the future. I wondered if others felt this way. And now, I asked myself what all this uncertainty and indecision around us says about the experiences we have been through? Why do we

sometimes feel so separate and alone? What does it mean to age? How long do we have to regret? What am I doing? A provocative “answer” to these questions came from anthropologist and psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman:

... seeing the world as dangerous and uncertain may lead to a kind of quiet liberation, preparing us for new ways of being ourselves, living in the world, and making a difference in the lives of others. Surprisingly, confronting the deepest fears can mean giving them up and asking critically why we ever allowed ourselves to be so morally and emotionally shackled. (2006:10)

Having listened to the story of another’s life, from someone who days before was a stranger, had sensitized me to the needs of the people I planned on interviewing and made me cognizant of the importance of empathy, compassion, and humility. It also made me aware that in hearing these stories, I may find myself questioning my own life and where I had come from on an even deeper level. I realized that, for me, these people would be much more than a research project. As the weekend drew to a close, I knew that my original thesis topic was no longer an option. I now needed to discover what the topic and question of my thesis *would* be.

I was not alone. As I shared my distress with my course advisor and the small honors thesis group that I belong to, the sympathetic nods and smiles of acknowledgement verified this. As I babbled on trying to arrange my thoughts into something coherent and scrambling for that thesis question that would absolve me of all my worries, our advisor, looking thoughtfully in my direction, and to whom I am indebted, asked “well, what is a life?” I stared back at him and said “I don’t know—that



is a good question.” That *is* my question. All these life stories would gather into one question: *What is a Life?*

The next step was finding women and men to interview. Synchronicity seemed to play an important role. I discussed my thesis with anyone who I thought might be interested. Consequently, I was fortunate enough not to have to create a flyer and post it all over campus. Professors and employees with whom I had become friends during my time at community college sent me their current students and work study employees. Classmates had mothers and fathers they referred me to, and graduate student instructors I knew referred me to their friends. Additionally, colleagues from my work study job at a women’s center generously offered to contact some of the scholarship recipients who commonly were returning to college at midlife, and I approached a few people whom I encountered at my University orientation and at transfer student dinners. Lastly, there were friends and neighbors who offered. It was serendipitous because the people appeared as I needed them. Maybe it could be said that we chose each other. But the fact is, the cup was so overflowing with the generosity of those who *wanted* to tell their story that it was with great difficulty that I eventually ended my search.

Immediately a marked difference surfaced from a field experience where an ethnographer places him or herself among a group of people and takes the time needed to connect to those who come forward to share and become key informants. Even though I was working with a particular group of individuals within a larger community, this was not going to be an ethnography that took me into the field spending weeks, months, or years gathering extraordinary details, picking and choosing informants and collecting stories incrementally from the daily mundane tasks like anthropologist Lila

Abu-Lughod describes in “Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter” (1988) or Barbara Myerhoff in *Number Our Days* (1978). My connections were limited to one to two hour interviews: brief and often intense.

Scheduling and finding a location for the interviews were done by email, except for Henry, who, at age 77, was used to the old fashioned way of making an appointment, via telephone. I committed myself to only face to face interviews to enhance the intimacy and warmth of the encounter, to see expressions, body language and even sense the smell of the interviewee, but mostly to promote sharing. When only one interview remained, I agreed to Skype as an experiment in order to determine whether that technology would interfere in any way with the integrity of the interview process. The majority of my interviews were in local library study rooms, others were at on-campus locations, offices, one at an interviewee’s home, and two at coffee shops. Because most of my interviewees were strangers, I purposely chose public venues for safety reasons. Except for my reaction to one man, working together, my interviews and I created an atmosphere of safety which allowed for a more relaxed experience.

People’s life stories touch me and revive me. Some stories even tend toward the sacred and speak of the wonder and awe of life, the suffering, the emotion and death. After reading many beautiful ethnographic works in my courses and on my own like Arthur Kleinman’s *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Death* (2006), Renato Rosaldo’s “Grief and the Headhunter’s Rage” (1989), Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), Oliver Sacks “The Case of the Colorblind Painter” (1995) and Dorothy Allison’s non-fiction *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (1995), I knew that was the kind of anthropological work that I wanted to do. Ethnography that was close to the heart and close to beauty. All spurred intellectual

dialogue, some left me speechless. Given those models, I was facing some difficulties with impersonal generic questions which might befit a survey, but create distance rather than intimacy. Charlotte Linde writes that life stories “express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way” (1993:3). It is for these reasons, and my own love for people’s stories, that I chose to use a life story methodology.

Using one core question that asked for the interviewee to talk about their life, with moments of clarification, this methodology created easy going, fluid and less scripted interviews, giving my interviewees the time to tell their own story in the order and intensity they chose and share as little or as much as they wanted. Conducting an informal interview, and learning to tell them a little of my own story before we began, seemed to present an opening to talk, to listen, and to get comfortable with one another. In each interview my own steady progression from a curious teenager to a woman with a more quiet presence, became more apparent as I engaged more thoughtfully. Gaining a sense of when the interviewee was feeling comfortable, taught me to learn to wait—going back to a token phrase for clarity or asking more intimate questions. Our common experience being older students, sitting in class with 18 year olds, also created a bond and lightheartedness during the interviews. Was this group more forthcoming because I could relate many of their life experiences to mine or at least had shown empathy for them due to my own adversity? I can’t confirm that these commonalities encouraged their sharing, but I think it is an ordinary part of being human that when one shows interest in another’s story they are given permission to share.

Telling one’s story can be seen as a form of prayer—a way to make sense of our world and the significance of our experiences while reaching for some higher good and purpose (Ochs and Capps 2001:242). Most of the interviewees created a place of solace

in which they gave themselves the opportunity to share their story with me, a stranger, much like a therapist or a bartender. Did simply telling their story diffuse the hardship and the anxiety and create that space of freedom? Not always, for naturally, there were those who proceeded with caution in our interview who, like Karen, admitted trust was an issue when she said “My shield is never down; I always keep it up ...”. And Jack, who may have found life so unbearable that outside of his one comment “my wife hates me, my son hates me, there’s nothing here” was only able to share the mundane facts and figures of his life. But, don’t we all hold things close? I wondered whether some of them had ever been asked to tell their story or had ever even actually been shown any interest in what they had to say. So for offering me a small peek into their lives, I am grateful. However, it does pose the open-ended question of how *does* one trust another with their story and build a relationship of trust with only an hour of contact or, for that matter, years of connection?

Just as becoming a parent brings on responsibilities beyond our imagining, being with a stranger in their pain or joy can be just as maddening and as beautiful. What is the responsibility of the ethnographer in the interview? The ethnographer has a responsibility to do no harm to the individuals who are vulnerable to our presence and the questions we ask. As we reach into each other, we witness “what you must know about me to know me” (Linde 1993:25). In reaching across we become just as accountable to the interviewee’s heart and the choices they have made in their sharing as they are. We are collaborators in the process of storytelling. Our responsibility lies in being aware of our own wounds, our own vulnerabilities, our own humanity, and how we live our lives as we listen to theirs.

There is always a period of debriefing after doing an interview with no determined time length. First, it is used to revive some of the interview “scenes” and outside details in order to note them for future writing. But, by and large, that time period for me, and for some of the interviewees, was a time to contemplate the interview itself. Some of the interviewees experiences were close to my own and cathartic—uprooting my own story from within, catching me off guard with my own strong feelings and inadequacies, my loneliness and joy. With each debriefing I saw how I could not expect others to share with me their own moments of healing if I did not open to my own. Those experiences eventually convinced me that two interviews, with a couple hours respite in between, was my emotional limit. Transcribing interviews, I found, also drew upon my emotional resources, but in a different way.

Robert Coles, author of *Doing Documentary Work* (1997), did not transcribe his interviews. He chose to replay the tapes writing down the passages that were meaningful to him and then composing the stories from memory and in his own words (Fricke 2006:11). I tried that. Even though I enjoyed listening to the interviews again and again, this method was unsuccessful for me because I would miss some of the little details that can enrich short ethnographies. Thus, I decided to transcribe the interviews, an arduous but necessary task, that I originally felt sucked the life out of the interview. An hour interview may take up to six hours to transcribe so I had to learn the art of stepping away, taking a long walk or watching a film. But, ultimately it enabled me to better absorb what I heard, to focus on items of importance, and also identify themes that surfaced. I was embarrassed by hearing how much I had interrupted the thoughts of the earliest interviewees—a taboo in interviewing—as well as realizing how

many important questions I had not asked. Then there was their laughter, something nice to hear again and again.

Twenty one interviews later, I approached the daunting task of choosing and writing the stories for my thesis. Ethnographies are a way of detailing another's life from the perspective of another and even though my interviews were limited by time and constrained by life's own details, they had an immediacy and richness. Henry had to pick up his daughter whose car had broken down; James had a strict study schedule for his five classes, as well as, a medication regimen and two jobs; Amelia had a class to teach. Yet almost all of my interviews went over their allotted time because the interviewees had so much they wanted to share. If I had had more time with them, I would have delved further into their relationships with their fathers and mothers, their grandmothers and grandfathers and their life at home. If not for the limited time and ensuring that my thesis question was answered, I may have been able to spend more time with details and complexities of their lives.

I've struggled with writing in the past. My academic papers often became rituals of obsessive thought, resulting in weeks of pondering and soul-killing perfectionism, leaving no room for enjoyment of the process or the intellectual stimulation. I would frequently collapse after the writing was finally over. This thesis was no different, but I found as I read Anne Lamott's, *Bird by Bird: Some Instruction on Writing and Life*, that to write you must "learn to be more *compassionate* company, as if you were somebody you are fond of and wish to encourage" (1994:31). Imperfection heeds compassion and it gives permission for others to be human as well. As the writing became more difficult, I took more tea breaks to refocus. What would it take to put words on the paper that had some semblance of order? I didn't want my perfectionism

to ruin the reciprocal relationships that I had developed with my interviewees. What more can someone ask than to have someone share their story with you? And because I felt privileged by the beauty of their words and our brief rapport, I needed to write to capture their stories in a way “that must be presented in a proper light to others” (Goffman 1967:91). Even though there were times when I didn’t know what I was doing or why, a longing to “write what I love to read” (Behar 2012) enabled me to push harder. As the writing progressed, the intention I held for this project was that of giving honor and beauty to my interviewees and their words for the privilege to write their stories.

I write from my own vantage point: how I saw those I interviewed and how I heard their words. The words I used to create their story became part of my relationship with them. I am also aware that I write through my own wounds and past experience the wounded lives and experiences of others. We are all, in one sense or another, “wounded storytellers” (Frank 1995). I have been taught by this lengthy process that I cannot separate my life from another so easily. If, as an ethnographer, I am looking through my own lens of childhood or adult experiences, how pure *are* my words, my descriptions of the interviewee’s experiences? How can I separate myself from their story if I can relate to it so closely? Or did I have to? It was a process of continual self-analysis and being honest with my own limitations to write their stories consciously and with integrity even though it is not easy keeping unbiased and leaving out my judgments and opinions. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes: “How can we know what we know other than by filtering experience through the highly subjective categories of thinking and feeling that represent our own particular ways of being ...”(2007:208). There is no perfect means to remove my life from their story. By being the interviewer I myself become part of their story and I will bring myself along no matter how hard I try not to.

Similar to the visual anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, who collected and chose stories for her book about elderly Jews in Venice, California, I chose the stories that captured a larger story and brought my thesis alive (Prell 1989:251). I knew that choosing the stories to include would be difficult. I wanted to include all twenty one, in some way or another, but I knew that was not possible. With a long and arduous process using intuition and guidance from the interviews themselves, I have included stories of five of the twenty one people I interviewed. What the interviewees chose to share with me created the story and the choices I myself had to make. As Barbara Tedlock points out, “what we see or fail to see, reporting a particular misunderstanding or embarrassment, or ignoring it, all involve choices” (1991:72). I also had to decide how much of myself, as the ethnographer, I wanted to put in each story and the thesis itself.

Vincent Crapanzano in his book *Tuhami* (1980) discovered that his lengthy fieldwork was an opportunity for self-reflection and psychological growth which he incorporated in the writing. Writing these stories *has* changed me emotionally and psychologically too, but how much of this does the reader need to know? To be a sensitive human being given the opportunity to enter into the lives of others, I would not be honest if I did not say that they affected my inner Self and my ability to look deeper within. But I decided that anything I said about myself here needs to be in relation to my interviewee, so as not to take away from their words and the time they gave me. Yes, “in the life history, two stories together produce one. A hearer and listener ask, respond, present, and edit a life” (Prell 1989:254), but I needed to bring a balance with the scales weighing more in the favor of the interviewee. The stories were written with what I hoped would be the same richness as their spoken word: molded by their words, setting



a stage and moving the reader through events and circumstances not only with my voice, but with the interviewees' voices in the forefront. It was evident that we are very much connected by experience and a longing to be seen and heard and these were stories "of those whose voices often go unheard" (Behar 2003:18). But, if they all could meet, they would see the similarities immediately and realize they are not alone.

One's story is evidence of one's existence and the world we live in. Listening, writing and reading someone's story is to enter into the sacredness of that life, and into my own life as well. "Sacred and truthful" words benefit those who hear, read or write them and anyone connected with them (Desjarlais 2003:67). Most interviewees let me into some of the most intimate details of their lives and I felt a need to protect them afterwards, to make sure that their stories were held sacred. I do see that writing a story and inscribing it on paper, creates a "permanence" to that story, "whereas speech is of breath and wind and so is fleeting and unreliable" (Desjarlais 2003:67). As a result, our story becomes a sacred text in itself. Because life is sacred, our words become sacred. Witnessing the interviewees stories—listening, writing, and reading—I felt anointed by the power and strength of their words.

Finally, the most difficult part of writing the stories was analysis. I did not want to tear them apart like an "object" or "other," as we often say in anthropology. This in itself creates distance. So I found it difficult to add analysis to the stories presented here and to link themes to the people for anthropological comparison. It felt like I was breaking faith with a group of people I had formed a relationship with even in the short time I knew them. Throughout the process, I continued to feel ambivalent about the prospect of taking literature I had read and integrating it into the stories in order to demonstrate my research capabilities and my legitimacy as an anthropology

undergraduate. I had the sense that I had to prove myself again at age 50 like I did in the corporate world. Forcing the content of my outside research into the lives of these individuals excluded many aspects of their stories. A question that continued to haunt me as well was that if I did analyze their stories, was I intruding into their lives or being disloyal to the field of anthropology and everything I had learned? Would it be an act of transgression? Telling their stories was a vulnerable act and my writing their stories had to be open to the same vulnerability. By taking the stories and comparing, contrasting, and producing themes to analyze them bit by bit, I felt it would sever the relationships.

Struggling with those issues, I woke up one morning and wondered if anthropologists really care about the hearts and minds of the people they “study.” After thinking about some of my professors, soul searching, and a discussion with my advisor, I came to the conclusion that, yes, anthropologists form relationships with people who become like family, complete with its struggles and its love. So maybe instead of the “study of,” we could see anthropology as the “study with,” and create a “togetherness” not an “otherness” (Ingold 2011:226)—linking our human commonalities with our shared humanity to create intimacy, relationships, and trust. All my angst over many months came down to this: my hope that anthropologists do not lose sight, when doing research and writing ethnographies, of what is most important. That being the people they care about and the stories they tell them, even as they research their bones, physical remains, material goods, words, or the lives they share.

I decided to compare and contrast within the group I had interviewed and pull in literature only if it fit into the context of the writing. I also decided to put as many of the interviewees voices into the written work as possible in order to maintain their presence. By doing this work, I actually realized it might be a way to show how none of us are

alone in our experiences. We can inspire each other in our uniqueness and determination. This made it easier for me to continue on. My one intention was that no matter how much analysis or cited material I put in, it would not take away the heart of their stories.

So after all this apprehension, I decided to delve into the lives of the twenty one. One result of that was that a cluster of themes or interconnections emerged as I listened again to the interviews and began to write. The interconnections that surfaced for this particular group of older adult college students were uncertainty, trauma<sup>1</sup>, education, choice, and faith. Resilience tethered everything together. These themes are like connective tissue in which nothing can be separated from anything else, like a web.

One other element that was revealed in almost every interview was a statement or collection of words which I will call their doctrine: *Everything I've been through has made me who I am*. Those seemed to be unstated words of hope from each interviewee. The doctrine seems to have pulled people through difficult times and enabled them to realize that if they can get through one painful thing, they can get through another, because that struggle makes them a stronger human being. In other words, it is their past experiences that reassure them: We all inherit a past that will always be with us in the present (MacIntyre 1981:221). "I think I had to go through everything I've gone through to get to this point" became a self-affirmation for Janice, as with the other interviewees, revealing where she had been, where she is now, and where she may be going. Bonnie added "I've been married three times...which I hate. I don't tell anybody, ever. I'm not really proud of it. I try to look at it too...that it's made me who I am."

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for American Psychiatric Association definition

The same doctrine seems to have served as a touchstone for each of the interviewees, helping them cope and have faith in what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (qtd. in Ochs and Capps 207). Their words helped each of these individuals make sense of the world and all the challenging things that have happened to them, giving the doctrine an agency or helping hand of its own. This doctrine also shows a striking comparison to Carl Jung’s writing about destiny in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: “Much might have been different if I myself had been different. But it was as it had to be; for all came about because I am as I am” (1965:358). The *doctrine* is no less than a ritual statement that they repeat to themselves each time there is an obstacle.

What is a Life? The basic questions permeating all the interviews, such as Who am I? What am I doing here? What matters to me? are a start, but I believe it may be that it all begins with a story. As James Olney writes: “There seems, deep in the human psyche, the necessity to tell one’s own story – or more exactly, perhaps, to tell one’s own story and the story of one’s people” (1996:43). The five chapters that follow are the written stories of five interviewees and the connections between them. The interconnections I mentioned above are expressed in how this group of older adults returning to college were able to remake themselves and they felt “in their bones” the emotional, financial, and physical “danger and uncertainty” of life (Kleinman 2006:11).

As you read their stories, they will reveal what matters most to them, what makes a life for them, and voices that long to be heard. A single parent with five children upends social inequalities as she excels in school and helps others pass the GED. A

journalist, now turned historian, creating a new self after a near-fatal injury. A self-employed middle-class woman finds her way through her father's abuse seeking goodness instead of survival. An elderly African American man, having experienced a life of discrimination, finds himself back in school for reasons he did not expect. A 50 year old woman facing the uncertainty of a recurrence of breast cancer, attempts to find solace in work and a Master's thesis. These stories, and those not written here, show that life can be quite beautiful, but it is *not* easy, and these people have shown their resilience through the many choices they have made, through uncertainty and trauma, in the pursuit of education, and the faith that sustains them.

~

## Love Never Gets Lost on its Way Home

*“These obstacles were my life, obstacles are your life. You can’t get out of it, you just have to get over it...” ~ Patty*

I come from a family where strict expectations to conform were imposed upon me even after my decision to divorce and become a single parent. I was expected to *be* the same even though I wasn’t, expected to *do* everything the same, as if I had their support, despite all the added responsibilities and having not a clue as to who I was or who I could be. I have tried to challenge that power of socialization all my life, wherever I encounter it in myself as well as in others. So when I first laid eyes on Patty, and her outer appearance was not what I had expected, I was challenged by all those expectations in a new way. We all devise imaginings of those we haven’t met.

After receiving emails from Patty to schedule our interview, I found myself falling back on my own student community college images. From her emails, I had imagined Patty as an older professional woman and mother going to school to promote herself in the business or medical fields. This was my typical experience of people in midlife at the community college I attended. But, my expectations were turned sideways when she approached me. She was a short, stocky woman dressed with worn blue jeans, t-shirt

and only a Chevy sweatshirt despite the cold weather. Her hair was slicked back into a pony tail, her long bangs hiding her eyebrows. As she walked confidently to me with welcoming brown eyes and shook my hand with strength and purpose, I became curious about the real woman, the one I would begin to know, not the one I had made up.

I find it hard to write about Patty's story because it reminds me so much of my own. A life where horrible decisions are made in the absence of a foundation needed to guide one in making more mature ones. Coming from a life of abuse and neglect that did not instruct me as to how to function in a world where I deserved more, I was unable to structure a life of my own for quite some time. Patty's story is one of despair, pain, and struggle with attempts at choices that simply kept her on her feet. To describe the life of Patty is to describe what none of us would want for our children except for what Patty calls "the journey". There's nothing else one can do with such a life other than to continue on until some glimmer of an experience, or perhaps destiny takes over and wakes a person up from their slumber. She spoke to this: "...sometimes life kicks you in the head and you have to listen...Wake up, wake up...Finally, I woke up. I had to." Patty heard and listened right at those moments that were taking her closer to the black holes of an exhausted life. Her longing for a better life seized her and took her on different paths that rescued her each time. I'm really not trying to be poetic here. This is her reality.

Patty is a woman who has thrived on the substance of her being even when there's hardly anything left. This has been her means to a better life. The many lives she has lived in her 46 years need more than this thesis chapter. As I think of Patty, it is hard not to feel my own losses, but in her brutal truth and rawness, she illustrates hope, and an authenticity we all long to embrace.

Patty grew up in a small, northern Midwest town, but she immediately dispensed the myth of a close, helpful community documented so exhaustively in American Hallmark specials and holiday movies. With a voice of concern, she shed light on the reality of her town as one “where everyone knows your business, there isn’t any work, nothin’ for teenagers to do, and people get restless.” Her parents divorced early in her childhood leaving her with an un-medicated bipolar mom, “making life difficult,” and a dad living many miles away in a large middle-class community. As a teenager entering an “80’s mall-hair” high school experience, she moved in with her dad hoping she could become the “city girl” she desired to be as she grew up. Her dad, a Vietnam vet, was a wonderful man, but had not really given her the tools to survive. Even though his heart was in the right place and he thought he had provided enough for Patty, she believes that there were things that she needed to know in life that she had not been taught until after she’d gone through “a lot of stuff” on her own.

Being one class short of graduating, she started work in various jobs: a retail store managerial position was her favorite. At the age of 19, she gave birth to her son. Even with all the struggles, being a mom to him became “the center of my world”. Shortly after, she had another child whom she chose to give up for adoption. She then met Jon who was her “perfectly fine” partner for 10 years...until they married. Her existence then turned into a life of soul crushing physical abuse and her sense of self never had a chance to flourish under those circumstances. Patty described this to me in a spacey voice as the “... nice things abuser’s do.” They eventually had four children together—a girl, twin sons, and another girl along with the son she had at 19.

She knows that people stigmatize her for her choices. She is someone who “*chose*” to have all these children and “*chose*” to marry this abusive man. She explained



about the many years of rape in the relationship, her moral misgivings not to seek abortion, and that getting pregnant was not a *choice*. She told me that she can still hear their voices saying all she had to do was take responsibility by *not* having children and *leave* her husband. Patty's honesty and awareness is unmistakable and has freed her from this stigma.

At the beginning of their marriage, Patty and her family moved from their small town to an urban area where there was work. While living with her 90 year old grandfather and keeping the abuse "out of his vision," Jon only allowed her to work as long as he could keep an eye on her by forced her to only acquire jobs, if possible, at the companies he worked for. After her grandfather sold his home and moved north, they settled into another home and Patty gave birth to twin sons. If Patty were to continue working, it would involve putting three children into daycare, devouring her paycheck, a portion of Jon's, and their state aid. Patty's indignation and defiance over that situation led her to say: "It irritates me that the system doesn't allow you to get out of the system."

So she quit her job, forcing a move this time to what she called "the hood," an area now condemned. She described it as a horrible place to live, but "when you have nothing" you make it as nice as you can using a little paint and second-hand goods. To my surprise, she said, "I cried for two weeks when I moved in, but [also] cried for two weeks when I left." She described their ghetto as a "tribe" and as a place that, when you go through a hard time, it becomes very egalitarian. If someone didn't have groceries, and everyone knew they didn't have them, there would be a bag of groceries on their front porch the next morning. If Patty or other neighbors had extra food stamps, they would buy bigger pieces of meat and share it with all their neighbors. They were the only white people in the neighborhood, but were treated as family. It was just the kind of

place it was. With pride, she stated “If someone got into trouble, someone got sick, if kids needed a babysitter, we just did what we had to do.” She became one of the “hood mamas:” a group of women in the neighborhood who watched, at times, fifteen or so children to keep them safe from afternoon drive-by shootings, drug deals taking place on their back lawns, gangs, and fights. For the first time in her life, Patty felt like she belonged to a real family.

Her whole existence of living in a “tribal” environment that was separate from the rest of the world gave her the attitude that changed her life. She had never been exposed to people who were willing to give her and her children so much from themselves. She found this fundamentally different from the suburban life she had lived for four short years with her dad, and the life of verbal abuse and neglect she had received from her mentally ill mom. It was not utopia, in fact more like a dystopia, but it was all she had.

Even though her neighbors may have been kind and generous, things in her home life came to a head where she “couldn’t take it anymore.” Her relationship with Jon was deteriorating as she gave birth to another daughter whom she described as “awesome and looks and acts like me.” Finding herself in “hysterics” during a conversation with a friend, she found the strength to make a change in her life. She filed for divorce, but even with a personal protection order, he tried killing her in front of her children. Blocking out the event, her children have clearly shown Patty the affects that abuse can have on families. She also knows how hard it is to break cycles of abuse once they begin. So, from her perspective, meeting another abusive man was just another part of life.

He was a business owner, charming, and very handsome. What was this man doing with “a pudgy, divorced girl with five kids?” Patty asked. There was a recollection of her “stomped on” self-esteem and the notion that having a good looking guy meant

things were going to be great meaning “she must be doing something right.” But, ultimately, “not so much” in the three years they were together. Seth controlled the money as Patty ran his business partially propped up by her monthly child support payments she received from her ex-husband. Beginning to feel the urgings to attend college and attain a more career-oriented job, she found herself a prisoner in her own home. Seth was “that jealous, that insecure, that abusive and controlling” that even going to the gas station corner store meant she was out “blowing somebody in the parking lot.”

Life isn’t always kind. And others are not always willing to see beyond appearances and their own prejudices. I wasn’t, initially, upon meeting Patty. Patty was forthcoming in saying she didn’t have a choice in leaving Seth. She was clear that she was not mentally prepared to do that. With a soft, but firm interpretation of her situation, she said:

“That’s a stigma that’s really hard for some people to understand...You say, well you did have a choice, you could’ve left, you could’ve done this or you could’ve done that. I *could have*, but at the moment you don’t think about those things...you think about, if he finds me he’s going to hurt me or he’s gonna do something to my kids, or he’s going to, ya know, he’s gonna call the police and say something or whatever it is.”

The fear keeps you there. The “choices” of other people were her “can not’s.”

“I can’t do it because I don’t have any money, I can’t do it because I don’t have a vehicle, I can’t do it because I will fail my kids. All of these things go through your head because they have put them there. So you do have a choice, but at the same time you don’t feel like you do. It’s a really hard

thing to understand unless you've been there. I mean completely. You can't completely understand unless you've been there."

Patty was unable to protect herself from another man's abuse or release herself from the inner demons that subjugated her to the fears that Seth represented. But she did find one way in which she was able to take control of her life and leave another man behind: her children. After a culmination of events that she did not share with me, a misunderstanding occurred between Seth and Patty's daughter. Even though Patty was aware of how relationships have their own rhythm and misunderstandings, she had asked Seth to apologize to her daughter who had been hurt by a remark that he had made. The conversation quickly escalated and Seth "drop-kicked her in the chest." After hearing the yelling, her daughter approached the upstairs bedroom door, thinking her mom dead. She ran next door to get her older brother, age 16, frantically shouting "Mom's dead. Seth killed her."

Seth had a belief that 16 is the age when you are mature enough to fight, so when Patty's son came after him, he was more than ready. He punched her son in the face. Patty knew that she had endured many things over the years that some women would never have imagined putting themselves through. But at that moment, it became apparent to her that "you can do what you want to me, but you can't do anything to my kids." Seth was sentenced to a year in jail, but served only five months.

Now on her own, Patty found that her house in the ghetto was condemned. Seth had rigged the water and electricity from others homes and the water had been turned off. She had to send her children to live with their dad and moved into a different neighborhood with a friend. Given the opportunity to restore another condemned house owned by an acquaintance, Patty accepted an agreement to bring the rental home up to

code within six months in order to bring her family back together. She described the home remodeling experience as “therapeutic” taking out the frustrations of her life on the house. Learning how to tear down cupboards with a sledge hammer and put up cement board was all “very satisfying.” This kind of productive rage can lift the lid off the shame.

During those six months, she found an unexpected connection with Seth’s family, especially after a phone call with his brother. During her time with Seth, he had kept her away from his family, further isolating her from the outside world. She needed help and his brother gave it to her. She would arrive early in the morning to the house and the drywall would already be up in the kitchen. He would fix her van after numerous breakdowns. She had found “good people” that had “adopted me as their daughter,” giving her a family again after her departure from “the hood.”

Not having funds to work on the home was always an issue. She was still looking for a job so the landlord paid for the materials and discounted her rent. While sleeping for months on a friend’s couch, she was able to procure resources from local and state programs she spoke about with high regard. Her search for employment had spanned three years since the loss of her clerical job in 2008, the beginning of the U.S. economic recession. She admitted that “it was the most terrible time to get out of an abusive relationship where someone [else] had all the control of the money.” But she never regretted her choice of leaving Seth. After the renovation of the house, her children were able to move back in with her.

When asked how her life has changed, Patty reminisced about a good friend who “kicked her butt” for two years to go to college. After another one of those “friendly” calls, the pressure was enough to convince Patty to apply for a scholarship to pay for the

\$30.00 registration fee for a GED exam at the local community college. Patty leaned in towards me and with her raspy voice said: “I have a house over my head, a little bit of income...and my oldest is in college. It’s time.” This phone call was the moment when the “light went on” just as it did both times with her abusive partners. She said she had started a “million” times and in each instance it was not the time. She knew she was going to have to be strong because it “wasn’t going to be easy,” but with the support of an adult transitions counselor, whom she believes changed her life, she passed the GED in four days.

Now, while attending community college, she is mentoring students in the college GED program. “Besides raising my kids, it is the most rewarding job. I love this job,” because it gives her another purpose in life and connections with people to whom she can “relate” through their own adversity and life experience. Even though the job has short hours and minimal pay, it has brought meaning to her life and she would do it for free. Patty quoted a priest: “For a long time I was waiting for real life to start, but there was always some debt to pay, some time to be served, some business to be finished ...” As she gave one of her raspy, resounding laughs, she added, “These obstacles *were* my life, obstacles *are* your life. You can’t get out of it, you just have to get over ‘em ... !” She sees the younger generation struggling in part-time jobs and school, and Patty has no secret formula for success for them, except “are not old and weathered and wise” like her yet. Friends asserted early in her life that she would never be able to go to college and that there were things she could never do. But Patty did “not believe in the word never.”

Earning a PhD in Anthropology and becoming a professor at a university at the age of 58 may seem daunting to the average person, but Patty finds this future of hers

invigorating. It is as though she has been let loose wherever she would roam. One reason she chose this field was because social work would have “destroyed” her. She would have wanted “to take everyone home with her and care for them, but ... it will hurt me too much.” As she rubbed her palms together in a symbolic gesture of the perfect fit, Patty shared her innermost feelings about the Anthropology field. Anthropology is the “peaceful moment after orgasm, a solar eclipse, a world without earthquakes and death,” where everything is perfect right here. She dreams of creating urban gardens and merging culture and art. As she leaned back and pointed her finger to the ceiling during our interview, her “biggest” dream as an anthropologist is “way up there with comets and stuff,” an eco-center in the inner city near her home.

During the many tearful moments of our interview together, she let me know that her life has not been about the abusive relationships, but her children, and any decisions made were meant to form a good example for them. However, Patty felt like a failure to her dad when she chose not to go to college, and does not want her children to feel the same if they choose to take ten years off school to discover life. She wants her kids to know whatever they “get dumped with” they will need to “... just get up, don’t keep laying there.”

As I sat with Patty, her short sleeved shirt exposed the tattoos that were for the most part positioned on her arms and neck. What was the story behind these tattoos? As she described the etchings on her body, I saw a crossing over and a loyalty to her past. They were symbols that became touchstones to remind her of the many paths she has taken. One of her first tattoos was that of a bulldog on her arm; a depiction of Seth. In a defiant answer to her inquisitive friends as to why she didn’t cover up the tattoo, she said: “This is the story of my life, so why would I take it off?”

Pointing to each one, she told me the story of the remaining tattoos: a pentagram with a triple moon and goddess, representing her Wiccan ideals; a set of wings on her throat, designed by her son, depicting freedom; a lotus flower in the middle of her chest signifying rebirth; and an Adinkra African symbol meaning “Love never gets lost on its way home.” She then asked me to help her pull down the back of her shirt exposing the “best one”. The words *Love Conquers All* was tattooed on her back just below her neck. This one was done after Seth went to jail. As she sat back down in the library study room, she said: “It doesn’t just mean love ... it’s love of family, community, humanity, your children, your friends, but most of all it means loving yourself and *that’s* the hardest one ... the biggest one.” The tattoo is there to remind her of her ongoing challenge to love herself. The words will always have her back.

To represent her evolving life, she plans on erasing the arm tattoos. New tattoos are being created by her son partly as a symbol of his emergence as an artist. The tattoos will depict the strongest elements of her personality on one side, and the deities, Nuit, Ishtar and Oya, on the other. Her two brothers and sister have also agreed to get tattooed and have chosen a 1964 black and white photo of their father in wartime Saigon—a James Dean look-a-like with buffed arms and coiffed hair leaning on his motorcycle. As Patty spoke on the phone to her affluent brother, a Montana ranch owner who had always seen her as the deserved one, he asked her how it felt to be a “bad-ass Bradley” again after all she had been through? At that, she responded with the idea to tattoo that “bad-ass” statement below the tattoo of their dad. It was this tattoo that would connect them through time and space as family.

Her sister, a retired fifth grade teacher and her brothers are “insanely proud” of her new choices, while her parents advice has provided her with the incentive to



continue to move forward. Her dad's opinion was "big" as he told her "ya' know honey, I'm really proud of you." Patty, using her hands as if praying, said: "I know I didn't always make him proud." There were "crappy relationships" and "crappy decisions" that she believes disappointed him greatly, but she feels he loves her unconditionally regardless. He has become her rock. Her mom who "loves differently than other people," was able to tell her in the only way she could that she 'did not believe she would do it ...,' but adding later: 'Nobody can make you do, be or feel what you don't want. Living well is the best revenge.' Patty, through her own life experience, considers revenge as "the revenge you don't need ... I don't need revenge ... I'm good."

Patty's "journey," as she calls it, is a life that no one would have chosen. She believes her hard lessons have been learned and it is time to get organized to do more with her life as she moves beyond her past, eager for her future. She is still in school, working in the GED program, and speaking at organizations that house abused women. She believes she makes a mark on her children every day, but wants to do work on a global scale as part of a larger world community, not just the box she has been put herself in. She speaks to the many years of her life in terms of "the biggest thing you can't forget, is how far you've come. You can look as far back as you want as long as you don't go back. My life is good."

Because Patty believes in some form of reincarnation, she sees herself as an old soul who has come to learn a little more each time she is here. In this lifetime, she describes a life as "the journey, a chariot ride and everything that comes with it." Her goals will happen when they happen. Life is learning about oneself and passing it onto others, not just the knowledge from books and street-smarts. Patty strives to be unafraid to speak her mind and acknowledge her self- worth. She has had to "hold on

for dear life and grab the reigns” of her chariot without giving in to her own despair.

Attempting to include her family in answer to my question *what is a life*, she revealed that—all the “jerks,” the “blood,” and the “chosen”—were her life.

~

Patty is a reminder of how others stigmatize the poor and disenfranchised: women in abusive relationships, those accepting food stamps, state aid, and women with “too many” children. Such stigmatization does not help, but further hinders a person from progressing in a society that sees abuse and poverty as someone else’s responsibility. But why does one life have such adversity, while others do not? Who’s responsible for that life? Is it true that one’s own adversity can bring understanding to others’ lives? Without similar circumstances are we at all able to become more aware of what others are going through? Or do our own adversities just cause us to become bitter, to want to forget our past, and hate those who remind us of who we might have become or who we would never want to be? I believe it is our fears that keep us from others pain and suffering, so much so, that we deny help and understanding for those less fortunate. What kind of life is that to live? As I read Judith Herman, I thought of Patty:

The survivor’s shame and guilt may be exacerbated by the harsh judgment of others, but it is not fully assuaged by simple pronouncements absolving her from responsibility, because simple pronouncements, even favorable ones, represent a refusal to engage with the survivor in the lacerating moral complexities of the extreme situation. From those who bear witness, the survivor seeks not absolution but fairness, compassion, and the willingness to share the guilty knowledge of what happens to people in extremity” [1997: 69].

Patty's choices were carved from this past making healthy choices much harder. How are choices made? What happens to choice when someone comes from a damaged past that spreads like lava through many years of one's life? As Sperlich writes: "Traumatic events of an interpersonal nature—childhood maltreatment and intimate partner violence—are the most frequent causes of long-lasting emotional, physical, and interpersonal loss of well-being for women" (2008:xiii).

Patty appeared to have had life and death situations that prompted dramatic choices that moved her life in unknown directions. Each time, though, there were patterns that had not yet been broken. Experiencing emotional and physical breakdowns after putting herself and her children in unsafe situations warranted action in order to stay alive. But each time Patty was forced to make choices that in themselves sometimes created more instability. Patty eventually became more conscious, owning her choices, not only as an act of survival, but as a choice to not repeat the past. Patty's life choices can be described as Kleinman writes:

There is a powerful, enervating anxiety created by the limits of our control over our small worlds and even over our inner selves. This is the existential fear that wakes us...with night sweats and a dreaded inner voice, that has us gnawing our lip, because of the threats to what matters most to us [2006:6].

In the end, even though Patty came from a home with a mentally ill mother and a series of abusive partners, she did manage to make some very good choices. Accepting her reality in the "ghetto" provided a sense of belonging and love that she had not been given through her abusive relationships. Alice Walker gives a life like Patty's dignity and purpose when she wrote:

And yet, now that I am older, less easily frightened by images of poverty, now that I know poverty can also contain richness—deep friendship, for instance, or a faithful, devoted love—I wonder more than ever about the inner life of those who have been up and now are down. There is always the outsider’s look at an impoverished life: it seems pitiful, a waste, a shame. Yet seen from within the poverty, perhaps a different reality might be sketched. A reality of lessons learned the hard, hard way that lessons are learned. Perhaps to finally know one or two true things about life makes up for the lumpy bed and chilly solitude. (2000:13)

And as Patty grew and made the choice to be more conscious and aware, her choices matured and mellowed. College became for her a ritual place where her traumatic life events could be given context. It became a right of passage where she let go of the past and started looking forward to the future. Patty was given the needed confidence and chance to see her life through the many other lives in her work in the GED program and the students in her courses. School had become another community where she could explore what matters most to her. Her past choices have been a waterfall of unfortunate events, and now, able to walk around the slippery cliffs to the other side, she is reestablishing her sense of self and family. It is nothing but miraculous.

~

## Tender Soul

*“I’ll just put it this way...God spoke to me.” ~ Henry*

As he rolled his backpack filled with books my way, I knew I was in for a treat. Henry, a short, stocky, 77 year old African American man, was wearing a Disabled American Vets cap over his white pin-curled hair. Hearing aids in both his ears and wearing a community college sweatshirt, he greeted me with a big smile and a strong handshake. Placing his cell phone back on his belt loop, he told me he only had a short time before he had to pick up his daughter whose car had broken down. As I setup the recorder, his eyes, framed with brown, thick, wire-rimmed round glasses, looked down at his strong weathered hands clasped on top of the table. There is something about aged hands with all their wrinkles and bent joints that touches me—the time that has passed, the hard work done. They reveal a life, a long life and I was fortunate enough to be able to lay witness to Henry’s.

Henry’s story is one of discrimination, but also love and resilience. He allows one only a peek into those many years of inequality and injustice imposed on him. But his unexpected return to school reveals some of those same experiences. Henry’s story is

about keeping ones humanity through strength and love, despite his frailties and flaws. It shows that being a human being is ultimately what is most important. Finding beauty behind hatred and love inside anger is what his story gives to us.

This chapter devoted to Henry went from one creative exploration to another as I tried to find Henry, while editing down the original transcript for readability, much the same way as Studs Terkel's book *Working* (1974). Throughout the interview his responses were touched by a poignant humor, full of laughter, yet also reflecting a sadness, and also a sense of healing and understanding of his life. His words, spoken as he chewed gum, were strong, and his light and respectful personality beamed through the transcript. "The purpose of bearing witness is to motivate listeners to participate in the struggle against injustice" (Behar 1996:27). This is why I chose to give the reader a glimpse into Henry and his own words of struggle and hope.

~

~      *Childhood*      ~

Well I can tell ya' I was born in Boston, Massachusetts in the 1930's, 1934 to be exact. I was one of nine children. I had eight brothers and one sister. And both my mother and father were born in Massachusetts.

Growing up in the Boston area at the time we had integrated neighborhoods because everybody was poor in the 1930's so it had not yet become a ghetto. Both my mom and dad were high school graduates. College didn't happen for them because they were busy raising all those kids they decided to have. I was the middle child. My sister was the second born and my mother had seven boys right after that.

Childhood was eventful in the fact that we were black and there was racism and issues like that. Schools were integrated at that time. We were living in an area before all the flight, the white flight. *Everyone* was poor then. In our public school systems, where we went, there were no black teachers at all. They were pretty good though.

After the Second World War when things began to flourish and people began to make money and get different jobs and better jobs and all, they moved away, and this area became a ghetto. Then people moved up from the South.

The most unfortunate event was my mother died. I was 13. She left my father with nine children to raise and it was difficult. We got split up all over the place amongst relatives. I went to live with my grandmother along with one of my brothers. Some others went to live with aunts and uncles throughout Massachusetts.



It was kind of difficult, not only did we lose our mother, that was devastating, 'cuz I was really happen by then, but we experienced...some segregation. If you were to go outside in an area where you lived, the police may have come up and asked you why you were there.

As I got older, I felt uncomfortable if I would go downtown and ride on the train. I would feel the pressure of maybe sometimes being the only black person on the whole train, these were transit trains. I would have to get off at certain spots 'cuz the pressure would be so great. I'd get off and wait and catch another one. Those were the kinds of things we were experiencing.

By the time I got to be 17, I went into the Army. In 1950, the National Guard were called up [for the Korean War] and there was a black outfit in Massachusetts.

So my father...living somewhere with his girlfriend in a rooming house...brought me back to where he was. I was staying in a room with another one of my older brothers and he said to my father, "this is not a good place for him." And he said "what we need to do is sign him up and let him go into the National Guard." My older brother was a member there, my uncles were there, my cousins were there. I had a lot of friends that were in there. So my father signed the papers and I went into the Army. I went to Wisconsin for a year and the next three years in Germany.

~      *The Army*      ~

First of all I was going to make a career out of the service. I had gone to some switchboard school. We were in field artillery and I learned about that and I learned about wire, how to lay wire, and how to hook up communications.

I had suffered all manner of stress and racism in the Army. In 1948, Dwight Eisenhower was ordered by President Truman to integrate the Armed forces and that's what they did. They took half from the outfit I was in and sent me to an all white outfit and took half from there and sent them to the black outfit. It was very crudely done early on and, *Lord* we suffered! The outfit I went to was from Oklahoma and I'm from Massachusetts. They weren't used to being around blacks. They didn't wanna be around them, so I just had all manner of hard times.

They didn't recognize me as even being a person. I would go to bed and get up the next morning and get dressed up like I was supposed to. I would come out and fall down and no one would say a word to me. They wouldn't speak to me. As if I didn't exist. And I was qualified, much more qualified, than the guys in that outfit was. Many of them couldn't read or write or anything. I had made rank and had gone up to being a corporal. The next step was to be a sergeant and they put the papers in to promote me, but the ranks got frozen.

I went to the staff First Sergeant and I said, "What is it that you want me do?" And they said "Anything you want to do." Now you don't do that to a soldier, you're not just there on your own. That's crazy. So I said, "I should be doing this job here because that's what

I've been trained to do." He said, "Well we have someone else doing that." I said, "Well he doesn't have the rank. He's just a private. I'm a corporal and I should be a sergeant." He said "Do whatever you want." Then I asked to see the lieutenant and I went to see him and he wouldn't take any responsibility at all. He said "You need to go see the Captain."

I went to see him and he called me the "N" word when I went into his office and saluted him. He said that he was not going to promote me to anything. That I needed to just go back out there and do the best that I could.

So I left there...to a small town in Germany which is near Berlin on the border and we were there as the first line of defense. The Russians were on the other side in East Berlin; we were on the West Berlin side. They had a place in Munich, Germany that was a school for non-commissioned officers. They had this Caucasian guy on the list and they scratched his name off the list and put me on the list. That meant he was sending me through. Which for the most part would be something that people would say 'oh that's great! That's wonderful.' But their motives were not that because once you go to this school, if you flunk this school, they take your stripes away from ya'. If you go to the school and pass, they promote you to the next level.

So they put me on this two seated plane — one for the pilot and one for the passenger, me! With no top over it! I was only 18 at this time and I thought they were going to put me in the plane and then dump me out of the plane on the way to Munich. That was my thought process! I'm just frozen on the seat. They had *drops*, not bumps, and he would

say to me are you still there? He was a young guy and was concerned about me. So he flew me into Munich.

I went to school. And you have to have uniforms, one to work in, and one to dress in. You gotta have everything—your bed, your towels, your clothes, your toiletries, everything has to be setup and it's all gotta be *new*, the one that's on display when they come through for inspection. And then you gotta have one that you *use*. The first week I was okay and the second week I was okay, but then my money ran out. So this guy, this sergeant, is coming through for inspection and he says, "When we dismiss I'd like to see you."

He said "Your stuff, your clothes are wrinkled, your toothpaste and stuff is almost gone...what's going on?" I said "I don't have any money." He said "Why don't you have any money?" And I said "They didn't pay me." He said "Really?" I said "No, I haven't been paid." He said "Okay." What they had done was that they had said they lost my records...he said, "Oh, okay, that's what they said, huh?" He was from Georgia. I thought, boy, I'm really in trouble now 'cuz he's from the South.

He told me that he would take care of me. He would give, now this guy's white now, he said he would give me the money, he would take care of all my needs until I got through school and then if I would send him the money back...I said "I'll send you back the money." And he did exactly what he said he would do. He gave me the money and I passed.

But I did very well at the school and then I went back. I had to go see the same old Captain, so I went into the tent and I had my diploma and I salute him. He said, “It doesn’t make any difference, it doesn’t make any difference at all.” They paid me all the money that they owed me for three months. After that happened, I went out with one of the guys and got drunk.

And when they brought me back, they brought me to his tent. He said “Well I gotcha. I’m going to have to take your stripes from ya’. I can bust you now.” I said “That’s true, but you gotta give me a transfer, I don’t have to be in *this* battery here. I’ll transfer to another unit.” He said “Okay you can do that.” I knew that from reading the regulations manual. And when I was 20, I decided I was getting out of the service, I wouldn’t have anything to do with it.

~      *Back Home*      ~

I got out of the service and came back to Massachusetts. A friend of mine was working at the State Mental Hospital. I went to work first of all in the linen distribution room, she got the lady there to hire me. Then I left there and I became a nurse’s assistant. A psychiatric aid is what they called them. I went to work there and I decided to go to school. So I worked midnights and went to school during the daytime. Back then you can go through nine grades then the other three through high school. So I hadn’t graduated from high school. So I worked there for a while, but then I left [and quit school].

My life was kind of raggedy. My mother was dead, and my grandmother while I was in Germany, passed away. That was another hard thing for me, and I had to find a place to live. I went and found my father and said we needed to get our family back together. So we had brothers in different places. One had gone into Army and was out, one was at New York University. I had one brother in jail and we got him out. He was a juvenile. My sister also came back, she was pregnant and she was trying to hide out. I went and got her. She...had a guy who wanted to marry her but she didn't want to marry him. So she had this child and we got a house with my father. My oldest brother stayed in the service.

Boston was very segregated at that time and you couldn't get a job at the telephone company, you couldn't get a job at the electrical company, you couldn't get a job here, there, here...It was subtle, they would have it in the paper and when you went there they would say it was filled and it wasn't. I applied at the post office because the post office had a deferment for veteran's...ten point deferment so you could take the [civil service] test. So I passed the test and began working for the post office.

I met a young lady that came from New York and we married and we had two girls and that lasted about four years. I wanted her to stay home and raise our children 'cuz that's what I was raised with and I thought that was the best thing, but she didn't want to do that. I wasn't old enough or mature enough then to understand that she didn't wanna be a mother in a home, she had worked. I didn't care about that, I was stupid. She wanted me to change jobs, I could still work for the post office but transfer to New York, but I didn't want to live in New York.

New York was fine, but my brother who was the leader of the family, had died who had been living there. Lordy, it was tough, first my mother, then him. I was 22. It was a very difficult time and especially for me.

[So] she took the two kids back to New York with her. I let her go. It wasn't one of the knock-down, drag-out things at all. But she did say I could see the kids, but when I went there to visit she wouldn't do it. That's when I learned there were different laws in different states.

~      *Personal Transformation*      ~

About six to seven years later, I was still working in the post office and suddenly, and I'll just put it this way...God spoke to me and I turned around 'cuz I was going along with everyone in our community, and back in those days they smoked, got drunk, drugs, the whole bit. It's a deep experience, I'm careful when I tell people. I was getting up for work one day, I was working midnights, and I was all depressed and I was into alcohol and all this stuff. I had got into my car and I had made a decision that I was going to ram my car into these girders that we had in Boston, these trains ran over these girders. I just got into the car and I was headin' to do it.

I heard this voice say "that's not the way, take your foot off the gas," and I did. I thought there was someone in the car. And I looked in the rearview mirror and I didn't see anybody. I thought, oh my goodness they're hidin' in the back seat. So I pulled the car over. I went around and looked in the back seat, and low and behold there was nobody

there! Then I was really troubled, my mind was running with “what’s going on? I’m losing my mind.”

I drove to the post office. I was working where you threw bundles down and you throw ‘em in these bags, tie ‘em off and throw ‘em down the chute. I was down there working away and I’m trying to shut this noise off that’s goin’ on inside my head and the supervisor said to me, “go and sit down over there and take a break.” I said, “It’s not break time.” I said “ya’ know I need to keep busy.” He said, “you are busy enough, go and sit down!”

I went over and sat down and I looked across the aisle and there was this guy over there throwing mail, and I heard the voices again say, “go over there and talk to that young man.” So I get up and go over there. I was trying to talk to him about men things, about girls and those things and he said “I’m married.” I said, “but there’s a lot of women out there ...” and he said “I don’t care about that” and I asked him “why?” He said it was because “I’m following God” and he said “would you like this [bible] tract?” And he brings this tract out of his pocket. He gave it to me and then he told me he was going to come by my house and bring this book to me.

He came the next day, but I was sick as a dog. I was living in a rooming house. He said he was trying to come there, this was in the winter time you know, but his brakes got frozen and he got out of the car, knelt in the ground praying, and the break came loose. Of course, he’s telling me stuff I don’t know anything about and this sounded weird to me and I’m “what’s up with this?” He said he wanted to come the next week and take me up to meet his wife...I said “okay, I’ll go.” But when he left, I called my brother and I



said “you *be* here because I’m not goin’ up there with that guy by myself.” I had been down on Christianity because of its racism and I didn’t know anything about it.

He did come the next week and my brother was there with me. We met his wife and his children and they seemed really nice. In the meantime, the tract he had given me, I had read the tract. And it was called, *God’s Love for Man*. And I thought this is the first time I’ve ever heard God lovin’ man. I heard that you have to love God or he’d hit you over the head with something. It was a different understanding, all of it. So I sent away for the tract for bible lessons.

Eventually, I called him up and asked “where’s the church?” It took me three times to get out of my car. I went, turned around, and went back home. I didn’t realize it, but I was being resistant by forces that did not want me to go to church. It would change my life. So the third time I went. The first guy I met was my [future] wife’s brother and I didn’t know them at the time. He was just out on the porch. There was a guy that used to come into the post office and we talked. He had never told me that he was a Seventh Day Adventist, or he was going to church, but he was a really nice guy, I remember that. He saw me coming to church and oh man! He told them I would like to join the church. And I said oh my goodness. And I was sitting in the back of the church and they introduced me. I stood and thought, now you’re it! They’ll embarrass me and I’m never comin’ back here again! But I did and I kept comin’ and kept comin’.

About eight months later they baptized me and I’ve been in the church ever since. I joined the Seventh Adventist Church. I met my wife there, a girl from Alabama. I told her “the Lord saved you for me!” I was working at the post office, but because of reasons

to go to church from Friday night to Saturday, I had to quit. I went back to the state hospital and I worked there since it would allow me to go to church on the days I wanted to.

~      *Transitions*      ~

Before we got married, I had to pay all them bills we had with this other wife and children. So I went to get a part-time job. It was an out-of-state contract management company that would do the housekeeping in hospitals. So they hired me as an employee and two weeks later they put me in the management program. And they sent me to St. Louis, Missouri at the university hospital there...to help out. They asked me if I wanted to ... manage one of their hospitals.

I was going to say no, but the girl I was marrying, she came from Alabama, and she didn't like Boston anyway, so she said, 'Yeah tell 'em you'll go!' So three days before we got married, they told me they were sending me to St. Louis. Our two children were born there, a son and a daughter.

The company moved me then every two to three years: St. Louis, Omaha, Portland [Oregon], then Houston, Phoenix, Chicago, and then here to Michigan.

We ran into racism when we moved to Michigan, too. We'd always rent a place since we didn't know how long we were going to be there. We didn't have any money anyhow, we never did and we still don't. We've been married for 40 years and we still don't have any money! So we tried to rent a house in one of these towns here, and they said it was rented, but it wasn't. But another white fella working for Ford had bought some

duplexes and we saw it [an ad] and called him up. It's funny how these things happen ya' know. I'll never forget his name. He leased the place to us. We bought a house and we're still living in the same house in Pittsfield.

Now you see a local Michigan hospital contacted our company and said we would like you to come over and take a look at taking over our housekeeping department. They asked to interview five managers from around the country. I was one of them. So I went to work there for eight years on the hospital campus. It was a blessing for me 'cuz my kids didn't want to move anymore.

Then they laid me off. I got caught up in this political thing that they do. I was 62 at the time. I had eight years and I needed two more years to get retirement, but I understood. That stuff went on in hospitals and it still goes on!

After I left there, I didn't want to have to go back to work unless I had to go to work, and I've been disabled anyhow from the service. I have 40% disability for my back. I have other disabilities: My ears, that's why I wear hearing aids, stenosis of the spine, sleep apnea. I had enough issues and I know nobody's going to hire no black manager who is 60 some odd years of age, and when I went to one of those employment sessions I said no to that.

I decided one day to go down to the VA and I have these claims in to see if I could get declared unemployable. If they categorize you as unemployable then you get 100%. My wife retired because of all the political stuff going on in the office and she thought they were going to get rid of all them. She was right. Fortunately for her she had the ten years in that was required to get retirement.

This counselor she's so nice. She said, "Well ya' know, I'll send a guy out to your house and he'll test you to see if you can go to school." I said "What? Are you crazy? Do you know how old I am? I don't want to go to school." She said, "Well let the guy come out and interview you and then we'll talk about it after." She said "You can't be declared unemployable unless you have 60 to 70% disability and that's going to take awhile." And she was right.

So the guy comes out and tests me at my house...and I go back down for another meeting with her [at the VA]. She said "You're good for human services." I said, "Well what's that?" And she said "Social work and stuff like that." I thought that was interesting because when I was young, I wanted to be a social worker. "But I don't want to go to school," I said.

She said, "We pay for the school, we pay for the books and the supplies, and we pay *you*." And when she said that, I said "You pay *me*?" "Yeah, we give you some money." I said, "Well that's another story!" She said "It's just like a part time job."

People don't realize what happens when you get older. Your cognitive responses aren't as quick as they used to be and I'm thinking, oh my goodness, I'm going to be over there with all these kids and I said "how in the world am I going to keep up? I'm limpin' now as it is, my backs hurtin', I don't even get a good night's sleep. How am I going to stay awake?" All this stuff goes through my head. But I said, "Okay, let's try it."

About a week before I was to go [to college], I woke up one morning and my best ear, this one, (*points to right ear*) I couldn't hear anything out of it. "Oh no, this is it, I'm

through. What's the point?" So I called the counselor and told her. She said, "That's nothing." She said, "We cover all your medical problems too while you're in school. Go over to the VA, they will take care of you." She said "Look, I was 300 lbs. and I ride my bike everyday now, 10 miles a day. I had sleep apnea and all sorts of things." She said, "What's up with *you*?" That's what she told me! She knew how to get to me 'cuz I said, "Oh my goodness, you're right." She said "You can do it" and I said "Okay." So in 2007, I came to this community college.

~ College ~

Before I left Oregon, I just decided one day to go into one of the education places to see about a GED. See what it requires and see what I know. So I walked in and he told me to take the test and I passed it. I asked him if he was surprised...*I* sure was! I went home and told my wife, and I said "I passed the thing," and she said "I'm not surprised." I said, "You're *not*?" It shocked the daylights out of me! I mean I was 45 years old!

It's not because I want to go to school, I don't necessarily want to go to school. A lot of people go to school for different reasons. Do you know what I'm saying? And I'm going to school 'cuz I need money, that's why I'm going to school.

At my age, I'm 77, I'm getting killed by this homework. See, people don't understand when I went to work everything that they threw at me was fine, but when I went home I was home. Now I'm in school. My teachers have been great, I love them. But when I go home, I don't want to fool with them. I have to go home and do homework so there's this

battle going on with me. I want to watch the television or go with my grandkids and do whatever.

So I finished a two year thing [Associates in Human Services] in December and then I was thinking, maybe I can get a job. The counselor said “Where?”

I know that from being a manager not too many people are going to hire me period. Not too many employers are going to hire me ‘cuz they’re worried I’m going to go out on disability and I’m *already* over the hill. Well I thought I could try to get a job at the VA hospital. She said that’s true, but you need to have a Bachelors in order to do that. So that’s why I’m still here.

I golf with Seniors...people I know are saying ‘Are you crazy?’ “Henry, quit that place and come on, let’s just go out golfing.” I can’t golf as easy as I used to. I have to go to class and do homework. They say “Quit that place, come on tell the teacher you can’t come today ‘cuz you’re golfing.” I can’t do that.

Although I complain about going to school at this age, I also feel it’s great. The interaction between myself and the students, it’s just phenomenal. They are so good, I tell you. They help me if I have any issues or questions. They do it, right there. It’s just absolutely amazing.

We’ve got all these people out there talking about kill this one and kill that one and these kids are saying, hey, here we are in class with all these different ethnic groups from all over the world and we’re developing relationships or whatever and they’re telling us to kill them in war?

~     *Life*     ~

Right now life's a little tough because my daughter and her husband, they lost their home. They're back living in our house. When I say it's tough, it's really not that tough at all. My granddaughters live with us and I'm having a ball with them. They're nine and twelve years old. They're like little women and they love their grandfather and they run me all over the place.

And I actually like having them there. We just don't have enough money, that's all. That's the problem, 'cuz I suppose if it was just my wife and I, I probably wouldn't need any more money.

We're happy, my wife and I have succeeded in doing what we wanted to do and that was to raise children, have church, and have them raise their children and they're both doin' it.

Because I'm a Christian, and even before I became a Christian, I believe there was somebody that created all of this. And that it was a process and a journey that people would go through. So I have been on that journey and I have looked at the issues that took place in my life and I had some bumps and bruises and knocked about and racism and injuries and illness and I'm still going strong. And I'm thinking how my mind has changed and how my philosophy has changed, how I believe. And I just love God's creation. I think it's just incredible.

I'm struggling with all these black/white issues and segregation and all this stuff, and every now and then I run across somebody that doesn't fit the mold. And they come into

my life and bless me and bring all things to it and keep me from hatin' 'em. What is goin' on here? After a while I figured God just wanted me to just take people as they are and don't try to put them in one basket. And I don't try to, wherever they come from, whatever they do.

My wife, she came from Alabama now, she nearly walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and she told me about her family and how they lived. It was tough, it was rough, but she's the sweetest person you will ever meet.

I thought, one time I had all this anger in *me* and she doesn't have it and she is so nice to people. She says, I don't care who they are, what color they are, where they come from. I said, "it's amazing to me how you are." She said "well I decided early on that I didn't want to be hateful." So she said "I'm not going to hate people because of what had been done to me and my family." And they had a hard time...but they survived and she survived it. And she's a marvelous person as a result of that.

And, ya' know, to me life is wonderful. You live, and you can make it tough if you want to, or you can try and make it better. I'm grateful I really am. I thank God for what has happened to me in my life. I feel kinda blessed that I have been here.

~



Discrimination and the many losses Henry experienced in his many years shows just how fragile and precious life is. The affects of discrimination have followed Henry his whole life. His story is but a glance into the limited choices that black people face. The death of his mother was a significant event. I didn't have the details as to how the decision to break-up the family was made, however, I know it was not a choice Henry would have made. In a resourceful move and possibly as a coping mechanism, his enlistment in the Army became the place to connect with other black male role models and learn skills that he may not have otherwise been able to acquire. The personnel in the Army had the power, though, to view him through their own racist lens rendering him "unable to criticize his own conditions (Kleinman 2006:25). After being disappointed with the level of discrimination and lack of respect in his Army experience, he sought a sense of structure and brought most of his family back together for support. But, Henry was forced to make new decisions based on the social constructs of the time. Because of the color of his skin, Henry was limited in his choice of jobs, careers, and housing.

A part of Henry's story comes to mind here. Why was an eighteen year old young man afraid of being tossed out of an airplane on the way to a non-commissioned officer's school in Germany? Would a white 18 year old have had the same thought? This example reveals the depth of discrimination and the deep fear that remains as a result. Henry's words reveal his lack of control in making choices for himself. He is unable to do the job he is qualified for and sent to a non-commissioned officer's school in a situation to set him up to fail. As a black young man he found himself representing

his people in a war that may have put pressure on him to live, not just his own life, but the longings of his people over the century (Berger 1984:67). An immense burden with his present and future always seeming so uncertain.

Past history and feelings of identity affected Henry's choices and the roads he took. On cultural identity Stuart Hall writes:

But like everything which is historical, they [identities] undergo constant transformation. Far from being internally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power.

Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

(1989:70)

Henry's choices were positioned in past and present, his history with discrimination, his need for family structure, and faith. What did it feel like for Henry to not have access to a wide range of choices throughout his life? Henry—laid off from his job at age 62 without a pension—is now in college at 77 years of age because he needs the stipend he receives from disability that helps support his daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren who lost their jobs and their home and are living with him and his wife. This is a choice he would not have made. Does it bring up feelings of past discrimination and choices he could not make? Perhaps.

Finally, religious choice has played a major role in his life. Transcending his life and going through a deep transformation both personally and spiritually after his suicide attempt, reminds me greatly of Martin Luther King, Jr's statement: "I'd rather

be dead than live in fear” (qtd. in Walker 2000:1). Henry made the choice of quitting the post office to adhere to the rules of the Seventh Adventist Church, but his choice to be part of this religious community was perhaps a powerful means to construct meaning out of adversity and failure (Kleinman 2006:11). Faith became a haven that may have sheltered him from the lack of choice and injustice he was situated in. And religion “reveals the truth about how easily our sense of comfort and order is shaken and how hard we have to struggle to maintain our identity and cultural worlds in the face of profound suffering” (Kleinman 2006:11).

The doctrine *everything that I’ve been through has made me who I am* served a higher purpose for Henry when he was able to move from anger to love. He was saying if his wife went through what she went through and came out loving those that harmed her family, he could do it too. What coping skills has he had to embrace to deal with his past and lack of choices? Laughter. Henry laughed throughout many portions of his interview, revealing that in the most painful times and in his suffering he was able to create a means to diminish its power over him. Henry still felt regret about his anger toward injustice, discrimination and segregation, but he *was* able to come to a place of peace about his past. Ultimately, it is laughter that healed the powerlessness that he experienced in his past and has helped him reclaim his sense of power and love of life.

~

## The Letter

*“Laughter—there are definitely healing qualities in that” ~ Deena*

We met midday in the chill of winter at a downtown café thinking it would be as quiet as it had been earlier in the week when she studied there. But the espresso machines were loud and working overtime, providing double shots and café lattes for the baristas to sell to the large crowd. Deena’s smile was welcoming, but reserved. She was working at a table among small piles of schoolwork when I arrived. I had heard about Deena from a student and she was very enthusiastic about being interviewed. Standing eye level to me, Deena got up to greet me wearing the colorful striped scarf to recognize her. In the cramped quarters, only two chairs against the wall were available near a plug and my lap became the table for the digital recorder. Sharing her story, she appeared youthful, enjoying the interaction that her expressive hand movements and smiles revealed. Our interview lasted an hour and forty minutes talking about what matters most to her: Her existence, navigating through relationships, and doing work that means something (Kleinman 2006:2). While at the same time, she spoke of the life she longs for on the *inside* which does not always match up with what the *outside* world

offers to her. As we put our coats on to leave, Deena mentioned the therapeutic quality of telling her story, never having had anyone interested in hearing it, and she offered to answer more questions by meeting or by email. We hugged goodbye.

As I sat on a plane heading for a family Christmas visit, I was haunted by her interview. Deena was recovering from breast cancer and her treatments, but she talked little of it and seemed aloof from what she did share about her history. I didn't want to pry too far lest she shut down or open wounds that had not yet begun to heal, so I left it open for her to discuss it further. However, she had not. When I returned, I sent her an email asking her two specific questions seeing if I could find out more about what I was assuming was a life altering event, but I wanted to make sure I wasn't placing a judgment on her that wasn't hers. The questions were: How did your experience with cancer change you..., if at all, and how did those who provided support to you see you? She graciously agreed to answer.

Six days later I received the letter I have included in this chapter. As I read it, I was struck by her honesty, sent her an email of thanks, and put it aside until I was ready to write her story for my project. As the time approached to write her story, I pulled out the letter to get a sense of what I would include from it. As I sat on the couch cuddled under a soft blanket with a cup of tea—my ongoing ritual during this writing process—I read it again. I saw it with new eyes after having my heart opened so wide by so many stories over the last year. Its rawness and beauty, eloquence and provocative nature could not be put in any other words. Wondering what to do, I decided to step into another exploratory realm. What she could not share in our face-to-face interview, she was allowed to do through a letter written in her own time and space within her own zone of emotional safety, unencumbered by coffee drinkers and a recorder. Was it our

connection at the café that may have allowed her to share so openly? Did it give her permission to write without anyone seeing her vulnerability? Or was it just that we had run out of time? This was her own story, her own detailed account that I couldn't touch without lessening the impact her story may have on a reader.

Not only was Deena's body affected by her cancer, but her voice was also. Storytelling may be necessary in order to recover the voice that illness and treatment may have taken away...becoming a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices (Frank 1995:xii-xiii). In telling her story she may help other individuals who are also challenged by their own changing identities and become *valued* by them (Frank 1995:18). The storytelling not only helps Deena, it serves as guidance to others suffering from cancer or other illness and creates bonds between them. Fluctuating between denial and stark reality, she shows us what it means to be human and authentic. Deena's problem solving capabilities had not been able to master the experience of cancer. Feeling lost with the new identity forced upon her, she reached out to old friends to help her reclaim her "old" self. They became her compass.

Deena's fractured self-esteem may have been at play, when she said, through an email, that I could share the letter, but "I do wonder what some of my comments have to do with your topic at hand." After reading that, I thought of Kleinman where he wrote about the "small and forgettable quality of our private lives" (2006:16). The passage brought to mind the significance of being human and how we all have something to offer if we take notice long enough. Deena had something to offer in her candor about cancer and life. "Only by displaying our common mortality can humans accept...mortality as common and cease to fear it, Frank says (1995:121). So I wanted the readers of this work to hear from *her*, not from me, about who she is and what matters to her.

~

*How did my experience with cancer change me?*

I've heard people say things like cancer is a gift, a wake-up call, it makes you appreciate the small things, it motivates you to make changes in your life.

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to buy into this. I did do all these things about ten years ago, when work stress (at least, that's what I attribute it to) led to a slipped disc. *That* was a wake-up call. It did motivate me to slow down, change my job, lose weight, get more exercise, and appreciate things more. And I had a full recovery.

But, with cancer, things are different. I don't know what caused it, I don't know how to prevent future recurrence, I have lots of related aches and pains that continue to cycle back and never really go away. I also have to take an estrogen-reducing pill for 5 years which is supposed to lessen the risk of cancer recurrence but it's causing all sorts of side effects (at least, I suspect this, but no one can tell me for sure if there's a connection). And they don't really have a test that can tell you whether it's recurring. So, in general I'm always on edge with worry. Unlike, the slipped disc, I can never put it behind me.

As I mentioned when we talked, I have often used my passion for museum work and my school work (previous and recent) as a way to feel accomplished, creative, contributing. I thought I could come back to work and pick up where I left off, or even better, feel like I was making a special and unique contribution because I thought people would really appreciate my being back after being gone for so long. But, the opposite happened. I felt ignored, sidelined, replaced, not needed, purposely shoved in a closet, not listened to. So, for the last year and a half, I've constantly gone back and forth between feeling

moral outrage and forcing myself to emotionally shut down. Very unhealthy, but I wasn't able to get out of that loop.

At the same time, my self-consciousness about my hair not growing back (thin, short, and straight – compared to my signature long curly hair before) and other physical things have seemed to bring back all the feelings of low self-esteem that I had when I was a teenager. It's like I lost touch with myself. I forgot who I was. I've felt sub-human, not part of the human race. That doesn't seem to be waning and I can't seem to talk myself out of it.

I thought my classes would help. It's great to get those A's. It's great to have teachers like my papers so much they post them to the class website as a model to other students. It's great to read new books and research new topics and practice my writing skills. But, on the other hand, I've gotten increasingly so impatient with teachers' agendas: some of the books they pick, some of the paper topics they choose, the way they feel like they have to "teach" us stuff. This is why the Master's Thesis idea has become really appealing to me lately. I think (though I may be wrong) that if I go ahead with it (and I already have an outline), it's about what I want, not about what they want.

I think the pattern here is that I always want to feel like I'm moving forward with my life plan (whatever that might be at the moment), making a contribution while I'm here on this earth. Something that's unique and creative. This has become especially crucial to me since I put my life on hold for 8 months during treatment. And I just don't have the patience for anything that's standing in the way of my moving forward. Gandalf told Frodo something to that effect – you should do the best that you can with the time that



is given to you. Doug Fister, a pitcher recently traded to the Detroit Tigers that I've taken a great liking to, refers to "sticking with his game plan." I like that. I've taken to thinking of what I want to accomplish as sticking with my game plan.

Talking to you was so wonderful in December. When these kinds of things happen, I feel like I come back in touch with myself and remember who I used to be. And then I can move forward. I've always felt that I had a lot of determination and resilience. I put all of that into fighting cancer during treatment. But since then I've had a difficult time getting it back and using those character traits to my benefit.

There are some signs that things are getting somewhat better at work. The exhibit planning that I came back in the middle of is just about finished, the team put in place that I felt sidelined by is slowly dissolving, and we're all going on to new work. I feel like my boss is treating me as a more equal player here, that she doesn't feel that she needs to control me, to spearhead my "forced removal" from the team anymore.

Interestingly, soon after I talked to you in December, I was reacquainted with the Enneagram – a personality typing system like the Meyers-Briggs. I had found it useful a number of years ago, but hadn't looked at it lately. I was amazed at how exactly the description of my "type" aligned with the kinds of things I was telling you about my goals and why I went back to school:

*#4: The Dreamer, Individualist, Romantic, Tragic Romantic –*

*Fours are always aware of what is missing, and are often longing for what they don't have. At the same time, Fours are often highly creative and unique, and make excellent problem-solvers since they can always see how to make things better. Fours*

*focus most on connection and feeling. Fours avoid the ordinary at all costs, and seek uniqueness and originality.*

I also found my boss's type in the Enneagram, and understood a lot better why we are always butting heads, but more importantly, why we are always misunderstanding each other's intentions.

*How did those who provided support see me?*

My husband was the greatest support during my treatment and continues to be great support. He had his own bout with cancer (prostate) about 5 years ago, so he was very sympathetic to my diagnosis and needs (he took early retirement after his recovery). Mostly, he was great at logistics (shuttling me) and doing research on the web on my type of cancer (sometimes more than I wanted to know). He did not go through chemo or radiation and there is a blood test that can detect recurrence for prostate cancer. So he didn't have that long period of treatment, or the obvious physical changes like hair loss, or the continual uncertainty that I live with. He has generally been patient through all of my angst, but—between recounting his own experiences and recounting the research he's found—sometimes I'm not sure he's really listening to *me*. Though I'm probably hard to listen to, and I probably haven't given him enough credit for his ongoing support.

My son was also very supportive when he was home. They both continue to assure me that my hair looks fine, even though I cringe when I look at snapshots of me and the flash shines right through my hair to my bald head. Eeks, what a horror! That's not me.

My family (2 brothers, 1 sister and my Mom, all living outside Michigan) and other assorted relatives tried to provide moral support but they had little idea of what I was going through. Only one relative (a cousin's wife) had gone through this and I was never very close to her.

On the other hand, I had a very wide network of friends and colleagues from my many years of museum work who I kept in constant touch with and provided wonderful support. Again, there were some occasional people who had a sister who had gone through this, but most people were clueless – but that didn't really matter because they helped me keep in touch with my “old” self. I have one close friend here at work who I frequently went out to lunch with, and found a wonderful friend in my first creative writing teacher who lives in the neighborhood and we would also go out to lunch. It was great to laugh with both of them. Laughter—there are definite healing qualities in that. I considered breast cancer support groups but I found that they made the cancer too real. What I wanted to do was escape from it, not confront it more.

That's also what makes this hard to write. I have avoided writing all this down. Maybe it's a good thing I did or maybe not. I'm not sure.

~

## It is a Gift

*"The only way I can describe it, is it stripped me raw.  
I had nothing...I was so exposed... ~ Sara*

She was watching Oprah. Greeted by her cat, I stepped into the open living room as Sara, a slender 49 year old, turned off the television. A comfortable, orderly and warm space welcomed me, and the lived-in couch invited me to curl up with a good book. The room was soft to gaze at, just as was Sara's silky, shoulder-length brown hair and pink cabled sweater which softened her pointed eyebrows, weathered skin, and the sadness in her eyes. Seeming a little cautious, she crossed her legs and her eyes filled with tears, and as they met mine, she told me we were meeting on the anniversary of her sister's death. Sara has had many deaths in the last few years, including her own.

As Sara began to talk, I was aware that I had to find a way to separate my feelings from hers; segregate her loneliness and sadness from my own. Even though I don't think any of us has that power at a moments notice, I was stunned by how much I had to stop myself from reaching over and comforting her. Was I sending too much encouragement as her streams of thought grew more intense? I could empathize with her story and the

opposing forces set up against her. Sara's life is finally seeing the light of day and, in brief moments, I saw us as sisters in kind.

Sara was a shy, quiet child and "I was very reserved and stammered" and her family was not one that would sit around the dinner table and "talk about your day." She believes her siblings and herself did not have the skills to talk about what mattered to them or share thoughts and feelings toward themselves or others. It was more about everyday things, the dilemma of survival that mattered most, mostly survival in the face of physical abuse from her father. Sara and her siblings learned from an early age how to fend for themselves and find a way to stay safe so that they did not "rely on others."

Even though her mom grew up Baptist and her dad Protestant, Sara's early home life was not marked by religion or any form of spirituality. She "wasn't so sure what I thought about God, but my maternal grandmother was *big* into religion." As Sara sat with her legs crossed and her hands clasped before her she spoke: "My grandmother, bless her heart, I think she saved me." Both of us had tears in our eyes as she continued: "She spent time with me and valued me. She was the one person that loved. No matter what she loved me...it wasn't because I did this or that, she loved me for who I am." During her yearly visits from Texas, her grandmother would sit her and her siblings in front of the television to watch Billy Graham. This, Sara believes, was the start of her spiritual quest. She realized that this was done out of love, and receiving it fully, it was something Sara needed more than anything. Her inherent curiosity found her going to church with the neighbors and trying out whatever seemed to work for someone else—a creative type of learning and exploration she has utilized throughout her life.

The divorce of her parents when she was ten took an emotional toll when she was forced to live with her stepmother and her abusive father. Her mentally ill mother,

overwhelmed with the responsibility of seven children, moved to Texas to be with her own mother. Had she and her siblings moved three, close to her grandmother, her life might have taken another turn. But when she was 16 and her father struck her again, as he had many times, Sara found the courage to say “It is the last time you will ever strike me” and she moved out from that Northern Michigan working class home to live on her own.

To maintain her emancipation from her father, she used her ingenuity to find a friend to move in with and assistance from high school counselors. She made her own calls to school when she was sick and disciplined herself to complete her school work and graduate. In spite of demonstrating those skills, she did not believe in her own intelligence. Her parents did not value education, and in fact, they never spoke of it one way or another, probably because they too were focusing on survival. Instead they raised Sara with what they knew and what society and culture had taught them was normal for women: “get married and listen to what the man tells you.” With job and college opportunities slim during the Reagan years, Sara followed her then boyfriend into the Army and joined the Reserves and at the young age of 19, she married Tom. The Army was one thing that boosted her fragile confidence. Traveling to Korea, taking college courses, serving as a patient administrator and working in a bank opened her up to new worlds challenging the cultural norm she had been taught. But these norms, and cultural constraints, do not die easy.

Pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Computer Science requires passing Statistics. But when Sara discovered that Tom, confident in math and analytical problems, had a hard time she knew she was “toast.” Her Associate’s degree did not mask that she was “too afraid of failure” and she quit before she started. Why didn’t Tom help her? Did she ask?

Did his own intelligence feel threatened by her? She covered up her insecurity and disappointment by telling herself that “my job is going to be a homemaker anyway, so why get a degree.” Ironically, her fear of failure ended up causing her own failure. Her energy was diverted to typing up essay papers for her husband and supporting him in the completion of *his* degree. The question arises then: Does a society and culture that promotes these female roles contribute to a woman’s fear of failure? Perfectionism can be a natural outcropping of the fear of failure involving the dominant question in Sara’s life “was I good enough?”

After the birth of their daughter, Alisa, Tom’s verbal abuse had made the relationship intolerable. She divorced him three years later and Tom disappeared for two years. Even though she found it okay to divorce, Sara, now in her 30’s, was struggling to be accepted by her parents, an unresolved issue from her childhood. Each day was a way to prove to her parents “that she was good enough, that I could do it, that it [life] was perfect.” She did all she could to prove she was good enough and unwieldy perfectionism was the way to do it. Pressured by the culture she was raised in and her own idea of the model American family placed in her mind, Sara, tried to single-handedly create the “perfect” home, including “making huge dinners,” and supporting herself and Alisa at a full time job that was also “killing myself to prove that I was perfect.” Going “overboard in every area of my life,” Sara knew she was doing too much with too little energy. “I was exhausted,” Sara recalled. Even the way Sara spoke was in spurts and starts and rushed language. As I listened, it became exhausting to take in all that she had put herself through. But recalling my own drive and failure at a “perfect” life perhaps caused me to feel heavy and tired as I listened to her.

This “perfect” life ultimately brought on a mild heart attack. Sara was only 34 at the time and Alisa was only seven. It was a “pivotal moment.” Her hard work, dedication, and extreme loyalty had been signals to her supervisor that she would be able to carry out a two-person position. The day of the heart attack she was alone with an auditor when she felt the onset of the symptoms and drove *herself* to the hospital. As the room filled with her boisterous laughter, Sara said: “Clearly my body said that’s it! You’re done woman!” As I listened closely to her words the thought came to me that opening her own heart to others had now forced her to protect it with more vehemence. During a short recuperation, she alone took care of her daughter and everyday tasks. Sara was forced “to look at my life, what I was doing and why I was pushing so hard and for what?” I asked what kind of support she had received throughout her life and she said: “That’s been the hardest thing...I haven’t. I really have not had support and I think that...it’s unfortunate. I still don’t. That’s what I long for.” But even though she knew how to take “really good care” of herself, eating well and running, the stress of work and the mounting perfectionism had taken the heart out of her life.

As a pattern, Sara had placed herself, out of a desperate need for security, in a number of small businesses run by men who recognized her “weakness in being a people-pleaser and they just pushed and I let ‘em.” It was a pattern she had yet to recognize. One such job was in a windowless basement, with steel desks arranged in rows facing one another, and involved a supervisor with “ADHD and sugar problems who would fly into rages and [had] no impulse controls.” Even though she often wondered why she put up with the abuse, she knew she had to stay in the job for economic security. A couple of events spurred her into greater awareness.



Running to a meeting, Sara's boss grabbed some financial reports prepared by her for some clients without listening to her instructions. When the meeting went badly because he did not heed her guidance, he blamed her, yelling: 'You are supposed to protect me from myself.' Sara flagged this as *another* pivotal moment. She was recognizing patterns in her relationships with male bosses that mirrored her father's abuse. With her hands tightly clasped on her lap, Sara said: "I keep choosing my father over and over again and it's horrible, it's just horrible. I'm choosing these situations and I'm staying in these situations that are clearly not healthy. I recognize them in the pattern, but how do you get out of it?"

At a later time, faced with another onslaught of verbal abuse from the same supervisor, she saw the pattern clearly again giving her the strength to fight back replying: "Don't talk to me like that!" He then immediately asked her 'How much time do you need?' "Need for what?" she asked. 'How much time do you need to find another job?' Sara asked if he was firing her. Instead of answering, he continued asking her 'How much time do you need? A month, three weeks, two weeks...right now?' Sara sat up straight and firm as she reclaimed the moment when she said "Right now." She packed up her things and left. Sara was chuckling and smiled widely as she said: "I tell you, I would've flown ... if I knew how to do a cartwheel, I would've been doing cartwheels out that door. It felt so good. I had just been fired, but it was so liberating." But the pattern didn't end here.

It is just those kinds of patterns that are so intricately woven in one's history and childhood experience that hold one captive for life. But Sara was an exception. Her next "two years from hell" at the next small company where she "cried everyday on the way to work and...all the way home," was compounded by the stress of being rear-ended four

times in only a few months. She had wondered “what is this trying to tell me?” Chronic lower back pain ensued and Sara went to a chiropractor. Lying on the table, nervous and in pain, the chiropractor adjusted her neck carelessly herniating two disks in her spine. The physical pain was intolerable and she was unable to turn her neck for six months. Her life was a routine of senseless physical therapy, job duties, and personal responsibilities. Finally, a neurosurgeon told her ‘you can’t wait any longer. If you get bumped, you sneeze the wrong way, you’re a quadriplegic. You realize this right?’ After prolonged avoidance of the decision to have surgery, the spine surgery was finally performed and successful.

Sara’s life took many turns after surgery. During recovery, her mother died, but her injury prevented her from attending the funeral. Upon returning to work, she was presented with an intimidating official document forcing her to stay with the firm for eight months or she would have to pay back the sick time they had paid her during her time off. Knowing it was illegal, but not having the funds to retain an attorney, she chose to sign it. As things worsened at work, Sara’s father died. It was not surprising when her bosses tried talking her out of going to the funeral. Sara spoke with exasperation: “It was one of those moments where I think I was ready for a nervous breakdown ... because recovering from this surgery ... I’m still in pain, I just lost my mother, I’m trying to deal with this abusive situation at work, they’re harassing me at work and still trying to work me like a dog, and then my father ... they’re trying to tell me not to go to the funeral.” ‘We’re not going to pay you’ was her supervisors’ response. “Money is a really stupid reason to miss your father’s funeral. I’m going,” was all Sara could say. They conceded. Once again, her growing recognition of the pattern helped her stand up for herself.

When faced with the reality of her supervisor's words, "something clicked." Her father's funeral at a lovely southern resort, created enough distance for her to examine the patterns that in her stress and grief she was previously unable to see. Spending leisure time with her siblings and sitting on white sandy beaches absorbing the warmth into her bones, this rare gift from her father, gave her the energy to make some changes. Returning home, and "in total rebellion," she fashioned a strategy to "drift by in my job," take an online college course at work, and ceremoniously leave her job at the exact eighth month mark—without notice. "It felt good. He had treated me like crap for three years and I didn't feel any guilt about it. You can't treat people like that and do illegal things and then want them to be loyal to you. That was my big fault, that I was loyal to people."

*Your rage is your claim on life.* These are words that a dear friend gave to me as their dear friend gave to them. Sara had been "pretty well broken down" and she had originally placed her anger onto herself for taking the abuse and staying immobilized in a way she believes others also feel when they think they have no choice to leave a job without having another. It was "totally a leap of faith for me to quit that job...it was exhilarating, and that gave me a lot of courage." Each escape from abuse had been driven by her unanticipated rise of anger. The choice of feeling anger helped Sara slowly regain a sense of self, confirmed by her worthiness, her strengths, and a "rebellious intolerance" (Hillman 1996:18). Those moments of anger created a shift of awareness and provided the "breaks that were a gift:" A space for personal recovery to build on old lessons. At this point, Sara felt she had nothing to lose and her mindset changed from fear to "what else do you have for me!"

Unfortunately, her sense of freedom waned as her older sister died within a month of her dad and her “baby” sister died about a month after that. As I looked into Sara’s big brown eyes, she said “It derailed me.” Even though she had in the past been able to work through most of the deaths, she couldn’t, even with this time off, continue with school. With hesitation and tears welling up in her eyes, Sara said, “The only way I can describe it, is it stripped me raw, it did...I had nothing, it got me down. I was so exposed. I don’t know how else to describe it.” With all the deaths, the surgery and the responsibilities coalescing at this particular moment of her life, she used her anger again to shift. She explained it this way:

“ ... the stripping down with everyone dying, it took away a lot of falseness because nothing will bring you to reality like death. I started seeing things very differently. What was important to me became very clear, and superficial stuff, that was very clear too. I had no energy for it, I had no time for it...but in that is the opportunity and the blessing to build yourself back up in the way you want to be built back up and you get to leave a lot of that behind. And that to me was the blessing. I got to shed a lot and it gave me the courage to realize how strong you are when you face something like that. There are few things that can stop you after that ... ”

It became a cathartic moment resulting in a death to her old self and an awakening to her own mortality, courage and self-confidence changing her life trajectory.

Sara used that time off to examine her life, to figure out what she wanted to do and *why*. It gave her time to become aware of her hidden beauty and abilities. She started walking, meditating and praying. But she also became stubborn in her all-consuming grief: “I think there’s a point where I had to make a choice to let it go and a

part of me didn't want to." In her mind she thought if she let go that it would mean that it was all right that these deaths had happened and that she was still around and they weren't. Determined to free up that guilt and obstinacy, she had to find something that would bring her "joy." She said "I'm going to still grieve, but I can choose to not be stuck in it." With her "love for little kids," teaching helped her navigate through the grief. Also, a connection with her brother, born with brain damage and "perpetually a 16 year old," gave her an affinity toward special needs children. The fulfillment and rewards of teaching helped her make this shift to substitute teaching and working in special education in the public school system. "I was outside myself and that's what I needed. To kind of balance all that internal work I had done," she said. And it was her determination to finish her undergraduate degree in Business and minors in Computer Science and Psychology that gave her even more confidence: "I figured I was going for so long I might as well make it worth it!" Sara also began trusting herself enough to start her own administrative business. She is able to make her own hours and work out of her home. "I also love my boss, she's awesome!" she said. Humor has served Sara well.

Feeling like an outsider from the rest of the family, today Sara wonders what happened with their shared past, and why "I've been spared a lot of what they haven't been spared." As she asked why some siblings chose the alcohol and drugs, while others didn't, she seems to answer her own question: "I think most of us were dealing with so much...we all made our choices based on what we were taught. You get to the point that you can only deal with your own stuff [your own emotional baggage], you can't help that guy, because you can't help yourself."

Reflecting back to the "courageous" 15 year old she once was, she knows she has spent most of her life in survival mode. Frequently feeling "like I was always waiting for

the next shoe to drop because it was always dropping quite frankly!” To counter her survival mode, she has a daily ritual of seeking whatever gives her the most joy and taking care of what is most important to her. She says “When something challenges me or gives me pause, I look at it and I can either choose it or not choose it and feel safe in that choice. I think I am just starting to feel safe...I can turn things over when it’s too much and I know that I just have to trust that it’s all going to work out because fretting about it, is just not going to help.”

“About going back to life, I mean, going back to school.” Together we laughed at her Freudian slip. But she followed with “I do believe I have come back to life and going back to college has been a gift to myself.” As our interview was coming to a close, Sara pointed to a ceramic figurine displayed on the wall behind me—a romantic looking fairy that could have been pulled from a Waterhouse painting. The wavy hair bordered by hibiscus flowers was donned with a graduation cap and tassel. “She’s proudly wearing my cap,” said Sara. The coffee table displayed a garage sale find—a set of large open hands modeled from clay. She recalls that during her “two years of hell I kept reminding myself that I was in the Hands of God.” Both the God’s hands made at a walk-in ceramics shop by a stranger’s grandmother and a graduate fairy symbolize her intention to seek the good in life. Maybe they are looking over Sara to guide her on her journey to herself.

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As I read Sara's email back to me, she used the word "cathartic" to describe the experience she had while telling her story. I remember wondering if it empowered her to see her life in new ways and identify the forks in the road that gave her the opportunity to make new choices and direct her life through her courage, catalytic anger, and love.

Sara has worked throughout her adult life to break patterns of abuse, using her past experience with her father as her mode to move forward. Her self-esteem was damaged each time she was put in a situation that re-enacted her father's abuse. It leads one to wonder if she unconsciously chose to create or relive her experience of leaving her father as a means of empowerment, even though she went through more abuse to get there.

Judith Herman explains what Sara would describe as her need for safety as a child and how she was unable to create that safety as she aged: "The sense of safety in the world, or basic trust, is acquired in earliest life in the relationship with the first caretaker. It forms the basis of all systems of relationship and faith. The original experience of care makes it possible for human beings to envisage a world in which they belong, a world hospitable to human life" (Herman 1997:51). As a teenager Sara's cry for protection apparently went unanswered and her "sense of basic trust...shattered" (Herman 1997:52). "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life...Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion" (Herman 1997:52).

Always being in survival mode, whether financial or emotional, Sara found it difficult to follow her best intuition. It took her many years to be able to find the quiet space within and without to slow her down. And her lack of family and community support didn't give her a chance to process painful ties to her past, ties that reinforced the initial abuse. Her fears and unconscious choices put her in situations that endangered her physical and emotional health and well-being. As Herman writes: "Fear of conflict or social embarrassment may prevent victims from taking action" (1997:69).

As her act of anger lifted her self-esteem, she became more self-reflective, and used her review of past trauma and choices to strive for safety. She was able to find ways to take better care of herself. Her developing self-reflection helped her to make decisions to transform her life. Simultaneously "survivors who have disregarded their own "inner voice" may be furiously critical of their own "stupidity" or "naivete" (Herman 1997:69), something Sara went through after her many attempts to change her abusive work situations. But, as Sara came to acknowledge her courage and resilience she was able to transform "this harsh self-blame into a realistic judgment...to become more self-reliant, to show greater respect for [her]...own perceptions and feelings, and to be better prepared for handling conflict and danger" (Herman 1997:69). After being faced with so many family deaths and lost connections to the past unable to process them fast enough, she employed a strategy of anger to pull herself out of an abusive situation in the midst of her grief. Even though she was only intervening at the level of "problems that reach the crisis level ..." (Kleinman 2006:6), she was beginning to use her past to bring safety into her present life, controlling situations, *before* creating crisis again. Empowering herself through education and teaching is moving her through trauma, grief and guilt.

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## Old and New

*“... I saw things that I wish I had never seen” ~Mark*

They had linked up with a government convoy when an authority told them the war in Sierra Leone was over except for picking up the bodies, “cleaning up, a mopping up operation.” Because of the assurance that the war was over, journalists, like Mark and his cameramen, decided to go along. But when they approached a rebel checkpoint, and the military convoy continued on, Mark’s driver panicked and stopped the car. At the side of the road there were four kids dressed in military fatigues, t-shirts and carrying AK47’s indicating to Mark that they were not regular military. The driver called out to the kid with a bowler hat, a rounded black hat with a rim that older English gentlemen would wear. “He looked like one of the droogs” depicted in the movie “A Clockwork Orange,” said Mark. The young child “spun around on his heels” and blasted the car with bullets from his AK47. He killed Jon, the video cameraman. And, said Mark, “he put a bullet in the middle of my forehead and I mean, I was left for dead.”

My interview with Mark was the last that I would complete for my thesis and was the first and only one conducted using the online phone program Skype. So after a brief

lag in adjusting the volume on his end, Mark's soft, kind voice came through the speaker.

Mark was born in Montreal, Quebec and used to remember a "wonderful childhood." However, he now questions that happy remembrance, contemplating it anew and thinking, "maybe it wasn't so wonderful." He had a loving and devoted mother, but a father whose main focus was his career, with "kids [that] were in the way." Mark has realized that his father was jealous of him and his sister which put his mom in a "negotiating" position between her caregiver role as a mother and the same role thrust on her by her "needy" husband. I can only assume that Mark's dad was a child himself fending for the attention that children receive from their mother. He had not matured enough emotionally, even though he could perform at work, to be a mature father who could attend to his children rather than be another one that had to compete for the attention of his wife. Mark's father taught him lessons and was an influential force, but not in a positive way. He showed Mark the "wrong way to be," leading Mark to desire an opposite kind of life.

As Mark's father shuffled up the business ranks to executive, the family moved from province to province in a lifestyle marked by the comfort of "yuppy white" suburbs escalating from working class to upper middle class during his elementary and secondary school years. Mark performed poorly with the "very, very dull and dry" curriculum in school and made sports his priority. He had to repeat his senior year, and his poor grades thwarted his desire to attend university. He hopped from college to college and to a "Last Chance University" to acquire adequate grades for acceptance into a prominent university so that he could join his girlfriend on the East Coast of the United States. As Mark rubbed his hands over his face he mentioned that his parents

were “not big on education.” Mark’s trek into higher education met only criticism by his father, whose mantra, even to this day, is ‘I made it where I am without any education at all.’

Through some trials, Mark’s persistence paid off and he followed his girlfriend to the prestigious university where his true love became journalism. He began writing for a local newspaper to defray the costs of tuition, and became editor of the campus newspaper which he “adored.” He thrived in it.

Journalism school in New York was his next stop. His graduate work found him exploring the ethnic boroughs of Brooklyn while covering international affairs during a period of political unrest in Europe and Southeast Asia, as the United States was feeling its own anxieties with the Regan presidency. It was a growth experience because Mark had had grown up in “white bread suburban Canada.” He reported from German communities getting reactions on the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall. There reported from Middle Eastern neighborhoods during the sectarian conflicts and collapse of the Lebanese political system. The Vietnam War fascinated him and he felt privileged as he collected stories of refugees who had escaped from the extreme totalitarian regime of Cambodia via Thailand to the United States. As Mark described his accomplishments, he reflected on his father who was very successful in his career, but “not faithful” to Mark’s mom. The many affairs and job relocations left Mark’s mom without a supportive group of friends. So Mark became her confidant, listening to her many frustrations. As I sat looking at Mark through the monitor, I wondered what kind of stress this put on him as a young man when this would have been a developmentally normal time to separate from her. He had theoretically become a substitute husband. He was also becoming aware of “what it means to be a good person, a good husband,

and a good father.” This helped him to stay committed to his education and his work, which was notably rewarded. After graduating, Mark thought he was “going straight to the New York Times!” fulfilling his dream of becoming a foreign correspondent.

Unfortunately, as it is today, the U.S. economy was in the “tank.” After graduation, Mark was hired at a small circulation, New York State daily newspaper which bored him with city council meetings. He saved his money and quit to backpack to Beijing, China, meet up with his new girlfriend there, and begin a career as a freelance correspondent, a precarious position in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, when journalists who were not accredited with a major newspaper were severely constrained. Luckily, after a short stint with a Hong Kong newspaper, he secured work with an international press agency. Mark’s assignments took him and his girlfriend to India, and then took Mark alone throughout Southeast Asia, including Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Mark “learned very quickly that being a foreign correspondent and having a relationship don’t go hand in hand.” The 90’s began with his girlfriend saying goodbye and his job disappearing via a merger.

Having made connections with another prominent international news organization, Mark began covering a rebel faction in Afghanistan and Pakistan which would eventually become the Taliban. It was a “dangerous and wild time” because Pakistan’s corrupt government was falling apart and Afghanistan was ending a war with the Soviet Union. Once again, Mark had another intimate relationship go sour as his ‘I’ll be back in a week’ became six week forays into surrounding areas for news stories. Mark profoundly and quietly reflected on his inability to be a reliable companion: “So you can see the echo’s of my father where I was putting career above everything else. [I’m] not proud of it, but that was my life then.”

Consciously forestalling committed relationships for the next three years, Mark became the first bureau chief to cover Vietnam since the war. He became his work and was “at the height of my game.” A “workaholic” 18-19 hour day was required six days a week. He started covering “really, really horrible things.” Violence and death were a normal way of life in the field and on one such occasion, he got too close to the brutality. Reporting from a war to rid the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia, Mark was forced into the line of fire. He laid in a ditch for about three hours watching bullets “ping” off the road nearly four feet from his head. “I started thinking this is maybe a bit too much,” Mark said sarcastically. But, unfortunately, as happens to many journalists, he was unaware that he had become “completely addicted” to the adrenaline of the violence. Having come back “enthused and elated and overwhelmed” in his brush with death, he couldn’t continue his work reporting on the “really, really quite boring” communist party which took him away from the frontlines. Being caught up in the middle of the fighting and never “covering war or reporting on war for war’s sake” resulted in a passionate interest in the “plight” of civilians. So he began focusing on another area of interest.

A lot of political instability was occurring within West Central Africa. Mark had his eye on the conflicts in the Congo and Sierra Leone. After appealing to his organization, he was placed on his first assignment in Sierra Leone. “I loved Africa” he said and his life became consumed by it when he was promoted to a West Africa bureau chief position at the age of 30. Although the obsession of reporting on 23 countries with three hour drives to and from war torn areas started taking a toll, he continued. But there appeared to be a turning point that hastened his discontent.

By this time in the interview, I could feel myself fading in and out while making clear attempts to listen attentively to his story. I was feeling overwhelmed by Mark’s

descriptions of the violence and his incessant drive to continue such gut wrenching work. I felt Mark was putting himself in what anthropologist and psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman calls a self-blinding, a type of denial that keeps one functioning when feeling overwhelmed by what one is experiencing (2006:8). *What was it about Mark's life that he put himself through so much?* I was adjusting myself in my chair to get back to his words.

Mark and his crew had stopped at a rural medical clinic where he encountered a little baby, Uru, who had stopped feeding when his mother had been killed by a sniper a few weeks prior. Through my screen, I saw Mark lift his right arm as he mournfully said "This tiny little creature [sat] atop this adult-sized gurney, I mean he was the size of my forearm maybe. He was just starving himself to death day by day." Mark sounded choked up and I suddenly realized the limitation of interviewing via Skype. I wanted to face this courageous man in person. He continued to describe how moved and "incredibly overwhelmed" he was by this child, who was being comforted by his grandmother in "his last hours." Mark drove the three hours back to his hotel and spent a straight five hours in front of his computer. Mark moved his hands in front of his eyes as he poignantly affirmed that "with tears pouring out of my eyes" he filed a story that he hoped would motivate world interest in the plight of children such as Uru. After filing the story, he went to dinner and ran into a friend from the Red Cross. She "callously" told him "oh did you hear that Uru died?" As he looked at me through the monitor, he could only say "[there was] no emotion to it. Just a fact and I didn't want lives to just become facts."

His work lost all meaning at that point and he returned home finding that he was only able to "go through the motions" on his assignments. It no longer meant anything

to him. In 1998, he wrote a letter of resignation and “I put it in an envelope and meant to put it in the mail, but left it on my desk and I don’t know what happened, but it got lost in the shuffle.” Still linked to his contract, Mark got called away on what he decided would be his last assignment. He was to return to Sierra Leone in the middle of a rebel attack on the Capital. Breathing deeply he told me: “Beth, I saw things that I wish I had never seen.” After being airlifted by a military helicopter, they landed in the Capital. He saw nothing but dead bodies. The streets had been turned into morgues. The bodies, being torn apart by vultures, were everywhere as they drove through town. At this point in the interview, Mark apologized for “horrible stuff you don’t need to know.”

He doesn’t remember the rebel checkpoint, the boy in the bowler hat, or the AK47. But the driver “snapped to” and Mark was rushed to a government controlled medical clinic. He rose from his chair during the interview and picked up his book of memoirs, the cover of which was illustrated with his skull x-ray showing the bullet bright white against the black film. It had gone straight through the midline of his brain to the back of the skull. Unfortunately, because of helicopter mechanical failures, 36 hours passed before he was transported to the airport. Mark, left on the tarmac, had been placed in a luggage cart next to the dead body of his cameraman and friend whose lost passport was under dispute by local authorities. Intervention by government officials from the U.S. and Canada was needed to enable departure to a nearby country and onto Europe. In England, immediate brain surgery was performed to repair the frontal area of his brain and he was put in an induced coma until the next surgery removed the bullet out of the back of his head with a magnet. Mark pointed to the hole still visible under his short dusty brown hair. Another induced coma followed, but he came out of the coma as if a stroke victim.

The “tragic part” was the 36 hours left without medical assistance resulting in a concussion, a swelling that “sheered all of the nerve endings off the dura,” one of several layers surrounding the brain and ending with a left-side paralysis. He spent three months in hospital rehabilitation in England and nine months in a wheelchair. Mark’s left arm still lays limp by his side to this day and he walks with a “horrible” limp. Our interview became even more personal as Mark showed me some of the effects of his paralysis. As I got closer to the monitor, Mark was pointing toward the “sloppier” left side of his mouth which droops lower than the rest of his lip because of a dead nerve along the side of his face. He then held up his left arm with his right hand. The fingers of his left hand curled up toward the middle of his palm. “I’m holding it up here and it clenches up and it’s not pretty,” Mark proclaimed, “but I can walk and I can talk and I have all my cognitive skills and memory which is amazing.”

In those three months in the hospital, Mark had “to go from ground zero... ‘cuz everything was lost.” It was the beginning of a slow process of relearning how to walk, write and recover his memory. He noted that “the power of a head injury is just so overwhelming that you wake up every day and you don’t know who you are.” Being in the hospital became a way of life during this time. To test his recovery, the doctors asked him the date every day, a feat of intellect that eluded him until he noticed that one of the nurses always carried a newspaper in her white jacket. He began peaking at the date every day so he could “look like I was normal” to himself and the fooled staff. The memories gradually emerged and “the fog cleared,” and as he stumbled through this lifting fog, “everything was there.” Despite making incredible progress, what he wanted most was his arm back: “I didn’t care about walking... I was a writer and I wanted to be able to type.”



Returning to Canada for further rehabilitation brought his injury into another reality. Many friends came to greet him, but they were “like a funeral procession. Everyone had to come and see me and pay last respects because that kind of injury...you’ll never be the same. If he’s not dead, he’s not who he is.” Little by little each friend who had welcomed him home disappeared from his life. It became an awkward and difficult time for Mark because he was forced to disconnect from them with a defiant “okay fine” state of mind. His sister had also disappeared for a year not knowing how to be with her brother the way he had become. Only one of Mark’s best friends from college, Andrea, stayed the course with him. What surfaced during this friendship exodus, was a struggle between the old Mark and the new Mark. He described each of these Marks’ as different people. He had changed. He no longer wanted to be remembered as the person he used to be. As he brushed his hand through his hair, he was reflecting on his past: “I don’t know how much I liked who I was before...I was a very, very competitive, career-climbing, possibly overly insensitive journalist.”

As his mom took him to therapy every day, an obsession took over his life again. On a mission to gain the use of his left hand, Mark’s therapist worked very hard to help him regain gross motor skills: to grab, toss and catch a ball. As the therapy continued moving at a steady pace, his recovery “saddened” when grand mal seizures stalled the momentum. The use of his left arm was rewiring his brain in a way his brain couldn’t understand. He had to relearn how to do everything with one hand and simple things like cutting meat with a knife were daunting. He jokes that the world is “a two-handed world.” Temper tantrums, one of the side effects of head injuries, also became a part of life and a challenge for him.

Mark began to realize that he needed to come to terms with the incident in Sierra Leone. He wanted to make sure that the useless killing of his friend, his own injury, and the four child soldiers, killed in fighting close afterwards, “were not for nothing.” He wrote an article for an international group that was published in Canadian newspapers. A friend convinced him to make it into something more. So even though he didn’t know it at the time, writing his memoir was a means of resurrecting his memory and giving his injury a sense of meaning. It was a purposeful move to insure the incident and his past were never lost. The process was excruciating. He couldn’t remember the “most basic things.” He would get up each morning and write pages and pages, but unknowingly would not save the file because file-saving was not a memory that he had sustained. So he would write the same passages repeatedly, day after day. His mother, realizing what was happening, began saving the file for him so he wouldn’t feel “inept or emasculated.” After many months of splicing together life experiences and painful memories, the book led him home with the help of his mom...and his right hand.

Rebuilding his life had begun. He was speaking on radio and TV to keep the story from being “brushed under the carpet.” He was eventually granted a Fellowship at a Western university. He loved his work as he focused his energies on studying violence in Africa. But there was a “much more important part” of his life forming there—his future wife, Isabelle. Mark had always been painfully shy, but his distinct limp and lifeless arm made it even more difficult to create new relationships. To feel a “new sense of my body”, he enrolled in a meditation class where he noticed Isabelle. Teacher instructions impeded attempts to talk with her, but after seven long months, he found the tenacity to ask her out officially. “It was very down to earth” Mark giggled, as he described the sentiment of their wedding. They married in an intimate family ceremony overlooking a

valley with the reception revolving around a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. For the first time in the interview, I saw him smile widely as he asserted: “We are the happiest couple I think I have ever met.”

Difficulties with his former employer remained. For fear of a possible lawsuit, his employer “didn’t quite know what to do with him.” So a great journalist that had been assigned “street executions and coups and all the rest in Africa and Asia” was sent covering “local high school football games.” He was writing stories that were written with “I don’t care” infused in every other word. His final decision to quit journalism came when his sense of physical balance in his legs was still compromised. Mark resigned from reporting after being “bashed in the back of the head” by a local TV station cameraman, knocking him down a flight of courtroom stairs. At that time, his former employer only paid out short term disability. “Only short term—more than a decade ago—and I’m *still* disabled!” was Mark’s frustrated comment. He is now receiving weekly workmen’s compensation payments, but only because any settlement “to get rid of him” is linked to an agreement to discontinue all medical treatment. Health insurance in the United States does not cover pre-existing conditions. So Marks injury-related condition, including seizures that can cost up to “eight grand”, would not be covered. “So they’re stuck with me...they may not like me, but I don’t like them either,” Mark decisively spoke.

I asked Mark his thoughts on others’ perceptions of his physical inabilities. He went right to the topic of life in a wheelchair. Although only in a wheelchair for a relatively short time, he came out feeling, as a person, that “I didn’t exist in a wheelchair,” empathizing with those who need one for life. Mark relayed one disturbing story. Once, while living in Canada, his friend Andrea was pushing him along a downtown waterfront

and they decided to stop at a street vendor selling hot dogs. Andrea is not very tall, but, even so, the vendor looked straight over Mark's head into *her* eyes and asked her 'what does he want on his hot dog?' Tapping the vendor on the shin with his cane, Mark blurted out '*he* wants mustard.' I saw Mark lean forward and rub his face with his hands describing his frustration at that time as one of "I will not be dismissed this way." He was in disbelief that someone could be "*that* insensitive." He was realizing that the act of being in a wheelchair creates a notion that the person pushing you has become "the brains" of the physically "unabled" person. Mark was awakened to the fact that people in wheelchairs do not only have physical problems, but they are placed in categories that create "a whole big cascade of issues" that people assume you have, including a lack of intelligence or ability to think for yourself.

Mark also remembers feeling very self-conscious about his "droopy lip", his inability to move his arm and the obvious limp over which he had no control. Now, it is rare for him to pay attention to people who may notice. Even so, he has come to find that young people, especially those of middle school age, can be the most "crass and dumb." He was describing with a continuous laughter that "they'll just gawk, unabashedly! They just stare." Even though this insensitivity used to shock him, it no longer bothers as much and he has the "moxie" to say "Hey kid, are you okay? Wake up!"

The surgical scars also make others uncomfortable. There's a "big, big zipperline scar" in the back of Mark's head. To avoid making people squeamish, he kept his hair long in the back to hide it. Eventually Mark said "I got fed up with it, I *like* short hair." Pointing toward his hairline, Mark also showed me the "faded" scar where his forehead was pulled down for skull surgery. But Skype failed me again. It was a big blur and I felt

disappointed that I couldn't give him an honest reaction to viewing it or a strong description for the reader to understand what he was living with. With his spiky short hair and wise grey temples, he has put the discomfort back into the realm of those who are feeling it because it's "not mine." Mark is "happy with who I am" so he is leaving the work of his acceptance to others, or at least as much as he can.

His wife Isabelle was investigating graduate schools while Mark was finishing a screenplay for his book, about which he chuckled, "don't go looking for it, it didn't go anywhere." They ended up moving to a liberal Midwest town where she began her work. Mark began speaking at college conferences and his confidence increased as scholars encouraged him to continue his work on child exploitation in Africa. Isabelle and her mom had always wanted Mark to return to graduate school and earn his doctorate, but not until these conferences, did he have the confidence to do so. After all these years, he still finds it funny that he doesn't like school all that much, but it didn't stop him from applying and being accepted into an historical anthropology program near their new home.

20 minutes. "20 minutes is the time it takes for a short term memory to shift into your long term memory and solidify," Mark told me. So when he traveled back to Sierra Leone to start his ethnographic fieldwork and research, he wasn't surprised that he had "no recollection...nothing" as his old driver took him to revisit the spot of his injury and the shooting. People recognized him on the dusty street and an old woman invited Mark into her "very, very humble little shack home" to share tea and biscuits. Her telling of the incident triggered emotions within the household, and within Mark, even though he did not recall the story she told. But as Mark was being driven away, he felt a growing numbness coming over him. Suddenly, within a short drive from the streets he had

forgotten, he had the smell of gun powder in his nose and then the stench of dried blood and urine penetrating his senses. He was suddenly flooded with memories. The “heat of the day, the sounds, the panic, the terror” overwhelmed him. He entered his hotel room and in a state of shock, began drinking his first beer in “I don’t know how long.” After vowing to never start again, he put a cigarette into his mouth for the first time since the accident. It was a reminder of the two packs a day that had been the norm during the stress of wartime and the signature burn mark on his thigh from a cigarette that had fallen from his hands when he was shot in the head. Going back to Sierra Leone “really messed me up.” But he feels thankful that he doesn’t remember feeling the terror of seeing the “kid pointing the gun” or the last words “oh shit” of his cameraman who peered through his lens aware of his impending death. It became clear that his work in Sierra Leone was too close to home and he no longer had the desire to collect accounts of victims, but instead he was going to create a story of his own at home.

Mark remains content with Isabelle and their two boys, but getting a university appointment as a history professor is a “political beast.” His “mission as a scholar” would be to educate from personal experience. He wants to use his experience to teach current events and their connection with the historical past, but many departments are looking for “traditional historians.” His life has *become* an education, as trite as Mark finds that to be. He is open to something new every day of his life and not doing so means “you’ve stopped living.” Education also includes instincts. Mark had always stepped into war zones even as his instincts screamed at him to “don’t go there, it’s too dangerous, and you’re going to get hurt.” At the time of his accident, he believes he was ill. Mark was afraid that his colleagues would see him as a coward if he stayed behind; his fears got the best of him and he ignored his gut feelings. He believes that what he

learned from his actions that day created who he is and the way he approaches life. Life is a constant, ongoing education which adds to the essence of who you are. Mark also sees major traumas or adversity as a way to assess what matters in life, which in itself is an education. Learning how to “rise to the occasion or just fold over and say okay I can’t do it,” are major life choices. Mark would rather “hang out” with people that rise to the occasion instead of passing life by.

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Being disabled can leave one in a state of liminality—a place between leaving oneself isolated and reintroducing oneself back into society after an affliction (Murphy 1990:131). This sense of in-between allows other able-bodied persons to create distance from the disabled and vice versa. The disabled have been socially positioned in a form of purgatory. Mark had become the “other.”

Mark’s old friends found it difficult to be with him in that new place. Was it their fear of being with someone who had changed from the old to the new social persona, or was it their own guilt about how to be and act with him? Able-bodied friends may sometimes find themselves walking on eggshells for fear of saying something offensive to the disabled. There is no social handbook telling them what they can and cannot say. Not only had Mark become disabled, but the friendships he had come to know became disabled as well (Murphy 1990:124). To have contact with the disabled is a constant reminder of the fact that having an accident and becoming physically disabled can happen to anyone. The more society can distance itself from this fear, the greater the illusion of safety and perfect health.

Moving beyond that undefined state transformed the old Mark to the new, a journalist to a human being, living as a “Phoenix reinventing itself from the ashes of the fire of its own body” (Frank 1995:122). His reinvention following his massive trauma required him to “reconstruct afresh, tap new power, and appropriate patterns that help define a new existence” (May 1991:22).

However, rising Phoenix-like out of the ashes and rising to the occasion does not necessarily make Mark a hero. Here “the lesson is not one of standard heroism—there is



no victory—but a kind of negative heroism or anti-heroism that may not change the world, but helps make clear to others what needs to change if the world is to be a less unjust and desperate place” (Kleinman 2006:25).

By being more than he has been, Mark *has* risen to the occasion. His strength of purpose and the sharing of his experience—his emotional upheaval and sense of impermanence notwithstanding—become a “quiet liberation” that made all the difference (Kleinman 2006:10). Changing his Self through a suffering few others imagine experiencing, Mark chose to create a new Mark, a new identity. One who not only has survived, but has been reborn (Frank 1995:123). He is witness to how we can live our own lives and define our humanity.

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## *Epilogue*

All people yearn to tell their story; it is a part of being human. Everyone of these interviewees *wanted* to tell their story. They longed to be seen and heard. As I listened to their stories, it seemed that they used them as their chance to speak of their regrets, talk of their accomplishments, voice their opinions, and share their hopes for the future. Their stories were a way for each of them to give themselves a sense of belonging on this earth. There is space for all of us in this universe, and it could be that the people I interviewed, and possibly all of us, furnish ourselves with that space through story.

As I read Charles Taylor's quote: "...as I project my life forward and endorse the existing direction or give it a new one, I project a future story ...a bent for my whole life to come (qtd. in Ochs and Capps 242), it struck me that the people's stories I have witnessed, and wrote, would change over time as each storyteller finds new ways to remake themselves and new roads to follow, creating another chance to tell their story.

Simply telling their stories brought the interviewees lives to the surface. It was a way to acknowledge those who have helped them along the way and given them support.

It was a small way to cleanse their souls of the times in which they felt inadequate, vulnerable and desperate. Telling their story can serve as a means of healing because, as Sara shared afterwards, it was “cathartic” and for Deena she felt it was a “turning point.” It was hard for me to not think otherwise as well. Most of the interviewees shared their attempts to connect to their love of self and their love for humanity. Joe was disturbed by the bullying of children in his youth and the discrimination against native children and himself. The telling of a story seemed to be a way to communicate their sense of self to others and to themselves (Linde 1993:3). As I listened to their interviews again, I thought about whether human beings, in their love for one another, tell their stories as a form of shared suffering. Sara acknowledged how hard it is to leave a job when you are financially dependent on it. Ron’s co-workers at school were in the same shoes as him, psychologically depleted from a layoff and financially stressed. Each connects to others who suffered equally.

Storytelling is a means to recover one’s voice held silent by pain, suffering or serious illness (Frank 1995:xii), as Deena was able to do through her letter. When using one’s own voice to tell one’s story, it can be a reclaiming of the self. Most of the interviewees were grateful for the chance to be heard and lingered in their time with me to continue an “unofficial” interview after we were done. They were given an opportunity to share a life that from the outside may look very mundane, but on the inside is complex and beautiful. For instance, James was a waiter and a tutor, but he was also HIV positive and working on a committee to change how AIDs patients are treated. But no one would know it if one did not ask. After her interview, I received an email from Bonnie revealing that telling her story, and having me there, gave her a means to view her life differently. To tell one’s story can bring one’s life into focus,

making one more conscious of who they are, what they have been through, and possibly where they are going. Dorothy Allison writes: “to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (1995:72). And those who hear, or read, or write the stories become their witnesses.

After telling their stories, themes materialized out of a cluster of interconnections that cannot be separated. As you read through all of these interconnections of uncertainty, trauma, choice, faith and education, it is necessary to understand them as inseparable and the linkages they have to each other as not easily broken. The interconnections or themes provide an understanding of where these individuals came from, the world they live in and who they have become.

Almost all of the interviewees expressed experiencing some form of trauma: Abusive fathers, stepfathers and husbands, war, serious illness, discrimination, locked outside as a child with no shoes in the cold of night, the suicide of a loved one, verbal abuse, school bullying, and alcoholic and mentally ill mothers. There is still much to learn about how trauma affects one’s life, but the one thing known is that it does. As Judith Herman writes: “Trauma forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (1997:52). Ron, who suffers from depression and grew up with verbally abusive parents, was bullied and beaten up by children throughout his elementary school years. He retreated into shyness and escaped through daydreaming and fantasy. As a result, Ron kept putting himself into bullying situations in city positions resulting in declining self worth. Everywhere in his adult life he tries to prove himself and regain his self-esteem. Bonnie’s abuse by her alcoholic stepfather and abandonment by her father at an early age pushed her to find approval from men. Bonnie will not tell her current partners family that she has been

married three times for fear of retribution and her own guilt. The trauma, one way or another, created some form of self-hatred, hopelessness, and fear that followed them throughout their life.

Three of the people that I interviewed have attempted suicide or had a suicidal plan. But the interviewees also left a deep impression on me in their ability to use whatever coping skills they had—Patty’s humor, Karen’s work achievements, and Myles’s spirituality—to accept themselves. They seem to have become who they are through the act of remaking themselves, growing through their trauma and forming an inner or outer sanctuary. Whether it was a faith in a God, a higher power, a wiccan goddess, a “force that drives our lives”, meditation, or author gurus, something provided solace for many of the interviewees. This faith in some kind of entity or practice that brings an order to the universe gave them a path through chaos and a sense of security. In many ways faith became like a father or mother that took them as they were and cared for them no matter who they are. In other words, there is nothing from their past that God or love won’t heal. Bonnie, looking for consolation for her three failed marriages, found God to be a source of forgiveness in which she could release some of the guilt and regret of her past. Ron, angry at Jesus for his painful life, was able to find comfort in the words from his minister who offered “it’s a common thing.” Having a “higher power” in their lives also helped them make and accept their choices. Myles, a social work student, relied on his spirituality to guide him in making decisions about his passion for music and community service. Joe saw God guiding him in his ethical stance for social justice and in his choice of college courses.

Then there were those that had a deep faith in *themselves*. A faith that *they* had the ability to manifest the life they desired. Their faith was in the form of an inner

knowing or power that could change their lives for the better. After making the painful decision to divorce her husband, Isabelle was able to begin taking control of her own goal of finishing her PhD while raising four children. Janice who embraced the emotions surrounding her grandmother's suicide brought a sense of control back into her life and her relationships with her husband and children. This inner faith was a way of developing the kind of life *they* were going to choose, not what anyone else wanted them to do. They trusted themselves to be the navigator of their lives. Like Sara and her evolving awareness of unhealthy patterns, most individuals were required to reflect deeply in order to determine the paths their lives would take. The motivation for their self-reflection was grounded in commitment to change the patterns of their lives, fostering new directions and new life experiences.

All of them, even if forced to do so, were faced with risk. Faith, whether in God or Self, assisted them in their risk taking even while believing in something they could not see or feel. Having faith was a way to take action, saying, to some effect, that they had nothing to lose. For example, James foreclosed on his home, uprooted from Chicago, moved in with his sister, started serving at a restaurant and began college after moving back to Michigan. Then there was Patty who left an abusive relationship, passed the GED and started college. Even with trauma and past mistakes, whatever their faith, in God or in themselves, there was a simple trust, and "basic trust is the foundation of belief in the continuity of life, the order of nature, and the transcendent order of the divine" (Herman 1997:51-52). Faith made them who they are and gave them the strength to make it through whatever happened to present itself in the moment. All they *can* do is go moment by moment.

We all face uncertainty from just being alive. And we need to face it each day as we go to work, go to school, raise kids, and love. But what does one do when uncertainty is thrust upon one unexpectedly? “Life with all its transformation, has restyled us at the core. So what is the core? Who are we? We need to get away from the idea of an unchanging human nature that resists all the myriad changes around us ...” (Kleinman 2006: 17). Even though the interviewees were faced with events beyond their control and the life they were currently living was in jeopardy, each interviewee found specific ways to adjust to the uncertainty of their situation.

Financial difficulties, foreclosure, bankruptcy, and depleted retirement savings, had many facing an uncertainty of their future well-being. Ron, an ex-city administrator and his wife went bankrupt and ran through their retirement funds, while others, like Jack, a 56 year old laid-off engineer unable to sell a depreciated home, stays in an unhappy marriage in order to make ends meet. Ted, an on-again off-again 40 year old musician, was homeless and living in his car before beginning school. Health issues and having insurance coverage posed an uncertainty for many of the interviewees. Being HIV positive and making sure he could have access to his special state program insurance was James’s daily reminder of the uncertainty of life, but he used it to help him work toward his goal of getting a degree. Working part time after four years of searching for a job, Karen took a semester off in her pursuit of a finance degree. She did so despite being faced with financial and personal uncertainty because her husband, dying of brain cancer, is refusing to purchase additional life insurance and has placed her in a precarious financial situation.

Living with the present burden of demanding classes and declining prospects for employment looming after graduation is another kind of uncertainty. Bonnie told me of

a professor who, when she asked for help in her Math class, said she was unmotivated. She hired a tutor to get her a 4.0 to prove to the professor that she wasn't the person she thought she was. Anne, legally blind, is unsure of what she will be doing with her social work degree, but offered that she "just might find a 90 year man who kicks the bucket and leaves her all his money." Then there is Mark who had to downsize and move with his wife and child in order to continue looking for professorships. Joe was unsure of his direction moving him toward Grad school. But, what I found interesting was that none of them touched on retirement and what that would look like. It is not an option for most of them. Henry is, at the age of 77, trying to make ends meet and Patty, at the age of 46, is dependent on the state system that partially assists her and her children. Even though some of their uncertainty came from circumstances beyond their control, there were also those choices, like attending college, that created an uncertainty. They had confidence in their choices, but were also willing to take the risk to fail.

Choices are not always what they seem and some choices are not choices at all. Choices are formed by our past experiences and what worked and what didn't, but not all these individuals had the experience to make good decisions. How could Anne learn about independence if her only role models fostered a dependence on them? Joe was abandoned by his father and started drinking at thirteen dropping out of public school in eighth grade. Many lacked support throughout their lives making them dependent only on themselves. But, how can one make good choices if one does not know how and there is no supportive structures in place to do so?

This is the unpolished nature of living by trial and error. There are so many patterns in life that have a hold on an individual that they can't predict what choices they will make or if they will come out as planned. On the surface, choice seems to be



something people have control over. However, if one comes from experiences of trauma, during childhood or otherwise, as all of the interviewees have, it can take a long time, if at all, to realize how their trauma impacts choice. One way is to become conscious of choices and patterns. But how is that done? Does some singular event tip one's life?

Bonnie had been in therapy and realized how the abandonment of her father has affected her relationships and why her marriages were created to fail. Joe, who figured out that getting the best grades was not the purpose of college, became his best person through knowledge and education. Being conscious of choices is the first step, but not always the last. Once they could understand why they had made some of their past and present choices, they were able to take ownership and make better their choices in order to not repeat the past.

Janice, unhappy in her role as a wife and mother, hit rock bottom after she almost found herself having an affair with another man, but chose instead to go back to school to follow her passion for writing. Myles used his spirituality and connection to his family to ground himself when his life became stressful. Bonnie's mom calls her the phoenix rising since she is always in the process of change, though still strives to get her father's approval. Ron told his doctor he was suicidal and used his time in the hospital to get help for his depression and to work through his misfortunes. And Deena hopes her workplace will recognize her for her hard work. With each of the individuals in this group, there was a constant fluctuation between their past and their choices, a relentless cycle of transformation.

All of the interviewees shared a regret over some choice they had made at some point and had fantasies of going back to change them if they could. Janice had dropped out of school at 15. Joe regretted waiting to go to college because of money worries.

Amelia wished to get back all her time as a landlord after losing her rentals due to the housing crash. However, there were some *choices* made by some of the interviewees that they would never have *chosen*. Their *choices* were based on circumstances that were beyond their immediate control. Fearful of her husband, Patty was raped repeatedly and had four children. Not until she could find the courage and outside help from the authorities could she leave. Ron, laid off from his job at 50 couldn't make any choice. Anne had to choose a career path and education based on her disability. These circumstances formed their future choices. Everyone had stories to tell about the choices that shaped who they were—"good" or "bad." But one of the best choices they made was education.

Education comes into our lives through various forms. Education may come from community college or university, media, nature, grandparents, but to put it in a nutshell, it comes from life experience. Life experience and adversity taught the interviewees how to remake themselves, and some viewed college as a basic step in that remaking. Mark, ex-journalist and now historian, finds beauty in learning itself and the key to a fulfilling life. Amelia, a community college professor, continues her *own* college education reinforcing her excitement for learning and passes this on to her students. Her life experience *is* her studies. For most it is essential to get their degree at all costs because they believe it will be the determining factor in their future direction and career. College has changed the lives of the interviewees and without it they can't imagine where they would be. There's Bonnie who left her husband because he did not want her to pursue her paramedic degree or stay in her Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) job. Ron needed to change careers to keep his family in the state, is grateful to the community college that has given him a new career direction. And Janice knows what her life would

be like if she had not gone to college saying “It would not be a happy life, it would be a terrible life. It’s changed my life and it’s made me look forward to the future. I never thought of the future before.”

Most of the interviewees are living, if not solely, but partially, on loans and scholarships. For some, loans pay for ordinary living expenses and school, while a few are paying for school out of pocket. Ted, met a homeless man while living on the streets who gave him the idea to go to school in order to get loans. So now he’s at community college looking at becoming an anthropologist at the age of 40. In contrast, Henry’s education is paid for by the Disabled Vets of America and Anne’s is paid for by the Commission for the Blind. But it is important that even though money makes a difference in their lives in allowing them to go to college, education also makes a difference in one’s thinking and viewpoint of the world.

Many of these individuals are on campuses with a crowd of young people, taking classes that require cognitive skills they haven’t used in thirty years, and hiring twenty-something tutors. All the books surrounding them are a reminder of what their lives have become. They are asked to memorize data that may go in one ear and out the other or critically think in ways they have not been asked to do in their current or prior jobs. But what education has done, to a great degree, for these individuals is broaden their worldview helping them reflect on their own life and the choices they’ve made. For instance, Joe, a student of social justice and philosophy, says “there is no A in life. It’s about knowing things, but it [education] is more about being something, going through some kind of transformation morally, intellectually...I guess I’m learning to be adult for the first time even with children.” The interviewees were given new broader perspectives that helped them make new and better choices. Bonnie is moving from being an EMT to

a nurse in order to raise her daughter alone just in case her current relationship does not work out. After being encouraged by professors and advisors Janice applied to an MFA program and was accepted, while Deena developed a friendship with her creative writing teacher inspiring her to go back for her Master's degree.

Wives, husbands, partners, children and friends have also grown with them through this process of discovering who they are and they said most of them were proud. But I wondered, as I heard the interviewees college stories, if their friends and family genuinely know how hard it is to be doing homework, writing down every piece of information from lectures, doing work study jobs, and in some cases trying to keep their GPA up to transfer to another college while also raising children and meeting financial difficulties? Can anyone really know?

Culture, politics, and economics transform each of us — if not from day to day, then from year to year as jobs change, careers transmute, families undergo growth and collapse, marriages rise and fall, and the large historical forces that shape the destiny of nations and influence entire populations roll over our lives, grinding, wearing away, shifting, breaking, making us let go and move on. (Kleinman 2006:18)

As I look at the lives of all these individuals, it is nothing but astonishing that they are who they are and have made it this far. I have journeyed on a pilgrimage with all the interviewees. It has been a pilgrimage of shared human experience, of being allowed to journey through their lives even if for a short time. All the themes and the common doctrine unearthed while walking with this group of individuals have allowed me to look deeper into what made them who they are. For once a story is imprinted in time and space, as this one is, one can look back and see who they *were* if they feel lost

again, and also see how far they have come. “What we are to ourselves, then, and what humankind is as viewed in the perspective of eternity can be expressed only in a story” (Olney 1996:44). They deserve, all of them, to have their own story told, and in telling it, know who they are and find themselves remade.

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## Appendix

### THE CIRCUMCISION REFERENCE LIBRARY

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#### DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS, FOURTH EDITION (DSM-IV)

##### Anxiety Disorders

##### **309.81 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

##### ***Diagnostic criteria for 309.81 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder***

- A. The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:
- (1) the person experienced witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of others
  - (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.  
**Note:** In children, this may be expressed instead by disorganized or agitated behavior.
- B. The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:
- (1) recurrent and distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions. **Note:** In young children, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed.
  - (2) Recurrent distressing dreams of the event. **Note:** in children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
  - (3) acting or feeling if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated). **Note:** In young children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur.
  - (4) Intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event
  - (5) Physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.

- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three or more of the following:
- (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
  - (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
  - (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
  - (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
  - (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
  - (6) restricted range of affect. (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
  - (7) Sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)
- D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:
- (1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
  - (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
  - (3) difficulty concentrating
  - (4) hypervigilance
  - (5) exaggerated startle response
- E. Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in Criteria B, C, and D) is more than one month.
- F. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

*Specify if:*

**Acute:** if duration of symptoms is less than three months.

**Chronic:** if duration of symptoms is three months or more

*Specify if:*

**With Delayed Onset:** if onset of symptoms is at least 6 months after the stressor

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