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The Connecticut Writing Project offers opportunities for growth and professional development to teachers of writing in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. A program of The University of Connecticut Department of English, the Connecticut Writing Project is affiliated with the widely-acclaimed National Writing Project, which now has 166 sites in this country and abroad.

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Teaching on the "Edge"

by

Members of the Connecticut Writing Project
Summer Institute 1990

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and the CWP staff

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INTRODUCTION

The Connecticut Writing Project began its ninth summer writing institute in 1990. For the participants and the directors, writing was not merely a solitary act, but a collective way of making meaning that challenged us to hear our individual voices and against a backdrop of the other voices in our community--other voices laden with political, social, ethnic, academic, and aesthetic layers--voices rich in what Stephen M. North describes in The Making of Knowledge in Composition as teachers' lore.

In our planning, we considered how we might bring a sense of community to a group of teachers of various disciplines, K through college. Ann Berthoff's dialectic became the vehicle. Participants conversed first with one another in their writing groups and interpretive communities and then with the theorists via dialectical strategies, posing questions as to how research might best inform their practice, and what questions still remain unanswered. Our conversations were filled with hope, exploration, struggles, frustration, awareness, and growth. We salute each participant for making the other laugh, cry, pause, and think.

--Carole Jonaitis and Mary Mackley
Summer Institute Coordinators
Rhetorical Considerations in the Domestic Discourse
Rose Targonsky

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* inspired C. H. Knoblauch to examine philosophical issues, including the "ideological perversion that attends a privileging of some particular argument and the disturbing but finally inevitable oppositional commitment ("resistance") that emerges to displace that argument's authority." 1.

As a rule I generally avoid all perversion, being somewhat prudish; however, having recently experienced the "resistance" Freire and Knoblauch document, I must engage in what surely sounds like an unnatural act, "praxis."

Here are the circumstances that precipitated this philosophical reflection. After returning home after a week away at the university, I was not surprised to find my sons, twenty and twenty-two years of age, not at home. I knew they were out and about searching for Truth and Beauty—metaphysically, I hoped. Looking about, I did see much that caught my eye. When I noticed the hand mirror lying in pieces between the toilet and the wall, I wondered why it was there. I looked up to the place where it had hung from a hook nailed into the wallboard. All that remained was a small brown fuzzy hole where the nail had been. Why were the pieces all over the floor? It came to me in a flash. It was an example of the age-old philosophy question: If a mirror falls in the bathroom and no one hears it, does it exist? Obviously not, at least, it does not exist in my sons' philosophy, because two days later, the glass and plastic pieces remained untouched, as if unseen.

I used to get very upset by such things, but my recent study of rhetoric has helped me to respond with wisdom and restraint. "The instrument of transforming is dialogue, where competing representations of reality dynamically challenge each other to compose alternative forms of action" (Knoblauch). Home alone, I began the dialogue. It was not difficult because I was beside myself. With the "Mirror-of-Nature" shattered, I was ready to consider the differences in philosophical rhetoric within my domestic community.

Rose Targonsky is a summer fellow at the Connecticut Writing Project Institute, the University of Connecticut at Storrs, and author of numerous articles, all unpublished.

I once thought much as Aristotle and the other ontologists that knowledge is the same for everyone. Differences in attitudes and behavior arise when individuals lack education. For all of two decades I attempted to teach my sons the knowledge they needed to manage domestic details with efficiency and neatness. I was often frustrated. For a time I actually considered them to be reluctant learners, or worse, incorrigible slobs. But no more. Now I realize that my sons simply operate according to a rhetorical perspective different from the one I hold. What I once considered as mouthy insubordination, I now see as their need "to be boldly denunciative" in order to affect me in the midst of my "intellectual and political comfort." Yes, I am almost ready to assume the position of oppressor. Misters Freire and Knoblauch have given me insight and now I may be able to remove the discord from the discourse.

As revolutionary as it now seems to me, my sons do not share my belief in the existence of rules manifested as genres that precisely regulate the practitioners of the domestic disciplines. The genres that produce cooked food and clean clothes are, I proposed, in the traditional view, objective, analyzable, and are as fixed as the major appliances themselves. Long have I taken for granted that ontology which ratified my most cherished values, including the importance of literacy and civic responsibility. Before I left for my scholarly pursuits, I compiled lists of rules in the event their memories might lapse. My written descriptions of their duties were carefully worded and all-inclusive, capturing the truth of the kitchen and laundry. All they needed to do was follow the path I penned, and knowledge, dinner, and clean underwear would be theirs. The other rhetoricians in the domestic discourse community saw it differently. Actually I cannot be sure they saw anything I had written. It is obvious from the garbage piling up that they did not subscribe to the classic perspective.

All of this is not to suggest a callous disregard within our sons' philosophical systems for the realities of the world and its life forms. Was it a Salada tea bag tag, or was it some New England philosopher who said: "A life unexamined is not worth living?" Whoever it was, hadn't seen what is growing in the carpet under the dining room table. If there's a tiny version of the snail darter or a wingless miniature spotted owl in that rugged ecosystem, it need not fear extinction. The objectivists, in their unbiased observation, have seen fit to live and let live by simply allowing the vacuum cleaner to remain silent in this discourse.

Although I may display a limited appreciation of the rhetorical diversity within the choices my sons make, I will not deny their profound ties with some great thinkers. Wilhelm Von Humboldt, the prominent nineteenth-century Kantian, has seen fit to live and let live by simply allowing the objectivists, in their unbiased observation, to live and let live. He wrote that the expressionist view "defends the importance of liberating student imagination, of tolerating the messiness of individual searches for meaning ..." Surely Mr. K. has seen the landfill that is our sons' room.

Understanding the different rhetorical perspectives helps one to see other sites for dialectic within the home. Knoblauch writes that the expressionist view "denunciative" in order to affect me in the midst of my "intellectual and political comfort." Yes, I am almost ready to assume the position of oppressor. Misters Freire and Knoblauch have given me insight and now I may be able to remove the discord from the discourse.

Of course no one rhetoric is ever the sole determinant for behavior choices. Perhaps my sons approach the discourse with a sociological/dialogical perspective. There was certainly evidence in the kitchen that an interdisciplinary approach may have been attempted, not unlike writing across the curriculum. One can only surmise, but the flattened left-over portions on plates in the sink seemed to suggest a "wringing across the culinary." Try as I would, the ontologist in me could find only intrinsically irrational, "revealed" disorder. To understand this, I found the key in the famed passage of their ideas," leading to a well-furnished mind. My senses told me there must have been a feast. The objectivist in me did not fail to note the delightful diversity of sensory details: the mucilage of rice residue, the viscous film of a starch-based sauce, and the tenacity of slightly charred cheese.

This dialogue of rhetorical voices has proceeded without mention of one other member of the domestic community, albeit one whose power and authority are rarely part of the conversation. Max, the family dog, is himself digging for deeper meaning in life. It may be that he is troubled by the tendency of the sociological argument that contents "itself with an impoverished conception of individuality." Who knows? No one ever asked him and would the "voices already assured of their dominant positions" allow him the right to speak? Whatever his rhetorical stance, I sensed Max was feeling a little down when I left him last week in a slight depression in the backyard. I returned to find him in a full-blown psychological crisis. The depth and breadth of his depression suggested an in-ground pool was in our future.

In conclusion, I can only concur with Knoblauch when he writes that the statements of the four rhetorical perspectives "map themselves upon axes of human value, permanence and change, necessity and freedom," clean and dirty, clutter and order, my versus their chores, all polarities in terms of which intellectual arguments endlessly struggle and reit-
erate their theme." Yes, the practical choices of the household, mundane as they may appear, represent a "naming and transforming of the world." And as Knoblauch continues, "there can be no ultimate reconciling of opposed values, certainly, but there must be an enlightened, continuous, sometimes forceful and even raucous reappraisal of possibilities." I'm glad he said that because I think I'm going to scream!

The Land of the Gentle Learning Curve

Lou Gabordi

Note from Counsel: The author has directed me to apologize and to ask the indulgence of the following groups or individuals: school administrators, department heads, teachers, students, parents, the military, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, Donald Murray, educational researchers, patriots, Jay McInerney, the Connecticut Writing Project, and now, attorneys.

Allegro e Forte

You know you have your prep first period on Tuesdays, so you plan to sleep a little later, but you overdo it and have to rush through your apartment grabbing your jeans, grabbing your backpack, grabbing coffee. You roll through stops and turn left on red, which you think the state ought to allow anyway, really, and manage to make it to school only ten minutes after the day begins. The parking lot is full, or so you think until you see the spot reserved for the superintendent vacant next to the flagpole. You don't think twice. You know he shows about as often as the Yankees win a pennant these days, so you whip into his space thinking nobody will know the difference anyway. You untie the rope that holds your door to the rest of the Oddmobile, get out, and lift the door to set it back in place. You're pleased about the good looking square knot and guess that you would have made a pretty decent scout. You get most of your T-shirt tucked in and wipe the coffee drops out of your Fu. You say, "Look Professional, be Professional," and pledge your allegiance right there since you missed home-room. You tuck your hair behind your ears and head for the front door with a positive attitude.

As you walk in, you see The Breeze looking upset and waving you over like he means now. You tell him it's too nice a day to be agitated but he says, "Cut the crap, Ottinger" and tells you he's had a ticked off father in his office since the time you were supposed to get here. You place your hands on your hips and tell him no job is too big for Odd Man. He says it's Arlene Clanton's old man and he's military. You want to know which one and Breeze says he's Navy. You ask, "Tell him I already have an appointment," but Breeze says he likes being assistant principal and that you'll have to do your own lying. You tell him how disappointed you are in him and ask what the guy's problem is. Breeze says, "He claims you called his daughter a pus head." You say, "That's out of context." Breeze suggests that you tell it to Clanton and starts to lead the way. "Wait," you say, "Is Commander Cody in uniform or what?" Breeze nods and says, "Scrambled eggs." You figure you'd better start...
doing something about that right now. You tell Breeze you’ll be there right after you grab some coffee. He gives you "the look", and you know you had better show or you’ll get "the look" again.

You walk into the coffee room and pour yourself two cups. By the time you carry them into LoBrezio’s office, you’ve got Clanton’s hat off and you chuck it across the room. You rip some stripes off his sleeves and figure you’ve bust him down to sergeant, or something, but you keep it a secret for now. He is sitting across the table. Breeze sits like Daddy at the head. You bump your chair as you set your coffees down and wipe your hands on the back pockets of your jeans, extend your right hand to Clanton and ask, “How’s it goin’?” He doesn’t get up and doesn’t extend his hand. He says "Not very well, I’m sorry to have to say" and looks at you like you’ve got a flag patch sewn to your ass, which in your opinion would be improper use of the flag. You think that this Doughboy has gone just about far enough already, so you jerk his shirt out of his pants, loosen his tie, and rip the whole mess over his head. He sits naked from the waist up and you chug one cup of coffee and sit down. You’re ready for this conference.

Breeze kicks it off. "Mr. Ottinger, Commander Clanton is concerned that you’ve been expressing a negative attitude towards his daughter’s class and Arlene in particular." You look at Clanton and slap a small piece of bright green spinach on his upper teeth. You say, "I feel good about the start of the school year, education generally. I’m pleased to be contributing to that." That said, you drop Clanton’s pants to his calves, cinch his belt, and push him forward. He says "Let’s be frank here, shall we?" You say, "I certainly believe communication in the classroom is something I carry that conviction into other aspects of my professional life." Then you blow him a kiss, lean forward, and whisper that you want to be just like him when you grow up. Clanton demures, but you see that you’ve pleased him. The Breeze seems not to notice.

Clanton takes command. He says that he didn’t come here to dance, that the name you called his daughter would make some people angry enough to punch your lights out, but that he is a reasonable man and will settle for a written apology and an official reprimand in your file. You stand and say that you are pleased to have had a witness to his threat of violence and that you thought this conference was just about over, didn’t he? The Breeze disagrees and asks you to sit and finish the conversation. You tell Mr. LoBrezio that you’re sorry, that you are concerned about more than just yourself here, that he should do what he feels he must and you will file whatever grievances seem necessary. You tell Clanton you are just pleased to have gotten it all on tape and smugly pat your smokes in your front pocket. If the conversation continues, you’re not there to hear it. You’re jazzed. You haven’t made it halfway to your room yet, and you’re already one and O.

You’ve got ten minutes before C Period: thirty mouth breathers. Clanton used up just enough of your prep period to guarantee that you’re going in cold. Your step quickens in the nearly empty hallway and you rush into the men’s lav. After, you head back to the coffee machine and reload both barrels. You try never to enter the Land of the Gentle Learning Curve while you are able to blink.

The bell ends B Period. Four minutes. You sit down and light one up with your coffee. When the bell rings to start C, you grab the remaining coffee and head for class. You turn to the empty lounge, do a Scarecrow spin, and sing, "I’m off to be the wizard ... ." You continue to hum it in the vacant hallways until you reach your room several minutes later. From just outside your door, you, yard your empire tied cup and whip it across the room toward the can beside your desk. You know students respond to teachers with athletic ability. You bet it’s in a bunch of studies.

As you enter the room you shout, "Please hold your applause until the end!" Two people hear you: Brian, the only seated student, and Doris Karloff, your department head. She looks from you to the clock and back to you. You say, "Mrs. LeWare, what a nice surprise." She says, looking at the clock again, that she’s sure it’s a surprise, but she can’t imagine why it would be. You ask what you can do for her, you grab her leg and walk her outside the classroom so I can get this observation over with." You ask if you might see her in the hall for just a minute. Twenty-nine students aren’t aware of the conversation, but Brian looks like he’s watching his parents fight. You wonder if those pants he’s wearing come in his size.

In the hallway, LeWare wolf already has an attitude. "We set up the date for this visit a month ago." You tell her you don’t remember any such conversation. She says she doesn’t doubt that for a minute, which was why she stuck a reminder in your mailbox Friday morning. You tell her you never saw any such note. She says, "Yeah, I know. I just went by your mailbox" and suggests you check it more than once a week. You say, "Nonetheless" and leave it at that, which you think is damn cryptic. She says that she’s staying anyway. You remind her that she observed you only last week. She says, "Last week of January," and walks back into the classroom. You wonder how she can feel comfortable walking in only one high heel like that.
You walk to the board and write "Today's assignment" and turn to the class. "Let the games begin," you say three times, so the students take the conversations to their seats. You're ready to roll. You own this class. Brian is six inches in front of you when he raises his hand. He wants to know if there was anything due for today. You figure he might have been but look directly at your department head and say, "Well, Brian, let me ask you something. What would you like to have due today?" Student participation in lesson planning! Yes! You know you've toasted her. She smiles as she writes. If you had a football, you'd spike it. Brian says that he'd probably have the draft due that you told the class to write last night. You tell him not to be too hasty, to reflect a bit. "Let it incubate. We'll come back to it later," you say and ask if there are any other questions. Jason leans forward and sticks gum in Allison's ear. David turns to look at the War Department and doesn't respond to her missing right sleeve. He jerks his thumb at her and says, "Hey Odd Man, I suppose we're doing something today." You tell him it's Mister Odd Man to him and not to pay any attention to Mrs. LeWare, that she is here to study at the feet of the master, as who among them is not? David looks back at her and she rolls her eyes. You save that. "But to our work alive," you say and bow deeply. When you look up she is shaking her head slowly, her eyes narrowed. You explain perkily, "Shakespeare, a'blick back at the class and not Ohioan "Today's Assignment," still the only two words on the board. "Any other questions?" you shout above the language play. Having covered the aural and visual modalities, you allow students time to construct the necessary syntax to respond. For a moment you think Allison has a question, but, as an intuitive professional, you realize that she is merely tugging at the gum. Brian's hand goes up. You call on him immediately. "Yes, you there in front, Brian." What is today's assignment?" he persists. "Oh, our little concrete sequentialist", you say and rub his head playfully. You realize, though, that you've accidentally knocked his glasses onto the floor. Brian scrambles for them. David says, "I always thought that nose came with the glasses." This gives you a title for an essay: "Fun with the Fashion Impaired," and you wonder "ed psych. journal or local op-ed?" LeWare is standing like a kid in the street with one foot on the curb. "Yes, Mr. Ottinger, today's assignment is . . . .?" Her question trails off, leaving you to fill in the blank, which you do with "Evolving. Forming today's topic. Like fine pre-writing." You say the last word again, louder and more slowly for her and to write it on the board. She apparently commits it to memory. You love it when you produce under pressure.

Ten minutes pass. The period is nearly half over. The noise level has steadily increased and you feel like an important participant in the process. You know how it would intimidate the Brown Shirt grammarians, but this, you recognize, is the very stuff of communication. Brian has used the time to organize his notes on the period to this point. LeWare is at your desk. She leans into your personal space and asks what the hell is going on. You ask her if she can say Donald Murray. She had it coming. "I'm serious, Ottinger. They are completely out of control," she says. You are amused. "They are not out of control; I gave them permission. This is the period of 'inquiry,'" you explain. "It's in all of the literature." She smirks and says, you're using Bobby Dunston is inquiring about Jennifer's butt. You remain patient and seize the opportunity for conversation, "That's where Bobby is right now." You consider telling her that teachers have no right to rifle through the glove compartment of his soul, but decide to let the metaphor mellow. She makes you wonder what the studies have to say about the relationship between celibacy and enthusiasm for teaching diagramming. Your attention returns to the writing groups.

"Attention shoppers: we're ready to begin. Please, now, let's bring closure. I'd like you now to write something. Nobody moves, not even Brian. "Let me be more specific. I'd like you to write something carefully," David smirks. You intuit that you've pigged his curiosity and decide to take advantage of this teachable moment. You play the same thing to "Carl, you tell me you tell them they can never be prepared to answer questions on the piece. David wants to know what kind of questions. This is slipper ground you realize, but because they are merely developmental writers you dangle the carrot. "Exploring questions," you say. "Questions like, 'what did I write' and 'did you write it carefully?'" Relevance is meaningless, you have long contended, without high standards. Stephanie awakens as her head hits the desk behind her. Bobby ties her hair to his gym bag. You decide to allow the vignette to play itself out. To give them their social space. LeWare mumbles something about "gone after June." You think, "That tears it." You quietly but forcefully request to speak to your evaluator in the hall. She declines, saying that she fears for the safety of department supplies. Brian has one last question, "How long does it have to be?" You say "The whole period" and move into the hallway. LeWare follows but appears to be trying to make her lips disappear.

You intuit that she knows she's in trouble, but she leads anyway. She says, "I don't know what I was thinking when you impressed me in the interview." You hang her purse down her back, the strap in her mouth like bridle and bit. "But I know exactly what I think now." You open the purse, raise it above her head and turn it upside down; its contents clatter first about her shoulders and head and then her shoe. She says something about "having the necessary..."
paper trail," but you find it hard to concentrate with her skirt tucked into her panty hose like that. Rally you must, however, and you deliver. "Look," you begin, "I've tried to stay calm but I'm afraid that this has become a union issue. You not only come unannounced for observation after observation, you also impede the flow of my lesson and flirt shamelessly with one of my students." Her mouth drops. You seize the opportunity and insert the wax lips. You tell her how embarrassed you were to see her use her eyes to tell David "come hither" and that she might wish to consider retaining counsel. She smiles and says that that's no problem: there are three in her immediate family. She wonders, "How many are in yours?" You say that you suddenly remember that David is eighteen and tell her that the point, though still personally disturbing, is moot. She says that this conversation will be continued with a third party present. With that, she limps off. You feel generous and call it a draw: one, 0, and one. While you're out here, you might as well run for coffee.

You are about to walk into the faculty lounge, when the door opens into you. The Breeze apologizes automatically but changes his tone when he sees that it's you bent at the waist, trying to cup the blood from your nose. He says he was on his way to your room, that if you were smart, you'd head back there too. You pinch your nostrils and stand with your head tilted back. He says that he held Clanton off as long as he could, but that he insisted on seeing God about your conference. Breeze says that he told Captain Nemo that the principal was tied up in his office with Superintendent Connors. Clanton said, "Better yet" and stormed into their meeting. As you speak, LeWare brooms by and just says "Good, very good!" when she sees you out of your classroom. She hangs a Roscoe into God's office. You tell Breeze not to worry. You say, "I've got so much shit on Clanton and LeWare that you wouldn't believe it." Just in case, however, you ask him if he happened to catch what Connors was wearing.

An Open Letter
Candice Price

Dear teachers, administrators, and anyone else who has a stake in the education of our children:

Yesterday I witnessed what is so good about teaching. As a very tired but still excited member of the Connecticut Writing Project's Summer Institute, I saw what is also essential to the most productive education of our children, but what is often lost for any number of reasons. I've lost it for any number of reasons and on any number of occasions over my now completed sixteen years of teaching, but I've always managed to find it, at least a kernel of it, sometimes at the bottom of Pandora's Box.

This summer I found more than a kernel of what is often lost to the realities of any job and even more so to the subtle, often endemic pressures of teaching. Here were sixteen teachers most of whom had devoted not only years, but their lives to education. Elementary teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers and even college teachers from a variety of backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences came together in one room looking for something that they were afraid of losing. Not that they had lost it, but every year the fear became more and more real. It was now time to do something about it.

Yesterday I witnessed two teachers, one an elementary and one a high school social studies teacher, who showed us what is good about teaching. We, the "students," knew that we were important to them; we knew that they wanted us to learn, regardless of our sex, color, religion, values. In fact, both had repeatedly shown us, also as workshop participants, this acceptance and openness in everything they did and said about education. In our large group, in our small peer conferencing groups, in daily-changing small group interactions, in one-on-one conversations, they exuded what it is none of us here was yet ready to give up to antiquity. And that is the idealism that we all need to hold on to as teachers and educators, as parents and a nation. And that is what is so easily lost to the very real demands of the classroom, the school, the town, the state and the nation.

My proposal is simple: let's work together, not against each other, in keeping the ideal at the forefront of education. The solution isn't so easy. As we look around at all the problems that plague education today, you probably wonder why I even concern myself with something as nebulous as the ideal. But if we lose this support beam, which has been precarious for years, then education doesn't have a chance.
I'd like to return to the heart and mind of education for a moment: we, the teachers. Here is where education ultimately starts and ends and here is where the ideal cannot be lost. However, we, the teachers, need the encouragement and support from all who have a stake in education. And this support begins right in our schools. Teachers, let's share with each other the good things that go on in the classroom; let's share the bad things that go on as well, then look together for solutions. Let's do our best for each other. Let's use our differences as a springboard for ideas.

Keeping even a seed of the ideal requires action and nurturing. Let's exchange materials, teaching strategies. Let's talk about things that haven't worked and things that have. Teachers, we are in this together. We need each other to counter the loneliness of the long distance teacher. And let's remember the quote by Byrd Baylor: "If you think you are better than the horned toad, you will never hear its voice." This past year I almost forgot the implications of Ms. Baylor's message in working with others, especially my colleagues. This year the quote will find a visible place both above my desk in the English office and on a bulletin board in my classroom. Everyday let it be a reminder to me that every teacher, whether or not I agree with him/her and whether or not I really think he/she is doing a good job in the classroom, has something to offer his/her students. I can thank Mary Mackley, the director of the Connecticut Writing Project, and the entire four weeks of the Summer Institute for reminding all of us to look for the good where we often think there is only bad.

These words of wisdom hold especially true for you, our administrators, who much too often emphasize the negative. Instead, recognize the good that's going on in our schools, not only for P.R. purposes that we're all too familiar with. There's a lot more going on than just teachers earning PhD's and the title "Dr." or kids going on a whirlwind tour through Europe. Instead, take a real look at what's going on in the classroom; you'll be pleasantly surprised at the learning that's going on whether the teacher leads discussions, facilitates group work, writes with his/her students, or stands behind a lectern. Teachers need a pat on the back once in a while, not a reprimand for something one teacher did or for something that's a townwide or even broader problem. What teachers too often experience day after day is the harangue of frustration you're feeling from the ever-increasing pressures from every direction. However, there is an accessible alternative to trying to solve everything on your own: sit down with us, your teachers; ask for input; hold a dialogue; collaborate on solutions. Right is going on; in some cases, none of it is going on. Yet, it really needs to be if we're going to move beyond mere survival in our schools.

Finally, remember that we all (or most of us), teachers and administrators alike, started out with youth and idealism in our back pockets. We can't retrieve the youth, but we can try to air out our ideals that have been in storage for quite a long time.

Teachers and administrators, none of this is to suggest a panacea, or a simple one-time solution. None of this is to suggest that any one of us has all the answers in our back pocket. What it does suggest is that to do more than just keep our heads above water, we have to do what most of us encourage our students to do: be honest, communicate, and work together. The sum of many putting our heads and hearts together is a lot more powerful than the sum of one frustrated, tired teacher or administrator who can't find the bottom of Pandora's Box. We have to start some place, and this is at least a start in the right direction.
Anatomy of a Marriage
Peg Blum

Here I sit in the waiting room. I know Joe is O.K.; I talked to the doctor. Why can’t I see him? What is the reason to keep us separated now? The nurse teased me that the whole reason for the operation was to surgically remove my hand from Joe’s. Why was it so hard to let go? Why did I even think about it; of course it’s not worth taking the chance of complications—swelling—whatever. Yet if it were me, I probably wouldn’t let them take it off, I know Joe didn’t want to let go of it. Twenty-three years—it’s never been off—just like mine. We’ve focused recently on differences. Why? As I stood next to him, we were united in a way only two people who have spent a lifetime together could. He knew I was with him even though numerous rooms separated us. We’ve been farther removed from each other than that daily. He works in Naugatuck; I go to Cheshire; yet this was different—forced—like when I went to have the kids. The only time we were apart for overnight, even then, he visited when he was allowed. Hard to believe—we’ve never been apart for a period as long as twenty-four hours. I don’t think I’d want to either, though there are times I feel a bit confined. There’s comfort in the confinement of love, that silent invisible bond that says I miss you when you’re not around even if I ignore you when you are. Why do we take each other for granted like that? No wonder we can’t live in paradise—we forget to enjoy all the marvelous gifts we have.

Joe would say I’m being ridiculous. After twenty-five years, what’s the point of all this analysis? Who knows each other by now, it’s too late. I think if we’ve made it this long we need to reflect—we’ve grown stale. I find negative thoughts and even comments in me that shouldn’t be there. The polarity of our personalities is probably what brought and held us together. Now it seems to be a source of contention. What happened? We once celebrated our differences; now we’re looking to change them.

When we started counting the days to our wedding at 512, analysis was part of our everyday routine. The Catholic Marriage Manual. Did Father realize how seriously we took his injunction, “Read it”? Our “blue balloon” logged hundreds of miles as I read as Joe drove. We were convinced we had solved every problem imaginable. Could there be anything that this book didn’t cover? We even discussed sex. That was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done. My traditional Catholic parents had me convinced that my conception must have been miraculous, and only whores actually discussed those things. Were we the only couple in history who went parking so I could give him a backrub? I still love those shoulders hunched over like that—one arm draped over the seat.

It was a challenge to find a look on his face I couldn’t read. He didn’t always like what I asked, but his hesitation only told me how important it was for us to share that moment. We’ve come a long way from those long drives. Has it always been in the right direction?

I still cherish our silent moments. There were years when we had to sneak a walk around the block to find peace in each other. Were there really only three little kids? It seemed like a dozen when they all started to talk vying for our attention. Now we still sneak off, but even if it’s noticed, the kids wouldn’t want to walk that slow anymore. I hope they learn the value of walking and talking. It served us well until lately. We need to put aside tired feet and cramping legs to feed our souls again.

I used to seek Joe’s comments, “Tell me what’s wrong so I can fix it.” Have I stopped asking because I’m afraid I can’t succeed anymore? Why do I take criticism of the housekeeping personally? That was key in my relationship to the kids. Separate the act from the person. I love you even if I can’t tolerate what you are doing. That got me through some of the toughest situations. It’s what keeps me so attached to our son now. It’s why I was so angered when Joe rejected him for smoking. I forgot what made Joe the perfect husband for me. Like the manual said, “The husband is the head of the family,” with all the double meaning implied, “the wife is the heart.” I still think with my heart. Why don’t I handle it well when he uses his head? We had agreed that was why God taught people to marry. Children need the balance. Unconditional love that demands responsible decisions.

Does Joe know how I feel? Of course, my head always answers first if not best. Why do we treat each other the way we do if that’s true? Why didn’t we for that six months after marriage encounter? It was only a weekend—one of constant affirmation and love. (In spite of twin beds in all those rooms!)

Why can’t our focus be on the positive? Actually written in lists, if not longer—I’m sure the positive side would be much more valuable. We have shared life and love for twenty-five years. We endured, enjoyed, mourned and celebrated, argued and agreed.

The contrasts of our wedding vows were easy. Healthy was normal. In sickness, I was too worried to even think of problems. Richer might have been a problem if we ever had a lot of money. Poorer inspired my creativity. It was some-
how stimulating -- exciting, maybe -- because it was a challenge. I may not have seen it that way if we didn't have basics, but we did. I will admit that I was quickly running out of ways to disguise 29 cents a pound turkey.

I don't even remember the transition to our present comfort level. Joe, my financial manager, handled that in his usual dependable way.

Our role changes have also been gradual. When did Daddy become Dad? When did Mommy's kiss lose its miraculous healing power? We've dealt with the insurmountable tragedies only a two-year-old can suffer, attended parent-teacher conferences, played peace-maker and listened helplessly when all we could offer was a hug and a hand to hold. How could I be surprised at our changes? I've heard "old folks" who have been partners for life begin to recognize themselves in their mate. Joe has become a softer, gentler version of himself. He's even taken over household chores--unheard of in our prenuptial days. I'm not allowed in the grocery store--I can't stick to the list. When I tried to "help out" by doing a load of laundry, he peeked over my shoulder and said, "I only fill it to the line." This from the man who couldn't get out of bed without the aroma of steaming coffee calling from his mug on the nightstand.

I've changed, too. Has working full time distorted my priorities? I once dressed for dinner and anxiously awaited his arrival--eager to hear about his world. Now I rush in wanting only to share my world with him. If I think carefully and rationally (something I've seldom been able to do), I'm not surprised that Joe has also done some thinking about us.

Last night he asked me how I felt when he didn't offer our son a ride, although hints permeated their conversation. (That introspection hasn’t often been verbalized before.) It wasn’t easy to tell him the truth. "I couldn’t have handled it that way," but I’m learning what I knew when we were dating. Men think differently even after all their changes. I'm not ready to celebrate that yet, but finally I think I can respect it. I guess coming a long way back to where I started with him says a lot. We've gained more than grey hair, wrinkles, and a spare tire in our journey.

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Drops
Gilbert Moon

Why does captive water hang upon the faucet lip, sag heavy, pull, and lengthen to the break that bombs the sink below? Is it a prod to consciousness that sleeps; a force to sting our anger in the night?

Who ignores the drop? Its constant and relentless drum upon the night sinks of the world insists that life respond and rise to choke the source of wakefulness.

Then sleep, and back beyond the rubber washers, static in the copper tubes and tanks and further back, in broad deep wells and reservoirs it waits to trickle through, to form a skin upon the faucet lip, sag heavy once again to break and bomb the sink below.

Weariness cannot admit surrender to this awesome drop spawned in dreadful seas of writhing coils slapped in hissing swells of lifted spray.

Splashed! to yet prickling probe of midnight stumblings and red eyed twist against the faucet lip of liquid poised to break and bomb the sink below.

Then peace, far from reach among the trees cutting canyon deeps in froth and bubble dreams; caressed in troughs and gentle heaves of fluid bathing in warm pools.

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Provoked!
with sudden claps of light
and drops by wind assault
through open window slap
on hardwood floors, spray
the agony of sleepless
rising to slam window shut,
collapse and listen wide awake
to droplet armies
gathering upon the roof.

Somewhere a river
grown with rain
to flood
the black mud swamp
where those who would
capitulate imagine peace.
Seeping in it spreads
a circle on dark plaster
high above to form
a skin, sag heavy, break
and bomb the flesh below.

As I walked through the aisles of the grocery store
yesterday, I couldn't stop thinking about my dad. Why this
mundane chore made me think of him, I don't know. Perhaps
it was because he was the one who always did the grocery
shopping in our home and he was the one who taught me how to
do it. Or maybe since I had just finished a confrontation
with my daughter, I needed his advice. He always knew what
was best or what was the right thing to do. Whatever the
reason, I couldn't get him out of my mind. I couldn't stop
thinking of how much I missed him. I just wanted to talk
with him. But I couldn't.

Today, Mom came to visit for a short while. She had
been trying to keep herself busy. Today is June 30. Today
would have been their 49th wedding anniversary. I haven't
been able to stop thinking about Dad all day again today. I
miss him. He died last January from that ugly disease
called cancer.

Standing six feet three inches tall, my father was al-
ways a man I could look up to, but not because of his
height. He was extremely strong in character, very hand-
some, was a totally logical thinker, had a dry wit, was a
great artist, a dignified and honest man who spoke eloquent-
ly, had perfect penmanship, told the strangest jokes, and
sang the silliest songs. Neighbors said they could set
their clocks by him because of the way he stuck to his rou-
tines. He would let the dog out or open the shades or leave
for work and return at precisely the same time everyday. He
never liked to go anywhere; his home was his castle and that
is where he spent most of his time. I always admired him,
and I will be forever proud of him. He was an integral part
of my life, but it is his death and the way he accepted his
death, as part of his life, that has had such a strong im-
 pact on me. I will never forget the last few months we
shared together.

One September day he went to the doctor's for a routine vis-
it. He had worked for the same company for forty-two years
before he retired, and was never sick a day. It seemed so
strange that there could ever be anything wrong with him,
when he suddenly found out that he was diabetic. About a
month or so later all the testing was completed and his
treatment was prescribed. But this new lifestyle was not a
debilitating problem for him; he tackled it as a new and
challenging experience. He seldom talked on the phone, so
it aroused my curiosity one day when he called to ask, "When
can you come to see my new toy? I want you to try it out."I arrived at his house to discover he had just gotten a
blood sugar tester. I marveled at his playful attitude, but
I could hear the pride in his voice as he went into detail explaining how he could regulate his blood sugar by his diet, with the help of this device.

He showed disappointment over the fact that he couldn't eat the way he used to. He always enjoyed food and would eat everything. I imagine he made up the expression "I'm sufficiently suffonsified" but it sounded so normal to hear him say that after every meal. However, now he was limited not only by his diet, but also by desire. He began to look thinner. Mom was happy about this at first because she had always complained about his little paunch, now it had disappeared. He was getting along fine and we all accepted this as just a part of the aging process, certainly something we could all live with.

While this was all going on, something else was happening. My brother Mike in California, Tom in Maine, my sister Nancy and I decided that we would surprise my parents and have a family reunion for Thanksgiving. It would be the first time that our whole family would be together in 11 years.

One day in November, during a routine visit for his sugar level, the doctor thought Dad should go for a stress test. There seemed to be some irregularity with his heart. More tests. Now the question, should we still plan to surprise Dad on Thanksgiving? Would that be too much of a shock for his heart to handle? Or maybe tell him, but still keep him in the dark? We decided to go along with our original plan.

The night before Thanksgiving my brothers and their families arrived. Thanksgiving morning was spent with a lot of hustle and bustle but the anticipation was deafening. I made Mom and Dad promise they would arrive early so that we could have a nice long day together. At 10:30 a.m. they drove up the driveway, and our secret visitorstook their hiding places upstairs. The usual greetings, hugs and kisses took place between my family, my sister's family, and my parents. We finally got them seated in the family room when my younger brother and his family entered. The surprise was terrific, and tears began to flow. Visits to Maine or Tom's visits to Connecticut were usually pretty frequent, once every few months, so this wasn't too out of the ordinary, but certainly a joyous occasion. A few minutes later when normal conversation resumed our next set of visitors, my brother Mike and his wife from California, stole their way from their hiding place and made their shocking entrance. It was a good thing that Nancy had been video-taping everything because we would have been no way to describe what had taken place during the next few minutes. Screams, tears, disbelief, questions and exclamations, along with love and happiness permeated the air.

That day was the happiest day my family and I had ever shared all together. It was the perfect Thanksgiving; we had so much to be thankful for; we had each other. Dad couldn't eat too much; I remember feeling a twinge in my stomach when I saw just a tiny spoonful of everything on his plate. It always used to be heaping and piled high on Thanksgiving. We had such a delightful day, no interruptions, a nice calm relaxed atmosphere where we sat and lingered and talked. He laughed as we reported events that we needed to catch up on and reminisced about how things used to be when we were all living together. Dad even brought the dog with him so he didn't have to leave early. No one wanted to see the day end, but it had to. We knew we had a nice long weekend ahead of us, so we made plans for the next day. Dad was scheduled to go to the doctor's the next afternoon to get the results of his latest tests, so we would get together that night.

But then the bomb fell. We learned that afternoon that dad had pancreatic cancer.

Dad went to the hospital for the very first time in his life for some more tests. They tried one dose of chemotherapy in December but before the next scheduled treatment in January they knew it wasn't working. The cancer had spread to his liver; he had only a very short time left.

Dad took care of all his business. He continued to do the grocery shopping; he even shoveled snow, went to church every Saturday night, and sat in the same pew just as he always had. He gave mom lessons on the things he wanted her to learn, so that she could do them on her own. One morning he called me at school to see if I was free to pick him up that afternoon. He wanted me to bring him to the funeral parlor to make all the arrangements so mom wouldn't have to do it by herself. "You pick out the tie, you're the one who has got to look at it at not me," he said to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

Soon, he didn't have much strength and couldn't get out of bed. He spent those last few weeks with that same dignity with which he lived. He never complained, and accepted his fate right from the beginning, saying that we all have to die sometime; it's a part of life. He said he was seventy-two years old and he had lived a good life. If this was meant to be, there was nothing he or anyone else could do about it. He was ready. A hospital bed was set up for him in the living room during that last week, since mom wanted to take care of him at home. He died with us by his side, in his living room--his favorite place, exactly two months after Thanksgiving.
During the funeral mass, the soloist was singing a song I had never heard before. It was beautiful, floating somewhere in my subconscious. When she repeated the refrain I was able to focus in on her words. She was singing what was in my heart: "Daddy, did you ever know you were my hero? You're everything I wish I could be. I could fly higher than an eagle. I would be nothing without you. You are the wind beneath my wings. Thank you. Thank God for you, the wind beneath my wings."

I think of Dad often. I remember those last few months so vividly and how well he helped me to accept his death as being just a natural occurrence. I miss him, his style, his ways, his humor, his singing, his jokes and his advice. Through his examples and the standards that he set, he helped to shape me into the person that I have become. I love him. I miss him. I understand. He is not here. He is always with me.

Earth to Steve
Steve Straight

A field of tiny blisters has appeared on the ring and middle finger of my right hand; they are poison ivy blisters, I know yet I have not been near meadows or stray dogs or hay and they do not itch.

It is clear now my body knows me better than my mind.

One morning years ago I tried to rise from my bed and found I had twisted my back and could not move; then, I remembered my dream of the night before: rolling spiders chased me over rocky terrain and when I ducked between the trees they turned into snakes just as fast.

I managed to stay ahead of them, of course but if I hadn't I wonder if instead of eating me they'd have given me a message: We were only trying to say Lie down, take it easy, relax your life from the stretched rubber band you've created.

And perhaps those spiders were my body's last resort, perhaps I'd missed all the earlier clues, hadn't caught a hint, and so, I couldn't straighten up to eye my world, for weeks forced to learn everything from the ground in front of me.

It takes a certain harmony to listen to your body, harmony with the moon and wind and water; women learn this early when their blood flows out of their bodies like the most natural thing in the world.

Being a man, this listening must be practiced; even to write this poem I have had to grow quiet, so that in the stillness of each breath I can listen to the history of my body, the diary of its messages sent to me bulk rate, overnight mail and special delivery sign here please.
My father analyzed systems fifty hours a week for Hamilton Standard, and often he spent his Saturdays in bed, with the shades drawn, his head pounding with migraine until his eyebrows ached; he fought that message with all his strength, for family but the message wouldn't quit.

It came back one Monday morning with reinforcements; first a tingling in his fingers and toes, then numbness in his limbs, then a small pain in his chest that grew and grew until he collapsed on the living room floor, shouting.

Just between you and me, I'm paying close attention to those blisters, gentle couriers I need to know.

The taxi pulled away throwing the passengers forward in their seats. Barbara leaned back, closed her eyes and tried to remain calm. There was another red light ahead, but the driver continued to press the accelerator to the floor. And so it went, race to the light, screeching halt, accelerate. Now the driver was maneuvering to get into the right hand lane where a red Seat fought the intrusion. Unintimidated, the move was made anyway, the two cars avoiding collision by what appeared to be inches. "Loco, loco," the cab driver yelled at his opponent as he turned to his passengers in the back seat to gain their support. In this fashion the cab made its way up Paseo de Castellano to the Madrid airport.

The week, anticipated for so long, had gone by very quickly. Barbara had come to Madrid to see Sara, who was there on her junior year abroad program. They had a wonderful time. Sara was so adult, acting as tour guide through the city, its museums and parks, with her proficient use of Spanish.

As the taxi continued its perilous journey, Barbara sought to escape mentally. She reflected on the experiences of the past week and her observations about the people and places. It was Holy Week. Work had been suspended. People were out walking in the city. Often in family groups, they strolled arm in arm in various combinations: husbands and wives, boyfriend and girlfriend, sisters were often seen together. Certainly not something you saw very often in New York City. The pace was relaxed. She had not felt rushed in cafes. You were expected to stay there as long as you liked. It was your table. During the cafe con leche there was time for conversation. There was time to hear about Sara's courses, friends she had made, the family she lived with, and her travels around Spain. Time to reflect and savor the moment.

Barbara was struck by the social aspect of life in Madrid. The streets were alive with people. In the evenings, people were out late, enjoying eating in restaurants which seemed to be busiest at 10:00 p.m. In many ways it was a sophisticated urban way of living. This sophistication was also reflected in the appearance and dress of the people. Women in Madrid wore suits or jackets and skirts, conservative, but well cut and of good quality. Men wore slacks and sport coats or suits; no jeans, sneakers, or T-shirts. Shirttails were always tucked in. In the major department store, La Corte Ingles, all the sales personnel wore an identical outfit, which was very stylish and good looking.
People everywhere had been courteous and helpful, always willing to stop and offer help, answer a question, or indicate a direction. Perhaps that is why the behavior of the cab driver stood out in such sharp contrast.

The cab pulled up to the airport entrance. The driver did not get out to help with doors or luggage. Barbara was relieved just to be there safely. Soon they were inside, searching out the airline's check-in desk. From there they were sent to another line where bags would be checked and boarding passes issued. They were behind a Spanish couple who must also be going to New York. Well groomed and neatly dressed, they looked like a young professional couple. Perhaps they were going to the States to teach or begin new jobs.

As they waited in line a group of four people came in. They did not get in line, but bypassed the roped-in area to go to the counter and begin dealing directly with the airline personnel. Their physical appearance was not unusual. Barbara guessed their age to be early to mid sixties. What was unusual were the clothes they were wearing. They all had on blue denim jackets. Each jacket was decorated and embellished with painted designs, spangles, and rhinestones carrying out individual themes. There were two women. The first was a dyed brunet. Across the shoulders of her jacket were the words "Beverly Hills." Beneath these words, an airbrush design pictured the front end of a Rolls Royce. The sequined words "Rodeo Drive" and "Money" were emblazoned down the sleeves. The second woman wore jeans tucked into white cowboy boots. Her jacket read, "White Dove, Indian Princess." An idealized picture of an Indian maid with braids and enormous eyes was featured. One of men wore a jacket with "Atlantic City" and slot machines in garish shades of pink, purple, and orange. His friend, a large guy with protruding stomach and a Stetson hat, reflected a Texas theme. His jacket read "Lone Star," which was illustrated with an outline of Texas and oil wells.

Barbara thought these jackets must be the ones pictured on the evening news. She had seen a brief report about such jackets which sold for enormous prices. They were being made by a cult in California and reports indicated that the people making them were being paid slave wages. Young teenagers had been recruited and trained for the work. They were paid $1.00 an hour while the jackets sold for seven to ten thousand each.

The foursome engaged the attention of all the Pan Am personnel. They pulled out Polaroid photographs to show everyone. "Oh, here I am with Cher!" exclaimed Ms. Rodeo Drive. The man in the Stetson handed out mimeographed flyers. "I wonder what they say," Barbara said to her daughter. Sara replied, "Probably, We are the World." The line moved along. The celebrities disappeared to the VIP lounge and were forgotten. Barbara said goodbye to Sara. No point in her hanging around. Barbara assured her she would be fine. An hour later, Barbara was in the boarding area. Groups of American teenagers and chaperones were lining up to take the flight home. The voice on the intercom directed passengers in the first class section to prepare to board the plane. Suddenly, the garrulous group of two hundred people grew hushed. The throng parted down the middle. Down the path and through the crowds came the four spangled jackets to be first to board the plane. All was silent when a teenage voice from Ohio piped up. "My God! It's Sylvester Stallone's mother!" Mrs. Stallone was delighted to be recognized. "That's right," she responded turning and waving at the crowd. The woman next to Barbara leaned over and said, "I hope that means the plane won't crash."
A Lesson Learned
Shirley Bostrom

It is a great day to be alive and just turning seven. Nature has provided us with a magical playground. It is one of those rare, spring-like days in January known as the thaw. The three of us are aware of the gently warming sun as we make snow creatures. We gaze at the brilliant blue sky sprinkled with soft fluffy clouds far above the dark naked branches of the tree. It makes the green of the pines and the hemlocks more intense—greener. We splash through the crystal clear water in the small brook chasing imaginary invaders. Small streams are forming where yesterday’s snow is touched by the sun. We share squeals of laughter when the newly softened earth leaves traces of itself on our boots. For us time has no meaning. What wonderful fun.

Oh no, that’s the teacher ringing the bell. Recess is over. We can tell by the rapid, quickly repeated sounds that she is summoning us at once. Unfortunately our adventures have led us away from the school and the boundaries established for us, just yesterday, by the teacher. What should we do? We are going to be late. If we go back we will surely receive the punishment that none of us can bear—no recess. I am the oldest, Jon is six, and my brother Jack is five. We all understand rules and try hard not to break them. This time we know we are going to pay for our carelessness. We look at each other. Gradually the fear we see in each other’s eyes is replaced with intoxicating excitement. Why not?

We need a plan. We all know that. How much time do we have? It won’t be long before the teacher sends someone to get us. If we stay where we are we will be found quickly. That isn’t going to happen if we can help it. We decide to go to the cold cellar under the hill we had just descended. We hear voices. At first we think Grandma must be returning. Great, we love her coffee. It is so sweet and warm. Tastes like flavored milk, we tell Jonny.

What is the noise like a motor? A car, but Grandma doesn’t have a car. There are sure a lot of people talking and no one in the whole school coming after us. Granted it is only a one-room school, but without us she still has fourteen students. The old Model A has children of all sizes and ages either hanging out the windows, running along beside it, or standing on the running board. I know I will never see such an absurd sight again in my life. I wish she would honk the horn, however this is not a time to relax and enjoy. We must get moving.

We run all of the half mile to my house. Huffing for air, we enter the yard and burst in the door. My mother is startled and asks why we are home so early. Of course it is very difficult to plan a strategy running full speed away from a posse. I look around desperately. There in front of me is my salvation—a birthday cake. I push Jonny to the front and tell my mother, “I invited everyone at my school to my birthday party. Jonny came ahead with us and Miss Nickles struts into our yard, breathing hard, tired, and angry about what we are putting her through. My mother pulls herself together and offers a warm welcome. “I am so pleased and proud that all of you could come this far for Shirley’s birthday. This is marvelous.”

We are relieved to find Grandma is not home. She would have asked some very hard questions. We stop to rest and share the exciting things my grandmother owns. We head out to the cold cellar under the hill we had just descended. We hear voices. At first we think Grandma must be returning. Great, we love her coffee. It is so sweet and warm. Tastes like flavored milk, we tell Jonny.

Miss Nickles stands there. Her face is red and she appears very warm in her long black winter coat. Her expression is one of stunned disbelief. The other students are all very subdued. Jack’s eyes are huge as he finds safety behind my mother—as he always does. My mother is about to learn the truth. I freeze. I don’t hear Miss Nickles. I am startled when I hear the motor of the Model A growing fainter in the distance. My mother is saying, “Shirley, how could you?” I know we have been naughty and are in a lot of trouble.
Mom and Dad lecture us about being unfair to Miss Nickles, Jon and his parents, and the other students. Worst of all my dad tells me, "I’m disappointed that you lied to your mother."

Jack and I are sure we will lose recess for at least a month. The next day we nervously enter school, but Miss Nickles doesn’t say anything about yesterday. Jon tells us his parents said he can’t play with us at recess. Like we made him do it. No way, we were in it together, as a team. At lunch time Miss Nickles asks me to come to her desk. She dismisses the other students including my brother and Jon. I am confused and alarmed. Why just me?

I find out soon enough. She puts her arm around me. She calls me honey and tells me how much she likes me. Even at seven I understand this attitude is not going to last. Now she smiles and explains, "Shirley, you are the oldest and a girl. I expected you to take care of Jon and your brother. They are just little boys." The unfairness of it exploded in my head, but I smile as I learn the most important lesson in my young life.

I’m still glad we did it. Sure wish I was a boy though.

One night around my parents’ Sabbath dinner table, they announced to my brothers and me that they were no longer going to be members of our temple. I was shocked. Our family had belonged to the same synagogue for years, though I hadn’t been an active member since my teens. My religious education had been thorough—Hebrew school, Saturday services, Sunday school, and youth group. Our family was involved in the life of the temple. I grew up knowing I was a Jew and was repeatedly warned to never forget it, because "they won’t ever let you forget it." My parents told us stories of discrimination and prejudice, and always lurking in the background of their tales was the horror of the Holocaust.

I remember thinking that there was something special and wonderful about my faith, yet I was never comfortable being one of "God’s chosen people." But there was also a burden to being a Jew, the responsibility to carry on the faith, culture, and heritage. Because of this burden I really couldn’t understand my parents’ decision to leave the synagogue. What they said was that, since my brothers and I were no longer attending religious school, they didn’t want to spend the money to continue to be members. I recall being tremendously disappointed and thought that they were hypocrites for belonging to a congregation only for their children, and not for themselves. Didn’t they care about their religious life? I felt betrayed as if I’d been set up somehow, set up to live as a Jew. For so many years I had been told the importance of "building a strong Jewish foundation," and I had, but after this experience I wasn’t sure that I wanted to build a house on it.

The last thing I ever wanted to be was a "three day Jew." Those were the people who, in my memory, would show up for the High Holy Day services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, driving up to the synagogue in their long Cadillacs and Lincolns, the ladies wearing their mink stoles, even though it was too hot for fur. It seemed that they were only there to be seen, but not to pray, not really. I suspected they surfaced on the High Holidays to ask forgiveness for their sins of the past year and to be “inscribed in the Book of Life." But how could you attend synagogue three times a year and still call yourself a Jew? After my parents left the temple, I realized that that’s the Jew I had become, minus the Cadillac.

There’s this challenging question in the Yom Kippur service which asks, "When will your prayers come from deeper than the skin?" I always had a difficult time understanding how reading words on a page could be praying, especially if
you were reading them in archaic English, or worse yet, in Hebrew. In the traditional approach of my synagogue most of the service was conducted in that foreign language, which I could read, thanks to Hebrew school, but not understand. I'm sure that most of the congregants could not understand it either. For many years I had gone through this charade, not wanting to admit how superficial it seemed, performing a pious act with all the other pious actors.

There was also a war going on inside me between the forces of cynical intellect and heritage. I believed that religion was self-righteous, divisive, manipulative, and most important, spiritually bankrupt. But what could I do? I was a Jew with five thousand, seven hundred and sixty some years of history whispering in my ear. And that was that.

On a clear winter day, while walking by myself in a Michigan field, I came across a dead crow. Tentatively at first, not knowing if it was really dead, I approached, then looked carefully at its body. There was no sign of life but I kicked it a little with my boot just to make sure. Then I had this thought: What's the difference between this carcass and the bird in the sky? Nothing, but the spirit to fly. So this was what "spirit" was. It moved us around, had us be alive, and made the body function. And when it was gone, there was nothing but a slab of meat lying in some field, waiting for a hungry carnivore.

I wonder, if I died in some field in Michigan, and someone came across my body, would they see a slab of meat or a Jewish slab of meat?

In November, 1977, at the end of a year of redesigning my identity, I took the est Training, which was, I was told, an "enlightenment" course. I hadn't the vaguest notion of what that meant. On the final day of the Training, I had a uniquely remarkable and magnificent, split-second experience that I can only describe metaphorically as "being behind my eyes." It was in that fraction of time that I was my Spirit, my Being, and instantly, I knew who I was distinct from my body, mind feelings, and heritage as a Jew.

It was due to this experience that I was finally able to pray. The next time I attended a synagogue service, which was on Rosh Hashanah with my parents, I was moved to tears with the profundity of those same written passages, even, inexplicably, the ones in Hebrew. I had finally reached a place of peace and resolution with my religion, and it would be nice if the story ended right here, but it doesn't.

I know that I am a restless explorer, and that matters of Spirit intrigue and captivate my curiosity, and so it seemed rather natural that, when friends told me about Ramtha, a 35 thousand year old entity, who had lived on Atlantis, and was being "channeled" through a woman from Oregon, I would want to know more. This channeling business is a strange matter. Some ordinary person takes a brief nap and when she awakes, her spouse tells her that she was speaking in a stranger's voice, calling him Beloved One, and saying the weirdest things. Over the past year I have read a number of books written through different channels, by a few different spiritual entities. I have also heard tapes of these entities speaking, and actually seen a channel medium in action.

And it is strange, no, weird is more accurate. Yet, perhaps what's stranger still is that what they have to say speaks directly to that spiritual Being in me, and I know, but only in my heart, that what they speak is true.

Returning home from Philadelphia at night, last November, my wife, Judy, was reading a Ramtha book out loud while I was driving. Everything she read, everything he said, made so much sense in light of my previous experiences. He was talking about God and he was telling us that we were God. We were all God. All human beings, all crows. We are each God. Only we'd forgotten. And I knew he was right. And then we were crossing the Tappan Zee Bridge and I got angry, truly angry that they, my rabbi, my prayer books, my religion, never told me that I was God. God was portrayed as this Being outside of me, that I prayed to, not the Spirit of the crow, which is me, the real me, not the Neil me, the me that is you that is everyone. And I said to Judy and myself, "I am no longer a Jewl I renounce my religion!"

Since that time, I know that something's been missing, though I've hidden that truth from myself. I miss being a Jew, not the cultural Jew, which I can no more renounce than change my whole history, but I miss the religious Jew, the Jew of ritual, prayer, and celebration. And so I declare that I am once again a Jew.

After all, God can be anything.
On Leaving
Mary Ellen Tibbetts

A confession: I relate a little too well to The Wonder Years. Even though it's supposed to be a situation comedy, I often find, at the end of the show, one or more tears creeping down my cheeks. The episode that got to me the most, though, was the one where the older sister left home — left home, as the narrator pointed out, forever.

I remember my own "leavings" — going away to college, and more importantly, that day in July when after a few years of squirreling away my teacher's pay, I finally had that seemingly unattainable first month, last month, and security deposit. I bought a fifty-dollar Salvation Army sofa and rented an apartment.

Perhaps because I've always felt closest to my dad, it's his face I remembered as I drove away with the last of my clothes, books, records, and posters. I remember him standing there in the doorway, waving, and looking like I felt: very proud and very afraid. My mother, who could not bear the thought of any of her babies leaving the proverbial nest, could do nothing more than keep repeating her promise that of course I could move back any time I wanted. But I knew, as I turned to wave back, that I would never do that. I couldn't.

And so I guess that's why I'm having trouble understanding my brother's decision to return home with his relatively new bride. On the one hand, I know they see it as a necessity. In a burst of newlywed confidence that love really would pay the rent, they over-extended themselves on their first apartment, and now John wants to return to school. They simply can't pay their current rent and John's tuition. There are other issues, too. The house needs some work, and they can help with that. Perhaps most important is the fact that my father is ill, and I know my mother is afraid to be alone with him, and should something happen, she's even more afraid to be all alone.

Still, as much as Mom wants them there, she's busy already, before they've even moved in, resenting their presence. The other day I stopped over and found my mother all worked up because she couldn't even walk into her own kitchen. The reason was that John and Kris were on their hands and knees scrubbing the floor. Earlier that day they had painted the back porch, repaired the kitchen sink, and polished all the appliances. I should have to put up with such hardship!

The whole business has given me pause to examine my role in the family. How is it that this has become my problem? My closest friend said to me recently, "Don't you get tired of being everybody's mother?" My aunts call me because they're worried about how my mother is reacting to the latest news about my father's health; my brother calls me to see if I think Mom will be mad if they paint the bedroom; my mother calls me to complain about anything and everything; my grandmother calls because she's lonesome and scared. I listen, deliver a steady stream of "uh-huh's," "don't worry's," and "I'll take care of it's."

There are books that say this is what women do, and there are comedians who say that the guilt I feel while I do this is directly related to my status as an Irish-Catholic woman: when we aren't busy feeling guilty, we're out making someone else feel that way. While I can laugh at such a definition because I see the truth of my own experience in it, I know in my heart that there is something bigger going on here. After all, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter one bit to me where my brother and sister-in-law live. I love them, and I'm happy that they'll still be close, but their choice of a home simply is not my concern. And yet I worry for them and for my parents about this move.

And I wonder—perhaps it's not my femininity, or Irish blood, or Catholic upbringing. Perhaps I choose to worry about something that doesn't matter at all because the things that do matter are just too big to fathom. Five years ago, I waved goodbye to my father. And now, that gentle-eyed man who watched me go is dying, and I am afraid that I cannot bear it.

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Invasion of the Helmet Heads
Marilyn Cavanna

Something strange is happening in Storrs. An assortment of scientists at the University of Connecticut was called to Arjona Hall when university officials were unable to determine any known natural cause for some unusual events on the third floor of that building. Both the sprinkler and security systems malfunctioned and repairmen were unable to solve the problem through the usual channels. The phenomena had evidently begun sometime around the end of last week, and are most noticeable during the daytime hours, when the building is occupied. The scientists were able to determine that the source of the disturbance was at the south end of the third floor of the building where several office personnel, a team of maintenance workers, and sixteen teachers met daily with two officials of the Connecticut Writing Project.

The office personnel were asked not to use any electronic equipment for a one-hour period this morning while a troubleshooting crew attempted to determine the cause of the problem. The maintenance workers were temporarily assigned to another building, and the participants of the Writing Project, although made aware of the investigation, were allowed to continue their work as long as no additional electrical power was required. The scientists were quickly able to determine that a possible source of the problem was a parapsychological event since various meters were registering unusually high psychic energy readings, whose vibrations were evidently strong enough to interrupt the electrical systems and cause the malfunctioning of electronic equipment for a one-hour period this morning while a troubleshooting crew attempted to determine the cause of the problem. The scientists were quickly able to determine that a possible cause of the disturbance was a parapsychological event since various meters were registering unusually high psychic energy readings, whose vibrations were evidently strong enough to interrupt the electrical systems and cause the malfunctioning of electronic equipment.

Parapsychologists interviewed each member of the Writing Project and subjected them to meter readings to determine if any one individual's psychic field was abnormally high. They also used Curian photography to examine auras emanating from each participant's body. The results were surprising. Every person who occupied Room 307 was found to have abnormal brain waves and unusual auras, and when they all convened in a discus sion group, the measuring instruments were completely debilitated by the strength of the vibrations. A team of educational psychologists began to study the workings of the group to discover why these phenomena were occurring and, if possible, to fulfill their mission by using the results of the study to enhance the field of education.

Through interviews with Mina McKay, the director of the Project, it was determined that a week ago, on Tuesday morning, the group first convened to begin a three-week long course centered on the study of writing as a process. Ms. McKay and the seventeen other educators began sessions at nine each morning. The charismatic nature of Ms. McKay's personality when paired with the dynamic physical presence of her cohort, Cathy Donalds, was a catalyst for the psychic energy buildup. Their affinity for being comfortable with making others uncomfortable was also probably a contributing factor. After an intensive first day of getting to know each other and the workings of the Project, and experiencing some of the writing activities that would be focused upon during the subsequent weeks, the group of experienced classroom teachers was dismissed. They were given the following day off to assimilate the information they had acquired, and to begin to attack the monumen tal tasks with which they were charged.

This twenty-four hour break probably explains why there was no disturbance of any electrical systems in the building earlier in the week, and adds credence to the theory that the intensity of the psychic activity accumulated until it was strong enough to affect the immediate physical environment, which was first noticed on Friday. The participants enjoyed a two-day weekend furlough and returned to campus Monday when the problem with the vibrations recurred with sufficient intensity to cause this electrical emergency. When the educational psychologists began observing the group today, they found that the writing activities of the group were responsible for the highest meter readings from the participants, who spent their entire weekend writing, reading about writing, surveying the literature on teaching writing as a process, and cultivating these ideas into writing workshops. The energy was so intense today that someone was heard to say that the group members were becoming "preachers of the paradigm."

Educational psychologists will continue their study of these strange phenomena throughout the remaining three weeks of the session. Meanwhile, electrical engineers have been assigned to Arjona Hall to determine if they can somehow block the effects of the psychic energy and repair the existing damage. Parapsychologists and design specialists are presently working overtime on an energy-containing helmet for the participants to use during the discourse sessions, and Ms. McKay and Ms. Donalds have been requested to tone down their mental activities. However, if these measures are insufficient for suppressing the deleterious effects of the vibrations, the Connecticut Writing Project will be issued a cease and desist order, but only as a last resort. As a further precaution, University officials have requested that the group divide into two, nine-member factions with one of these factions moving to a far removed, first floor, north corridor classroom.
Implications for the future are unknown if the group is allowed to continue its work. In September, members of the project will move throughout the state on their mission of improving education in Connecticut. This could prove to be potentially disastrous, since the dispersion of members of the group could cause an exponential growth of psychic energy levels. Various local school administrators will have to be warned of the possible side effects of this endeavor when they request inservice providers from the Connecticut Writing Project. With all of these precautions, it should be safe for the Connecticut Writing Project to continue its work. But, it would be reasonable and prudent to ask, "Are the citizens of Connecticut ready for this enormous psychic energy change in their students?"

An Ending
Claire A. Day

Our dog died earlier this year. A little, white mongrel, she had originally purchased her as a gift for her children when they were young. But Lady had a solid inner core of love—enough for everyone around her, and soon established a relationship with each one of us, so that as years passed and the children left for college, it seemed natural for Eric and I to think of her as "our" dog.

Lady slept under our bed (she snored some nights), told us when she was ready for a walk, eagerly went for rides in the car and generally proved to be a terrific companion. Although no guard dog, her presence reassured me when the house was empty, and when I returned home at the end of each working day, her excited smile and wagging tail, her visibly unconditional affection, made me feel like a queen.

Lady’s strongest desire in life was to please, and the more she did it the happier she was. The whole neighborhood delighted in her loving nature, both adults and children alike—some were known to us and some were not, but all knew Lady and she knew them. Wherever we went on our evening walks, total strangers would stop to acknowledge a being who was obviously a friend to them.

Of course, to achieve such popularity required not only a wonderful personality, but also a certain amount of physical freedom. Oh yes, she wandered, but never really far, thanks to increasing arthritis. No one ever complained about her, just the reverse. They seemed to understand that we couldn’t lock her up, deprive her of her social life. Who could be a stern master to those big, trusting, brown eyes? Just once she was picked up by the dog catcher, but even then she charmed the pound keeper to such an extent that he put her in one of his best kennels, and greeted me with friendliness and expressions of indignation at the predicament which had been imposed on her.

When Lady died it wasn’t a shock. She was twelve years old, heavily arthritic and grossly overweight. (Not only did everyone love her, they fed her as well—a fact I learned after her death.) In short, she was in poor physical shape and during her last year had aged dramatically. Much as I loved her, much as the thought saddened, I found myself anticipating, mentally preparing for her death. We had a long goodbye.

The day she died, very peacefully, she and I were alone in the house. Eric came home early from work and we laid her to rest near the trees. There was never any doubt where she would be buried—in the open part of the yard,
Eric and I and our families believe in cremation, as do many, many British people. No headstones or well-tended graves exist to remind us of our departed fathers; nor will there be of any other family members. Yet the decision to have a physical reminder of Lady, the recognition of the need for one, was spontaneously acknowledged by both of us.

The next surprise was our daughter's reaction. She came home from college for an overnight stay, which is something she rarely does, except for holidays. I realized she wanted to get a sense of the house without Lady, to have an accurate impression of home fixed in her mind. But she is so logical and independent, with her own apartment, her own pet and plans for a second one, that this spontaneous, caring surprise was unexpected. Although little was actually said about our dog, the visit felt like a tribute.

There was a third surprise—but it didn't come from our son, who came home the following weekend, when his commitments allowed. He knelt in the dark at the grave, then came into the house and spoke of the wonderful times we'd had with Lady. He said all the things I knew he would say, because I know him as well as I know myself.

At least, I thought I knew myself—until we lost our pet. Then I wasn't so sure. That was the third and biggest surprise of all. For despite the awareness of her age and health, the welcoming of an end which came before she began suffering, my grief was enormous.

I mourned her from getting up to going to bed; I drove the car with wet cheeks; taught lessons with a lump in my throat, or worse still, with tears which had to be blinked away; I saw her sitting in the yard or lying on the rug in the living room; the empty spaces she had once occupied depressed me immeasurably.

For several weeks I lived like this, feeling empty and lost in some way. Neighbors and friend empathized as if she had been human. They called, they stopped me in the street. "You had her a long time— you must miss her." But their remarks, kind and welcome as they were, could not explain my overreaction. Logically I knew she had had a good life—my behavior was abnormal.

One day I was sitting at the kitchen desk doing paperwork when quite unexpectedly a picture, a memory, popped into my mind—Lady, a bubbly, tail wagging, young dog, romping in the grass with Eric and the kids when they were little. I saw the children's faces as if in close up, full of laughter; I heard their squeals, high pitched and excited. The scene was vivid: the shapes, the colors, the movement; all were in such sharp focus that for a moment I wanted to reach out and touch them. And in that moment, in that wanting, everything became clear. I hadn't just lost a pet; I'd lost the last link to a time I had treasured: a time before the children became college students, a time when we were a nuclear family in the fully functioning sense of the word.

I realized that during the past two or three years Lady had become, for me, the embodiment of our family, not as it was then, but as it used to be. In grieving her loss I was, in fact, allowing myself to experience feelings I had suppressed when our nest originally emptied itself of its young. At the time I had been so sensible and positive, always looking toward and never back. I threw myself into my new career, studied for a degree, pursued writing with increased vigor, and made plans upon plans upon plans until, sometimes, Eric's head was reeling. Most of what I did yielded positive results, but it was done at a frenzied pace that left no time for reflection, for experiencing remorse and doubts about the children's growing up and our new role as part-time parents.

But unresolved feelings have a way of coming back to haunt you—in writing, in spontaneous, spoken words and in deeds. That's what was happening to me. My feelings had taken over and forced me to confront the fact of my in confronting the fact of my impending redundancy as a parent, the frighteningly swift passing of time, mortality itself. For the first time I faced the fact that our lives had changed irrevocably, and in so doing I began to talk and talk—about what we had been as parents, what the children still needed from us and what we could look forward to as a family. It wasn't nearly as grim as my subconscious had feared. While the day to day responsibilities and involvements had gone, they had not disappeared in a total vacuum. Of course the kids still needed us! Of course there would be continued involvement and interaction! Our years would be highlighted by family events and gatherings, and in between would be the delicious freedom to follow new paths which had not been feasible, were not even in view, during full parenthood.

Suddenly I was aware of a past as well as a future, of a continuum of family life. And with that awareness and clarity of vision came healing. The tears stopped, and the event of Lady's passing was in perspective.

Even in her death, Lady was good to me. She freed me from an emotional baggage which had grown increasingly strong because I rendered it invisible. Lady gave me back my history.

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Now as I journey through life, seeking and meeting new challenges, establishing my role in a world beyond the home, I look back on my role of motherhood - of domesticity, nurturing and caring, with pleasure and with pride. I will never be that person again: full time mother, confidante and guide - but that person will always be a part of me.

Goodbye Lady. You were a terrific member of our family. We will never forget you.
herself, but she stood out. There was something different about her. Her face did not have a child's openness.

When the dancing first began the older man got up, wanting to join in. It was obvious from the heavy way he moved and his slurred and husky voice that he had been drinking all evening. He called to Shauna to join him, dance with him. She ignored him, staying on the other side of the circle. He called "Shauna, Shauna" two more times and she looked at him blankly but did not move. Then, I saw something flicker on her lovely face, a trace of distaste and she looked away. She understood that she could get away with not obeying him because they were in public. Then the woman called to her and she ran and stood next to her. They joined hands with the other women and children in an age-old tradition of people dancing around a fire.

When I next looked, the father wasn't there.

In our journeys across the universe, we have stumbled upon a most unusual planet. The local inhabitants call it Earth. We call it X49-32/C. There is a remarkable diversity of life forms here so we are still experiencing difficulties establishing the patterns of interactions among them. It appears on first examination that the species called the human being is the most intelligent and the most powerful. In this brief report (more to follow at a later date) we seek to present our analysis of that presumption thus far.

There is a baffling variety of religious beliefs among the humans, and their political systems defy all logical comprehension. We have found these characteristics on other primitive planets as well. However, their most perplexing behavior is their constant assault upon the environment which supports them.

For instance, in an attempt to prevent animals from eating their food, they often poison both their food and their water. Similarly, to prevent the spread of insects, the humans often willingly introduce toxins into their surroundings. A simple understanding of their own meager scientific knowledge could have predicted the resultant emergence of pesticide-resistant forms of life. Basic logic could have told them the disastrous effects on their own bodies.

Another oddity is the reckless pollution of X49-32/C's fragile atmosphere. Although we have not been here long enough to state this with certainty, it seems the planet is progressively warming. One behavior that contributes substantially to this is the profligate use of private automobiles. For instance, during the colder times of the year, millions of the residents of the colder zones migrate thousands of miles in their cars to warmer areas. This is especially true of older specimens. Perhaps they are purposely trying to create a warmer climate so that their northern offspring will be able to enjoy the practice of sunbathing year-round without traveling?

Which brings us directly to our next point. Currently, the inhabitants are engaged in a process of destroying the elements in their atmosphere which they already know protect them from the harmful rays of their sun. Ironically, it is those races within the species which are most vulnerable to
the sun's damage who are doing the most to destroy their
protection.

Simultaneously, there are segments of that same popula-
tion who will actually pay extra money (another primitive
concept which entails trading paper for various objects
which they often don't really need) to expose their bodies
to artificial versions of the sun, thereby doing further
damage. We surmise that the destruction of the atmosphere
is being intensified so that these people will no longer
have to pay for exposure. (i.e. everyone will get radiated
for free. Those who don't want to must pay extra for pro-
tection.) It is still a mystery why some people want to ra-
diate themselves, but it is suspected that the leaders are
encouraging this in order to help control the rapidly grow-
ing population through premature sicknesses and deaths, but
again we caution our data is not complete.

Garbage is another strange occurrence on this planet.
The people, for some odd reason, create things which they
use for only short periods of time, and then spend their
lives trying to get rid of them. (Again, they generally use
the paper to acquire it.) Why do they create plastic bags
which they use for only forty-five minutes, but which last
for 500 years? Why do they wrap everything which is sold,
sometimes multiple times? Why do they buy more food than
they need to eat? This seemed totally illogical to us, un-
til we discovered what they do with it. They use the things
which they dispose of to actually build more land. Some-
times they fill in holes; other times they build mountains
or even islands with it. Understanding the growth of their
population, it is now evident that they are probably trying
to create more living space. However, this hardly seems
like the most efficient way to do so, nor the most pleasant.
We find the odor totally repulsive, but we assume humans en-
joy it since they create so much of it. Some people even
dedicate their lives to moving the stuff. Some communities
go so far as to take the garbage of other communities! The
idea of making only what you need and re-using everything
possible apparently is not known here, but at least they put
their trash to an innovative use.

Probably the most absurd thing we have learned here is
that these people use the same technology to generate their
power as they do to make their most destructive weapons.
Rather than reducing the amount of power they use, they re-
sorted to something called nuclear fission to create more
energy. We could not have understood this if it were not
for the historian on our research team who recognized this
as being the process used by the ancients on our home plan-
et.

The destructive force of nuclear power also makes it a
powerful weapon, and these people, whose judgments we are
increasingly coming to doubt, now have the frightening abil-
ity to effortlessly obliterate themselves. Many deadly ac-
cidents have occurred at the power plants and the effects of
the bombs have killed hundreds of thousands. Surprisingly,
they have not used any of these bombs in the time that we
have been here. The use of the same technology for both
purposes leads us again to question if perhaps the leaders
are in fact discreetly trying to control the population
growth.

We could go on endlessly with examples, but we feel
this gives a good flavor of the nature of life here on
X49-32/C. While we have found no logic to the way these be-
ings behave, it has become quite clear that they surely are
on the path to self-destruction. Since it is so evident, we
must question our original assumption that they are the most
intelligent inhabitants of the planet. These beings seem to
have been mysteriously hit by a mass amnesia or stupidity
for the last fifty years or so. Or perhaps their leaders
have been hypnotized into self-destruction by the leaders of
a rival planet. In any case, while our analysis of the hu-
mans will continue, we will also begin searching for less
visible forms of intelligent life here. If the humans anni-
hilate themselves after doing so much damage to their home
planet, we will have to conclude that the laws of cosmic
justice apply here.
There are those moments when it all comes together ... those lucid moments when things are finally clear. Effortlessly, understanding comes when least expected, uninfluenced by hard work, persistence or willfulness. These are magical moments, not the product of the focused human will, but rather a product of human willingness. A willingness to know, I think. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened... These powerful blasts of insight come gently from the soul not from the mind, over-riding history, role modeling, and socialization. In my experience, once the veil is lifted nothing can ever be quite the same. Change is inevitable.

As was our custom, one sunny Sunday morning we sat in the bay window reading the New York Times. I on the white couch in an Indian position facing the window and he in the black rocker nestled between the large green plants that live there in the sun. We drank coffee. I smoked cigarettes. He smoked pot. We didn't talk. It was peaceful on Sunday mornings unlike most of our troubled relationship. An alleged marriage, plagued by destructive compulsions and control battles. A relationship more like that of a desperate parent to her self-destructive child than that of a wife to her husband.

As I sat there in the bright sunlight, staring into space, thinking of nothing, I was overcome by a profound feeling of knowing. I had spent the last year and a half, and in retrospect most of my life, like all the king's men trying to put this person, this situation, this self back together again. I thought it was my job. Exhausted and bewildered, I paused in the brilliant warmth of that morning to catch my breath and in this moment of letting go clarity came. It was the physical sensation of AHA!, like a heavy burden being lifted and a great sense of relief. The room seemed brighter and warmer than before ... serene. I heard nothing. I smelled nothing. I just knew. The understanding was nonverbal and holistic, not just about my current circumstances but about my whole life, all life. In this moment my world view and my role in that world completely changed.

I have no words to express the magnitude of this moment. Call it an epiphany, call it a spiritual awakening, call it what you will. My mind only commented "I don't have to do it any more," and I understood I did not have to listen to the shoulds. I could set limits. I learned I didn't have to be what anyone else wanted me to be. I didn't have to suffer or starve to please another. I could choose what I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. I knew I wasn't re-ponsible for other people's messes. I was responsible for myself. I didn't have to accept the unacceptable and I could ask "what's in it for me?" I learned that I needed to love and accept myself as I am before I could love and accept anyone else. I learned I was only accountable for my own actions and that I could not control anyone else. I learned love had nothing to do with pain and that I was good and deserved to be treated with respect. I knew that people abused power because of who they were not because of who I was or was not. I learned I was valuable. I understood that I could live my life and that I was expected to be perfectly human, not perfect. In this moment I gave myself permission to become me.

Much has changed in my life since that startlingly lucid moment. All but two of the plants that lived in that sunny window have died. The survivors, however, have grown so tall they touch the ceiling in another bay window where the light shines even brighter and where they have been joined by many new plants. This is the nature of change I suspect. The great evolutionary adventure that began for me that sunny Sunday in 1984 continues showing no signs of slowing down or reaching its completion.