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Old: a Personal Essayist's Reflections of an Aging Adult

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OLD: A PERSONAL ESSAYIST'S REFLECTIONS OF AN AGING ADULT

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This dissertation opens with a critical introduction that examines the role persona, reader, and implication play in the composition of the personal essay. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory is then applied as a tool in an essayist's exploration of how one's communication choices impact life experiences. This section is followed by an explanation of the subject matter of the essays. The pedagogical chapter addresses the author's experience with the student-centered teaching of a first creative writing class, lessons learned, theorists who affected the process, and suggestions for improvement as the author moves forward in postsecondary teaching. The dissertation concludes with a collection of creative nonfiction essays precipitated by the author having entered the young-old cohort.

KEYWORDS: Adult; Aging; Essay; Old; Personal; Reflections

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"What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but for me."

Michel De Montaigne, "Of Practice"

M.I.T.

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CHAPTER I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The personal essay is a genre that "can elicit emotions and bring about an awareness as real and as moving as any play, painting, or musical composition" (Taylor 21). My own writing is grounded in the exploration of self. I am drawn to the personal essay because it is the genre I find most conducive to my writing style, allowing me to speak to the readers in a manner through which they might identify and engage with me. My subject of interest is the aging adult, and this dissertation includes a collection of personal essays I have written on my observations and experiences as a member of the "young-old"[1] cohort. In this critical introduction, I will discuss the following five areas:

1. the role of persona[2]
2. the role of the reader
3. the role of implication
4. the role Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory played in my writing process
5. the subject matter of my creative work

The Role of Persona

I believe an essayist's persona significantly contributes to the credibility of their work. My examination of theorists, as well as essayists, has led me to conclude that the formation of a persona is affected by numerous factors—the period in which the essay is written, the subject matter, the presence of additional characters (real-life individuals), the setting, and the story itself, all of which contributes to the complexity of the persona created by the essayist.

In his discussion of persona, Phillip Lopate addresses the supposed advantage memoirists

[1] Gerontologist Bernice Neugarten, a leading pioneer in her field, is credited with categorizing age groups when in 1961 she introduced the designations of young-old (65-74) and old-old (75 years and older) (190-91).
[2] In this dissertation, I am using the Merriam-Webster online definition of persona as "a character assumed by an author in a written work."

have over essayists. He writes that memoirists have the luxury of relying on a single persona to carry the narrative through to a particular conclusion, "accruing extra points of psychological or social shading from initial set-ups, like a novelist, the deeper he or she moves in the narrative." Essayists, on the other hand, are writing in a genre that by its very nature requires them to recreate, for each essay, a persona, along with biographical background, a process that proves to be "a wildly wasteful procedure, from the standpoint of narrative economy" (xxix). I question the argument that a "biographical background" necessarily plays a significant role in the creation of a persona. In my using Webster dictionary's definition of persona as "a character assumed by an author in a written work," the character's history does not play the same role as one created for a fictional work such as a novel, short story, or play. The character created and assumed by the essayist serves as a means of exploring an issue or challenge. As such, the background may very well prove to have little significance with regard to the end product. We may find that such information complements the message when reading about Cheryl Strayed's struggles with addiction and infidelity, or Harriett McBryde Johnson's reflections on disability, but when Joan Didion writes about coping with the debilitating consequences of the migraine, her life history is not needed to appreciate the power of her work.

In the work of Nancy Mairs and Cheryl Strayed, we see essayists who have created complex personae that offer the reader moving insights into the challenges they each struggled to overcome. With Joan Didion, we have been given a persona that is both analytical and sympathetic. Harriet McBryde Johnson's persona is one that reflects her struggle to come to terms, not with her disability, but with society's perception of her place in this world. This is reflected in her interaction with the philosopher Peter Singer, a controversial figure who advocates for the parents' right to euthanize infants born with a severe disability.

In her essay, “Unspeakable Conversations,” Johnson looks to the reader for affirmation as she struggles to come to terms with her experience debating Prof. Peter Singer at Princeton University in 2002. Singer, known primarily for his position on animal rights, has been met with strong opposition from the disability rights community for his position on the rights of the new-born with a severe disability. He argues that the right to life should be based on the person’s ability to recognize and experience pain as well as pleasure, and to appreciate being present in the world (171). Johnson’s essay could easily be interpreted to represent an issue Johnson had been confronting her entire life, that being her presence in society. The discussions I’ve led about this essay are often geared towards issues such as assisted suicide, death with dignity, even right to life. However, I believe that Johnson has created a persona less concerned with the debate on the value or right to life of those with disabilities, and more to do with her struggle to maintain objectivity and contain her aversion to Singer’s philosophy.

> He simply thinks it would have been better, all things considered, to have given my parents the option of killing the baby I once was, and to let other parents kill similar babies as they come along and thereby avoid the suffering that comes with lives like mine and satisfy the reasonable preferences of parents for a different kind of child. It has nothing to do with me. I should not feel threatened. (507)

Here we are witness to a struggle, not with a disability, but with society’s proclivity to define a person’s identity by their ability or disability. Johnson takes pride in her ability to function in society and is scrupulously forthright in depicting her own physical appearance.

> I'm Karen Carpenter thin, flesh mostly vanished, a jumble of bones in a floppy bag of skin. . . . At 15, I threw away the back brace and let my spine reshape itself into a deep twisty S-curve. Now my right side is two deep canyons. To keep myself upright, I lean

forward, rest my rib cage on my lap, plant my elbows beside my knees. Since my backbone found its own natural shape, I've been entirely comfortable in my skin. (508)

Johnson concedes that trying to explain that she is happy has become a tedious exercise, making her examination of her debate with Singer all the more powerful. It is at this point that I believe Johnson's essay takes on an even more complex challenge—the conflicting emotions that she experienced in conversing with, relating to, and debating Singer. She tells us that she is indeed angry, "shaking, furious, enraged—but it's for the big room, 200 of my fellow Charlestonians who have listened with polite interest, when in decency they should have run him out of town on a rail" (510). We feel Johnson's pain as she struggles to reach the people to whom she must continually affirm her satisfaction with life; people who are unaware that their sympathy, which borders on condescension, actually support Singer's argument. She has created an honest persona that elicits from readers recognition of their own culpability.

Johnson writes in a persona that wants to be fair to a man who has been gracious in offering what she must see only as horrific arguments. "I can't help being dazzled by his verbal facility. He is so respectful, so free of condescension, so focused on the argument, that by the time the show is over, I'm not exactly angry with him" (509). Later, she discusses the reactions of her friends: "I am regularly confronted by people who tell me that Singer doesn't deserve my human sympathy. I should make him an object of implacable wrath, to be cut off, silenced, destroyed absolutely. And I find myself lacking a logical argument to the contrary" (517). She ends the essay leaving us feeling that we have been in the presence of someone who, in her inability to see her opposition as an enemy, feels she has betrayed the very principles to which she devoted her life.

Nancy Mairs, an essayist who also addresses her disability, takes on a persona that is

much more confrontational than Johnson's. In her essay, "On Being a Cripple," Mairs introduces, early on, a persona that pulls no punches in challenging society's use of the euphemisms "handicapped" and "disabled," instead choosing "cripple" to identify herself. She writes that initially she was unaware of her motives for choosing the word but has come to "recognize that [euphemisms] are complex and not entirely flattering. People—crippled or not—wince at the word "cripple" as they do not at "handicapped" or "disabled." Perhaps I want them to wince . . . to see me as a tough customer. . . . As a cripple, I swagger" (9).

While her persona is more confrontational than that of McBryde Johnson, she is similar in her unflinching description of the illness that has left her a cripple:

> [M]y disease has been slowly progressive. My left leg is now so weak that I walk with the aid of a brace and a cane; and for distances I use an Amigo, a variation on the electric wheelchair that looks rather like an electrified kiddie car. I no longer have much use of my left hand. Now my right side is weakening as well. I still have the blurred spot in my right eye. Over all, though, I've been lucky so far. (11)

I see an interesting dichotomy in the persona of these two women. Johnson struggles to come to terms with those who advocate against her very existence (or, at least, against those infants who will grow to be like her if they are allowed to survive infancy with a disability). The subject matter compels her to reveal her frustration, even despair. Mairs also offers an insight into her struggles, but it is with the use of a self-deprecating humor that Johnson's situation doesn't allow. With Johnson, readers aren't participants, but members of an audience with whom she wants to share a particular dilemma. The circumstances behind Johnson's essay emerge from a debate that questioned the value of the lives of the disabled and whether or not parents have the right to end the life of an infant with a disability. She created a persona with words that are

framed in such a way as to enlist the reader's attention while working through the issues.

Mairs' work, on the other hand, comes out of a need to challenge society's understanding of a disabled person's life and the daily struggles of functioning within that society. Mairs' language is sharp and concise. There is a rhythm to her words that allows readers to imagine that they are engaged in an actual conversation. Mairs creates a persona whose level of honesty is both brutal and non-threatening. The reader sees a person with a biting sense of humor who nonetheless is forthright about her frustration with her disability.

As much as I was informed by Mairs' work, I find myself gravitating toward the persona found in Johnson's essay. I've discovered in my own writing that I've created the persona of someone in doubt, questioning decisions and her own value, bouncing ideas off readers who are, I hope, willing to go along with me as I work through the circumstances and situations in life. I'm not there to confront the readers as much as I am to use their imagined presence to help me find my way through the various challenges I have faced and continue to face in this stage of my life—and from there, find my way into the artifact I'm creating to evoke those challenges. The persona that evolves in the artifact is reserved, not as interested in challenging society as in challenging herself to move forward and continue in her growth as a functioning member of that society.

Cheryl Strayed is an essayist who is not faced with the challenge of a disability, but an affliction that affected decisions she made about her life. Her persona is more subdued, perhaps because her story is that of someone who played an active role in bringing on herself many of the tragedies she experienced. She is brutally honest in exploring her addictions and infidelities as she mourned her mother's death. One can see this in her essay, "The Love of My Life," as she opens with a quote that exposes her vulnerability, her flaws, and her gift to express an honest assessment of self:

> The first time I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week. I was in a cafe in Minneapolis watching a man. He watched me back. He was slightly pudgy, with jet-black hair and skin so white it looked as if he'd powdered it. He stood and walked to my table and sat down without asking. He wanted to know if I had a cat. I folded my hands on the table, steadying myself; I was shaking, nervous at what I would do. I was raw, fragile, vicious with grief. I would do anything. (297)

We see this persona return in another essay by Strayed, "Heroin/e." Still vulnerable, and just beginning the journey to her near self-destruction, Strayed writes of the moments shared with her mother after being told she had less than a year to live. "We didn't say a word. Not because we felt so alone in our grief, but because we were so together in it, as if we were one body instead of two" (169). In these words, we see a woman who is unafraid to share her fear as well as her grief. Nor is she afraid to share her desperation and naivety following her mother's death. "It is perhaps the greatest misperception of the death of a loved one: that it will end there, that death itself will be the largest blow. No one told me that in the wake of that grief other griefs would ensue. I had recently separated from the husband I loved. My stepfather was no longer a father to me. I was alone in the world and acutely aware of that" (172). Strayed maintains the persona of a woman searching for a way out of her despair, and it is that persona that effectively reflects the strength Strayed showed in overcoming her personal demons.

Joan Didion is an essayist whose work with the personal essay is considered some of the finest in modern-day literature. Each of her essays comes with a persona that is confident and informed. Didion consistently conveys a willingness to lay bare her fears and flaws. "In Bed" is one of Didion's most intimate essays, offering personal experience as well as an easily accessible scientific explanation of her illness—the migraine. She opens by implicating both herself as well

as the reader, who may also engage in the same behavior as she does, or who is an active participant in a society's reluctance to deviate from standard assumptions—in this case, the migraine as nothing more than a bad headache. She provides the example of completing application forms that address one's risk of absenteeism:

> Wary of the trap, wanting whatever it was that the successful circumnavigation of that particular form could bring (a job, a scholarship, the respect of mankind and the grace of God), I would check one—*Sometimes*. I would lie. That in fact I spent one or two days a week almost unconscious with pain seemed a shameful secret, evidence not merely of some chemical inferiority but of all my bad attitudes, unpleasant tempers, wrong think. (168)

With the essay, "In Bed," Didion creates a persona that is vulnerable, at the mercy of her body, and often helpless to do anything but succumb. However, she also maintains a reporter's objectivity. I believe that the strength of her writing comes from using a persona that does all of this without engaging in self-pity or accusation. In his online review of Didion's essay, Ned Stucky-French writes, "Didion concisely details what a migraine headache is, what the symptoms are, and how it is treated. Her matter-of-fact language successfully depicts the pain and frustration of migraines without seeming to invoke sympathy."

While not a disability, or even self-destructive behavior, aging is a challenge faced by an increasing number of individuals as baby boomers age. The frustration of finding one's place in society is expressed in equally strong personae by two essayists, John Améry and Barbara MacDonald, who write about the challenges of aging in today's world. Améry creates a persona that shares Nancy Mairs' proclivity for confrontation but lacks her biting sense of humor. His persona reads more like a highly intelligent, well read, and cantankerous "old" man struggling with

the reality of growing old. He refers to time as "our arch enemy and our most intimate friend, our only totally exclusive possession and, as we never seem to realize, our pain and our hope" (5). As readers, we want to explore further his ideas on the complex nature of time—that it can be a friend and an enemy; that it can bring both pain and hope, but without the emotional investment elicited by Didion, Johnson, Mairs, or Strayed. Instead, Améry's essays read more like lectures that are eerily personal in the frustration he expresses about aging. When he addresses society's treatment of the aging adult, Améry concludes, "All at once we realize that the world no longer concedes us credit for our future. It no longer wants to entertain seeing us in terms of what we *could* be. . . . No one asks us any longer, 'What do you want to do?' All declare, dispassionately and unflinching, '*That* you've already done'" (55).

Barbara MacDonald, in her discussion of aging, is as averse to acts of self-indulgence as is Améry. However, while she writes in a persona that challenges the ageist attitudes of today's social structure, she also acknowledges her own biases, which she comes to recognize in her reactions to aging. MacDonald holds society responsible for many of the biases it is determined to sustain, but does so as a woman who is alarmed that she once held the very ageist attitudes to which she is now subjected:

> I see my arm with the skin hanging loosely from my forearm and cannot believe that it is really my own. It seems disconnected from me; it is someone else's, it is the arm of an old woman. It is the arm of such old women as I myself have seen, sitting on benches in the sun with their hands folded in their laps; old women I have turned away from. I wonder now, how and when these arms I see came to be my own—arms I cannot turn away from. (14)

Barbara MacDonald's persona is that of a woman coming to terms with her own life

experiences. However, unlike Améry, who grudgingly resigns himself to the aging process, MacDonald embraces it. She writes, "'I like growing old.' I say it to myself with surprise. I had not thought it could be like this" (19). I find her to have a presence as strong, even as confrontational as Améry's, but one that allows us to identify with her in a manner Améry does not.

The persona Améry creates is that of a philosopher, someone who examines the aging process clinically and theoretically. His life experiences during World War II, which include surviving imprisonment in the concentration camps (Gornick 58), play a significant role in the conclusions he draws. Although essayist and memoirist Vivian Gornick is not in agreement with Améry's arguments, she speaks eloquently of his work because of the sheer intensity of his vision.

> I am older now than Améry was when he was writing, and I share none of his conclusions. Yet for me, these essays are an essence of persona. The negativism embodied in them is so intense, so insistent that I for one feel penetrated by the strength of its vision. Améry's focus, like acid on zinc, bites deep into the grain of his experience. He is a scientist at the microscope staring into a cell slide he can make no sense of with a killer epidemic raging at his back. He stands where I think I will never stand. Yet I feel, powerfully, *him* standing there, *him* looking into the void. lt is the depth of his concentration under duress that compels. (63-4)

Readers, possibly because of the stage in life they find themselves, may or may not identify with the specific struggles of these two essayists, but the personae created in their efforts to reach out are effective in eliciting empathy from the majority of those readers. Readers are compelled to deliberate on the impending experience of old age and wonder what their own

reactions are or will be as they age.

I believe that the persona is as important as the content itself. The essayists' willingness to expose their own flaws is what I hope I emulate in my own writing, as I believe it is that willingness that allows readers to identify with the essayist. Consequently, personal essayists have a responsibility to the reader to be as honest with themselves in developing their personae as they are in their exploration of the subject matter.

My persona evolved out of the experiences I recalled, and the observations I made; and it is situated within various time frames. One component of it may take precedence, but none will ever dissolve completely into the background, as they are all part of who I am; they factor into the exploration I hope to conduct; and they contribute to the artifact I hope to create.

The Role of the Reader

While I consider persona a critical part of the personal essay, it is not the sole consideration. One must also address the expectations readers have of the writing. The personal essayist may engage readers by choosing topics that at first glance either have little relevance to contemporary issues, or are considered taboo. As I wrote in the introduction, the creation of persona is affected by numerous factors, one of which is the time period. The personal essayist may feel constrained by topics considered acceptable for public consumption at that time. This constraint is what linguist Robin Lakoff refers to as a "clear dichotomy of the public and private codes of behavior" (173). In her article, "The Politics of Nice," Robin Lakoff argues that this dichotomy saw a gradual erosion starting in the 1960s. She credits (or blames) the advancement of communication technology that brought public figures into the home. Over recent decades, the public has been given increased access to these figures via television, which brings them directly into our homes, or so it seems, blurring the line between public and private (173-5).

Today, the internet, with its multiple social media platforms, not only brings these figures into our homes, it also brings the reactions of their supporters and detractors via discussion boards, blogs, and websites. As a result, we are seeing what at one time were considered taboo subjects entering the public domain and being explored on a more intimate level. Why else are we receptive to essays on issues, such as one's infidelity and drug addiction, as explored by Cheryl Strayed; or the pervasive and long-term effects of a father's alcoholism on a family, as recounted by Scott Russell Sanders' "Under the Influence"; or body image, as Nora Ephron reflects on her specific obsession from adolescence to adulthood in her essay, "A Few Words about Breasts"? The online site Buzzfeed lists among its best personal essays of 2016 ones that deal with transsexualism, date rape, and hoarding. There is an audience today that is receptive, perhaps desperate, for the opportunity offered by the personal essayist to say, "That happened to me." The reader recognizes someone who not only understands, but is willing to expose, their vulnerabilities to the world in an effort to find resolution.

Even before this erosion of public vs. private as described by Lakoff, F. Scott Fitzgerald initiated a debate when he offered, in stunning detail, the story of his mental breakdown in a series of essays titled "The Crack Up." Once a taboo topic, Fitzgerald brought mental illness into the public sphere by way of the personal essay at a time when such issues were expected to be addressed solely through novels and short stories. The essays, which appeared as three separate installments in *Esquire* magazine in 1936, were met with derision by critics and friends as well. Patricia Foster writes, "[Fitzgerald's] self-revelations shocked and angered many of his literary friends, who seemed disgusted by the intense self-scrutiny of the essays" (147), while Patricia Hampl points out that it was Fitzgerald's break with social convention that seemed to be unforgivable. "[H]e had pulled aside the scrim of fiction's decent authorial fig leaf and just stood

there in his altogether, the autobiographical first person" (154).

A writer who seemed to be most disturbed by this break with convention was Ernest Hemingway, who proved to be one of Fitzgerald's harshest critics. He described the articles as "whining" and referred to Fitzgerald as having been "'wrecked' . . . by his worship of the rich" (Berg qtd. by Donaldson 174). Scott Donaldson singles out popular magazines of the time that were equally brutal in their critiques of his work. *The New Yorker*'s "Talk of the Town" wrote that "[H]is essays were merely a chronicle of how sad he feels in middle life." Curiously, while *The San Francisco Chronicle* also accused him of self-pity, it was compelled to acknowledge readers' interest in a work that strikes "a common chord . . . among members of the almost-lost generation" (172). Donaldson's research showed various expressions of support from friends, as well as the readership, but these expressions were not in praise of his writing. Instead, these friends and readers were providing resources they felt Fitzgerald could use in dealing with his mental breakdown: resources such as God, AA programs, or pep talks designed to help pull him out of his depression (171-2).

What I find compelling is that these criticisms were not directed at a taboo topic or even Fitzgerald's skill as a writer; instead they were focused on the fact that Fitzgerald chose to write in a nonfiction genre, one that did not allow the buffer that comes with the fictionalized story. According to the literary conventions of the time, Fitzgerald's revelations of an emotional break-down should have been written in a fictional genre, one that did not overtly identify him as the main character in the story. Fitzgerald's decision to forego the trappings of fiction touched a nerve that his colleagues and critics could not, or would not, tolerate.

These critiques lead me to ask whether responses would have been more favorable had Fitzgerald conformed to the expectations of his contemporaries. Reading the essay through a

different lens, that of the omniscient, third-person narrator, offers a much more palatable message for readers (or should I say critics?) of that time. As fiction, his work would not be assessed as an exercise in self-pity, but rather as a sympathetic story of one man's harrowing experiences. With the following passages, we see how Fitzgerald's essay measures up against the genre for which his critics advocated:

> I saw that even my love for those closest to me was become [*sic*] only an attempt to love, that my casual relations—with an editor, a tobacco seller, the child of a friend, were only what I remembered I *should* do, from other days. All in the same month I became bitter about such things as the sound of the radio, the advertisements in the magazines, the screech of tracks, the dead silence of the country—contemptuous at human softness, immediately (if secretively) quarrelsome toward hardness—hating the night when I couldn't sleep and hating the day because it went toward night. (522)

What if he had written this passage instead?

> He saw that even his love for those closest to him was become [*sic*] only an attempt to love, that his casual relations—with an editor, a tobacco seller, the child of a friend, were only what he remembered he *should* do, from other days. All in the same month he became bitter about such things as the sound of the radio, the advertisements in the magazines, the screech of tracks, the dead silence of the country—contemptuous at human softness, immediately (if secretively) quarrelsome toward hardness—hating the night when he couldn't sleep and hating the day because it went toward night.

In third person, the language, save for pronouns, doesn't change, nor does the message itself. Neither subject matter nor writing skill is the issue. Criticisms of the essays emanated from an expectation that the writer establish distance from the readers.

I believe there is another force at work here and that is the burden Fitzgerald's honesty placed on the contemporaries of his time. His honest and sometimes emotionally brutal examination of his own behavior must have been unsettling to his peers. Implication, a convention I find critical to my work with the personal essay, was finding its way into the mainstream literary circles of the day, and it was happening at the hands of one of its foremost writers. In the face of this criticism, Fitzgerald laid a groundwork for future essayists to explore issues that reached readers with an intimacy and relevancy that had been avoided by the fellow writers of his day.

Obviously, the reader's response to an essayist's work has as much to do with the expectations of the genre as it does with the acceptance of a subject matter. The essay "Slouching Toward Bethlehem" falls somewhere between expository and personal. Joan Didion was assigned, as a reporter, to write an article on life in the 60s Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. She had already established herself as a writer and essayist, and this "article" would prove to be one of her most memorable works. However, in spite of the favorable reaction, she laments that so many readers missed the essence of her work. In the Preface to the collection of her essays in the book of the same name, she speaks to her disappointment with the initial reception given the essay.

> [I] had failed to get through to many of the people who read and even liked the piece, failed to suggest that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads. Disc jockeys telephoned my house and wanted to discuss (on the air) the incidence of "filth" in the Haight-Ashbury, and acquaintances congratulated me on having finished the piece "just in time," because "the whole fad's dead now, fini, kaput." I suppose almost everyone who writes is afflicted

> some of the time by the suspicion that nobody out there is listening, but it seemed to me then (perhaps because the piece was important to me) that I had never gotten a feedback so universally beside the point. (xii)

I believe that Didion's intent was to place her observations within a different framework, one that was less about the people she was observing and more about the society that had led them to this point. Chris Anderson writes, "Her characteristic strategy is to reflect on contemporary life from the standpoint of her own experience or to engage in autobiographical narrative which ultimately leads to commentary on the social problems of the time. . . . [H]er presentation of fact is almost a point of departure for personal reflection and meditation" (qtd. by Zehelein 4). She had given the reader what Anderson refers to as "a hybrid" of reflection and reporting, and to her mind, the reader failed to recognize the meaning behind her personal reflections, instead focusing solely on her observations and making judgments she may not have intended to elicit.

Other essays from her book, specifically "On Keeping a Notebook," "On Self Respect," and "On Morality," give us a persona that offers a clearer representation of what she wants to say. Her willingness to share insights on specific subjects made me feel like I was chosen as her private confidante. Her recognition of her own flawed thinking allows the reader to form a bond with a character who is profound in her struggle to find answers. In discussing her life-long practice of keeping a notebook, she acknowledges that her own daughter's innate gift to be "delighted with life exactly as it presents itself to her, unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up" stands in stark contrast to her description of those who keep private notebooks as a therapeutic device, "a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers [*sic*] and changers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some

presentiment at birth" (132-33).

In Didion's work I see a confirmation of my position that the essayist not only wants the reader to accept and identify with the issue being explored, but to act as a confidante. As a personal essayist, I think of the reader as someone with whom I am engaging in conversation, albeit one-sided, but one in which I am sharing ideas and thoughts in a way I could not express sides of myself I would not expose under any other circumstance.

The Role of Implication

My goal with this dissertation is to create a collection of essays that consistently reflect a commitment to implication, both of myself and the reader. When using implication as a framework for the personal essayist's work, there exists the possibility for a bond that can be formed with the reader through a shared flaw or insecurity. In doing so, attention must be given to approaching the work with an appropriate mindset, that of someone who is committed to an honest examination of life experiences and a willingness to grow with the work. To do any less could lead to an exercise of self-indulgent exploration. I believe that the willingness to implicate oneself can give the personal essay its power, in that it puts the reader on an equal footing with the writer and allows for the reader to identify with the issue being explored.

Evidence of self-implication dates back as far as the 16th century. Michel de Montaigne, in challenging the literary norms of the day (Klaus and Stuckey-French 1), popularized the self-reflective personal essay. His work is credited for giving the essay legitimacy, using what Carl Klaus calls the "experience of thinking itself" (2). In "Of Practice," Montaigne addresses critics of the personal essay who considered the genre an exercise in self-indulgence when he writes, "I still must not, according to my general plan, refrain from an action that openly displays this morbid quality [of speaking of oneself], since it is in me; nor may I conceal this fault, which I

not only practice but profess" (Klause 2). Even when in defense mode, Montaigne engages the reader by acknowledging the challenges that lie before him. His continued use of the genre resurfaces in "Of Repentance" when he writes, "If my mind could gain a firm footing, l would not make essays, l would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial" (9). Making use of self-implication, that he is not on a "firm footing" and is in a perpetual state of "apprenticeship" and feeling "on trial," Montaigne allows his readers to be part of a discussion in which they may otherwise consider themselves to be out of their element. The self-implication in Montaigne's arguments humanizes him and consequently strengthens his defense of a genre subject to criticism in the literary circles of that time.

Today, we see self-implication in the works of contemporary artists such as Seymour Krim, whose persona Phillip Lopate describes as "that of the quintessential New Yorker: street smart, neurotic, ambitious, self–mocking, manic yet depressed or downbeat" (576). Gornick praises Krim for his ability to make self-implication so compelling:

> [T]hrough this persona he made an identity out of his breakdowns, his hungers, and his envy of those who had achieved worldly success—very much in the style of the great nineteenth-century English eccentrics in essay writing (Lamb, Hazlett, etc.) who also developed ardent, ailing, self-involved voices speaking to us at vivid and voluble length. The ability of these voices to compose themselves into monologues that entertain and instruct rather than weary and exhaust is an extraordinary achievement. (52)

Other examples that illustrate Krim's use of self-implication, as well as implication of the reader, include "Epitaph for a Canadian Kike" and "To All My Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business." In "Epitaph" Krim writes, "I am as unworthy as you, my hypocrite readers, and as nine-tenths of humanity, so we all make a team don't we?" Readers see it again in "For

All My Brothers and Sisters," as he uses the first-person-plural pronoun "we" to examine the expectations of fulfillment we place on ourselves. "Our secret is that we still have an epic longing to be more than what we are, to multiply ourselves, to integrate all the identities and action-fantasies we have experienced, above all to keep experimenting with our lives all the way to Forest Lawn" (580).

Self-implication has proven to be a cornerstone of many contemporary personal essayists. In "Under the Influence," Scott Russell Sanders takes on the issue of alcoholism. Sanders critically examines his struggle coming to terms with his own trauma of being the son of an alcoholic. I find that what gives his essay its power is that he addresses the hypocrisy of a society that both condemns the alcoholic while at the same time celebrating the substance that engenders the illness in the first place. Sanders goes on to put himself (as well as his family) directly in the crosshairs, addressing the irreparable damage that can be done to those who are not only subjected to the destructive behavior of the alcoholic, but who through their enabling, ultimately contribute to the alcoholic's demise. Sanders' essay is powerful because he is willing to use the memories of his and his family's actions to tell his story. He makes a conscious decision to lay himself bare before the reader. Sanders' essay is not a confession but a self-investigation, "the kind that means to provide motion, purpose, and dramatic tension" (Gornick 35).

In my essay, "Suppos'd to," I acknowledge my unwillingness to accept my mother's diagnosis. "When I was told my mother's heart condition was terminal, that she had two to three years to live, I went straight to denial. I heard there was nothing they could do. I heard two to three years. But I didn't hear what that meant. That someday she would be gone and I would be alone. I was Scarlett O'Hara. 'I'll think about that tomorrow.'"

When recalling my brothers'[3] visit the final week of her life, I write, "I was relieved he was the one who was with her and not me. He was filling the role I had filled for the last 15 years, but now she had someone with her who would know what to do. . . . But, I didn't want him there." For the first time since her health had taken a turn for the worse, my mother had her entire family with her. While I recognized how this benefitted her, I resented that my brothers were there, that once again, they were the ones who knew what to do, and I was the "little sister" relegated to the sidelines (at least in my mind), while the grown-ups took care of everything.

As a result of exploring that time, I not only came to terms with my own grieving process but came to recognize my flawed thinking and put it out there for the world to see. This admission was something I had never done for myself, let alone for other people. However, for me the essay proved to be the means by which I could do just that.

The Application of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

The Oxford Dictionary defines sociolinguistics as "The study of language in relation to social factors." According to the Linguistics Oxford Research Encyclopedias, "Language is imbued with and carries social, cultural, and personal meaning. Simply put, language is not merely content; rather, it is something that we do, and it affects how we act and interact as social beings in the world." For creative nonfiction writers who are interested in the examination of interpersonal relationships, this field of study provides a remarkable opportunity to approach our work through a scientific lens.

Linguists Robin Lakoff (1973) and Paul Grice (1975) were the forerunners in what would become the foundation of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. In 1978 Penelope Brown, an American anthropological linguist, and Stephen C. Levinson, a British social scientist, published

[3] In the essay the narrator has one brother; the character is a composite of my two brothers.

their study on politeness theory in *Questions and Politeness*, edited by Ester N. Goody. This was followed by the publication of their book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, in 1987 by Cambridge University Press. In these publications, Brown and Levinson introduced their theory on politeness with the concept of face as its cornerstone. According to Brown and Levinson, face is the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves consisting in two related aspects. Negative face [is the] basic claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Positive face **[**is the] positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including that this self-image be appreciated and approved of)" (3.1).

Another concept that is critical to Brown and Levinson's work with politeness theory is that of weightiness, which determines the choice of politeness strategy used to mitigate a face threatening act. Face threatening acts, or FTAs, are acts by a speaker that threaten either the hearer's claim to freedom or the hearer's need to be appreciated. Weightiness is determined using the following formula: $W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$. Their formula represents the social distance between the Speaker and the Hearer plus the Power that the Hearer has over the Speaker (if the Hearer has less power, such as occupying a subordinate position in a workplace environment, the Speaker's concern about threatening face is decreased, but not necessarily absent) plus $Rank_x$ which measures the degree to which the FTA is rated an imposition in that culture (3.4.2.1). In attending to the weightiness of communicative interactions, the five strategies are:

a. Bald-on-record, which is used when the speaker is concerned with efficiency, does not place importance on the face of the hearer, or has no means or reason by which to minimize the FTA to the hearer.
b. Non-redressive positive politeness strategy is used to satisfy the Hearer's positive face.

Showing one's appreciation or approval of the Hearer's work or appearance is an example.

c. Non-redressive negative politeness strategies satisfy the Hearer's negative face. The Speaker may humble and abase him/herself to achieve a goal by apologizing for an intrusion on the Hearer's time.
d. Off-record strategies are characterized by ambiguity and are generally used when the Speaker has power over the Hearer. The Speaker can get credit for being tactful and non-coercive, and at the same time avoid responsibility for the potentially face-damaging act.
e. The highest politeness strategy is not to do the FTA. This is done only when, from the Speaker's perspective, the threat to face outweighs any need or request. (3.4.3)

Any writer, regardless of genre, has a responsibility to present work that is thoughtful and deliberate in its presentation. Personal essayists, indeed writers of any creative genre, rely on tools outside their own memories or imagination. These include research of a topic, observation of behaviors, and input from those around them. With Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, I see a means to inform the personal essay through a study of the complexity of verbal communication and how that communication impacts the decision-making process.

In their study of politeness theory, Brown and Levinson provide a theoretical foundation by which to examine how personal interactions, and one's responses to those interactions, impact behavior beyond the actual one-on-one communication. When introducing their work on politeness theory, Brown and Levinson write that how we choose to construct our message, or how we find ourselves "putting things," forms the very basis of social relationships. They argue that their theory is a tool for what I see as describing in a simple, but concise, manner "the quality of social relationships" (1.1). Within that framework, I propose to look at past

experiences with an objectivity that identifies how social relationships evolve out of communication choices. In other words, in their work I have found a theory that allows for linguistic exploration on a very personal level.

I use the personal essay as a means of telling people that they are not alone; that their experiences have been and are shared by others. In politeness theory, I have found a means by which to look at the role politeness strategies (or lack thereof) play in the formation of a person's self-esteem and sense of belonging or sense of isolation. With this dissertation, I discovered the strategies that I used most frequently; which strategies were most effective; if there was a time when a strategy failed to be effective; and if a strategy did fail, why it failed.

My essay, "Jumping the Shark," was written as a direct response to the concepts found in Brown and Levinson's theory. It's an attempt to come to terms with my self-perceived failure, not so much in my failure to make use of a politeness strategy, but in my failure to recognize and appropriately acknowledge when a strategy was used with me. In this essay, I place the onus on the hearer, not the speaker. In attempting to understand why a particular period of my life elicited a general feeling of regret, even despair, I approached the issue with a tool that allowed me to focus on specific interactions with peers and the people I was there to support. I recall encounters with speakers who made use of both the non-redressive positive and negative politeness strategies, as I respond with the mental, "I could have had the job done by now had you not taken so long to ask." Instead of appreciating efforts made to lesson any intrusion on my time or to express appreciation for my work, I saw the effort as an unnecessary overuse of please and thank you. I reference the bald-on-record strategy when I acknowledge that those who made no effort to minimize the FTA would prove to be of no importance to me as I revisited this period in my life. Finally, I express concern with those who made use of the highest politeness strategy, which

is not to do the FTA, and simply walked away. “The question becomes when did ‘then’ happen. Was it the time I saw the recent hire approach my desk only to turn around and walk away? Did I do something to make him walk away, or did he just change his mind?”

As I wrote my essay “Friends,” I found Brown and Levinson’s concept of Weightiness colored many of the experiences I was trying to come to terms with. Real or not, the amount of power I gave to those with whom I interacted determined how those relationships evolved. The face threatening acts of those to whom I attributed more weight in the relationship were far more painful than those of people to whom I did not invest as much power. In my essay, I recall one particular experience to illustrate that even I had a line that could not be crossed in meeting demands, but it was with someone who held little influence in my life.

The difference in my memories of childhood friends, on the other hand, were colored not by specific experiences as much as by the strength of the personality of each individual. “Marcia was sweet, reserved, and amiable. She always let me decide which games to play and roles to assume. . . . Alice, on the other hand, was competitive and much less cooperative than Marcia.” I found myself acquiescing to Alice consistently, a subjugation of power that repeated itself throughout my life with other strong personalities, and as a result, stirs memories sixty-plus years later.

By making use of Brown and Levinson’s study on Politeness Theory, my goal here is not to advocate for their work over other theorists in the field, but to inform my own reflections on interpersonal relations. I recognize that their work has not been without its detractors, with the strongest criticism focusing on its assumed universality across cultural and linguistic lines. There are, however, scholars who have chosen to take their theory and develop it beyond its original premise. Jonathan Culpeper argues for the study of impoliteness or “communicative strategies

with [an] opposite orientation" (349). There is also Rong Chen's work with self-politeness where he argues that politeness theories have "focused exclusively on other-oriented politeness while no attention has been paid to [the] speaker's need to save their own face" (83). However, what I found compelling and worthy of further consideration was Robin Lakoff's use of Brown and Levinson's work as the basis on which to explore, among other phenomena, the double standard assigned to women in today's political climate. Lakoff moves the Politeness Theory from Brown and Levinson's "conversational dyad" (73), on which previous theorists had focused their studies, to a much broader arena, that of the politician and the general public.

As I argued in my discussion of the public's reaction to Fitzgerald's collection of essays, reader response changes over time because people's expectation of acceptable behavior changes as well. Lakoff uses Brown and Levinson as a catalyst for her discussion of how society's expectations started changing in regard to public figures from an "impenetrable facade, with stylized emotions, the grammar and diction of the standard language, and formality" to a friend we can invite into our home on the most informal terms (174). In other words, formal discourse, as reflected in language choices that reflect polite behavior, took a hit.

Lakoff writes that "[u]ntil the 1960s most Americans might encounter presidents or presidential candidates live or in movie newsreels," but modern technology has moved public figures into our homes on a nightly basis (and I would add that with the internet, we now see this happening on an hourly basis as well). "Not surprisingly, then, the style of presidential discourse has moved over the past forty years closer and closer to the folksy intimacy we expect in that context" (174-5).

Written in 2005, Lakoff's essay is dishearteningly prescient in her application of politeness theory to the expectations that we, as a society, have of our political candidates. There

is nothing particularly new in her acknowledgement that men are allowed, even expected, to display a forceful demeanor, while women who assert themselves too strongly receive negative responses to their behavior. What I found compelling about Lakoff's work was the historical context of her arguments, which revealed that, even with the loss of a clear dichotomy between "public" and "private" behaviors, the expectations of women, for the most part, remained the same. In my essay, "Forgiveness," I express a frustration I felt, and saw expressed by much of the populace, with an electorate that would choose not the most qualified candidate, but the one with a much thinner resume. I am baffled by the argument that Hilary Clinton ran a poor campaign because she never connected with the people. What I see in this criticism is the failure to recognize that the outdated expectations of public behavior of a female candidate kept Clinton from engaging with the public on the same terms as her opponent, or as her husband did 20 years earlier. Couple that imbalance of expectations with the constraints she confronted in dealing with a far inferior candidate, you have what proved to be an impossible challenge to overcome.

In 2005, no one could have predicted the impact the loss of polite behavior would have on the national landscape, or how that loss, coupled with the expectations placed on women, would impact the outcome of a national campaign. In "Forgiveness" I explore my own expectations of the voters and my unwillingness to forgive those who voted for the opposing candidate. In doing so, not only do I bring the candidate into my home; I bring his supporters as well. I took the liberty of denying them a forgiveness they had not even asked for. In condemning their choice, I in essence questioned their right to choose their candidate, which in another time would have been a private act. Instead, I made it a public one on which I passed judgment.

Those of us who underestimate the connection the candidate made with the general

electorate attribute Donald Trump's win to an unacknowledged and deep-seated anger with the status quo, but that still left me wondering how people could choose a man of such coarse behavior. Lakoff suggests that that very behavior is what made him so attractive. We had travelled a short distance from George W. Bush who was "'folksy', 'approachable', and 'simple'" (Lakoff 181) to Donald J. Trump who was coarse, rude, and boorish.

Subject Matter of My Creative Work

In their seminal article, "Ageism and Feminism: From 'Et Cetera' to Center," scholars Tony Calasanti, Kathleen Slevin, and Neal King issued a call for increased attention to the older adult in feminist studies. Inspired by Barbara MacDonald's collection of personal essays, *Look Me in the Eye,* they wrote, "Some feminists mention age-based oppression but treat it as a given—an "et cetera" on a list of oppressions, as if to indicate that we already know what it is. As a result, feminist work suffers, and we engage in our own oppression" (13). They then point out that "because privilege is often invisible, most women's studies scholars and activists have been blind to age relations and deaf to age studies advocates" (25).

As determined as some scholars have proven to be in addressing the marginalization of the older adult in feminist studies (Calasanti, Bowen, McKee, Blair, Crowe, and Barrow), I find a void in creative nonfiction genres that, if addressed, would reach both scholars and those outside the academic community on what aging in today's society means. How to address this void is a question I asked myself early on in my studies as a graduate student in the doctoral program. Upon starting this program, I was struck by how little ageism, if any, I encountered within the program. I can say unequivocally that not once did I feel like an outsider. I realize now that could have been due to my state of euphoria at being back in the classroom as a student and as an instructor. People may very well have had their opinions, but if they showed them, I

did not see it.

Was this the case outside the academic environment? I regret to say it wasn't. More than once I was asked, "Why are you doing this?" or "What will you do with a degree?" However, the most disturbing was the condescension: "Well, this will give you something to do." I wasn't looking for something to do. I wanted to understand how I had reached this point in life and how I might use that understanding to inform others. When I first proposed this project, I planned to write about my observations of people from my cohort. However, as I progressed in my writing, I found myself drawn to an exploration of my own experiences and not the experiences of others. Just as Amèry and MacDonald used the personal essay as a means to share their beliefs and insights at this stage of their lives, so was I. Barbara MacDonald writes, "I like *growing* old." I want to write that I like *being* old, and I want to look at what brought me to this point and what lessons I still have to learn.

So, What is My Persona?

Given the focus of my proposal, it follows that I come to these essays with a clearly defined persona. In formulating a vision, I found myself brainstorming—insecure, wounded, healed, unbreakable—all describing where I have been, who I am, and what I have come to understand about myself. I am confronted with the question as to whether it is possible to fuse each of these features into a single persona. My answer is yes, since unbreakable comes from healing, healing comes from wounds, and wounds emanate from insecurity. They are all a part of the same life and contribute to the same experiences. No one aspect of our being ever leaves us completely. Because of this, a writer does not want to deny one facet in an effort to highlight the other. Persona, as I define it for this dissertation is "a character assumed by an author" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary), and as such, can and should be complex in its make-up. My persona

will evolve out of the experiences that I recall and the observations that I make; it will be situated within various time frames; and it will see iterations in which one component will take precedence, but none will ever dissolve completely into the background, as they are all part of who I am, and factor into what I want to explore.

CHAPTER II: PEDAGOGY

The New(?) Pedagogy

At 64, I am in the position of being a product of an educational system, and by extension, a pedagogy that was focused on the hierarchical structure of teacher over student. As an incoming graduate teaching assistant with this firmly entrenched schema, I found myself going into the classroom as a novice instructor who had only recently been introduced to theorists arguing passionately for a change in traditional structures (Haake 1994, Kearns 2009, Vanderslice 2010). I believe it is this entrenchment that initially led to failures that left both the student and the instructor (myself) struggling to find the value in what had taken place over the previous 16 weeks of class work. These experiences reinforced for me the validity and importance of a student-centered and activity learning pedagogy.

I am learning to let go of the classroom structure I grew up in and that held steady well into the mid-70s. However, I find myself still making use of the PowerPoint based lecture, perhaps more often than is wise. It does seem to be the expected means of lecture on the part of students, along with the more contemporary Prezi. Still, if we're really committed to a student-centered classroom, we need to look at our reasons for relying on the lecture, whatever form it takes. In arguing for the use of creative writing exercises in the teaching of non-humanities courses, researchers in the field of Library Instructional Sciences (LIS) argue that "[s]tudents are groomed to consider carefully structured, standardized PowerPoint slides to be an indicator of exemplary teaching; by extension, professors are likely to get higher evaluations on the grounds of 'clarity' and 'teaching effectiveness'" (Dali et al. 298). I would argue that not only does the PowerPoint indicate to students that they are witness to exemplary teaching (even though they may not be engaged with the subject matter), it also gives instructors a false sense of security in

assessing their own effectiveness in reaching those students. Aren't I saying, "Here's the information I know and now you know it as well"? In lodging these criticisms, I am not advocating for the elimination of the lecture or the various tools at our disposal as teachers in this modern age of technology. I am saying, however, that to assume these tools are the most effective means, or even the only means of effective teaching, is a disservice to the student and the instructor.

That being said, I am still learning to embrace a pedagogy that advocates for students and instructor working with each other on an even playing field. What I have come to discover is that basic concepts and definitions, although important to forming a sound foundation for any writer, need make up but a small piece of the overall structure of the class. In letting go of the "traditional" role of instructor, I am discovering a reluctant willingness of students to embrace the challenges that come with a more active involvement in their own learning process. Even in today's use of active learning pedagogies designed to engage students in critical thinking and observation, these students expect detailed guidelines that range anywhere from providing directions that help them know what and how to answer questions, to specifics on font size, margins, and page length. What better way to insure meeting the instructor's expectations than to ask for as many hints as possible? No wonder students resist an approach to learning.

The reliance on student-centered learning is not the only uncomfortable challenge posed by the teacher. With the current movement towards genre studies and Cultural Historical Activity Theory, we see students being given tools that allow them to write in a variety of situations outside the confines of academia. The goal is to have an enlightened cohort entering the workforce equipped to write and/or analyze a multitude of communication genres. This means, however, that students are confronted with the challenge of writing in genres other than the five-

paragraph essay or research paper. Not only are we not telling them what to do, we are asking them to do it in genres many have not explored before. Instead of posting on Facebook, tweeting their latest rants, or engaging with friends through Instagram, they are being asked to analyze how each of these means of communication works and why they are effective.

For me, however, genre studies falls short if it fails to do what Grant Wiggins, noted scholar in the area of curricular reform, argues is the purpose of writing, which is "to have something to say and to make a difference in saying it" (29). While "having something to say" is an inherent goal in any writing class, to make a difference in saying it is of even more importance in the creative writing classroom. The creative writing classroom provides opportunities for students to explore their potential as artists, but I believe it should do so in a way that emphasizes the responsibility that comes with doing so. Poet and scholar Irena Praitis contends that the creative writing classroom can be a "remarkably compliant space, a gymnasium for exercises that provides a support group to further advance idealism and social awareness" (6). While I place an emphasis in my classroom on honing students' skill at identifying and expressing their passion(s), I place equal importance on ensuring that they recognize the responsibility they, as writers, have to society. Paul Dawson, in his book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, argues that "writers' work should undertake a social purpose" (qtd. by Myers 172). I recognize that the interests and commitment of students in the creative writing classroom, at least at the introductory and intermediate level, may fall anywhere from career choice to earning a college credit. Consequently, an instructor of a creative writing class will be met with students hoping to develop the writing skills needed to achieve commercial success, or pursue advancement in the academic community, as well as those simply accruing credits hours and an "easy A." My ultimate goal, therefore, is to see students embrace the idea that regardless

of one's goals, writing should have a purpose; it should advocate for change and do so in a way that reaches people on an emotional level that logical arguments cannot achieve.

Personal Essay Across the Curriculum

I have found the personal essay useful in both the creative writing and composition classrooms in critically analyzing subject matter and advocating for change on both the rational and emotional levels. In my teaching of this genre, I place an emphasis on the role implication of self and society plays in many personal essays. In so doing, students are led to look at others' writing as well as their own with a more critical, even objective eye. Do the writers play a role in, or are they contributing to a particular situation; is it a positive or negative contribution; do the writers recognize it as such; do they consider how outside forces, *i.e.*, society or the reader, contributes to a controversial issue? Obviously, not all genres can be analyzed from this perspective, but I find it helps many students see how their biases contribute to their interpretation of someone's work.

When students are asked to respond to Sanders' essay "Under the Influence," I asked them to look at how Sanders implicated himself and society. Many recognized his willingness, even his need, to implicate society, as well as his family, in the denial of alcoholism as a disease and placing the burden to get well on the alcoholic. One example of self-implication that students identified was Sanders' acknowledgment that as a workaholic, he was putting the same burden on his son that his own father, an alcoholic, had put on him. For those who initially placed blame on the father for the pain he inflicted on his family, further analysis helped them to recognize that he was as much a victim of the disease as was his family.

What I found compelling in my research was that the personal essay proved to be the subject of a growing movement in fields outside the creative writing classroom such as Business

and Math. Scholars from these areas are putting put forth an argument that the personal essay is a viable tool in helping students at both the undergraduate and graduate level find work in their respective fields, or in the case of Barry M. Cherkas, an associate professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Hunter College, dealing with a student's math and science anxiety.

Cherkas argues that in the fields of science and math, there is lacking an effort to appreciate a student's apprehension about the subject matter, and consequently the "opportunity to promote solid learning is lost." (83). In addressing this issue, he designed a questionnaire that he distributes on the first day of his class. He writes that "by the time they get to the essay segment, many students are primed to treat the questionnaire as a chance to make the equivalent of a New Year's resolution. They use the occasion of writing an essay to affirm their commitment to do their best to achieve their goal" (83-84).

He argues that the information from the essays does much more than ease the students' anxieties; it also informs the instructor. From his students he learned that the "induced shut-down response" found in some female students in adolescence "is a temporary lessening of resolve [and] need not be permanent" (85). More commonly for Chekras, however, is that these essays proved to dispel erroneous assumptions teachers may make based on in-class behavior. What may seem like disinterest is actually fear of failure, and non-engagement is an unwillingness to reveal how little the student knows about the subject matter (86).

Reading Chekras' examples revealed a trend among the responses. The students not only were willing to make "the equivalent of a New Year's resolution," but they also revealed their fears and what has held them back in the past. They implicated themselves, and sometimes the system, and in so doing, gave the instructor insight into their needs as students experiencing various levels of anxiety. Examples reproduced verbatim include:

1) Nothing seems to make sense when it comes to math. I don't know if it is because that no matter how much I struggled I bearly make it. That's the reason why I hate hate and hate so much. Why I am then in it? I was compell by my major to take it! Now that I am in it I am not going to fail. I have to make every possible effort to pass it. Even if I have to spend all my pay check on tutoring. Because I know when it comes to math I am absolutely stupid. I heard that out of 10 dents taking this class only 2 pass. This scares me a whole lot…. I feel that I should video tape you so that I won't miss anything. I feel as though everything is crucial in this class one must not miss a word you are saying. I questioned every single thing that I think I understand. Only a super natural force could help me thru this course. (84)
2) I have very high anxiety about math. As my grades in math, in high school, decrease my anxiety increased. My anxiety is to a point now that I can't even do simply math without working up a sweat.

   I'm not much of a mathematics fan. I don't know why it was ever discovered but if I were to see the person who did invent this type of mechanical theory, I'd choke them. Mathematics is one of my worst classes, not only because it seems too mechanical or non-sensible, but because I feel it deals with too much memorizing. . . . I've always felt insecure about learning it. . . . (84)
3) Generally, I think I enjoy math, but there is a part of me that feels slow & stupid when it comes to numbers. I remember the frustration in the 5th grade (or whenever??) when I had to learn the "time tables" it was so hard for me to remember numbers. I remember crying, it was so hard for me to attach meaning to the numbers to help me remember them. Back in H.S. I remember being very bored with math.

4) I think my biggest problem w/ math has been the way it was taught to me. It was never really explained to the students the reasoning behind the calculations so therefore I never really understood the formulas etc. . . . Basically, I just memorized everything.

   When I got to high school, I had problems with algebra, but thanks to a concerned instructor, I eventually learned to enjoy it.

   I never got along with any of my math professors. (85)

Chekras concludes with three main points about the personal reflective essay that I see reach across the curricula. 1) Fears and apprehension are revealed, which teachers can then address; 2) teachers are sensitized to students as individuals, and any assumptions made about student engagement, or lack thereof, are curtailed; and 3) the relevant questions of students' feelings and how much students are willing to share with their teacher are addressed. The essay has proven to offer an "important motivational tool that serves both teacher and student as an incentive for overcoming affective obstacles to learning" (86).

Of course, unlike students entering a math course, an introductory creative writing course is not required, but chosen. Students do not come in with the same level of fear that the student taking a math course does. However, they do come in with expectations, anxieties, and emotional baggage that can affect their performance in the class. This entry essay could prove to be a valuable tool for both the instructor and the student. It not only informs the instructor about a student's potential and how best to reach that student; it also can be used as the first example of the personal essay genre and provide an opportunity to inform the student as to its conventions and use. Where do you see yourself taking responsibility for your fears or concerns? Or do you? How do you hold others responsible for your feelings? Or do you?

In full disclosure, I did not find this article until my most recent research and did not apply it to my own class. I recognize that variations of this exercise are common within English Studies, and I have made use of them myself, but not with the specific intent or outcome Chekras explores in his article. I used them as a means to introduce the students to the course and alleviate their fears about writing. It was an informal exercise that offered the opportunity for students to share responses with the class if they chose to do so. In other words, I approached students with this as an ice-breaker activity for their use, but not as an opportunity to explore a specific genre or to inform me as to how I might choose to assess an individual student's work as the semester progressed.

In an effort to give the exercise more credibility in a creative writing classroom, I propose revisions to Chekras' questionnaire (see Appendix A). First, when distributing the questions, I would instruct students to pay particular attention to how they express their feelings about writing; to be as specific and honest as possible and not to focus on the mechanics of spelling and grammar, since these are issues to be addressed later in the semester as needed. I would also attach a grade to what would be their first writing assignment and require them to complete the questions outside of the classroom. I would do this first to separate the exercise from a "getting to know you" association, and second, to give it the same importance as future assignments. While I expect students in the creative writing classes to provide more polished responses and pay closer attention to the creative element of the assignment, I would encourage them to engage in the same level of honest self-reflection as Chekras' students did, investing time and energy in it, and using the exercise as an opportunity to express their concerns about writing and their background with writing.

I find the fact interesting that their proponents, whether in the academic fields of business

or math, make use of conventions inherent in the personal essay to inform their own pedagogies as well as serving the needs of their students. In each area, there is an emphasis on pursuing a particular issue, finding resolution if possible, and even recognizing how the student and society is implicated in whatever challenges they face—all conventions of the personal essay that are often overlooked. The fact that these conventions are inherent in the genre, even when they are not recognized as such, gives power to the personal essay that can be highlighted in the creative writing classroom.

Teaching Philosophy

In my commitment to the empowerment of students, I engage in classroom strategies that support, encourage, and inspire the writer while asking all parties to learn from one another. My teaching is grounded in a commitment to a move away from the hierarchical nature of teacher dispensing knowledge to students. I have come to make use of an active-learning- and student-centered classroom, although not always as successfully as I would like. I found myself inspired by Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, with his identification of the teacher as student, someone who often fills the role of inquisitor, and, as a result, models learning as an ongoing journey. Just as the teacher can take on the role of student, I strive to create an environment in which students feel comfortable and competent in the role of educator, offering insights and opinions in a clear and coherent manner. This level of confidence is discovered through activities that challenge students to move beyond conventional tools of problem-solving and engage in activities that explore alternative means of expression and communication.

The challenge in adhering to this philosophy lies in finding the means to allow students to consider and recognize new ways of interpreting the world around them; but to do so in a way that mediates any threat they may feel to their current world view. To do otherwise may/will lead

them to shut down and refuse to consider other ideas or viewpoints.

I have found that in the creative writing classroom, students are both willing and expect to explore new ideas. I do not mean to imply that students do not offer any resistance to the exploration of ideas that may be counter to their core belief system or that they are easily persuaded to let go of ingrained practices without question. There may be resistance, but I find the creative writing student typically amenable to new ideas.

I believe that creative writing, whether it is poetry, prose, fiction, or nonfiction, is an art form that can and should effect social change and am committed to approaching its study with this as a guiding principle. In this framework, the student as writer is also an artist with a purpose that extends beyond the self, and as such needs to be encouraged in a safe yet structured environment to venture outside his/her comfort zone.

Discussion of Classroom Practices

What follows is an overview that focuses on my Introduction to Creative Writing class. First, I discuss the syllabus (see Appendix B). I believe that classroom management is critical to reaching goals and maintaining a productive learning environment, and that the syllabus is the most effective means of making your policies known at the outset. However, I have learned that setting policies means making careful and thoughtful decisions on content. My syllabus provides a brief description of the course, my teaching philosophy, the course requirements, learning goals, grading scale, and, of course, the requisite statement on "classroom behavior." I found that the policy statement played a significant role not only in how students conducted themselves in the class, *i.e.*, their willingness to engage and participate in activities, but also in their success with completing assignments in a timely manner. I know now that if I am willing to give

extensions, I need to indicate so in the syllabus with clearly defined parameters on how and when those extensions will be given.

I follow with a description of the assignments I designed. I found these assignments resulted in productive, even provocative, work from both the novice as well as the experienced creative writing student. The students were consistently engaged in writing, both with the in-class exercises and take-home assignments, and even more importantly were eager to share their work with peers.

I then discuss my experience with the use of the workshop and peer review. I found that contrary to author Rosalie Morales Kearns' criticisms of what she calls the "normative workshop," the structure proved to be productive, and this was due in no small measure to an environment that consistently fostered trust, while encouraging fair and constructive criticism. I follow with a discussion of changes I would make, as even a student-centered classroom is in need of a structure and content that adheres to meeting the skill levels of the class as a whole.

One of the most significant changes comes out of my review of reading materials. While of value to a creative writing class, I found that *Litscapes: Collected US Writings 2015*, and to an extent, *Understanding the Essay*, are books better suited to use in higher level courses. It would have been equally beneficial to have made use of PDFs, and, instead, require books that focused on the basic concepts of creative writing. Such books as Virginia Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, Klaus' *The Made-Up Self*, and Bishop's *Keywords in Creative Writing* would easily meet the needs of an introduction to creative writing class.

Finally, I will discuss how my area of interest, life writing and the personal essay impacted choices I made in the teaching of fiction and poetry genres. I will include those theorists who influenced my initial choices and how I found their conclusions surfacing in a form

I did not anticipate.

An examination of the syllabus (Appendix B) revealed to me that my decision to integrate the learning goals into the description of the course may have left the students, as well as myself, underserved. Following is the description excerpted from my syllabus, wherein for the purpose of this discussion, I have italicized those goals. While the statement reflects my intentions for the course, the generalization reveals how these intentions may have been lost to the students.

> **Description**: The primary purpose of this course is to acquaint you with *the practice of creating and developing a creative work*, relying on both in-class writing prompts *to exercise the creative spirit and the revision process to provide valuable balanced critiques* of your process. There is a flip side to this practice. Given the importance of the workshop to the development of one's work, your input on classmates' work will carry significant weight in the determination of your final grade. Be ready to *offer constructive and honest criticisms* (remembering that criticism includes noting what worked about the piece, not just what was lacking).

Ludwig, *et al.*, argue that motivated students use learning goals as a checklist to monitor their progress, while the majority of students refer to them as a guide before submitting work for evaluation by the instructor (21-2). A review of other instructors' syllabi, both from this department and online research, shows that specific learning goals appear on as many syllabi as not. However, in developing my pedagogy, I have come to the conclusion that those points italicized in the above quote would have been better represented as a separate component of the syllabus. Such a separation not only would have made the goals clearer to the students, it also would have led me to articulate them in more concrete terms. For example, what does "practice

of creating and developing a creative work" mean? For me this included a grasp of genre and sub-genre conventions and terminology; mastering the rules of Standard English; and deciding to which genres those rules apply, and when/where they can be subverted. I see that listing those goals instead of expecting students to infer their value would have done much to clarify my intentions for the course. Even in a student-centered classroom, clarification of expectations is a learning tool that does not necessarily reflect or promote a hierarchical structure.

Also included in the description are the statements "to exercise the creative spirit and the revision process to provide valuable balanced critiques" and "offer constructive and honest criticisms." My intent here was the development of one's self-confidence. I did this by requiring the oral reading of exercises that developed a wider range of writing skills. Of equal value in nurturing self-confidence is the honing of one's peer- and self-assessment skills through the workshop process, which I will address in more detail later. For the sake of this discussion, however, I list peer- and self-assessment as a learning goal. I want students to recognize upfront that developing this skill allows one to look at work through a critical eye, and recognize feedback as a tool one can use to improve his/her work. My goal is, and continues to be, helping students reach a level of assurance in their writing and presentation skills, as well as critical thinking proficiency, but to do so through a process that engages both peers and instructor.

Ludwig, *et al.,* write that the syllabus is the instructor's first tool in reducing student confusion and promoting commitment to learning throughout the semester (23). I recognize that all of the goals I set were addressed throughout the semester; however, it would have better served the student to have these goals more clearly articulated, so that expectations such as those expressed here could be more fully realized.

Assignments and Tasks

Following is a discussion of three exercises I uses in the creative writing class: the exit ticket, the annotated bibliography, and "Public Places" (Ostrom, Bishop, & Haake 62-3).

In regard to the tasks I assigned, the one that surprised me the most (in a positive way) was my use of the exit ticket. At the end of each class, I asked students to briefly comment on that day's class. Their responses were not graded, and only occasionally did I offer individual feedback. However, if I recognized an emergent theme or concern, I would address it in the next class. I initially looked at the exercise logistically as a tool in classroom management, as I would use it to take attendance without intruding on class time. I also saw it as a means of emphasizing the idea that participation in class discussions would require preparation. I discovered, however, that its value extended far beyond class maintenance.

Robert Hampel uses the exit ticket as a means by which students can express their understanding of that day's activities, ask questions, or offer opinions they do not feel comfortable expressing in front of other students (77). Deborah Owen and Patricia Sarles argue for their use as assessment tools that inform instructors how effective they are in getting across a specific message. For Owen and Sarles, the exit tickets are written in class as reflections of that day's work (20). I found that as the semester progressed and students became more familiar and comfortable with the routine, comments were more than summaries of the day's activities. This paralleled Hampel's use, and as Sarles writes, proved helpful to my assessment of my own work.

I chose to use the tickets for another purpose, not only to ensure the reading was completed (another means of class management), but to compel students to be prepared to analyze and defend their choices. Kristine Gritter writes that classroom discussions allow students to integrate what they "already know, have experienced, and value" in new material

covered in class and in the readings (446). Students seldom brought in identical passages, and discussions revealed a full range of interpretations of reading assignments. These tickets, in other words, generated discussions that would in all likelihood have been much less insightful without the specific forethought required in choosing and defending them.

The first take-home assignment was the annotated bibliography which I designed as a basis for students' writing throughout the semester. Their topic was to be on subject matter about which they were passionate. I initially saw this as a means of focusing their choices of subject matter for their creative writing, as it would allow them to express themselves from an informed position, whether that be in fiction or nonfiction, prose or poetry.

However, what I expected, and looking back see that I didn't clarify, was that the topic (or passion) should involve social issues upon which they could reflect. Instead, a number of students interpreted the word "passion" to mean an "interest." For example, bibliographies included Walt Disney and/or his "empire," genres (graphic novels, slam poetry), and historical figures (the House of Romonov).

I recognize now that I was bringing into this classroom a specific exercise that had worked well for me in a composition course focused on genre research ("What is an annotated bibliography?"). However, without a clearer explanation of its value as a means of researching an issue one cares about, it failed to meet its full potential as a learning tool in a creative writing class. As a result, my plans to have students refer back to this task as a source for their creative writing topics took on a much smaller role than I had intended. I saw in some bibliographies social issues that could be used as topics for their work; however, given my failure to specify that as the goal, I found it to be less useful as a reference tool for future assignments.

Public Places (Appendix C) is an exercise I assigned one-third of the way through the

semester that proved to be effective in that it not only took the students outside their writing environment, but also took them away from self-imposed limitations on topics. It required students to observe environments as well as the occupants. Attributing to Flannery O'Connor the observation, "A writer should never be ashamed to stare," Olstrum *et al.*, designed this as an exercise that grounded the writer in "what is, what seems to be, the work of writing: look, see, think, imagine, write" (63). Students chose train stations, coffee shops, and bus stops; some observed campus sites; and others used visits home for their observations. But more than the variety of locales, the students made use of the exercise to look at the people who occupied these spaces. It was from those observations that I saw original ideas with a social component inherent in the message. While the intent of the exercise was to develop observation and descriptive language skills, students used it as a means to look at the world outside their own space, to observe and comment on that world, and finally to write creatively of their experience. As with all of the exercises I assigned, students had the option of expanding on any writing exercise for formal workshops, and I was struck by how many of them chose to use their work in the Public Places assignment. The social component of the class that I thought was lost found its way back into the space by way of the students' innovation.

The Workshop

In her article, "Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy," Kearns argues for an alternative approach to the "normative" workshop, something she critiques as being both counterproductive and alienating. Her criticisms focus on three major flaws—"the positioning of the author as faulty," "the gag rule," and an overall "fault-finding mode" (791-4). I found the arguments compelling and the alternative worth consideration. In brief, she argues for a non-normative workshop that "would not position the work as inherently flawed and would not

position the author at the bottom of a hierarchy of a writer's work." She argues for an approach that treats the work as "in process, or ripening, rather than inherently flawed with the author taking part, [even leading the] discussion" (801).

I found her arguments compelling but wasn't quite ready to implement the non-normative workshop as a sole means of peer response. I find the arguments that support the use and value of the workshop in its traditional form warrant its continued use. Scholar and creative writer Gayle Elliott argues that it is the very physical design of the workshop as an inclusive circle (or conference table) that alters the hierarchical nature of the traditional student/teacher dynamic. It does not allow for a student to sit passively while information is disseminated via the lecture format. It, in fact, "exemplifies the cooperative, dialectical relationship" (13). Gayle also sees the workshop as a communal effort, with the roles of writer and reader/critic interchanged session by session. According to Gayle, the work is not positioned against another; art is not combative; nor does one need to defend itself against the next (14).

Perhaps it was the combative tone of Kearns' article that gave me pause. However, I did find her suggestions intriguing and wanted the students to have the opportunity to make use of her suggestions. Therefore, I asked students to take on the role of leader when talking about their in-class writing tasks and offered them the option of following that same model during any or all of the formal workshop sessions. Initially, students followed the normative workshop model. However, by the end of the semester, I saw that some were adapting a non-normative approach, explaining their intentions with the work, taking the time to lead discussions in a non-defensive or noncombative manner before asking for feedback.

Required Books

'The Creative Writing Program at Illinois State University is recognized for its emphasis on avant-garde aesthetics and encourages students to explore if not engage in conventions that take them outside the comfort zone that characterizes traditional writing, or, more specifically, the literary canon of 20th century writers" (Department of English). This is not to say that students are discouraged from pursuing the style of writing that is best suited to their skills and interest, but to expose them to those writers who have moved beyond genres that are accepted, and expected, on a commercial level and an academic one as well. In that frame of mind, I chose the recently published anthology *Litscapes: Collected US Writings 2015* as the primary means of introducing students to the wide range of creative writers engaging in avant-garde work. I also chose to use the work of writers who are part of, or coming out of, ISU's Creative Writing program, Dr. Kass Fleisher and M.A. graduate, Caitlin Alverez. Their visits to the class allowed students to engage with published authors. Questions were geared, for the most part, to the writing process, with some inquiries focused on publishing. Most rewarding was the fact that both authors' work found their way into the conversation well after their visits to the class. While *Litscapes* generated thoughtful exploration by the students, as well as the instructor, I see that it may have been too complex a collection for an introductory class, especially when one considers that I chose it over those that offer basic guidelines for the process and conventions of creative writing. I relied on mini-lectures and PowerPoint presentations in covering basic concepts and definitions and see that discussions of the books listed here would have allowed for more consideration and application of these terms and practices. Although *Understanding the Essay* offered an important analysis of a wide array of personal essays, *The Situation and the*

Story and *The Made-Up Self* are better suited for an introductory course, given their examinations of the conventions and processes of the personal essay. *Keywords in Creative Writing*, on the other hand, provides an overview of the creative writing genres and the logistics of pursuing a career in the field.

The Role of the Personal Essay in an Introduction to a Creative Writing Class

In my proposal for the teaching internship, I viewed the genre of the personal essay as a source from which to draw for the study of other genres:

> I find that the examination of self and society, regardless of topic (or genre), requires a willingness to be honest with oneself as well as with the reader of one's work. I believe a creative writer has an obligation to explore what s/he would rather leave alone and to expose readers to what they may not want to see. The ultimate goal is to give readers a means by which they discover that they are ready to examine these issues because of what authors have given them in their creative work. (1)

Looking back, I realize that I expected that this focus would entail more formal lectures on the conventions of the personal essay. Given my decision to move toward student-centered learning, this proved not to be the case; I found myself letting the discussion of these concepts evolve from the class discussions. I found that my own doubts about the reliance on the personal essay surfaced as the class progressed. I wondered if that was a selfish, if not unrealistic, goal to set for the students, as well as for myself. The examination of self and society, regardless of topic (or genre), requires a willingness to be honest with oneself, and I wanted to pass that along to the students. While I believe a creative writer has an obligation to explore what s/he "would rather leave alone and to expose readers to what they may not want to see" (1), I discovered that in this class there were students who were already at that level of insight, and wanted to explore how

they might continue to hone their writing in this regard. As a result, any formal instruction on the conventions of the personal essay was replaced by in-class and one-on-one discussions.

A recurring topic of discussion in the courses I took on creative writing pedagogy was the inclination of novice writers to "indulge" in their own issues—lost love, isolation, frustration, stress—without addressing their relation to the human condition or social injustice. In other words, students are inclined to write about their own challenges without consideration of how those same challenges are felt and dealt with outside their individual experiences. How do you tell a student that his/her writing about the heartache that comes from a break-up doesn't necessarily make for poetry that reaches out to the reader? What if the student counters with, "It isn't about the reader, 'It's about me!'"?

In her discussion of personal essay and memoir, Deirdre Fagan addresses those in the creative writing community who are apprehensive of, if not overtly opposed to, the use of the personal narrative in the classroom. Fagan, in arguing for its merits in developing sophisticated thinking, reveals personal narrative to be a genre that requires the use of student-centered learning. She writes that "teaching memoir does not present the teacher as therapist and the students as patients," or, to put it another way, there is not a hierarchy in place. The teacher is not posed to provide answers, but, more importantly, when addressed as a genre, students are asked to look at writing the personal narrative as a process. It is not the content of the writing that engages students in critical examination but what brought them to this point. As such, students are willing "to take risks as writers and thinkers" (1).

With the personal essay's emphasis on the issue (or challenge) being explored by the writer, and my focus on the role of implication in this genre, I saw students' style affected by the focus on these conventions. One student whose interest was first-person historical fiction

consistently presented work that summarized events instead of dramatizing them. In directing the student's attention to the role her main characters played in their own demise, and society's role in placing them in that position, the student was less inclined to describe the events and more inclined to tell a story that engaged the reader in the action. Another sign of the essay's effectiveness was the change in writing of those students who were prone to write satire, but sometimes missed the humor because of the bias they brought to the work. By looking at the subject matter through a lens that exposed the roles we play in creating our own struggles, and how society contributes to those struggles, the students found the balance needed to tap into the absurdity they were trying to capture.

Conclusion

I opened this paper with an expression of my own struggles adapting my teaching practice from the practices I experienced as a student growing up in a different system. One might argue that activity learning and the student-centered classroom could exacerbate such doubts, as it hands the work over to the students. Nothing could be further from the truth. Allowing ourselves to function on a level playing field with our students requires a confidence and proficiency that for all intents and purposes exceeds that of the instructor who fills the traditional, hierarchical role. It means that we are willing to trust ourselves, as well as the students, to reach a level of proficiency by way of practice and discovery. I'm not prepared at this point to say I have completely freed myself from ingrained habits. However, I have come to embrace the classroom experience with the confidence that we, as students and instructor, can move forward on a journey together.

CHAPTER III: REFLECTIONS

Insights

1. I like the classroom. I like being a student. I like the chalk board that runs the full length of the wall, the slightly skewed rows of student desks, and the front desk where the instructor stands at the podium, perhaps operating the overhead projector.
2. Epiphany—I remember a moment as a senior at the University of Illinois. I was walking into the Student Union from the quad. It was winter. It was cold—Illinois cold. The cold that makes your teeth ache. I just wanted to get inside a warm building before I started the five-block walk home to the apartment I shared with two friends, one a Junior and the other a Sophomore. I envied them, and on this day, I knew why. As I opened the door, I realized that this was my last semester as a student. Ever. I felt an overwhelming wave of sadness, fear, and surprise that this was the first time I had even considered what was about to happen. I would never again sit in a classroom, go to the campus bookstore, plan what courses I would take, or stand in line to register for classes—as we did in the 70s. My life as I had known it, not only as a student but as someone's child in whose home I would spend holidays and summer vacations, was about to come to an end. I was going to be an employee, but I had absolutely no idea where I'd be or what I'd be doing. I suppose I should have been afraid of the uncertainty of what was ahead, but I just felt sad about what I was leaving behind.
3. I like being a teacher. Sometimes I ask the students to put their desks in circles for small group work. I make sure that each student's desk is part of the circle and not left outside because someone decides it's too much work to move it around. I could say that I insist on this inclusion primarily because staying outside the circle makes it too easy to avoid

contributing to the discussion. But if I'm going to be completely honest, the real reason is that I want the symmetry that comes out of fully formed circles. Symmetry is important to me. I make a conscious effort not to let it dominate my teaching. I know it's just a quirk, my quirk, but to deny its presence is an exercise in futility. That's why I always leave time at the end of the hour for the students to put the chairs back in their slightly unaligned rows. Anyway, it's a professional courtesy for the next class, in case that instructor conforms to the structure of a traditional classroom.

4. I tried a number of jobs when I graduated from college. I worked as an assistant manager for a retail chain. Assistant Manager—I had never had a title before, so I told myself I was making good use of my bachelor's degree. After ten months, I left that job to work the graveyard shift at a local truck stop. *Trucker's Special—2 eggs, hash browns, toast, and coffee for $1.25*. I had to buy my uniform. I couldn't afford to go to the laundromat every day, nor was I willing to fork out the money for a second or third uniform. I washed it out by hand, along with my pantyhose, in the bathroom sink each morning when I got home and hung it to dry on the shower rod. I lasted six months in that job. I then got a job as a receptionist at a university. After my previous experiences, working in an office was my dream job—I would have a week-long Christmas break and a four-day Thanksgiving weekend. I would work Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. No graveyard shifts or 12-hour workdays. This change was a significant improvement.
5. I chose to take courses on aging for two reasons: a) the topic interested me; and b) I saw career opportunities in the field of gerontology, even though I never actively pursued them. I spent two years learning about the social aspects of aging, the physical aspects of

aging, the psychological aspects of aging, and the familial aspects of aging. As I look back, I realize I took these courses not to pursue a new career, but because I wanted to learn something. Anything. I wanted back in the classroom, and I don't regret one minute I spent there.

6. The best part of working as a secretary at a university was my being back on a college campus. Fall was my favorite season because it was when all the students came back. An exhilaration took hold of me. I was where I belonged. Students pulsed through the campus while bookstores accommodated the long lines of people buying texts, binders, and weekly planners. Faculty reappeared in offices and hallways in unassuming droves. I was part of something, even though I really wasn't. I didn't care. Being there was enough.
7. Maybe that was the problem. I was always happy with "enough."

Lessons

1. I've been an ageist, and that really sucks. I think about the friend who told me of her caregiver's emotional intimidation, and I responded with silence and a shrug. I assumed she was an overly dramatic old woman, and I wasn't going to encourage that behavior. I remember the friend whom I failed to appreciate even though she consistently offered her friendship and support. I didn't want to spend time with someone who was that much older than I was. I want to tell them both how very sorry I am, but they died many years ago. I want to tell them I was wrong and that I am so sorry, but the only person left to forgive is me, and it's just too fucking hard.
2. Forgiving myself may even be impossible.
3. Unconditional love is painfully rare. You really should watch this.

   "A Phone Call" by Auburn Sandstrom.

   http://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=11026
4. Facebook posts are sometimes incredibly profound.
5. Illegal drugs, prescription drugs, alcohol, food, sex, television, gambling—self-medicating feels good. To stop is hard.
6. Self-discipline is hard.
7. Discipline imposed on me by others doesn't make my work better, just easier to get done, because I'm meeting their expectations, not my own.
8. Writing is all about self-discipline.
9. "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." Mark Twain
10. Facebook can be a profound waste of time.

Friends

I had two best friends as a child, Marcia Thomas and Alice Sims. Marcia was sweet, reserved, and amiable. She always let me decide which games to play and roles to assume—who would be the mother and who would be the child, who would be the doctor and who would be the nurse, who would be the boss and who would be the secretary. She was one of the nicest people I knew.

Alice, on the other hand, was competitive and much less amenable to my suggestions than Marcia. I was the follower in that relationship, a role I found myself playing many times throughout my life. She not only decided which games we played, but who would win. She was smart, and, as I recall, quite calculating. I suppose that's what drew me to her. I often have found myself drawn to strong personalities, even though I abdicate control and repeatedly get lost in the relationship.

Several years ago, I heard a couple of rumors about my friends, neither of which I tried to verify. Alice, now a divorced mother of three daughters, one of whom had Downs Syndrome, was working as a secretary at a local university, and Marcia, who never married, was living in a nursing home. I'm inclined to believe what I heard about Alice. I knew her to be, even as a child, quite deft at handling whatever life threw her way, and I have no doubt that she did well as a single mother raising a child with a disability. Marcia, on the other hand, was far more fragile, and I can only hope that the rumor about her was not true.

As is the case for many of us, my childhood friendships did not continue into adulthood. For me, they didn't even make it to high school, as my mother moved us away before I reached my teens. Once in high school, I became part of a small circle of friends, but no one with whom I bonded. I'm not sure why that was the case, but I know I didn't mind. I was happy—well, as

happy as any teenager can be. There's not much more than that to hope for, whatever your age.

Friendships can be formed out of common interests, age, or even workplace. Before retirement, I worked with the same people on a daily basis. Friendships were formed, but interactions, for the most part, remained formal. Relationships were grounded in a show of respect for each other's position, regardless of where one fell in the hierarchy. Although lacking the intimacy one finds with close friends, I believe that these relationships remained stable because of the unstated rules we followed. We respected each other's positions, and our interactions reflected that mutual respect. When rules were broken, participants generally did so out of necessity and without malice. Because friendships had been formed, people were willing to tolerate less than stellar behavior from their colleagues.

I'm finding it somewhat ironic that long after I left, many of the friendships from my workplace remained intact. In all fairness, my situation was unique in that, with my retirement, I stayed in nearly daily contact with several workmates, albeit in a different role. However, even in this new role, I found that what I considered to be professional relationships were actually friendships. We still engaged in extended conversations about our families, our health, or our latest vacations. If someone had been ill or had lost a loved one, sincere expressions of concern and condolence were offered. Perhaps the unwritten code of behavior we followed, one which was grounded in mutual respect, resulted in a stronger bond than I realized.

I recently had an encounter with a former co-worker from many years ago. I was standing in the aisle of a local store when I heard a familiar voice call out the nickname she'd given me when I first started working with her. I didn't hesitate. I immediately knew who was calling to me. I turned around to see the woman who, in my opinion, had not changed in the last 20 years. She had the same gregarious style, joking with me as if we hadn't missed a single mid-week

lunch date in the 20 years since we last saw each other. Our visit was short. We didn't go for coffee or arrange to meet for dinner, although we may have said we should. There was a warmth in our exchange that I found reassuring. We enjoyed the same banter we once engaged in on a daily basis. We picked up right where we left off so many years before.

I'm continually learning new lessons in retirement, and often under the most unexpected circumstances. With regard to friendships, I realize that some bonds are formed that are much stronger than I realized. Friends whom we may not think about for years can reenter our lives at the most unexpected time or place, and the familiarity is still there. It can be a most comforting realization.

Then, there are the friendships that are formed on a less stable foundation and elicit only painful memories. I always have had a propensity to want to please people. In fact, my mother repeatedly cautioned me about my inclination to be overly solicitous. That was the word she used, "solicitous." But her warnings too often fell on deaf ears, and my need to please often left me vulnerable to those I trusted most.

To my credit, however, I do have a point at which I will say no, enough is enough. For example, I had the friend who saw our relationship come to a quiet but abrupt end as she insisted on using me as her personal cab service. Leaving me waiting in the car while she ran errands that turned into shopping sprees, or turning brief visits into hour-long social calls were behaviors I would not tolerate. Friendships such as that one came to an end early on. However, I was much more tolerant of friends who were not as blatantly exploitative but still managed to covertly control the relationship, in which case the friendships lasted for years before coming to an end.

For the most part, I have had and still have friends who are both supportive and kind. But I somehow continue to attract the domineering personality. Each time this happens, I find myself

being swallowed up, struggling to find a way out. Sometimes the friendship ends with a confrontation of some kind, but more times than not, our contact tapers off without anyone even noticing the friendship has ended. Oddly enough, the decision is almost always mutual, with no expression of regret from either party.

Relationships that lack reciprocity are destined to fail. At its most basic level, respect is expressed through the choices we make when addressing each other in conversation. When a friend is giving orders instead of making requests, the affront to my self-esteem eventually leads to irrevocable damage to the friendship. I am more than willing to accept my share of the responsibility when a friendship ends, but at the same time, when my self-worth is undermined, I have no compunction with my decision to move on.

When I retired, my life took a turn for the better. I could go where I wanted to go, when I wanted to go. The possibilities seemed limitless, but a choice I made one evening in early summer five years ago affected my life in a way I never expected. Taking my Chihuahua to the dog park was an innocent enough idea. He would have a chance to play, maybe run off some of his excess puppy energy, and be a bit more manageable at home.

This simple idea, however, would have a profound effect on my life, and the park would become so much more than a playground for Joey. Within weeks I found myself part of a select group of people who had little else in common than a love for their pets. Among the members were a retired nurse, professor, insurance adjuster, secretary, and a sales rep who was a subject of corporate downsizing. Neither socioeconomic status, age, sex, political affiliation, race, nor religion played a role in which people were embraced and which ones weren't. The only criteria one had to meet was being kind to the dogs, yours as well as everyone else's. Hence our bond. Regardless of our differences, we were always kind to the dogs.

These friendships would become a centerpiece of my life. Our time together was brief, not more than a couple of years. Interactions that started out as chance meetings at a local park turned into connections among people with a common bond—their pets. We became a circle of friends exchanging phone numbers, confirming what time we each planned to arrive the next day. Our daily outings evolved into bi-monthly cook-outs, birthday celebrations, and local Pork, Peach, or Apple Festivals—but only those that were dog-friendly. These people became a family whose members looked to each other for support and companionship, but as much as we may not have anticipated forming these bonds, we were also equally unprepared when we saw them fall apart.

The Teacher

Doc was the nickname given to the retired professor in our group. Doc was a talker. I mean he talked, and talked, and talked. And we adored him. He was a man who loved his life. He had no regrets and expressed no fears. Even when he talked of his ex-wife, a woman he clearly still loved, he did so with a sincere appreciation that this woman was still in his life. He shared with us that she was engaged to be married, but it was a marriage he was convinced would never happen, and as of this writing, it hadn't.

Doc loved teaching, and he often talked about his experiences in the classroom at the medium-security prison where he taught for 30 years. The stories about his tenure at the prison were endless, and we enjoyed listening to this consummate story-teller. He loved the profession he had chosen for himself, and in retirement, he was still teaching part-time.

What I liked most about Doc was his willingness to examine issues from both sides. "Yes, the Governor is bull-headed about the budget, but Congress is just as fixed in its position. Neither seems to be willing to move, and that is what is hurting the state." Did I agree? Not

entirely, but to hear someone willing to recognize both sides of an issue was refreshing. I particularly appreciated his objectivity when discussing world affairs, the state of the economy, and even religion. A devout atheist, he managed to engage in friendly debates with the Evangelical Christians in the group. While I found that their arguments only proved to highlight the narrow-mindedness of their positions, he always managed to engage with them without judgment.

The Insurance Adjuster

Looking back, I feel sorry for the insurance adjuster, a retiree on permanent disability. He could be a most unpleasant man who insisted on sharing everything from his dietary choices to images from his latest colonoscopy. He was destined to be ousted at some point, and at our leader's direction that was what happened. I'm not even sure when it happened, but he made her unhappy, and she would not tolerate any behavior that displeased her. Sadly, this was a condition of membership that would eventually bring an end to what I saw as our family. The fact that he no longer joined us in our social outings or our evening sessions at the park was barely noticed. We didn't miss him; I think we even welcomed his removal. He never really was our friend, but neither were we his.

The Nurse

Our retired nurse took on the role of mediator. She was probably the most perceptive person in the group. Eventually, she imposed the following rule: "Discussions will be on any topic *except* politics and religion." She was reserved; someone who was content to go off by herself or sit back and take in any of the multiple conversations occurring at one time. A former Marine, she received her nurse's training while in the service and worked in the profession until her early retirement only a year before meeting us. She confided in us about the challenges she

had with co-workers—challenges with which we could all identify. There were the supervisors who would give the orders but were sorely ill-informed on the actual day-to-day responsibilities of the job. There were the co-workers who failed to carry their share of the workload. And then there were the patients. We received a number of lectures on the pressures that came with working in a hospital. “The hospital isn’t a resort—nurses are there to care for you, not wait on you. They are working under highly stressful conditions. Don’t forget that.”

She loved her retirement, even though she admitted she had financial struggles. Her pension suffered a severe hit when she chose to retire early. She once confided in me the reason behind her decision to retire early. I remember so clearly riding in the car with her. We were alone. She started talking about a little boy who had been hit by a car. She was one of several people who saw it happen. She told me the story in a matter of fact tone, but I still heard the pain in her voice.

“I gave him CPR even though I knew he wasn’t going to make it. The driver was devastated, but there was nothing he could have done. It all happened so fast. One minute a little boy is chasing a ball into the street and the next, I’m giving him CPR. When his mother got into the ambulance with her son lying unconscious on the gurney, she looked at me for some reassurance. I nodded even though I knew he had little chance of survival. I saw her later that day, and she actually thanked me for helping him. She was convinced that I had kept him alive long enough for her to be with him before he died. I don’t know if that was the case at all, but it seemed to make her feel better.”

The experience left my friend bereft of any desire to stay in the nursing profession. “I simply had no patience left for the bullshit I had to deal with every day.” She sold her house and everything in it except for her clothes. Then she bought a pick-up truck, left Colorado, and

headed back to Illinois, where she had grown up. I was in awe of the courage it took to simply walk away from everything she had worked for her entire adult life—the home, the furnishings, the security. I had never met anyone who had done something so courageous before.

Once retired, she tried variations of nursing on a part-time basis including working in home healthcare, but nothing seemed to work out for her. It wasn't because the employers failed to compensate her fairly for her experience and training. She simply did not like what she was doing. She told us, "I didn't give up everything I had to continue being unhappy, even if it is only part-time." Simply put, she didn't want to be associated in any way with the work she'd left behind. She wanted something completely different, something she could enjoy, perhaps be her own boss and set her own hours.

And she found what she wanted—garage sales. She endured ceaseless teasing from friends as she continually stopped to pick up so-called junk put out on the curb, purchasing items for as little as 25¢ to $5.00 at the garage sales, and almost always turning everything into, at a minimum, a 200% profit online. She was obsessed, but isn't that what retirement should be—not only finding your passion but being obsessed by it?

I marveled at her kindness, calm demeanor, and her remarkably bold spirit. When she decided to sell her house and move to Illinois, she did so completely open to every opportunity that presented itself, including renting a room in the home of a newly found friend, the "leader" of our group. The living arrangement worked well until she decided she to return to Colorado. She had taken on a nomad existence, and she had no desire to put down permanent roots. We all knew we would miss her, but we didn't know how integral she was to our unit—with her departure came the eventual dissolution of our family.

The Sales Rep

Our leader was a loud, flamboyant woman whose personality was as big as her size. She was the force that drove the group. We willingly gave her the power to decide who was a member and who was not; who could stay and who would leave. I'm not sure that we had any choice but to let her take the lead, and in all honesty, I'm not sure that anyone else would have done the job as well as she did it. She served as hostess for the cookouts and information hub for any and all planned activities. We loved spending summer evenings sitting on her back deck eating hot dogs and hamburgers. We were together for holiday gatherings and the birthday celebrations provided a cornucopia of gifts and cards.

Her home was immaculate, decorated with art prints in ornate frames from Hobby Lobby, her collection of Precious Moments housed in the mirrored four-shelf curio, and adages such as "No one can make you feel inferior without your permission" and "You don't need a silver fork to have good meals" perfectly stenciled on her living room and kitchen walls. She was in her glory when she was entertaining guests. Her dinners included everything from ground sirloin burgers and kosher hot dogs to roast chicken and ribeye steaks. We never questioned how she could afford to host the elaborate events, given her employment situation. To do so would have been met with her sullen disapproval. Such an intrusion into one's personal affairs was a greater misstep than parking your car on a finely manicured lawn. She took pride in the fact that she owned everything outright, and with only utilities and miscellaneous expenses to cover, she seemed to be doing well on her $10.00 an hour temp position. At least, that was the façade she presented.

Appearances were just that—appearances. What we saw proved to be illusory. Using everything from the immaculate home with hardwood floors to the oversized leather couch and

Longaberger baskets, all of which would ultimately be sold off, she presented a front she could not possibly maintain in the long-term.

This woman, who had been our group's leader for close to two years, and whose sheer presence had held us together for so long, was in truth a frightened and abused little girl hiding behind the trappings of success she so desperately wanted to simulate from the successful life she knew before her layoff. Hers would come to be a tragic story, one that so easily could have been averted had she only been willing to listen to the advice of friends, and we would later learn family as well—something she chose not to do.

She was the domineering personality I thought I had excised from my life. But here it was again. With her came the drama, the stress, and even the guilt. I read once that if you put a frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out. However, if you put that same frog in a pan of water and slowly turn up the heat, the frog will make no effort to escape and eventually be cooked to death. I honestly don't know the veracity of this story, nor do I care. I simply find it to be a fascinating metaphor with me as the frog . . . again. Why I didn't see that the water was boiling, I can't say. I just know that I stepped in with the rest of my friends. While everyone else jumped out as the temperature rose, I stayed, holding her hand, giving her support, advancing her money, and simmering.

I want to understand how on earth did I let it happen again, and now that she's out of my life, what am I feeling. I'm learning that I have expectations of myself that are still unrealized, expectations such as learning from past mistakes. Einstein is credited, accurately or not, with defining insanity as doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results.

My friendships sneak up on me without warning. One day I find myself spending more time with a person, or persons than I spend alone, and I seem to like it. And whenever I'm

disappointed by a friend's behavior, it's because I let them take advantage of me instead of simply standing up for myself. Insane.

The family had scattered. The nurse was gone, the adjuster had been ousted, and the teacher had just ceased contact altogether. I had reached a point where I no longer liked spending time with her. Now, I wonder if I had just reached a point where I no longer liked her, but I wouldn't let myself consider the possibility because that's not what friends do. Friends are loyal. They are stalwart. And in this case, they are enabling.

I stayed with her as the others distanced themselves. The drama, the demands, the mandates were more than they had the time or energy to handle, but for whatever reason, I just couldn't leave. She would be all alone. I thought what kind of person would abandon a friend, all the time admiring, even envying my friends who had done just that.

And so, I stayed, helping her as she moved from one apartment to another, in mortal fear that she would one day ask to move in with me, or worse, that I would offer to let her. With each move, the drama increased—"My credit rating is shot, the government is garnishing my wages, I'm going to end up living in my van." And with each disaster, I distanced myself further from her.

I don't know when I decided that I'd had enough. Maybe it was when she scolded the sales clerk for how he had bagged her groceries for which I had just paid. Maybe it was her taking satisfaction in the idea that anyone who didn't accept Jesus Christ as their "Lord and Savior" was doomed to eternal fire and damnation. Too often I stood in stunned silence at her ingratitude or outright anti-Semitism, moving from one day to the next almost robot-like in my exchanges with her.

Ultimately there was no confrontation—the communication simply ended. One week she

didn't call to ask where I wanted to go for our weekly Friday night dinner, and I didn't reach out to see if everything was all right. I struggled with the guilt and had to make a very deliberate effort not to call her.

I wonder if she suffered through the same struggles as I did. Did she have issues with me she chose not to ignore any longer—my aversion to confrontation, my commitment to liberal positions, my preference for CNN over Fox News? Is she as relieved as I am that the friendship ended?

I am curious about where she is and what she is doing. Even now, I want to know whether she kept her dogs, and if she did, how they are doing. Are they getting any exercise or do their lives consist of confinement in a dog crate during the day, ½ cup of dry dog food each morning at 6:00 a.m. and each evening at 7:00 p.m., and lying next to her as she falls asleep on the couch every night? Are they even getting dog food or is she feeding them left-overs because she can no longer afford the high-end brands? Does she still have her apartment, her job, her car? Is she even alive, or has the 300-pound body, which she abused with junk food and diet cola after her second gastric bypass surgery, failed her? Am I just curious or do I actually care?

In all likelihood, she is right where she was when I last saw her—working her $10.00/hour job, living in her $600.00/month apartment, driving her 2005 Rav4 sports utility vehicle with the expired license plates and no insurance, and coming home each night to the dogs who love her unconditionally. She's a survivor. She has learned every trick to keep going, even if she doesn't realize they are tricks. I suppose she should be commended for her perseverance. I'm just not the one to do it.

I honestly don't know how I feel about her now. I'm not angry. I'm not sure I know how I feel about anyone from that circle. I don't miss them. I'm glad for the time we had together,

and I appreciate the role she played in bringing us together. I appreciate what I learned about independence from our nurse, tolerance from our professor, and survival from our leader, both what to do and not do. But more than anything, I feel gratitude and relief. Gratitude for the cook-outs, birthday celebrations, and apple festivals, and relief that we all moved on.

Addiction

"There is a terrible stigma that exists out there of people who have problems with addiction. Society imposes this stigma, and the damages that it causes, looking at addiction as a character flaw or a weakness that can be cured when with most, it is a lifetime struggle" (Armstrong).

The sociologist Laura Armstrong refers to addiction as a struggle. While I have used the euphemism "character flaws" when addressing my addictions, I find the word struggle to be a much more apt description. I like the word struggle, not only because it is kinder in its connotation, but the word is much more accurate in its representation of what one faces on a daily basis. Therefore, I've decided to refer to my addictions as struggles.

I have quite a few struggles. I'm not saying that I have any more or any fewer than most people, but I seem to think about them more now that I'm retired. That was one advantage of having a job. It kept me from spending too much time focusing on what was wrong with me and more time thinking about what was wrong with everyone around me.

I am inclined to believe that the people who are happiest in their lives somehow bucked the trend. The made choices they felt were best for them, even when doing so was anything but practical. Our natural instinct is to be safe. That is why so many of us conform to expectations. I know that I certainly did. For most of my life I have taken the road more traveled, and now that I'm on the exit ramp, I have much more time to spend on me.

And, well, I find I can be pretty hard on myself.

I have a number of struggles I deal with on a daily basis, and three specific ones have plagued me for longer than I care to admit. The first and foremost is my reliance on food for comfort. Food takes care of me, not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically—when I'm stressed, sad, bored, angry, happy—yes, I look for comfort even when I'm happy. I'm not unique in this regard. Looking to food for comfort is fairly common in our society. Food brings us comfort and is one of the reasons, if not the only reason, we are facing an obesity epidemic in this country today.

Food can be as addictive as alcohol or drugs. The challenge with confronting one's overeating is that a) eating is not a habit you can quit unless you plan to starve; and b) you suffer no immediate harm from overeating, so the threat is not as great. After 30 or 40 years of Big Macs and KFC, the arteries will show damage, and you may find yourself at risk for a heart attack, stroke, diabetes, or even cancer. But you aren't going to be pulled over for having an opened box of Krispy Kreme donuts or asked to take a breathalyzer test for sugar overload. Being a drug addict or alcoholic is something that offers risk to the general public as well as yourself. Being fat—not so much. Still, overeating is a problem, and as someone who deals with the compulsion to eat the most sugar-laden and high-fat content foods available to her on a daily basis, it can tear at the soul.

I chastise myself for being fat as I eat my DQ peanut buster parfait because that's what I do. I eat and then hate myself for doing so. Until I don't. Until I replace the parfait with a bowl of cherries because Weight Watchers has had the good sense to give all fruit and vegetables 0 points on its 30 points a day food plan. But cherries don't comfort my anxiety. They don't satisfy my appetite. So, I obsess on how to fill the void.

I convince myself that I don't look that bad as long as I avoid having my picture taken,

and my cholesterol levels will remain stable as long as I stay on my medication. Then I read Facebook posts by friends who tout the benefits they enjoy from joining the new gym that just opened in the strip mall on Veteran's Parkway. I envy their fortitude, promising myself that someday I will be like those people.

But for now, I eat.

The Journal of Behavioral Addictions printed an article that called addiction a behavior that allowed one to achieve a "sense of satiation, become preoccupied with the idea, and suffer negative life consequences as a result" (Sussman and Sussman). In the same article, the authors wrote that they were able "to locate [only] 33 published, relevant studies on [this addiction] outside of books and dissertations." I'm not sure how important such information may be to some of you reading this, but it may be reassuring for those who identify with what I'm about to say.

TV is my second struggle. I like watching TV. I really like watching good TV. And now that I'm retired, and I can make my time entirely my own, I find myself liking it a bit too much. What has proven to be particularly problematic is that, with cable being what it is, I have some really good shows from which to choose. When my brother calls and tells me how phenomenal *Fargo* is this season, I say I'm not watching because the series is too dark. The truth is that I'm not watching it because I know how good it is, and I don't want to be sucked into the vortex of yet another program with stellar writing, acting, and directing. Just as a hot fudge sundae activates the endorphins for the overeater, and heroin does the same for the drug addict, high definition images from the television screen brings me extraordinary comfort and pleasure.

With today's television industry, shows that are no longer on the air, but can be found as reruns in syndication, add to the temptation to escape into the fantasy provided by the electronic

age. *Boston Legal* is a show both profound and timely. It takes the genre of the legal drama and manipulates it into bizarre contortions. I see lawyers defending and getting them off cops who brutalize innocent victims. I actually enjoy watching as the lead characters find loopholes in the legal system to keep serial killers out of prison. The same is true of sitcoms about nothing and crime shows about OCD detectives. They seduce and mesmerize their audience, and I don't even care. I just know that hitting the off button is as unthinkable as throwing out the half-eaten Pepperidge Farm chocolate layer cake.

What draws me to this electronic artifact that can freeze in the oddest positions when the cable line fails to deliver, or worse yet, doesn't deliver at all? How did these images become so much a part of my life? Paid cable is seductive enough with *Madmen, Oz,* and *Homeland,* but now we're hit with the likes of streaming networks offering the political brilliance of *House of Cards* or the terrifying timeliness of *The Handmaids Tale*. They are to me what the $400 bottle of whiskey must be to the alcoholic—perfectly smooth and delicious.

I believe we are living in the second Golden Age of Television. Having missed the first one, I am captivated by what I see today. I am also disheartened at my own inability to look away, or to be more accurate, my inability to turn off the damn thing. There are times when I find myself so overwhelmed that I fail to realize I'm not watching Lisa Kudrow in her groundbreaking cable comedy *The Comeback*, but, in my haze-like stupor, I have Phoebe Buffay conversing with friends in the Central Perk coffee shop, the latter played to the laughter of a live audience. Both are good television, but why do I need to watch either one for the umpteenth time. I don't, but I do. I need the noise, I need the laughter, and most of all, I need the distraction from doing what I want least to do. Sit in silence.

Silence is a reminder that I'm alone. Why I don't embrace the solitude, I'm not sure. I

like being alone. I like the freedom and the control it gives me. Things as mundane as leaving my bra hanging on the rod above the washer for days on end, feeding the cat on the dining room table while I eat my meals on a folding TV table, and—the most daring—leaving the bathroom door open are curiously liberating. I like not having to answer to anyone or accommodate their needs. I especially like not having to be on all the time—not having to be nice, or happy, or polite. I like being alone; I just don't like being alone in the silence.

Finally, I seem to have an aversion to money. While I enjoy seeing it appear in my bank account, I have this inexplicable need to make it disappear. And I have some very inventive ways of doing that. I have taken endless trips to the grocery store on the pretext of buying toilet paper and Milk Bones, only to leave with chicken breasts, grated cheese, frozen dinners, and paper towels, none of which I have an immediate need, but know that I will use at some point in the future. As e-mails flood my inbox, announcing the one-day-only special prices for shoes, dresses, and jeans, I delete more than I read; still, the ones I do open offer items I feel compelled to purchase, if for no other reason than they are on sale.

I would not have looked at spending as an addiction but for the fact that in retirement I curiously feel more financially secure than I ever did when I was working full-time. Perhaps this particular struggle presents itself because for the first time I feel a power that I didn't have before. That power has given me a sense of security, and I do so like it.

I read somewhere that money is power. I believe that is one reason I feel better about myself today. Real or not, this power has freed me from the stress of counting every penny. I have a feeling of peace in my life now, and while I am still enough of a realist to know how easily I could lose this security, I'm curiously comfortable with that ominous possibility.

Spending the money doesn't activate the endorphins in my brain that eating a medium-

well New York strip steak and loaded baked potato does or watching Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright spar in the White House Oval Office. I wonder if the struggle, in this case, isn't an addiction that needs to be addressed, but instead is my coming to terms with where I am now in my life. The life expectancy for women today is 81 years. My mother lived until she was 95. Her sister and mother and my paternal grandmother died in their mid-60s. I note this because, genetically, my chances are slim for living as long as my mother, but given today's medical advances, I'm going to assume I won't be leaving this world anytime soon. I'm enjoying a level of comfort and security I've never known before. Maybe this particular struggle isn't a struggle at all. Maybe I don't need to question everything that makes me happy and recognize that being happy doesn't necessarily mean I'm doing something wrong.

I can't predict the future. I certainly can't predict what choices I will make in the coming years. I do know that how I choose to address my struggles will have a significant impact on the quality of life I enjoy in the coming years. Understanding why I do what I do is a key to dealing with these struggles. I want to explore exactly what needs comforting when I order the medium two-topping pizza from Dominos, and what am I trying to escape when I turn on the *Columbo* episode from 1973. Am I distressed by CNN's report on the latest White House scandal? What about the silence do I find so uncomfortable? Answering those questions would be the first step to confronting the struggles, but when dealing with addiction, the journey extends far beyond a single step. Determining how I handle those additional steps is my challenge now.

Renovation

I always wanted to be a teacher. I looked at it as a noble endeavor, shaping lives, making the world a better place. Perhaps it was my romanticizing of the profession that kept me from pursuing it in earnest. In addition to my inherent and ever-present fear of failure, I had the

nagging thought that I was not up to putting forth the level of effort required to succeed in a career of that magnitude. As a result, I chose a line of work that was safe, predictable, and without risk. I spent 30 years in that vocation, and as I look back, I am awe-struck by my perseverance. I went to work every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday at the same time to sit at the same desk and do the same job for 30 years, 1,560 weeks, 7800 days, 58,500 hours, 3,510,000 minutes. I deserve credit for hanging in there if nothing else. But when looking back on my life, I'd like to think I did more than hang in there. I'd like to think I made a difference in some way. Who doesn't want to believe that about themselves?

During one of my early ill-fated attempts to pursue a teaching career, my instructor related to the class a story from her years as a high school teacher. This instructor lectured with a passion that transfixed her students, and I was no exception. While I can't recall the specifics, or what compelled her to tell the story, I do remember at one point she exclaimed, "and I told them I am *not* a civil servant." The expression of utter contempt at being considered a member of *that* vocation was jarring, especially coming from someone for whom I had so much respect. But looking back on it, 25 years later, I wonder how much of that contempt lay dormant in my own estimation of the work I was doing every day.

I could go into great detail about why I chose to be a secretary. Suffice it to say, the work was in keeping with the goals I've made throughout my life—finding comfort and security. I tried working in the private sector, but the capitalist model left me feeling curiously unfulfilled. As a result, I found myself gravitating to higher education. I realize now that my move to academia was my way of being a part of a community I envied, if only from a peripheral position. I became a civil servant. Civil service employment met my needs, and at that point in my life, meeting those needs was a—no it was *the* dominant focus of my life.

The bottom line is that I chose a vocation that expected me to do what I was told to do when I was told to do it. And, in what now seems to me to be rather odd, this was a paradigm I accepted, actually embraced, for the better part of my life. As a retiree today, I wonder just when did I want to change the paradigm and why.

Renovate: (1) to restore to a former better state [as by cleaning, repairing, or rebuilding] (2) to restore to life, vigor, or activity**.** (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

The proposed state-funded renovation project many years in the making of a 40-year-old building finally had been approved. The project involved relocating three significantly large university departments from one location to another. Half the building would be vacated, and occupants would be moved to a temporary location and moved back one year later. The occupants in the other half of the building then would move out of their offices as construction crews completed the final phase of the project. But this was a government project, so, not unexpectedly, there were delays, and it would be another year before the actual move took place.

Let me put this in perspective, my perspective. The renovation project was the catalyst for initiating dramatic changes in the administrative direction of the office where I worked. Redefining my position was just one of those changes. The responsibilities of my current position were becoming more and more obsolete and naming me "Move Coordinator" for the project was the first step in creating a new role for me. For many people that would be a welcome change. You people know who you are—passionate, ambitious, hungry for challenges that allow you to grow as individuals, not to mention as employees.

But remember, I entered this vocation for the security, not the challenge. This job gave me a comfort zone that allowed me to use a collection of skills in a routine, and, quite frankly, non-disruptive manner. Yes, I am one of those people who is fine with making do. Or at least

that's how I saw myself, and for the better part of my life, making do had served me well.

Looking back, I see how I may have been considered a good choice for the move coordinator. My supervisor and I worked well together. I was considered to be someone who had good, sometimes compulsive, organizational skills that would keep the process running smoothly. I was also what one might call the most malleable staff member in the office. I was willing to do what needed to be done when it needed to be done without argument. I avoided conflict with a passion and got along well with people, which meant tensions that are inherent with a project of this magnitude would be kept to a minimum. However, I knew from earlier conversations with my supervisors that they had one concern—would I take the initiative when the occasion warranted me to do so. With that in mind, I was determined to set their minds at ease.

I was placed in a leadership position. I saw an opportunity to show my strengths as a leader and develop additional skills. I was determined to measure up to expectations. Although I've never been one to embrace change, I was uncharacteristically amenable to taking on this new role. I am talking positive mindset. If management thinks I can be a leader, then so do I. *No* problem. There is *nothing* to worry about. That all being said, when the move was pushed back a year, I felt a tremendous wave of relief.

Later

First things first. I knew that as a leader, I needed to take control and show that I had the determination to stand my ground on the issues. I was about to take responsibility for coordinating the move of 160 people—faculty, staff, and graduate assistants—from one building to another. Lives were going to be disrupted and routines upended. People were stressed, confused, and aggrieved by a move they neither wanted nor understood. I decided that the most

effective means of dealing with the upheaval was discipline and structure. For example, there were rules, and people needed to follow those rules. I believed that with a move of this magnitude, it was especially important to make certain that we adhered to the policy put in place by administrative offices directing the project. The instructions were simple and concise.

1. All furniture will be placed in temporary storage.
2. Departments will use only furniture already located in the building where we are moving.
3. Said furniture is not to be moved from office to office without prior consent.
4. All personally owned furniture and possessions must be taken home.

As move coordinator, I was responsible for ensuring that everyone knew and followed these rules. Yes, this policy meant people had to move, among other things, Barca Loungers, floor lamps, coffee tables, and original art pieces out of their offices. It would be an additional burden for some. But I knew I had the skill and the resolve to articulate the policy clearly and diplomatically.

I believed I had a responsibility to get this project off to a good start. I was growing into my leadership role. I was stronger than I thought I could be and determined that I would succeed.

The Rubber Hits the Road

Early on, reality tested my resolve. We were only a few weeks from the actual move. I walked into the main office and discovered the entire staff was gone, leaving only a part-time employee to assist people who may come in. “Where is everyone?” I was told they went over to check the new office space. I was annoyed. That’s not true. I was pissed. I was being shut out. I actually felt threatened.

My first thought was, “Are they moving furniture around? They can’t do that. It violates

policy. I need to get over there."

Because—I'm the Move Coordinator.

When I walked in, I saw they already had brought in pieces of furniture for our reception area. I thought, "What do they want, a showplace? An end table? They actually brought in an end table. They just moved furniture from one room to another without going through proper channels. Without the paperwork in place? Without Union movers? They could get us into trouble. They had to learn to make do."

But these were not people who knew how to make do; they did whatever they could to make things better. Still, I wanted to tell them everything I had been thinking—but I didn't.

Because that's not who I am.

Instead, I stood in silence as I was told what to do.

"Irene, we need to have the file cabinets moved over from our office. The ones already here won't do. And I don't care about that shit from Facilities. They can just deal with it."

I started having second thoughts about the whole "growth in the job" thing. I knew who I was. I was a person who hated arguments. I hated asking for special treatment. What if I asked, and the answer was no? What if I argued for an exception to the rules, and no one backed me up? I would look foolish and weak.

I learned my lesson. I resolved that I would never take on a responsibility like this again. This change was too hard. There was too much risk.

Evasion

I need to take a break now.

An instructor once told her class, "What is most uncomfortable to write about can result in the best writing."

I pull out the first essay I ever wrote.

I don't like smoking. I don't like the taste. I don't like the dry mouth. I don't like the heaviness in my chest or the phlegm in my throat when I wake up in the morning. I don't like the smell it leaves in my car and my home. And I really don't like the $51.35 per carton I fork out twice a month.

But, I do like one thing about smoking. I like the ritual, raising the cigarette to my mouth, barely touching the tip of the filter to my lips, sometimes tilting my head back slightly, inhaling, and then the long exhale of smoke into the atmosphere. I'm Lauren Bacall to Humphrey Bogart. "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? Just put your lips together and . . . blow." Inhale deep and exhale slow and long. That's nice.

I'm so fucking proud of that.

I'm sorry, where was I? Oh yes, the renovation. I should get back to it. I wish I had kept a journal of that experience. A journal is such an effective device for a writer because it provides details like dates and time and place. But is that the kind of truth people are looking for in life writing? Do they want dates, numbers, places? Is presenting as a dialogue what you know was an e-mail exchange fair if the result is a clearer representation of the conversation? If the weather was fair and mild, is it unethical to write that it was hot and humid because of the dramatic effect created?

I really don't want to write about this move, do I?

This is a Box

It was the last department meeting before the move. I was given a few minutes to review dates and procedures. I was ready. Finally, I would be able to address everyone at one time in one place. I knew that by the time I was through, everyone would know exactly what they

needed to do and how to do it.

I walked to the front of the room and addressed my audience. “Movers will be in the building on [this date] which means you will have your offices packed by [this date] and you will be allowed into your new offices on [this date].” Clear and simple. I saw intensive note-taking by everyone there. I gave them a moment.

I then moved on to the really important business.

“This is a box.”

“It is a new, flattened box provided by the facilities office.”

“This is how you open the box.”

“This is how you fold down the flaps of the box.”

“This is how you tape the box.”

There was laughter. But it wasn’t the “Oh, she is hilarious” laughter. No, it was the “Oh, thank God, someone is finally giving us information we can use” laughter. This was going well, but I knew not to get cocky. I still had ground to cover.

“These are the labels. They are white labels. You place three labels on each box, one on the top, one on the long end, and one on the short end. Write on each label your name and your new office number. Remember, write this information on each label and place three labels on each box, top, long end, short end.”

The laughter continued, combined with diligent note-taking.

These were good people. I left feeling confident that we would be ready. Nothing to worry about.

Sharpies, Scissors, and Tape Guns

To Do List—send an e-mail to faculty regarding the importance of returning all Sharpies, Scissors, and Tape Guns.

The university has provided the department with two tape guns and 36 Sharpies. It is very important that you not keep either of these items for an extended period of time, but sign them out only when you need them and return them as soon as you are finished.

If a tape gun is not available, the department can provide you with scissors and one roll of packing tape. Unfortunately, we have no substitutes for Sharpies.

ONCE AGAIN, please remember to return these items when you have finished using them.

What is wrong with these people?!

Move Day

The offices were packed. Everyone was out of the building for the week except move coordinators, and, in my case, the move coordinator *and* her supervisor. It was OK though. The truth is I was glad not to be there alone. I believed that there were too many mistakes I could make, and I have to say my supervisor had a talent for knowing how to avoid catastrophe. Last month she saw we were running low on boxes and asked that I order them. What if we hadn't had enough boxes or packing supplies for the faculty? I didn't want to think what might have happened.

I have to say though that having two people representing the same area seemed to be confusing for the movers. I decided to stay out of the way and help only if I was needed. I did what I was asked to do when I was asked to do it. I was being me, the old, comfortable, dependable me, and I must say, it was a lot easier than being the one in charge.

I Get It Now!

My supervisor had only six more months before she would retire. I can only imagine what must have been going through her mind. “My last budget projection for the fiscal year. My last class schedule. My last faculty search. Retirement. This year should be easier, not more difficult. There should be less stress, not more. I’m tired of the conflicts, the personalities, the tantrums. Why can’t people just do their jobs? Why can’t it be easy?”

Is that what she was thinking? Probably. Who could blame her? She had been a fixture in this department for over 28 years. She had hired me. She was the driving force behind my advancement. If not for her, I’d probably still be in an entry-level position and perfectly content there. She continually pushed me and always made me feel I deserved whatever rewards I reaped. But by that last year, it had all changed. I realize now that she was tired. She no longer had the energy to be gentle or supportive. Affirmations were a thing of the past. She was ready to move on with her life, and truth be told, so was I.

I had wanted to prove myself a leader, but instead, I became as needy and unsure of myself as I was the first day I walked into that job. I had failed to shine, and I like to shine. Damn, why did she have to stop telling me how wonderful I was?

So, This is What It’s Like

February 2008 the new supervisor was hired. For seventeen years I had lived in dread of this change and what kind of person would come in to fill the position. No one would be as patient, competent, or fair.

Odd how dependency can cloud the judgment of the most experienced and educated people. So many in the department feared that we would be lost without the anchor that had kept us centered all those years. Whatever made us think that there was only one person in the world

who could do her job? What made so many have the same reaction as mine? We walked around in a state of denial. Staff was concerned about what kind of leadership we would have, and the people we served were concerned about what kind of support would now be made available. Who would handle the budgets, travel, grants, schedules? No one knew the how of her job, just the what. Given the ease with which she had done her job, many of us questioned how anyone could take over her position without a serious upheaval in the department.

The old was gone, and the new was here, and guess what? So were we. We were still here. The department stayed intact. The new hire had less experience with this department, but she still had experience and skill to meet the responsibilities of her position, including supervising people like me. I felt a curious calm with the new leadership.

The year in our temporary space would soon be coming to an end, and the move back to our building was fast approaching. This time I was given the freedom to take the lead on the project. And something happened—I discovered those catastrophes that had so adeptly been avoided before were only problems that I was able to solve.

My crutch was gone, and I found that I could stand on my own two feet without bringing about near ruin to an entire unit. When I incorrectly updated a detailed spreadsheet, I simply met with the movers and corrected my errors. If we ran short on packing boxes, I requested a delivery. If I saw an area was not being packed in a timely manner, I scheduled extra help and, together, we had the items packed and labeled in time.

When moving day arrived, my new supervisor was the godsend that kept me grounded. With no one on a pedestal, I was now working as a colleague. It took a year for it to happen, but I was revitalized. I learned to be a voice for my unit. I learned to take control of a situation. Even though I still liked to shine, I discovered that just getting the job done was enough.

A Cog in the Wheel

I was sometimes asked about a professor. A student looking at the schedule would say, "Does she give a lot of outside work? I'm taking Chemistry this semester, so I really can't be spending a lot of time writing papers." Or, "I have Dr. [whoever] for 101, what's he like?" I tell them that *Dr*. [whoever] is the Undergraduate Director and students like her, and the syllabus should give you an idea about the workload. Your 101 instructor has a great sense of humor, and he likes working with students. In other words, I knew one side of these very complex people, and it had little to do with how they performed in the classroom.

I was us, and they were them. What I saw was not what they did.

I so admire teachers, and social workers, therapists, artists. I admire people who commit themselves to making others' lives better, more fulfilled, more tolerable. But the truth is that educational, social work, and healthcare systems—even the artistic community—cannot function without administration. They need the leaders to determine budgets, the accountants to balance the budgets, the secretaries, the janitors, the electricians, plumbers, and the computer geeks. We're all part of administration. I'm the first to acknowledge that I am a cog in the wheel. And as that cog, I have just one question for the wheel that initiated the entire Renovation Project.

"What the hell were you thinking?!"

Ah, Those Spinning Wheels

I looked back in absolute amazement at how far we came in our return to our original space with only spinning wheels to get us here.

DAY ONE: Keys. They are such a simple thing. People want to lock their office when they leave and unlock them when they return. It really isn't asking a whole lot.

My job was fairly simple. I was responsible for securing keys for staff, faculty members,

and graduate assistants. I created a To Do list because I like lists.

1. Create a spreadsheet of returning office assignments.
2. Proof against current office assignments – make sure no name is left off.
3. Send the list to facilities.
4. Notify everyone of time and location for key exchange.
5. Include options for key exchange to those who will not be on campus on those dates.
6. Explain gently that staff cannot pick up keys for other people; individuals must pick up their own keys.

DAY TWO: We may not have unpacked yet, but some issues needed immediate attention. The Associate Director alerted me of faculty members who were having problems with the locks on their office doors. “We need to request that Facilities send a carpenter today. People either can’t get into their offices, or the doors won’t lock when they leave. We may need new doors installed.”

After looking into the options, I reported back. “I’ve been told that installing new doors is not an option as such work is not part of the project’s budget. The facilities office doesn’t know when or if they can install new locks. I will call our liaison with that office. He’ll know what to do.” No hesitation. No apologies. I stated the facts. My word was accepted.

DAY THREE: The calls were now coming directly to me. “Hello, Irene? Is there anyone I can call about these office doors? I just learned that my assistant was trapped the other day. The phone wasn’t connected yet, so she had to yell for help. Someone heard her and was able to pull the door open while she pushed from inside. Do you think you could do something about this problem?”

Keys. They’re such a simple thing. I was so pleased that I had been on top of *that* task.

However, locks that don't work and doors that won't open were issues no one could have foreseen. I realized that even if we were back in our permanent space, the coordinator part of my job was far from over, and I was oddly comfortable with that realization.

DAY FIVE: I want to tell you about temperatures and what people come to expect in an office setting. If it's zero degrees outside, people assume that when they come inside a building, it will be warmer than it was when they were outside the building. In fact, they come to expect that the temperature will be quite a bit warmer than it was when they were outside the building.

By day five, the calls had become more frequent and more desperate in tone. "Irene, it's 30 degrees in my office. I turned on the space heater left for me yesterday. I didn't know it could be a problem to have my heater and computer on at the same time, and, well, I blew a fuse and there is no power in the offices on my hallway. Would you look into this? I'm inclined to believe that space heaters are not a viable solution to the problem. What do you think? Also, I'm afraid I crashed my hard drive. Would you place a work request with computer services? I'm going home now and will work from there. Thanks."

OK. So far, I had managed to ensure that people had the keys to get into their offices. I just needed to work on their being able to get out. I was working on alleviating the problem of people having to work at a computer while wearing their winter coats and gloves. I needed to find a solution that would allow people to work at their computers in relative comfort and not short out the circuit breakers or crash their computers.

DAY EIGHT: There's this thing about being a smoker. You *have* to smoke. Smokers don't care how cold the temperature is outside; when that nicotine craving kicks in, you have to deal with it. So, we pay the price. In 0^{o} weather, we go outside, light up, inhale short, not long, because the freezing air can really hurt our lungs, finish and go inside. But this particular day,

my “disgusting” habit proved to be a real asset. It made me available to the poor sod who had the misfortune to twist her ankle and was struggling to walk with a pair of cumbersome crutches. The problem faced by this particular student was the handicap-accessible door had been disconnected, and it would be several days before it was repaired. So yes, thanks to Virginia Slims, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10:00 a.m., a very tired, but grateful student was given solace by a loyal civil servant who was there to open the non-electronic door and help her reach the elevator in a timely manner.

DAY 12: Panicked professor comes into office. “What’s that smell? We can’t tell if it’s chemicals or if the building is burning down.”

I reassured her that we were aware of the problem. “We know, and everything is all right. The construction crew is laying glue on the roof.”

The panicked professor responds, “But my students are starting to complain of headaches. We can’t stay in that room.”

In my most reassuring voice, I tell her, “I can call to see if there’s another room available, but it will take at least 20 minutes to secure a space.”

The exasperated professor responds, “We can’t wait that long. We’ll go outside.”

When the panicked, exasperated, exhausted professor returns, I ask how the class went. “Well, two of the students decided they wanted to get some coffee since we were all going outside. Another three students didn’t know where we were meeting, so they wandered around until they finally found us sitting in front of the building. The actual time spent on class—30 out of the allotted 75 minutes.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Thank you. Believe it or not, that helps.”

All I could think was, I did something that made someone feel better.

And the Winner Is. . .

I so love award shows. The Oscars, the Emmys, the Tonys. I've watched these events every year for as long as I can remember and each time I know exactly what I'd say. "First, I want to thank the Academy for this award. I also want to thank Sandi, my friend, director, and acting teacher; my agent who brought me this amazing script; and of course, my fellow cast members and the fabulous crew. My brothers at home. You are the best! And Mom, I love you." Yeah, I really like award shows.

April 15, 2009, Old Main Room, Dean's State of the College Address and Awards Presentation. I had been nominated for the Civil Service award. I had never attended before. No reason to. I mean, the state of the college is important, I'm sure, but I was never interested or invested in that part of academia. As I saw when I arrived that day, neither are that many other people. The seating was half full, mainly administrators and nominees.

The process was set up so that no one had any idea who or how many people were nominated in each category, making it difficult to determine one's odds of winning. One of the nominees said she just tells herself she's not going to win to avoid any disappointment. It's a good coping tool. I've used it often myself, but as much as I tried, it was hard not to get my hopes up when I had already decided what I was going to do with the money that came with the award.

Did I tell you about the money? There's a nice compensation that comes with the honor. It's a point of contention among some faculty, by the way. "Why not use that money for travel or research? These awards are just a lot of 'white noise' if you ask me." I'm pretty sure this was from someone who never won.

The tension mounted as the winners were announced.

Of course, they couldn't just name the winner. There had to be some anticipation. It started with the announcement of the person who received honorable mention. We were given a description of the individual's history with the university and contributions to the college. With that, the name was announced, the person's photo flashed up on the screen, there was applause, they walked up to accept the award, walked to back of the room for a photo, and on to the winner.

OK, I didn't get an honorable mention, which I thought was good. Not to sound too mercenary, but I wanted the money. Then came the announcement. "This year's recipient has worked at ISU for 20 years." I heard someone whisper, "It's Irene." "He has been with our college for ten years." He. Ten years. It wasn't me.

The Civil Service Award was the first one announced, so I had to sit there, clapping vigorously with each name announced for each award given, smiling, being gracious, being a grown-up about the whole thing.

Outstanding AP Award.

Outstanding Scholarly Achievement.

Outstanding Teaching Award.

It seemed that every award went to someone I knew. I thought, "Is there anyone from my department who didn't win one of these frigging things? Oh yeah. Me."

Affirmation

Awards are nice, and affirmations make a person feel good. But the bottom line is that doing the day-to-day tasks of any job can be frustrating and tedious and hard, but you still do them. If the result is a nice plaque at the end of the year, that is nice, but not necessary.

Oh, who am I kidding—I wanted the frigging plaque!

The Final Phase—Yeah, Right

I attended the first Move Coordinators' Meeting prior to the final phase of the Renovation Project. The offices on the first and second floors were scheduled to be brought back to our building by mid-June. By the fall semester, we would be a whole and functioning building again. All entrances would be open and operational. No more construction, no more noise, fumes, disruption. At least, that was what we expected until we received the following agenda item—Additional Renovation Work, Date TBD.

1. Funding came through to remodel all bathrooms and replace all windows. The work will delay bringing the building to full functioning until December—at the earliest.
2. Faculty in offices with windows will need to move out of their offices while work is completed.
3. The university will provide boxes, tape, labels, and Sharpies.
4. We assume departments still have the tape guns provided at the beginning of the project since none were returned to us after the first phase of the move.

Forgiveness

One truth of which I am certain—people are going to let you down, and not just friends or acquaintances or colleagues. Anyone can let you down, and how much you may be hurt by the experience has less to do with the relationship and more to do with the act itself. For example, even though I have no relationship with anyone in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, or Michigan, I will never understand those who cast their winning ballot for Donald Trump.

On the evening of November 8, 2016, I sat in front of the television flipping back and

forth among CNN, MSNBC, and the major networks as the news outlets began calling the results of the states for the next President of the United States. By 9:00 CST, Hillary Clinton had fallen behind in the electoral count. For the next five hours, she would pull ahead then fall behind. I sat in stunned silence as reality waited to settle in. Several months would pass before I fully embraced what happened that night.

Still, the news anchors and the pundits had a job to do. "It's too early to draw any conclusions" became the mantra of the night. I felt a sense of foreboding coming through the airwaves. Lester, George, Anderson—I could hear it in their voices. Or maybe I just wanted to hear it. Maybe I wanted to hear some remorse from those who played a central role in the normalizing of this fool who would become President.

So, I went to bed. I felt utter despair on the night that I'd expected to experience a euphoria I hadn't known since 1992 when my mother and I watched Bill Clinton and Al Gore walk onto the Arkansas state courthouse steps, their families standing by their sides—Tipper in her pink suit and Hillary wearing blue. But on this night, I watched as the candidate better qualified and with more experience than her husband, who had taken office 24 years before, lost state after state. I went to bed, ill-equipped to comprehend the victory of a TV personality with the emotional depth, moral character, and human decency of a sedimentary rock. I retreated to the comfort of my queen size bed surrounded by my family of two Chihuahuas and an aging cat. I did so in the specious hope that this disaster wouldn't happen if I didn't watch—if I didn't listen as Gergen, Axelrod, and Noonan commented in dispassionate horror on the travesty unfolding in front of them. It could not happen. It would not happen if I simply chose not to watch.

I woke up at 4:25 a.m. and pulled out the iPad I had tucked away under my pillow.

TRUMP WINS. My heart sank, even though my mind still could not process the reality. That day I saw the first expressions of denial voiced across the nation. Facebook came to my rescue, enabling me on multiple fronts. “We still have the recounts!” and “In some states, members of the electoral college are not legally bound to cast their ballot for the candidate elected by their state.” Petitions were created asking electors to vote their conscience. I believed the posts that assured Clinton followers, and maybe some Trump “anyone but Hillary” voters, that this election wasn’t over yet. We’re better than this. Our country is better than this. Don’t give up. Don’t despair.

But regardless of the posts and headlines, I was overcome with hopelessness and then anger. I was pissed. I was pissed at the people who voted for a candidate I saw as a con man—a lazy, ill-informed, lying con man. I was not, and to this day I refuse to be angry with Hillary. I wasn’t even angry with Bill Clinton, the albatross she chose to carry around her neck for the last 18 years. Maybe her decision to stay in a broken marriage after the humiliation of her husband’s sex scandal was a calculated move on her part. Maybe she was guided by political aspirations—or maybe, just maybe, she stayed because she loved her husband and believed in the vows she had taken 41 years before. I didn’t care—let me be clear on this point—I . . . didn’t . . . care about her motivation then, and I don’t care now. What I cared about—then and now—was Bill Clinton’s brilliance as a politician and Hillary Rodham Clinton’s unwavering commitment to the disenfranchised. On that election night, both were lost to the country.

I was angry—not with the hard-core racist misogynists who continued to flee in droves to his ego-inflating rallies long after the polls were closed and the banners were discarded. As much as they offended and frightened me with their actions, at that moment, I didn’t give a shit about them. My anger was directed toward a different community.

The subjects of my rage were the people who never said the N-word, who raised their daughters to be as strong and independent as their sons. I was angry with the people who were educated and enlightened, but on election day, were willing to overlook Trump's racism and misogyny because 1) he was a businessman who could fix the economy; or 2) he wasn't Hillary. Those were the people who knew better but chose to ignore core principles that under any other circumstance would have guided their actions. They were the ones who left me devastated.

In the past, when confronted with betrayal, I would tell myself to let go of the anger, for my own sake if nothing else. My Midwest upbringing instilled in me the belief that we have a responsibility as "Christians" to forgive those who have wronged us; that forgiveness is the only way to move on from being hurt or treated unfairly. Whether or not my anger was in reaction to the betrayal of a friend, a lover, or a full segment of the populace did not matter. If I wanted to heal, I had to forgive.

For the better part of my life, I looked to forgiveness as a means to escape the pain that comes from betrayal. However, adhering to a faith that offered forgiveness as the panacea for all wrong-doing left me feeling like an absolute failure because I found myself still feeling angry. As a result, I felt I had no choice but to suppress the emotion.

My favorite time of the day is morning when I'm in the shower. I love the feeling of stepping out onto the floor mat and reaching for the terry-cloth bath towel. Regardless of where I am in my life, what mistakes I've made, goals I haven't reached, or injustices I've experienced, when I'm in the shower, every imperfection, real or imagined, and every betrayal, fresh or long forgotten, is washed away. That is the time I know I will feel good about the person I am. I take my beauty salon shampoo and wash my hair, lather up with my scented body wash, and let the pulsating hot, warm, or sometimes tepid water wash over me. I'm particularly comforted in times

of crisis. The morning shower is my reprieve.

At my lowest point, I may stand under the steaming hot water for 10, 15, 20 minutes or more. I relive moments when I was hurt by someone, only this time I am in control. I play the different scenarios over in my mind. In each one, I am stronger, smarter, and wittier than I have ever been in any confrontation. I'm also angry as hell. My body is completely exposed, and while I couldn't be more vulnerable, neither could I feel braver as I formulate my plans of attack against those who have hurt me. Some mornings, when the wounds are fresh, I play my scenarios until the hot water runs out because I don't want to relinquish control.

You see, as many times as I may have said I forgive you, as much as I've tried to bury the pain, the anger was still there. So, when did it leave, because I certainly didn't let it go? Time did that.

I may see something that reminds me of that person I loved or the friend I trusted, and I wonder, what happened to the anger. I felt such rage, and now it's gone. I feel a sense of relief and realize that what was said or done doesn't matter anymore, or at least it doesn't matter as much. I remember the experience without feeling pain, and I ask myself when did all that hurt go away; how did all that hurt go away? Do I even remember the sting of the betrayal or only that I was betrayed? And finally, I ask what role, if any, did forgiveness play in my recovery?

I look back on experiences, and I ask myself with whom was I really angry. Could I have been angry with myself? I have never been angry with the woman standing in the shower. That woman is strong and articulate. She speaks with a force and clarity I only experience in the written word.

Was I angry with the 20-something who didn't confront the boy who broke her heart for the first time? Or was I angry with the 30-something who didn't tell the boss to stop the

unwanted sexual advances? If once, just once, I had stood up for myself, how much pain would I have been spared? Would forgiving myself alleviate the guilt I continue to feel for my past failings? Or am I still giving power to a word that more times than not has proven ineffective? Have I just come full circle?

Too many times forgiveness has failed me. I didn't let go of the pain. I only denied its presence. Only now am I beginning to understand that forgiveness doesn't happen with the utterance of the word. Only now am I beginning to realize that forgiveness isn't always possible. Sometimes it's not appropriate, and sometimes, the act of forgiving is just wrong. When that is the case, what am I left with?

My journey in life will be judged by my actions. How I handle the challenges I face should not be dictated by an often unrealistic and ineffective directive. When I vent my frustrations at the cashier of the local Wal-Mart or sit in the car too long after the stop light turns green because I keep replaying an encounter in my mind, I am still in the grips of the pain regardless of how many times I say I forgive. In these cases, I haven't forgiven anyone. I've just directed my anger elsewhere. If I'm going to be in pain, I need to correctly identify the source of my anger.

Does this mean that anger is my only option? I sensed a passion in the demonstrations that were held in the aftermath of the election. Voices were heard, and they were saying this is *not* who we are as a country, but I don't remember hearing them say what *we are*. Maybe they did say what we are, but anger was all I heard. I saw people expressing their pain loudly, forcefully. I needed that. I needed the anger, the passion.

Don't misunderstand. If saying "I forgive you" keeps someone from making destructive decisions, fine. I'm just saying that I have stopped looking for forgiveness for a quick fix. I have

found that pain of real consequence goes away only with the passing of time. The deeper the pain, the longer it takes for the healing to manifest. To expect anything less only sets me up for failure.

I remember watching Hillary's first public appearance after the election. She was being interviewed by Christiane Amanpour. I found her to be articulate and brave. She took responsibility for her mistakes. She acknowledged that she was the one who made the decisions on how to run the campaign. She did this more than once throughout the interview. But, she also articulated other factors that played a role in her loss. They included the hacking of the Party's server, Putin's hatred of her, Comey's closing and then reopening the e-mail investigation, and an over-reliance on the polls.

All were criticisms considered valid when expressed by commentators and pundits, but not when they came from Hillary. Glossing over her acceptance of responsibility, critics read into her remarks an attempt to blame others. I heard critiques such as, "She needs to let go of the bitterness. She needs to move on. Anger isn't going to do anyone any good now." I want to ask, "Why not? Why not be angry?" I say she should be angry. We all should be angry.

I saw in her words strength of character and a resolve to go forward. She analyzed; she looked at what people wanted in their lives and acknowledged the message she didn't hear from them.

Forgiveness exists as a binary. It says that even though you're a bad person for hurting me, I am the good person if I absolve you. Forgiveness makes everything too easy. There's no examination of the how or why of the pain, and those questions have to be answered before anyone can move on. Finally, and most importantly, those questions have to be answered before a decision can be made about whether forgiveness should even be offered.

I'm not going to forgive the people who laughed as Trump mocked the disabled news reporter or cheered when he spewed misogynist rhetoric. Why did they laugh? Why did they cheer? Why did the boss make those passes at me? Why was my heart broken so many times? Forgiveness doesn't answer those questions. I've been told that forgiveness will allow me to move on. But seldom have I done so. Instead, I revisit the experience until I grow tired of doing so, or I just stop caring. Maybe that's what I fear about Trump's victory. I'm afraid I'll either grow tired or I'll stop caring. At least if I'm angry, I am still feeling something.

I don't want to stop feeling.

Don't Tell

There are five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

The year was 1992. The office staff was enjoying its annual Christmas lunch at a local high-end restaurant. Several conversations were going on at once when my attention turned to a new hire. She mentioned that one of the male employees who worked in her area had been trying to give her unsolicited backrubs. She wanted to know if we thought she was right in telling him that he was making her uncomfortable and then she asked, "Should I tell my supervisor?" I was stunned by their responses.

"Oh, I know him. That's just his way. He doesn't mean anything."

"You don't want to overreact. It could be a problem if you make a big deal out of this. Aren't you still on probation? Reporting him could get you fired."

"As long as he doesn't do it again, you'll be all right."

"He doesn't mean anything." "You don't want to overreact." "As long as he doesn't do it again, you'll be all right." Did they really say those things? What the fuck? Seriously—what the fuck! I had to respond. "It is not all right. I don't care if he doesn't mean anything. There is no

such thing as overreacting when someone makes you feel uncomfortable. You speak up. You have to speak up." End of discussion.

But that was not the end because this discussion was taking place twenty-five years ago. We were in a different culture, a different reality. A "#me too" movement would have been as much a fiction as *The Handmaids Tale*. And if we're going to be honest, ten years ago, five years ago, even a year ago responses such as those were the norm. No, the discussion did not end. In fact, a debate ensued. I expected my arguments to be met with stunned silence, followed by grudging agreement and, finally, encouragement for our friend to speak up for herself. Instead, I was witness to the practical "we need to be real here" arguments. My colleagues were firm in their opinions. "This is coming too close to charges of harassment, and no woman wants people calling her an alarmist. Just let it go. You don't need to worry."

And with that, the discussion ended.

Denial

The year was 1985. I had secured a position in a two-person office. I had never managed an office before, nor had I ever answered directly to a male boss before. And, I proved to be no match for a 50-year-old, twice married man with a libido the size of Mt. Rushmore. He was an imposing, 6-foot-tall figure obsessed with his appearance—a stereotypical sexist who failed to see his own biases. He was a man who either formed a bond with the female colleagues who acquiesced to his decision-making or conducted covert actions to undermine anyone who failed to follow his lead. He was an accomplished expert at getting what he wanted by any means possible.

I spent my days completing tasks in as timely and efficient a manner as possible. I made coffee later in the morning so it would be fresh when he came into work. I checked his calendar

daily so I could give him his itinerary when he arrived. I filled the paper tray on his printer, reassured the angry patrons who called in to complain and smiled when he complimented the outfit I was wearing that day so as not to offend him. I did everything I believed a good secretary should do. I settled into a pattern of behavior that met both of our needs—his need to operate in his job unimpeded and mine to keep a job that ensured financial security.

In my second year, we moved to a new office, one that was better suited to the needs of the organization. He was invigorated by the prospect of working in a new space. One afternoon he was covering in precise detail which materials I should toss away and which ones I should sort and pack. I remember studiously taking notes, writing down every word, hoping against all hope that I would follow to the letter every instruction.

As we walked through the storage area, I felt his arms around my waist. They were strong. He pulled me toward him. I could barely breathe. The moment lasted only a few seconds, but it left a powerful impression. I pulled away, stunned and overwhelmed. I said nothing. As I walked up the stairs, I heard a chuckle and "Uh oh."

I was sick with fear. I should have been angry, offended, and repulsed. Instead, I was paralyzed emotionally and mentally. I wanted to leave. I couldn't imagine how I would be able to work the rest of the day, let alone the coming weeks or years. But I couldn't walk out. One doesn't leave work without good reason, and in this case, the person I would be asking for permission to leave was the reason. I stayed, but I have no idea what I did with the rest of the day. What tasks would I possibly have completed in that state of mind?

I had never felt as isolated as I did that day. I didn't understand what had just happened. I only knew I didn't want it to happen again. I called a friend that night and told her about the encounter. She was sympathetic and supportive, but then came the cautionary advice. "Can you

say for certain what he meant when he hugged you? He may have been caught up in the moment. Don't jump to any conclusions. Has anything like this happened before? You must be very careful how you proceed from here. Start taking notes. Write down the when, where, and how of anything he does in the future. And remember that this may be nothing. You don't want to cause trouble, you don't want to make your situation any more difficult, and you certainly don't want to put your job at risk unnecessarily."

I found comfort in her words. First of all, she had taken my concerns seriously, but more importantly, she had given me permission not to act. "You're right. So, he hugged me. It may mean nothing. It probably is nothing."

I had entered the first stage of my ordeal—denial.

He approached me the next day and apologized for any awkwardness he may have caused. "I'm just a physical person. I certainly didn't mean to offend you in any way." My friend had been right. I needn't overreact. There was no problem here. I simply had to adjust to a particular working style.

Bargaining

Over time I saw my responsibilities change. I was being groomed—I thought. He asked me to join him for client meetings, business lunches, and organizational dinners. I was being introduced to complexities of the organization I would have never seen sitting at the receptionist's desk. One day, as we were driving back from a luncheon, he told me he had to stop at his house and asked that I come in with him. I stood in the kitchen while he ruffled through some papers on his desk. He sat down on the couch and asked me to join him. I told him, "That's all right. I'm fine over here." He insisted. "No, you're making me uncomfortable standing there." I finally agreed, and as I sat down, he moved next to me, pulling me close to him as I struggled

to pull away. His stubbled beard rubbed against my face as I kept him from kissing me. I made my way to the kitchen and stood there unable to speak. I wasn't afraid or even sick. I was numb. I knew we would eventually have to go back to the office, so I waited. He finally spoke. "You need to grow up." Our drive back to the office was in complete silence.

Denial was no longer an option. Something terrible had just happened, and it was my fault. I shouldn't have been at his house. I shouldn't have sat down on the couch. I shouldn't have let him get that close to me. I asked for this. Hubris. I thought I was a phenom advancing in a new career when in reality I was nothing more than the person who knew when to make that first pot of coffee so it would be fresh when he arrived each morning.

I had brought this on myself. I must have done something that he misinterpreted as an interest in him. I believed that, if I had been more professional, less enthusiastic, less informal, less comfortable, he would have never taken such liberties with me.

The next day he apologized. "There will be no repercussions on my part. I don't want you to think this will affect our working relationship in any way." I accepted his apology and his assurances, all the time thinking how odd it was that I didn't feel more relieved. I decided I would be more guarded with him. While I had shown poor judgment in the past, I would make better decisions in the future. My work ethic would change. I would commit to doing the job I was hired to do with no illusions of anything more.

My efforts proved to be fruitless. Despite my resolve, we failed to find the productive work relationship I so wanted. I started making mistakes. He chastised me for everything from making appointments that didn't fit his schedule to not passing along messages in a timely manner. As much as I was determined to do better, I continued to make mistake after mistake.

It never occurred to me that something else was going on. It had been weeks since the

encounter at his house, and he had assured me there would be no repercussions. He *assured* me there would be no repercussions. It never occurred to me that his anger was directed at anything other than my work performance. I was responsible for the errors, and I had to make changes in my work ethic for my situation to improve.

One morning he called me into his office to say he was writing me up for poor performance, and I had a right to have representation. When I called my union steward, I was crying, lamenting my weaknesses as a secretary, never thinking to mention the previous encounter. Although her role required that she meet with both of us, the two-hour trip from headquarters was difficult for her to fit into her schedule. He was scheduled to go to a quarterly meeting later that week. Was I the one who suggested the two of them meet without me or did she? I honestly don't remember.

I had long accepted the isolation of this office. I had taken this job knowing I would be without colleagues, and to inconvenience someone because of my poor work habits would be wrong. I had found yet another justification for the bargain I had made with myself to keep this job. I was willing to think the worst of myself rather than acknowledge what was happening to me. Recognizing the problem would mean I would have to deal with it, and I simply lacked the courage or self-confidence to do that.

He and the union steward met without me. He came back seemingly chastened. He said he was surprised to be told that I had been so upset when talking with her. He apologized. "I am so sorry to hear you were crying. I want this to be a good experience for you. Let's start with a clean slate." He actually used those words—clean slate. I remember the conversation so clearly. Was a disciplinary letter placed in my file? I can't say. That I don't remember.

Acceptance

Again, I moved forward on the assumption that I could make the situation work. We moved to our new location. The days ran smoothly with one minor change—I accepted the premise that he was indeed a physical person. The hugs became more frequent as the weeks progressed, only now I didn't pull away. I allowed him to put his arms around me and sometimes brush his hand along my breasts and thighs. I had learned my lesson. If I didn't want to be yelled at, cussed at, or threatened, I had to accept that this was a condition of the job.

I could no longer deny that I was being mistreated. I made a decision. I would do what I had to do to keep my job and maintain some semblance of peace in the workplace. I told myself there was no harm in the hugs and occasional groping if he didn't go any further. He seemed to recognize the boundaries, and as long as he respected them, I could handle the advances.

Then one day—another outburst. I had made a mistake. I don't even remember what I had done. Again, there was yelling and cursing. This time, however, I had had enough. I was willing to accept groping and fondling, but not the verbal attacks. I was holding up my end of the bargain. It no longer mattered whether or not I had done a good job. Work ethic, work performance, meant nothing. He had taken that all away from me.

Depression

I knew my next step. I submitted my letter of resignation. Over the next two weeks, I watched applicants go into his office. Oddly, I never thought of warning them. I never thought to say, "Run. Employment here isn't worth the price." I don't know why I was silent. Probably because I still blamed myself. I still felt responsible. I didn't need to warn anyone. Someone else would know how to do a better job; how to be a good employee; how not to be a victim.

I finally let go of the job I had struggled so long to keep. I had little time to adjust to the

loss of employment. Applying for unemployment benefits was not an option. At least that was what I was told because I had quit and wasn't fired. My priority was to keep a roof over my head. I couldn't go back home. I knew if I did, I might never leave. Instead, I relied on temp jobs as my means of support for over a year. Looking back, I know I couldn't have handled anything permanent even if the opportunity had presented itself.

Going to work each day was my lifeline in more ways than one. The jobs paid the bills, but they also got me out of bed in the morning. They kept me from giving up. I was healing without even knowing what was happening.

Anger

I can see each of the stages of grief I experienced save one. I didn't get mad. I should have been pissed. I no longer had the financial security that was always so important to me, and yet I was so relieved not to feel threatened, that the loss of my security was unimportant.

A few months later, maybe half a year after leaving, I contacted the secretary who replaced me. I wanted to see how she was doing. I don't know why. Maybe I was starting to realize the situation had not been my fault. Maybe I knew that she might very well be his next victim. Maybe I was finally ready to say, "Run. None of this is your fault. You don't have to put up with it."

When I called, she started yelling into the phone, asking "Why are you calling? What do you want? Did he tell you to contact me?" I assured her that I had not heard from anyone since I left and suggested we meet to talk.

We met for dinner, and I listened as she spoke of an all too familiar narrative. "I've thought about filing a formal grievance against him, but I have to work with him alone, and I know he would make my life miserable. I'd have to tell them what he's done, and other than

being a lousy boss, his only offense is calling me into his office so he can stare at my breasts the entire time we're talking. Is that harassment or just rude? I know some will think I'm being oversensitive and need to toughen up. I'm a divorced mother paying child support to my husband. I have to work, but I just want to get away from him and forget I ever took this job in the first place."

I listened, letting her talk her way through her options. I told her about my experiences with him, not to persuade her in any way, but to let her know she wasn't alone. I knew what she was going to do. I didn't blame her for her choice, and she didn't blame me for mine. We both knew she had little choice.

She walked away.

Not until I saw him through someone else's eyes did I fully understand what he had done to me. For the first time, I was angry. I was angry for her. I was angry for me. I finally allowed myself to assign blame where it belonged, and it felt good.

Tell

Rape is about power and using brute force to assault another person. It leaves psychological and emotional wounds that may never heal. In the eyes of the law, the convicted rapist is a criminal. Modern society recognizes this fact, and only the most ignorant consider blaming the victim. But even today, the questions still surface. Someone will ask. "Why was she in that particular place at that particular time? Why did she live in that part of town, why was she out at that time of night, why was she wearing that particular dress?"

Sexual harassment is also about power, but it is psychological, not physical. The role of employer and employee is clear. The employee does what she is told to do. The expectation is that she will recognize the hierarchy of the workplace. "He's the boss, and he is yelling at me. I

must have done something wrong. He just gave me a bear hug. I must have done something to encourage him. Of course. I see what is happening. He's not acting inappropriately. He's *reacting* inappropriately because of something I did. If I stop, then he'll stop."

I assumed I was culpable. “Was it something I did? Did I give a false impression? Was I too enthusiastic? Was I over-confident? Did my lack of confidence expose a vulnerability? Did that just happen? Am I overreacting?”

Often people who are harassed are made to feel like children. If we’re lucky (not smart—lucky), we come to realize that we’re dealing with a bully in a place where we expected to find a leader. We’re entering a professional workplace only to find ourselves victims on the playground. Do we speak up, go to the principal, or simply accept what happens?

The questions asked of sexually harassed persons differ from those of rape victims, but both situations involve misplaced culpability. Just as some may insinuate that the rape victim is responsible for her assault, others suggest that the victim of sexual harassment is the guilty party. “Why did she wait so long to speak up?” “She must be lying.” “She's a spurned lover out for revenge.” No wonder we choose to walk away.

When I first wrote about this experience ten years ago, I wanted to believe I would never allow myself to be caught up in a similar situation again. I wanted to believe that I would step in if I saw this happening to someone else. And as much as I wanted to say that we as a society had advanced significantly, that harassment finally was being recognized for the assault it was, I knew such ideas were not realistic. Instead, I could only hope to see change in my lifetime.

Today I listen to pundits. I watch cable news far more often than I should, and I look to Facebook posts for confirmation of my social and political positions. I say this not as a self-criticism, but as a fact I want to acknowledge. I say this because, as we enter the year 2018, we

are bombarded with information that is sometimes credible, sometimes not.

I hear that we are experiencing a watershed moment in history. Questions such as “Why did she wait until now to speak up?" or "Why did she put up with the behavior for so long?" are posed with less frequency. However, warnings of a backlash against the movement are also being voiced. We hear of concerns about due process, which has credibility. Unfortunately, less credible rationalizations are resurfacing, including concerns that women will find it difficult to secure employment because businesses fear litigation. Calls are being made to curtail holiday celebrations and Happy Hour as they offer an environment ripe for unwanted advances.

Such statements continue to place power in the hands of the men. We don’t need to worry about businesses not hiring women if we have more women in positions of power. We don’t need to curtail office parties or Happy Hour. We just need to address a system that fosters improper behavior.

Even with the debate, I believe permanent change is taking place. I see women and men coming forward with stories of harassment (some of which cross over to criminal assault) that are far worse than anything I experienced. Victims are finally being heard, and they see something being done. Society is no longer turning its back.

The possibility, just the *possibility*, that we have reached a watershed moment gives me hope I never felt or even knew I needed before now. I, like so many others, was silenced and had to find a way to move on. I did that, and, in so doing, I believed I had healed. I question that now. Maybe the anxiety softened with time, but the satisfaction I take in watching more and more women not only speak up but also be heard, makes me realize I never completed my grieving process. I can do so now.

We are all getting closure now. No longer do we have to deny, accept, and bargain to

survive. We can avoid the depression altogether, get angry, and say stop. I find that to be extraordinary.

Collateral Damage

When Irene woke up that morning, she experienced a surge of energy course through her body. It was joy, pure absolute joy. Today she didn't need the post-it note affirmations. *Transcend your circumstances*. *I am responsible for the day I create for myself*. *My job supports the unfoldment of my highest potential***.** She didn't have to convince herself that this was a good day. She woke up knowing it was.

She was going to work. She was going to work at a job, *her* job. For the first time in three and half years, she was going to be at her desk, in her cubicle, doing her job. There would be no hanging her purse on the back of the chair while she sat at a work table in the corner. There would be no wondering from one day to the next if the temp agency would call with another placement for her, perhaps one that would last for a full two months instead of two weeks or two days. This was a permanent, full-time position—a steady paycheck, health, dental, vision, vacation *and* sick leave. She was back. She was employed.

It had been a painful journey for Irene. She had lost her home, her car, her identity. She had endured the requisite, "It will be all right. It's just a job. You'll find another." "These are the times we live in. So many people are going through the same thing, and they survive. So will you." "Those are only *things*. What matters is that you have your friends, your family, your health." And her favorite, "It's all part of God's plan."

She loved her family and her friends. She even had a sense that there might be something out there beyond the physical being and calling it God was just as good as anything else. However, the idea that *it* would have a hand in a company's downsizing and the resulting impact

on her life seemed a bit of a stretch. To Irene, life sucked because it sucked. To believe this had all happened as part of some grand scheme from above exceeded her concept of the reality. But the fact was that while she loved her family and her friends, she also loved her home. She loved her big screen TV, her hardwood floors, and the 2010 Nissan 370Z with 332-horsepower, 3.7-liter six-cylinder engine, and six-speed manual transmission. In other words, she loved her things. And she wanted to keep them.

Then came the day when they were gone, and she just wanted to get them back.

And then came the day when they no longer mattered. What mattered was that she find some sense of permanence and security. She wanted a job. And after three and a half years, she had one. Hence, the joy, the pure absolute joy. She wanted to run, to dance, to jump on the bed like the four-year-old girl she had long forgotten ever existed. But instead, she sat quietly at the kitchen table and relished the moment, as she drank her single cup of coffee with hazelnut creamer and watched *Good Morning America*.

After the morning walk, she went to the closet and took the dress out of its *Morris Ave. Cleaners* cellophane. She admired the bold red and black vertical pattern, power colors with a slimming effect. It was the same dress she wore on her last day of work. She promised herself then that she wouldn't wear it until she could again walk into an office as a permanent employee. It was a little snug, but she expected that. Some people with depression lose weight; she gained. And just as some people suffer from insomnia, she went the other direction and couldn't seem to do anything but sleep. At her lowest point, a good day meant making it to the couch and staying awake long enough to watch the Weather channel for a couple of hours.

She was cut off from the world. She had no immediate family to speak of and her friends—well, it was only after the layoff that she realized how central that job had been to her

life. It even determined her choice of friends. After the downsize, many moved away, often through forced transfer, an option not offered to those at her job level, or to live with parents. Her one lifeline was Joey, the rescue dog she had agreed to foster prior to the layoff only to join the esteemed club of Foster Failures, those who find it impossible to give up their foster "children." He stayed by her side day and night. If not for his need to go outside on a regular basis, Irene may not have ever left home.

Then the day came when her home went from being a house to being an apartment.

"Irene, you've got to let it go. It's time. Otherwise, you're looking at foreclosure. Is that what you want?"

"No, Sarah, of course not."

"So, I can tell them you accept the offer?"

"Yes. But I'm not backing off the 'as is.' If I have to take this much of a loss, I'm sure as hell not putting any more money into it just to make a sale. If they have a problem with the leaky sink, they can just fix it themselves. Are we clear on that?"

"Clear. I'll let them know. So, have you found a place yet?"

"Not yet. No one wants to rent to someone with a pet."

"So, you're keeping Joey?"

"Well, of course, I'm keeping Joey." Irene was clearly annoyed. She couldn't understand why *everyone* asked her that same question. "I'm not worried. I've got a couple of leads."

"That's good. I know he means a lot to you."

"Listen, I have to go."

"OK. I'll be in touch."

"Sarah, thank you for everything. Really. I know I haven't been the easiest client to work with."

"Not to worry. It comes with the territory."

Irene hated any show of emotion and wondered if Sarah had heard her fighting back the tears. She had.

As Irene walked out the door that morning, the house she had so loved was a distant memory. She glanced back to see Joey looking at her, his brown eyes showing both sadness and contempt. Was it because their walk that morning had been rushed? Well, he would just have to get used to that. Was it that he knew she was leaving for the day? That while she would come home in a few hours to put him out, it wouldn't be the same as having the leisurely walks they would take two, sometimes three times, a day when she wasn't working.

Surely, he had come to know the routine by now. He had learned it from the days she went to work for the temp agency. Even though she was leaving, she always came back. She would never abandon him. But this look was new. How could he possibly know this day was different? That this was the new routine.

Irene settled into her job quickly. She understood that for many people data entry had to be one of the most mundane jobs on the market. But she didn't care. She knew how quickly it could all be taken away, and she was going to make the most of this opportunity. If she had concerns about anything, it was having to leave Joey. He was being left alone every day, sometimes evenings if she had overtime, which she took whenever it was offered. And it all came to a head the day she came home to find the toilet paper strewn throughout the entire apartment. Whenever she worked overtime, she worried about Joey having to go that long without being put outside. However, that day, instead of finding any accidents, she came home to

mounds of paper strewn throughout the house and Joey, totally oblivious to his offense, met her with the same exuberance as if all was as it should be.

Her outburst bordered on rage. Joey couldn't know this, but it wasn't directed at him or the chaos he created. It was directed at the system that had cost her those years of her life and the possessions she had worked so hard to attain. Maybe they were just *things,* but they had given her life value, and she had to give them up just to survive. She took pride in the fact that she had survived, but she had never once let herself express the rage she felt at the injustice of it all. That night, Joey gave her the outlet. She cried, she yelled, and the profanities ran the full gamut. And then she stopped. She just stopped.

Irene sat on the bed and listened to the absolute silence. She let it go—the injustice, the rage, and things. Her house, her car, even her hardwood floors were gone, and finally, it no longer mattered. For the first time in how many years, she knew she was all right. At that moment she felt a level of peace and clarity she had never experienced before. She was free.

Irene called to Joey. She looked around the apartment and finally found him curled up under the bed. She gently said his name, coaxing him out from his refuge. She started to cry again, softly this time, and he licked the tears from her face. She sat on the floor, surrounded by the White Cloud, rocking him in her arms. Once again, he had found a way to save her.

It was only a few weeks later that Irene met the couple, Russ and Vicki Walker, who lived in the house directly behind her apartment building. It was an older home, one of those fixer-uppers. They were newlyweds. That was obvious to anyone who observed them together. They had an optimism and energy that comes from starting out on your own for the first time. Irene was immediately drawn to them as was Joey it turned out.

The night Russ invited Irene over for a cook-out, Joey came along. He and his wife also had a rescue dog, a basset hound they named Chloe. Vicki was convinced that it was love at first sight between Chloe and Joey. Irene and Russ laughed at the thought that two dogs could fall in love, but for Vicki, it was no joke. She knew love when she saw it, and these two were in love.

"So Irene, tell us about yourself. How long have you lived here? Do you have any family close by?"

As he handed her a bottle of Bud Light, Russ warned, "What my wife really wants to know is if you have a boyfriend."

"Or girlfriend."

"Or girlfriend, and if not, she knows someone you should meet."

Irene laughed. "No, I'm not in a relationship. I'm focusing solely on my work right now. And Joey of course."

Vicki was quite pleased. "Of course!"

"Hm. Evasive on the relationship question. She's either gay or a Democrat."

Irene answered, "I might be a gay Republican."

Vicki cried in mock horror, "Oh Irene, you're not!"

"Gay?"

"No, Republican!"

Joey and Chloe looked on as their masters laughed and continued to visit late into the evening. It would come to be a standing date for the three of them, the Wednesday night barbeque or take-out. Sometimes Irene would insist on cooking, but even that would turn into a pot-luck, since Vicki's training as a chef lent itself to some very exotic dishes to go with the tuna

casserole or Hamburger Helper. Russ and Vicki soon learned that Irene had never mastered the art of cooking beyond the very basics of meal preparation.

Irene again found herself forming a circle of friends at the office, but this time she was determined not to confine her friendships to the workplace. For that reason, she was particularly grateful for having Russ and Vicki in her life. She was also quite amused at the interaction between Joey and Chloe. If she hadn't known better, she'd have agreed with Vicki. These were two dogs in love, soul mates of sorts.

Irene grew to have the utmost respect for Russ and Vicki. Over the next year, the renovations they made to their fixer-upper turned it into a beautiful home, one of the loveliest in the neighborhood. Working weekends, evenings, even holidays, they not only installed new state-of-the-art plumbing, but siding and windows, flooring, and, their last project, a Jacuzzi.

Irene was doing well herself. While her job didn't offer many opportunities for advancement, her salary did allow her to rebuild her savings. In celebration of her first-year anniversary, she bought a new car.

"So what did you get?"

"A Ford Focus, 27 miles to the gallon on the road."

Russ approved.

She thought about buying a home, but she knew she wasn't ready to make that kind of commitment. She wouldn't admit it to herself, but the thought of moving away from her friends factored into her decision to wait. She was happy in so many aspects of her life. She had no desire to make any changes. For Irene, life had taken on a new level of simplicity, and she felt a serenity she had never known before.

Then came the day when the painful memories of the past flooded back. Russ had been laid off from work. Vicki sat in Irene's kitchen, speaking in an eerily calm and detached voice. "He has just enough seniority to make it better for them to let him go than to keep him on. He already took a pay cut, but that wasn't enough. I hate them. I absolutely hate them."

Irene was numb. Paralyzed. It was happening again. And while she knew it was happening to someone else, she had the same feeling in the pit of her stomach. Had it only been four years? Could those wounds still be that fresh? She thought it had stopped, this thing, whatever it was, that could shatter one's life in one single gesture. She believed she was safe. And if she was safe, shouldn't those around her be safe as well? But they weren't. No one was.

Irene wanted to comfort Vicki, but she knew they were facing devastating times. With Russ's experience, he might find another job quickly. But this was the only company in the area. Even if he did find another job, it would mean moving, giving up the house they had grown to love. Russ and Vicki had always been very open about their decision not to have children. They said they already had their family—their house, Chloe, and each other. That they might lose all three was a thought even Irene wouldn't allow herself to have.

Russ knew he didn't have much time. He had no severance. Vicki's catering business, which she ran out of the house, helped for a while, but it wasn't enough to pay all the bills. A savings account was something he and Vicki always talked about starting—once they had finished with the house. He would tell her, "You have to spend money to make money. That's what we're doing with the house. It's our investment. *Our* future." But now that was all at risk, and he felt powerless to do anything about it.

The job search proved futile, just as Irene had feared. Even out of state, the prospects were scarce. His interviews, in-person or online, were unproductive. "I'm either too old or too

young, or over-qualified or I don't have enough experience. But more times than not it's, 'We're not hiring right now, but we'll keep your application on file.' It's enough to send me over the deep end."

"Don't talk like that. It scares me." Irene knew how real that feeling could be.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean I'd ever do anything. It's just so damn frustrating. I look around this house and wonder if this was all a mistake. Should we have been more conservative with the upgrades? I mean a Jacuzzi? Really? That's certainly what our folks were saying. Especially Hank and Martha. If I have to listen to Vicki defend me to her parents one more time, I think I'll take the phone out of her hands and throw it across the room."

"It doesn't matter what anyone else says or thinks. You love this house. You put so much of yourselves into it. Don't blame yourselves for that, and don't let anyone else blame you either."

"How did you do it? How did you get through? I feel like such a failure. I've let down my wife. Hell, I even let down my dog. She knows. She really does know. Chloe's just a dog, but you can see it in her eyes. It's as if she knows . . . ."

"Knows what?" Irene asked the question, but she didn't want to know the answer.

"That we may not be here. For her."

Irene just looked at Russ. She didn't want to believe what he was about to say.

"Irene, if we lose the house, Vicki's going to live with her parents. Things just aren't good between us right now. We need time apart. At least the house gives us the space to be away from each other. God, I don't know which is worse—the arguments or the silence. And it's always one or the other. There's never anything in between. Anyway, as much as Hank doesn't

like me right now, he doesn't like dogs even more. Never has. Sometimes I think Vicki loving Chloe so much is a simple act of rebellion against him."

There was a long silence. Irene didn't want to hear what was to come next. She didn't want to believe her friends could do this.

"Anyway, I don't know where I'll end up. Probably rent an apartment. There's no way we can keep Chloe. We'll have to take her back."

Irene grabbed his arm, her nails digging into his skin. "Don't say that! Don't even think it. She's not some *thing* you can sell or give away. She's Chloe. She loves you. She's the one who can get you through this. Don't you forget that. Don't you ever forget that! Do you hear me? Do you?"

Russ carefully removed Irene's hand from his arm. For what seemed to be an interminable amount of time, nothing was said. He had never seen Irene lose control. He realized he had never seen her show any real emotion at all. Even her laughter was reserved. When she told them about her layoff, there was a level of objectivity to her story that didn't mesh with what had happened. She never betrayed the pain she had gone through. But there was no objectivity today. There was only raw emotion. "You're right, Irene. You're absolutely right. Giving up Chloe isn't an option. OK? Are you OK?"

But Irene didn't trust him. She knew that for all their generosity, both Russ and Vicki were pragmatic individuals. They may have called Chloe one of their "children," but she was a dog. And a dog is a possession, a thing that can be taken back.

The strain on the marriage increased over the coming months. One night the arguing escalated to the point that Irene was compelled to intervene. She crossed the backyard and knocked on the door, knowing very well she might be turned away. Russ answered, and she was

surprised when he told her to come in. Vicki was hysterical. Irene realized that it was Vicki who was out of control, and Russ was trying to calm her down. Vicki was holding the foreclosure papers in her hand. They had been served that day. The bank was taking back the house. They had nowhere to go. It was over.

Vicki was sobbing uncontrollably. “It’s not fair. It’s so not fair. We worked so hard. We had plans. And they’re taking it away from us. We didn’t do anything wrong. We didn’t do anything wrong! My parents say we shouldn’t have put so much money in the house—we should have saved our money. What good would that have done? It wouldn’t have stopped this from happening. Why is this happening? I hate them. I hate that company. I hate my parents. I hate all of them.”

Russ sat at the table motionless. He stared at the wall directly across from him. He remembered the night when he and Vicki stayed up until dawn stenciling pictures of yellow, pink, and red flowers on the wall. Even though he said the idea of looking at flowers as he drank his coffee every morning made him nauseous, he relinquished with little opposition. For Russ, Vicki’s enthusiasm could be intoxicating. It’s not that arguing was futile. He simply couldn’t bear to dampen her passion. So, he acquiesced. And he was glad that he did. Painting the kitchen that night was one of the happiest times of his life. He had never felt so close to her. Now he sat, seemingly paralyzed, wondering how something so perfect could leave him feeling void of any emotion at all.

Irene studied them as they sat on opposite sides of the room. She had been where they were now. She knew what it was to lose what seemed to be most important to you—your work, your home, your identity. She also knew they would survive. They had to survive. The

alternative was too unbearable to consider. She knew because she had once considered it herself; she knew how easy it would be to give in to that desperation.

For the first time, she understood the helplessness people must have felt when trying to comfort her. She wanted to say, “It will be all right.” She wanted to tell them, “You’ll make it through this. It’s not your fault. You did nothing wrong, and it is unfair. But it will be all right. I promise you. It will be all right.” But she couldn’t. They were empty words, and she knew it was the emptiness of those words that could inflict the most pain. She would spare them that agony. But in doing so, she had nothing she could say. Irene could only hold Vicki’s hand and pray to a God she didn’t even believe existed that it would be all right.

The bank had given them two weeks’ notice. Vicki would stay with her parents and Russ would get an apartment. He refused to move in with Vicki’s parents, and Vicki didn’t argue. It was as if they had both given up. They wanted to forget everything. Not only what they had lost, but that they ever had it in the first place.

Irene helped organize a yard sale. What they didn’t sell, she arranged to have taken to Good Will. She knew the drill. After three years, it was still fresh in her mind. But this time she wasn’t operating in a fog. She was fully aware of what was happening. She didn’t let the most valuable items be bartered down to a fraction of their value. She knew what they were worth, and so did the people coming there to make their purchases. Vicki and Russ were at least going to have fair compensation for the things in their house. They deserved that.

The last night, Irene sat with Vicki and Russ in the backyard one last time. They ordered pizza, but nobody ate. Irene brought the Bud Light. She made sure it was ice cold, just like the bottle Russ gave her at that first cookout. Joey and Chloe were lying next to each other on the lawn. He tried to get Chloe to play with him. He grabbed her toy and ran around the yard, but she

just looked at him. He took it over to her and put it next to her front paws, rubbed his nose against her ear until finally she jumped up and started to wrestle with him. Any other time they would have all laughed. Vicki would have told Russ, “Honey, get your cell phone. We need to take a video of this.” Russ would have scrambled around looking for where he left it. “Honey, it’s on the table. Quick, hurry. This is so cute.” And just in time, Russ would have recorded the two of them playing together, and Vicki would have insisted that he post it online, which he always did.

Tonight though, Vicki simply said to Russ, “Do you have your phone?” But he didn’t answer. So, Irene took out her phone and took one last video of them together. Her Joey and precious Chloe.

Grief

When I remember certain moments from my past, I fear that exploring them in depth may tarnish them in some way. This memory was vague, almost dreamlike— a place filled with flowers of every color imaginable—crimson red, deep gold, bright yellow, violet, purple, and blue. Are there such things as blue flowers? Only in my memory. Memories, at least the good ones, tend to make things better, and in this case, more colorful than they really are.

I didn’t know where this place was, if it existed anymore, or if it ever existed at all. Could I find it? Was it real? Could I have been holding on to a memory that had only been something I dreamed? That day, a crisp sunny Fall day, I decided to find out.

I went looking for the greenhouse my mother and I had visited nearly 40 years earlier. I drove through the gate; ever more certain I had found it. Only I was looking at much more than a greenhouse. I had entered a state park nature preserve. I found it all to be quite beautiful. I walked the nature trail and crossed a wooden footbridge painted a deep coral red. I looked at the

mini-waterfall off to the east and marveled at the pond, covered with water lilies. There were variations of elegant stone benches and wooden picnic tables.

I imagined how much my mother would have enjoyed this place today. Then I thought of her final years when such a visit would not have been possible. Her vision was impaired and her stamina non-existent.

I saw the greenhouse we had visited, but it was empty. The door was boarded up, and the siding looked like it was rusting out. For all the beauty that I had seen on the grounds, I was saddened that the greenhouse had been sacrificed to the expansion. The simplicity of a space that at one time had been cared for by a scant number of people was a loss that couldn't fully be filled by the grandeur found in the current gardens. This place had not been supplemented but replaced.

The visit gave me the courage to continue to the place that had shaped the person I am today. The park preserve had been a detour, just as looking for the greenhouse had been a detour when my mother and I visited the college campus where I would spend the next four years. Today, I was going back.

As I approached the town, I read the signs for five interstate exits and chose the one that took me directly to the campus. I recognized some of the street names but was frustrated that I wasn't approaching any familiar landmarks. I finally reached the Student Union, but I was more interested in finding the library and the Performing Arts Center. My frustration was only heightened by the street construction that hindered me even more.

Finally, I came to the street I wanted to reach—Lincoln Ave. The corner pharmacy had been replaced by a coffee shop, New Brew, and a Jimmy Johns. The Methodist Church had not changed, nor had its coffeehouse with its inconspicuous side entrance. I remembered the

evenings I spent with friends drinking tea, a beverage for which I have never had a fondness, burning incense, listening to bad guitar music, and having a freedom I had never known before. I was part of a group, something I had never known in high school. We discussed the futility of the war, the injustice of poverty, and how much we hated Richard Nixon and his war machine.

As I continued driving soaking in the sights, I reached Allen Hall, the first dorm I lived in as a freshman at the university. I expected to experience the same bittersweet nostalgia I had when I visited the gardens, or when I passed the Performing Arts Center where I had spent the better part of my four years as a student. But instead, I was overcome with an almost unbearable wave of grief.

I wasn't sure what possibly could have elicited such a response. The memories of my first year at school, or even my first day moving into the dorm wasn't what brought on this reaction. I'd had those thoughts many times over the years—the friends, the first time I had deep-dish pizza, the first time I got drunk, the first time I fell in love, and the first time I had sex.

And then I realized, the memory that had brought me to this point was my mother. I saw her standing in the kitchen of our home deciding what she would do that day now that I was gone. She was starting her new life without me just as I was starting my life without her. Today, however, I was reflecting on that day as it affected someone other than me.

I had never before ached so deeply for my past. I felt such remorse for not realizing how strong she had been, raising me, and then letting me go. I wanted to go back and thank her. For the first time in my life, I wanted to go back in time. I wanted to experience that innocence again, but with the maturity to recognize the precious nature of everything around me.

I stopped. I cried for what was gone. The pain ran deep, but I didn't want to stop hurting. I didn't want to stop crying. For the first time in years, I was missing her, appreciating her, and

realizing how much I still loved her.

I found a quote not long ago. It read, “When you can tell your story without crying, you know you've healed.” I thought I had completed my grieving long ago. I had healed, but I resented that healing because it meant that I no longer missed her, that I no longer had anyone to love.

I wrote a play several years ago. I first performed it as a workshop piece to a full house. Granted it was a small “house,” and maybe I’m wrong that all the seats were filled, but it doesn’t matter. If memory is playing tricks on me, I’m fine with that. Let the tricks flourish. My play was a success. The humorous lines were met with laughter, the dramatic moments with tears—primarily mine—and the play was met with applause. I was given a bouquet of flowers by someone learned in the customs of the theatre. It was a grand night.

One year later I performed the play again. We did a full production over two weekends, but this time the house wasn’t full. In fact, we were lucky if there were ten people in the audience on any given night. Still, the laugh lines worked, and the dramatic moments elicited tears— again, primarily mine. With these performances, however, the tears came from a place deep in my core. I couldn’t catch my breath; there was a gasping for air that came through my throat in a whisper-like scream. Still, the performance was controlled. I had found that elusive place an actor seeks between the expression of a character’s emotion and an actor’s command of the moment.

I was both the actor giving a performance and the character grieving the loss of her mother. My response wasn’t confined to performances. I found myself in the same place emotionally during rehearsals as well. I was “in the moment,” and I trusted myself every night that I would do what I needed to do—honor the woman for whom this piece was written. What I

didn't realize was that, with each performance, I was saying goodbye. And as a result, with each performance, I came out on the other side a little bit more healed.

I had carried grief that was so deep I didn't even know it was there until I performed this play. I hadn't let go of the grief or handed it over to a "higher power." I had lived with it, and while I may have buried the grief, it would surface again. And just as it had surfaced unexpectedly, it left me without my even knowing it was gone. I discovered that pain was no longer a part of me. Healing was that elusive.

Four years later, I had the opportunity to perform the play again. But this time, the grief was no longer lurking under the surface, aching to come out. I felt lost. As a daughter, I was determined to return to that place I had occupied with earlier performances. As an actress, I had nothing to pull from. I wanted to reach the emotional depth I had experienced before. I recalled my acting classes. I revisited Constantin Stanislavski's "magic if" and Lee Strasburg's "method acting"—place yourself in a similar experience from your past and use the emotions those memories provoke to create a strong performance. But in my case, I didn't have to make use of the memories from a similar circumstance. The story I was telling was my story, but I was left void of emotion, real or manufactured. While I feared failure as an actor, an even greater fear was that I no longer missed her. Simply, I had completed my grieving. I had healed, and I resented that healing.

How could I possibly have recovered so completely from losing someone who had been a central force in my life? What kind of person stops missing someone they loved so dearly? Does this happen to people who lose a spouse or a child? Do parents and spouses ever find that place where they can say they've healed?

The character in my play had changed. I was different, and consequently so was she. I

assumed that healing had done that. It had changed who I was. The wounds had left scars, and the ache had subsided. I was no longer a person in mourning. I was someone who could recall and reflect without feeling the pain. I told myself I was stronger, that I had said my goodbyes and moved on. My grieving was over, and there was nothing I could do to change that. All the acting exercises in the world couldn't bring back that grief. They brought back the memories, but not the pain.

I recently watched an interview with a mother who had lost her child to gun violence, and she referred to grief as a child. I have been inclined to call grieving a bitch, but I have to concede that child is a kinder and more accurate description. I like looking at grief as a separate entity, and calling it a child gives it a gentler, more innocent life of its own. In doing so, I find answers to many questions.

Grief never grows up. It never acquires wisdom of its own. I expected to grow out of it with time— to grow stronger, even wiser, from the grieving process. I wanted the grief to quiet itself, perhaps even leave, and when it finally did, I wanted to know where it went. Was it taking a nap, and would it come back at any time without warning? Had it left me completely? And if it had, what was I left with? My strength? My wisdom? My guilt for sending it away because it made me feel uncomfortable?

I wanted to feel sad again. I wanted to grieve again. When I set out on my day trip that Sunday afternoon, I was looking for something, but I honestly wasn't sure what. I think it was a connection to something that touched me emotionally. I wanted something that could make me feel again.

As I drove by Allen Hall, I knew I needed to leave because being there was proving to be too painful. But at the same time, I didn't want to stop hurting. The hurt felt good. It was like

having sex, experiencing the orgasm when you climax so you can feel that release, but not wanting to release.

You know you've healed when you stop crying, but also when you stop being scared or lonely. I learned that I didn't want to heal so completely that I forgot how to cry or be angry or scared or lonely because she was gone. I didn't want the grief ever to leave me completely. I find comfort in knowing that grief may find its way back into my consciousness whether I will it back, or it decides to return when I least expect it.

I'm glad it has stayed with me, even though I don't have the control over it that I'd like.

Jumping the Shark

In the late 70s, the seed for a literary trope was planted—*Jumping the Shark*. It is used to reference that moment when a television series has passed its prime, no longer meets the "high" (or perhaps low) standards expected of a network program, and resorts to gimmicks to keep the series alive, or at the very least on the air long enough to find its way to syndication. The series was *Happy Days.* The gimmick focused on its already iconic character, Arthur Fonzarelli, aka the Fonz, accepting a challenge from his nemesis, The California Kid. On water skis and clad in swimming trunks and trademark leather jacket, the Fonz takes a water ski jump over a shark.

It was epic! No. It was silly, but so was the show and so, certainly, was the character. The episode garnered 30 million viewers and continued for another six seasons. That can hardly be called a failure, even by today's standards. So why does the series carry the weight of this particular trope and its negative connotations? Maybe the criticism comes from what the series represents—that attempt to stay around, to stay relevant, long after it is time to leave.

Five years ago, I left a career/profession/vocation/job that I had worked in for close to 36 years. And I was glad. I came to that fork in the road, and I took it. But I left wondering if I had

done my best if I had served those people well who had counted on me. Over time I came to realize my real question wasn't whether or not I had done the job, or even if I had done it well, but whether or not I had done it with a smile. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild writes of a "managed heart" and the emotional labor associated with professions, those primarily in the service industry, including office support. What's emotional labor? In a nutshell, it's that job that requires you, not out of malice but by its very nature, to be glad that you're there. Not glad that you have a job, not glad that you can pay the bills, but glad that you're there doing whatever you're doing, and showing everyone who sees you that you are indeed happy.

Trust me, that's labor.

Thirty-six years. That is a long time to spend in a profession that by its very nature requires one to be happy, to have a smile regardless of the situation or the demands placed on the employee. So, I find myself asking, did I stop smiling and if so when? Did I jump the shark, stay past my prime, resort to gimmicks to keep my place on the schedule? And most importantly, what did my "non-smile" mean to the people who approached me every day, some days every hour or more with their questions, requests, interruptions? What did it mean to those people who put forth the greatest effort to say they recognized my value? I'm talking about the people who asked me to stop typing long enough to make 20 copies or send a fax, but always followed with a "please and thank you." What did my non-smile mean to those people who didn't make any effort to consider my feelings? "Make these copies. My meeting is in five minutes." Did they even care that I wasn't smiling? Probably not, but they're not the ones I worry about today. I worry about the ones who took the time to say I mattered, even if they sometimes took too much time to say it.

Out of those 36 years, I spent 21 years in one office. It was my home, and, as unoriginal

as it may sound, the people were my family. I'm talking about the people who approached me with requests such as, "I know this is an imposition, and I hate to bother you, but I just couldn't get to this earlier. I was wondering if you could find the time to make 150 copies and walk them over to the "fill-in-the-blank" office by 2:00? And by the way, I love that haircut." Did my non-smile say, "Well, I might have been able to if you hadn't spent the last five minutes asking me!" God, I hope not. What kind of person would lose patience with someone who's just trying to be nice, EVERY—SINGLE—TIME they need something done? I hope it didn't show, but 36 years. Sometimes their efforts to show how much I was valued just didn't pay off.

They aren't bad people. We who support them, we aren't bad people either. I'm not a bad person. I came to work every day, sometimes only in body if not mind. I did my best. The expectation to show respect isn't new. It's the norm. It's the standard for all parties. It's how it should be. So, what happened when those efforts didn't seem to matter anymore? When did I become so jaded, so tired that the interruptions that came with the kindnesses just became interruptions? And did I let it show? If I did, should I have left then?

The question becomes when did "then" happen. Was it the time I saw the recent hire approach my desk only to turn around and walk away? Did I do something to make him walk away, or did he just change his mind? How about the time the committee chair came to my desk to first ask where I found that stunning blouse before asking me to deliver a package across the street because she had to get to a meeting . . . only to be met *not* with a non-smile, but an actual glare? I don't know. I'm guessing it doesn't matter now.

So, what is the question? Did the real me finally claw its way to the surface and say I'm more than a smile. I want more than strategies that show I am respected, no matter how sincere or how legitimate they may be? 36 years. 21 in one frigging office. What was I thinking? That I

liked it? That I belonged there? That I took care of it and it took care of me? That I was shown respect and I appreciated it more than I even knew? But now I want more.

Maybe I just over-stayed my welcome. Maybe the tricks and gimmicks I used to keep myself engaged and relevant stopped working without my knowing it. Maybe I jumped the shark without even putting on the skis. This place, where I had spent the last two decades and that had become my home, had taken a different form. These people, who I treated less as co-workers and more as relatives, had been there when I survived cancer, when I cared for my mother as her physical and mental health went into decline, and when I mourned her passing. It never occurred to me that I would leave them one day. I was not only comfortable in this place; I was entrenched in it.

Of course, I knew that one day I would retire, but I had never really envisioned it. I saw retirement as being three, four, even five years away. And then the day came when I was reminded abruptly, even brutally, that this wasn't my home and these people weren't my family. My Neilson ratings were on the decline, and the Q score showed that my favorability had fallen. That was the day I realized that this was a job, and my mistake had been in assuming it was much more.

I see now that my fall from grace was more my interpretation of events than actual fact. I wasn't a failure. I had just grown out of the position without letting it go. These people could no longer be my family. No longer did I have the annoying cousin, the patronizing brother, or the overbearing in-law. I now had people I worked with and for. I established that distance again, and, consequently, was able to meet the standards required for this position. And then I walked away.

Retirement was much closer than I ever imagined. I left the job I had done for over two

decades. For something that had meant so much to me for so long, that had defined who I was for so many years, walking away was surprisingly easy. I had no regrets. I was ready to start a new chapter, and I knew whatever success I enjoyed was due as much to the person I had learned to be with these people as it was to the person I would eventually become without them.

Stigma

When I was 59 years old, I retired. Whenever I spoke of my decision, I never wavered in saying that I had taken "early" retirement. I now see as my personal code for, "I'm retired, but I'm not old, and because I'm not old, it's not too late to do whatever I want to do, so I'm starting a new career." That career was teaching, and in pursuit of that career, I returned to graduate school.

First, let me say that I have always been most comfortable in an academic environment, specifically a public university. I tried working in the private sector, but I always came back to academia, so in many ways, a move from the office to the classroom wasn't that radical a change for me.

And yet it was. This move was earth-shattering, life-changing, ego-building and -deflating, terrifying, and exhilarating. With all of those emotions flooding at one time, it never once occurred to me how out-of-place my peers must have seen me—peers who ranged in age as young as 22 years and no older than 35, if that. I spent four years as that old woman sitting in their classroom, taking part in their discussions, listening to their professors. But never once did anyone display ageist biases of any kind. Or maybe they did, and I just didn't see it, because I truly did not care.

Earning the degree was all I wanted to do, and I was determined to do it. Only, I wasn't. What I was determined to do was make it through the first semester of classes. No, that's not true

either. I was determined to make it through the first reading assignment on pedagogical theory and my first presentation on the significance of the color pink in visual rhetoric. And I did. I made it through the first semester, then the second, third and fourth, completing my course studies, followed by doctoral exams, and finally taking on the final step, the dissertation. I don't know when I stopped experiencing the journey as a one-step, one-day-at-a-time-endeavor. I don't know when I let myself look at the whole landscape instead of the pieces that it was made of. I don't know when I fully embraced the possibility that this was going to happen, but I did. I'm here now, on the precipice of victory or defeat.

I see the wisdom in the adage, "Life isn't about the destination, it is about the journey." I agree with the sentiment. Emotionally and logically I know the lessons I've learned in life come from the pursuit of the goal and not the reaching of that goal. Memories of my undergraduate years are not about the degree I received at the end of those four years. My memories are about my failures as much as my successes; the friendships I formed; how, where, and with whom I studied for exams and researched papers. They are about the instructors who challenged me and those who ignored me. They are about roommates and classmates, those who became friends and those who betrayed my trust. That journey taught me many lessons, but today my lesson isn't about how I got here, but rather embracing, and not fearing, the fact that I am here. My lesson today is knowing that I can complete this leg of the journey and take pride in my accomplishment.

Finally, as I close in on this goal, I see myself looking back and thinking, "Thank God I didn't know then what is becoming ever so clear to me now. I'm old and old people don't do what I just did." But we do. We do it all the time. We run 5 k races. We start businesses. We begin new careers. We do it all the time, but the pushback can be daunting, especially if we're

the ones doing it to ourselves. What we do to ourselves is so intrinsically tied to what society says we should be. When we don't conform, too often our lives can take a turn for the worse, not because of who we are or what we do, but because of the stigma inherent in society's view that we then internalize.

Stigma is how society tells someone they don't belong (Coleman-Brown 147). It is a tool used to exert pressure on those who don't quite fit the norm because, well, there's something different about them. They may be too old or too fat; poor or sick; disabled or mentally challenged. They may be the victims of poverty or have simply shown poor judgment.

The inevitable stigmatization that accompanies aging is unique in that, save the unforeseen tragedy of premature death, *everyone* will grow old. However, society doesn't seem to want to acknowledge the certainty of the aging process. Instead, it goes to extreme measures to forestall, and then to hide, the process. Is this practice pure vanity? I think the problem goes much deeper than that. I believe fears about the loss of ability and productivity play as important a role in assigning stigma to aging as the loss of youthful appearance. No one is exempt from aging and as such, no one is exempt from feeling the stigma that comes with it.

What I find particularly disturbing is the work of feminists who allow ageist rhetoric to find its way into their discourse. In "The Double Standard of Aging," feminist Susan Sontag wrote a compelling essay on the biased assumptions made about women as they age, but her arguments were based not on the idea that ageism was wrong, but that women had to deal with these biases at a younger age than did men. She opened with the premise that there was nothing unreasonable in one's anxiety about growing old, citing 35 as the age when such anxiety first presented itself in women. She referred to advanced age as one being in their 70s or 80s and seeing a decline in physical and mental powers. Sontag made these arguments with

condescension and pity while referring to aging as a "shipwreck" (19).

Published in 1972 when Sontag was 39, her essay reflected stigmatization based on assumptions by society; assumptions that tell us when we are old we are going to be outsiders. Yes, she railed at the injustice women face when they were judged as less competent and less active, both as sexual beings and members of society. My issue with Sontag lies in the fact that she argued the judgment was premature, not wrong.

When leaders of a movement as enlightened and progressive as feminism express such rhetoric, it is no wonder people will do whatever is necessary to hide the effects of aging and avoid the subsequent stigma. I think back to my 30s and feel a tinge of guilt for the assumptions I made about both men and women in their 60s and 70s. The guilt comes from my own condescension. "How they must want to be somewhere other than at this job or struggling with that particular climate or living arrangement. How tired they must be." I made these baseless judgments with no consideration that I too would someday be in my 60s and 70s.

As a society, we are fixated on maintaining the illusion of youth. As we age, we feel enormous pressure to maintain the illusion. Not to do so results in an assumption that we don't care about how we present ourselves to the general public and therefore don't fit in. Society provides an extraordinarily large number of options to help people pass as younger than they are. The cosmetics industry generates a multi-billion-dollar profit world-wide with hair coloring to cover the grey (or white), as well as facial creams and age-defying make-up to hide those unsightly wrinkles. The American Society of Plastic Surgery offers accredited facilities for both in-patient and out-patient surgeries. Websites advertise in-office Botox injections, eyelid surgery, and tummy tucks with zero to two days recovery time. Not only can you look ten years younger overnight, but you also don't have to miss a day of work to do so. The payoff is that, as long as

we can maintain the illusion of youth, we are the ones imposing the stigma as opposed to being subjected to it.

Are we complicit in our own ageism? Do we engage in practices, that when applied to any other segment of the population, would be considered blatantly prejudiced? I think we do. I'm not saying we do so deliberately or maliciously. We do so because regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, most, if not all of us have emotional ties to people who are aging, and we make judgments without even realizing we are doing so. We may ask less of the person or assume we know their wants and needs. More significantly, we do so knowing we are going to someday belong to the segment of the population we are judging.

Gerontologist Todd Nelson wrote, "[T]o to illustrate how incredibly open yet pernicious this ageism is, [think] about the outrage that would ensue if there was a section of greeting cards that communicated the message 'sorry to hear you're Black' or 'ha ha ha too bad you're Jewish.'" He is right! Birthday cards written for the older adult are written almost exclusively with humor. None celebrate aging but instead ridicule the inevitability of growing old. I found cards for people as young as 30 written with messages addressing the loss of faculties—mental and physical. With each decade, I saw a rise in the number of cards encouraging recipients to engage in activities not encouraged in their younger years—eating, drinking, or screwing with abandon.

Humor allows us to avoid, even deny, the inevitability of growing old. Does making light of growing older mean we can avoid thinking about death? Do we fear our mortality? Inherent in these questions is the assumption that growing old means we become increasingly focused on death. But do we? I don't. I think about tomorrow, next month, next year. I think about what I want to do and what I need to do—walk the dogs, buy a car, take a vacation.

I'm not saying I've never thought about death. I have—when my mother died. I was 52 years old. But I also thought about it when my aunt died. I was 16. And when my father died, I was 8. Aging doesn't equate to dying. For me, aging has meant a growing appreciation for life regardless of the challenges it may throw at me. I say this not because of any studies I've conducted, or even read. I believe this because of what I have witnessed in my own life.

A Force of Nature

I have friends, close friends, some of whom have been in my life for many years, some for only a few. They are friends I rely on and go to with problems or when I just want to hang out. Some are my age, some are younger, and some are older. I know I can count on them, and I do. I feel very grateful for that.

But I have one friend—my best friend. She is the person I can talk to about anything, and she will know exactly what I mean. I never feel I need to be careful with my words around her. I never worry about embarrassing myself because of something I say or do. I can use a word incorrectly in a sentence, or forget a name, and she can correct me without either one of us giving it a second thought.

She is a woman whose life, as represented on a financial spreadsheet, has lost its value; a woman who with each successive year, adds weight to her 300-pound, 5'3" frame while taking in less and less food—not because she lives on fad diets or suffers from an eating disorder, but because her body simply cannot ingest food in any way other than storing it as fat.

She literally, quite literally, worked herself into an illness that left her incapacitated, forcing her to leave a $50,000 a year position. She divorced her husband of 35 years when he told her of his extra-marital affairs throughout their marriage because he "felt guilty and needed to get this off his chest." In negotiating the divorce settlement, she acquiesced on his financial

demands, which proved to be a devastating hit to her retirement. Today, she lives on a monthly SSI check of $600.00 while paying off thousands of dollars in student debt.

This is a woman who for all intents and purposes is not a productive member of society. She is 76 years old. She suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, morbid obesity, and life-threatening allergies. She is subject to stigmatization on multiple levels—age, ability, and appearance—and does not care. Or if she does care, she never, ever lets it show. She can't afford to because she is, without question, an essential presence in the lives of everyone who knows her. She is determined not to burden them in any way. That includes not complaining.

We go out to dinner, and I want to say to the people around us, "Can't you see what I see?" She is a force of nature. She is still here despite the aching muscles and joints. She has swollen feet that turn purple if she has to sit in a chair so high her legs dangle. She stopped taking the medication that controlled her restless leg syndrome because it gave her nightmares that left her waking in bed drenched in sweat.

She is subject to life-threatening allergic reactions at any time for any reason. Over-the-counter drugs are all the doctors can offer to counteract the swelling of the esophagus that would otherwise close off her throat and cause her to suffocate. She monitors the kinds of food she eats including candy or fruit, all the time knowing that a whiff of perfume or potent room freshener is as much a threat as a Milky Way or tangerine.

We talk on the phone, and I ask if she has enough money to buy Benadryl for the month. She assures me that she does, but that's not her concern right now. Her family wants her to come back for a visit. Her grandson is coming home on leave before he deploys overseas. He is 18. He believed he would do better to enlist, because, with his grades, he didn't think he would be

accepted into college. When we talk, she tells me, “I don’t blame him for not wanting to go to college. He didn’t do that well in school, but why on earth he chose the Marines is beyond me. He’s leaving, and I want to say goodbye, but it’s a three-hour drive. I may not have the stamina to make the trip, and I won’t know until that day, so I can’t make any promises.” She may have to cancel if she’s too exhausted, and she’s worried about her family’s reaction. He’s not her favorite grandchild. She has no favorites, but she really does. They are all her favorites. And this one is leaving. “What if he’s sent to Afghanistan? What if he doesn’t come back?”

She lives this life and never questions why she’s reached this point of desperation. She’s grateful for a government that provides for her basic needs, but she asks how much longer it can continue to pay the thousands of dollars for each procedure she has to undergo, just to stay alive. I never ask, but I think she worries about being a burden because she *does* want to live.

That makes me angry. We do this. We rail against assisted suicide, and then we turn around and say the government shouldn’t be expected to pick up the tab on rising healthcare costs for the most vulnerable sick and elderly. And all the while, the frail and poor are caught between honoring the so-called sanctity of life and feeling guilty for wanting to live.

She’s grateful for her family, but wonders why they don’t understand, why they ask so much of her. I want to tell her, “They can’t see the illness because it will take you away from them. They need you too much. Of course, they love you. But, they need you more.”

And I want to say to them, “Can’t you see what’s right in front of you? Why won’t you do more?”

A Big Man

My friend Phil was a big man. Big—that word captures the essence of this man. He was big in stature. In talent. Voice. Heart. I use his name, not because he’s gone and I don’t risk his

wrath for speaking of him in such glowing terms, but because he deserves to be named. He faced the stigma of disability his entire adult life. As the muscles slowly atrophied over the years, he didn't stoically move forward with his life. He did so with all the noise and bluster any person in his position could express, and he did so without apology. He railed in frustration the night he found himself the last person left on the second floor of the theatre in which we'd been rehearsing. The elevator was out of order, and there was no way to call for assistance. So, he sat down on the stairs and lowered himself, butt-first, down the 13 steps. He had no choice. I can't begin to imagine what that must have been like for him. He must have been scared and frustrated and angry.

He survived over 30 years with this crippling muscle disorder. Not MS, but that's what everyone assumed it was. I never knew the name. It didn't matter. Not to me or anyone who knew him. That's because you never saw the disability when you were with him. He overpowered everything in the room, including his disability. First, he overpowered the cane, then the walker, then the wheelchair. You didn't see them. You just saw *him*.

And when he was on stage, you never saw the actor. You saw Willy Loman, Big Daddy, Macbeth, the stage manager. I once told him the story of Thornton Wilder, who, when asked about his thoughts on the after-life, responded, "Well, I lied in *Our Town*." And Phil laughed. It was wonderful to hear him laugh. It was a big laugh that came from deep within him. He never bothered with polite laughter. If he thought something was funny, he let you know. And if he didn't, he let you know that as well.

His memorial service was held in a theatre. A theatre/auditorium. It was appropriate given his life—acting, directing, producing, teaching. But more than that, it was necessary. We needed that much space to accommodate the audience of mourners. And we did mourn. And we

paid tribute. The testimonials came in from former students, colleagues, and actors—Tony- and Emmy-award-winning actors—all offering words of gratitude for the impact he had on their lives and how his work inspired them. If not for the disease that robbed him of so much, he would have . . .

We learned of the opportunities he had to walk away from. He moved to New York, a young actor just out of college, to a job with the New York Shakespeare Company. No one goes to New York *with* an acting job. You go and find work as a waiter or personal secretary—anything to support yourself until that first role comes along. But he was different. He was big. His talent was big as well.

And then he came home. After only one week, he had to walk away. He knew his body couldn't stand up to the rigor that came with working in a professional acting company. Many years later he had to walk away again, this time as a professor at a major Midwestern university. Too many hills. It seemed he always had to walk away. But he never let it defeat him.

He thrived. For him, what else was there to do? He performed, directed, produced. But time doesn't look at what you do. It just does what it has to do: pass. As time passed, his body continued to break down. And as it broke down, so did his ability to work. He had to move from his home to a one–room, government-subsidized apartment. Oddly, it was giving up his driver accessible van that he grieved more than anything. He just couldn't keep up financially with the maintenance and costly repairs. But he always knew how to adapt to what he could do and what he couldn't. In this case, moving was easy. Giving up the van? That was hard.

I'm making him sound like a saint. I guess that's what you do once someone is gone. The truth is he was frustrated. He could be angry and moody. But that was who he was. That was as much a part of him as the wheelchair and the walker and the cane. When he was moved to the

skilled care facility, he tried to come home two separate times. But he had to give up on being on his own because he could not find the strength to meet the most basic needs.

In the nursing home, he shared a room with two other men. He had the center bed, which meant he couldn't look out the window or through the doorway to the hall. Still, he held on. Because that's what he did. He always held on until he couldn't any longer. He stayed with us as long as his body allowed.

I miss Phil. I wish he'd had an easier life, but for all the challenges he faced, he never gave up on himself. He never let anyone define who he was. He made a place for himself in this world and refused to give up a single square inch.

In the end, he was put on a morphine drip that eased him into a coma allowing him to take his last breath free of the pain he had known his entire life. He was surrounded by family and friends. I miss him. We all miss him. But more than anything else, we are so grateful he was such a big part of our lives.

Lucky

I am lucky—very, very lucky. Whatever issues I've faced as an aging adult are small compared to those I see others face every day. The fact that any stigma assigned to me because of my age escaped my attention says not only that I was oblivious to what was going on around me, but that I have been spared so many of the markers that make growing old an isolating experience.

I think the insidiousness of stigmatization lies in our failure to recognize that illness can be as much a part of the aging process as are our slowing reflexes and vision loss. So much of society doesn't want to think about the fact that aging means people no longer move as fast as they once did, or they may need to wear glasses to read the small print on the food labels, the

latest novel, or an op-ed piece in the newspaper.

I find that many fear the vulnerability our aging brings. We equate being vulnerable with being weak. I need only look at the examples set by friends around me, those friends who have demonstrated on a daily basis the inherent ability to be strong and proud in the direst of circumstances to see how misplaced such fears are. I am truly grateful to have people around me to offer that lesson.

Smoking

May I tell you about me? It won't take long. I'm a passive person. I want approval and acceptance. I avoid confrontation. I have a great sense of humor, and I love it when I'm the center of attention. I'm a secretary. Well, I thought I was until I was given my first Happy Administrative Assistant's Day card with the annual box of Fannie May Pixies a few years ago. Whichever, I don't care. Being a secretary is a perfect fit for me. I'm helpful, reliable, and supportive. I like the routine and the confines of an 8-hour workday. My profession lacks romance and excitement, but it pays the bills, and that is an unavoidable necessity of life.

I've learned through the years that we live in a world of "have to's." We have to have food, clothing, and shelter, and most of us have to have jobs to pay for the food, clothing, and shelter. It's a given in life. Now in our youth, we have aspirations of pursuing respected, if not glamorous professions. At 20, we don't think about jobs, we think about careers. Me, I wanted to be an actress. I know I'm a cliché. By 30, reality sets in. We've grown up, in chronological years if nothing else. We're adults now. We find ourselves in jobs. Whether they are in the professions we envisioned, or they lead us to the fame we wanted doesn't matter. What matters now is that we are supporting ourselves, paying the bills, having a home, putting food on the table.

We're 30, and we have jobs. And in those jobs, we are introduced to the reality of the

"supposed to." A supposed to is what we think we should do. I think we choose our supposed to's, and that can chart the course of our lives for years to come. For me, it seems that almost everything I approach in life has a supposed to attached to it. I'm not saying for a moment that I expect it to be any other way—rationally and logically, I don't expect it to be any other way. But, emotionally, I'm not so sure.

I live by many supposed to's. I'm supposed to be pleasant and kind, as well as generous with my time and resources. That's what good people do. I'm supposed to take care of myself, so I can live a long and productive life. I eat fresh fruits and vegetables, chicken and fish, fat-free yogurt and low-fat cheese. I exercise three times a week. Walking is exercise.

I can find absolutely no "supposed to" in the act of smoking. When I inhale, absorb the nicotine, hold it for just a second, maybe two, and exhale, I say to everyone and everything, I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do.

Do you ever wonder about all of those people who function without the crutch of smoking, drinking, gambling, or any fill-in-the-blank anonymous affliction facing society today? They're functional, strong, and emotionally secure in who and what they are. They're a bunch of jerks.

I didn't always lean on this crutch. I quit smoking once before, and I'm not talking about last month for a day or two. I mean for 15 years. It wasn't that hard to do. My mother had just come to live with me. She didn't mind that I smoked. In fact, she used to ask me to sit closer so she could get a whiff. She stopped smoking before I was born. Something about finding religion and feeling it wasn't a Christian thing to do. But she never denied that she missed it. She still wanted that whiff.

Well, I decided that, given what I knew about second-hand smoke, it just seemed

irresponsible to put someone at risk, especially someone I loved, so I decided to quit. It was relatively easy. Why, I can't say. Probably because my mother was there and she filled the void left when I quit smoking. She made it easy to let go.

I miss her. I miss having someone to come home to each night. I remember when she first came to live with me. I told people I didn't know how lonely I had been until she moved in. She was my best friend. I'd do anything for her and she for me. In a perfect world, everyone has that one person. Fortunately for me, I had that person with me most of my life.

I'm getting off track. I want to tell you why I smoke. Why does something that is so unpleasant, something that makes me so physically uncomfortable and is so financially draining, so consume my life? Maybe it's because it fills the void that's left when the most important person in your life leaves you. You see, we can't live in a vacuum. We can't survive there. We need to fill it in some way. Maybe I just want something to do—when I'm watching TV when the workload is slow and I'm bored, or the workload is heavy, and I'm stressed. I want something to do. I tried knitting, power walking, meditation. All the productive, physically challenging, new-age things I'm supposed to do to be active and healthy. But they didn't work.

No. I think it's more than replacing a loss or keeping myself occupied. Smoking gives me a voice. It may not be the gorgeously deep, sexual, "don't fuck with me" Lauren Bacall voice. It just a silent, passive-aggressive "you're not going to tell me what to do" voice. To quit means, I lose that, and I'm just not willing to give it up.

The truth is I'm pretty ordinary. And with ordinary comes fear. Not sure why. I just know I'm scared. God, if I stand up for myself, especially if it's at the wrong time or if I say the wrong thing . . . .It's happened. I won't waste your time here with details, but sometimes I've been wrong. I've given people justification for not liking me or for being angry with me. I don't want

to do that again. Oh, I know. A better person doesn't care about such things. A better person isn't supposed to care. A better person lets go.

So, how is that for self-analysis? Don't buy it? OK. Then how about this? It's easier to keep a bad habit than it is to give it up. It's easier to stay where I am than it is to change, move forward, embrace the opportunity. Yes, I'm guilty of the greatest sin of the 21st century. I like the comfort zone. And smoking is my comfort zone.

There are still days when I remember how it was when my mother was here. What it meant to come home after work, sit down on the couch next to her, make some lame joke and hear her laugh. That was my comfort zone, and I was thrown out of it when she died. I didn't have any choice. It wasn't a have to, or a supposed to. It just was. Life ends. Nothing can stop that.

So, I returned to my old comfort zone, and I'm not leaving it, not yet. I don't care if that makes me weak. I don't want to be strong. I've already been strong. I was strong all the nights I stayed with my mother in the emergency room as her heart slowly gave out. I was strong when I had to repeat to her again and again that new glasses wouldn't help her vision because the macular degeneration had advanced too far and there was no treatment . . . just as there was no treatment for the dementia. I was strong when I spent the last week of her life listening to her moan in agony as the congestive heart failure caused her organs to shut down, and the morphine drip could only ease a fraction of the pain. I've had enough of being strong. I just want to have a cigarette.

There are times in our lives when we wait for things we want, and it seems they'll never come. Then there are the times when we savor the wait, so we don't have to deal with the loss. As my mother lashed out in frustration from the losses she had to endure, I just wanted the pain

to end and to have a normal life again. When I was told my mother's heart condition was terminal, that she had two-three years to live, I went straight to denial. I heard there was nothing they could do. I heard two to three years. But I didn't hear what that meant. That someday she would be gone and I would be alone. I was Scarlett O'Hara. "I'll think about that tomorrow."

Maybe denial is the only way we can function in our daily routines when confronted with such news. I like where I work and who I work with. That's a good thing. Was I wrong to focus on what was good in my life instead of what was tragic?

My mother raised me using two role models—Pollyanna and Jackie Kennedy. Pollyanna always looked on the bright side, and Jackie Kennedy was brave. "Marcia, she never let anyone see her cry at her husband's funeral. That's how you should behave. Be strong and stop crying." Today, all I hear from my friends is that I'm too positive and I don't express my feelings. "It's the 21st century, Marcia. You need to express your feelings, tell people what you really think and stop acting like everything is OK when it isn't."

I never seem to be at a loss for well-intentioned advice. When it's offered, I listen intently, smile, and pretty much discard what I don't like. I have good friends, and I'm not sure if I pity or envy the ones who had contentious relationships with their mothers. Maybe that kind of conflict allows someone to grow more into her own person. I mean is there really something wrong when mothers and daughters get along well? Is there really something unnatural about a relationship that isn't racked with conflict and resentment? I don't know. Maybe if Mom and I hadn't been so close, I'd be a bitchin' powerhouse today. Still, I wouldn't change anything. I mean why would anyone want to change a relationship that good?

Have you ever had a moment from your past that keeps coming back? No matter how brief, it just keeps coming back. My brother had flown home. He was staying with her while I

went to work. I called one afternoon. I could hear Mom moaning in the background . . . and I laughed, not a nervous laugh, certainly not a "that's so funny" laugh, but an "I don't know what to say" laugh. The truth is I was relieved he was the one who was with her and not me. He was filling the role I had filled for the last 15 years, but now she had someone with her who would know what to do.

That said, I didn't want him there. I wanted him to have been there before when Mom would have known that even if I weren't with her, someone else who loved her was. My brother had flown home to . . . what? Help me, be with her, do the right thing? I don't know. I told myself that I had her with me for all those years. Now he would have this time with her in the final days of her life. That was how I justified my handing her over with such ease.

My mother died at 4:32 a.m., Sunday, February 6, 2005, one day to the hour after my birth 52 years before. When the call came from the nursing home, I was asleep next to Kevin, my boyfriend. I called my brother. He answered with an "I already know" tone in his voice. The nurse had called him first.

I felt as if I had been found out, caught in the act of not caring enough. I had told my brother that I was going to spend the night with Mom at the nursing home, but when I woke up a couple of hours later, I had to leave. I had to get out of that room. I didn't know why, but I couldn't stay. As I drove away, I honestly didn't know where I would go. Home was not an option. My brother was not the person I needed, so I went to Kevin.

When I got there, he held me as I cried, but there were no tears, just dry sobs. It was forced, but not for show. Something told me I had to let the pain out, and crying, even without the tears, was the only way I could do it. We went to bed, and I slept a wonderful, deep, sound sleep in Kevin's arms the final night of my mother's life.

Four years earlier I was told that my mother had aortic stenosis resulting in congestive heart failure. The heart murmur she'd developed as a result of Scarlet fever when she was a child had weakened the aortic valve that pumps the blood from her heart. As a result, her heart muscle was enlarged, and, over time, it just couldn't function. There was nothing they could do to reverse the condition. Her age didn't allow for open-heart surgery to repair the valve. The only option now was to treat the symptoms. Two to three years.

In high school, there was never any doubt in my mind that I would go to college. Once I graduated, it didn't matter what kind of job I had, as long as I was on my own, taking care of myself. My father died when I was seven. My uncle died two years later, and my aunt when I was sixteen. You can't help but be affected by something like that. Early on I decided I had to prepare myself to live my life someday without my mother. I knew my life would crumble without her in it. Not only during those last three years but my whole life, I imagined our final days and hours together. I knew it would be no different for us than for the people in the countless stories I had read or movies I had watched. I would be at her side, holding her hand as she quietly drifted away. My life would fall apart. It would be like losing a limb, and the very core of me would be irrevocably damaged. I would feel a constant physical ache. That's how I knew it would be, how I knew it should be for someone who loses the love of her life. But instead, I was asleep next to my lover, already starting my new life without her.

I wonder if all caregivers ask if they have done enough. Do they want to know if they could have been more attentive, more loving, if only they weren't so human? I think even the most attentive caregiver will always want to have done more. I felt that I had failed her in some way. I felt as if I had cheated her. I felt as if I had cheated myself.

I wasn't by her side that week. I wasn't holding her hand. How could I? She didn't want

my hand. She wanted to go home. She wanted to hear again, to see, to remember, and most of all, she wanted to stop feeling so tired and so sick. As she lashed out, I was the closest target. For all the years I had spent taking care of her, reading to her, feeding her, bathing her, washing her hair, I know now that my most important role was to be there in her final days while she lashed out at the natural order. And I'm not sure that I was. I can't handle conflict, and that for me was conflict. So, I retreated. I gave her over to my brother because I knew he would do the right thing. How unfair of me to put that on him.

I remember the last day she and I spent together alone. When I got home, I couldn't make myself get out of the car or even turn off the ignition. I just sat there, so tired at the thought of all I still had to do when I walked in the door. I remembered the time I came home to find the living room furniture turned upside down, walking into the bedroom and seeing her there, so sad for the outburst she couldn't understand. I put my arm around her, wishing that I could be with her to fill those empty hours. But this day I was completely drained.

When I finally walked through the door, she was sullen and withdrawn. I was tired of it all. I had long stopped understanding that her health dictated her moods. She resented spending the days at the Adult Care Center. She resented that I was always gone when she came home. This day was no different. We barely spoke that night. I opened a can of Campbell's Chunky Chicken Noodle soup. We ate in silence, each of us angry with the other. I cleaned up the kitchen. And when I looked over at her she was sitting there with her head in her hand, and I knew.

I called the paramedics. She offered no resistance. I followed the ambulance to the hospital as I had done countless times over the last three years. I spent the night with her in her room.

The time for denial had almost spent itself. I was facing reality now, and I went numb. She couldn't make it to the bathroom so they brought in a commode. It was all of four steps from her hospital bed, and it took two people to help her. She couldn't hold up her own weight. That frail frame was too much for her to carry on her own. I stood in the corner watching in horror as I realized where we were in time. The nurse asked me if I was all right. If *I* was all right. It was coming to an end. She wouldn't leave the hospital this time. She had days left, but doctors don't want to tell you that. There must be something in the Hippocratic oath that precludes them from that level of honesty. First, do no harm. So I proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for her final weeks. Nursing home. Hospice. Memorial Home. Cremation. Direct cremation.

My brother was coming back. All I could absorb was that this hospital stay was enough to bring him home. We were going to be together. I no longer would be alone. It was going to be so wonderful to have him here. . . . How could I possibly think of anything as being wonderful? What kind of person would feel that way?

I live by many supposed to's. I'm supposed to be pleasant and kind. That's what good people do. So even with my mother lying in the hospital bed, unable to sit up, let alone stand or walk, I played hostess to the friend who decided it would be nice if she dropped by to say hello. I didn't even like her. She was a friend of a friend. She came by on the chance she would run into our mutual friend. But she wasn't going to say that, any more than I was going to say that she was the last person I wanted to see right now.

I listened as she talked about her family, her job hunt, her prospective boyfriend, and, of all things, her mother. I listened politely, thinking that if I didn't respond, if I didn't say anything, she would tire of the conversation, maybe even get the hint that I didn't want her there. I couldn't say, "Please leave. I want to be alone with my mother. She doesn't know who you are.

You're just a voice. You're taking away my time with her." That wouldn't be nice. And I decided long ago that I was going to be nice. In the end, I was nice to everyone but my mother.

We will all die. We will all see someone we love die. And we all believe we know how we will handle the crisis, how we will cope with its aftermath, and how we want to prepare ourselves for the loss. The truth is we don't have a clue.

I didn't spend my mother's last moments with her. Maybe it's a rationalization on my part, but I choose to believe she wanted me to leave that night, that she was pushing me out the door so she could move on.

Do you believe there's an after-life? I do. But I think it's something more than any person in the history of mankind has ever been able to imagine or articulate. Religion is man-made, our attempt to conceptualize that entity that made us. It's what we do. We try to understand that which cannot be understood. It's our nature.

Here is what I understand. I don't think my mother would be proud if she could see me or that she would understand if she were here. I think she is proud, she does see me, and she does understand.

I remember this one day. Mom was gone. I had pretty much made the transition to life without her. Work had had its "challenges," but this day was particularly bad. Every attempt I had made to prove myself had failed, and I knew I wasn't going any further in this career. That was the day I knew I wasn't special. And it pissed me off. I was angry and frustrated and sad. But mainly just angry.

I pulled into the garage, and I sat in my car. I hadn't been thinking about Mom, I hadn't seen anything to remind me of her—and then I felt it. Her presence. She was there with me. Maybe she's always with me. Or maybe she just checks in once in a while. Either way, at that

moment, I knew she was all right, and I knew I would be all right. So, I took out my pack of Salem Menthol Lights, raised the cigarette to my mouth, barely touched the tip of the filter to my lips, tilted my head back slightly, inhaled, and then . . . the long exhale of smoke into the air.

Who knows why we smoke. Maybe some of us are passive, or bored, or lonely. I just know that it gives me a strength I've not known in any other part of my life. I'm a single, never-married woman who has spent her entire adult life taking care of herself, relying only on herself. So of course, I'm strong. But for whatever reason, I don't want to show people that part of myself. Except if I have a cigarette in my hand.

I know it doesn't make me cool or sexy. But it does say I'm more than what I appear to be. I need people to know that.

Frozen

What happens when I have nothing to say? When I use every trick I know—and some I didn't realize I had—to avoid writing. Tricks such as watching the same movie two, three, or more times a day because it allows me an escape (or maybe it just anesthetizes me from the pain that comes with being exposed as a fraud). Or going to the Mall (even though I can only afford the bare necessities of food, shelter, and cable) because I enjoy walking around looking cool with that Starbucks Caramel Mocha Macchiato. I may decide to spend an entire morning on the phone with the cable company's customer service because I'm suddenly unable to access that movie I need to watch again for the third day in a row. What happens when the tricks stop working? I write.

I sit down and put the first words of an inspired idea on paper only to discover that those first few words are as far as I can go. So, I stop and move on to my next idea, only now it's nothing more than a title.

- Reflections of a Civil Servant—a reflection on a 30+ year career
- I Used to Like Anderson Cooper—a rumination on the news coverage today
- November 7—a rumination on the 1968 Presidential election
- Falling Away—a reflection on the dissolution of friendships
- Wait Loss—a rumination on struggles with weight loss (and yes, the misspelling is intended)

I find myself looking at a list of intriguing titles and vague ideas that seem to go nowhere. I realize I may have nothing to say and a knot forms in my stomach. I want to cry; no, sob uncontrollably, because if I feel badly enough about my failure, then it will be all right that I'm not writing. *I'm not* a failure. I simply set the bar too high. I can say, "I'm sorry, I thought I could do this. I feel really awful, and if you knew what I went through trying to do this, you'd know that I *really* am sorry, and eventually you will say, "That's all right. You don't have to do this. You're still a good person. You're still my friend. Don't you know by now that I am here for you?"

I just don't respect you.

So, I sit in the recliner with my laptop in front of me, my dog curled up next to me on one side, and my cat purring next to me on the other. I want to stop worrying, stop beating myself up and just say, "This is enough. Just being here in this moment. It's enough. I don't have to prove anything to anyone. I don't have to 'do' anything. I've earned the right to just 'be.'"

But I know "being" isn't enough. I know this because the knot is still in the pit of my stomach, I still want to cry, and I can't figure out what the fuck I should do to fix me except to write.

In Margaret Atwood's poem "Spelling," I found two stanzas that echo in my mind:

I wonder how many women

denied themselves daughters,

closed themselves in rooms,

drew the curtains

so they could mainline words

. . . . . .

A word after a word

after a word is power

And so, I begin. ‘A word after a word/ after a word is power.”

The knot is still there. I want to cry. I want to scream. The way I screamed at the TV when it wouldn’t give me the movie that I was jonesing for. But, I don’t. I don’t scream. I don’t cry. I don’t even eat the half gallon of ice cream that soothes the incessant intestinal pain. I stop.

I wait for the words to come.

Where are they?

Where do I find them?

What is this fear that had visited me so many times before and what did I do with it then? I felt this fear my first night as a college Freshman when I found myself alone in my dorm room. I remember calling home and being comforted by mother’s words. I don’t even remember what she said. Probably, “Have you met your roommate? Have you unpacked? What is the dorm like?” She tells me that she fixed herself pancakes for supper and that the dog is asleep on the couch. All the while, she knows how afraid I am, how homesick I am, but her voice tells me that it will be all right. Her voice tells me that she knows what I’m feeling because she knows me,

and it will be all right without ever saying the words, “It will be all right.”

I would learn later, as I read her memoir, that it was the saddest day of her life.

I remember the fear that I felt in my late 20w when I decided to return to graduate school. I imagined all the terrible things that could happen because of this one decision. Quitting my 40-hour-a-week job could have dire consequences. Would I be able to pay the rent, buy food, keep up the maintenance on my car with the reduced income?

And then I imagined going back to the life of a full-time student. What if I weren’t accepted by the other students? What if the professors didn’t like me? What if I wasn’t up to meeting the standards of a graduate student?

What if a serial killer were to break into my apartment?

In spite of the fears—rational and irrational—I powered through. But it wasn’t because I found the inner courage to overcome my fears. It was because I had no choice. Quitting was not an option. School was my only means of support. Looking back, I see how the mundane realities pushed me forward. I powered through not because of my commitment to pursuing a new challenge. I did so because I had to pay the rent.

My therapist once told me that I was afraid of failure. Obviously, not to try is so much easier, in the short term, at least, than discovering you lack the skill or talent to succeed. But I’m not sure it’s that simple. I think it has been more than a fear of failure that has kept me from taking on challenges or pursuing a dream. For one thing, dreams are safe. I control the outcome. I succeed without the nuisance of working hard, making mistakes, being critiqued and told to try again, or just following through.

What if my fear is of the process? What if the fear isn’t of failure, but deciding I don’t want to do the work? What if I simply don’t want it enough? What if I take on a task, and, in

discovering that it's more work than I want to do, I look for a way out. How much sympathy can I expect if I give up because I'm too lazy to follow through? How the hell do I justify that?

I won't say that I believe in reincarnation, if for no other reason than I don't want to do this again. I honestly don't want to come back. I don't feel this way because I had a difficult life or suffered unimaginable pain. The truth is I've had a pretty good life. I was loved. I was nurtured. I was protected. So why would I want to come back and do it all again? No, once was plenty for me.

Still . . . if the whole notion of past lives proved to be true, and I had no choice but to come back, and I could pick one attribute to develop when I come back, it would be passion. I would come back with passion. I would pursue dreams with an energy and a hunger that would stifle any fear that lingered in my soul. The passion would be my driving force, not the rent.

A word after a word

after a word is power.

I take a breath. I write word after word after word in the hopes of finding in myself something of interest. The process is terrifying. I stop. I come back. I rework and revise. I ask if this were a novel and I could write myself as a character, would I find this task to be easier to do? Would the words come more readily if you weren't reading about me, but someone you thought I made up? Would the dilemma be more profound? If I were a character, would I be more interesting? Would I be sympathetic? Would you like me? I suppose, if I were *really* good at creating this other person, I would make her sympathetic as well as unlikable. I'd feel like I had succeeded.

I/she would be couched in a plot line that includes other fascinating, complex or one-dimensional characters. Maybe they would be sympathetic, maybe not. Because of the fiction,

the ideas I would come up with, no matter how far-fetched, would be worth the investment of your time and energy to read. The story would be the compelling factor, not me. At least that's how I envision fiction. Of course, I may be under-estimating the process. It just seems to me that when you make up a story, you can say anything, and as long as you say it with flair, it will be interesting.

But my essays aren't chapters in a novel. They aren't fiction. And I'm right back where I started. How interesting or valuable can my ideas possibly be? I really do think that I'm afraid to find out. Shit, I really am afraid of failure.

A word after a word

after a word is power.

I'm an actress. A pretty good one at that. I've only recently learned that about myself. I live in a relatively small town, by east coast/west coast, New York/Los Angeles standards. However, by Midwest standards, a population of 100,000 isn't that small, and in a town this size, anyone who appears on stage is going to be told they are good. It would just be hurtful to say otherwise. So, I'm not basing my assessment of my talent solely on what people tell me. There is an unspoken judgment in the reactions of other artists. I see it in their approach to me. There are no hedges, no "I had such a lovely evening" or "This was certainly worth my time" or "That was such an interesting interpretation."

The encounters I now have are brief and the words are direct. There is no looking for the most diplomatic means of saying I was good but not great. I know this must sound incredibly vain, but I'm good, and I know they know I'm good. I can't tell you when this happened, but I no longer have to earn a place in the hierarchy of this small but gifted community of artists. I'm already in the higher echelon. I can say "no" without fear that this may be the last time I'm

offered a role, or "yes" with the confidence that I can pull off a particular role. As an actress, I enjoy a confidence and comfort level that I haven't yet found as a writer. As an actress, I am fearless. As a writer, I have nothing but fear.

Maybe it's because of my audience. My audience is made up of a small circle people. I want to please them, but how? I write for them. They include the best friend who encouraged me to start this journey, the director who wants to see more writing that he can produce, and the professors whose own achievements eclipse anything I might do. They are people who are kind. They are supportive. And they are brutally honest. That can be terrifying. What if . . . this isn't good, or it doesn't engage the reader, or it doesn't present a message that can reach even a small segment of the population. What if their response is, "So what?" or "Nothing happens"?

There is no "logical" explanation for my fear. If I fail, I will go on with my life. I can say, "I'm so sorry, but I just can't do this. Thank you for understanding." And they will. Who are they? They are the people I need to get out of my head before I move forward. Even though I know they are holding me back, and I'm the only one who can make them leave, I can't. I'm Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind.* I can't shake them, but unlike Crowe's schizophrenic Jim Nash, my people are real. They are the people I am writing for. I don't want them in my head, and I have no doubt that they don't want to be there either. But as long as they are the only people I can think of, they are the only people I can write for. Hence, the fear.

A word after a word

after a word is power.

I have quit before, but I don't remember ever quitting anything I really wanted. Some jobs I started because I thought I should, like teaching a Sunday School class or volunteering for an adult literacy program. Other times I completed a job that I was required to do with no more

than the bare minimum effort. I did props on a play . . . once, but never again. I operated the light board . . . once, but never again. I stage managed . . . once, but never again. No. That's a lie. I never stage managed. That was a task I simply said no to. Too many people, far, far, far too many people, depend on a stage manager, and I didn't want people depending on me.

The stage manager's responsibilities may differ depending on the location and/or theatre company. For example, in the professional theatre, a stage manager is the director's right-hand person. From the first audition to closing night, the stage manager is there to ensure that a production runs smoothly; that actors are present and in their places, that light and sound cues are coordinated, and that any and all fires are put out, metaphorically and otherwise, for each performance. In the Midwest, at least in Community Theatre, those responsibilities are shared with the assistant director who is with the director, holding their hand, from the first audition to opening night. It is at this point that the stage manager takes over. Regardless of geography or venue, once opening night arrives, the stage manager takes the mantle of God from the director and carries it throughout the production. Did I mention that the director is God? She is. Or he is.

I've gotten off topic. It is bound to happen when your write word, after word, after word, don't you think? Where was I? Something to do with quitting. Disappointing someone? Letting people down? Oh yes, the audience. Are you still there? You're larger now. I don't know all your names. Some of you don't know me. Still, I don't want to lose sight of you. You're important to me. I care about what you think and want to know if you've ever been where I am. But you can't tell me because I don't know you, and I can't see you. I can only hope that what I'm saying here has some meaning for you.

I'm letting go now and just writing. I won't know if these words touch you, but I keep writing, and somehow that's what keeps me going. The very thing that I feared—writing—is the

only thing that can get me through the fear.

This is an essay. More specifically, it is a personal essay. You will be reading a number of them. I hope. With a personal essay the operative word is "personal." As an essayist, I'm expected to expose myself, metaphorically speaking, and all my flaws. And that is hard, as in painfully hard. Especially when the exposure is perceived as not being that profound. I haven't endured the tragedies of Cheryl Strayed, or been witness to the events of Joan Didion, or suffered the challenges of Nancy Mair. I'm ordinary. I'm not putting myself down in any way, so please don't think you need to tell me how special I am. I know I'm special, but I'm the "everyone is special in their own way" kind of special. I'm still ordinary.

As a writer, I've only experienced one tragedy and even that, the death of my 95-year-old mother, is more a consequence of the life cycle than it is a tragedy. And challenges—does cancer count when there is a 90% cure rate? What if there is a recurrence of the cancer, and that rate drops to 70%? Does sexual harassment count? Maybe, but 30 years later, the pain is a memory, not an experience I relive every day. What makes me think I have anything of value to write? What lessons have I learned or questions do I have that 90% of the people haven't already answered? I'm ordinary. So, who am I to think that I have something important to say.

I can walk away. I can walk away openly, directly. I can say that's enough. Once is enough. I tried; now on to something else! But this is different. What if only 40% of the people share my concerns—a number I arbitrarily pulled out of my ass—shouldn't someone speak for us? Pain is relative. It can't be quantified. If I were to ask you to place the loss of a loved one, a pet, or a job, on a pain scale of 1-10, each of you would give me a different answer. Pain is pain. It hurts. Just as fear hurts.

So, I write and hope the insights my writing brings me may have some resonance with

you. I sit at the computer, with the knot in my stomach somehow loosening its grip on my psyche, my need to cry having subsided, and my urge to scream somewhat deterred, at least for now.

A word after a word

after a word is power.

Waiting

Impatience is my downfall. When I'm scared or angry or just frustrated, I don't want to wait to fix it. I want to fix it now. Whatever "it" may be, I want a resolution, so I'm no longer scared . . . or angry . . . or frustrated. When I don't find an answer, I give up. I stop. I walk away because I don't deal well with the uncertainty of not having the solution I want. I feel this way when my car won't start, when I step on the scales, or when I sit down to write. As a writer, I want the inspiration to come now. I want my best writing to show itself now, and when it doesn't, I stop. Sometimes it may be for only a day or two and other times it may be weeks or months before I start again.

When I stop, I find my escape from many venues. I may escape into a good book, the internet, a movie, or TV—FX, USA, CBS, CNN. I will use whatever means necessary to avoid working through the tedious process of finding resolution or reaching a goal. Whatever means I choose, you can be sure that it will distract me from whatever challenge I have chosen to forego.

I'm impatient. I always have been. I'm frustrated that I can't shake off the guilt of a careless act or thoughtless word. When I start a diet or write a budget, and I don't see immediate results, I give up. I tell myself I don't care if I'm fat or if I'm drowning in debt. I tell myself I'm basically a good person, and if I can't have the abundant life I dreamed of, then fuck it. I can wait out the clock. I'll settle for what I have.

When I lost weight, people commented on how hard I must have worked to look so good. I found it difficult, and I still do, to accept that compliment. Not the compliment that I looked good—I'm fine with that. No, it's saying that I worked hard. Road construction, housekeeping, waiting tables are hard work. But losing weight is simply doing without that which you didn't need in the first place. It may take determination, but hard work? I'm not so sure.

For me, overcoming my impatience is the challenge I face. There is no fast-forward. When staying within the 1200 calories per day doesn't result in a loss showing up on the scale the next morning, I head straight to McDonalds for an Egg McMuffin and hash browns. I give up because I don't want to wait.

When I was nine, I was sitting on the sofa with my legs folded under me, and my aunt Marcia said, "You have fat thighs." I know that sounds cruel, especially today when people rail against fat shaming, but in 1962, it was nothing more than an observation from a woman I loved. A woman who was known for expressing her opinions—unfiltered. For the record, at age 9, a person doesn't have fat thighs when she weighs all of 80 pounds. Looking back at that moment had I simply been sitting with my legs dangling off the sofa instead of folded under me, Marcia wouldn't have even noticed my thighs.

I believe my aunt's comment was not what led me to obsess over my weight for the next 50+ years. If only the challenge were that simple. Her observation was just one of many catalysts for my obsession. I look back, and I still see the images promoted by teen and fashion magazines, not to mention tv celebrities, movie stars, and beauty queen contestants. These images had had as strong an impact on me in the 60s as it has today. Then and today, thin means success. For me, it only followed that if I weren't thin, then I couldn't be successful.

So, I obsessed. Over the years I read weight-loss books, took diet supplements, attended

support groups, and kept meticulous food diaries. (I may not be able to tell you where I went or what I wore when I graduated from high school, but I sure as hell can tell you what I ate—potato skins, pizza, and chocolate cupcakes.) I have "sweated off to the oldies" with Richard Simmons, "walked off the pounds" with Leslie Sansone, and "felt the burn" with Jane Fonda. I lost weight, gained it back, and looked on in envy at those around me who did what I couldn't do, or, more accurately, those who were what I wasn't—thin.

Looking back, I see that even worse than the envy I felt was the air of superiority I allowed myself when looking at those who were fatter than me. "There but for the grace of God." One would think that after six-plus decades, I would have come to terms with my body, that I would have realized that my body isn't what makes me who I am. Unfortunately, wisdom does not always come with age. Self-acceptance is still illusory for me, confined to Facebook posts and refrigerator magnets. "I fully accept myself and know that I am worthy of great things in life." That may be true, but for me, I still want to know why I can't fully accept myself, do great things, *and* be thin, too.

After all those years and all those attempts, I finally found the answer. I learned that losing weight wasn't about counting calories, carbs, or fat content. It wasn't about diet drinks, protein bars, or appetite suppressants. Successful weight loss was about one thing—the wait. It was about giving up the comfort and control that comes from eating what you want when you want it. Weight loss meant losing the immediate gratification that came from a bag of chocolate covered peanuts or a New York Strip and baked potato with butter and sour cream. Losing weight was about giving control of my body over to my body and waiting for it to do what only it could do—lose the fat.

My mother once told me we live in a time when people don't have any reason to wait.

She said people just press the fast-forward button. I didn't want to wait for the weight to come off, so I gave up the struggle, as I had so many other struggles. When I found myself drowning in bills, I gave up the interminable wait of seeing the debt reduce at an excruciatingly slow pace of single digits and increased my spending instead. And although I had no choice but to wait for my mother's death, I didn't wait to mourn. I began missing her while she was still here because she was the only person who could comfort me through the impending abandonment. She was the one who made me feel connected to the world without my even knowing how important that connection was. She was the person I could spend hours with, hardly saying a word, and never once feel lonely or alone.

A term has entered mainstream discourse in the last couple of decades—the sandwich generation. It refers to adults who are raising children as well as caring for their parents. They are "sandwiched" between the two generations. A variation on the term is the open-faced sandwich. We are single adults with no children, and in my case, no spouse with whom to share the burden. "Open-faced" is about vulnerability: being exposed to every attack on one's emotional, physical, and financial security without a buffer to cushion the blows.

As a single woman and caregiver, my energies may have been directed toward only one person and not two or three or four, but the pressure was just as real. The stress on members of the sandwich generation comes from being responsible for the well-being of various people, spouse, children, and even a boss. I understand that completely, and I don't for a moment dismiss what that means. But being a member of the open-faced sandwich generation meant that I alone was responsible for the well-being of this person. It meant that I was the one responsible when mistakes were made. As much as I wanted to treasure our time together, the stress made it nearly impossible to recognize the comfort I so desperately wanted. My time with my mother went from

finding comfort from her presence to waiting for her death.

An overriding consequence of stress is sleep deprivation. During the final months of her life, my mother's sleep pattern was disrupted, and, consequently, so was mine. Seldom, if ever, did I have an uninterrupted night's sleep. She was afraid to be alone, so we shared a bed. We had just moved into our new home. I had looked forward to a room of my own which was larger than the closet-size bedroom I had occupied in our previous home. I wanted a space where I could spend time reading, writing, or just being alone. But this was a new environment, and my mother never adjusted.

She was confused and afraid. She wanted me near her, not only during the day but at night as well. She needed the warmth of a person lying next to her, protecting her. Initially, once she fell asleep, I would go back to my room, hoping she'd sleep through the night, but after an hour or two, she'd come and wake me, angry that I had left her. Eventually, I came to feel comfort in having her next to me. The time came when I no longer cared about sleeping in my bed. I found I wanted her with me as much as she wanted to have me with her.

In the last year of her life, our sleeping together was no longer a choice; it was a necessity. At least three, four times a week she'd wake up in the night complaining of chest pains. I'd have to decide whether to call paramedics to take her to the hospital or simply wait for the episode to pass. The hospital stays were seldom overnight. She'd be examined—blood test, x-rays, the consultation with the doctor, and finally the interminable wait to be released. These visits were often as stressful as waiting at home until she was no longer in pain. She refused to take the nitro tablets because the taste was so foul. I remember the night I sat on the side of the bed with her, holding her as she cried, "What are we gonna do, what are we gonna do," until she finally agreed to take a tablet. And then relief came.

Those nights took a physical toll on me as well. My health went into a tailspin. I once woke up from a dream where I was struggling to type something, only to realize that I was at my computer, with several lines of gibberish on the screen. Absences from work became more frequent. Some days I called in so I could take care of my mother following a night in the Emergency Room. Other days, I simply needed to take care of myself. I was lucky. My job remained secure. I cannot fathom life for people who do not have the support I enjoyed during my family crises. It's an impossible choice, job or family, but people have to make it every day.

For all the stress, nothing changed my feelings for my mother. I wanted to be with her as long as possible. She never wavered in fighting for her life. I came to believe that because she had survived this long, she could defy all odds. Regardless of the physical pain and fatigue, she wanted to live. To this day, I am in awe of her appreciation for life.

I look back at that time and am amazed at my capacity for survival. We were approaching the third year of my mother's illness. Her heart was failing. I was on automatic pilot. My life was a matter of getting through each day. I'd wake up, get dressed, dress her, coerce her into going to the Adult Day Center, go to work, come home, fix a meal, and go to bed. I had stopped thinking about the future. I was just doing. There was no waiting. I was getting through the day. Everything else stopped. Dreams, longings, self-incrimination. They all stopped and would have to wait to resurface.

But my choices came with consequences. I was asserting myself, finally, even cruelly. I insisted on staying up until 9:00, sometimes 10:00 at night, regardless of how tired either one of us might have been. Mom wouldn't go to bed without me, and I wouldn't go until I was ready. Watching TV, she would ask, "Can you hear it?" and I would answer, "Yes." I didn't say, "Do you want me to turn it up?" Why did I do that? Why did I want her to say, "Turn it up" before I

would do anything? What the fuck was that about?

Control. Mom was an unstoppable force meeting the immovable object: I'm not turning up the volume until you ask. I'm not going to bed until I'm ready. And she wasn't changing either. She was staying with me no matter how tired she was. She had always been and would continue to be an unstoppable force.

My mother lived a full life that became even more active in the years after I left home. She was a nurse's aide, church pianist, Red Cross volunteer, and she worked at the polling booth on election days. She lived a passionate life that would turn into a series of unimaginable losses.

First, she lost her hearing. We tried the hearing aid, but she never adjusted to it. By then, her short-term memory was failing. She didn't know why she had this odd thing in her ear, so she would take it out. I'd find the $700 device in the bathroom, next to the cat's dish, or in the refrigerator. Her memory, then her hearing, and finally—the most painful loss of all—her sight left her. Her world had become smaller than she ever imagined it could be. When she lost her most treasured pastime, reading, she started to lose who she was.

The beginning of the end for her came with the diagnosis of Macular Degeneration, a condition that leaves you looking at the world through a thick fog. Imagine getting out of a hot shower and looking into a bathroom mirror that is thick with condensation. Now imagine seeing the world through that same fog every day. That was how she saw the world. She could no longer see the television screen. The flowers she had always pointed out to me as we drove by people's homes were gone to her forever. She could no longer see the printed page, even the large print for the visually impaired. She wasn't impaired. She was legally blind.

My mother used calendars as her journal. I have a dresser drawer full of them. There are daily notations such as "My leg hurts today," "Ruth was late picking me up for choir practice this

afternoon," and "Very cloudy this morning." One day I saw an odd entry scribbled on the calendar on our refrigerator. "I can no longer see the print in the newspaper." My heart sank. How could I have missed what was happening? How could she not say anything to me?

I called the optometrist and got her in that day. When we were brought into the examination room, I stood against the wall as the doctor helped my mother to the chair and started the exam. He asked her to read from the chart on the wall. "What are the letters on the fourth line from the top?" She couldn't tell him. "What are the letters on the third line from the top?" The second line, and finally the large "E" at the top of the chart. I felt my heart sink and then break as the humiliation came across her face. When the doctor walked toward her with his index finger raised, she finally could say she saw something, when he was all of three feet from her face.

We were sent to the ophthalmologist that day. I filled out the forms: Medicare coverage, prescriptions, chronic conditions, supplemental insurance, and family history. Then came the exams. Mom was uncharacteristically patient through the whole process. Moving from one room to another, I found the ordeal to be brutal, but we were both willing to do whatever was necessary and wait for however long was necessary to be told what could be done to help her. And what were we met with? A doctor who walked in the door and said there was nothing he could do. She had macular degeneration. "She's not in complete darkness. She can make out figures, but she is legally blind." And he walked out.

We had waited for hours, and he was with us all of five minutes. I wanted to call him back into the room. I wanted to know how this happened and what could be done for my mother, but he didn't stay long enough to answer any questions or even offer any words of encouragement. He just left. We didn't care if he could fix this *now*. We would have waited for

whatever treatment was available. We would have settled for any answer, any treatment no matter how long it took. But he couldn't stay even to tell us there were no treatments.

I searched the internet. Macular degeneration is of two types—wet or dry. One comes on quickly and can be treated if caught in time. The other is a slow progression. The doctors couldn't tell me which type she had because it had progressed too far. If she had told me sooner if I had picked up on the cues, could she have been spared this loss? I will never know. I still ask myself those questions.

I had missed the signs. She tried to tell me. There were the repeated requests to look for reading glasses at the local pharmacy. Every time we went to pick up a prescription, she would want to try on different pairs, but nothing seemed to please her. And then I saw the entry on the calendar, "I can no longer see to read." She had no other way to tell me, and I don't know why. Did she not want to bother me? Was I so self-absorbed with my own issues that I couldn't stop to see what was right in front of me? Or was it something else completely? Is there a reason she didn't tell me? Maybe telling me would have meant admitting to herself that there was a problem, and she wasn't ready to do that.

The struggle didn't end there. When we enter old age, debilitating old age, the challenges compound. You have a disease that has stolen your sight, and there is no remedy. What if you don't remember anything about the diagnosis? She had just been told the most devastating news of her life, and she couldn't even remember. I couldn't fix this for her, no one could. I just had to tell her again and again about the diagnosis. But she continued to ask and then waited for whatever it was that would make it better.

I was naïve to expect that I could prepare myself for her death. Nothing can prepare you for that kind of loss. Denial takes you only so far, and then reality hits you in the face. Her eyes

were closed, and I had no idea if she could hear me, or if she had any idea I was there. Her body had begun to shut down, but I knew I had to talk to her one last time.

I kneeled next to her and whispered in her ear. I struggled to find the right words. I was so afraid they wouldn't come. "I love you. You did it right. You did everything right. You were perfect." Again, "I love you. I will never love anyone as much as I love you."

When I stood up, I could see the tears on her cheek. She had heard me. That is what I want to remember. She left this world knowing how much I loved her, and in that, I find great comfort.

At my mother's memorial service, a friend who had recently lost her father said to me that we were both now orphans. That is what it means to be an open-faced sandwich. The sandwich generation is squeezed between two generations, and when someone from one of those generations dies, you are left with the other family members to see you through the grief. The open-faced generation is left alone. We're orphans.

My loss had finally arrived. The wait was over, and I had survived.

Something curious happens with waiting—at least when waiting is all you do. Opinions change, dynamics change, and suddenly a moment you always thought would be yours is no longer *your* moment at all. Instead, it is everyone's opportunity. I'm talking about the ever-present workplace promotion, of course. I learned that standing passively on the sidelines wasn't going to take me where I *thought* I wanted to go. A goal that had been set for me; this carrot that had been dangling in front of me for years, was no longer there for the taking, and I wasn't even sure I wanted it.

If I wanted to lose weight, I took in fewer calories and waited for the pounds to come off. If I wanted to reduce my debt, I spent less money and waited for my financial situation to

stabilize. If I wanted to survive my mother's death, I accepted its inevitability and valued the time I had with her. In each case, waiting required me taking control of the situation.

However, with my work, I had based my value on someone else's validation of me, and in doing so, I relinquished control. I had been told I had strong potential for advancement, but instead of nurturing that potential, I let it stagnate.

The moment came and then it passed. I felt the loss of something, and I struggled to understand what it was. I knew it wasn't the promotion. That was a goal someone else had set for me, and I didn't feel a loss at all. I knew I was grieving, and I struggled to understand why. Finally, I realized my grief was for something more profound than a change in title or salary. Someone had believed in me as I had never believed in myself. I hadn't let myself down; I had let her down. I was grieving the loss of her confidence in me. Waiting had been my weakness., and it had become a part of who I was.

There are no absolutes when predicting our future. Life is fluid and requires change, growth, and compromise. I hadn't changed with my job. Instead, I waited for change to come to me. I had placed my identity in the hands of another and assumed my future rested on my being the kind of person she perceived me to be. I chose to wait, and the result was exactly what is to be expected of inaction.

Nothing.

And nothing was what I wanted.

I believe in an after-life. I'm not born again. I offer no preaching here. In fact, I sometimes wonder if I follow any religion. I've been told that I'm a smorgasbord Christian. I pick and choose pieces that appeal to me from the different denominations and go from there.

I'm fine with that idea. I believe that my mother's spirit, which kept her fighting even as

her body grew weaker, lives on as a separate entity in and of itself. I believe we live on as more than a memory of those we left behind, more than the legacy we built. We live on in spirit. I believe my mother exists somewhere. How, and in what form, I do not know. But she is there, and I find enormous comfort in that.

When my mother died, I had already grieved her loss. Still, I found myself waiting for the sorrow to present itself to me. Had my impatience been my undoing? How could I possibly be all right with my aloneness? Then I realized I still had a wait ahead of me, not for her death, but for my own. Is that what I was going to make of my life, waiting for my time on this earth to end? Was my life going to be waiting for its own loss?

I was tired. I had been strong for my mother. The thought of finding the strength to make a more purposeful life for myself, when she had been my only purpose for so long, seemed impossible. I thought in terms of how long it would be until we were again together. I started crunching the numbers. She died when I turned 52, which meant that, in all likelihood, we were together longer than we would be apart. In those terms, it seemed bearable to continue if I was only going to be waiting. Then I realized if I were to live as long as she had, I had another 44 years ahead of me. A 44-year wait. How would I ever get through those years? I had nothing to wait for because there was nothing I wanted. I felt anxious, uncomfortable, unhappy.

Life is about accepting its inevitable losses, setting goals, and making the sacrifices to achieve goals. Advancing in the workplace meant leaving behind the comfort of a job I had mastered and excelled at doing. Letting go of a loved one meant embracing freedom and independence from responsibilities that had defined me for years. Losing weight meant losing the person, life, and body that had protected me from so much pain.

My mother loved gardens. She didn't particularly like houseplants, but preferred seeing

flowers grow in the ground. She knew that you plant the seed, water the soil, and wait for the blooms to appear. When we first see the sprouts, we don't pull them up to make them grow faster. We take care of the seedlings. We make sure they get enough sunlight, water, and nutrients, and we wait for the blooms to appear. She understood about the wait.

How I move forward with my life is determined by how I choose to wait for its rewards and its losses. I can passively wait for the time when my physical body wears down and no longer supports my place on this earth, or I can actively wait, pursuing goals, making mistakes, nurturing myself, reaping the rewards when I succeed, and learning the lessons when I fail. My mother loved life. I so admire her for that. But I realize she loved life not only because of who she was but because of what she decided to do with it. That's all I can do. Sometimes I'll make the right decisions and sometimes not. I'll just have to wait and see what happens.

Recall

My family was a "modern" family, long before its time. My parents were separated, never divorced. I had two older brothers, George, the sullen one, and Jack, who was gregarious and unceasingly upbeat. We called our father John; don't know why, but we did. My father lived a half continent away. He was a man I've heard referred to as kind, generous, and irresponsible. I remember him only in images. The first is seeing him standing on the train station platform when my mother brought us back to Oregon for a visit. The second image I have was from that same visit when he walked me to the mailbox across the street from his apartment building. Until then, I only knew of post office boxes located in the building found on Main street of a small farming town with a population of 1100. I thought mailboxes, the metal, curved receptacles attached to a post alongside the road, only existed in the movies and on TV.

My memories of Roseville are clear. The summer band recitals every Wednesday night

on the pavilion of the city park. Going with my brother, sometimes my mother, and sometimes alone. Homemade ice cream—chocolate, vanilla, and lemon. Slices of Texas sheet cake, cherry and apple pie, Rice Krispie treats, and brownies with chocolate icing and walnuts. Playing on the swing set while the high school band performed *Stars and Stipes* in the background. And always getting home just before sunset, watching *Wagon Train* but never seeming to stay awake for the ending. Those were my Wednesday nights in Roseville, Illinois in the summer of 1960.

I went to Sunday School and church every week. After church, my best friend Alice and I would stop at the National Restaurant to share an order of French Fries. She went to the Christian Church. I went to the Baptist Church. And we always met at the restaurant after the services because they ended at the same time.

We sat at the counter, never the table. We would each take a French fry, squeeze a fine line of mustard topped by another fine line of ketchup, then salt, then pepper and then eat each one individually before starting on the next. We would do this until we became bored, at which point I would squeeze a circle of ketchup with a dollop of mustard in the middle, and we would finish off the order in time to make it home for Sunday dinner.

I find it interesting that I can remember something like eating French fries in such detail. I remember it as a ritual that Alice and I performed every Sunday, but memory can play tricks, especially when you are telling a story. Did we really do that? And did we do it every Sunday? And how long did this ritual go on?

Could I have been with my brother and not Alice I? He and I always walked to church together. Why wouldn't I walk home with him afterward? Still, it doesn't sound like something he would do—stop at a restaurant and share an order of fries with me. But he could surprise me sometimes.

Jack was my idol. I so wanted to be like him. I once made a list, “How to be like Jack”:

- Always be happy.
- Never be moody.
- Do the dishes without being told.
- Pick up clothes without being told.
- Be popular at school.
- Always help Mom.

Measuring up to my brother was a pretty high bar I set for myself, and I never quite made it. I always fell a little short.

One thought colors every memory I have of Roseville: my family did not fit in. A small town that size proved to be a hard nut to crack. At the time I didn’t know that. I was six years old and thought everyone was the same. We all were on a level playing field. And falling in love had nothing to do with whether you belonged there or not.

Douglas Mills. I thought he was the smartest, cutest, most wonderful boy in the whole world. He was the funniest too.

Knock knock.

Who’s there?

I EEp

I EEp who?

You Eat Poo?

And he was fearless. I’m sure that was why I fell in love with him. He was always making people laugh. Even Mrs. Bellinger. Most of the time. Just not when he told dirty knock-knock jokes. I thought Mrs. Bellinger was the nicest teacher in the entire school. I still do, but

she didn't even try to be nice when she said, "Douglas, I don't want to hear that kind of language. Do you understand me?"

I wasn't sure if Doug understood or not. He said he was sorry, but he sat there with this goofy smile on his face and didn't seem afraid at all, which surprised everyone. Whenever Mrs. Bellinger said, "Do you understand me?" *and* lifted her right eyebrow, you knew she was serious. I believed that Doug was special, and because he was special, the teachers liked him even when he did something bad. Everybody liked Doug, but I was pretty sure I was the only one who loved him.

I liked being around Doug. I remember the day Mrs. Erlandson called me over because I was playing with the boys in the sandbox instead of playing with the girls on the merry-go-round. I wasn't doing anything wrong, not to my mind anyway, but to the Roseville elite, this was a major breach of etiquette. Mrs. Erlandson decided this situation needed to be corrected. I can still hear her as she yelled across the playground, "You heard me, young lady! I want you to come over here right now."

Mrs. Erlandson wasn't even my teacher. But this was the playground, or more specifically, a playground in Roseville, Illinois. She asked me, "Don't you want to play with the girls on the merry-go-round? Don't you think that would be more fun than playing in the sandbox?" I'm not sure if I answered, but I know I wanted to say, "No, the merry-go-round makes me sick. I almost threw up once." Mrs. Erlandson wouldn't have cared. "No, you should go play with the girls. Go on."

The next year I entered second grade with Mrs. Erlandson as my teacher. In first grade, I believed that I had the nicest teacher in the universe. And going into second grade, I knew I had the meanest one. My God, even then I thought in terms of a balanced universe. Ying and yang.

Mrs. Erlandson had a reservoir of resources that she used to humiliate students. She could bring a child to tears with no effort whatsoever. I remember the day she interrogated the new student for coming back late from lunch.

"Theresa, I want to know why you are late. Are you going to tell me, or do I need to send you to the principal's office?"

Poor Theresa. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be late. After I got home, my mother started to fix me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because I like peanut butter and jelly on toast, but she burned the toast. We didn't have any more bread, so she opened a can of soup. It took a long time to heat up and then it was too hot, and I had to let it cool before I could eat it. When I finished, I started back to school, but I remembered I hadn't gone to the bathroom, so I went back home and used the bathroom, and then I came to school. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

She was sobbing the whole time. No one said a word. Mrs. Erlandson told her to stop but she couldn't, and that made Mrs. Erlandson even angrier. Everyone was watching, wondering what would happen next. Finally, Mrs. Erlandson looked around and saw us staring at her. She stopped, walked to the front of the room, and started talking about addition and subtraction. Finally, Theresa stopped crying.

Of course, that was nothing compared to what she did to Randy Thomas. We were taking our afternoon nap, and suddenly we heard Mrs. Erlandson yelling. 'Randy Thomas! What have you done?' She grabbed him by the arm and took him out of the classroom. We could hear them in the bathroom. He was crying, and she was yelling at him. Everyone was scared. No one said anything.

When they came out, he was wearing a diaper. Or was it a towel wrapped around his waist? I don't remember. But he had to wear it for the rest of the day.

Whenever I remember that day, I wonder, why she didn't call his parents, or send him to the nurse's office, or the Principal's office. What on earth possessed her to be so cruel? And then I think, "Was she cruel?" Was she yelling or was he just crying? Was it a diaper? Did he wear it for the rest of the day or just until his pants dried?

Randy didn't come back after that. He went to a school in another town. His father drove him there every day. Mom said that he was probably going to the Catholic school in Monmouth. When I told Marcia, she was really surprised.

"I didn't even know they were Catholic."

My mother answered, "Just him. That's why the mother is the only one who comes to church. He takes the kids to Monmouth every Sunday."

Mrs. Erlandson taught at the school for another 12 years. I heard that she had diabetes, but she tried to keep teaching. Eventually, she had to quit. I heard that she was losing her sight and had to have a leg amputated. People said she drank a lot and didn't take her insulin. I would have no idea if any of that was true. Gossip ran rampant in Roseville, even 20 years later. Either way, I felt no sympathy for the woman.

When I was in fourth grade, Randy Thomas came back to school. By that time, he had grown at least three inches and gained 20 pounds. No one ever bothered him, but no one spent a lot of time around him either. One day he gave Sheila Moore a black eye. Sheila was always talking and liked to give orders to other students. I certainly understood how it could happen.

I didn't like Sheila. She took my red sweater home with her, even though I told her it was mine. We were getting our coats to go home when she grabbed the sweater out of my hand. I tried to take it back, but she wouldn't let me have it.

She started yelling. "You can't have my sweater. You'd better let me have it." Mrs.

Smith was our teacher then. She came back to see what was happening. I liked Mrs. Smith, but she was no help that day. “All right, Sheila, you don’t have to yell. If it’s your sweater, you should take it home with you. I’m sure no one was trying to take something that didn’t belong to them. Isn’t that right, Irene?”

Mrs. Smith looked right at me, and I realized I had to let Sheila take the sweater because Mrs. Smith clearly wasn’t interested in any more arguments.

The next day, Sheila brought back the sweater. “Here.” And she threw it on my desk. “My mother says this isn’t my sweater, and that I had to bring it back. And you better not tell Mrs. Smith.”

I never found out what Sheila said to Randy, but it made him angry enough to punch her in the face, right there on the playground. She was crying and screaming when every teacher in the school came over to see what happened. Everyone knew Randy was in trouble, but he seemed oddly unaffected by the entire scene. He wasn’t happy, or sad, or scared. He didn’t show any feeling at all.

The next day the principal came to the classroom. “Randy, you need to come with me now.” Everyone knew what was going to happen. Sheila had this weird smile, and she looked even creepier than usual because of the black eye. When Randy came back, he was crying. We knew he had gotten a spanking. No one thought it was fair for him to be punished. At least that’s what I remember.

There are some people from your childhood you don’t forget, and you can’t help but wonder what happened to them. For me, it wasn’t Sheila Moore or even Doug Mills. I always wondered what happened to Randy Martin. Did those experiences shape his life? Were they traumatic? Am I remembering them as being worse than they were? Was he 20 pounds heavier?

Was he crying or were his eyes just red? And where is he now?

Second grade. My thoughts keep going back to second grade. It was an important year in my life. It was the year my father died.

I answered the phone that day, and a woman said she had a telegram for Nelle Taylor. We had never gotten a telegram before, and I was excited. My mother took the phone. She said, "Thank you," almost in a whisper, and hung up. Then she called her sister Marcia. I heard her say, "You need to come down here now. Something's happened. John had a heart attack."

Marcia came to the house. Then my uncle Lee. They stood around talking to each other in low voices so I couldn't hear, and my mother was sitting on the couch. When I sat down next to her, she was crying. I had never seen my mother cry before. I walked over to Marcia. I told her, "She's crying," and Marcia just said, "Well, she's sad."

I will never forget that moment. "Well, she's sad."

The only other time I saw my mother cry was when Marcia died.

That is all I remember about my father's death, that and seeing him in the casket, looking cold and incredibly white. I remember thinking that he looked hard—like a porcelain doll. He didn't look like a person. He didn't look like he had ever been a person

My mother had a favorite story about my father. They were living in Portland. Jack was two years old, and George was six. One Sunday afternoon a man came to the door asking if we had any work he could do. Mom had made fried chicken for dinner. She fixed mashed potatoes, gravy, corn on the cob, and green beans. Not the kind with the crispy onions on top, just plain old green beans. She was always very clear about that.

My father told the man to come in and have dinner with us. My mother always laughed when she came to this part. "The poor guy didn't have any teeth and was sitting there trying to

eat fried chicken and corn on the cob. I thought, why doesn't he just eat the mashed potatoes and gravy and have some bread and butter? But did your father even notice? No, he didn't even notice."

My father's absence had been so much a part of my life that I never questioned why he didn't live with us. As a child, everything I heard about my father centered on how nice he was to people. Marcia said she thought that was why my mother married him. "He sure didn't have much else going for him." Marcia could be brutally honest.

My father drank. Over the years I heard the stories. One day he took the money from George's newspaper route to buy beer. My mother had forgiven him many things: the low rent housing with poor heating and leaky roofs; turning down overtime even though they desperately needed the money; spending the weekend drinking during a family fishing trip when George was only seven. But stealing a boy's paper route money was more than she could tolerate.

It was the 50s. Women didn't leave their husbands. It wasn't done. But my mother couldn't live the life she had with her husband any longer. She called her brother Lee and asked him to come out and get us, and we all moved back to Illinois.

I heard the story of that trip many times. It was a long drive back from Portland. I was four years old and prone to car sickness. Mom had three dresses, and all three were the victims of my vomiting without any warning. The first time was just an hour after leaving Portland. The next was late at night. Lee insisted on keeping on the road at least 12 hours a day and making short stops at gas stations for bathroom breaks and snacks. My second expulsion of food was a combination of potato chips, root beer, and bananas. And the last time—just as Lee was pulling into the parking lot of a roadside café. After that, Lee agreed to more frequent stops that were slow and easy.

My brothers told me that Lee was continually reassuring my mother throughout the entire trip. “It’s the mountains. She can’t handle the mountains. Once we’re over the Rockies, it will be better. We’ll be home soon.”

“We should have come back on the train. Marcia would have sent us money for the train.”

Lee disagreed. “I wouldn’t count on that. She was determined that I come out here and bring you back myself. You know, she’s going to spoil the baby. You won’t be able to stop it.”

“I can handle Marcia. Let’s just stop and get some saltines and ginger ale. It should settle her stomach.”

The last years of my mother’s life she would repeatedly lament that she was the last living member of her family. I would reply, “What about George, and Jack, and me? What are we? Chopped liver?” And she would smile. I wish I had been more sensitive. As difficult as ever was for my mother, she always had her family.

I have one memory of my grandmother. Well, two I suppose, if you count the “bedroom” my aunt set up for her in the living room. There was a bed, twin or double; I’m not sure, a dresser, and a chair. I have a vivid image of jumping up and down on the footboard of the metal bed frame, my grandmother telling my mother to make me stop, and my mother sitting in the chair and doing nothing.

I know from conversations that both my aunt and my mother had contentious relationships with their mother. When she died, she left everything—two houses and an apple orchard to their brother. In all fairness, it was the 60s when second-wave feminism was just getting a foothold, and my grandmother was a woman who came out of a generation that saw property as the purvue of the male. Add the fact that both of her daughters had entered into what

would come to be unsuccessful marriages, she may have felt her property was better left in the hands of her son.

Still . . . did my mother really let me jump up and down on an old woman's footboard and say nothing? Why would I remember that if it didn't actually happen?

Family. My God, does anyone have a typical family—mother, father, children? I know that as a child growing up in Roseville, I certainly did not want one—or, not a typical one. I watched *Leave it to Beaver* religiously, and to this day, I don't know why. Even then I knew the acting was bad and the stories were lame. That's not a memory. That's a fact.

Still, I watched, so grateful that I didn't have a Ward Cleaver in my life. He scared the bejesus out of me. He was so stern, always deciding what his children could and couldn't do, and always, always, every fucking week, lecturing and punishing one or both of his sons for breaking some rule.

I much preferred Fred MacMurray and his three sons. He never lectured, never punished, at least as far as I can remember, but then, he was widowed, so maybe that was what made the difference. My own experience was that the single-parent scenario was just more laid-back and happier.

My family was unique, and for all the evidence to the contrary, I wonder now how we weren't treated more as outcasts than we were. Or maybe we were, and I just didn't see it. Marcia was the thrice-divorced aunt who offered my mother a reprieve from a life void of hope. The nursing home she owned and operated was a successful business venture that allowed my brothers and myself a level of comfort and security denied them in their early years.

My widowed uncle was a stabilizing force, but unusually grouchy in my eyes. Both brother and sister were much appreciated by my mother and middle brother. For George, not so

much I'm afraid, at least not where Marcia was concerned. I don't know why, but I think Marcia just didn't like George.

Of course, compared to Jack, no one stood much of a chance. Jack—he was funny and smart and popular. He could do anything. I saw it, Marcia saw it, and Mom did too. That didn't mean my mother played favorites. But I did. For much of my childhood, I was less than kind to George. At least that's how I remember it. It took me a long time to figure out why. For all the qualities I wanted to emulate in Jack, my proclivity was to be like George. Moody, needy, insecure. I think I treated him as badly as a child can treat anyone. That's how I remember it, anyway. And I know now why. It wasn't George I didn't like; it was me.

Marcia continued to build up her business, and Lee agreed to manage the books. I know that she appreciated being relieved of the responsibility of filing quarterly tax reports, payroll taxes, and insurance premiums, but she was always clear that she was the person in charge. She was accepting her brother's help; she wasn't handing over control.

My mother knew if not for her sister, she would never have been able to leave my father. She told me that more than once. Marcia was the woman who saw to it that we had our own house, the last house I would ever live in. It was a large two-story colonial with an open front porch where I would roller skate every Saturday morning. I still have dreams about the country kitchen with the refrigerator on top and freezer on the bottom and a picture window, which looked out on the half-acre backyard with its vegetable garden. Mom fixed us French toast every Saturday morning, and the Sunday dinner was always fried chicken with mashed potatoes and green beans.

The basement had a ping pong table, which I loved if only for the fact that it was the one game my brother would play with me without complaining. The living room, or as Marcia would

call it, the room where the family lived, had the television, TV tables, recliner, and fold-out sofa, all of which served to make for a dining area, entertainment center, and bedroom. My aunt provided all of this for my mother and brothers.

I didn't like sixth grade. Mrs. Walker was the teacher, and she was a very unpleasant woman. I mean ALL the time about EVERYTHING.

"Byron, how can anyone be so stupid? How many times do I have to show you how to do this? Just sit down. You're wasting my time."

I thought she was particularly unkind the day she singled out Bryon. Even at that age, I knew calling a student stupid in front of the entire class had to be wrong. I don't remember him giving any response. I only remember that he sat at his desk saying nothing.

By sixth grade, being in Mrs. Walker's class was not the only thing I disliked. I just didn't like Roseville anymore. Everyone seemed to be unhappy or mad or angry. One day after school I started to go with Alice Sims to her house, and the crosswalk guard called me back.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Alice's house."

"I don't think so. You get back in line. There are two busy streets to cross before you get to your house. You need to stay with the group."

I didn't say anything. His name was Charlie. He was in the same grade as Jack, and I did not like him at all. Even though I was in the habit of doing what I wanted, I got back in line. I just went over to Alice's house after I got home, crossing the same two busy streets I crossed every day.

I seem to remember that Charlie was my brother's best friend. I think he came over to our house a lot. Mom was always nice to him, but she did not like his mother. As often as Mom

lectured us about gossiping, there were days when she couldn't keep her feelings about Clara Hofstadter in. And there was a reason.

Mom would tell Marcia, "Clara is just lazy. She'll do anything to get out of doing anything. I don't know why you keep her on. She's just no good."

Marcia would answer, "I know. She's worthless when it comes to the patients, but Lee keeps asking me to give her work, and if it means he'll get the payroll out on time, I'm not going to fight with him about it."

"I just don't like her. She's . . . ."

"A tramp? A slut?"

And here Mom would say, "No! Married! She has a family. She barely pays any attention to her son. He spends more time here than his own home."

"Well, if he's that much trouble, send him home. Irene wouldn't mind having him out of the house."

"What is the problem she has with him anyway?"

"I think it's his crossing guard uniform. It's given him an exaggerated sense of power."

"Uniform? It's an orange vest, for pity's sake."

"To him, it's the first step to becoming the next county sheriff. He wants to follow in his father's footsteps."

"Heaven help us. Another Hofstadter strutting around in uniform with a gun holstered to his hip. That's all this town needs."

And then they'd go on to something else.

My uncle Lee's death was as unexpected as had been my father's. Only this time, the deceased wasn't 2,000 miles away. He was at his desk working on Marcia's tax returns when he

slumped over with a sigh and was gone. I don't remember a funeral. I find that odd because I'm sure we had one.

I would come to learn many years later that Lee had lived a life no one knew about, but all was revealed with the reading of his will. He was leaving half of his money to my mother and the other half to his mistress, Clara Hofstadter. Although Lee and Marcia had never gotten along, even when they were kids, my mother would say more than once, "To leave Marcia out of the will was mean, even for him." She had always been careful not to take sides in their squabbles, but she had no problem doing so now. A mistress was one thing, but to cut their sister out completely was unforgivable.

Lee's estate was made up of proceeds from property their mother left him upon her death. Leaving Marcia out of the will was an act of vindictiveness, but I never knew for what. That she was opinionated; she ran her own business; she was the boss. I'm not sure anyone ever knew, even Marcia. But she fought back. She mounted a valiant but failed campaign to contest the will. One day my mother found Marcia sitting alone crying at the desk where Lee had once worked. "I never knew how much he hated me." Marcia's eyes were tired and red. Mom told me that she had never seen Marcia in so much pain. Mom never admitted this, but when she told this story, I only heard anger for her brother who had betrayed their sister and for her mother who had betrayed them both.

My mother made a choice that day he found her sister in tears. She gave Marcia her half of the inheritance. "Our mother left everything to Lee when she died, and now that I finally had what was due me, what do I do? I give it to Marcia."

Only a few months had passed since Lee's death when my mother announced that she and I were moving. She told me, "I don't know where we're going, but I'm getting out of this

town." I thought, "I'll be in 7th grade. Junior High! I'll be at a new school, and I'm going to be popular, just like Penny."

Penny was my cousin. At least that's what she called herself. She said it was easier than saying, "I'm the girl Marcia took in when my family life went to crap." I thought Penny was great. Her father abandoned her to an alcoholic mother when she was a baby. At 14 she saw her family being thrown out onto the street while half of Roseville watched. Her mother wasn't paying the rent, and in Roseville, you didn't fall behind on any bills.

So, Marcia stepped in and paid off their bills.

I remember so clearly the first time I walked into the nursing home and saw Penny standing at the sink doing the dishes. I thought she looked kind of goofy, but she smiled, and I smiled back. Not long after that day she was spending almost all of her time there. In only a few weeks, she had moved in, and I had a cousin. I thought she was fun and smart and beautiful.

I found her insights on life profound. We were walking home from school one day, and she gave me her insights on popularity. "School is like a layer cake, Irene. There's the top layer, and it has the most popular kids in the class. It took me awhile to get there, but I made it. I always said hi to the most popular kids and made sure I dressed the way they did and went to the same places they went. But most of all, I was friendly, but not too friendly. I always played it cool like I didn't care if they liked me or not. And next thing I knew, I was on the top layer. It's not easy, but it can be done."

"I think I'm on the second layer."

"That's OK. Those people are nice, but no one wants to be second layer the way people want to be popular. They do all right though. Usually one of the girls will be a cheerleader, and one of the boys will be on the football team, but that's just because they don't have enough first

layer people to do everything. The rest of the second layer people are in the band or run for class treasurer or secretary or something like that."

"I'm going to be in the band. The clarinet. I wanted to play the coronet, but all the school had left was the clarinet. So, I've been practicing. But I don't know if I like it or not."

"Well, then you may want to find something else to do. Or just do it anyway until you can work your way onto the top layer. That's your decision. Now, finally, there's the bottom layer. The people on the bottom layer pretty much hang out with each other and don't do much school stuff. You should stay away from them because they could bring you down."

Penny and I had some very interesting conversations. I do remember that.

Mom settled on Nashville, Illinois for our move from Roseville. She and I got in the car one day and started driving. It was a bigger town, almost 4400 people. She liked it because no one knew us. "If they don't know us, they won't have anything to say about us. "

Of course, the move did not mean I would automatically make it to the top layer. It would not be as easy as Penny had made it sound. The most popular girl in the class was Ellen Niermann. She was the most popular of the popular, the leader, and she was not letting me in. I decided I would settle on the second layer, but even that proved not to be a sure thing.

I didn't like sports, I never did get the hang of the clarinet, and I didn't know enough people to be elected to anything. Even though Penny had instructed me to stay away from the bottom layer, they were the only people who would talk to me. I found they were not that bad. People on the bottom layer were pretty much left alone. We didn't have to go to games or talk to other students if we didn't want to. We just went to school, came home, did our homework, and watched TV.

Mom and I did all right on our own. She bought a mobile home, and we had a

comfortable life. Marcia came to visit, and I made trips back to Roseville until she sold the nursing home and moved south. With the move, she was close enough to visit, but far enough to be alone.

Jack went to college for a year but didn't like it. Marcia said he had always been a big fish in a little pond and couldn't handle a big university. I think this was one of the few times Marcia was wrong. Everyone liked Jack no matter where he was, no matter what he was doing. He just realized one day that he wanted to get as far away from Roseville as possible, so he joined the Navy and married his high school girlfriend—second layer, really nice. Mom was happy about that. She said Marjorie's mother was the only person in Roseville who was nice to us, and she never gossiped about anyone.

Mom took it hard when Marcia died. Things back then weren't like they are now. There were no grief support groups or outreach from friends. There was a funeral, and then you went back to living your life.

We buried Marcia in Roseville. Mom said if Marcia hadn't already had a plot there, she would have never taken her back to that awful town.

It was another 30 years before I went back to Roseville. The house that had been the nursing home was gone. All that remained was an empty lot. One story was that it had burned down, another was that it had been demolished.

I learned that Doug Mills had been Prom King Senior year. Marcia sent Penny to college. She married a car salesman, had two daughters, got divorced and, the last I heard, she was living in Florida. I found her on Facebook, and she called one night. We talked for about half hour or so, and I never heard from her again.

I learned that I have a cousin, Clara's son Jeff. Jack told me that Clara brought her new

baby over to the house one day, and Mom said he looked exactly like Lee's baby pictures. We moved from Roseville shortly after that. At least I think it was right after that.

Mom remembered it differently. We were talking about Roseville and why she decided to leave. "Yes, I was tired of the gossip and being ostracized for every little thing, but that wasn't why we left." I asked her why. "You don't remember? I walked in on Marcia and her boyfriend to find you sitting on her boyfriend's lap. That was when I decided to move. I was getting you out of that town. You don't remember that? How can you not remember?"

I didn't. I didn't recall anything like that. "I don't even remember Marcia had a boyfriend."

What I remember was going to The Junction with my family for dinner on Saturday night. Lee and Marcia would order catfish because they both had false teeth and couldn't chew meat. Jack and I got to order T-bone steaks and Marcia would take the bones home to her dog. She and Lee would order Stag beer, Mom had coffee, and Jack and I had Pepsi.

I remember the two-story house with three bedrooms, a bathroom with a stand-alone tub, a half bath off the kitchen, a living room, a dining room, a foyer, and an open front porch that wrapped around half the house. I started having dreams about that house after my mother died. I never missed it until she was gone.

I never blamed my mother for moving from Roseville. I think a part of me thought we would someday move back, but we never did. I am glad we didn't. Roseville was a small town that left me with many memories, most of them good. But it wasn't a good town. I didn't know that for a long time. I think it's because I was always protected . . . by my brothers, my aunt, maybe even my uncle, and certainly by my mother.

I never became popular, never made it to the top layer. I don't order T-bone steaks

anymore, and I only give my dogs treats from Petco. I live in a town of 100,000 people. I still hear people gossip and I usually don't mind.

I probably should.

In Conclusion

I am Gone with the Wind

I am gone with the wind. I am on the road.

Finally.

Fucking finally.

Mother fucking finally.

Fucking mother fucking finally.

Goddamn fucking mother fucking finally.

whoawaitaminute

God I'm a pretentious writer. I mean how many times can I portray her contempt before the audience gets a little bored?

Um, seven?

I probably should have stopped at mother fucking finally. I mean, fucking mother fucking finally and then goddamn fucking mother fucking finally probably overstated the point. There's a word for that.

Sledge hammer?

No. I don't like that.

Bad writing?

No. That's too easy. Fox News easy.

Exaggerate?

You went to the thesaurus, didn't you?

Well, I don't know what the problem is. You're writing the damn thing. If you don't like it, then change it. Stop analyzing everything. Stop worrying what other people think. Be like Bush. God knows he didn't care. He was the decider. Take control. You can be the controller.

It's LIFE Insurance

"How much will it cost?"

"$12,000."

"So, did she have any funeral insurance?"

"She had *life* insurance."

"How much?"

"$10,000." That was a lie. Her mother had two policies, one for $10,000 and another for $3,000. Later she would regret what she had said. If she was going to lie, why didn't she quote the $3,000 policy?

"So what if we split the cost."

"That's OK with me. So, $6,000 each."

"Well, no. We'll split the difference between the cost of the funeral and her funeral insurance. That would be $1,000 each."

"It's *LIFE* insurance." Silence. "You really want her to pay for her own funeral."

"That's what funeral insurance is for."

"It's *LIFE INSURANCE*. And I'm the beneficiary and that is ALL she had to leave behind. I was going to split it with you." She really was. $6500 each.

"If that's the case, what difference does it make?"

“It makes a difference. Goddamn it. It makes a difference. Jesus, she’s not even dead yet and already we’re fighting.”

“Don’t be a baby.”

“Don’t be a son of a bitch.”

“Well, $1000 is all I can pay.”

“You are such an asshole.”

“And you are such a brat.”

“Fine. Keep your 1000 fucking dollars. I’ll pay for all of it.”

“Drama queen.”

“Asshole.”

Mary Had a Little Girl

Mary had a little girl and wherever Mary went she also had to go sometimes Mary couldn’t breathe sometimes Mary couldn’t stop Mary couldn’t stop the little girl make her be quiet sleep pick up her things the little girl just kept going until Mary stopped her then silence the little girl looked in silence the little girl watched Mary try to put them on she tried to put them back the little girl only wanted to dance but Mary had made her stop Mary only wanted rest quiet to hear the quiet but Mary cut them off and then she tried to put them back there was no red there was no pain there was no sound but Mary held them she looked at them she had to put them back the little girl waited she was all right she was with her mother the little girl was all right because she was with her mother and her mother never hurt the little girl so that wherever Mary went the little girl was sure to go.

She Has Gone with the Wind

This is not a joke. I want to be good. Really, really, really good. Damn it. I did it again. What is the word?

Redundant?

That's it! Yes. I was redundant. She wouldn't have been redundant. She'd never be redundant. She's a brilliant writer. She's succinct, articulate, vibrant. She would use estrangement and know what it means without Googling Shklovsky every time.

It doesn't matter now though. She's gone. She's gone with the wind. She's on the road again. She left without you. She got pissed and just left and you're still here. So fuck her.

Mother fuck her.

Fucking mother fuck her.

Goddamn fucking mother fuck her.

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APPENDIX A: PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Barry M. Chekras Personal Reflection Questionnaire for Math

Please write a few paragraphs on one or more of the following themes and return this form at our next meeting:

What would you like me to know about you?

What are your inner feelings about math?

Have you had any unusual positive or negative experiences that affected your attitude toward math? If so, what were they?

What are your reasons for taking this course?

Revised Personal Reflection Questionnaire for Creative Writing

Please write a few paragraphs on the following themes and return this form at our next meeting. This is your first graded assignment and is worth 20 points.

What would you like me to know about you?

Write specifically on your feelings about creative writing? Include both positive and negative experiences that affected your attitude toward creative writing and why they had the impact on you that they did.

APPENDIX B: SYLLABUS

SYLLABUS

INTRODUCTION TO CREATIVE WRITING

ENGLISH 227 SECTION 05

FALL 2015

STV 410

MS. IRENE TAYLOR

OFFICE: XXXX

OFFICE PHONE: XXXX

EMAIL: XXXX

OFFICE HOURS: TR 1:00 – 2:00 and by appointment

REQUIRED READING:

Dead Woman Hollow (2012) by Kass Fleisher, ISBN 978-1438442624.

Litscapes Collected US Writings 2015, editors. Caitlin Alveraz and Kass Fleisher, ISBN 978-0983632689

True or False: __Break, __Mend, __Live. Alvarez, Caitlin. Chapbook. Not available in bookstores, but provided in class at $7.00 per copy.

Understanding the Essay, editors Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter, 2012. ISBN 978-1554810208.

PDFs, as assigned, available online

DESCRIPTION:

The purpose of this course is to develop your creative writing skill. To this end, we will study works by published authors, make use of in-class writing prompts, and finally, look to the revision process as a key to one's growth as a writer.

PHILOSOPHY:

My purpose here is not to offer instruction on how to write, but to explore the process and purpose of creative writing. Creative writing allows for the exploration of one's own strengths and foibles, as well as those of society. I find the examination of self and society, regardless of

topic, requires a willingness to be honest with myself and the audience who reads my work. That is the real challenge for the creative writer – a willingness to explore what we'd rather leave alone and to expose readers to what they may not want to see but find they are ready to examine because of what we've given them in our creative work.

I believe that creative writing is an art form that can, and should, act as an instrument for enlightenment and change. As such, it needs to be perpetually sharpened and honed in order to fulfill its purpose. Creative writing is not only a talent, or even a gift, but also a skill requiring fierce discipline inspired by a passion to express one's values and beliefs. It's the discipline to read everything, all the time. Not only the great works, but the good works and the mediocre works. It's the discipline to simply sit and listen while peers offer their insights on your work and accept that you don't always get it right the first time. (In fact, does anyone ever get it right the first time?) It's the discipline to revise, and revise, and revise.

I am a writer. I love writing. But let me be clear. Doing what I love doesn't mean it's easy. Doing what I love means I feel a purpose in going through the process, however demanding it may be. We live in a society that, for whatever reason, views honest work as work one *has* to do, not work one wants to do. As a result, there's a temptation to only do what we want to do when we can make time to do it. It's as if committing to something we enjoy isn't really a commitment at all. I'm here to tell you that is a mistake. Writing can be frustrating, tedious, and time consuming. It can break your heart. It's not always fun, but it can be rewarding. Therefore, unless (and until) we are willing to make a commitment to do the work, we aren't creative writers, we are people with a hobby.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS (ALL MUST BE MET TO PASS THE CLASS):

ATTENDANCE/CLASS PARTICIPATION: You are allowed two absences without penalty. This includes excused and unexcused absences. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. If you are late, be certain to see me at the end of class so I can make a notation that although late, you were in class. (Three late arrivals equal one absence, so you don't want to make it a habit.) Please know that participation involves more than showing up. Engaged contributions to

discussions, thoughtful critiques of published works, energized involvement in writing exercises[4], and constructive and honest criticisms of classmates' work will carry significant weight in the determination of your final grade.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON A TOPIC OF YOUR CHOOSING, I.E., *YOUR PASSION:* I believe creative writing is one of the most effective means of addressing issues and motivating change. My passion includes animal rights (recognizing all living creatures as sentient beings capable of emotion – pain, joy, fear, and courage); feminist and ageist issues; and protecting the environment. In one way or another, one or more of these passions present in my writing. I believe, however, that to write effectively about an issue, we need more than our opinions. We need to know about the topic; what do scholars say; how is it treated in the mainstream; what are the arguments from the "other" side? I'm not going to ask that you write a formal research paper. Your research is reflected in your creative writing. But I do want to see that you have looked into the issue and have a clear understanding of what you are writing about. Hence the Annotated Bibliography. Details will follow.

EXIT TICKETS: Tickets will be gathered at the end of each class (the exception being the three formal workshop sessions). *Failure to provide an exit will result in an absence for that day.* There may be an occasional exception; however, generally speaking these tickets will consist of at least two questions about, or insights into, a quote on the assigned reading for that day. Come in prepared to share your quotes with the class.

PUBLIC PLACES EXERCISE: details forthcoming

READING RESPONSE PAPERS: At any point during each unit, you will submit a response to one of the reading assignments. These responses may be written in a genre of your choosing. For example, if you want to write a poem in response to an essay or a short story in response to a poem, that will be your choice. The criteria that must be met are as follows: it includes your

[4] Save for the workshop units, my goal is to allow *at least* 30 minutes per class period for in-class writing exercises.

name and date of submission, it is typed, and it clearly identifies the assigned reading to which you are responding. I will not require a page length, but will leave it to you to decide the amount of time, energy, and number of words you want to devote to this assignment.

PORTFOLIO: I will not be assigning a grade to any of your creative work. Instead, you will submit your revised workshopped pieces and three in-class writing exercises accompanied by a formal statement that discusses your revision process for *each* piece. This includes changes you made of your own volition and those made based on comments you received from your peers and/or me. I will not require a page length for this formal statement, but will leave it to you to decide the amount of time, energy, and number of words you want to devote to this assignment. Do remember that the portfolio is worth 350 points, or 35% of your grade, and will communicate to me your level of commitment to this class.

WORKSHOP PIECES: The Thursday prior to each workshop unit (see syllabus), you will provide hard copies of your work to me and everyone in the class (that would be 19 copies if you include yourself). As a reader, you will provide written comments to each author. You will have the opportunity (or should I say expectation) to elaborate on these comments during the discussion. For the workshop, you will introduce your piece, talk about what you were trying to do and how you went about doing it, and then read a 3-to-5-minute selection. At that time, your peers will offer their insights, suggestions, and ask any questions. While your piece is being workshopped, you will not speak, only answering questions that are directly posed to you. After the piece is workshopped, you will be asked if you have any questions and/or if you have any clarifications you'd like to offer. You are strongly encouraged to take notes during these sessions as they are for your benefit and will be useful when you put together your final portfolio.

GRADES: All of the following must be completed, or expectation met, to pass the course.

Attendance/Class Participation: 20%
Annotated Bibliography: 10%
Exit Tickets: 10% (also required to be counted as present in class)
Reading Response Papers: 15%
Public Places Exercise: 5%

Portfolio (includes a submission for publication letter on at least one of your pieces): 40%
Workshop Pieces (3): This is worth repeating. These will not be graded, but must be presented in order for you to pass the course.
(A= 90-100, B = 80-89, C = 70-79, D = 60-69, F = 0-59)

POLICIES:

Late Work: I will accept late assignments if, and only if, you contact me in advance. Extensions for workshopped pieces will be given only in cases of dire crisis.

Saving Files is critical for composition in *any* genre. Save early and often! You are encouraged to save your files in *at least two locations*. This includes a USB drive, your home computer, or e-mail. Losing assignments to a crashed computer or damaged flash drive will not be accepted as a valid reason for extended deadlines.

APPENDIX C: PUBLIC PLACES WRITING EXERCISE

Public Places

"A writer should never be ashamed to stare." Flannery O'Connor

Part 1

For this assignment I want you to go to public places and look, see, think, imagine, and write with the idea that public places are rich with images, sounds, encounters, conversations, odors, and moods. Look for possible stories or poems – seemingly ready to be seen, imagined, written. In other words, observe, write; write, observe.

Airports or train stations: What is the language, *i.e.*, conversations, signs, warnings, announcements, special lingo? How do people wait there? How do they behave . . . toward strangers, toward friends and family arriving or departing? What conversations do you overhear? Just how many different sounds can you hear? What's in all those bags? How do *you* feel at an airport or train station? What memories of emotions do they seem to call up in you?

*Eateries***:** Cafeterias, coffee houses, bars, fast-food, restaurants, soup kitchens. Who sits where and why? What are the obvious but also the almost unheard sounds and sights? What are the explicit and implicit protocols (rules of behavior)? What do people do before the food arrives? As it arrives? Focus on chewing until it loses its familiarity and can be seen for the truly weird activity it is. What do people do with their hands? What hidden power relationships do you see? Guess what the relationships are: Is that person on a job interview? Is that couple breaking up? How do people behave in "a food context" whether they are in love, dating, intimate but quarreling, or just friends?

Any public place: Motels, hotels, dormitories, stadiums, malls, supermarkets, parks (doggie parks).

Once you collect your notes, I want you to write a story (prose, not poetry) about a specific image, event, conversation, example of behavior, whatever is interesting to you. Describe it as vividly as you can. Bring it to class on Tuesday prepared to share it with the other students. Also be prepared to discuss the following questions:

Do you see any parallels between this exercise in observation and Roberson's work?

How does your story differ from Roberson's (or does it)?

Deliverables:

1) a typed list or description of your observations
2) a copy of your story
3) no minimum length; maximum 5 pages double space (you can always expand on it later)

Be sure to include your name.

Part 2:

Take one image from your observation and describe it as vividly as you can. Then write about what makes it is so interesting to you. How prominent is that image in your story? Is it even in your story? For Thursday, bring in a revision of your story with a more prominent placement of that image or, if it's not already there, include it in the story. You may share the revised story via the ReggieNet course mail prior to class if you want us to read it in advance, but it's not required. I'll ask for volunteers to share their stories or image descriptions in the story for feedback.