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## Unsettling Nostalgia: The Difficult Journey Home

Susan Shiver Barrow

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# UNSETTLING NOSTALGIA: THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY HOME

by

SUSAN BARROW

(Under the Direction of Daniel Chapman)

## ABSTRACT

Contained within the following pages is a narrative inquiry which analyzes the impact of place upon those who have occupied particular rural Southern spaces. This ethnography pays special attention to life forces and attempts to confront issues of gender, race, class, religion, and community by analyzing the larger cultural forces at work within those spaces. It attempts to encourage ways of living in the world more ethically and more inclusively. In many cases cultural influences have come to constrain the lives of young girls, women, and other marginalized people in the region. Historic economic structures and tendencies to devalue education in the region have had far reaching implications. In this work it has been found that place is inseparably intertwined with the customs and social forces at work in the region. It is a call to reconfigure culturally constraining notions in an effort to reconceptualize a more inclusive Southern paradigm.

**INDEX WORDS:** Reconceptualization, Place, Other, Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry, Marginalization, Deconstruction, Defacto, Currere, Post Structuralism, Patriarchy, Cor Inquietum

UNSETTLING NOSTALGIA: THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY HOME

by

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M.S. Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2003

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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UNSETTLING NOSTALGIA: THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY HOME

by

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## DEDICATION

None stands in isolation, and we are all the reflection of those many generations who came before us. Having lived a life that was inspired by both the imperfections and the virtues of my family, it was my intent to let those voices speak through me, those of my grandparents, my parents, my sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and those of my own dear children – Ashley, Michael, Christian, Joseph, and Blythe. Each of these left their imprint on my life and from each valuable lessons have been garnered. It is my hope that the passages communicated on the pages that follow and the stories found within this text will teach my children what it means to live ethically within the world that we share with many and to embrace the opportunity and the obligation to speak for those found within the margins of our society.

I dedicate this work to my husband, Jody Barrow, for his love, support, and encouragement as I moved through this journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Chapman for taking on a student, sight unseen. Perhaps for your trouble this project helped you become acclimated to the culture of the region. You brought valuable insight to this project in the way of further reading and constantly pressed me to sharpen my critical cultural awareness, a feat sometimes difficult for Southern women. I appreciate your support of my writing and your encouragement in the pursuit of further research and writing in the future. Sometimes you saw in me things I do not see in myself. This was of great value to me in persevering. Thank you for being so responsive and timely in the way you led me through the process, setting deadlines and offering relevant feedback. Most of all thank you for allowing me to do work some might perceive as unconventional and for allowing it to speak in my own voice.

My committee was the best. I do not think I could have found a more cohesive and supportive group of people to work with. Dr. He, I will never forget the Saturday in our dissertation writing class when you said the words that inspired this entire project, “Susan, you tell a good story.” Clearly, an example to all of us as teachers—the power our words carry in the lives of our students. I wish I could communicate your accent on paper, but those of you who know you can hear your voice, I am sure. It was on that day that I became determined to find a way to utilize narrative to write my dissertation. In addition, the story of your own life as a young girl in China was also inspirational to me and showed me value of personal narrative in transformative processes. Dr. Weaver, you were a fellow historian and just as I knew you would, you brought that perspective to bear on this work. You were also my literary agent and always provided me with the

next book, relevant and interesting text to pursue. Although from entirely different regions we experienced similar challenges growing up, and I always appreciated your willingness to share those personal insights into your own past. It made me feel less isolated. Dr. Haberland, thank you for stepping out of your comfort zone to be on this committee. Although not from the College of Education you seemed to be a perfect fit with the other committee members. History is such a critical part of this story I knew a strong representation of historians would strengthen my research. I appreciated the contribution you made by offering relevant readings and I appreciated your kind words and encouragement as I maneuvered through the process.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my husband Jody, who also pushed me to confront my past and who listened to and critiqued many times over for hours and hours readings of this work. His insight was invaluable. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the influence of my little sister who is a quintessential teacher of teachers. And to my friend and colleague Jane Holloway who has always made me laugh and carefully edited this work and offered feedback throughout the painstaking and tedious process.

Finally, I thank all of those in my family whose voices are represented on these pages. While most are gone now, their voices are no longer silent.



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## PROLOGUE

This is a narrative; one which offers the reader a window into the ways gender, race, and class both clash and merge within rural Southern culture, often rendering devastating results such as poverty and disassociation for many inhabitants. It is a narrative that is never finished; one that is woven like a sweet grass basket found only on the Georgia Sea Islands. Only certain ones of us understand the craft, and although it seems simple in appearance it is complex and commands a high price in the open market. It is a narrative that takes the reader on a journey; one that calls them to be somewhat of a voyeur. For here the prying observer seeking the sordid or the scandalous is likely to find just that, for there is much that is hidden beneath the veneer of decorum and manners, codes which only natives can decipher, codes which defy and perplex the outside observer. Codes that are so difficult to disrupt that they sometimes seem to be a part of our genetic fiber.

St. Pierre, writes of “identity based work” (in Whitlock, 2007, p 45). He makes the claim that it is perhaps some of the most important and exciting curriculum work being done for it advocates starting research from one’s own lived experience. It gives value and legitimacy to that which has often been devalued in our society. It gives women and other marginalized individuals worth because in their own unique voices they can speak to the injustices in society and present problems encountered each day in simply living life. It calls those with privilege to address within their practice that which suppresses others and supports various forms of human suffering. It allows us to continue a process already begun; one in which we re-vision what a reconceptualized curriculum would look like and the ways it would address the needs of the disfranchised.

It is a process that shifts the educational experience from one that is linear to one in which we examine personal and political dimensions of such experiences, one that is multidimensional taking many twists and turns along the journey. In doing such identity work we must take into account our own original landscapes—those occupied us and those who came before us and inquire as to how our own is intersected by the common one we all share. While the geography here is often very beautiful it is rarely as serene as it appears. Such work calls us to excavate that which is found on the surface to reveal the fertile soil buried deeply beneath.

As a woman I am called in my own identity work to self-examination and to continue work begun by others that have sought to demystify the Myth of Southern Womanhood (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p.128). This holds different meaning for each of us but in all cases place has significance, for in our place we are faced with unique dilemmas. Like many women in this rural setting my family was lower class, yet we at least had within our grasp the resources afforded us by white privilege. Such work is disruptive, shattering past concepts of what it means to be Southern, what it means to be a woman in the South, what it meant to the generations of women before us, our grandmothers, aunts, mothers, and sisters. What it will mean for our daughters. It is work that sometimes makes you proud of where you come from while at other time it makes you ashamed. It is filled with tension; tension that for me comes from the *telling*. If I listen closely I can hear my grand daddy in the kitchen yelling to one of his kin that, “You don’t need to tell all my business!” We are raised to keep our business private, our ghosts silent and hidden from the eyes of the prying intruder. We take great pride in honoring the privacy of our members so in many ways this identity work that I have

undertaken feels like a betrayal of my family, my heritage. Identity work gets to the heart of the study of curriculum, which is complicated by virtue of the fact that it is so closely associated with the place in which it is practiced. The work I have undertaken in this study has been based not only in identity but is also deeply rooted in place. It is all but impossible to disentangle the two. They are as closely connected as an old oak tree covered by thick clinging cords of purple wisteria. Such work seeks to disrupt or unsettle the forms of nostalgia that we have become so comfortable with. They are part of our communities, our families, our institutions and they seek to constrain those found on the margins. Such work is painful for it causes those undertaking it to step away from that which has rarely been questioned. Nostalgia is a closely guarded treasure in the South. For within this treasure is carefully encapsulated the assumptions and justifications for all of the past wrongs imposed upon others. All of which must be shattered if we are to move forward and find renewal as a region.

Perhaps Janet Miller (2005) articulates it best in the title of her text, *Sounds of Silence Breaking*. To a Southern woman breaking the silence is an emancipatory act, almost one of treason. It is frightening because it means stepping outside of the magic circle, a deed that could result in our estrangement from the family, the community. Banishment from the place with a shared “sameness.” Yet, the idea of “silence breaking” is empowering. It engages language that evokes in our minds what disrupting nostalgia might look like. Images of shattered glass come to mind with fragments and shards littering the floor leaving pieces strewn about that can cut, cut deeply if we pick them up to examine them more closely. Whitlock (2007) sees nostalgia as “an excessively sentimental yearning for an irrecoverable past place or condition...there is no space for

present be(ing) or future be(coming) when the present is past is present” (25, 27). When the past melds into the present there stands little hope for reconciliation. The wrongs remain there just as they have done for years, just beneath a fragile veneer. Such states of being create a tension that remains within a community until the fractures are revealed and healing process can begin.

Before reconciliation can occur disruption of traditional Southern codes must take place. The text of this dissertation attempts to “disrupt the nostalgia” of the region by laying bare Southern sensibilities related first and foremost to place and within that framework it uncovers disparities related to race, class, gender, religion, and community. The first chapter, “The Course of the Journey,” contains a discussion of the power of place and the importance of ones situatedness within that specific locale. Found often within bucolic settings there are the marginalized and the need to confront the suffering of others is discussed. The metaphor of the journey and crossroads is introduced as a thread that is woven through subsequent text. Autoethnography is introduced as the method employed for thematic analysis of cultural traditions and for questioning and reconceptualizing oneself and uncovering disparities found within the culture.

Chapter 2, “The Veneer of the New South”, discusses how cultural influences have come to constrain the lives of girls and women in the region. It elaborates on how historic economic structures and the devaluation of education over time have had far reaching consequences for its inhabitants. The role of race, class, gender, family relations, and religious institutions have a tremendous impact on identity formation and customs embedded in the specificity of place reveal the importance of redefining ways of thinking as we move to reconstitute Southern paradigms.

Chapter 3, “The Sins of the Fathers” explores the power of family and the impact it has on identity formation of Southern women. This chapter analyses the changing gender roles of women, the value of kinship networks, and the power and influence welded by the Southern patriarchal model that remains in place in many areas. Within the patriarchal framework is found a discussion of how the men in our lives often embody a juxtaposition of power within our worlds, that of protector, that of abuser. For some women in the region such conditions influence their very intentional abdication of personal agency to the men in their spheres. This chapter also addresses the nature of the socialization process of women in the region as a critical component of their decision making processes.

“Private Morality,” Chapter 4, explores arguably one of the most personal aspects of our lives, that of our religious journeys. This chapter challenges the reader to confront their own personal dis-comfort zones in order to deal with the suffering of the other. It confronts disparities found within Southern culture and institutionalized religion, as well as the impact of fundamentalism on people living within a community. It discusses the valuable, yet often difficult, rejuvenating process of deconstruction of religious institutions and traditions. This chapter reveals the face of evil and the face of love and offers hope to those who have suffered from the cruelty of others and discusses the redemptive power found in excavating our own interior spaces.

Chapter 5, “Outside the Magic Circle,” discusses the implications for Southern women who dare to “step outside the magic circle.” The incumbent isolation that results from nonconformity and our often blind attachment to culturally constricted notions found within the region. Many among us continue to adhere to traditions framed within

vernacular forms of master narratives and these traditions continue to undermine rather than foster human potential—potential of many marginalized individuals in the region, not just women. It discusses the sometimes smothering effects found within the institutions of the family and the community and how these traditions perpetuate the Southern myth rather than disrupt it.

A brand new graduate student to the Georgia Southern doctoral program for Curriculum Studies came to observe my dissertation defense. As we concluded my defense and the committee dismissed those in the room to the hallway for their private discussion, and a second conversation ensued between those present in the hall. After congratulating me she looked at me with naive wide eyes and said, “Do you mean that this program is going to isolate me?” It was as though this was the first time this thought had crossed her mind. I attempted to clarify what isolation meant to me within the educational context to put her somewhat at ease. However, the truth is that the deeper I went into my educational journey in the doctoral program the more isolated I felt within my community. Over the passage of time you begin to realize that you no longer think as you thought in the past. Professors challenge your thinking at every turn and push you to think beyond what you may have thought you were capable of.

The research I have done in this dissertation is very specific and very personal. It is specific to this beautiful conflicted place in which I have been raised and in which I have chosen to live, work, and raise my own children. Although I often feel isolated I have chosen to remain here because I think that I can make a difference based on my interactions with others who also call this home. The contents of these lines are so personal to me that I have often felt as though I was breaking a sacred trust in committing



them to the page. In order to do such painstaking work one must have a passion for that in which they have immersed themselves. My work was motivated by my passion for the transformative potential education has for those who embrace it. As the reader turns the pages of my life found in this text I think that this transformative power will be revealed as they follow the evolutionary journey of my life. In this work I am not so much interested in communicating some profound singular truth, rather I hope my reader comes along with me on my passage through my own emotional epiphany, one which transformed me from my old self to my new self.

Kaplan (in Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 153) asserts that Southern curriculum should provoke women to ask themselves "...what feelings move a southern woman to reject the myth of Southern Womanhood." What moves us to risk exclusion from the homeplace, the magic circle? Although we may speculate and offer a sound reply the response is null because if we have undertaken this journey, we have already left. There is no turning back, and we can never return home the people we were before we undertook our journey. We are not the "same" any more, no longer can they say we are "cut from the same cloth." We are still strong but maybe now a more little tenacious. We are still proud but perhaps with a little more humility because we have learned the vastness of that which we will never know. Those of us who have undertaken the journey are the new Southern treasures. We have a voice that speaks to the past but promises hope for the future. Not content to retell the same delirious stories embodied by the surreal mythology of the South but rather pressing for a framework that is more inclusive. This journey was hard won but offers the traveler special gifts, that while given to her, bring with them the obligation to offer hope for the future found within our

humanity, our authenticity, and our ethical orientation. This was a long and winding journey that gave me the strength to confront who I was and moved me closer to that person which I want to be.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE COURSE OF THE JOURNEY

*"I am a writer, a woman, a southerner who due to birth experienced in early childhood the ordeals, the psychic and spiritual ordeals, and the intellectual ordeals of a life lived in a culture split and broken, full of abysses and not many towers, full of estrangements; a region that learned its weakness against the past; that lost its vision of God...(Smith in Gladney, 1993, p. 247)*

There is no quick or easy route that connects my neck of the woods in south Georgia to Statesboro. No interstates, no rest areas. It is the place I live right now, but it is not home. It is not my *place*. It does not have the familiarity that my home on the coast has, and although it lies only a single hour from my home, I have few, if any, connections to its past. Nobody here knows my daddy or granddaddy. Friends I have had for decades and who have seen me through the births of my children and the deaths of my family are no longer around the corner to provide support and encouragement that Southern women so often extend each other. Despite this void, living here has provided a growth opportunity for me, one that I would not have consciously chosen for myself. It has given me some understanding, if only a small measure, of how it feels to be isolated. It is perhaps the first time in my life that I have consciously felt like the *other*. Small rural towns tend to be particularly cliquish and difficult to gain acceptance into, even for a native Southerner. It has been an uncomfortable experience. In small rural towns there often is little desire for new ideas or the acceptance of difference of any kind.

At night the roads that lead here are lonely. When traveling one might meet an occasional car or pickup truck, perhaps a logging truck trying to make up time on the back roads; but traveling companions in these parts are rare after dark. The roads are so far afield that my cell phone is rendered useless with no access to needed communications towers for much of the journey. God forbid one should encounter car

trouble on these narrow winding back roads, especially at night. Despite the fact that many times my journeys have been late into the evening, coffee bought in Statesboro before I head south is rarely a good idea. To do so insures a stop at one of the less than desirable rest stops on the way. The only restrooms found along the route are in one or two crossroads convenience stores, and to access these you usually have to navigate through pockets of people gathered outside in the parking lot, smoking and drinking from brown paper bags and who look at you as though to say, “you ain’t from ‘round here, are ya?” They make me feel uncomfortable, unsafe; so these stops are avoided at all costs.

This is the route that I have come to know well as I have traveled to Georgia Southern University working through my doctoral classes for the last several years. Between the two points there are only miles and miles of two-lane hardtop flanked on either side by pine barrens and palmetto bushes. If it is early in the morning or late in the evening, the air is often heavy with humidity in South Georgia, and fog will settle in like a warm soft white blanket, enveloping the woods and everything that surrounds them with a shroud of mystery and making travel hazardous. Along my path deer can often be seen grazing under the pines or on the side of the road and have not yet come to understand that their homes are now shared with fast moving cars and logging trucks to which they often fall victim. They graze under the tall slender pines cultivated for pulpwood. By day migrant workers rake and gather the warm golden strands of pine straw that fall as a by product of the trees and pack them into tidy bundles to be sold by roadsides and in the small towns. These are the low-paying jobs that few people bother to consider, but the migrant workers are industrious and rarely pass up an opportunity to earn extra money to support their families. The roads are winding and hazardous. It is

easy to take a wrong turn and find oneself lost and uncertain of which way to go, especially in the dark. There are many crossroads where one must choose will I go this way or will I go that way. Turning down the wrong road can take you miles away from your destination causing you to waste valuable time when it is already late. When traveling these back roads, it is recommended that you not let your mind wander, keeping yourself focused on the route; but that is not easy to do because the surrounding silence and the beauty are seductive. They lull you into complacency.

### Metaphors

As I traveled these roads, much of my time was spent thinking about my research, how I wanted to conduct my study, and metaphors related to my inquiry. Driving home was my time to be introspective. It was one of the few quiet times when I could plan and reflect on my feelings. Although I considered many, there was one that returned to my thoughts again and again, and it is that of *crossroads*. I think I returned to it so often because as I traveled I became more keenly aware of how one can become confused when faced with an unfamiliar junction, just as one can become disoriented when confronting unfamiliar crossroads in life. I have been granted the gift of time in my life; I have come to be more introspective related to my own choices at critical crossroads, and how those have led me to the place that I now dwell. While there are sometimes right and wrong choices at crossroads, other times there are choices that are neither right nor wrong but those that will take you to your destination a different way. There have been many instances as I have moved down my path when everything seemed familiar, and then all at once nothing looked familiar. Some road encounters are smooth and short and others are dangerous and full of potholes and lead you to places you wish you could have,

should have, avoided. Sometimes our views are obscured and we make decisions based on limited knowledge of what lies down the road. I have come to appreciate how simple decisions made at crossroads can have profound consequences in one's life. If only I had chosen another path, where would I be? These are the questions I considered as I reflected on my own life and the choices I have made at critical crossroads. I have come to realize how profoundly our choices can impact our lives, for the better or for the worse. They can improve or diminish the quality of our lives and the lives of those whom we love. They can impact others in a powerfully positive way or leave no legacy at all, as though our time on earth mattered for nothing. Choices made over a period of many years at my own educational crossroads had profound implications for me. As a young Southern woman, I saw education as a means to an end, but as I grew older I came to view it differently. Rather than being an avenue to meet a husband, over time I began to see it as a way to escape a husband and as critical for the survival for my children and me. For too many years I saw my life and my sense of worth as being reflected in the accomplishments of my husband and my abilities as a wife and mother. Like my mother and my grandmother before me, I had been all too often thought of as someone's mother or someone's wife. It took a great deal of courage and tenacity to embark on an educational journey I never thought myself capable of and that has endured for many years. With each progressive leg of my journey, I began to change and grow stronger and more confident. It was a journey that took me down roads that were far from my home and out of my comfort zone. Although it was a trip made up of detours and wrong turns, it is one that altered the outcome of my life immeasurably.

As I considered the use of metaphor I thought of a book I read for my research, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). I read it only because it had been assigned by a dissertation committee member; it is not one I would have found on my own, but it proved to be of great value. It moved me from the crossroads metaphor to that of the "other." The other represents any one in society who is not considered mainstream. *The Black Atlantic* considers the plight of the other, in this case the exiled Africans. The book delves back to the roots of the conquest of human beings that were snatched from their homelands in Africa to support the slave trade. Although the primary relevance spoke to the African exile, it led my thought processes deeper as I considered the interconnected nature of human suffering and subjugation. The text discusses oppressive conditions that laid the foundations for a complicated set of circumstances orchestrated by white men that oppressed many including Africans, women, and children in the South. Perhaps more relevant to my research was that this work expanded my thinking to include not just marginalized young women, but a broader more inclusive understanding of the myriad of marginalized individuals we are surrounded by here in the South. So while my focus is on white women in the rural areas of the South (in fact, mostly on the women in my life who were closest to me), it also reminds me that they are only a representation, one facet of the "other" represented in the region. There are others here forced to the fringes of society, including those undesirable people lurking about in the shadows and parking lots all around me.

On nights when I have to stop at those convenience stores, I so often think, "only by the grace of God go I," as I meander through the less desirable gathered outside. Why are they gathered here outside in the cold while I travel in a nice car and have a warm

coat and a nice place to live? On any given night they may include the Hispanic migrant workers who escaped Mexico to find a better life here in Georgia and to help support their families far away by picking onions or raking pine straw, or the poor black men gathered around the trashcan fire that were denied opportunities and access to the resources needed to better themselves early in their lives. Physically impaired individuals are seen commonly, as are marginalized women trying to sell the only thing they have of value, themselves. Recently, I learned that there is a thriving gay community in this town, and I often wonder how they are received by those they encounter. The list of marginalized here is long, just as it is everywhere. A place can be small but even in Mayberry there were the Otis' who were often pushed to the margins. Intimacy in size does not insulate a place from those who suffer. While I understand our conditions are related to the choices made at crossroads in our lives, I also realize that for many of those living on the fringes, the opportunities to elevate their circumstances were few, if any, and that for the socially disenfranchised there are often a small number of opportunities to access social resources needed to elevate their status.

When we study homophobia, sexism, racism, or poverty in schools...we are really looking at how some people are valued less than others, how their interests are considered to be less important, and so how they are made to suffer the often dire consequences of others' prejudicial perspectives and actions. These actions are translated directly into a material reality, a hierarchy of distributed resources (economic, educational, cultural)... (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 104)

Not only is it difficult for them to rise out of poverty, but also there are those within our society who seek to diminish their prospects by denying access to needed resources or



agencies. So often people without agency are seen by others as lazy, but “the quality of people’s lives is never simply a matter of an individual’s reason or free will” (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 102). Unfortunately, these circumstances are often generational, and it is the children of those mentioned that I serve each day. I often think of the love that has been lavished upon my own children. Like all children, they too have faced sadness and challenges, but I am comforted because I know that despite the circumstances ahead, the love that they have been given will affect them always; and it will serve as their secret store of goodness like a pill with a delayed reaction that releases elixirs into their bloodstream, not just for a day but for all of their lives. No matter what ever happens to them they will know that they are loved. I cannot help but contrast their lives with those of some of my school children; I am coming to know their stories all too well and often feel powerless to reroute their paths because the obstacles seem monumental. I wish I could give them a secret pill as well, one that they too could tap into when they need a quick fix of love and support. The challenge these children will face, like all other children, will be grounded in their ability to reinvent themselves as the persons whom they want to be rather than what they are based on their current circumstances or that of their parents. Serge Leclair (1998), in his text *A Child is Being Killed*, reminds his reader of how this process transpires “...the death of the wonderful (or terrifying) child who, from generation to generation, bears witness to parents’ dreams and desires. There can be no life without killing that strange, original image in which everyone’s birth is inscribed” (p. 20). The challenge then for all children is to reinvent themselves despite their circumstances. Very often this is a process that takes many

years and a great a great deal of struggle and reflection; it is a voyage that virtually never ends.

There are times in my life that I long for leisure that I need to reflect, think, and write and for the solitude that such an enterprise requires, for time to wander, to embark upon a voyage, or simply continue the one which I have begun. However, this is not something that is likely to happen anytime in foreseeable future since I am at a place on my journey where I must deal with the daily demands of managing my household, nurturing children both great and small, and nurturing the children of others with whom I have been entrusted within the school setting. As co-inhabitants of this earth we are all called to make a difference in the lives of others, especially the marginalized. Teaching students to grapple with painful experiences and learn from their struggles gives them the tools to reinvent themselves after they have moved from my influence, to move forward in spite of their circumstances. Hence, I must seize the moments that I can isolate and take from them that which I need to nurture my own exploration of self with the hope that I will grow and be of use to others, most notably the students and teachers with whom I work. Clearly, we must slow down and reflect on the implications of what we say and do, but to be of use to others we cannot remain totally focused on ourselves. The self-exploration to which I refer is not that undertaken in a narcissistic sense, but rather exploration of my life as part of a larger set of cultural circumstances. It is my aim to explore the text of my life in an effort to make sense of the world through the use of narrative inquiry.

Narrative depicts people in the throws of life with all of its complexities. It shows them in their moments of struggle as they cling, often desperately, to some sense of

continuity and coherence in their lives and attempt to resist chaos, fragmentation, and isolation that such states of being impose. Narrative begins with one's personal life. It is an art form that that is undertaken humbly because the author, too, is a part of the anathema. "The artist must have a sense of vocation, a sense of being 'called' to her work; it is something she must do; she must listen when she is told to 'make a new thing' (Smith in Gladney, 1993, p. 267). It is a process that requires cultural criticism; like Lillian Smith, "I criticise [sic] evil wherever I see it, knowing it is in me, also; therefore I try to do it humbly (p. 260).

Autoethnography is a particular strand of narrative that pays special attention to life forces. It reaches deep within and listens carefully to physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Rarely are we in touch with these aspects of our lives because they are often sequestered to the margins of our existence. Most often they lay dormant within us because of the intensity, intrusion, and demands of daily life; they are simply pushed to the side. Autoethnography delves back into the past with an eye to understanding particular experiences and the impact they have left on the life author. It is not necessarily exactly representative of the past itself but rather a story *about* the past. Its demands are great as one is compelled to confront frequently unflattering aspects of oneself. It requires vulnerability and objectivity. Once written it cannot be taken back and the author has no way of knowing how readers will interpret the text. "Meaning is not just inherent in the text, or given by the author, but rather created by the meanings and assumptions brought to it by the reader...an author can never predict what meaning a particular text will have for her readers" (Martusewicz, 2002, p. 12). By telling stories, the author elicits an emotional response; they beg to be *used* rather than theorized, they

offer opportunities for conversation rather than undebatable conclusions. Individual “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Whichever the approach, it offers the possibility of accomplishing something meaningful for one’s self as well as others.

The stories we write put us into conversations with ourselves as well as with our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values...showing how we changed over time as we struggled to make sense of our experience. Our accounts of our selves are unflattering and imperfect, but human and believable. The text is used, then, as an agent of self-understanding and ethical discussion... “In conversation with our readers, we use storytelling as a method for inviting them to put themselves in our place. Our dialogue centers on moral choices, questions having more to do, with how to live than how to know. (Ellis & Bochner in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 224)

Finally, “the work of self-narrative is to produce this sense of continuity: to make a life that sometimes seems to be falling apart come together again, by retelling and restorying the events of one’s life (Ellis & Bochner in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 207). Good autoethnography should motivate constructive cultural criticism, motivate us to implement social change, and move us to action. According to Ellis & Bochner (2003) narrative helps us unsettle the past, and in doing so we gain tolerance. All communities need to confront issues related to racism, sexism, poverty, classism, homophobia, and disability because these issues touch us all. “It is important to be exposed to local stories

that reveal to us the concrete daily details in the lives of people who have been underrepresented or not at all to help reduce their marginalization. We need to be aware of how situated our understanding of the world is” (p. 223-24).

### The Course of the Journey

As fate would have it, I have managed to carve out a few days in which I can withdraw from many of the distractions of daily life and escape to the place where I can lose myself in my thoughts and my books. For me this is best accomplished in our rustic wood frame cabin on the banks of the Satilla River miles away from intrusions. I am fortunate in that I am able to escape there periodically. In this place I have the luxury of letting my thoughts wind through my mind just as this river I love so much caresses the shore as it meanders slowly on a path toward the ocean. It is the place that I am most comfortable, and it is also the place I am most able to confront entrenched thought patterns that daily life manages to sequester. It is a place that helps me remember how I have come to be the person that I am and to understand the processes that have shaped me as a person. What does it mean to be educated and what can those who are educated contribute to their family, their community or the world? In my practice, do I intentionally aim to create new and better ways of thinking that result in more ethical and socially responsible ways of being in the world? How does my work benefit those who have been pushed to the margins, and do I impart the importance of this social imperative to those whom I lead? These are rigorous and complex questions to confront as we move through our practice. To undergo this process Michel Foucault suggests one must be capable of self-detachment (1989, p.303).

What can the ethics of an intellectual be...if not...to render oneself permanently capable of self-detachment...? To be at the same time an academic and an intellectual is to try and engage a type of knowledge and analysis that is taught and received in the university in a way so as to modify not only the thought of others but one's own as well. (Foucault, 1989, p. 303 in Martusewicz)

Martusewicz (2001) suggests that, "Self-detachment is a willingness to question one's entrenched points of view, to subject one's identity to an analytic interpretive process, and to distance oneself from those positions if necessary" (p. 20). In order to achieve this, she calls on one to not only reflect on our beliefs and practices but to also examine the larger social and cultural context in which they have been established (p. 20). Self-detachment requires departing from that with which we have become numbingly familiar. Ridding myself of distraction is a critical part of self-detachment.

As a child I was taken camping; it was an activity I loved and could never get enough of; I continue to love it as an adult, and it is a joy that I have shared with my children. In nature I am more in touch with myself. One place I am the most contented is around the ring of a campfire off in the woods where I sit with those whom I cherish. In the evenings we gather around the fire ring and listen to the cadence of the crickets and frogs as they harmonize in unison while the welcoming embers of the fire warms us both inside and out. There we contemplate those things that have challenged us and celebrate the victories that we have shared over the passage of time. We reflect on the memories that have come to embody our common past. It seems that in this place distractions melt away, and I am more able to find my spiritual, intellectual, and emotional center. The sights and sounds one encounters closely gathered around the camp ring mirrors those

found on the bank of the Big Satilla River. Each evening as the sun begins to sink into the horizon, all of the crickets and frogs seem to know when it is time to harmonize and begin their performance. The pattern is predictable; first one begins chirping and slowly what sounds like millions of others join in to form a symphony that could be found only in nature. It is to their melody that I drift into sleep. All of these sensory experiences intensify in me my sense of the world and the forces at work around us, especially those found in nature. It brings to mind the notion of *currere* as it moves me forward and invites complicated conversation with others and myself. It raises an awareness of the “affirmative movement of life forces” (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 3) and compels us to move forward as we interact with and think about the world and our place in it.

While change is inevitable, forward movement is not, rather it is a choice that often embodies the excavation of difficult memories. In my case, these were memories that were harmful to healthy functioning, memories that I had worked for many years to forget. Repressing those memories was like trying to contain a down pillow in a tiny box. Over time I managed to squeeze one side of the pillow into the box only to find that another had eased its way out; but eventually the troublesome pieces of the past were contained, and the business of life helped keep them tightly bound within the walls of the tiny box. As I grapple with my ghosts in my place of solitude, it is not my goal to soothe myself with merciful lies but rather to propel myself into the depths of questioning; to delve into my personal misery with the hope of reconceptualizing myself from the shattered splinters I had become. It is facing the realization that every event has value, should we choose to explore it, and that it is potentially worth telling. In excavating those events I have found that beneath one thought lay another I had long forgotten was

even there. Revealing difficult memories rather than sequestering them to the margins of my life has allowed me to begin to make sense of my journey, despite its treachery, with all of its wrong turns, and to reconcile my past with who I have become.

### The Adventures of Kitty and Anne

As a kid I ran and played in the pastures and barns of my cousin's families where we chased cows and plunged into giant piles of hay from the hayloft above on Sunday afternoons. These were my country cousins and comprised most of my extended family. Although I was not a city kid, I was raised in a somewhat different setting than my cousins were. It was equally isolated and an infinitely more beautiful place to me. I was blessed to have grown up on the shores of the Atlantic on a small barrier island off of the coast of Georgia. It was a simple place at that time with little pretense and a few clapboard vacation cottages erected along its shores. The dwellings were simply constructed because the constant threat of hurricanes was always on the horizon; in a few torrential hours everything stood to be washed away, so few of the summer colonists overly invested in their cottages. Hurricane season was always an exciting time for island dwellers, especially those of us who lived there year round, and there were only a handful. We lived for four months of summer poised to pack up and migrate inland, but it rarely happened, maybe only once or twice a season, if that. The kids loved this time because the impending danger and excitement that it brought and perhaps most important, a storm meant school cancellation in August and September and piling into the homes of our relatives on the mainland for what to us became known as hurricane parties. Despite the imminent danger there was a sense of frivolity as we watched the storm, ate food that usually had been warmed on our camp stoves, stayed up late and listened to the



stories of the grown ups as we all sat, usually in total darkness for hours, and waited out the storm. Because our island is the western-most point on the eastern seaboard, and although we were often threatened, it was rare that we were actually ever hit by a hurricane. The last direct hit was in 1963, Hurricane Dora, and although I was just five I remember the adventure of taking refuge in my own elementary school for the storm. We camped in the central hallway with many other families as the storm swept through our small town leaving a wake of destruction that took weeks to repair. So extensive was the damage from Dora that President Johnson visited the town personally to assess the destruction. I will never forget standing on the side of Altama Avenue as his motorcade passed through the gathering of locals, hoping to catch a glimpse of the President of the United States. Dora was the exception. Most of the time the storms just flirt with our little island and skirt up the coast providing us with torrential rains and an amazing show of thunder and lighting, leaving us with a tangible reminder of the power found in nature. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the storms, and a testament to their power, was waking the next morning to beautiful blue skies juxtaposed against a backdrop of destruction. As strange as it may seem, to this day I love to sit back and soak up the beauty of a soaking nor'easter as it licks away at the coastline.

Perhaps it was the simplicity of the island that made it such a beautiful place, forever etched in my memory; or maybe it is the memory of the adventures and the connection to nature that makes it so endearing. It was landscaped with majestic oaks gracefully draped with swags of lacy moss and surrounded by marshlands, rivers, and the Atlantic on its fringes. My younger sister was my constant companion, and the things we found in nature served to entertain us and provided us with adventure after adventure on

the weekends and during the long hot summers. We were the female versions of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. I dare say we explored almost every inch of the island before we outgrew our propensity to roam and entered adolescence. As an adult, my sister chronicled our childhood adventures in oral history stories to her own children she entitled *The Adventures of Kitty and Anne*. She was Kitty and I was Anne. Her stories were so vivid that when she returns to the island for a visit, her children recognize scenes from the stories as they pass them in the car. It is a way of sharing a bit of our childhood with the next generation. One of our favorite adventures was found not far from home. We loved to swing from a rope swing found near our house, tied high in the boughs of an oak that clung to the river where the marsh met the bank. It was all we could do to muster the strength to raise our skinny frames up the tree to the massive limb where we plunged away from the safety of the giant branch to the exhilarating fall out over the marsh and river before our feet returned to the safety of the ground found beneath us. Even more alluring was the ever-present danger that the rope, tattered and frayed by the weather and many years of use, might finally snap landing us on our backsides in the middle of the muddy marsh and surrounded by hungry alligators.

In the summer our bathing suits were our uniforms, and Sunday was virtually the only day we could be found in real street clothes. Our second home was the local marina, which I suspect was not the most wholesome place for two little tomboys to spend their time. The docks were filled with shrimpers and unsavory characters wearing red bandanas around their heads and white rubber boots made for mucking through their catch on the decks of their trawlers. In the eyes of a little girl they appeared to be modern-day pirates, frightening individuals that sent us scurrying for the sanctuary of a

distant floating dock where we could observe them safely from afar while we garnered our share of the river's bounty of blue crabs.

The marina was a place where everyone knew our names and that of our most faithful companion, Prince(ss). However, our dog's name was a simple matter for people to remember because our dogs were always German shepherds; if they were males they were named Prince, if they were females they were named Princess. There had been many generations of dog royalty in our family. My daddy took great pride in his German shepherds, and now that I reflect on his infatuation with them, I think it was because he knew black people were terrified of them, and why wouldn't they be? Although desegregation in our small town was rather uneventful, media images of race riots, snarling dogs, and water cannons continued to lie close to the surface of everyone's memories at this time; and although the violent demonstrations were locally unfamiliar, they were brought to us in our family rooms in living color each evening by the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite and on-the-scenes reporter, Dan Rather. There were few incendiaries in our small town; there was a superficial sense of decorum and the overarching feeling that everyone knew their place, which few chose to cross. As recently as the 1970s and 80s there was a group of black men that sang Negro spirituals table to table, mostly to white audiences at a popular island restaurant, which was owned by a round black gentleman named Alfonso. He was a smart businessman who filled a niche, really a demand by tourists, to experience a slice of the mythic Old South; so the *Sea Island Singers* belted out the Negro Spirituals table to table, and the Yankees lapped it up. The singers laughed all the way to the bank, as did Alfonso who was a well-known and respected businessman on the island. But in these men, beneath the veneer of their

good natures and ever-present humor, there were carefully concealed scars linked to a time that had been lost. It was a time that the Yankees could not conceive of; it was the loss of a way of life and a culture that existed in isolation and will likely never be regained. In an effort to forge new identities much was sacrificed and the price paid was immeasurable.

### The More Things Change...the More They Stay the Same

There were not many black people that lived on the island, to my knowledge only one family. Many worked there but traveled daily from the mainland to work primarily in service jobs in the local homes and hotels, meeting the needs of the white folks visiting the island. The one I recall that did live there was a black doctor who practiced on the mainland, and he lived in a nice two-story brick house on the south end of the island. All things black took place on the south end of the island. There you could find The Dolphin Motel, the only black motel on the only beach that served the black community. My life on the island spanned the time just before desegregation, as well as the time during and after. However, life there did not look much different across the span of that time. The beach that had been allotted for black families was a pitiful excuse for a beach and was used by black families well after desegregation. Rather than bordering the ocean as the other five miles of beach did for the whites, it bordered the silty muddy river on the shark-infested St. Andrews Sound. Clearly, well into the 1970s *de facto* segregation was still an embedded tradition in south coastal Georgia.

The legacy of the Princes continued even after I was an adult and had left home. My daddy is 75 years old today and his dog is a German shepherd, but she is the first one in all these many years to deviate from the genealogical legacy defined by princeliness.

Her name is Blaze. My daddy was bequeathed a legacy of prejudice left to him by his family, and his dog was an outward representation of that attitude. It was his intent to share that legacy with my children and me just as his parents and grandparents had done with him. One day I left Daddy to baby sit my oldest son while I went to run a few errands. After being sure that all of his guns were locked safely away from a curious little boy, I left. He assured me that all would be fine, and that he would refrain from smoking while Michael was in the house. I left with both hesitation and trepidation, but when I returned it was to a seemingly heartwarming scene. He was lying in the floor of the living room, as he often did, reading the afternoon newspaper with my son. Just as I was telling myself that I was silly to have wasted worry being concerned about having left Michael with Daddy, Daddy proudly pointed to the newspaper asking Michael to identify the picture he was pointing to. In less than three hours Michael had been taught by my father to identify every “nigger” in the newspaper. My father laughed proudly as he successfully finished his first lesson in racism with his three-year-old grandson. Needless to say, it was the last time I asked my daddy to baby sit any of my children for fear that the next time I might return to find them target shooting in the front yard at any unsuspecting black person unfortunate enough to happen by.

Over time and as the realities of desegregation began to really take hold in the coastal Georgia, Daddy’s stance on black people gradually began to mellow. At the local mill he worked side by side with many blacks and served as their supervisor. In many cases he came to respect their work ethic and integrity. While he came to the place where he did not hate black people, to this day he continues to think himself superior to them. During the 80s he lost most of his material wealth. In addition to working at the mill, he

built homes on the side to supplement his income. He owned a number of pieces of real estate that he lost when the stock market crashed. He had to declare bankruptcy and move to a transitional mixed race neighborhood, and ironically his next-door neighbor was black; this was both a humbling and a sobering experience for him. His neighbor was a policeman who was both kind and helpful to him and his wife. It is hard to maintain hate when people are helpful and agreeable. Over time they grew to have a friendly, greet-in-the-yard, relationship, and I could tell Daddy always felt safer knowing he lived next to a policeman.

I grew up slowly along the rivers and marshlands of the coastal plains where the years of my youth were spent learning often unspoken lessons about what it meant to live a well-lived life. I learned those lessons from those who surrounded me and they are, in part, chronicled in this work. They taught me how to love, to hate, to forgive, and to survive. The women around me taught me how not only to survive, but how to do so with dignity. “First and foremost one has to survive. Second one must survive with as much dignity as possible. Finally, one must accept responsibility for others, especially for those to whom one has given life” (Brabant in Dillman, 1988, p. 103). Many say that life lived in the South is done so at a slower pace, and I think that to be true. Here we make time to appreciate our days and value their number, our families and the depths of not only their joys but also the anguish of their sorrows, our friends for their commitment and support, and our place and our situatedness in it. For me, a child of this region, everything seemed to move slowly, the changing of the tides, the passing of the seasons, and the gradual movement into adulthood. It seemed as though those days would extend infinitely into the future like the grains of sand along the sweeping expanse of the

beaches upon which we played, and that those who had cared for and protected us would remain with us through all time. As I pen these words I do so with a lump in my throat and a heavy heart because life has once again been abrupt and brought with it change that I am not ready to accept. Life can be hateful like that. If I have learned nothing else I have learned that the one sure thing we can expect is change, despite my resistance to it. In deference to this reality, I chose to live my life as though those I loved were immortal because I could not stand to think of my life without them. I was given the gift of having known some of my great grand parents and my grandparents, many of whom played sustaining roles in my life. I was given a mother who gave me life but who lost her own to a propensity to alcohol abuse. For those like her who suffered from such maladies, it was a hopeless time to live. Little was known about the psychology of addiction, and those who languished there often had little hope for recovery. As I got older I learned that her father, my grandfather, died in an insane asylum; and he too suffered from alcoholism as well as a host of other conditions related to brain dysfunction. He lived in a time when asylums were often used as the dumping ground for those with whom society did not know what else to do. He died in that asylum. The years crept slowly by, and one by one I was robbed of those whom I loved. First my grandmother left me, and by and by they all began to slip away, all of those whom I loved. As long as they stood between death and me I was able to cling to a degree of certainty, but with this writing that is slipping away.

With the writing of this dissertation, I knew there would have to be an ending and with each story there came the inspiration for the next. In the recesses of my mind I wondered if my daddy would live to see the end of it – would the loss of him become part

of my story line? I have watched his health fail for some time now, but recently his decline has become swifter. His doctor has told our family that he is afflicted with many aneurisms around his heart and that at any moment one could explode, killing him. He has already had seven bypasses and the vessels are spent. There is nothing to be done. Although he has lived a relatively long life (he is 75) I resent that he is being taken away from me, from my children, from his wife. I am angry with him and hold him partly to blame for his own demise, for over the years he has not paid attention to his health and has thrown caution to the wind in his habits. In doing so, he has thrown away years that we could have roasted oysters on the bank of the river...years that my children could have come to understand the depth of his character. Recently while he was in the hospital, an old friend of his called to check his condition, and I was amused at his response. He told his friend that everyone was taking really good care of him, that the nurses of every color had been very good to him. It struck me odd that he would distinguish nurses based on color to his friend. I found it odd that even as he faced death, he found it necessary to distinguish people into categories of color. It was a comment that once again made me question my own color lines and how they came to be drawn as they are.

#### Needwood Church

On the wall in my office hangs one of my favorite possessions. It is a painting that would be of little value to anyone but me. It is a primitive piece of folk art that illustrates a busy Sunday morning in the dirt churchyard of Needwood Primitive Baptist Church. It is a real church that exists today in the historic region referred to as Needwood, on the outskirts of Brunswick, Georgia, just south of the McIntosh County



line. This church was established in the early 1800s to serve a unique population of Africans. They existed in virtual isolation on virgin cypress swamplands along the banks of the Altamaha River between Brunswick and Darien. They had been captured from the west coast of Africa because of their skill in cultivating rice. Although malaria was rampant in the coastal Georgia region, they had a seeming immunity to the disease. Ironically, the same blood cell traits that gave them immunity to malaria also made them susceptible to sickle cell disease. Primarily because of disease, land-owning plantation aristocrats often spent most of their time on higher ground leaving the cultivation and management of their properties to black over-seers. This allowed the Africans time to gather, meet, and worship, all of which were activities not generally afforded slaves in most plantation settings for fear of their planning escape or rebellions. The church served Africans from Broughton Island Plantation, established in 1802, which consisted of 300 acres of rice plantation requiring the labor of over 500 slaves; and also Broadface Plantation, which would eventually become Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation, established in 1803, consisting of 7,300 acres. However, not all of the land was arable. Hofwyl-Broadfield claimed 357 slaves. New Hope Plantation also utilized Africans to cultivate rice crops and claimed many slaves as well. Over the years the church has survived, although today it stands in desperate need of repair and does not house a congregation. It is another haunting remnant of the past that few who pass by its doors today take the time to understand. My rustic painting depicts ritualistic life in a small African American village and fast forwards into the 1920s. There are ladies crossing the dusty church yard in their Sunday best, children chasing wayward dogs and throwing balls, and men making the church ready for Sunday services.

It was done for me as an assignment by a student in one of my Georgia History classes. Ronnie was an incessant doodler. He found it almost impossible to work in groups with other students because he was very shy, and he had difficulty completing assignments in traditional formats. A reading assignment guaranteed sound slumber for him, and they were generally avoided. Hence, we struck a deal for a special project in the hopes of not rendering the semester a total loss for him. Perhaps he might pay a little more attention to the discussion if he knew he had to produce a product from it; but it would be a product that would be, at least somewhat, on his own terms. For his grade he would compose a piece of art of his own choosing that would convey a time in history that we had studied that semester, and we also agreed that he could doodle as long as he doodled on topic. It seemed to be a compromise we could both live with and a way to keep him in class and at least somewhat engaged. After class he often slipped quietly by my desk where he silently deposited jibs of paper with scenes of Georgia's past, perhaps his images of the Battle of Bloody Marsh, Archaic Indian tribes, or the capitol dome, often sketched out simply using his pencil. I often made a big fuss over them and shared them in the hallway with the other students and teachers who were always amazed at his talent. It seemed to grow into a source of great pride for this otherwise shy and unassuming young man. The more we bragged over him, the more sketches I found on my desk. I was continuously amazed to see the pictures that he composed as a result of listening to the conversation taking place around him. Having absolutely no artistic inclinations, I have always been intrigued by how the minds of artists work, especially such young artists. Although he assured me that he was in fact working on something at

home, I held out little hope that a product would actually appear by the end of the semester.

In the harried pace brought by the close of the semester, I had pretty much forgotten about Ronnie's special assignment. One morning before students had begun to come down the halls, Ronnie walked into my classroom with his mother carrying a large rectangular canvas. I could see only the backside and really had no idea of what the front might illustrate. Frankly, at that point I was just delighted to see that he had actually been working on something throughout the semester that could help support a passing grade. When he turned it around I was almost speechless. I could see the amount of time that he had put into the work and was deeply touched to see it was our own little Needwood Church. It could have not been more perfect. We hung it frameless in the classroom where it was displayed proudly until the end of our last semester. He told me that he wanted it to remain with the classroom, that it would be his legacy to future students who were compelled to doodle. I insisted on paying him for his painting, which seemed to surprise him. He and his mother had agreed to sell it for fifty dollars, but I insisted on seventy-five, which delighted him and allowed him to buy some real art supplies and cover the nineteen dollars he had paid for the canvas. He had sold his first piece of commissioned artwork, which would hopefully be only the first of many that would follow. I left the children of that school at the end of the following year, but I took with me a vivid memory of that place in his painting. When I look at the painting, it evokes not only memories of those students but also incites my own imagination as I think about what must have gone on within the walls of the church during the time it was used as a meeting place for the slaves from the surrounding plantations.

Back in the 1980s Mr. Cleve Wilson did an interview with the local newspaper. He described another era for the old church. It was just after the turn of the twentieth century and the church had served many purposes other than a place of worship. It was during Jim Crow and the African Americans in the region had utilized the church as a school – it was referred to as the Needwood School for Colored Children. He told many stories, but the one that stuck most vividly in my mind was that of little seven- year-old Cleve on the side of a country road, walking to school in the pouring rain and soaked to the bone. Despite the inclement weather he had been not only passed by school busses carrying white children to school, but also splashed with mud and water as they moved toward their white destination.

Recently my daddy, my sister, my daughter, and I were discussing racism. Although daddy says he does not hate black people he does think himself superior to them in every way. For a man seventy-five years old he is surprisingly open to frank discussion on the matter and seems almost as anxious as we are to understand it. In our most recent conversation he called up some of his memories as we were mining our histories in search of answers. He thought back to the time when his granddaddy had died and the family was going through his things. There within a small tin box of his personal effects were his prized treasures, his Masonic Lodge pins, old coins, old love letters from his wife, and membership cards for the Ku Klux Klan. Despite finding this telling artifact, he said he never recalled any kind of involvement by his granddaddy, no sheets or pointed hats, no burning crosses, nor did he recall any conversation on the matter between him and his daddy in his presence; but there lay the undeniable and tangible evidence of hate. He recalled growing up in a time when black people rode in

the back of the buses; they ate in different restaurants, and attended different schools. There were virtually no times when they came together on common ground and were allowed conversation or meaningful interaction. He felt that growing up under such circumstances greatly limited the potential for inciting anything but estrangement. My sister and I grew up on the cusp of a paradigm shift, the 1960s, and the influence such a shift instilled remains evident in our lives.

I remember no large-scale drama related to desegregation in our small town. The first recollection I have of going to school with black children is seventh grade. At that time all of the children, black and white, were consolidated in the Burroughs-Mollett Seventh Grade Center. Not only was it the first time I can recall going to school with black children, but it was also the first time I had been threatened, and it was by a black boy. He told me that he was going to beat me up after school on the way to the bus. I ran all the way to the bus that afternoon, and the next day some of my black girl friends walked me to the bus just daring him to touch me. Ivory Jean Snow was an untrained naturally born gymnast and was as buff as a bull – all four feet one of her. One snarl from her and some of her friends was all it took to send Timball Stanley heading for Stonewall Street.

We have had many conversations concerning his racism over the years, some serious, some not so much. My daddy is a great teaser, and I think much of his off color humor is motivated by his love of aggravating his two educated liberal daughters. It is interesting that he considers us liberal because in any place other than the South we would be considered conservative. He is tremendously proud of our educational accomplishments. But he still loves to get a reaction and spark a debate. With the

demise of the Princes, I am hoping that it is an outward sign that my daddy may also have moved beyond some of his own racial albatrosses that were bequeathed him.

Unfortunately, while he has made progress I do not think his underlying belief in white supremacy will never be eradicated; however, in my family and that of my sister, I think it is safe to say that upon his death those remnants of hate and intolerance will be buried with him. While I do not know what stance my own children will ultimately take, I am hopeful that their own exposure to people who are different, especially in college, will guide their consciousness. One month ago one of my sons at college answered his dorm door to find two black guys with masks on their faces. One put a gun to his head, the other a gun to his chest and took his grocery money. For fifty dollars they were willing to kill my son. While they could just have easily been white, they were black. Two of his roommates are also black. I hope when he conceptualizes his opinions, it is the good that he remembers most. Last Sunday our other son appeared in the living room with his old middle school friend J.D., whom he had not seen in years but had become reacquainted with in college unexpectedly. I had taught the young man and he was a fine fellow and excellent student. He looked a little different in dreadlocks but that sweet boy was still under them. They had just stopped by to pick up warmer clothes for the cold snap we recently experienced. They were on the way back to college and had to make one other stop to pick up another kid, who was also black. No doubt a clean-cut white kid driving his grandparents' outdated white caddy and two black kids from the hood had to have turned some heads in this town as they were leaving. Unlike my daddy, my children have had the opportunity to interact meaningfully with people who are different. It will be interesting to see how it all turns out.

On our small island home folks knew where we lived, and they knew that generally we behaved because if someone should have to call our daddy due to bad behavior, he would tan our hides if necessary, and there would be marks to prove it; they were hard to hide in a bathing suit or shorts. At that time people minded their own business where this was concerned; I am not sure if Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) even existed. Daddy did not fool with a switch like my grandma did; he went right for the belt. I still remember the sound that his worn leather belt made as he snatched it through his belt loops, then doubling it over to spank us. So most of the time while out of his sight we stayed on the straight and narrow. If lunch time should roll around while we were at the marina and we had forgotten money for a sandwich, Connie, the manager of the rustic grill and marina, would fry us up a hamburger regardless, never seeming to keep a list of accounts or caring if they were ever settled. We swam from the dock high tide, crabbed at low tide. We fished for yellow tail and croaker and tied chicken wings into crab baskets in hopes of a bounty of blue crabs for supper. We would spread our wooden table with newspaper and pick just enough to eat, and before our meal was over always wonder why we had undertaken such a fruitless venture, swearing never to do it again, but we always did. Why we loved them so much remains a mystery to me. You could starve to death before picking enough sweet white meat to suppress your hunger and poke your fingers full of bloody holes picking through the razor sharp cartilage for a teaspoon of sweet white meat. Picking crabs in the factories on the mainland was a job generally reserved for the black people in town, and I suspect that there was an art to it that we never managed to perfect.

Our bikes were our cars, our time machines, and they transported us from adventure to adventure. We rode from the river side over to the beach side down the narrow path, past the pond where the lazy gators sunned on the bank while keeping a close eye on us as we passed. We played in the sand and surf on the beach, often seeing the sun sink down into the horizon as we retreated home. Still today the smell my kids have after coming in from a day of playing on the beach reminds me of the days my sister and I spent avoiding the return home. It is the smell of sand, sun, lotion, and the ocean, and there is no other smell like it. There were not many full-time residents on the island that were families. Most were retirees, so we learned to be content being in the company of each other and were adept at making our own fun; the possibilities seemed endless. My little sister sometimes went missing, but rarely did we worry. It was not unusual to find her at one of the houses of our elderly neighbors paying a visit or playing a game of old maid with them. Even the island dump held allure for us as we made daily trips to plunder the discarded treasures that we used to construct our most recent fort. At the dump we gleaned construction materials, fort furnishings and interesting materials of many kinds, and it often took trip after trip to drag it all to the thicket behind our house. Throughout our entire lives our father constantly reminded us when we would fall out of love with each other that we were all each other had, that one day he would be gone, and that no matter the cost we should strive to remain sisters, to remain close. He continued this habit as we became adults. Having grown up in this isolated setting did encourage a reliance upon one another that may not have otherwise existed in a place with more distractions. In the evening we reluctantly returned home, crusty from the baked on salt, sand and sweat to the place where we settled for a night's rest and cultivated the seeds of



the day's memories as we drifted into sleep induced by our exhaustion. Perhaps my youth influenced the way I have come to view the world, to relate to others and nature as an adult; whatever the reason, the solitude found only in nature calms my spirit and heals my heart if it is hurting and invites compassion for those whom I know are suffering. It is a powerful call that reaches within my soul to compel me and draw me forward, to seek connections and more ethical ways of being in the world and being with others.

### The Sanctuary

As good fortune would have it, my husband and I found a secluded cabin on the Big Satilla River deep in the Georgia pine forests. There are only a handful of cabins there, one of which is my sister's. It was only because of her that we have a place there. Her place was so special to us that when we chose to get married, it was in that setting that we wanted to have our ceremony in the presence of our families; so one July not so long ago we were married on her dock at sunset after a drenching summer shower. Cabins on the bluff rarely come up for sale; but when one did, my sister told me about it, and we made a quick decision to buy it. We thought at the time it would be our full-time residence, making a conscious choice to commute to a nearby town to work. It is the place we will one day retire and distance was the price we had to pay for solitude. It is a simple cabin with big porches that sits on a high green bluff on the banks of the river, miles from civilization and surrounded by protected wetlands, secluded from the intrusions of modernity. Both my husband and I crave a reprieve from the hectic pace of our lives and have come to see it as a sanctuary of retreat and rejuvenation. In this place of solitude I am more given to allowing myself moments of self-reflection and understanding because I can hear myself above the noise of life and can take the time to

listen for the answers. It is a place that in many ways reminds me of my childhood island home.

As I move to unravel the experiences of my life I begin to understand that although they seem to be unique to me, they are not. Rather, they are a part of the fabric that connects me to a larger cultural process, and they move me to question my own experiences and call me to be bold enough to step away from my entrenched points of view and confront what I find around me; it is a challenge that calls me to lead others to do the same. On my journey I have found that it is only in the giving to others that we find meaning in our own lives. To challenge myself is sometimes a very difficult and painful process because it requires confronting ideas and assumptions that are intricately woven into my being, just as my father's racist assumptions were woven into the fabric of his being from a very early age. They are beliefs that were transmitted to me not in a simple conversation, but rather night after night sitting on the front porch while telling stories or while doing the dishes with my grandmother and aunts or riding around town with my daddy in his truck. They are things that I was taught not to question because and my grandma or other elders said "I say so, that is why!" However, now I am an adult and the place of questioning is my own. It moves me away from universal truths that I seem to hold fast to and toward a new place that seeks connections and links me to others. Perhaps most importantly it leads me to seek ways of living in the world more ethically. In submitting to this questioning I have learned that there are few universal truths to which I can cling and none that can be claimed as justification for doing harm to others. To uncover more ethical ways of living I must "wind through the labyrinth of memory, pushing questions to the edge and seeking passage to somewhere else" (Martusewicz,

2001, p. 26). In our moving away from the universal we often move toward new ideas and new texts in order to create meaning.

### Leaving Home

In doing dissertation research we read and we read. We read for years it seems. We think, we process, and we read some more. One text often leads to another, and the process seems to never end. It is the task of the text to lead us to the places that push us to our personal edge and challenge our closely held assumptions. During this process students take what they find relevant to their research and their lives and move on. In many cases that which is relevant to my life is also relevant to my research. For me, good research is based on passion, a quest for justice that moves us to action. Early in my doctoral work I was given perhaps the best piece of advice that a student could be given by one of my professors. It was to choose a dissertation topic that I was passionate about because, if I did not, it would be a miserable trip when it is meant to be a wonderful journey. While doing research, once in a while you encounter a text that resonates within you and stands apart from the others. You feel as though you could have written it yourself because it articulates the thoughts that are flowing within you but have yet to find passage onto paper. It is ironic that some of the texts that have held the most meaning for me personally, and for my research, have been slim volumes with powerfully concise language. I think of bell hooks and her feminist primer, *Feminism is for Everyone*.

Feminism has over the years been off putting to many women in the South because they did not really understand the meaning behind the idea. The Deep South is comprised mainly of women those from the outside might consider to be plain folk, or

those that have been under represented in both literature and research on the South. bell hooks points out that class bias prevented many women, both black and white, from understanding the tenets of feminism because so much of what was disseminated was done through the written word. Many plain-folk women in the South, my own family included, possessed poor reading and analytic skills or both, or had little access to the written materials used to disseminate information on the movement. Hence they failed to recognize its value to both them as women and to their families. Rather, they deferred to, "The superficial and perverted versions of feminist ideas that end up in the public imagination, via TV, for example" (hooks, 2000, p.109). In this region much of what was seen in the media related to feminism was considered to be radical behavior, and many chose to completely reject the philosophy. As a child of the 1960s I remember a lot of demonstrations being shown on television. This was coupled with the chaos and social unrest brought about as the result of the Civil Rights Movement and the war in Viet Nam. It was simply a time of great turbulence in all regions of the country, and the south was no exception. There was a great deal of anger associated with the second feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. Some of it was perpetrated by the middle-class women in power, and this was compounded by the masses of working-class women who felt disassociated with the movement and angered because their needs were not being addressed. Still there were other women, like my aunts and grandmother, on the fringes who were angry because they sensed their way of life was on the edge of destruction should such a movement take hold in the region or, God forbid, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) should pass. For me the evolutionary acceptance of feministic ideas has been slow to come, and it has become a guiding tenet in my life in large part because

of my education. In the 60s many of the women the media associated with the women's movement were very different from Southern women in their mannerisms. For most of us they were off-putting: they seemed loud, pushy and crass. All of the things we were raised not to be. They were intimidating because of their abruptness and their intellect. Neither is a threat to me any longer, but the images of angry bra-burning women on television remain in the minds of many women here. I think this is in large part because radical feminism threatened to dismantle the system that not only allowed me, but encouraged me, to stay home for many years because it was my duty to create and maintain a warm welcoming home and raise children who would contribute to society in a beneficial way. Instead, what the movement did was to make me feel that what I was doing did not matter and was perhaps even a waste of time. It is to that end that I think it is important to clarify what is meant in this discussion by the word feminism and to understand the goals of the brand of feminism I have come to espouse as a Southern woman. First of all there is no single universal definition of feminism - there are numerous definitions of feminism, but I identify well with belle hooks' due to its simplicity. hooks (2001) states, "...feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. 1). The goals of feminism are to become economically self-sufficient and to find ways to assist other women in their efforts to better themselves economically" (p. 42). In paying special attention to the goal articulated above, I have to wonder how any woman, regardless of her circumstances, might argue with it. I was not introduced to bell hooks nor any of her books until I entered the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University. hooks appealed to me because she cleverly and concisely summed up a bit of history and purpose to the movement in a way that could speak to

almost anyone. Had my grandmother and aunts been told that, "feminist politics aims to end domination to free us to be who we are -- to live lives where we love justice, where we can live in peace" (p. 118), I think they might have bought it; at the very least they might have listened. Although it was later in my life, her commentary drew this Southern conservative Bible thumping girl into communion with a more moderate version of the movement and led me to understand and embrace concepts that before I had not understood. It spoke to me not just for myself, but it primarily spoke to the possibility of a more just way of living for my daughters. I have recommended her text often to those with whom I have engaged in conversation on the topic once I have realized they view feminists as bra-burning man haters with little, if any, redemptive value. However, of all of the texts that I have read, the most influential one for me has been another slim text, *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics* (2001) by Rebecca A. Martusewicz.

Martusewicz is a professor of Education in the Women's Studies Program at Eastern Michigan University. Her passion is preparing practicing and prospective teachers to deal with and create practices around the issues of education and social justice. *Seeking Passage* calls us to upset our closely held assumptions in order to move toward more ethical ways of being in the world. It calls us to examine our personal responsibility for those with whom we share the planet. Hers was a text I was assigned very early on in my course work. I happened on it again when revisiting my old material and assessing it for relevance related to my research. When I began the program, the ideas that were being espoused by my professors were very strange and foreign to me. Probably most radical, though, were their ways of *thinking*. I vividly remember sitting in

the class on the first night, knowing no one there, thinking that I was way out of my league. The other students all seemed to be at ease as the professor spoke. I later found out they were feeling just like me! I studied the facial expressions of the others present hoping to find someone else, anyone, that seemed perplexed, but they all looked so confident as they scribbled down notes in their pads. As I studied them I thought they looked like fairly regular people; no one stood out as an intellectual genius, and as I contemplated my situation I decided that if they could do it, I could too. I soon adopted the “fake it until you can make it” philosophy and held on for dear life. What a ride it was. Over time I learned about ideas that I had never thought much about like *marginalization, currere, place, post structuralism*, and philosophers I had never heard of such as Deleuze, Serres, Foucault, and Derrida. In their texts I would read a few pages thinking that if I just kept reading it would begin to make sense. In most cases they did not, but I kept reading anyway. Dr. Weaver must have had the assignment to weed out the weak in the program, and his assigned text *Plato’s Republic* almost defeated me; but I kept reading and showing up for class. Sloooooowly..., very slowly, themes began to repeat themselves and isolated concepts began to come together. I am guessing it was Dr. Reynolds who assigned *Seeking Passage* to us since he had co-authored a text with Martusewicz, *Inside/Out Contemporary Critical Perspectives in Education* (1994). Although *Inside/Out* was not assigned text, it proved to be a foundational read for those interested in educational reform and one that cleared away the cobwebs for me.

For anyone interested in true educational reform, it is critical that he or she undertakes a journey. It is a journey that raises more questions than it provides answers. On the adventure, one learns that there is no one right way, no definitive solution. My

journey began in that classroom four years ago. It is a journey that requires the ability to step away from practices that isolate those who cannot represent themselves as a result of the space they occupy within society. It confronts rather than ignores the suffering of others. It is a process that is ongoing, one that demands periodic reassessment of our practice and introspective reflection on our purpose as teachers and mentors to our students. It requires acknowledging as educators that rather than teach students we must lead students on a voyage of self discovery. It is a process that was so foreign to me just a few short years ago, but it now brings new meaning to my work. It is a difficult process to explain but rather one that must be internalized. In order to run the course we must depart: we must leave that which we love and have learned to find comfort in, and we must embrace the beauty of the journey ahead. I could sit and write for days but could not articulate as poetically as Martusewicz has done the importance of turning from the past and embarking on the journey in her letter to *the River*.

*December 29, 1992*

*My dear River friend,*

*I have been living a kind of split existence for many years. With you I experience a connection that has claimed a very important piece of my soul. You are the River, and I am more tied in love and reverence to you than words can describe. This is a love of the earth and her water, of a beautiful place and the time spent there. In your arms I have felt cradled by this reverence, profoundly at home.*

*And yet not at home. And this because of another pull in my life that has nothing to do with that place, that is something much less*



*tangible, incorporeal, and yet so real for me that it cannot be denied. This other love has haunted me since childhood. It is about questions, about wonder, about thought, about ideas, about words, about the world, the universe, myself. And it takes me away from home, the River, toward a home that has no place. A place that is profoundly no place. Joyous beyond anything I have ever experienced and yet very, very lonely.*

*And so dear friend, it is with great difficulty that I write. It's time for me to leave home. (Martusewicz, 2002, p. 28 )*

## CHAPTER 2

### THE VENEER OF THE NEW SOUTH

*You don't know why you stay in a place where you were born.  
How can you be sure! There're a thousand reasons why it's easier to stay than to go.  
...That's the way you feel about the place you were born. Always looking for it.  
Always staying or coming back, searching for the you that you left there.  
---Lillian Smith (1944, pp. 35, 37)*

The aim of this work is to plumb deeply into aspects of Southern culture that serves to constrict the positive development of women and girls in the region, myself included. While many of us possess average or greater intelligence, we often make decisions that adversely impact the quality of our lives related to educational attainment, employment possibilities, personal relationships, and child bearing. Sometimes we encounter roadblocks, things that we cannot control, that prevent us from moving forward in a positive manner. However, very often at critical crossroads we seem make decisions that derail positive growth. Stories serve to illustrate how cultural influences have come to bear in my life and the lives of women and girls I have encountered along my journey. The women I have chosen to include in my narrative are those that have had the greatest impact on my life including my grandmother, mother, sister, and my aunts, as well as (no comma) some of the students I have encountered in my work and who have touched me deeply by their will to survive and tenacity in overcoming tremendous adversity. Embedded within the stories one finds several significant factors that impact quality of life in the region including historic economic structures and their resultant impact on the current quality of life in the region, the influence of the family and church, and the role of class, race, and gender on individual identity formation. Perhaps the following discussion will provide some insight into how these factors influence choices made by

women in the region and provide a deeper understanding of how they shape our outcomes.

### *This Strange Place*

The South continues to be a strangely unique region, different from other areas of the country; there are traditions in other regions, but in the South adherence is not confined to pockets of distinct cultures, rather it reverberates throughout the entire region. In the South there is an extremely deep regard for kinship networks, strong family ties, adherence to the opinions of one's elders, and religion has a powerful impact on families (Dillman, 1988, p. 7). Raymond Gastil in his text *Cultural Regions of the United States* (1975) describes people of the South as the most "native" of any region (p. 174). These sentiments are echoed according to Willie Morris in his autobiography, *North Toward Home* (2000). The South bestows on its native sons and daughters powerful "Southern treasures" such as a closeness to the land and a "feel for the rhythms of nature" (p. 145), a place where the importance of friendship is cherished (p. 146), and a place where folks love storytelling and the resultant sense of community and tradition that it gives us by linking us to the past (p. 149).

Journalist John Gunther of the *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), painted quite a different picture of the South. During the optimistic post World War II days he did a national tour of America describing life in all regions. His depiction of life in the South was anything but bucolic.

...traveling from town to town I felt that I wasn't in the United States at all, but in some utterly foreign land....The South highlights almost every American problem....The South contains a great number of pronouncedly schizoid people;

the whole region is a land of paranoia, full of the mentally sick; most Southerners feel a deep necessity to hate something, if necessary themselves. As for civil liberties, the South is probably the darkest place in the nation. (Gunther in Goldfield, 2002, pp. 35-36)

I referenced this passage because it remains a poignant descriptor of the region that I am ashamed to acknowledge but would be remiss to deny. It is likely that what disturbs me most about this quote (made in 1947) is its continued relevance today. It illustrates the ongoing ignorance of some of our inhabitants and continued gaps in achieving greater social justice for the marginalized. Research has shown that there are no inescapable detrimental elements of the natural environment that can be blamed for having shaped the psyche of our region's people. In fact, if anything our abundance of natural resources should have enhanced our opportunities for success. There remains a tendency to resolve differences through the use of violence that is pervasive in this setting, and this is a distinct characteristic of the South (Hackney, 2005, p.3). While more urban settings offer greater acceptance of difference and greater economic opportunities, a movement toward change has been slow to evolve in more rural settings. While poverty exists in every corner of this nation, the poverty in this region seems oppressive, pervasive, and virtually inescapable for many of those locked within its grips. I see children, who were born of children, themselves having children at very early ages in a cycle that seems almost impossible to alter, and little girls coming to school carrying with them the scars of all manner of abuse – sexual, mental, and physical. I wonder why their mothers would stay with a man that does that to her babies. Often they stay because they have few better options. In my thought processes I must use caution as arrogance and judgment slip

silently into my thinking. I now find myself safely detached from such hostile situations but just beneath the surface lies my knowledge of the truth. For many, a roof covering her head and that of her children is more immediately important than the scars that are inflicted as her part of the freight. There is hate all around – hate of self, hate of others, hate of those who are different, and hate of those who are closely attached.

I see adults in the community wearing Dixie Outfitter tee shirts in public with references to hunting coons on their backs, and I wonder what the black man behind him in line must think. Car tags tout the *heritage not hate* mantra and rebel flags fly high over vast expanses of property along the four lane highways leading into town. It is a place where people know their place and if they forget there will be someone there to remind them. It is indeed a strangely haunting place that is cloaked in natural beauty and covered with a veneer of decorum and grace that makes one question how such wretchedness could be found in such a beautiful place.

In analyzing the morays of the region it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate inquiry into a particular dilemma from the *place* in which it is embedded. Its accepted customs and traditions have been forged over time and are intricately connected to aspects of the culture including gender roles, class delineations, and racial lines. This may be particularly true for regions of the South where there has been a long legacy of accepted cultural traditions that have marginalized groups of people based on gender, class, and race for centuries and can be seen most pronouncedly in isolated rural regions of the state. Certainly, it is also impossible to not consider the influence of each of these characteristics when deconstructing existing belief systems in pursuit of establishing a new more inclusive paradigm in the region. In studying cultural regions of Georgia and

the influence of place on marginalized people, one must be aware that the state also has the strange distinction of consisting of “two-Georgias.” Perhaps this is an example of the “schizoid” reference alluded to by Gunther.

There is metropolitan Atlanta, and then there is the *other* Georgia. The other Georgia consists primarily of rural regions and includes eighty-eight of the 159 of counties in the state. These rural areas comprise the majority of the states landmass. Poverty is a persistent characteristic of many of these towns and communities, and it is not difficult to see when driving through these regions that despite their best efforts to modernize, their heyday has come and gone. Many have little hope for prosperity in the future. They have few natural or human resources with which to compete in an increasingly competitive economy. The South is the most impoverished rural region of the country (Harris & Zimmerman, 2003 p. 2). Manifestations of the poverty can be seen in low educational attainment levels for young people, substandard living conditions for many, high teen pregnancy rates, and high drug and alcohol addiction among those affected by these factors. The roots of this sore condition can be found in the past.

Historically, much of the economic foundation in rural towns was based on manufacturing enterprises that developed after the Civil War, railroad activity that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and agriculture. Unfortunately, over recent years the rural South has lost manufacturing gains it had realized as recently as the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these losses were to the more urban areas of the South or to other countries such as Mexico, China, or India (Harris & Zimmerman, 2003, p.3) where there is little regard for human rights and exploitation of the marginalized sectors of society can easily be accomplished. However, due to these losses, residents of many

rural areas of Georgia have found themselves unprepared to earn a decent living in order to support their families.

Many rural towns arose in Georgia due to the growth of the railroad. When traveling through one of these towns, one is almost certain to see a train depot around which it was organized. Homes, business, and post offices were often situated in close proximity to this town hub. Trains were necessary to transport products to and from the ports in Savannah and Brunswick to other regions of the state and country, and they were utilized to move crops such as cotton and other agricultural products from their rural locations to their markets. Some towns were simply a stop on the route while others, such as Waycross, were a railway hub. Many trains converged here. The growth of Waycross was primarily due to its importance as a railway crossroad; with the loss of that distinction, today the town suffers economically as many smaller surrounding towns do. As rail traffic has decreased over the years due to faster and more modern modes of transportation, many of the railway towns have experienced a loss in prosperity. Many of the railroad depots have been abandoned or repurposed to meet other needs such as a welcome or history center for the town, but they are rarely torn down and seem to serve as a tangible reminder of a more prosperous past.

The importance of rail enterprises in small towns and rural areas of the South cannot not be over stated. Over many decades in the South the railroad provided numerous jobs for a largely unskilled uneducated workforce. For many small towns, there were decades prior to No Child Left Behind that school drop out was not necessarily seen as a problem, rather as a solution, for it was those who dropped out of school that filled these critical jobs. There was also an abundance of auxiliary support

jobs in associated industries that under girded the railroad operations and offered employment to the uneducated. These jobs filled a niche and provided those without institutionalized education an opportunity to occupy a respectable space in society. These job opportunities provided people with a way of life in which they enjoyed the respect of others primarily based on the foundations of honesty, work ethic, and integrity. Despite race or class, those who possessed these character traits held a place of esteem and respect in society – each at their own level within small-town Southern society. That is not to say that Blacks rose within white society, rather that within Black society there arose subcultures whereby Black entrepreneurs began to meet the needs of their own race. While many small towns in Georgia certainly did not fall within the affluence of places like Jekyll Island, where the millionaires vacationed, the remaining historic photographs depict elegant hotels, a vibrant downtown, and a lovely collection of elegant Victorian homes that graced its boulevards. The photographs reflect the affluence represented by privileged whites in the town. Like many other small towns experiencing urban blight, most of the beautiful homes have fallen into ruin and are now enclaves of the marginalized, predominantly African Americans. Few industries have moved in to replace the economic foundations once filled by the railroad. The railway is just one example of the loss of enterprises in small towns. Other losses include manufacturing that has moved to foreign lands where marginalized unprotected workers can be exploited, thus yielding greater profits for the owners; and agricultural losses to small farmers due to the increase in more scientific mechanized farming methods. The loss of these enterprises contributed to the economic problems of the South that we continue to suffer from today. Closely related to the railway decline was that of agriculture.



Cotton was easy to cultivate in the temperate climate found in the South. Almost anyone could grow a patch to supplement the family income. Unfortunately, this ease contributed to an unstable reliance on a single cash crop and left the economic foundations of the region vulnerable to many calamities. Even during the Ante-bellum period the South was reluctant to diversify crop production, relying primarily on cotton, leaving the region economically unstable and subject to weather, rising and falling production and market costs, and even insect infestations.

“Prior to the Civil War the South contained some of the wealthiest counties in the United States, and in the region as a whole per capita income levels approached national levels” (Fogel & Engerman, 1974, vol. 1, p. 57). Of course, that wealth was not distributed but maintained by those in control of the plantation system. After the Civil War, the South languished in poverty for decades despite the fact that journalists such as Henry W. Grady of the *Atlanta Constitution* touted the arrival of the “New South.” Despite efforts to promote a national image of progress in the South, the region remained stilted in social and economic quagmire, and the problems facing the region were only obscured in the propaganda and press releases promoted by Grady and others. As the country entered the Depression those living in what seemed by all accounts to be a land of plenty were identified by President Roosevelt as “the Nations No. 1 economic problem” (Carlton & Coclains, 1996, p. 1) in the National Emergency Council’s *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*. In his text, *The Selling of the South*, James C. Cobb (1993) discusses how Southern chambers of commerce worked to entice industries away from their manufacturing facilities located in the North by the lure of “cheap and docile” workers in the South. “The South was an enemy within, a parasitic region whose

employers were benefiting from the degradation of their own labor and that of others” (p. 9.). It seems that for many in the South, economic desperation drove them to accept work in unsafe factories for long hours and low wages, and such situations were being secured and promoted by their community leaders as discussed by Cobb. While such systems exploited all who fell within the ranks, it offered little or no special protection or consideration to women or children. While the low industrial wages for men often necessitated children, as well as women, working to bear the burden of family support, the lower wages paid to women and children also stood to undermine the security of the adult male worker and, indeed, had an impact on the workers and the entire community. According to the governmental report, three-fourths of all children employed in the nation were employed in the South, and for many of the women employed full time, their income was insufficient to provide for them and their children, and they also received public relief (p. 66-67).

Although the rural regions did slowly transition from an economy based wholly on agriculture to one more inclusive of manufacturing and extraction, education continued to be ignored; and due to short-sighted implementation methods, manufacturing failed to be the panacea hoped for by many. Employment of children affects school attendance, and effective compulsory school attendance is only as good as those who enforce it. As time passed, little consideration was given to the value education could bring to the region’s inhabitants, especially women. In fact, according to Goldfield (2002) the South lagged in educational achievement and the quality of its academic institutions. “Part of this resulted from poverty, but part derived by design” (p. 31). It seems that education empowers people to think and independent thinking served

to undermine a system that defined and justified the power structures carefully constructed by a patriarchal system.

Thinking threatened history, and history remained one of the few luxuries left to the South after the [Civil] war. Thinking implied some cognizance of the future, but the South's future could only mirror the 'past.' And thinking sometimes produced change, and change was an anathema: How could you change perfection? (Goldfield, 2002, p. 31)

Clearly, all regions of the country have their histories and in many cases patriarchal power has influenced advancements made by women in other regions. In the case of the South, maintaining the status quo was crucial for the survival of a way of life that was built on the subjugation of large numbers of marginalized individuals. Crucial to this end was limiting access to education which would threaten to undermine the very structure society was built upon, not to mention the economic foundations of the region. One factor that was crucial in maintaining patriarchal control over women in the South was the pervading instances of isolation, especially for those in rural areas. With miles and miles of wilderness between farms it would have been very difficult to disseminate new ideas that might serve to empower women, even those who could read. "The optimism that characterized Northern women after the war and led to women's rights organizations and suffrage movements was absent in the defeated South" (Goldfield, 2002, p. 96). Education for any facet represented by "the other" was a dangerous threat to daily operations of the plantation system and eventually the factory system that placed power firmly in the hands of the property owning white male and structures of power within a region.

The degree of power they wielded was directly associated with the amount of property they held; property was crucial for a man during this time because it meant independence. Along with self-sufficiency, this independence also guaranteed a degree of independence from the rule of law with regard to the treatment of those under their jurisdiction, which included slaves, women, and children. In the case of women, denial of educational opportunities was tied to a carefully constructed power structure that supported slavery and justified violence perpetrated by white men. Furthermore, “The need to control white women was also fed by fear that female moral concern [related to humane treatment of slaves] might indeed turn its attention to slavery” (Evans, 1997, p. 89). The use of violence in the South to influence behavior and to subjugate the other is well documented, “...the historical record and the actual crime statistics suggest that both today and historically, Southerners have had a ‘tendency to appeal to force’ to settle differences and it may be supposed that they view such resort as more often legitimate than do non-Southerners (Reed, 1974, p. 46). It was not just slaves and unruly women that were managed by the threat of violence; white men with little or no property were also kept in check by those in power. Among the victims of [white] lynchings between 1889 and 1930 were 788 white men (p.46). Whites were lynched for helping blacks or being anti-lynching and even for domestic crimes. According to Gail Doss and Jeanne S. Hurlbert in their article, “Too Good to be False” an essay in the *Folklore of Social Science in Surveying the South: Studies in Regional Sociology* (1993) by John Shelton Reed, “It seems that if social scientists know anything about lynching at all, they know that it increased when cotton prices fell and decreased when they rose” (p. 75).

The problems of the past left a lasting legacy for Southerners. The transition from plantation agriculture and other extraction-based economies, such as timber, to manufacturing coupled with historically weak investments in education and skills training have provided the state with low-wage industries and low-skills workforce in rural communities (Harris, 2003, p. 3). The implications for residents of the region today are that serious challenges will face those who enter the workforce with no post-secondary training. Most of the jobs available to these individuals will be found only in the secondary labor markets where pay is significantly below that awarded to college graduates or those with post-secondary training of some kind. According to Harris (2003), “Over time, the gap between wages garnered by college-educated workers and those paid to non-college-bound individuals will likely widen, particularly in context of global competition and technological advances in the workplace” (p. 3). Students in rural areas of the South continue to outpace students in the rest of America with a disproportionately high number who do not acquire post-secondary training of some kind (p. 3). I currently work in a school system in the south eastern portion of Georgia. It is largely a rural town with few industries and rail enterprises that are diminishing. Based on the economic outlook for the area, a great deal of planning and effort goes in to preparing students for some measure of post-secondary training after their graduation from high school.

#### *Many Children Left Behind*

In the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) it is easy to become a cynic with regard to public education. For generations free public education has been touted to be the great equalizer, but the hopes and promises offered by institutionalized education has

failed to deliver for many, especially those living in the margins of mainstream America. Among those marginalized are children from economically disadvantaged families, children with disabilities, and children from racially or ethnically diverse backgrounds. These children whose parents are often invisible within the community are also invisible in the halls of the school. The parents are disenfranchised themselves and have little capacity to advocate on behalf of their children. The situation seems even bleaker if these children live in isolated regions devoid of intellectual or cultural capital. Despite one's position on NCLB there is no denying that it has forced those who have in the past closed their doors and taught to the middle to consider the needs of all children who sit in their classrooms. Blackwell (2002) speaks to the impact children's surroundings, including family and community, can have on their outcome.

Characteristics of the area in which the youth live can influence their attitudes and beliefs about the importance of educational attainment. Areas with higher family incomes, lower poverty rates, and higher educational attainment of adults may provide an atmosphere of strong support for higher levels of educational attainment. Such communities would also provide good role models, showing the advantages of staying in school. (Blackwell, 2002, p. 40)

Hence, the impact of place becomes a significant factor when considering outcomes of all students and specifically for young women "...where a low value placed on education results in little community support for schools and a culture that does not value school achievement" (McGranahan, 2004, p.65). Certainly, this does not suggest that everyone should go to college; however, it does suggest that opportunities for people to improve the prospects in their lives come primarily through education, an asset that leads to

increased economic well-being and strengthens the civic bonds necessary for healthy communities.

Gilroy (1993), in *Black Atlantic*, further communicates the importance of place, being connected to a home place as a critical component of cultural identity, having a connection to a larger kinship group in order to formulate a personal identity. For those who have been displaced, they even become aliens in their own homelands, no longer finding comfort there, having lost their connection to the “insiderism” that one gains living within a cultural group. Gilroy refers to this concept as “cultural insiderism,” and it is the “idea of national belonging or aspiration to nationality and other more local but equivalent forms of cultural kinship” (p. 3), a state of being that is lacking for displaced people. It is not difficult to understand that those who perceive themselves as displaced often find themselves in a state of being that results in alienation and dissatisfaction with their lives.

*Black Atlantic* emphasizes the sense of estrangement that results when one does not have agency and has been denied access to resources that might improve the quality of his/her life. One of the most centrally important affordances given to people by their identification with a place is a *voice* within that place. Voice is critical because it allows people to have agency within their particular culture. Voice allows one to participate in the process of political engagement, an activity rarely embraced by those who occupy the fringes of our society. For most people in dominant cultural groups, it is not likely that more than a passing thought is given to those who occupy these spaces. They are seen, perhaps pitied, but certainly avoided because their presence is a reminder of the inequities inherent in our society. It is ironic that when many consider images of the South, they

choose to focus on those that are the least realistic, rather than those that depict a more accurate and comprehensive representation of conditions found here both today and historically. One cannot understand contemporary patterns of cultural disengagement without understanding the influence of deprivation and poverty in the South. In order to do this it is helpful to reflect on the history of the region.

Current patterns of social and economic inequalities are tied to the ways in which the economies of the region were organized over a century ago around plantation agriculture (Harris & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 1). This social system put into place a caste system that would subordinate all but white men for decades to come. “The slave South was a patriarchy where fathers ruled over women, children and slaves” (Evans, 1997, p. 88). According to Dillman (1988), the patriarchal model was organized for the benefit of society and the family.

...this model promised the greatest good for the greatest number, that it maintained order, and that misery was reduced because the patriarchy was bound by ethic or reciprocal duties to care for his family, his dependents, and those he owned. For his dependents, the consequences of not cooperating in this scheme of reciprocal duties could lead to violence. (pp. 31-32)

The most prominent groups affected by the system were black men and women of any color. Both class and gender determined where within the social hierarchy women fell and class further delineated those designations for women. “Guilt about their own actions and fear of the suppressed anger of slaves and white women fed the violence with which white men enforced their authority and defended their ‘honor’ ”(Evans, 1997, p. 89). Hence the unique cultural configuration was instrumental defining the spaces



occupied by the other in the South. Crucial to understanding the importance of place is the idea of first being able to understand the “other” who shares a geographical place. Via an understanding of the other who shares a particular place, one comes to a better understanding of his/her place within that landscape (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 78). The difficulty arises when the dominant group finds little value in dismantling accepted conventions and is, in fact, threatened by such actions. In small Southern towns there is little buy-in to the idea of redistribution of power for the purpose of empowering the other. The idea of “them and us” is often accepted, if not promoted. According to Edgerton, “Place is linked with the construction of difference, of ‘them and us,’ often resulting in the exclusion of the ‘other’ ” (p. 78). It is crucial when reconstructing Southern paradigms related to race, class, and gender that, “One can experience the comfort of one’s place without banishing the ‘other’ through elimination of difference. In Casemore (2008) the point is made that in the South there is a need to unsettle the fantasy of a continuous, harmonious past embodied in Southern sites, we will have to deconstruct place “as a stable site of tradition and history” (Ladd quoted in Casemore, 2008, p. 28) if educational renewal is to occur. Landscapes in the South have been stable places for white men because they have used fear and domination to marginalize weaker people, be it African Americans, women, or any other subgroup found within the culture. For members of these groups, stability is continuously pursued and is accomplished only by unsettling the myths of the past. To confront and challenge aspects of the myth often requires betrayal not only of social history, but in many cases betrayal of our family history and coming face to face with the role our heritage played in supporting oppressive systems. This type of analysis requires people to plumb deeply into the foundations of

their personal identities and leaves them at risk of shattering their sense of place in the world. Kincheloe and William Pinar (1991) point out in their text, *Curriculum As Social Psychoanalysis: The Significance of Place*, “the loss of place precipitates the loss of history....” (p. 9) and “place is only place if accompanied by history” (p. 9). For Southerners a loss of history represents alienation and estrangement from all of the millions of moments that converge over time and come to embody our identities. One would be well served not to neglect the importance of history in the construction of Southern identity. According to Whitlock, (2007) “Constricting conventions of Southern identity construction obstruct ...understanding from which progressive individual and social change might emerge” (p. 34). And the inhabitants from a region steeped largely in conservative values have much difficulty altering such conventions because they have been carefully woven in to many aspects of their daily lives. They are embedded in their religion, their politics, and their almost unquestioning acceptance of tradition within the family structure.

### A Haunting History

While traveling, one has a great deal of time to think and to soak up the natural beauty of the countryside, and it strikes me time and again as I travel these back roads just how much of Georgia is still composed of vast acres of undeveloped pineland, wild land punctuated by beautiful oceans, rivers, marshes, and swamps. As I pass over the little bridges I am often intrigued by the names of the waterways, the Ogeechee, the Altamaha, and the Frederica, to name just a few. As a historian I know they were not haphazardly given their names, but that there is meaning attached to each one. Many have Indian or Spanish names and often my mind wanders, and I can visualize how the

roads I travel were once Indian trails where explorers, traders, and Native Americans trod, traded, and perhaps made war in an effort to claim the territory as their own; in light of human history, it has not been that long ago since they were present in this place. On this land the haunting peacefulness proclaimed in nature is interrupted by the knowledge that there are things that have gone on here that are unsettling. Things witnessed by the majestic oaks, the rivers, and the rocks that induce the strange presence and beg that their stories be told. If one is immersed in the rhythm of this land, there is a sense of the ghosts that remain, those for whom there is no one left to tell their story.

Much of this land is found within the coastal plains region of Georgia, a location that was prime for the cultivation of Sea Island cotton; and by virtue of this location, this *place*, the layers and complexity of its story becomes more compelling. Evidence of the story still exists if one is perceptive enough to look for it. Although most people would not recognize them as such, clues are found scattered intermittently along the fringes of the back roads. Just like the cotton that litters the shoulders of the highways each fall, they are seen as eyesores: things that clutter the landscape, objects that would be better off removed. But for those of use who call these spaces home, they are a constant, a part of our internal landscape and are linked to our history. The ramshackle dwellings provide us with a familiar comfort because for those of us who dwell here, we know their stories; we know the people, and the kinship connections that they represent. They are the remains of dwellings, an indication of want little tangible evidence lingers of the cotton culture and the subsequent effort to survive in the wake of destruction. They are a visual reminder of the wreckage of the plantation economy that existed here over a century ago. Despite the passage of time the region is still littered with remnants of

abandoned sharecropper cabins; crumbling evidence of the unmerciful past. They are found in random patterns, without paint, windows, or doors – many had none to begin with. They stand on crumbling brick piers, often leaning and in various states of total collapse, and are surrounded by overgrown thickets that disguise their genealogy. Most look as though a good strong northeaster would take them to the ground, yet year after year, decade after decade they remain. The presence of these structures reminds you that once people lived, worked, and died here; and in most cases they were the homes of the marginalized who were trying to eke out a living based on their very limited options. This is substantiated by the evidence of many tiny family cemeteries, some segregated from the surrounding countryside by leaning and rusted iron fences. Some show few signs of care or concern as the headstones are crumbling, and the area is overgrown with weeds. For Southerners the markers signify the importance of family and heritage and serve as a reminder of their people's storied past. "The South is a place where people detail the eccentric lives of old ladies and previous generations...my own Southern heritage is exposed by the importance of story telling in my childhood...indeed, the stories help create place and, for that matter, the past" (Kincheloe in Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 150). However, all too often no one of these families remains to retell the stories or care for the humble monuments that at some earlier time seemed to hold such meaning.

The sharecropper cabins are among the few vernacular structures that remain of the post antebellum period in rural Georgia. They were usually occupied by former slaves and poor whites. Without the presence of slave labor to exploit the land, share cropping was an effort to subdivide plantations to tenant farmers in hopes of extracting

some income from the property; perhaps enough to cover the taxes, enough to hold on to the land until the next year when things would surely get better. But boll weevils and European cotton sources ensured that it would be many years until things got better; in fact, they never did return to the day when cotton was the cornerstone of the Southern economy.

### Constrained by our Heritage

The essence of this text is a journey of self. I have been touched and influenced in many ways by the women who raised me and with whom I have grown up. I have seen glimpses myself and been reminded of my own personal struggles as I have watched my students on so many occasions work through a variety of struggles. The narrative in each section has been inspired by a real relationship I have had with a woman or girl. Parts of the story will serve to frame a discussion that will focus on gender, class, and race. I have come to realize that I have ended up a productive and contented person because of a few decisions made at critical crossroads in my life. Often the decisions were not what many people would consider to be the “right” one at the time. Despite this and very often after having experienced long and costly detours, I managed to recover from my mistakes and get back on the right path. Perhaps as important as those decisions were people placed along my journey who helped me navigate uncertain territory. Had it not been for them, I would have likely turned back. I shutter to think of how different my life could have been without my education. It is my hope that the girls I have bonded with along my own journey will come to understand themselves better and discover the transformative nature of education in order to improve their prospects.

These girls, like me and many other women in the South, have been constrained

by our heritage; in many cases we have contributed to our own conditions. It is as though some women in the South, especially lower class uneducated women, have turned over the keys to their lives to others, in many cases men. This observation was supported by the work of Haynes in her dissertation research,

I don't understand why we make the choices that trap up, constrain us, leave us without an identity unless it flows through the acknowledgement of someone else. Maybe it's not so much choice as it is absence of choice. There are no easy paths to follow that lead to becoming constructive partners in society. The paths that are well-trod here are the ones that lead you marrying the guy who knocked you up because you thought you wanted to be grown up. (Haynes dissertation, 2007, p.65)

Surveys taken among antifeminists in the South were generally aligned with demographics in the rural region. Research has found that Southern antifeminists have lower levels of educational attainment and are less likely to have spouses with professional occupations and that antifeminists in the South are often lower-class, non-employed women (Johnson, 1991, p. 85). We have been raised to be dependent upon others, especially men, leaving us vulnerable to abuse, poverty, and a myriad of other pitfalls. Clearly the class difference among feminists in the South and antifeminists isolate women from each other, preventing them from entertaining new ideas that could lead to increased standards of living and accessing social support networks for them and their children. The compelling question then becomes how can Southern women change our tendency to forge our identities based on that of a man? Sadly, this tendency sends the same resounding message as that of the antebellum period: women [in the South]

continue to derive their class and status directly from the men they were associated with.

Young women in the region are particularly vulnerable to the inequities embedded within the economic system of the South. Because women are excluded from the work force at higher rates than men and they are more often segregated into lower-paying jobs with few or no benefits, these statistics impact their lives and those of their children in a more profound way. Mother-only families are dramatically increasing in the region and their children are more likely than children in two-parent families to live in poverty (p. 3). Southern teens are more likely to get pregnant and drop out of school (p. 2).

\*\*Early pregnancy is a persistent pattern among young women in rural areas of Georgia, and that seems to be on the rise. It is a problem faced in my own county, and it has a sad paradoxical twist. Discussion of teen pregnancy is taboo for the schools. The perception is that this is a problem that should be addressed by the home. Based on our record of live births to girls under the age of eighteen in the county, it is not being effectively addressed by anyone. In fact, early pregnancy seems to be accepted, if not endorsed, by the caregivers of the teens. The most recent count at our high school reveals forty pregnancies for this year, and that does not include the number who already have children. In most cases the teen mother's parent or grandparent becomes the caregiver of the baby. With one child the teen is usually able to manage returning to school should she so choose, but with the birth of subsequent children the burdens of childcare become unmanageable in conjunction with school. Oftentimes the girls drop (no hyphen) out of school leaving them more vulnerable to falling into a cycle of poverty from which escape is difficult, if not impossible. Almost all of these girls have mothers who gave birth to them in their teens, reinforcing the fact that escape from the cycle is difficult. At a recent

meeting of one of my small groups at school, we discussed how old each girl's mother was when the girl was born. One mother had been 14, the current age of the child; the rest fell into a range of ages in between, with 21 being the oldest. Only one girl's mother had been 21 when she gave birth. That having been said, single mothers are thrice cursed. Women's median earnings are less than men's. As single parents, they support a family on one income, and many single mothers have low educational attainment. Although pregnancy is becoming more common among all classes, the poor girls have a disproportionately higher rate of teen pregnancy than the more affluent girls.

#### We Don't Know What We Don't Know

Like plantation economies, contemporary economies in the South are organized along the lines of race, class, and gender inequalities. Persistent race and class inequalities work in a feedback relationship with weakened economies to keep communities and families poor (Harris, 2003, p. 5). In a study by Duncan (in Harris, 2003, p. 5), she concluded that wealthy white classes have restricted wealth and power to themselves, thereby keeping poor families from having access to the kinds of social and cultural resources or institutions that could help change the quality of their lives. She noted that poor children often cannot escape poor-performing schools, and that they often leave these institutions with little skills or knowledge necessary to move out of poverty. For many poor children it is not a lack of talent but rather being denied opportunities to learn the skills, work routines, and habits that would make them successful and more able to escape poverty (p. 5).

Unfortunately, rural areas of the South seem to provide young girls with social and personal environments that are antagonistic toward positive development. Many of



the environmental factors found here hinder or undermine their self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being. Characteristics of the area in which the youth live can influence their attitudes and beliefs about the importance of educational attainment. Residents of rural areas typically have lower overall educational attainment than urban residents. Rural youth have generally placed less emphasis on educational attainment. The quality of life to which they have aspired did not require high levels of educational achievement to reach the norms in their sphere of relationships. In essence, these rural youth did not know what they did not know. In contrast, areas with higher family incomes, lower poverty rates, and higher educational attainment of adults may provide an atmosphere of strong support for higher levels of educational attainment. Such communities would also provide good role models, showing the advantages of staying in school (Blackwell, 2000, pp. 37-40). According to a study by Haller & Miller (1963)...“there is a patterned status attainment process which begins in childhood and might be subject to social intervention” (in Shoffner, 1986, p. 1). This study implies that it is possible to increase the attainment process with students if we intervene and provide additional support.

When analyzing Southern crossroads, the goal is to explore some of the influences, including cultural factors that are found in the Southern landscape, which work to undermine self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being of many young women, especially those living in conditions of poverty. Very often they perceive their part in their place as one of being passively acted upon, leaving many young women with a sense of helplessness. The purpose of this study is to analyze conditions found in the South and to try to understand that in this place there are cultural and social morays

that are antagonistic toward positive development of young women. In this region family is often central to our being. For young women who are particularly vulnerable, family becomes even more significant. Members can offer support in a myriad of ways, perhaps helping to care for small children or alleviating financial burdens for a time. For some family and home place represents places of safety, but for others it represents a constricting set of circumstances that only serves to complicate and already distressing situation.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

*...I learned that I need to love my mother and father in all of their flawed outrageous humanity, and in families, there are no crimes beyond forgiveness.  
(Tom Wingo, The Prince of Tides)*

*The Prince of Tides* is one of my favorite movies, perhaps even more so now that I reside away from my home. It opens with a sweeping scene of the coastal landscape in which I feel as though I am gliding effortlessly over the vast expanses of the rivers and marshlands of the coastal South. As I linger in the moment I can almost smell the mustiness of my own coastal wetlands for they are much the same as those found in the coastal regions of South Carolina. Just in these few moments I am taken home. I, like Tom Wingo, had a large uneducated working class family, and from them I learned that although someone nearly destroys your life, you can still feel love for them. Within our family were many closely guarded secrets that rendered injuries to our members, injuries that to many might seem grievous and unforgivable. In each case the injured party was a woman or child; in most cases it is the powerless that suffer. I learned very early that men are not the only ones capable of abusing power and inflicting pain as members of my own family so vividly illustrated. The recipes for culturally constructed patterns for behavior were handed down by our ancestors, teachers, and authorities in the South to be used as a guide for behavior in all situations within the strata of the culture. In this culture these morays are deemed trustworthy and taken for granted by both women and men. Once internalized, such constructs employ subordination, natural inferiority, and unequally distributed rights to dominate the person or group of persons in question (Greene, in Stone, 1994, p. 18). I have learned from my experiences with counseling my own students that it is easier to judge a situation from the outside than to do so while

trying to survive from within it. It is amazing the atrocities that we will forgive in the name of family.

While my immediate family was small, only my sister and I, we had close relationships with my father's two sisters and their children. My grandmother and grandfather lived in a frame shotgun house that had been built for them in the 1930s. When my grandparents were married, a house was built for them on the property right next to that of their elders. After my great grandparents died, my grandmother would sometimes rent the extra house, but she mostly used it for her three children as they found themselves down on their luck. My father and mother lived there when I was first born as a struggling young couple, and later his sisters periodically lived there, one after a divorce and the other while her husband was away in the Navy. Both houses were simple and had exactly the same floor plan, only Grandma's house had added a big screened-in back porch where we usually ate dinner. The back yard was full of fruit-bearing trees. There were pecan, pear, and fig trees from which she made pies, jams, and jellies. There was a large communal garden in the back, butting up to the alleyway that produced enough for all of us. In the summers we harvested corn, tomatoes, butterbeans, peas and squash; and everyone helped. There was scarcely an evening rocking on the front porch that we did not have a pan of butterbeans in our laps for shelling. As soon as the weather cooled in the fall, she planted mustard and collard greens that would grow almost until the first frost. We ate as much as we could and put up the rest, and during the winter months we ate from that which was frozen and canned.

As children we spent a lot of time with our cousins, and the meeting place was often my grandmother's house. This was because she often kept the brood of

grandchildren in the summers while our parents worked. There were six of us cousins; each of her children had two children. Members of my family were all very proud people. I suspect that they could have used help from time to time in the form of public assistance, but never would they have taken a handout. In times of stress or disaster they came together and did what was necessary to pull the others through. They were stalwart members of their church and rarely missed a Sunday or Wednesday night service. They worked hard to at least take on the appearance of a middle-class family, but in reality they were still working-class. In fact, we may have even been poor, but if we were, I never knew it. I never remember being hungry or not having something I needed. Of my grandmother's three children, my daddy was by far the most financially successful, which really just meant he could pay his bills; and this was due largely to the fact that he was smart, strong, and industrious. He held down almost as many jobs as there were hours in the day. In reality my family was country come to town, and I was one generation removed from the farm.

#### Life as a Treadmill

My daddy told me a story about how my grandma hated living in the country as a girl and how she had sworn that if she could ever get out she would never go back. So adamant was her desire to escape it, that one of the first things she and Papa did when they moved to town was to buy a cemetery plot in the city limits. She is the only one of her siblings that was not buried in the family cemetery in the country. Well, she did get out and we did go back to the country; in fact, we went almost every Sunday afternoon after church and dinner. Despite the fact that she craved a more refined way of living as an adult, the call of the country was never far from the surface. We called on almost

every one of her six siblings, all of whom remained in the country when they were home for Sunday visitation. There were differences in town life as compared to country life though, and especially in the ways folks made a living. Everyone worked, men and women alike, except my grandmother and my mother, and they were housewives. My grandmother stayed home but not because she had wanted to. Before she married my papa she had attended the Massey School of Business in Jacksonville, Florida. That was fairly unusual for a woman born in South Georgia in 1915. I recall that my daddy tells the story of her deciding that she was going to go to work as a young married woman. She went to *Kresse's Five and Dime* in downtown Brunswick (never having discussed it with my papa because she knew he would object), got a job, and worked contentedly until Papa came home at dinner time to find no meal on the table. Such was my grandfather's pride that even in the midst of the Great Depression he would not allow her to work, for allowing her to do such would imply that he could not take care of his family. Once he learned where she was, he promptly went to town and returned her to their home. That was the end of her business career. My mother had occasionally worked at the counter in Roger's Drugs downtown before I was born, but did not work much after that because, while she had a pretty face, she had been a high school drop-out and had few skills other than her charming personality. In time my parents would rise to the level of middle-class, but it took my father's holding numerous jobs to do so. My father worked at the local mill and also did odd construction jobs on the side, my aunt Anne was a bookkeeper at a downtown furniture store, and my other aunt, Talma, was a secretary at the local radio station. My grandmother, the matriarch of our family, tended

to the needs of her sprawling extended family. Whatever the needs were that arose, she always seemed to make sure they were taken care of, despite her slim resources.

One tradition that I loved most about our family was that of our mid-afternoon meal. Each her three children, and perhaps spouses or co-workers, would appear promptly at noon for “dinner” each day. We would gather on her screened-in back porch around her huge claw foot round table and eat in shifts until all who had shown up had been fed and could eat no more. If there was room at the table, the kids ate there too; but if it was full of grown ups, we could eat in the sweltering kitchen or wait for a space on the porch. It was a huge spread usually with fried chicken, maybe country fried steak, and always with rice and gravy and biscuits or cornbread perfect for slathering with butter or dipping into cane syrup. It was also around this table that we enjoyed the bounty of vegetables that had been grown in the summertime. Having been raised in a rural agrarian home, large noon-time meals were a family tradition that she continued, even when she moved to town. When it got too cold to eat dinner on the porch, we moved inside to the dining room table. It was around these tables that we solved family problems and shared news, both good and bad, and together searched for solutions.

Instead of the men and children working in the fields, this generation of laborers traveled home from mills and offices. All of their gender roles and routines were traditional and generally, in the South, traditions are adhered to almost without question. Of course, there are traditions in other regions, but in the South adherence is not confined to pockets of distinct cultures; rather it emanates through the entire region (Dillman, 1988, p. 7). Most of the women in my kinship network lived under the influence of traditional Southern patriarchal oppression that was not only supported by, but reinforced

by, tradition; none of them were really aware that there might be other options for them, and in reality without education their options were greatly limited. It was as though they saw their "life as a treadmill, of fate 'portioned out' in a fashion that has nothing to do with choice" (Greene in Stone, 1998, p. 18). They had no alternative interpretations of what their lives could be like because their everyday world was so overwhelmed with common sense realities that they could not entertain alternative interpretations or realities of other ways of being in the world. Because of their lack of options, there were things that they had to tolerate such as verbal and physical abuse, and infidelity. There was a great deal of deference to the men in our family by the women. In retrospect it was not necessarily due to respect but due more to fear. My grandfather had set the stage for, and served as the model for, how women in our family would be treated for some time to come.

He was a well-respected member of the community, despite his frequent absences from it. He was a master carpenter, a member of the local chapter of the Masonic Lodge and apparently a good manager of men. His skill set was one that was in demand, and he traveled a great deal overseeing the construction of Saks's Fifth Avenue stores along the east coast. He was rarely home, perhaps a weekend a month. By the time I was born, my grandparents were perhaps two decades removed from the Depression, and the scars and fears ingrained in them by want, hunger, and uncertainty were never far away.

Apprehensions lie close to the surface in both him and my grandmother. I never saw her spend a dime carelessly, and her idea of a treat was indulging in a little bottle of cold Coke or a fresh orange on the front porch in the evenings. My grandfather sent home a modest allowance to sustain her family, but when she died, my daddy found that over the



years she had managed to tuck away over \$30,000 in a hidden box. Traveling as my grandfather did as a requirement for steady stable income was a concept that was perfectly acceptable based on the economic circumstances of the time. After my father's divorce from my mother, my sister and I, along with my father, resided regularly with my grandmother so that she could assist with our care while daddy worked; and my grandmother was always the most important and influential woman in my life. During all of that time I have few recollections of my papa's presence and, of those, even fewer happy recollections. Of the times I can recall, I remember that when he was coming home we all dreaded it. After the initial arrival excitement faded, he soon became as ornery as an old mule. If we ever had a family gathering it seemed, as my daddy was so fond of putting it, that he would almost always make a scene and "show his ass." He fussed at us lest we make a noise, and everyone in the family tiptoed around so as not to rouse him. On Sundays at high noon he got up from the church pew and walked out of the sanctuary whether Brother Meaterman was through preaching or not. I suspect that the hell fire and brimstone sermons and calls to repentance made him squirm in his seat. And God help you if you dropped anything on the seat of his spotless Mercury Marquis on the way home from church. Such a car was not representative of our lifestyle, but when he was on the road nobody else knew that we lived in a shotgun frame house. It was his rolling status symbol and granted him that certain savoir faire that he clearly desired. It was a relief when he finally packed up and went back to wherever his job was. I do recall occasional physical abuse inflicted on my grandmother by my grandfather, and it is likely that it would have been more had he been around more. They slept in separate

bedrooms, and I sensed little if any romantic love between them. I always thought that an odd situation and only learned that there was a reason for it after I had become an adult.

As a young man my father worked away from home with his father during the summers. While away with him on one such trip, daddy told me that he had found some letters in the glove compartment of Papa's truck. He read them and discovered they were from a woman who lived in Atlanta. However, despite the fact that he was torn by what he had discovered, he could not bring himself to tell his mother because he knew it would break her heart. My papa's brother and his wife also knew of the situation because they lived in Atlanta; and finally, after she could stand it no more, his wife confronted my grandmother with what she knew. My grandmother immediately had my daddy take her to the most well-known divorce attorney in town, where she filed for divorce. Papa begged her to come back and she relented, but the damage had been done. Over time it was revealed that the relationship had endured over twenty-five years, and that for most of the time he was away working in Atlanta, he had been living a double life with this woman. Thankfully, there were no children as a result of the relationship. As far as anyone in my family knows, after he ended the relationship that was the last he saw of her. However, the situation caused a tremendous rift in the family as my father took the side of my grandmother, and his sister Anne took that of Papa. I think it was because she was so much like him. Both of them had a hateful edge that could surface when you least expected it. Daddy's youngest sister Talma was really too young to understand what was going on. Aunt Talma is the only person I have ever met with that name. As was the custom in families of that time, she was named for a popular political figure in the state, Herman Talmadge. Talmadge holds the distinction as perhaps one of the most racist

political figures in the state and was known to have had Klan associations. Aunt Talma recently passed away and some of the events of her life serve to illustrate vividly what happens to women when they feel they have few viable options.

I work with nothing but marginalized children. All are economically disadvantaged but most also have the deck stacked against them in many other ways. It is my job to work to remove as many barriers as possible so that they can stay in school and ultimately graduate from high school. At the beginning of last year, I noticed a girl in the lunchroom who was completely unkempt. Her hair was greasy and disheveled. Her clothes were old, dirty, and usually too big and hanging on her. She always kept her head down in the cafeteria and did not associate with other kids. After observing her several days, I called her mother to see if perhaps I could help find her some new clothes from our social services contact. I explained my concerns to her and, upon hearing them, the mother began to offer a possible explanation for why Megan was acting the way she was. It seems that she was repeatedly raped by her father as a child, and to make matters worse, if that is possible, he made her younger brother watch as he committed the atrocity. It all began to make sense, as I was aware that rape victims often turn inward and try to present themselves as unattractive as possible in order to discourage another encounter. In some cases physical manifestations related to illnesses even occur. I eventually learned that the situation had been going on for quite some time, most recently in the last three months, and that the child had reported it to the mother, who did little to stop it. She had finally reported it to the police, and the father was now on the run. The girl lived in constant fear that he was going to return. I was irate with this woman and completely disgusted with a mother that would let such a crime continue. Was she so

ignorant or simply so stupid that she could not conceive of the pain such circumstances would inflict on her own baby, let alone the long-term ramifications such actions would have on her sense of self as a woman?

Sonja was my aunt's baby. Day after day I returned to the house next door to my grandmother's where my aunt and her family had been living. Sonja had been sick – so sick we could not play as we had been accustomed to doing each day. My aunt had two daughters ages five and seven. At this time I was about nine or ten. Upon my return, I again found Sonja continuing to deteriorate as she lay on the sofa. She had become malnourished and had withered to a point of frailty that left her almost beyond recognition. Day after day she lay there in a fetal position with her frail hands curled around the shape of her bones. Her face was pale with dark circles under her eyes, and her appearance seemed to indicate she was very near death. Despite the fact that her parents had taken her to doctors and specialists at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, no diagnosis could be rendered that would explain her deteriorating condition. I do not remember the exact process because I was too young, but I do know that very slowly over time she began to gain weight and get better for no apparent reason. It was later realized that her slow steady recovery began at about the same time her father was shipped back to sea with the Navy. She never completely returned to the carefree little girl that I remembered before her illness, and her illness remained a mystery in our family for many years; but as she and her sister reached adolescence, a dark secret came to light that would help us all understand better Sonja's vexing journey through darkness.

When Sonja's older sister Vicki became a teenager and began to date, she had a boyfriend to whom she made a dark confession. She revealed to him that her father had

been sexually molesting both girls since they were as young as three. This unleashed a fire storm in our family, especially when it was exposed that my aunt had been told repeatedly by the girls what was happening to them and she maintained a position of denial. I was older and married by this time and glad that I lived out of town. Being away relieved me of having to take a side. One thing I was clear on was that I despised her father, but I did not know how to manage my feelings about their mother. She had been my favorite aunt. Ever since I had been a child, their father had made me uncomfortable. He was a greasy-looking little man, especially when compared to my own daddy. He always had slicked-back hair and usually held a cigarette between his teeth. There was one occasion involving me that occurred before everything had come to light. It was an event that sent up a red flag, even for a little girl. It was the dog days of summer and so hot that you could fry an egg on the sidewalk. As frugal as my grandmother was, she let us waste the city water and play in the hose for a while in the back yard. He had come out to oversee our fun, and I remember that he put the garden hose down my bathing suit bottoms. As quick as it happened, an internal alarm sounded, and from that moment I made a point to stay as far away from him as possible. I could not have been more than eight. He never did anything else to me, and that was to his credit because my daddy would have snapped his slimy little neck without breaking a sweat or having cause to pause, regardless of the consequences.

My student Megan became pregnant at the end of last school year. It seems that her mother's boyfriend, about age 42, had slipped in and had his way with her. Although the case was reported to DFCS, the girl remains with her mother who is now raising her baby. I have effectively lost faith in most social service systems and have come to

understand that in order for children to be removed from a home an adult just about has to kill them. The authorities contend that they cannot take them out because nobody wants them. My aunt recently passed away, and although I came to a place where I could be cordial to her, I never really forgave her for allowing her husband to ruin their daughters' lives. In my eyes the culpability for this atrocity lies with her as equally as it does with their father. They also had another daughter Patti, who died from complications of organ failure at the age of 24. The father did spend almost 20 years in prison for his crimes, but his punishment was but a mere pittance compared to the havoc he reeked on so many. Vicki, the oldest daughter, has had five children, each with a different father, and as many divorces. She is currently in a dysfunctional marriage, and I doubt that situation will ever improve. The one bright spot in her life is that miraculously in the midst of all the chaos she somehow managed to earn an MBA and has been able to find decent employment. Sonja has been in and out of jail on various drug charges for years. Her body has paid a high price for the abuses she has subjected it to. She was married briefly and has a child as a result. Due to her addictions she is unable to hold a job or maintain custody of her child and has lived with her parents for the last several years despite the violations perpetrated on her body and soul. Her father is now dying as well, and, although I profess to be a Christian, I can not find forgiveness for one such as him. He is dying, and I cannot muster an ounce of compassion. I often think of the scripture Exodus 20:5 that says "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." (NIV) The verse is directed to parents, not just fathers. It applies to moms as well as

dads. It means that the sins you commit today can directly impact your children, your grandchildren, and even your great-grandchildren. It is a terrible truth to consider.

### Our Unwritten Dowries

So much of who we are as Southern women is transferred to us through who our daddies and granddaddies were. Good or bad, we travel with an unwritten dowry transferred to us through our family that influences not only how others see us but how we come to view ourselves. As a teenager, my daddy would always scrutinize my suitors based on who their daddies were around town and what they did for a living; in some cases the genetic legacy reached back generations. If the boy's granddaddy had been a crook, then he was marked with the distinction of having come from a "long line of crooks." In small Southern towns familiarity is a double-edged sword. It comes in handy when it works to your advantage, but the inverse is true on the occasions when you realize your life is an open book. Reputation was something held in the highest esteem by my elders; and, therefore, the shame brought to our family name, whether real or perceived, by my uncle's crimes was almost immeasurable in affecting my grandmother and my father. It was a rare occasion that daddy did not have at least one point of reference on each young man based on his daddy's community standing. Anyone moving in from outside of the region was somewhat suspect. If they were Yankees, they were in for an uphill battle in proving their worth, especially to my granddaddy who still had a concrete connection to the oral history of the Civil War passed from his granddaddy to his daddy and on to him. Those were the stories of his youth and in his eyes a Yankee was still not worth killing. Worth of a man, in many cases, was based on reputation. In small towns such as my own even important financial matters like home and car loans

were granted with the stroke of the pen, not necessarily because of high social standing or great wealth, but because of a man's reputation. To some extent this continues to be true today. Transactions of all kinds, both business and personal, were consummated based solely on a man's word, and that good or bad name was generally transferred to his offspring.

Little girls of my generation were coming of age during Watergate and the Carter Whitehouse years. We were too young to be a part of the hip generation and Woodstock but old enough to sense that we were on the fringes of radical change that had been initiated by African Americans and white people sensitive to their cause. We were perhaps the first generation of young women that might be bold enough to deviate from the traditional roles dictated to women by Southern society, should we have so chosen. We sensed this based on what we saw going on around us; because of all the commotion generated by the many movements of the day, change was in the air. For most of the previous generations, as girls got older and grew into young women they learned, as Rosemary Danielle communicates in her novel *Fatal Flowers* (1980), that after leaving your daddy's house, "You are who you marry...and...power to a Southern woman, comes through a powerful man" (p. 9). A similar reference was made in *The Prince of Tides* (1991) as the mother told her children when reflecting on her life with a miserably hateful man, "You marry into nothing and you get nothing". While this philosophy was not necessarily articulated, our lives were so ordered to increase the likelihood of "marrying-up" above your breedin'. For girls blessed with a pretty face and an engaging disposition, this was not a difficult social hurdle to cross. This would in essence raise the status of the entire family and the generations that would follow. Despite the fact that the



winds of change were blowing in the South, many women still occupied traditional gender roles as mothers and wives. As women, they were a part of a story that had been written within very specific cultural conditions, "shared conditions through which specific forms of desire, identity, and hence social relations" were made (Martusewicz, 2001, 77). Although many went to college, they often were said to have gone for their Mrs. Degree. Few of those in my young married circle who went to college actually pursued a career related their degrees. Instead most stayed home, took kids to preschool, went to lunch with friends, and carpooled kids around the county to various lessons, in an effort to help them transcend future social barriers. My daddy always provide enough exposure to sports and activities to ensure that if I happened to be invited to participate in an event I could at least hold my own. It was important to him that I be able to fit in should I be invited. While I did not excel at any one activity, I could participate in many. I now see this as his attempt to give me the social graces that would allow me to maneuver seamlessly among middle class circles and perhaps climb a rung or two on the social ladder.

Although I am sure it must have happened somewhere along the way in my young life, I can never recall being asked who my grandmother or mother were with the possible exception of referencing whose wife or mother a woman might be or who she was within the context of social networks or in reference to roles in the church. Women generally occupied spaces that fell outside the realms of the public sphere while the men occupied the forefront of life. Angela Haynes supports this supposition in her own life experience conveyed in her dissertation stating, "These men of the land respect strong men who dominate their women, not men who recognize that a woman's identity extends beyond

whose wife or mother she may be” (Haynes, 2006, p. 67). While it seemed women had more options than ever open to us down South during the 1970s and 1980s, we generally did not seem to take advantage of them. I never recall as a young woman having had a conversation with my daddy about college after high school. Perhaps had it been an expectation, as it has been for my own children, I may have chosen to follow this path. Instead, after only one pitiful semester at the local college, I followed the natural course of events here in the South and got married. According to a study by Blackwell on educational attainment, "Parents who are influential in their children’s lives but discourage their children from attending college can send a very strong message that limits their children’s goals and attainment" (Blackwell, 2002, p. 38). For girls in the South, perhaps other regions as well, there are significant barriers to girls becoming educated; even our own families, while they may not hinder us, very often fail to promote the option as a viable life choice. As I struggle against the flood of memories, many of them painful, I write against the grain of my own life to uncover how our unique culture works to circumvent the ambitions and dreams we all cultivate and nurture as little girls. It is important to note at this juncture that I am not referring to education simply for the sake of education but education as it impacts the lives of women and girls and allows them to participate in forms of public and personal engagement "around ethical and political decision making needed to participate as active, fair, and effective members in their relationships, communities, and the larger world (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 74). Despite the arenas made more accessible to us, we continued to occupy the fringes of leadership, finance, and other matters; we defaulted, it would seem, by choice to the men in our lives. Church and volunteer organizations have benefited greatly by the

participation of very bright, often degreed women who, along with intellect, possessed the gentle power of persuasion.

### The Web of Family

There are dozens of movies and books that have been written over the decades that attempt to illustrate life in the South and the meanings conveyed through the complex web of relationships found here. There are so many movies, that books have been written critiquing the myriads of movies that have been produced about us, such as John Temple Kriby's (1986), *Media-Made Dixie* and Tara McPherson's (2003) *Reconstructing Dixie*. Unfortunately, few productions, be they situation comedies made for television or full length movie presentations, paint a very accurate picture; what they do seem to accomplish is perpetuating stereotypes that make for engaging stories. Preconceived notions about the capacities of people based on the irrelevancies of color, class, and gender continue to plague the South. This practice interferes with the functioning of the market, with education, and with individual opportunity. Despite this fact one might think that we Southerners would be more tolerant of this, albeit a misstep, because we *do* like and appreciate a good story. One question we often ask each other when telling a story is, "do you want it good or do you want it true?" Very often in the telling and retelling of a story the "good" then becomes the "true." However, in the South there is more to a story than the telling.

It is a form of socialization and entertainment. It is a way to pass the time and to indoctrinate new comers into the nuances of the family history. The positive stories are recapitulated often and the bad ones you have to pull from the teller's lips. You learn early in life never to ask about the controversial ones in front of company, especially ones

that cast a blemish on the family name. I came along listening to stories on my grandmother's front porch on hot summer evenings as the mosquitoes feasted on my flesh and the fireflies danced in the breeze. Even though I had heard the stories time and again, I dared not leave because a new piece might be remembered and added as the conversation passed from grown up to grown up, for each one had his or her own rendition of the story. As is the natural order of things here, you then take the narratives, refine them and make them your own, and you tell them to your own children.

As the sweltering days cooled to a warm simmer and the supper dishes had been washed, we gathered on the front porch where stories were told to me about how my great-great grandfather walked over to Brunswick from Brooks County after the Civil War to establish a new home and how another great-great grandfather had been a sharpshooter for the Confederacy before being wounded and sent back home to Brunswick. The ancestor they did not like to talk about much was my great uncle Hampton. It seems that he had been murdered. In the South, in cases where men murder other men, it is generally a situation that involves women or money. Being good Baptists, in neither case was the outcome likely to be good for the family name. Hampton's was a story only the old folks knew. They wanted it to die with them, and they did a damn good job protecting it. I badgered my aunt unmercifully until she finally shared with me that she had heard snippets of the old folk's conversations and knew that he had been killed on the same day as President McKinley was assassinated, September 6, 1901. If her memory had served her, then it would make my detective work too easy to be true. All I needed to do was to go back to the archives of the local newspaper where I found an article that told the story of that hot September the president had been murdered. Sure enough under

the headlines reporting McKinley's death was a smaller headline reading, "HAMP SHIVER MURDERED IN THE STREET," and the details of the event followed. At the turn of the twentieth century it was not uncommon for men to handle their grievances with one another through duels and the like, especially in the South. It seems that my great uncle had been shot for stealing Mr. Sam Story's pig. After his murder, the family honor came into question and it seems that his brother, my great uncle Laurel, had no recourse but to track down Mr. Story to Douglas where he was hiding out. He shot and killed him in the streets as retribution for killing his brother. From that point he disappeared and the disgraceful story became one that was closely held by the old folks. Once my grandmother realized I had discovered what had happened, she asked me never to discuss it with my papa; and I had enough respect for her that I never did. Something I find peculiar about myself is that while I tell my own children stories about their distant ancestors like their great uncle Hampton, I tell them very few stories about my own past and growing up.

Unlike our grandparents, we do not seem, in our harried existences, to be able to work those stories into our evening rituals, even in the South, a place that supposedly honors all that is sacred about the past. The family rituals of the past seem to have been replaced by endless ferrying of children from athletic events to lessons, all too often culminating with an evening meal from McDonald's drive-thru window rather than around the dinner table at home where stories were often communicated to me as a child. We have air conditioning as a matter of course in most homes, and it is no longer necessary to linger on the porch to catch a cool evening breeze as we recount the events

of the day. In addition to the hectic pace, I also find that there is little about my past that I want to convey to my children.

### Divine Secrets

My sister recently saw “*Divine Secrets of the Ya-ya Sisterhood*” (2002). It is a movie depicting the close association of women in the South and uses a story-telling format that reflects on the past memories of the women involved in an effort to soften the blow of a dysfunctional alcoholic mother, Vivi (Ellen Burstyn), who is estranged from her daughter, Sidda (Sandra Bullock). I thought it sounded like a cute title and a good “chick-flick,” but she warned me not to go and see it. I heeded her warning and avoided it for a number of years but recently felt obligated to watch it, despite her warnings, because it spoke to the perpetuation of stereotyping of women in the South. I was lured to movie in the name of dissertation research.

Initially, I found it to be a humorous light-hearted movie depicting life-long friendships among Southern women. I very much related to its message in a positive way as I thought of my own friendships. However, beneath the humor and engaging sarcasm there was an underlying message of dysfunction between mother and daughter, which the friends of the mother were trying to smooth over. It soon became evident that this movie was striking cords that were a little too close to home, but I was in too deep to turn back. Clearly, Vivi had been drafted into a 1950s/1960s role of dutiful mother and housewife that she had taken by default. With few other options open to her, she relinquished her dreams to the role of unselfish motherhood. It was simply the expectation of the time period, but the role imprisoned her and her inner being was constantly in turmoil and in search of a way out. Her escape became a carefully cloaked drug and alcohol addiction

with which she coped and under which her entire family suffered for years. One moment she was the doting room mother and at other times, often without warning, she became an abusive drunk. Her words cut her children deeply and, through her physical abuse, she showed them no mercy. The only way her grown daughter found that she could cope was to disassociate physically and emotionally from her mother and her memories. Sidda exploded to her momma and friends, “I am SICK AND TIRED OF HER TANTRUMS AND DRUNKEN RAGES! I HEARD THE ICE CLINKING IN THE GLASS MOMMA! SOUNDS OF MY HAPPY CHILDHOOD!” As I continued to watch the movie, those words resonated with me. They articulated feelings that, while they lay dormant, were so familiar. I had that feeling that comes over you when you venture down a road you know you should turn back from. You want to go back, but at the same time you wonder what is around the next bend. My uneasiness was soon realized as the movie flashed to a scene in the front yard of the rambling clapboard country house. It was nighttime, and there was a driving thunderstorm; one that the South is famous for, one that literally shakes the foundations of the house. The mother had been drinking heavily and responded to the cries of her children with resentment and anger at being interrupted. She began to beat them, eventually chasing them into the front yard in the driving rain. The children, all trying to protect each other from their mother’s unsolicited onslaught, are thrashing about in their pajamas in the mud trying to avoid her beating, to little avail. The tears began to stream silently down my cheeks as the scene evoked suppressed memories from my own childhood that I could not control. At this moment I knew why my sister had warned me against the *sisterhood*. There was little I could do but wait for the torrent of emotion to subside. I just prayed that my husband did not walk

into the room and find me in such a state because it was a place I do not often revisit. After all, I had worked for many years trying to forget the missing details of my childhood.

My mother, too, had been an abusive alcoholic/doting mother who was compelled to prey upon someone weaker during her fits of rage. I have two conflicting, yet compelling, childhood memories. One is of an early family birthday party. It is my birthday party, and I must be three or four. I am dressed in a starched cotton party dress with my hair neatly pulled into a pony tail and appear to have the perfect family; the scene a visual juxtaposition to my real life. There is a beautiful party cake and everyone appears happy. My parents are there with me and photographs are made to document the moment. I have gotten a puppy for my happy birthday. In contrast, my other vivid memory is a particular weekend when my father had to be away for Naval Reserves. We live in a nice split-level home, but most homes did not have central air at this time, so it is hot. I am about five years old. By early evening, my mother is drunk to the point of passing out in her bed. I have prayed and waited for that moment to come. She has the hi-fi on and it is stacked with Nat King Cole albums. “Your Cheating Heart” is blaring in the background. She has the phone next to her bed. I wait for her to fall asleep and crawl across the floor, dragging the phone attached to the long cord into the hall. I quietly call my grandmother across town to come and rescue my little sister and me, which she always does. But on this particular day my mother catches me; and as I flee into my bedroom to hide, she slams the door against the wall trapping me behind it. You see, I cannot flee the house altogether because I have to protect my little sister – she is only two, and if she begins to cry in her crib, no telling what might happen. My mother



repeatedly smashes me between the door and the wall. I am five-years old. I wonder what I have done to deserve this? Sometimes I still wonder.

After many failed attempts at treatment for alcoholism, my father took us and left. He won custody of us in court, which in 1965 was an uncommon occurrence. I do not think it was much of a court battle; I do not think she really wanted us anyway. I think she loved her liquor more, and I think that it was her way to escape the life she had been drafted into. I do think that it is very likely that I have spent the rest of my life trying to validate my existence because, as we all know, if your mama does not want you, who does? I spent the bulk of my life disassociating myself from her, just as Sidda had done. Her midnight phone calls in which her speech was indiscernible were emotionally draining, so disassociation was the only way I could cope. Ironically, she died from complications of alcoholism only two days after one of my own *Ya Ya* sisters, and best friends, died suddenly and unexpectedly. As one might expect, this left me with a tangled web of grief issues which ultimately were shelved because they were too complex to disaggregate. All of this was a long time ago, before I chose not to have a memory.

### The Cultural Imprint of Place

Despite these tender but well-concealed bruises, like the generations before me I am deeply connected to my family and the place in which I was raised. As Ugena Whitlock (2007) eloquently expresses in her *This Corner of Canaan*, I too love the South. Like her (and many other natives) I am drawn to the solitude of the land, the familiarity of small towns, the slowness of each day's pace. Southerners continue to eat "dinner" at the Yankee lunchtime and supper at everyone else's dinnertime. Southern cooks

invented “comfort food,” which they see as the universal healer and bring in mass with the birth of a child, or the illness or death of a loved one. While it is a flawed place haunted by many ghosts and the tear stains of the past, it is my home. In many ways it remains a provincial place with little interest in changing. “Provincialism implies a narrowness of perspective, stubborn attachment to the only place one really knows” (Lyons in Jones and Monteith, 2002, p. 100). While tradition is seen as admirable, provincialism is arrogant and keeps a place mired in the past. For Southern women, traditions are passed down through the generations just as the stories are and are seen as the glue that binds us to our family, even when things seem to be falling apart around us.

As tradition would have it, I am not simply a woman *in* the South; rather I am a woman *of* the South. Sociologist John Shelton Reed (1986) suggests that the measure for “Southern-ness” be based simply on residence (p. 12). I suggest that despite the ease of use, his “quick and dirty” measure is a woefully inaccurate gage. Southern feminist scholar Caroline Dillman (1988) offers alternative ways to measure a Southerner and issues a warning to those who study the South: “Inherent in studying the South, Southerners, and/or Southern women is the absolute necessity to recognize and accept the fact that Southern culture is still quite formidable, yet there are multitudes who are still promoting the continuity of the culture in spite of all of the changes going on around them” (p. 6). Many make the mistake of assuming that the South is really not that different from other parts of the country. There are those that promote the assumption that for the South recognition as a culturally distinctive region, the end times are near. While capitalism has the power to “derealize familiar objects, social roles, and

institutions” people have been decrying the demise of the South as a distinctive place for over a century (Jones & Monteith, 2002, p. 40-41).

Due to the influences of the media, the South and Southerners are often perceived as slow or even dumb. We enjoy a slower pace out of choice, not stupidity, and our accents often mask our intelligence. We are generally polite to outsiders but they can be easily deluded by Southern hospitality. The women of *Sugarbakers Design Firm* depicted on the *Designing Women* (1986-1992) sitcom illustrate how often Southern women are perceived as being dumb, while in reality one learns that they are “dumb like foxes.” *Designing Women* used its cast of characters, which included a gay African American ex-con, to revision southern women and gay men, as well as to challenge dominant paradigms of previous eras concerning the South and its move toward a more global economy. Atlanta, a setting that is a far cry from the small town *Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-1985) or the *Walton's* (1972-1981) rural countryside, promotes an image of a city wired for global information and leaves behind images of rednecks and nitwits so often associated with regions in the South. While *Designing Women* was conceived by native Southerners, in most cases Northern researchers or those writing screen plays rarely get to know old-time families of the South and rarely recognize the differences inherent among our members.

Southern author Eudora Welty has been credited with being the first to use the expression “a sense of place” to describe not only Southerners’ commitment to their homeland but also their part in it (Falk, 2004, p. 175). We all live under the influence of our own particular place. Some might argue that similar circumstances persist in many other parts of the country, but clearly the South has its own set of cultural circumstances.

As a native Southerner, Angela Haynes (2006) eloquently articulates the depth of the impact of these circumstances upon our lives: “Envision a mindset – a way of thinking, feeling and believing – a sense of community that prohibits escape by continuously drawing one into the web of family. To be born here is to be inextricably linked, marked, and channeled into roles molded through decades ( p. 110).

When considering Southern women, you may have a thirty-five year old woman who was born in the South and lived here her entire life. She may speak with a Southern accent, perhaps fry a good pan of chicken and bake light fluffy biscuits, but because her parents and grandparents were not born here she has not experienced any of the extreme egocentrism found inherently in Southern culture. She has not experienced generation to generation the uniqueness of traditions of a place that was for a short time estranged from the nation politically and economically. She cannot claim one male relative who lost a way of life by losing the war (p. 9). She cannot tell the stories that have been passed generation to generation that convey, in many cases, the struggle to survive. According to Dillman, for a woman to be Southern she must be able to trace back to the Civil War (p. 9), at least. This explanation brings to light then some difficulties inherent in studies involving women in the region.

It is likely that the writers of some of the less-than-realistic books and screen plays fail recognize her point. They often do not hit the mark because the cultural nuances that exist within the region are difficult to convey. Very rarely will someone from the outside come to really understand the nuances of Southern culture. There are many living in the South that consider themselves Southern because they have lived here twenty years or so. There are others who were born here and consider themselves

Southern. However, both of these instances fail to acknowledge the importance of the socialization process in the making of a Southerner. Hence, these people may be *in* the South but they are not *of* the South. I think most true Southerners would concur with Reed in his defining the South as the eleven ex-Confederate states – and the belt of high “Southern identification” corresponds to approximately the areas of cotton cultivation (p. 9-10). This definition is again related to location and, while geographically accurate, it fails to acknowledge the most important factor defining Southerners and Southern women. While location is a prerequisite of Southernness, perhaps the most relevant indicator is the socialization process through which Southerners are indoctrinated into their culture.

In most cases a Southerner can track ancestry in the region back before 1850 and many before 1800. My earliest lineage in Georgia was the late 1700s. My Georgia ancestors fought in both the American Revolution as patriots and in the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. My parents and ancestors have always been working class people who labored to provide their family with a better quality of life than they grew up with. We have never been even marginally wealthy but have aspired to be middle class and, due solely to hard work and multiple jobs, each generation has seemed climb a notch or two on the ladder. My younger sister and I are the first generation in our family to graduate from college, she having recently earned her doctorate from the University of North Florida and me in pursuit of one.

I have only one sister and no brothers. There are times when we look at our lives and wonder where in the world we came from; how did we become the people we are despite our circumstances? We are vastly different from our relatives; we even look

different. Our grandmother helped to raise us and was our connection to our extended family, but now that she is gone so too is that connection. Recently I walked into a family reunion at my great-grandmother's small country church with my husband and children, and this feeling was personified as the entire room full of people turned to look at us as if to say, "you have apparently stumbled into the wrong reunion because you don't fit in here." My connection is all but gone. I feel that it is gone because I ventured outside of my place, and when I returned I was not the same person who had left.

Our mother was not a high school graduate and acquired no further education, and our father achieved two years of college prior to enlisting in the military. Neither of our father's siblings had post-secondary education. In many ways we feel detached, at times even alienated, from those who raised us and we love. Pratt (1984) speaks to the heart of this alienation from place, the nostalgia of going home, or perhaps losing home: "We don't want to lose the love of the first people who knew us; we don't want to be standing outside the circle of home, with nowhere to go" (Pratt in Whitlock, 2007, p. 65). We can never be completely separated from our attachments to our place, and traces of the people we were stays with us, but nonetheless we must leave if we are to grow. We must confront the cultural lags that are most evident in those who have traveled. For both my sister and me there has been an energy that has emanated from within that has driven us on to pursue other things in our lives. It was she that first ventured out from that which was familiar to explore alternate ways of being and later encouraged me in my own emancipatory ways of thinking and efforts to break free from the socially constructed realities found in the South. In redefining ourselves as Southern women, Greene (1978) suggests that we must, as women, be able first to harness and lay aside our

“everydayness, conformity, and fear” (p. 24) and invoke our capacity to assess our situations in a way that our lacks can be defined. In doing so, injustices can be exposed and new standpoints can be established related to constructs that we have in the past taken for granted as immovable. Such articulation then gives form to our perceived world in such a way that it can then be reinterpreted. We each possess a discontented restlessness that has driven us away from our home and, in leaving, we have learned that returning is very difficult, if not impossible.

We return and see the world through different eyes. Perhaps we left because we wanted something different for our lives or the lives of our children, particularly our girls. Girls, especially girls in the South, are raised in a complex environment that is culturally learned and maintained. It sends them messages that define their feminine values in terms of attracting the attention of men. Through these representations and sociosymbolic constructions, girls form significant barriers that make them resistant to education (Martusewicz, 2001, p. 74-75). “Even today in this presumably liberated time...I believe it is necessary to look into the darkness, into the terrible blankness that creeps over so many women’s lives, into the wells of victimization and powerlessness (Green in Stone, 1994, p. 20). Very often in an effort to fill the blank spaces and voids in our lives we turn our attention to spiritual matters. The South continues to be a powerful bastion of Christianity and in most small towns it remains an influential part of the culture. However, it is not a “one size fits all” solution for those who are gripped by isolation and loneliness. The search for spiritual well being is but another segment of the journey; one that we must wrestle with just as the Biblical character Job did as he endured misery brought on by a steady stream of troubles, the loss of his home, the death

of his children, and alienation from his community. The search of a spiritual center can be as elusive for us as relief was for Job.



## CHAPTER 4

### PRIVATE MORALITY

*“I am promised over to God from time immemorial, long before I would,  
by my own intentional act, seek or aspire for God,  
Before I even know this name...  
(Emmanuel Levinas, “Of God Who Come to Mind”)*

Just as the previous pages of this work have taken the reader on a journey of sorts, this chapter will address, arguably, the most crucial journey any of us undertakes; it is the journey of faith, in my case the Christian faith. In fact, there are spiritual masters, those far more learned than I, who suggest that our very lives are themselves reduced to the essence of our spiritual journeys. What will we accomplish while on our journeys? How will our faith be lived out? Will we live a life fortified with religious dogma, present in the pew but lacking compassion, or will we use our resources, talents, and influence to ease the burdens of those who are suffering, those who live in poverty, those who have inherited a legacy of marginalization? As I have recently pondered that question and searched my own soul, I have found my results to be disappointing. Christmas is only days removed, and I recently found myself in a neighboring town gathering last minute gifts with my husband and three-year-old twins. While for many Christmas is a time of joy, celebration, and family, for others it is a time of darkness and despair. It is a well-documented fact that incidents of suicide increase around the holidays when, for some, loneliness and isolation come to the forefront of their lives and become a state of being that they can no longer endure. For us, this trip was not a stressful one as most of our necessary shopping had been completed. As we rolled to a stop at a traffic light, my gaze was drawn from my passenger side window to a figure walking toward us in the distance. The babies were singing Christmas carols and chattering in the background, and the air

was abuzz with all of the excitement and anticipation one experiences with young children and the holidays. Outside my window I saw a young man walking through an adjacent parking lot. He was not panhandling, he was not begging, he was simply walking. He was perhaps a little older than my oldest son of 24. He was dressed in what appeared to be real military pants, as opposed to those that the local hunters get from the military surplus store and don when they enter the nearby woods to play their primal hunter games. These had the appearance of authenticity. I wondered if he was a soldier returning from Iraq; there is a military base in this town. If he was, what were the issues that he must be dealing with? I have heard so much lately about Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and the difficulties faced by those returning from war. It was one of our first cold days. He did have on a jacket, much like one my sons would wear, but it was faded and worn. His head was covered by a stocking cap and he looked unkempt. The fringes of his curly long hair peeked out from under his hat as his own gaze was directed toward the ground. He was thin, pale, and the skin on his face was taut. In contrast to those in my car, he had a look of sadness on his face. If one can look hungry, he did. He had a pack on his back presumably filled with that which he held dear or perhaps that which he found most necessary for survival. I did not get the impression this young man was returning from a hike in the wilderness. It appeared that his was more a journey of survival; however, I do not know that to be sure. As I stared out the window at him, warm salty tears began to roll silently down my cheeks. One of our sons has recently chosen a path that could easily place him in these very circumstances, if not worse, should he not change his course. I thought to myself this young man is somebody's son; he could be my son. It is just three days away from Christmas day; is he homeless? Is he

hungry? As we drove away I asked myself perhaps the most convicting question of all...why am I seeing the face of despair on this young man and simply driving away?

To me in light of what it truly means to be a Christian, this is the most serious question I could pose to myself. What if he were Jesus? Even if he were not Jesus, he embodies the call that is upon Christians, which is to address the needs of the poor, the hopeless. Not only the economically poor, but also the poor in soul and the poor in spirit. At the very least I could have given him a few dollars to at least stave off hunger for the moment. More to the point for Christians is the call we have upon us to extend “hospitality” to the wretched, to the other...the poor, the needy. This is a concept with which many find great discomfort. We have no problem extending hospitality to those we have chosen, those likely to reciprocate; but as for reaching out to the other - that sends sounds of alarms resonating through our very being. Imagine the sequence of events that would follow if we had asked this young man into our home and provided him with shelter and food for a few days. What if he robbed us, or worse? Few in their right minds would behave in such a way with society as it is today. Each day we are made aware of random acts of violence perpetrated upon the unwitting and the innocent. Such an act would be foolhardy you say, especially should it place my children in harm’s way. Caputo (2007) in his text *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, asserts that a willingness to respond in such a way can only be attributed to what he refers to as “messianic madness” (p. 76). Derrida weighs in on the topic of hospitality as well; in fact, so important was the theme to him that many of his later lectures and seminars were devoted to it (p. 75). He stresses the fact that risk is built into real hospitality, and screening guests for safety in advance to reduce risk also extinguishes extending true hospitality to the other (p. 75).

Caputo reminds the reader that a certain madness is required in giving gifts in any form, including unguarded hospitality, pure love, true forgiveness - any expenditure where a return is not expected. The question of lived faith has been called into account for me in recent years for a number of reasons, and this question often addresses situations like the one just described.

### Dis-comfort Zone

Although given ample opportunities for charity, I do very little that truly inconveniences me or calls me to meet the other armed with the love of Christ. While money is necessary and material goods are essential for survival, writing a check or donating used clothing or even new Christmas gifts does little to inconvenience me—to bring me face to face with the ambiguity of suffering - the ambiguity true Christian faith entails. When I see the homeless on the street I am often afraid of them, mistrusting. I wish I could be more trusting and less suspicious. True faith requires humility and putting the other first, not avoiding his glance. We live in a society that stresses taking care of number one, being first rather than last. For me, truly putting the other first would require a monumental overhaul of my life, my worldview. Chances are that this is not an undertaking that I am likely to embark on because it no longer simply affects me; it also affects others, my family. Missionaries come to mind when I think of self-sacrifice. I have always truly admired missionaries. I wish I had the resolve to give legs to what I say I believe as they have done. They relinquish their personal comfort in order to help others. Not many people are willing to undertake such a task. I have, in the past, gone on mission trips to far-away lands, just for a week or two in the summer. I have taken my teenaged children, too, so that they could learn first hand their obligation to give back to

others less fortunate. We seem to live in a culture where many children, including my own, grow up with an entitlement mentality. Leaving our comfort zone illustrates the fact that none of us are entitled to anything. Even as we arrived in foreign lands, I could not help but think...why am I going to Honduras when there is suffering on my own doorstep? So even in my best effort to be self sacrificial I still fall short of the call. Perhaps we sacrifice in other ways, such as giving to mission organizations to support their work. Not everyone can join the Peace Corps, but what then is our role in supporting the other? How do we reconcile our guilt as Christians for not being more self-sacrificing, more Christ-like as we are called by the scriptures to be, more willing to get our hands dirty and smell the stench of the other?

For me and perhaps others, other cognitive compensatory mechanisms take over that help me justify my choices. We have made a conscious choice to follow another path, but with that path there remains a degree of guilt for our lacking. I think many carry with us this burden; if we honestly evaluate our lives and examine the footprint we leave for humanity what often becomes clear is that in our daily walk we have done little to inconvenience ourselves for the sake of another. To what degree are we responsible for the other? Butler wrestles with the notion of responsibility for the other and concludes

I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself. (Butler, 2005, p. 82)

There is what came before us, over which we have no control, nor can we control what will come after. We can sway only that within our current sphere of influence. Since we cannot retrace the steps of Jesus as he modeled, embracing the other unreservedly, we turn then to a sort of legalistic existence. We often become the modern day Pharisees, the law keepers, and try to follow the law as it is set forth in the Bible for our justification. We check ourselves and we check those around us. The problem with such an existence is that we constantly disappoint both others and ourselves, as living perfectly by the law is an impossible undertaking. Nonetheless, we try to keep our house in order. For me, it has been a case of having done over a lifetime all of the things one is supposed to do in order to gain admittance into the kingdom of heaven, yet knowing that something is still missing. There remains a void.

Belonging to a church and participating in its activities in the South is important. Simkins in Reed (1986) remarks on claims that the South

...forces religious conformity in a subtle and effective way, irritating the [visitor] by asking, "to what church do you belong?" If the answer is "No church whatever," the Southerner turns away bewildered. Unless he is widely read or widely traveled, he can scarcely conceive of a person who is decent in dress, manners, and morals who has no church inclinations. (Simkins in Reed, 1986, p. 66)

As a child growing up in strictly fundamentalist church settings, I was surrounded by contradictions. We had a long list of "thou shalt not's" to which we were to adhere. "Southern religion takes a hard line on private morality, an 'anti-fun, highly individualistic moral orientation,'" (Fitcher & Mattox in Reed, 1986, p. 69). There were

chasms between what I was told was the way to live and how I saw those around me living out their lives. These discrepancies were difficult to reconcile because those involved were supposed to be our role models. Growing up totally indoctrinated by fundamentalist religion leaves one deeply engrained in such ideas. It shapes one's identity, as well as informs one's pedagogy. Minnie Bruce Pratt (1991) writes in *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991*, about the effects of total emersion in this culture:

I fear those images, embedded in me with the words of hymns, the scriptures, the images of sacrifice and purification, of power and dominion. I am skeptical of attempts to redeem the images, the system of belief contaminated by centuries of misuse. (Pratt in Whitlock, 2007, p. 91)

Such quiet contradiction lies within me as well and, because of such, I have launched a lifelong journey of wondering ...how should I really live my life?

I hate hypocrisy. What I have come to realize is that in trying to keep the law, I, in essence, missed the proverbial boat in my walk of faith. But it was not time wasted; rather it was an essential part of my journey. While list making can be a useful part of our lives, our lives cannot be reduced to the sum of checks on a list, simply going through the motions. Clearly, there are benefits of maintaining the scriptural laws such as keeping the Sabbath day holy, but keeping the law is only a portion of the equation. Down through time there have been many evil people who have simply mastered ritualistic behaviors. It is likely that Hitler sat through many worship services because he was Roman Catholic, but his results were less than holy. He was not excommunicated from the Church, and he died a Roman Catholic. Hating Jews and Protestants (among others!) he replaced the worship of Christ with worship of the Fuhrer; pictures of himself

replaced those of Christ on the walls of people's houses, and he was actually worshipped as Germany's Messiah. Clearly, sitting in a pew does not a good person make. We all benefit from the support of others as we journey across the mountains and valleys of our lives, but I no longer think that a legalistic adherence to the written law is a requirement for salvation. As Pratt observed in the above quotation, we are living within “the system of belief contaminated by centuries of misuse” so how do we find our way on our sometimes-confusing journeys? Sometimes I have to work in my yard on Sunday, thus breaking the Sabbath day; but I am hoping God understands it is the only day I have to do this task. My grandmother allowed no work of any kind on Sunday, fearing eternal damnation. While she did not cook, she still washed the dishes—hum...seems like work to me. So where, when taking a legalistic approach to our lives, do we draw the line? Chances are we each have our own standard and few could agree on this tenet. At the end of the journey I think we will be faced with a question that begs an answer: what have we done in our lives to help others rather than how many checkmarks did we accumulate? The journey, then, continues.

As an infant I was baptized into the circle of believers in the Methodist church. My mother was a Methodist but my father was a Baptist. After the departure of my mother, it was the Baptist church that became the most influential for me because my grandmother was Baptist, and I spent a great deal of time in her care. After my parents' divorce my father remarried; his wife was also Baptist, so that was the church we attended. I suppose it was the church that I was the most tenured in, and as I have so often heard, familiarity breeds contempt. It was a small congregation, and in such settings the incongruencies between what we espouse to be and what we are in reality



often become apparent. Very often these inconsistencies evidence themselves in small ways such as the way we treat others when a conflict arises (which happens often in churches), the way we treat children when their parents are not looking, and the way we conduct our social/private lives when we do not realize others are watching. All of these situations bear witness to who we are. We Christians have been taught well whom to model our lives after; how close do we come?

### Reliving Prohibition

Surely it could have been any church, but in this case it was the Baptist churches I attended that called me to question my faith the most. Baptists are the dominant religious denomination in the South and their tendrils have far reaching influence on the people of the region. They speak to the morality of the people in the town, and they even promote political agendas where they see fit; generally the issue at hand supports the causes they promote. According to Reed (1986), of those that attend church in the South, half are Baptists (p. 77-78). Known for their hell-fire and brimstone sermons, these ministers have a way of getting your attention. Sometimes church was a scary place for a child, who did not really understand what was going on as red-faced preachers calling for redemption drove their messages home by beating violently on the pulpit. Brother Meeterman was the one that stands apart in my mind. I do not recall ever seeing the man smile. He often preached on immorality but, despite his impressive pronouncements on the topic, I remember the scandal that ensued in the church when the choir director ran away with the wife of one of the most prominent men in the congregation. She was a stylish red head, and when hearing of this I was not really surprised; however, it did make me understand why the preacher yelled so much and was red faced a great majority of the

time. It was the 1960s and things were simply different then. People were not as open in disclosing issues of sin, alcohol, drug abuse, and sexuality; but they were there simmering just beneath the surface nonetheless. When departures from acceptable standards came to light, Brother Meeterman had a knack for bringing you to your knees or running you out of the church. Like Whitlock (2007) I can trace my life through my memories of my childhood church, my earliest friendships, and the now old people who were middle aged at the time. Recently I took my father to his high school reunion. Among these people, many of whom he was church-ed with, he was teleported back decades to, for him, a happier time. When they told their stories, they all glowed as they reveled in the distant memories. While there, we ran into one of the now older church ladies. I asked about her sons. There had been two with whom I had grown up, attended Sunday school, and gone to Bible school in the summers. As we went our separate ways as adults, I could never keep their names apart in my mind, so I always flounder when I ask about them. You know what is the polite thing to do here; you always ask about the children and the grandchildren, and listen attentively as they proudly drone out lengthy stories that mean nothing to anyone but themselves, smiling patiently as you listen. One had died of A.I.D.S. We are not supposed to know that, but everyone does. There are few real secrets here in the rural South. It is just that no one acknowledges what they know. For anyone who should inquire, the young man simply died; no further questions are asked. Perhaps the church curbed the sins of its people or maybe it just taught them to conceal more discreetly their transgressions from the eyes of nosy intruders.

It seemed that in Brother Meeterman's interpretation of the Word that almost everything one might care to participate in was a sin, everything from dancing, to playing

any kind of card game, including Old Maid, to having a glass of wine with dinner was a sin. For the older adults in that church it must have been like reliving prohibition.

Alcohol in the South presents an interesting quandary; in fact, it has been said that some here consider it to be the “eleventh commandment” -- *thou shalt not drink alcohol*.

(Dillman, 1986, p. 69). Reed (1986) reports that Southern Protestants are nearly twice as likely as non-Southern Protestants to report that liquor has been “a cause of trouble” in their families (p. 69). He goes on to say that of Southerners who do drink, especially women, they drink to excess. It seems that the region chariest of vices such as cigarettes, whiskey, and wild women holds the distinction of owning the most in those categories. Drinking is not our only vice. There are sins aplenty for everyone.

Men standing around outside of the front doors of the church smoking cigarettes after church is okay, but a glass of wine with dinner is a sin. Men beating the hell out of their wives and children on Saturday night is okay, but dancing is a sin. Gambling away their earnings in a backroom card game is fine, but children playing frivolous card games to pass the time on a rainy day is a sin. It seems that in my world sin is a matter first of perception and second of opportunity. In the mind of the doer, the activity is justified, be it gambling, drinking, cursing, or even adultery. It is as though they were able to pigeon hole their misdeeds into compartments that belong to separate spaces in their lives. They have a Sunday morning face and a Saturday night face, and more times than not, they are not the same. Much of what went on happened in the absence of the women. It was not that they did not know what was going on, they simply chose not to confront it. The women were, in most cases, the pious ones. At least they were more conscientious about cloaking their misdeeds. On Sunday morning we sat in the pews with the knowledge of

what had gone on within our four walls and many times within those of our family. We closely guarded those secrets and kept them safe from the prying eyes of those looking within. The sinners lived with the freedom that all they need do was to repent and seek forgiveness, and then the sun rose anew.

Early on, even as a child, I always saw the incongruence in that which I was being taught and that which I saw lived out by the adults that surrounded me, and it confused me. I always thought of my grandmother almost as a saint, but it was not uncommon to hear her use the word “nigger” in the course of a conversation. My grandfather kept his bottle of bourbon hidden in the hall closet, but when the men folk came to call they pulled it out and fellowshipped over a drink or two of Jack Daniels around the little kitchen table. They never drank to excess but, regardless of the amount consumed, I had always been taught that drinking was bad. My mother had been a living example of the destruction that was possible with uncontrolled abuse. But I was a child, and as a child I had to show at least superficial respect for my elders lest I have my behind beaten. So I moved through the cursory checklist of religiosity provided to me by my elders in an effort to work my way up to heaven, just as they had done. With my checklist came the blessed assurance of knowing that if I adhered strictly to the list of do’s and don’ts set forth, then I was on the right path for getting into heaven. It did not take me long to realize that even with the best intentions I could never be good enough to make the cut at the golden gates.

My first recollection of the church is the induction of religiosity as opposed to spirituality through the liberal use of the carrot and the stick. Frankly, it is no small wonder that as an adult I am associated on any level with institutionalized religion, and

there have been times most recently that I have questioned that association. As I have heard ministers quote on many occasions, “the churches are full of sinners, those who are perfect have no place in church.” For me the saving grace has been that despite the existence of the church people with all of their imperfections and righteous indignations, I have an unwavering relationship with Jesus, The Christ. He was there in that room as my mother slammed me between the door and the wall, and he was there when my husband walked out the door and abandoned my children and me. He was in the operating room when my tiny eight-month-old son lay on the table and with the physicians who tenderly mended the hole in his ailing heart. He is in the room with my father, even today, as his own heart teeters between life and death, and he will be with me still on that day my father’s heart beats its last. It is the very fact that Jesus has made his dwelling place within my heart that I scrutinize my own faith so harshly. It is the reason that the trendy catch phrase "What would Jesus do?" resonates within me when I see suffering among those on the fringes of society. Clearly, it is the presence of Jesus that incites me to continue the journey and begs me to find ways to do more for the least of His children.

### Still Searching

As a young married person I moved my membership from the Baptist church to the Presbyterian church because that was where my sister attended with her new husband. His family had been the cornerstone of this church. From within this family I was influenced by the living out of three critical mechanisms of what I associate with true spirituality: love, hospitality, and faith. Very little except that which was illegal was a sin, and all things in moderation was the philosophy. This variety of institutionalized

religion seemed like a good fit for me. I could enjoy a guilt-free glass of wine at dinner and dance up a storm should I so choose. I could even take my children to play BINGO on Saturday nights at the community center without fear of eternal damnation - mine or theirs! My sister experienced a mutually agreed upon and civil divorce from this man who had introduced us to Presbyterianism, and she then moved to the Methodist church on the island simply because it provided her with some distance from her newly established marital status. There was a split within the local Presbyterian church I was attending, and I elected to move with the people with whom I had forged friendships. I stayed with the Presbyterians but had moved to a more left wing branch of the religion, Presbyterian Church of America (P.C.A.) as opposed to the more conservative branch, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. In retrospect I think I made this move based on friendships that had been forged within an interdenominational women's bible study that I had attended. Within this group there were people who had been spiritually supportive during a difficult chapter in my life. I do not think I fully comprehended the magnitude of the differences that would be in store for me on a personal and spiritual level in this move.

In the P.C.A. women were relegated to the work of the church that was completely behind the scenes. They could not occupy the pulpit, could not teach men, and were always submissive to male authority without question. "Let the women keep silent in the churches" (I Corinthians 14:34) was a guiding tenet. There was no ambiguity related to the role of women in this church. "It was a veritable fortress of patriarchy giving divine sanction to sexism by serving up a heavenly patriarchy as a model for the rule of earthly fathers" ...the Bible was invoked to oppress women (Caputo, 2007, p. 105) as a matter of course. As time passed, more and more of the doctrine

espoused by that church troubled me, and I moved my membership to my sister's church once again, the Methodist church, where my original journey had begun many years before. My spiritual journey has been an eclectic one, to say the least. I am not tied to church walls or dogma but search for a place that I feel welcomed and comfortable. As time has passed, I have also come to place value on a church that welcomes those who are different and shows hospitality to the wretched. A church like this is hard to find, perhaps impossible, especially in a small provincial town. However, I am not ready to give up. Having been disassociated for a time from being a part of a congregation, I have found that I do miss the sense of belonging that being associated with a church can bring. It can be a way to disrupt isolation. Like the other journeys I have taken, those through the tiny Georgia towns, or on country roads intersected by cotton fields, my journey of faith has led me down many paths as well.

According to Caputo (2007), "The most authentic journeys are explorations in which I really do not know what I am going to find" (p. 53). The truth is that although it is prudent to plan and to set goals, to a reasonable degree, despite the most thought out plan we never truly know what we will be faced with around the next bend. Hence, I never *really* know what I am going to find despite my best efforts. As I continue to embark on this discussion, I take a cautionary pause to acknowledge that I am moving down a slippery slope. Touching on matters of religion, especially in the South, is risky business. "I risk the criticism that such generalizations invariably invites" (Woolf, in Gilligan, 1979, p. 26). Virginia Woolf expressed similar concerns when embarking on a similar endeavor related to the subject of sex: "When a subject is highly controversial-- ... [and religion is that]—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one

came to hold whatever opinion one does hold" (p. 26). My opinions related to religion - my faith - are complicated and closely tied to traditions linked to my culture and how, as a result of its influence, I came to view my own religious journey and my faith. I was likewise influenced as I observed it (or the lack of it) being lived out in the lives of those closest to me. As for our faith, it is intensely personal, our own to claim or deny; and ultimately it is our responsibility to call it into question where we find insufficiencies. I have chosen to address the topic of faith because, as I have begun to deconstruct aspects of my life as a Southern woman, it is a facet of my daily existence; and I am cognizant of the fact that it also looms large in the lives of many others, including that of my own family.

There is much work yet to be done in deconstructing the harmful mythologies embedded in Southern culture, including mythologies associated with religious practice here. We must address the issues surrounding that which we are *supposed* to do as opposed to what we *actually* do as Christians. Clearly, this is not a problem unique to the South; it is just that here the church occupies much of our spiritual spaces. In rural areas with few other distractions, the church continues to be central in the lives of many families. Such analysis invites the discussion of deconstruction and what it means to deconstruct something, including an institution as monolithic as the Southern church.

Deconstruction is a largely misunderstood concept and many would be wary of any suggestion of taking apart their church. It implies the tearing down of an idea or institution—destruction, but there is far more to the process than that. This particular destruction offers a positive outcome. Jacques Derrida offers a view of deconstruction as an affirmation--“affirmation of memory [of the original intent] affirmation of a future...in



the best sense it keeps happening, without ever actually arriving at a final fixed, finished destination" (Caputo, 2007, pp. 46, 57). Derrida offers that,

Things get deconstructed by the *event of truth* that they harbor...so the event need not be delivered by a thunderbolt. It gradually overtakes us, grows on us, until at a certain point we realize that everything has been transformed. In a deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure—which is risky business. (Caputo, 2007, p. 27)

Deconstruction calls us to remember—to reflect on the reason the institution was created to begin with and to move to reclaim those noble intentions. In the case of our churches they were, without exception, created to glorify God: to have His people become His earthly feet and to continue to minister to others in His absence—those who embody the institutions and those on the fringes.

Deconstruction offers to us daring ways to imagine the future, be it a vision for a more inclusive culture in the South or a more responsive faith for those who populate the region. However, in order to analyze the role of institutions in our society, we must first be willing to truthfully confront the roles that individuals play as instruments of those institutions. We think of our churches as institutions within our communities, but in reality they only consist of bricks and mortar; it is the people who breathe life into the work of such institutions. It is the people who must be called into account for the outcome and purpose of the institutions they represent.

### *Cor Inquietum*

John Caputo (2007) suggests in his text *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* that we are one of two kinds of people. In his analysis of human nature we are either searchers or we are vacationers (pp. 38, 41). Searchers are those who live in search of something, as opposed to being satisfied with that which sits under our noses. We recognize we are lost and in need of a guide. On the other hand, he refers to the vacationers as *knowers*. "They are those who insist they *know* the way, have programmed their lives, have put their lives on automatic pilot as though they are connected to some celestial Global Positioning System. We all know them, they are *knowers*, Gnostics, who have taken themselves out of the game" (p. 41). They are like vacationers, eager for adventure but not without the trappings and state of the art equipment that take away the sense of adventure that trips typically bring. These are the kind of people who go camping in million dollar motor homes. Clearly, I am a searcher and I have a restless heart (*cor inquietum*) because within my core I know that I will always be a searcher. I will never arrive; for me it will always be an unfinished journey. I will never be a *knower* because I have come to understand like many searchers, that the more we know, the more we realize the magnitude of what we can never know. Such knowledge is an unsettling side effect of education.

It may seem in this text that I am critical of *The Church* as an institution; perhaps I am, but there is a subtle difference in criticism for the sake of being critical and social criticism, which hopes for refinement rather than destruction. Rather, this criticism that I have undertaken stems more from a longing to see the function of the Church as an institution sensitive to the needs of those it was intended to serve, those on the fringes.

As the reader may have already surmised it comes from many years of disappointing observations of the nature of people, both family and outsiders. Having been raised in a Christian home, I have had the benefit of having my own case study, my own microcosm, in which I could observe the effects of Christian doctrine on its followers. Sadly, it appears to me that within the institutional setting something of the essence of Jesus has been misplaced or forgotten. Rather, it seems to be that the observation of religious practices for many has been reduced to a dogmatic approach to the practice of worship. Worship is, after all, more than what takes place in sanctuaries during formal services. True worship involves follow through in our practice, the practice of how we impact the lives of others.

I find some irony in the catch phrase among many Churches in recent years, “What would Jesus do?” For awhile people were wearing the bright bracelets that were to serve as a reminders for the owners to remember to take time to think as they moved through their day and respond to situations in a Godly way --- *what would Jesus do* in a given situation. We do not see them as much any more. Perhaps they were simply a fad; or maybe people realized that following in the steps of Jesus was simply too hard to do in a fallen world. According to Caputo (2007), the Church as an institution would be well served to ask the question of itself rather than using it like a club to punish others (p. 37) —in essence, to deconstruct itself in an effort to better serve the needs of the kingdom of God. However, with this criticism I also bring a sense of hope; for it is not I who deconstruct the workings of the Church, but it is the Church itself. It is an uncontainable truth that would be exposed through its own processes, its own frailties. According to Caputo (2007) “things [including churches] contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that

they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody can come along and ‘deconstruct’ things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth,” that the truth is not the “stuff of edifying hymns, rather it is a dangerous, dirty, and smelly business” (p. 29). He asserts that the Church is not the question - rather it should be the answer. As Christians we are called together as a church - the body of Christ - to be called into question by *the question*, we stand accused. *What would Jesus do?* Under the authority of the question we are interrogated and are unable to rescue ourselves (p. 34). Just as we found difficulty in the concept of hospitality previously discussed, we have again been brought to the place where we can see that for this question there are no easy answers. The question only raises more questions...

#### The Lost Family or Family Lost

As a small child I had little understanding of the circumstances of my parents’ marriage difficulty. As an adult I have been able to piece more of the puzzle together, to fill in the gaps of the story if by no other way than by watching, being an observer of the events of my own life and those that I love. Womanizing, physical abuse, and alcohol abuse are not the kinds of stories fathers convey to their children by the fireside, but over the years the difficult truths have come to light. Stories reveal the truths of our lives, as well as the lies, and in essence we are all sum totals of those stories. The trick is to listen to the fragments and look within the fractures for the truth because it is there and it, too, is uncontainable. Although many times there are efforts to conceal the ugly, it seeps out into the cracks and fissures of our spaces for us to soak up and use as we revision our ways of being in the world. It took many years to piece together the fragments of my life found in bits and pieces of stories; but like a intricate puzzle with many complex pieces,

over time I gathered pieces here and there—perhaps one from a distant aunt, and a new piece from my father, some from my sister and more from a myriad of individuals found within and without my family. I have finally fit them together to form an undeniable and cohesive picture of my life. As a result, I learned that it would be rather easy to find fault with both of my parents and all of their human imperfections. But there were many more circumstances that had to be considered as well. Learning of parents' shortcomings is unsettling for a child. No child wants to disrupt that which we have carefully constructed to bring coherence to our lives. This speaks once again to disrupting the nostalgia of our childhood, of our culture, or unsettling our heart's desire for what we wished for our past, the mythology of family. Clearly, there were culprits such as alcohol and a convoluted sense of morality that seem to stand out in culpability for the loss of our family. I do not know if my mother had always had an insatiable craving for alcohol or if my daddy's stream of indiscretions brought it on, but I know it took a tremendous toll on our family and ultimately led to my mother's death. I remember that after my little sister was born it became apparent to me that there was a problem. That is not to say it did not exist before that time; if it did, I was just too young to remember.

It was not as if my father did not attempt to help her get sober. He tried to send her to several alcohol treatment facilities, but each time she denied she had a need. She was simply not interested in quitting. I have to make peace with the fact that I will never know, and a greater peace must be made with the more difficult fact that she loved the liquor more than she loved us. That is a difficult reality for a child to confront. To hide her addiction, she hid bottles of booze in every nook and cranny of our house. They seemed to multiply like dirty laundry - Daddy would find three and she would hide four

more. He never knew what he would find when he returned home or if his children were safe on occasions that the military took him away. Seatbelts were unheard of at this time, and she drove while drinking without hesitation, endangering our lives and the lives of countless others. It seemed to be a never-ending downward spiral that incited abuse and violence among all that were involved. On any given day I could hardly anticipate what might happen; life had become a series of unavoidable violent confrontations. Had it not been for the grace of God, my sister and I would not be alive today; I am convinced of that. It was a hellish nightmare that eventually ended in divorce, and as sad as the fracture of a family is, for me, this was a tremendous relief. Nonetheless, it was an undeniable loss for my sister and me, for there always exists a void in our lives that came with the loss of our mother. My fraternal grandmother had always been a supremely important person in my life. She had become my intermediary and protected me from the abusive wrath of my mother when she was drinking and my father was not around. She became my guardian angel. In her I found refuge and safety, comforts that every child craves and deserves. Prior to the divorce I sought out time with her and prayed that I would never have to be with my mother.

While my parents were separated, I have vivid memories of being in first grade and being preoccupied during the school day with the fear that my mother would be outside in the carpool line waiting to abduct me after school - she had done so several times before. Although my grandmother's house was only a few blocks away, I was afraid to walk home for fear my mother would get me in transit; therefore, my grandmother would come each afternoon in her car to pick me up. These fears were not unfounded or simply those of a child. My mother had abducted my little sister on a

court-ordered weekend visitation. My father had no idea that she had left the state with her and taken her to Tennessee. My aunt in Tennessee called my father in the middle of the night and told him if he ever wanted to see his child alive again he had better get up there because my mother had Cindy with her and was on a two-day binge. He drove all night, and when he got there, he searched until he found them driving on a winding mountain road. He pulled the car over to the side of the road and found my mother with a shaggy man. Both were drunk, and my little sister, who was about two at the time, was curled up fast asleep on the back seat. Daddy laid a pistol against the fellow's cheek and told him if he wanted to see the sun rise that day, he had better hand over his daughter. He retrieved my sister, left my mother, and returned to South Georgia where we were again all reunited in the cloistered safety of my grandma's clapboard house. For my sister and me, our grandmother represented the only constant in our lives and safety, most importantly safety. My father loved and protected us but never denied himself that which he wanted to do simply because he had us. Instead, he left us in the care of our grandmother and went about his business, which included his own long list of indiscretions that were not conducive to child rearing. I do not think that many people are aware of how many children in our society are being raised by grandparents after having been abandoned by their own parents. The only thing that separates us from them is that he came back. Addiction claims many of the homes of these children, just as it did my own, and a large number of kids have one or more parents who are incarcerated. For these children, there is no one left for them except for their grandparents, many of them tired and weary from raising a brood of their own troubled children. Years of uncertainty and fear surrounding life with my mother and father were ended by divorced, and I

thought I was safe at last. Soon I would come to understand that this was just one leg of my journey.

In the pre new-mother days, on holidays such as Christmas and Easter my father would take us to Sears where he would attempt to assemble a presentable holiday ensemble for us in an effort to reflect the season and do the things he thought a mother would do. He would clad us in dresses, stockings, hats, and new patent leather shoes. For church on Sunday he would always order a corsage for his mother, one for his wife, if he had one at the time, and wrist -band corsages for my sister and me. They were usually made from carnations for the little girls and orchids for the women, and delicate pieces of lace and ribbon were woven into the arrangements. It was somewhat of an archaic tradition but one that always made me feel special. For Daddy, on these occasions, it was our hair that frustrated him most. He did not know what to do with girls' hair and we certainly did not know what to do with our hair either! And to make matters worse, in all honesty neither of us was blessed with the most beautiful mane of hair. Girls needed mothers to teach them how to fix their hair, or at least fathers in touch with their feminine side with the ability to fashion a suitable coif. The struggle of the hair usually ended in frustration for him and tears for us. After a sufficient time of threatening us to do something with our hair (and that if we did not, he was going to take us to Curley's) he loaded us into the truck for the shearing. He simply could not manage our hair so the solution for that quandary became a visit to Curley's Barber Shop. The mere mention of the idea struck terror within me because the two things I wanted (besides a real family) were long hair and pierced ears. Curley (who had not a single hair on his head!) would place me on the shop booster seat and proceed to give me the best



little boy hair cut he could muster. Despite the fact that I cried and cried over this trauma, my daddy's heart was in the right place and he was doing the best he could to manage two little girls on his own. There are so many times in my work that I am faced with the poverty, neglect, and abuse of the children I am associated with. The sheer numbers are staggering, leaving one with a disturbing sense of hopelessness. As I consider my homeless students, many that parents have literally and figuratively thrown away, and I thank God that we did have people who loved us. Although our circumstances were far from perfect, often dysfunctional, there was that reassurance at least.

It is strange today to look at my father; it makes me sad. Once a strong and vibrant man, fully in command of his circumstances, now he is a shadow of that man, frail and weak. Every day that he sees another sunset is a gift; it is a gift to him and a gift to me. Despite our tumultuous upbringing, I deeply love and respect my father. I have not always liked what he has done, but I have always loved and respected him. He chose to live his life hard and fast, temporal, for the moment, in many cases to the detriment of his children. I often wonder if he realizes it; I think he does. I am uneasy even articulating these circumstances to outsiders and laying bare the intimacies of home. It feels as if I am betraying that which we hold most sacred in the South, family. The benefit of the discussion is that in its storied revelation one can understand more clearly the ways of being for women in the South. Family and relationships are undeniably intertwined in our acculturation process. By exposing the dysfunctionality of the relationships, we can better understand our responses and the roles played by our family, our religious institutions, and our community and culture. Perhaps most importantly it

lays bare the intricacies of relationships between males and females in the region—husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, fathers and daughters and mothers and sons.

It is difficult to see any benefits garnered for my father from having been raised by a spiritual mother in the church. It seems that for him finding true spiritual peace has been elusive and that his faith was deceptive. We went to church; he was even a deacon and on the building committee, but it seems that his own foundation was lacking as a younger man and that this deficiency continues to the present day. For as I watch him face his later years, there is little peace that one hopes one's father would embrace in his old age. Little patience can be found, and kindness is sometimes elusive as his piercing comments often lie close to the surface. Recently, I had an opportunity to witness in him a little joy. I went with him to revisit our high school.

Four generations of our family have graduated from our beloved alma mater, Glynn Academy. A great deal of pride in our community stems from the fact that it is the oldest high school in the state of Georgia. My father, his father before him, I myself, and three of my children are all graduates. My husband was the principal of the school for eleven years, until he took the job as superintendent of schools in an adjacent county. My father was the class of 1952, and he gets much joy when reminiscing with his comforting old friends about the stories of the past. It is entertaining to think of my father as a high school student. As I listen to him and his classmates recount the stories of their youth, I can almost see them as young men and women in the early 1950s as they strolled across the majestic old campus adorned by age-old oak trees draped in flowing tendrils of grey Spanish moss. It was the days of poodle skirts and slicked-back haircuts and big bulky

cars. He was a football player, and one of my favorite stories that he likes to tell is that of him and his teammate, John, getting locked out of their hotel rooms at an away game while in their skivvies. Their attempts to get back in their room before the coaches found them frolicking in the hallway almost naked got them into a world of trouble. His friend John happened to grow up to become the minister of our Presbyterian church at home, confirming, I suppose, that there is hope for us all.

In October my father was hospitalized with congestive heart failure. His cardiologist is also a personal friend of my sister and me. While hospitalized, Daddy learned that, in addition to the congestive heart failure, he also has numerous aneurisms surrounding his heart valves, any of which could blow and end his life in the blink of an eye. In addition to that, he likely has lung cancer, but we were told that there was little use in addressing those issues because one of the aneurisms would surely kill him first. Ten years ago he had seven by passes, the result of years of smoking. When we raised the question of restorative surgery options, we were told the tissue surrounding his heart was like cheesecloth. No hope of lifesaving surgery existed. I do not know what of his own mortality he has chosen to acknowledge. What is the use of discussion but to take away any sliver of hope he might have for a decent quality of life for the time he has remaining, and what I want most for him is contentment. I have come to believe, though, that this illusive contentment in our lives comes as we reflect on that which we have given others: our contribution to the greater good, if you would. Although his body is weak, his mind is sound and fully capable of understanding the reality of his situation, should he so choose. We do what we can to support his wife, but she rarely asks for help. We visit a little more often and try to call every day or so. In his voice I can hear if it is a

good day or a bad one. My sons visit as often as they can, and my daughter took a month of family medical leave to come and stay with him. She wanted no regrets, and she wanted that time with him to make sure he knew how much he meant to her. She was the first-born and he was closer to her than to the boys. I have come to see that because he raised only girls he really does not know what to do with boys, which is ironic since he is a man. As they have gotten older, they have found new common ground such as the Georgia Bulldog football games. Much of his time recently has been spent in a recovery mode, and the boys take advantage of that time to visit and share the mutual interest in the outcome of the Dawgs. We always take the twins when we visit. Although their presence insures chaos, it seems to be a welcome reprieve. They also take his mind off whatever he has been dwelling on that day in the loneliness and solitude of his house. Amid the chaos I often watch him from afar and I can see that, at the very least, he knows his days are numbered. He watches as the babies play contentedly on the floor with their blocks with the full knowledge that he will not see them grow up. I sometimes see his eyes glaze over, and a far away look comes over his face. I know that in this place he recounts all of the decisions, the misdeeds, the loss of his family and his part in it, the sacrifice of his children to follow illusive dreams of his own, and the pure uncertainty of life. I try to never let him catch me see him at such a vulnerable moment. I realize he is in a place where he feels completely alone, despite being surrounded by those whom he loves and who love him.

Very few artifacts of my childhood remain; they are the casualties of frequent moves. But one day when going through a chest with a few items I had managed to save I found a Bible. In the Bible was inscribed the name Jeneane. I later questioned Daddy

on the identity of this person. He told me it had belonged to a woman he had been married to before my mother. I was stunned that he had been married before. For some reason, it was both surprising and disappointing to me; I felt betrayed. This was the first of many disappointments I would experience as my image of love was dismantled over time.

So my mother was his wife number two. He had met her in Columbus, Georgia while there working on a construction job with my grandfather. She was a waitress in a small café he had come to frequent. He knew her only for a short time before marrying her and knew little of her past. After my parents were divorced, when I was seven, Daddy began the next in a series of failed marriages after my mother. All in all he has been married six times, and that does not count the two wives he divorced and then remarried. I suppose each attempt was an effort to find a mother for his two disheveled little urchins. In between women, my grandmother was the only constant; and I sometimes wonder if we would not have been better off had we just been left to grow up with her. Although I know he loved us, I have come to wonder if he was simply looking for someone to relieve him from the day in and day out responsibility of caring for two young girls. The sanctity of marriage and fidelity within that institution is something that I grew up being taught was important. But in each and every marriage, there seemed to be nothing that was sacred. My father had a weakness for women and no concept of what it was to remain faithful. It would not be surprising to surmise that his philandering behavior incited much of the wrath inflicted by his women on his children. For my father, wives took on something of a *disposable* attribute. Margie was his third wife. In

her house, we found little solace and our dream for having a replacement mother and loving family became more elusive.

She was his first wife after my mother. As we entertained the idea of having a stepmother, we held great hope that we might at last reclaim some of that which we had lost. But this was not to be the case. As time would reveal, our new situation was little better than that from which we had escaped. The cruel ways that she treated my sister and me left us both with wounds that have taken years to heal. Although those flesh wounds slowly scarred over, the skin remains thin in places and tender to the touch. It is difficult to reconcile the discrepancies in the woman's character. While she presented herself as a Godly woman, we saw little evidence of good in her nature.

We had lived on the mainland, but she lived on the island. Subsequently, her marriage to my father is what took us to that bucolic setting I have written so much about previously in this work. Perhaps I should thank her for my love of the outdoors, for she was the sole reason my little sister and I sought refuge away from her home. It was never our home and never felt like a safe place to us. We felt safer at the marina and in the nearby woods than we did in her house. Could my father have really been so gullible and subject to what I now recognize as the masterful manipulation of a Southern woman? It seemed that we had gone from the frying pan into the fire. Her original credibility was in the fact that she was the organist for the Baptist church on the island, having grown up in the Baptist church as well. This served as a superb reference for her character. Her husband had died of a sudden heart attack, and, in retrospect, I am sure that her hateful disposition must have played a role in his demise. As a child, I wondered if she might kill my own father as well, if for no other reason than the strife she caused him and the

strain he was under holding down one job at the mill and numerous other part-time jobs to keep her in pearls and driving her Mercury Marquis. With her mothering skills, she was more suited for raising cobras than children, and she did little better with her own son.

He was a year older than me and she doted on him to the point that he was completely dysfunctional and rotten; so much so, that it was difficult to be around him. She would not let my father correct him in any way. In addition to being a bully, the young man was also a pervert. He gave me clear indications that I had better not be caught in the house alone with him. There was rarely a civil moment between us siblings, and he took advantage of every opportunity my father was outside of earshot to torture my little sister and me. My stepmother was barely civil to me in the eight years that my father was married to her; and, living in her house, I learned what the faces of evil and cruelty looked like.

She tolerated us and put on airs when my father was present, but out of his range she was a different person. On most school mornings I was on my own. She would get up and fix breakfast for her son and leave nothing for me. I always avoided being in her presence when she was home, which was most of the time. If she happened to walk into the room and I was sitting on the couch, with a stroke of her hand I would be dismissed. On Saturday morning she always had a litany of chores for me to do, anything from raking pine straw in the immense yard on clear days, to cleaning the tile in the bathrooms with a toothbrush on rainy days. Cinderella was not alone when it came to evil stepmothers.

## Pink Lemonade and Chocolate Chip Cookies

More than anything I longed for a “normal” family like my friends had...if I could just have had a mother like Marie’s. While there is much more to being a loving mother than pink lemonade and chocolate chip cookies, for me it was the small details of life that exposed the voids within my own. Even to this day when I am faced with pink lemonade and chocolate chip cookies, I am reminded of Mrs. Killian’s graceful smile. So many little things other kids got like notes in the lunch bags, dancing lessons, and the parents simply being present and doing the things that parents who love their children attend to—all of these things were absent in my life. When living through such experiences, one often feels alone; but sometimes there are those within the community who sense the lack in the life of a child and who attempt in some small way to fill the void. I am sure that was the case in my situation.

In a small community people talk and those that are kind hearted work to fill the void on occasions that they can. My mother had worked in the drug store of my teacher’s husband when my parents were married long before I came along. The Gladdins knew of my mother’s drug and pill addiction. Mrs. Gladdin knew all about my past. To some degree she knew the details that you hope no one knows about your family situation. After my mother left, there were several years in between my reconnection with Mrs. Gladdin, who would become my teacher. When I ended up in her fourth grade classroom, she watched from the fringes what my new life had become after my mother’s departure. She knew I was terrified of my stepmother, and she knew many of the parents well. Undoubtedly she shared concerns with a few of them, a number of whom were



teachers themselves, and I think that those mothers did what they could to fill some of my voids. These women were among those that I came to view as little angels in my life.

Marie lived close to school and on days that I would go home with her to play, if her mother was not there, she would always leave pink lemonade and chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen counter for us. She was excited to see us upon her return and spent time talking with us about our day, about boys, and about clothes. I lived many years with the “if only’s” such encounters brought with them. Now I choose to celebrate what a wonderful example of a loving mother Mrs. Killian provided me, rather than dwelling on my own parental assignment as a cosmic mistake. There was a time that I thought that a normal family was attainable, but Margie shattered that hope. From that point forward, I became much more skeptical of the possibilities. In addition to becoming more skeptical as an adult, I held myself to unrealistic standards for marriage and motherhood. As a wife and mother myself, I have spent years overcompensating for the lack in my own upbringing. No one, June Cleaver nor myself despite my best effort, could meet the unrealistic standards I set. I was determined that I would not end up like my own parents had, as either a wife or as a mother. As a stay-at-home mother, I garnered every opportunity to go on my children’s field trips, be room mother, bake cookies, and be scout leader. I raised an Eagle Scout and another son who came close to achieving that honor. As a wife I endured for far too long a marriage that I should have abandoned much sooner. I really have no recollection of living within circumstances that mirrored normal. I know now that there really is *no* normal. In his text, *Field Note from Elsewhere*, Mark C. Taylor reflects on the concept of normalcy, we call normality is a narrow bandwidth—a fraction of a degree more or less, and everything spins out of

control” (Taylor, 2009, p. 2). His description of chaos aptly describes most of my childhood. A few years here, and a few years there, after which time chaos again ensued once again.

I am ashamed to say that even to this day invoking Margie’s very name elicits a very bad feeling in me, even hatred. The difficulty with this is that as a Christian I am not supposed to hate. I am supposed to forgive, but in this case I have found forgiveness elusive. I have been taught that sin is sin and no sin is greater than another. I do not think she deserves forgiveness, I think she deserves wrath. That having been said, I also understand that I do not deserve forgiveness for my own transgressions, yet in Christ I am forgiven; apparently I have a double standard. I have been taught that none of us *deserves* anything but the wrath of God, but instead we are admonished by *grace*. Grace covers a multitude of sins. This intense emotion is one I continue to wrestle with, even today. Living with Margie presented me with a most problematic view of a living, breathing faith as it is to be embodied by those who love Christ. These situations, those of abuse, neglect, and cruelty, are among many that are troubling for me from both a spiritual and a human perspective. They cannot coexist in conjunction with Christianity...or can they? Mark C. Taylor in his text, *Field Notes from Elsewhere*, suggests an alternative perspective from which to view troubling people and troubling situations that offers the possibility of redemption for those who have suffered through them. He suggests that we only come to know ourselves through an *other* (p. 2).

It can be a parent, teacher, or pastor whose gaze we flee or guidance we seek.

The other can also be the enemy we struggle to destroy, the beloved in whom we long to lose ourselves, or a child in whose eyes we see our own reflected...There

might be ghosts of the departed or demons that possess us. (Taylor, 2007, p. 2)

There is very little that is remarkable about the collection of stories here, those that chronicle my life. They could be the stories of many girls who have grown up in rural areas of the region. But for me they have a purpose; they invite me to raise questions within myself and speak to some issues that truly matter, enabling me to address long-term implications for the sanctity of my own interior spaces. Many of the situations I have described over the course of my journey remind me of the ease to which one could claim the role of victim -- victim of mother, father, grandfather, a steady stream of stepmothers, and a wayward husband, victim of the influences of my culture. The list is almost endless. The role of victim is one in which it is so easy to fall, but like quicksand, it sucks you down deeper. It is very difficult to escape, so there you remain, and there you can also rot. While this is a disgusting image, remaining for a lifetime in the role of victim is more distasteful for me. For as a victim, your life is not lived as a series of events within your control, but rather you are faced with circumstance after circumstance over which you have little or no control. This is a fate that is familiar to many women in this region. For me, this speaks to the crux of my passion for education, for it was education that not only brought independence within my grasp, but perhaps more importantly, it allowed me to begin to deconstruct myself in order to begin to repair my past.

After we suffer trauma, the role of victim seems to be one we assume, at least for a time; and we either choose to stay in that place floundering in hopelessness and pity or we move through it and on to something more productive. Whichever the path we take, one fact remains constant: we must each come to grips with the inalterability of the past.

In a powerful text, Levinas elaborates on forgiveness and suggests that we can give the past new meaning, “repair the past” if you will, by retelling its story in a new narrative. Clearly, this is a tedious process for it requires excavating painful often unresolved issues of our past, but he suggests that by putting the past into a new perspective, we can *free* or open up the future (Levinas in Caputo, 2006, p. 228). One way to undertake such a process is by writing about such troubling stories, confronting our ghosts. As is so often the case with writing, our language is often abstract; it flows in spits and sputters like my words here and is somewhat discontinuous with reality. Many years have passed and often the contexts have been lost. In my case the stories enter my consciousness as flashes from the past, almost as mental snapshots. They are reflections—memories that have been deliberate in nature, and in this writing a great deal of time has been taken to ponder their meanings. Some stories are tattered and frayed like the edges of old pictures and well-loved books, faded in black and white and yellow. They often come to mind when least expected like those pictures of lost memories housed in my attic. Nonetheless, the problems my narrative explores are frightfully concrete and through their liberation I have found within me the ability to give them new meaning. Finally, Levinas leaves me with the lofty challenge to treat “each moment as a *new creation*, which allows the past to lapse and life to begin anew” (p. 229).

My father had little difficulty attracting the attention of others. He was a very dashing man, tall with jet-black hair and blue eyes and very fit – a United States Marine – a status that even today is his greatest source of pride. Today he would be known as a “chick magnet” and, although it must have been nice for him at the time, ultimately I do not think this status worked for his good. He was too much like a kid in a candy shop

without the self-control needed to handle the overwhelming variety. We ate out a lot when we were womanless, and I continue to this day to be amazed that strange women would walk by our table and leave jibs of paper with their names and phone numbers on them as they passed. Having two little girls was the equivalent of taking a puppy to the beach; we garnered a lot of attention from women. I do not know if it was his dashing good looks or our pitiful haircuts that enamored women; whatever the reason, he had no trouble attracting them. He always allowed us to meet and spend time with his girlfriends. This time (now wife number three - really number four if you count the one he was married to before our mother), he decided he would let us choose from among the candidates our next matriarch. Well, that was easy. One of the girlfriends, Chris, took us camping (need I say more?) Hands down, she was our choice. But, for whatever reason, he overrode our choice and married Allene, another girlfriend. Remember he always had a backup. She dealt with me during the tough time—adolescence—and she was the best stepmother that I ever had and possibly the reason I emerged from my rocky early years with any semblance of normalcy.

She had two daughters with whom my sister and I bonded well. We lived near the beach and had more than our allotted amount of fun. Perhaps this was God's way of making up for Margie...who knows. Allene made a gallant effort to avoid showing favoritism among us girls. She cooked for us, did our laundry, took us shopping, and, most of all, she was kind to us every day. I will never forget the day my father was determined to give me a beating for some infraction of the rules—now I do not even remember what it was, but it must have been bad. Beatings were not a part of Allene's child-rearing repertoire. She had seen him beat me one time too many. Upon his arrival

home, it was clear he had been drinking and he was a mean drunk on those occasions. She calmly went into her room and returned with a pistol that I had never seen before. She met him at the garage door, had a word with him, and turned him away. Perhaps it is true...“ *A kind word turneth away wrath*” (Proverbs 15:1). It seemed to work in this case. He left and I did not get that beating.

My father was raised in a home where spirituality and activities of the church were central. Based on his level of emersion in religious activities as a youngster, one would think he might have made some different, even better, choices in his adult life. There were services on Sunday morning and evening as well as supper and Bible study on Wednesday evenings. In addition, the ladies of the church were constantly ministering to both the needy and to members in difficult circumstances. There were summer activities like Bible School and summer camps with which his mother assisted, as well as retreats and revivals. And having spent a great deal of time as a child with my grandmother, I can honestly attest to the fact that she was a Godly woman, but she was not perfect. She was a woman under the influence of her culture. After dinner was cooked, served, and removed, after we sat a spell on the front porch and rocked, after our baths and perhaps some television, she would turn off all distractions, including us. She would put us to bed, get a glass of water, sit in her red patent leather rocker, pull her Bible close to her and read the scriptures. She began reading over her Sunday school lesson and had her quiet time with God. She was faithful in doing this every single evening of her life that I can recall. She told me on many occasions that she faithfully prayed for my sister and me. It was in her church that I was “saved” at the age of eight-years-old.

It was during a revival week and *Just as I am* was being played in the background. I still remember the moment vividly, the smell of the church and the tension in the air to come forward, and the feeling that I was going to vomit. Others were moving from their pews toward the altar. Pressure was mounting. Although I hated to have attention drawn to myself, I knew it must be done; I finally mustered the bravery to walk to the front of the sanctuary to make my public profession of faith. The Baptists require this public act to get into heaven. I vividly recall, even to this day, that very emotional tug that was made to my heart, and I am convinced that it was my grandmother's prayers that brought me to that critical point in my life. That is not to negate my good Presbyterian theology that insists on preordination of "the chosen" - whether God preordained my call to salvation or whether Grandma prayed me to the altar that hot July evening during the revival meeting, for me the results are the same. I gave my life to Christ on that day. From that day forward, he made his dwelling place within my heart. My father had done the same as a younger man, I am sure. How could he have escaped these powerful influences? My grandmother was a very spiritual woman, but I am afraid my grandfather was a spiritual renegade. Could it be that my own father, after watching the life of his father, turned away from the hypocrisy and simply gave up?

He attended services on Sunday when he was home but forfeited opportunities to attend other church functions. At Sunday services he simply rose and left the pew at high noon, and stood outside the massive front doors to the sanctuary where he smoked cigarettes with the ushers waiting for the conclusion of the services. He saw absolutely nothing wrong with this behavior; he had done his time, checked the legalistic requirement off his list, and presumably covered his spiritual bases...or so he thought. It

seems that for those of us who occupy Southern spaces it is the appearance of being religious that matters more than our real spiritual integrity. My poor grandmother was mortified by his behavior and, in addition to it attesting to his “lost” state, she saw it as down-right rude and disrespectful to those around him, especially to the minister. Sometimes I think he did it to keep her in her place, as if to illustrate to her a point by reminding her she could “...lead a horse to water...” but she could not make him drink from the well of spirituality. As you learned in a pervious chapter, he had a long history of womanizing, having kept a secret second home and woman in Atlanta for nearly twenty years. He openly enjoyed a stiff bourbon and water at the kitchen table with the other men who happened by when he was home for a cursory visit, and he was not above striking out physically at anyone who might have annoyed him. Despite my grandmother’s best efforts, it does not appear that the teachings of the Bible or church attendance had much influence on many of those around her, including my daddy or, for that matter, either of his sisters. If I were to venture a guess, I think that in our family there was a great deal of dogmatism in our religiosity. It was too hard to achieve perfection, so why try at all. Sometimes I wonder if spirituality for our family is like a disease that skips a generation only to appear in the next.

Raising these questions is an attempt to understand the culture from which I have emerged—amazingly resilient despite it, I might add. I think this because I believe what seeps out of us illuminates the people that we truly are from within. As Grandma would say, “What’s down in the well comes up in the bucket.” Caputo references the following scripture to elucidate this point, “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (Mark 7:17-23). For my grandfather, his entire life served to clarify his



spiritual state, but for the others it consistently came to the forefront from conversations that we were involved in over the years as well as their own actions or responses to those actions. Racism was an ever-present undercurrent with my father and his sisters. As has already been discussed, they genuinely believed their status was raised simply by virtue of their skin color. Abuse was a common occurrence among our family members with the most horrific instance being the sexual abuse perpetrated by my Aunt Talma's husband upon their two daughters, and very likely their grand daughter as well. Adultery was commonplace among the men in our family and learning the same about the women would come as no surprise to me. All of this having been said, there are times in our lives when the events we endure can be overwhelming, having the potential to devastate our world. The best course of action, sometimes the only course of action, is to pigeonhole them, hoping that with time and a change in perspective we might be better equipped to deal with them. However, ultimately it is in our best interest to revisit them when we are better able to reconcile them with whom we have become and acknowledge the influence such events have had on our evolutionary process. In some cases, such as my own, this could be a matter of years, even decades, before one is ready to revisit painful recollections of the past. Such a process helps one determine where do "you" really begin and where do all of the saturating influences in our lives such as culture, family, religion, and education leave off?

#### The Community as the Body of Christ

For those of us who live away from our homes where members of the family still remain in some distant but familiar place, the holidays reawaken ambivalent feelings. Do we stay in our new place and attempt to establish new traditions, or do we head for home

and hearth in pursuit of comfort, familiarity, and safety? As I write this, I envision some of that which makes the call of home so powerful for me during the holidays. The children's Christmas Eve service in the sanctuary of our beautiful church is what comes to mind first. It is a tradition that for my family begins the first festivities of this holy night. The building itself finds its beauty in the simplicity but elegance of its organic architecture. The outside remembers the history of the region and is constructed of tabby made from crushed oyster shells and burnt lime using the natural resources of the area while carefully remembering the historiography of the place. It has a timeless beauty found in few structures I have encountered in America and gives the appearance of having been anchored on the site on which it rests for hundreds of years. The inside of the sanctuary draws one into its warmth with its wide caramel-colored hand-hewn pine floors, soaring brick arches and exposed beams. The ceilings are adorned not with glitz or shiny brass, but with hand-forged rustic iron chandeliers. Large, simple paned-glass windows invite the beauty of the surrounding area inside; in this place one is surrounded by the simple beauty of nature. It is a place where God feels close at hand.

For the past several years, we have chosen to remain in our new place for the time leading up to Christmas and we have missed some of our comfortable old traditions. We decorate our house with the tree and all the trimmings, shop as much as we are able within the community, and generally try to take advantage of any holiday activities available there. There is a Christmas parade, and another big event is a visit to the swamp park for a ride on the train that encircles it to view an assortment of holiday decorations and sparkling Christmas lights. The swamp is decorated from stem to stern and there are blinking alligators everywhere. Our three-year-olds are at a stage where

they love trains, all things train. We especially love Thomas the Train. Although the swamp train is not Thomas, it does not seem to bother the twins in the least, and we make a festive evening of riding through the swamp oohing and ahing over sparkling lights. For the past several years we have even chosen to remain in our new place for Christmas Day in an effort to begin creating new memories.

We have had family in and entertained everyone in our home, and it has been a pleasant time where we have begun to establish some traditions in our new place. However, this has been a difficult year for us for a number of reasons related to my husband's work, which directly impacts my own work as I am employed within the same school system. When we came to the county, only forty-five percent of students who attended high school here were graduating, leaving them at a terrible disadvantage for future employment opportunities. This was about four years ago. Most of those who were not graduating were children on the margins, blacks, Hispanic, low-income students of all backgrounds; this seemed to be a largely unnoticed phenomenon within this community. It was acceptable because someone had to fill those low-income service jobs. If the upper and the middle class students were being successful, there were few, if any, taking into account the needs of the lowest. They were effectively disfranchised from the educational system just as they had been their entire lives.

Since that time, many changes have been implemented within the school system to offer those students more opportunities to find relevance in their educational process, and many new programs have been put into place to help non-traditional students graduate. This has meant a great deal of change and, as is usually the case with change, a great deal of discomfort for those in this community involved in the educational process;

however, the proof has been in the pudding as close to eighty percent of the county's students walked across the stage and graduated this spring. Then recently, due to budget constraints and cuts, the board was forced to close one of the county's schools that coincidentally serves a largely white population of students. The school's existence stirred controversy in the county long before our arrival, and many in the area have referred to it as a public private school. For this community, this has been a watershed event and lines of delineation have been passionately adhered to. The closure was done as a result of a board vote (as superintendent, my husband has no vote). Board members poured over details and statistics for months leading up to the event, and each prayerfully considered his/her difficult decision. It seemed that with each month there came new budget cuts from the state that pushed them closer to what seemed to be an inevitable decision. While it was a board vote that closed the school, as my husband so often reminds me, it is he who is "the point of the spear," and it is he who is at the forefront of the battle. As superintendent he sought ways to cut any unnecessary expenditure and has spent many sleepless nights pondering the magnitude of the difficulties this economic crisis has brought on. He starts each day at our kitchen counter praying for wisdom from God in the difficult decisions that he has to make regarding the care and education of the children that have been entrusted to him. Among other things, we pray for the same as a family at dinner. Many irate parents, teachers, and students attended a recent board meeting to try once again to plead their case, and there was standing room only. The tension in the room generated enough electricity to light the town, had we needed it. The conduct exhibited by some present was disturbing, to say the least. My husband tried to explain the circumstances that brought the system to this juncture, explaining how many

have poured prayerfully over this difficult decision and how they searched for other solutions before arriving at this one. He explained that even with this massive cut it will still not be enough, and that the situation is so serious that other cuts will be necessary with the coming of the new school year. One man shouted out that my husband may have prayed, but that if he did, he did not serve the same God that man did. While the meeting was in progress, my telephone at home rang with people leaving harassing and threatening messages. When you are home alone with two small children in the dark of the night, this is quite unnerving. These people were by and large, as we say in these parts, by their account anyway, God-fearing people. They attend Sunday services and Wednesday night supper. I find this to be an interesting juxtaposition of moral character that they exhibited in a very public setting. Many people, who work closely with my husband and have witnessed the systematic work undertaken by him on behalf of children, have stopped me on numerous occasions and explained to me that they have never witnessed a leader with such calm under fire. They simply do not know how he does it; I do not either. However, do not confuse a calm demeanor with weakness. They also tell me that when he needs to be tough, he is capable of doing that as well. He has the gift of being able to be involved in hotly contested disputes without destroying his opponent's personal worth. It is a facet of his personality that I admire and one that I wish I possessed.

All of that was said to communicate our need to return home to the safety of welcoming arms during the holidays. We have been in this community for almost four years now and during that time we have visited a number of churches. Most of those visits were made prior to the drama that we are facing now over the school closure. Of

course, within a school system there will always be some level of drama present.

However, such an event was not an antecedent for what is to follow. We visited a church for months, and there were a couple of friendly elderly people who spoke to us, but for the most part it was a most unwelcoming experience. While attending this particular church regularly our eight month old son had open heart surgery. We never heard a word from anyone in that church. Instead there was much talk about budget shortfalls and increasing pledges. As an outsider looking in, it was rather obvious that extending hospitality to newcomers might be a good place to supplement the budget since the stalwarts of the congregation were a large and quickly aging population. New blood is a transfusion that keeps institutions revitalized, but this sort of proactive discussion never came up in our presence. After of a number of months of hoping people might welcome us, we abandoned the cause and moved on to another church in town. In the next case there were more friendly people. There were also many older people there, and they had to clear away the cobwebs on the nursery door for the twins to gain admittance.

Unfortunately, it too just did not seem to be the right fit. Finally, after auditioning all of the Methodist churches, it was not too difficult a sell to persuade my husband to give the Presbyterians a try. Clearly, this is the most liberal church in this town aside from the Catholics. Ironically, the Presbyterians have an interim pastor that I suspect has been there for going on a second year now; he is Methodist so we are right at home! At any rate he is a jolly fellow with an Irish background and a former college theology professor. The second time we visited he remembered our names from our first visit, hugged us and made us feel welcome. It is the only church we have visited where we have consistently seen African Americans worshiping, as well as other people of color. Right now I am on

a quest to figure out why they have chosen to visit this particular church in town to make their home. It definitely does not appear to be a bad thing, but it does concern me that it is taking such a long time to find a permanent pastor. Even since I first wrote about this problem, yet another interim pastor has come to the church. I have to wonder if it is because they cannot convince any other pastor to move here.

What we miss most about our former church is the sense of community we felt with the other communicants. We were married by the minister there; and when the twins were born, we went back there because we could not abide the thought of our children being baptized in the presence of veritable strangers. We had hoped to find a church in our new place much more quickly so that we could have our children baptized there, but that did not come to pass. When we return home for a visit people actually hug us and tell us they miss us and that they want us to come back (my husband was not from there, but he was the principal of the high school for eleven years and, in my estimation, he was a loved and respected part of the community). At this juncture one needs to more closely consider the idea of community since it plays such a crucial role on our day-to-day feelings of acceptance and our spiritual lives.

Community for me is a word that I immediately associate with good feelings. In such a place I think of warmth, caring, support, and respect, to name a few images that come to mind. Community is a wonderful thing if you happen to be a part of one. As this writing has illustrated, however, if you are not, the outside can be an unappealing and callous place to be, devoid of kindness, compassion, support, or caring. This is not the way I care to live my life. I have the capacities needed to find another place or return to my home place, should I so choose. Many others do not have within their means that

option. I was recently shocked to have my comfortable white middle class definition of community shattered. According to Caputo (2006), community can be broken down into its Latin root words - it is to build a fortified circle around oneself (*com + munis*) to protect against the coming of the other (p. 262). It was one thing to have difficulty finding a new church home but quite another thing to realize that in this town I am a firmly entrenched "other." It seems, just as it did with the problem of large numbers of students dropping out of school, that this is a situation that has gone largely unnoticed. It is not an issue for the "thems," it is just an issue for us "others." I knew that there were demographic issues that plague this town. Those who do attend college do not return but move to places where there are greater opportunities. Also, there is a largely uneducated unskilled labor force in the town which makes recruiting new industry difficult, the county has one of the largest number of workman's compensations claims in the state, and, finally, the census numbers verify the sad state of affairs. In a ten-year period the population in the county has grown less than one percent. That is a statistic that implies the idea of stagnation -- no new growth, no new ideas, no new industry. Just as the water in the surrounding swamp stagnates when no new sources flow into it so, too, does a similar circumstance occur in the community itself. If my family, as an upwardly mobile family of educated professionals, have not been made to feel welcome, I shudder to think of the reception given to the other when he arrives dressed in rags and smelling like a homeless person. As Caputo insists, we had better be careful what we pray for. "The next time we look up to heaven and pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," we may find that he is already here, trying to get warm over a street grate [or in our case around a burning trash can] or trying to cross our borders (p. 30).



## CHAPTER 5

### OUTSIDE OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE

*You cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education;  
You will do better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one...  
To take as rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction...  
The difference is between acting and being acted upon,  
And for women it can literally mean the difference  
between life and death.  
(Maurice Merleau-Ponté, "Phenomenology of Perception")*

According to well-known sociologist of the South Sheldon Reed, Southerners hold the distinction of "having retained to a greater degree than other Americans a localistic orientation--an attachment to their place and their people" (Reed, 1986, p. 43). Most from the region would agree with this statement. We acknowledge that there are many facets of life in the South that are worth retaining, such as the deep appreciation of friendships, "the recognition that manners are a signal that one accepts one's moral obligations to others" (Hackney, 2005, vii), the importance of honor, the value of family and faith, a sort of spiritual connection to nature, the recognition the importance place has on our existence, and shared traditional values. However, in many cases that which has been shown to be of value, when taken to the extreme, can be a detriment and seriously threaten to impact the quality of life for some in the region. For example, while relationships are important to us they can also exert undue influence upon those with whom one is associated; honor can be taken to the extreme resulting in violent expressions in its defense; family has the potential to smother and limit the outcome of its members in an effort to keep them close; ultra conservative expressions of faith can be used as an instrument of oppression to promote patriarchal privilege suppressing the potential of women and others; and the intolerance in many communities of difference of any kind pushes many to the margins. There are those in the region who seem to have

difficulty releasing those damaging aspects of our culture, those that run contrary to our own best interest and that of others. As a collective group many in the region continue to maintain a lack of awareness of how the past impinges on the present; in fact, it often seems that they protect and nurture the status quo, even if it damaging results. Despite the pervasiveness of these archaic thought structures, there do exist pockets of Southern (more) liberal thinkers (around here they are referred to as “flaming liberals”) working to usurp the tradition of the romantic Southern myth in an effort to weave a new tradition that is more inclusive of those in the margins. Their ideas promote racial and social justice, work toward the eradication of poverty and the abolition ignorance, all of which permeate the land and are supported by an array of social structures. However, deviation from the accepted social norms often brings isolation to those who dare to stray from the accepted standards of behavior.

Those who embrace such thought structures are then recognized as being individualists, and individualism is accompanied by the incumbent isolation that such a state of being implies. “The sin of the nonconforming individualist, of course, is that he [she] undermines the ability of the community to protect its values and self-image against the criticism or assault of outsiders. The community cannot tolerate that, especially a community like the white South that sees itself as besieged by alien forces (p. 109).” Within this tradition one finds the women, women *and* their children, who are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of our region’s closely held traditions. We find it difficult to escape that which has come to embody our very existence, making departure from our haunting past an ever-present challenge. Some women feel connected inescapably to this land. For example Angela Haynes asserts, “I could not maintain my

identity and sense of self in any other place” (Haynes, p. 111), but others find themselves driven away in search of more libratory landscapes, in essence stepping out of the magic circle in search of vistas where they can assert their independence, intelligence, and equality. Outside of the magic circle one abandons privilege and challenges monolithic thought structures that are pervasive within the region. The challenge before us as libratory women educators who are native to the region and keenly aware of its restrictive nature is to use the compelling power found within our own personal narratives to offer stories that sustain us and inspire others and to “... use the apparently personal story to understand the social structure that shapes it, to forward a libratory political agenda both by articulating suppressed and distorted stories and clearing space for new ones” (Romero & Stewart, 1999, p. xvi).

For many women in the region, blind attachment to culturally constructed notions have had adverse effects upon us and have resulted in our diminished functioning, as well as a decreased sense of well being as we move through our lives. In compliance to their structures we constrain ourselves and our daughters setting the stage for generational subjugation.

“...the paradoxical role of women in the South – that the idealization of women in the abstract is/was useful for the maintaining class and race boundaries, but the evaluation of women qua women is quite low; that is, women’s position in the family and elsewhere is subordinate to men, and any attempts to change this traditional ordering can justifiably be met with strong measures.” (Glass in Dillman, 1988, p. 197)

We have a tendency to not only accept tradition unquestioningly, but to promote its

continuance. In some cases we are our own worst enemies. It has been a common practice in the South for women to communicate stories in their writing that discredit other women's stories which, in fact, shore up patriarchy.

One of the most universally recognizable examples of a literary work in which traditional gender roles for women are supported is Margaret Mitchell's (1939), *Gone With the Wind*.

Ellen's life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and, if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such. The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. Men were rough of speech and often drunk. Women ignored the lapses of speech and put the drunkards to bed without bitter words. Men were rude and outspoken; women were always kind, gracious and forgiving. (Mitchell, 1939, p. 147)

Only by breaking from those stories told within the confines of the master narratives of the region can we break the cultural constraints. Clearly, there is a new reality for women brought on by the contradictions of managing, for many, full time work and family responsibilities. Our tendency toward unquestioning acceptance of such gender-explicit mythology is dangerous and has a self-perpetuating mechanism that repeats itself in subsequent generations making change almost unperceivable and offering up our daughters as sacrifices to future indentured circumstances. These cultural influences have often resulted in a diminished quality of life and low educational

attainment for women in the region. According to Ryan & Deci (2000) humans have a need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy to support the development of positive human potential, and he points out the lack of these results as the principal sources of human distress (p. 75). This distress may not be something that we are acutely aware of. Instead it may manifest itself as a persistent discontinuity in our lives, a nagging uncertainty and bring with it feelings of helplessness and dependency. It is accompanied by a sort of dissatisfaction with one's life without a clear indication of why. For others it may be more apparent, and the results can be more tangible such as being trapped in a life of poverty, abuse, and hopelessness. "The distinctiveness of the South may lie not in its empirical differences from other regions, but in its unique belief system" (Hill in Dillman, 1988, p. 157). "Without the gender role ideology encompassing Southern womanhood, and indeed supported by many Southern women, the South would not be the South" (Middleton-Keirn, 1988, p. 157). It is the former of the manifestations, that of a persistent discontinuity in my life accompanied by a nagging uncertainty, that I found to be most troublesome in my own life; but in the lives of many of my students and their mothers it is the latter that I most often see represented. Kincheloe (1991) sites Cora Kaplan (1986) in *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* and looks at socially defined roles such as those discussed above. She persuades women to analyze structures of their feelings and inquires into which feelings incite women to rebel or submit to such roles. "When confronted with modern Southern alienation such analysis of feelings asks what allows some individuals to sense, expose, and overcome the deleterious effects of alienation in their lives and what binds others to its existence" (p. 152). Many experience

a sense of hopelessness and feel they have few options for escape, a role that we as women seem to assume too readily here in the South.

I cannot resist a bit of further discussion in the use of the literary example of *Gone With the Wind* for it carries with it an interesting paradox. As a child Mitchell was surrounded by educated women, and she grew up in an family that valued education. Her mother, although a native Atlantan, attended college in Quebec, Canada at Bellevue Covent. She completed her education at the Atlanta Female Institute with honors. Both of Mitchell's aunts went to Charleston for their college educations. Mitchell's mother, May Belle Mitchell, was the leader of the Atlanta Woman's Study Club where she found an outlet for her love of literature, and most interestingly, she was an active suffragist. One of her greatest desires was that Mitchell acquire a college education so that she was ready for what ever came her way in life. Keenly aware of how much life had changed after the Civil War, her mother believed that it would again change dramatically in Margaret's lifetime and that she should be prepared. In her eyes, "education was the key to survival. The strength of women's hands isn't worth anything[,] but what they've got in their heads will carry them as far as they need to go" (Johnson, 2008, p. 13). Mitchell's mother was determined that her daughter would not assume the role of the helpless dependent female that was so typically acted out in the lives of Mitchell's characters in *Gone with the Wind*.

Friendships are important to women in the South just as they are to women in most places. Willie Morris (1967) speaks to the value we place on such informal associations, those with people seen frequently and informally. He juxtaposes these easy associations with those of *relationships* such as those that result from effort—as in the

Dale Carnegie “relationship.” For many finding relatedness is an aspect of our existence in which we excel. “...women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care...care and concern for others that infuses the psychology of women’s development and is responsible for what is characteristically seen as problematic in nature” (Woolf in Stone, 1994, p. 35). We learn early in our lives the importance of relationships. We learn by our involvement in clubs such as scouts and church groups, and later in our lives we continue to build relationships within social groups, Bible studies, and other community organizations. We gather in kitchens and church social halls and there from a very young age we learn to build relationships by example and later come to understand the values of those supports in our lives. Most often those with whom we choose to relate often reflect that with which we are familiar. They have shared values and cultural expectations. Our ability to relate well to those whom we are associated with can be viewed as a strength, but it also contributes to our weakness manifested in our dependence upon the approval of those with whom we are closely associated. Home then becomes likened to the battle field of old, that of the lost cause, a source of pride and identification. It remains centered on time-in-place where all of those then and all of those now reflect shared sameness and celebrate their power and privilege. When here they are treated like family and “lies of normalcy” (Segrest in Whitlock, 2007, p. 71). are upheld and celebrated. None want to find themselves outside of the magic circle.

...youth from areas of the rural South live in a world revolving around social relations with family members...close ties with family members are advantageous because they serve as important mechanisms that provide assistance to family

members during times of crisis. (Hansen & Hill, 1964 in Shoffner & Kenkle)

Undoubtedly, the power of family as a support mechanism cannot be overstated. However, there does come a time when the influence of the family can become convoluted and oppressive to the individual's well being.

...familistic orientations can be a disadvantage when they discourage young people from contacts beyond the family boundaries with those who are capable of providing alternative ideas about life decisions. Thus, strong family bonds may exclude alternative sources of influence by isolation or even alienating youth from constructive sources of information beyond family boundaries. (Shoffner & Kenkel, 1986, p. 167)

Those with whom we are in close relation often influence our life choices in the absence of something more reliable. The advice most often given supports and reflects familial and cultural expectations that members of the community most often adhere to. Very often the advice disseminated reflects a desire on the part of parents and family to keep their children close, perhaps so that they have convenient access to their grandchildren. It is a widely accepted custom, almost an expectation that children care for their aging parents in this region. Only in unmanageable circumstances do we even give consideration to institutionalizing our parents. We often excel in building relationships and lean heavily on them. On the other hand, competence and autonomy are distinct challenges for many Southern women, especially those who live in isolated regions, because there are so many cultural constraints that undermine achieving such states of being.



Competency and autonomy are qualities that do not support the patriarchal system that continues to thrive here; instead they represent a departure from the status quo that very often is viewed as threatening to the region's way of life. The hand full of women who do possess these qualities are often viewed as somewhat of an enigma. In a recent conversation discussing the stigmatization of women in the area with a female college educated Canadian transplant who has lived here for twenty years, she explained to me that, "around here they don't know what to do with smart women." It seems that in order to coexist peacefully, young women may have been socialized into thinking that if they wish to get along with the men in their lives they must embrace the traditional societal expectations in order to avoid isolation.

For the greater portion of my life the only area in which I felt any sense of competency was being a good mother to my children and being a supportive wife. These were not high-demand skills within the job market; hence, any feelings of autonomy were completely out of my reach. I had gone from being taken care of by my father to being taken care of by a husband. Because I was not prepared to support my children and myself, I knew in the recesses of my mind that I was susceptible to a variety of undesirable conditions. These thoughts always loomed silently but persistently in the recesses of my mind. Being taken care of, a condition many Southern women relish in, is not all it is cracked up to be for it implies dependency. You are subject to the whims and shortfalls of another person. These feelings were unsettling and constantly looming just over my horizon. The motivation for me to achieve in my life was an impending sense of doom...what if my husband dies, what if for some reason I found myself alone with three children who were completely dependent upon me for life, but my unarticulated fears

were what if he leaves me...*what if I want to leave?* What if *I chose* not to continue living this way any more? *I must have a way of escape. I must have a way to take care of my children.* For women in the region there remains the expectation to accept responsibility for others, especially those to whom one has given life. The theme is articulated by Sarah Brabant in her article, *Socialization for Change: The Cultural Heritage of the White Southern Woman*. According to Brabant, “One survives: one survives with as much dignity as possible; one is responsible for others. The obvious message prepared the Southern female to live in the traditional society; the more profound theme prepared her to cope with change” (in Dillman, 1988, 105). For many years I was not truly prepared to cope with change, especially catastrophic change.

I come from a long line of Southern women who were able to survive in difficult circumstances, even catastrophic change: the Civil War, the Great Depression, and many more personal tragedies, many of which have been articulated in the preceding pages. Over the course of my life I learned many unspoken lessons through their example and by watching their quiet strength and tenacity. By watching them I know that certain behaviors were inexcusable; others were essential for survival; our skill was found in our ability to flow seamlessly between the two extremes in behavior without detection and to know which was called for in a particular circumstance. Despite their circumstances they never left. Perhaps it was strength. Perhaps it was necessity. The completely unglamorous truth that I have come to is this: I think it is more likely that, as in my case, it was fear that kept them where they were. How would they survive without training to enter the work force? Although my people came from very humble means, rudimentary survival is not a very palatable prospect one in such circumstances relishes. Regardless

of their personal circumstances they did have warm homes that were owned by their husbands, albeit they were shotgun houses, and they did have food on the table. I know few people who would be content to merely survive. In the South there is also the shame that is associated with divorce and the loss in community status that one must also endure. After divorce you then become the woman every other woman is compelled to keep her husband away from, and isolation ensues. To a great extent this remains true even today. I experienced it after my own divorce. A Southern woman has an implied obligation to loyalty, despite her circumstances. She should try to help her family or her husband, see them through the hard times. All of us are taught to do that in relationships, even if we are trapped in violent relationships.

Women's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. While women have thus taken care of men, however, men have in their theories of psychological development tended either to assume or to devalue that care. (Gilligan in Stone, 1994, p. 35)

By example we have learned to hide that which is not acceptable on the outside and carry with us an obligation to try to "fix" it for the preservation of the family. In this story, most of the women in my family are, or have been at some point in their lives, players in the saga of the great Southern myth. However, our cast of characters was more of the plain folk variety. No belles or gentlemen. Like many generations of women before us, we have been compliant players. The mythologies that embody the South did little to advance the way for women in my family; for us they are just that, stories foreign to our way of life. Our women were hard-working plain folk whose identities were lost

in the support of others because for them it was too difficult while engulfed in the day-to-day processes of life to imagine an alternate way of being. It has been only within the current generation that we dared to begin to disrupt the nostalgia of the past. We were hesitant to cross the boundaries that we had been indoctrinated into for the span of our entire lives, lest we be cast aside. "...for there was no reason to talk of what lay all around...to raise your voice, to shout about what was happening to you or around you was useless; it was not reasonable, it was *foolish*, if not crazy, since the social order, the nature of people was set, doomed, and no amount of shouting would alter creation" (Pratt in Barge Johnson, 1991, p. 288). The limitations of our customs seemed natural. We have assumed our roles and moved through our lives surrounded by that distinctly Southern aura as yet another act of the lost cause was played out on the mythic stage of our lives. As players in that saga, our roles were those embedded in a long and continuing detailed account. However, in reality there was little heroic about it for heroism implies supremely noble or self-sacrificing acts. Nobility and self-sacrifice would mean going against the grain, against the flow, rather than with it, perpetuating the status quo. It seems like yet another *lost cause* because for so long now there have been too many who have been willing to assume the role unquestioningly. There are many, not just women in my family, but many other women living in the region who have shored up patriarchy and assumed the role. What of our daughters? Is this the legacy that we will leave for them? When will we as a collective group of women wake up? When will we begin to take responsibility for those who lie shattered all around us? They are difficult to ignore. Their children are haunting reminders of the new generations of thrown away people, thrown away possibilities.

I have come to learn what it means to question, and I want my daughters to question. One can disagree without being disagreeable. And women can question without being militants. We can continue to love our region and embrace our families without accepting oppressive roles that perpetuate Southern madness. Virginia Durr, a white Southern woman who was born at the turn of the century and was an early women's activist whose book "Outside the Magic Circle" had originally been entitled "The Emancipation of Pure White Southern Womanhood," said it well:

...there were three ways for a ...Southern white woman to go. She could be an actress, playing out the stereotype of the Southern woman...flirtatious to her father-in-law, and offering a sweet smile to the world. In short going with the wind. If she had a spark of independence or worse, creativity, she could go crazy...Or she could rebel. She could step outside of the magic circle...and challenge this way of life. Ostracism, bruises of all sorts, and defamation would be her lot. Her reward would be a truly examined life. And a world she would otherwise never have known. (Durr, 1990, xi)

It is a madness that turns a deaf ear to violence and exploitation against women, women's poverty that injures not just women but their children, and job discrimination that sustains the poverty cycle, limits economic and educational opportunities, and sustains social isolation undermining prospects for reaching positive human potential.

With the benefit of having had years to soak up my culture and now reflecting back with a different set of lenses, I can acknowledge that that which I thought was strength and tenacity on the part of the women in my family was actually fear and trepidation. Such a realization shatters that which had been my constructed reality—who

I had wanted those women to be, their mythological roles in the genealogy. It disrupts the noble cause of family and reveals the ugly underbelly of homeplace. It calls me to “revisit the privileges and apparent security of the white, ...male dominant home,” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 65) and reposition myself and those women within the dominant storyline. Like the family recipes, themes of marginalization that have been handed down from generation to generation (Haynes, 2007, p.162). The women were not so noble; they were surviving. In reality their quiet strength was more likely a survival tactic rather than a character trait. It was a coping mechanism to avoid rocking the proverbial boat, a way to placate, and a way to survive in difficult circumstances with the least amount of collateral damage to themselves and their children. I have come to understand those mechanisms intimately as I too have employed them from time to time.

But for those women, as it was with me, there was damage. Each day as they relinquished another shred of self, they became mired in a sense of belonging not to themselves but rather having slowly given over control of their lives to another until they were so psychologically undermined that little of whom they were remained. Greene (in Stone, 1994) speaks to the concern for suppressed individual capacities which must be released to develop free and autonomous personalities. In order to accomplish this, she suggests that we as women must intensify our critical awareness of our relation to ourselves and also to our culture for a clarified sense of our own realities. Only in madness would we continue personally destructive ways of being that would effectively exclude *her* as an active participant in her own life.

I believe, without a doubt, that the choice to begin to acquire an education was a watershed decision in my life. Haynes (2007) referred to her educational experience as

“where she first experienced her ‘awakening’ ” (p. 150). And we must not only awaken for ourselves but we must awaken for our sons and daughters. Education in the South has historically been exclusive. This was not by accident. Although today we have an array of colleges in our state and region available to women, the early lack of them brings us in many ways to the situation in which we find ourselves today. “The lack of colleges for women in the South which was a result of the desire to keep women in traditional gender roles, ...had the reverse effect: it pushed Southern daughters out of the region into the seedbed of women’s rights” (Johnson, 2008, p. 4). Although this involved a very small minority of the women living in the region, it was a beginning. For many of the women who moved to the North for an education, “A northern college education enabled them to challenge Southern patriarchal society, to take public roles heretofore closed to women...many of these college women led others to achievement...the influence of this small group of women was felt in communities throughout the South” (p. 4-5). Although the numbers were few, it did provide some women in the region with a vision for possibilities. Many of these women returned to the South and began to proclaim the power of education and use their new-found knowledge to enlighten others.

Over time I came to recognize this lacking in my own life. Despite the fact that there were many circumstances I could not control, this was one that I could. The decision to move forward afforded me a sense of control over my own life, and it was also the catalyst that led to other dramatic changes for me. In 1977, feminist essayist Adrienne Rich delivered an address to women graduating from Rutgers University in which she urged them to “take charge of their educations and though extension, of the

rest of their lives” (Greene in Stone, 1997, p. 1). This quote resonates within me and carries with it powerful implications for change for myself and other women.

I have often heard the saying that “education is transformative”. It implies that education will have a positive impact on one’s life, perhaps a better job or increased income. While this is often the case, sadly for many young women education remains only a concept, and one which is too often out of their reach. As was my case in the past, there remain many other women, young and otherwise, who feel little sense of control in their lives. Many have minimal education or needed training which would allow them to support themselves and in some cases their children; they often come from situations of cyclical poverty where abuse has been the norm. For these women there seems to be little hope. In them, many of whom live in rural areas, signs of human distress can be seen manifested in a number of ways that impact their daily lives, including an acceptance, almost the societal expectation, of the use of violence to address conflict; narrow and defining classifications of gender roles; adherence to conservative attitudes communicated by family and religious bodies; limitations set fourth in socially articulated expectations by the rural subculture; and in stereotyping and the impact it has on the perpetuation of ignorance within the region. Ryan & Deci propose that there are specific psychological needs that are universal and failure to achieve them sets up circumstances for impoverishment of well being and alienation. They suggest that,

...need satisfaction is facilitated by the internalization and integration of culturally endorsed values and behaviors suggests that individuals are likely to express their competence, autonomy, and relatedness differently within different cultures that hold different values...these are theorized to be influenced not only



by their own competencies but, even more important, by the ambient demands, obstacles, and affordances in their sociocultural contexts. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 75)

Embedded within the cultural setting in some rural areas of the South one can find conditions that undermine rather than foster positive human potential, and clearly these influences impact the development of those living in the region. These influences are difficult to escape. They permeate almost every aspect of life that one encounters during the course of the day, week in and week out, from birth to death. “We are so carefully crafted that we can’t separate ourselves from our place; an insistent guilt creeps in to remind us to tailor our behavior to that which we know to be true (Haynes, 2007, p.105). We know it to be true because we have little else by which we can model ourselves; no other mirror that does not reflect the familiar image of self that we are almost exclusively surrounded by. This is especially true for those who rarely or never find a pathway out. Their sense of community embraces the provincial security that they are afforded by keeping the other out. New ideas are often met with unwavering attachment to the old ways, and battle lines are drawn to maintain the status quo. I find myself in utter amazement of the good ole boy influence, even upon educated people who dumb down their daily existence to better articulate the language of the culture, rather than striving to raise the level of consciousness to that of greater tolerance and understanding of difference. “Those ‘natives’...have trouble even recognizing that they exhibit culturally distinctive patterns of belief; [with the realization of this fact] it is like discovering that one speaks a distinct genre--prose” (Harding, 1991, p.3). In most cases people are unaware that there are alternative ways of being until they feel the assault from the

outside. Perhaps the persistence of modernization stands as an ever-present threat and fear wrought by change and progress are encroaching and threaten the old ways of being. The outside is moving in and, perhaps due to the isolated condition, the flux generated by change has not been as readily experienced as it has in more populated areas. “The explosion of the international economy and the destructive effects of deindustrialization upon old communities’ have revealed ‘place’ to be a crucial element of the bonding process—more so perhaps for the working class than the capital-owning classes...when capital has moved on, the importance of place is more clearly revealed.” (Williams, 1989, p. 242). When capital has moved on as it has in many areas of the South, people are driven to cling to that which they can find comfort in—that which remains the same.

All of this having been said, occasionally one of us slips out of the fortress only to find that when we return to our place we feel strange, and we are then treated as strangers and feel the onslaught of our own difference. Leigh Ann Duck (2006) in her text, *The Nations Region: Southern modernism, segregation, and U. S. Nationalism*, confronts the difficulty of leaving the South and returning, like the character in “*Strange Fruit*” who leaves and then returns to find things not as he had left them. Duck insists on the experience of “temporal distance in shaping one’s responses to others and even one’s sense of self. Ideas of ‘cultural lag’ are most evident in the text among characters who have traveled and must confront their feelings about the South upon returning” (Duck, 2006, p. 196). As I grapple with my own changing sense of self as it is juxtaposed against the backdrop of the past, it is difficult to reconcile the conflicting ways of being. I share with Ugena Whitlock (2007) ambivalence in my return, “When the sojourner crosses the threshold from the spaces of her own life experiences and subjectivity—as

subject of difference, as propagator of difference—the journey home becomes tentative” (p. 80). Such dissonance elicits within me a sense of betrayal of my family and my culture-- the culture within which I choose to continue to exist. In doing so, I pray for the wisdom required to understand the injustices of the past while simultaneously moving myself and my daughters toward a more inclusive view of the future.

### This Present Darkness

I will likely never forget the day of the departure; nor will my youngest son. He was a twelve-year-old student at the same middle school where I taught. It was a beautiful Indian summer day, much like any other. On our way home, my husband called us on the cell phone. It was a call I was expecting because he had had an important meeting that day, and he began by telling me how the meeting had gone. The last few months had been a difficult time for us. His business had been languishing in a sea of financial difficulties that I was not fully aware of, creating a great deal of stress on our marriage. He had been absent a great deal and traveling a lot, which I never questioned because travel was a part of his job. In twenty-eight years I had never had a reason to suspect him. At the end of the conversation he interjected a casual, “...and by the way I have taken my things and moved out.” These words were so unexpected that at first I thought he must have been joking. As I was trying to process it all, I realized that it could not have been a joke because such humor would have been exceedingly cruel, even for someone mounting such a plan. As I drove in utter disbelief, the chaos of the situation was almost unbearable. I had had not so much as a hint that such a catastrophic event was in my future and felt completely blindsided as I tried to right myself. My brain was filled with flashing moments like representations I have seen of people on LSD trips,

and I could not make them stop. Questions flashed through my consciousness as did scenes of the past. At one point I thought I was going to run my car off the road and into the woods. That is what I wanted to do—I wanted to hide until this all went away—these woods were just as good a place as any. I wanted to protect my child from this terrible knowledge but it was too late; he was right there with me and had heard everything. What had happened? What had I done wrong? I assumed that what had happened was my fault. It was always my fault because I could never get everything just right. As we made that long pilgrimage to the home that was now solely occupied by my boys and me, shock and devastation washed over me. My son sat hushed with tears silently rolling down his cheeks. As we drove across the causeway from the mainland, the sky was a beautiful vibrant blue and the sails of majestic boats were gliding effortlessly across the water; by all appearances all should have been right with the world. I was struck that the people driving by me were completely unaware that our lives had been shattered. It reminded me how much our lives can change in the blink of an eye and how, despite our tragedies, life goes on. It seemed as if life had ended, but it fell upon my shoulders to make sure that it went on, if for no other reason than for my boys. It was as though someone we loved had died, but this was worse because he *chose* it. I would rather that he had died because then I would not have had to deal with all of the doubts and judgments that come with rejection. We arrived home uncertain of what we would find there. My husband had had the advantage of preparation and planning time, but I had been cheated of that. Surely this had been something he had been planning for a while. You do not just wake up and leave your family one day. The questions still imposed: what had I done? I should have done better. As we turned into the driveway I wondered

what we would find. Would everything be cleaned out, furniture missing, items topsey turvey? We moved through one room and then the next, and everything seemed to be as I had left it that morning. As I entered my bedroom, that too was the same except that all of his things were removed from our closet. I eventually realized that he had cleaned everything from his desk, and that was all that had been upset. Neither the boys nor I really understood what had transpired that week or why. I would later learn that this man was dealing with demons of his own that only he could resolve. There was a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety with each sunrise, but my children and I pulled inward, and the three of us managed to survive within the ambiguity that had become our lives. My greatest fear in all of this chaos stemmed from being the sole caretaker of my children, although in essence I had maintained this role for many years prior to this day. While my husband had made monetary contributions, it was me who was present and for many years had maintained what sense of normalcy there was for them.

What I had secretly feared for so many years had come to pass. It was as though I intuitively knew it would, I just had not known when. Perhaps it all began with the loss of my mother, her choosing booze over family, that the pattern of *leavers* began to make the imprint on my life. I had gotten to the point that there was the expectation that anyone who loved me would eventually leave, and it would be my fault. I was silently thankful that over those many years I had persisted through my college coursework despite the difficulties in doing so while raising three children. I felt that I was more ready for this challenge than I would have been at any other time in my life. It was after the dust had settled somewhat that we began to realize a marked difference in our home.

With his departure there was a peace that came over our house, a new-found

condition which was a foreign but welcome respite for all of us. No longer did we live in fear of what his mood would be when he returned home, nor did we find it necessary to walk around our house as if on broken glass waiting for the next time one of the boys was going to do some little thing that might send him into a rage. During these episodes, he might beat the boys and verbally rail against me. One never knew what to expect or what might set him off. If I failed to comply with his wishes, there were times when he would drag out a bag and begin to fill it. An act, I thought, of drama; but clearly I should have seen the writing on the wall. Our sons were his regular punching bags, but I too had taken my share of hits even being knocked to the ground during my pregnancy with Christian. It had gotten to the point where we never really knew what to expect, and we spent a large portion of our lives “laying low” to avoid his ferocity. Not only did I lay low around the house, but I had also begun to isolate myself from my family and friends. After it was over, my father expressed the concern he had had related to my behavior in the months, even years, leading up to the departure. It was a situation over which my family had felt powerless, but they had known it was not going to end well. My sister and brother-in-law made similar observations. At one point they had become so suspicious of his behavior that they were on the verge of hiring a private detective to confirm their suspicions. As I was moving through this difficult marriage, true to form for a Southern wife, I defended his actions and began to avoid anyone that might criticize him, especially those who knew us best, my family. It is only in retrospect that I can acknowledge their observations to be true.

In an article by Mary Suh, *Understanding Battered Women*, Susan Schechter, program coordinator at Boston Children’s Hospital for AWAKE (Advocacy program for

Women and Kids in Emergency) tries to explain some characteristics of battered women. A woman in a traumatic situation often avoids making the batterer angry and instead attempts to placate him. She believes he will change, and that she should try to help him through the hard times. I think this is even more applicable to Southern women because such thinking is infused in our culture. A common tactic of batterers is to isolate the woman from her friends and family. The stress level eventually reaches a point where the woman becomes very depressed and numb—a common survival tactic for victims of many kinds of violence (Shu, 1989, p. 229-230). This is what my family saw in me, but I failed to recognize it in myself. I maintained a plethora of excuses suitable to cover any contingency I might have to defend.

Since my divorce I have remarried and on occasion my new husband, in search of some lost object, runs across boxes in our attic of carefully packed away memories. Despite the fact that my first marriage did not survive, I still feel a need to preserve the past for my children; so I have separated and saved for them photos of what now seems like a distant and unfamiliar past. The children are the only artifacts of that time that I care to embrace. Had I know when I was in the pit how much better my life would become, it would have given me some solace in the midst of the storm. On more than one occasion, my husband has told me that he hardly recognizes me as the woman in many of the pictures. When I go back I see what he means, although I do not like to admit it. It is amazing to see the physical manifestations of stress and unhappiness etched onto one's face. Such physical evidence confirms the claim on my life and my well-being of another. It disturbs me to digress to a past time where tangible evidence preserved in photographs confirms that I gave another such power over me. It assumes a

state of powerlessness over my life and a dependency on another for the outcome of my fate. Like my female ancestors, I was participating in the madness. While many outside of my family may not have realized it, my face bore witness to the fear and stress the children and I lived under for so many years. The most difficult questions come from my boys as they question why I allowed them to be treated in such an abusive way for as long as I did. My oldest son, who bore the brunt of the hostility, no longer refers to his father as Dad or as being his father, but rather he refers to him now as Mike and has come to reject all claims his father might have on him. Those are difficult questions to revisit, and I have few redeeming answers for them. There really is no justification for failing to protect one's children. Children should be protected at any cost, and I should have taken them and left at a much earlier time. But rather than break free of the circumstances, I chose instead to live a life paralyzed by fear and uncertainty.

Many women leave frequently but come back. If it's early enough in the relationship they hope that it will get better. Sometimes they flee but they have nowhere to go or don't have enough money, so they return. "I can cope with being hurt three times a year, but I can't put my kids through this... ." (Suh, 1989, p.230)

The most interesting aspect of the situation to me was that once I was removed from the abusive situation my entire appearance began to change to that of a happy, relaxed person. Sometimes I find it difficult to recognize myself in those old pictures, and I am troubled by the fact that I allowed myself to live with my children under such circumstances for as long as I did. On one occasion my then twelve-year-old son and I were discussing our tenuous situation. At that time there was a great deal of fear and



uncertainty because at no time in my life had I ever had to take care of even myself, much less children, alone. I had gone from my father's house to my husband's house. I was ill equipped to be independent. He looked at me and said, "Mom, thank God you went back to school so you could have a job and make money to support us." I will never forget his words because they articulated thoughts I had had myself many times since finding ourselves in this situation. My former husband's departure ushered in a time of peace in the midst of turmoil. For the first time in many years we felt relaxed in our home, despite our uncertain circumstances. We had become numb to the violence we had grown accustomed to and had lived with a high anxiety level for many years and had not even realized the toll it was taking on our lives. It is only in retrospect that I can recognize that I had been trapped by physical and economic intimidation, as well as fear for my children. What would become of them since I really had no marketable skills? I had come to view the issue of violence in my world as normal. It is often easier to judge what you would do in a difficult situation such as the one I described, but the daily reality of living in it gives one both perspective and humility.

In revisiting the story of my Aunt Talma and her daughters, both of whom experienced repeated sexual abuse by their own father, I recognize that I was very critical at the time. I have come to a greater understanding of abuse and I regret that I have been so judgmental toward others who were suffering. As I have now learned, it is easy to be critical from a distance. I remember thinking that I would have divorced him and seen him rot in jail for a very long time before I would have let my kids stay in such circumstances. I would have protected my girls when they told me what they had been going through for years. But as fate would have it, when finding myself in an abusive

situation I reacted to it no better than she did. Rather, traditional morality thus conspired with fear to bind marriage partners and perpetuate a relationship bound by little else.

In the South we have come to expect that violence is ever present. Hackney has concluded in his mountains of research that, a “tendency toward violence has been one of the character traits most frequently attributed to Southerners” ...and the image is so pervasive that it compels the attention of anyone interested in understanding the South (Hackney, 2005, p. 1). Violence here is not simply a *Dukes of Hazzard* Saturday night brawl or an occasional bar room fight, but rather an accepted way to settle differences. It is seen in Southern society between adults and it is seen acted out in the schools by children. It is something that is so common and natural that it is perceived as part of the landscape. Popular culture has helped to endorse issues of violence in Southern society in the ways such topics are promoted in televisions shows, movies and music. *Independence Day*, a song recorded by Martina McBride, is such a pointed example that I would be remiss not to share it because it addresses not only the issue of violence in society but the way it is culturally endorsed.

Well she seemed all right by dawn's early light  
though she looked a little worried and weak.  
She tried to pretend he wasn't drinkin' again  
but daddy'd left the proof on her cheek.  
And I was only eight years old that summer  
and I always seemed to be in the way  
so I took myself down to the fair in town  
on Independence Day.

Well, word gets around in a small, small town  
they said he was a dangerous man  
but mama was proud and she stood her ground  
but she knew she was on the losin' end.  
Some folks whispered and some folks talked  
but everybody looked the other way  
and when time ran out there was no one about  
on Independence Day.

(CHORUS)

Let freedom ring, let the white dove sing  
let the whole world know that today  
is a day of reckoning.  
Let the weak be strong, let the right be wrong  
roll the stone away, let the guilty pay  
it's Independence Day.

Well, she lit up the sky that fourth of July  
by the time that the firemen come  
they just put out the flames  
and took down some names  
and send me to the county home.

Now I ain't sayin' it's right or it's wrong

but maybe it's the only way.

Talk about your revolution

it's Independence Day.

(REPEAT CHORUS)

Roll the stone away

it's Independence Day.

*Independence Day* is a country music song that was written by Gretchen Peters, one of the first mainstream contemporary country artists to push the political envelope. It was performed by Martina McBride, who has herself become known for being a singer of songs of a progressive subject matter. The lyrics tell of a woman's struggle with domestic abuse as seen through the eyes of her eight-year-old daughter. There was also a music video of the song that, at the time, was considered quite controversial due to its graphic scenes of domestic abuse. The mother is shown setting her house on fire with herself and her husband in it as her daughter looks on in the distance. Country music is a genre that often has as its theme the struggle of the working class and the poor. It has been ridiculed in the past, but artists like McBride and Peters seem to be giving a bit more credibility to the genre.

In addition to the themes of domestic violence, the song also makes allusions to Biblical justification for invoking force in certain circumstances, for example, "this is the day of reckoning." (The world is coming to an end and this court is being held because God has decreed a 'Day of Reckoning' as a result of sin. Ezekiel 7:1-4) and "...let the weak be strong" (Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.

Let the weak say, 'I am strong.' Joel 3:11), and finally references to the resurrection—"roll the stone away" (The angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it."—Matthew 28:2). As the song references, the event took place in a small, small town which could have been any small town, but since it is a country music song we assume it to be in the South. Since the people "looked the other way," it is clear that those onlookers in town thought this man had coming to him whatever he got. One final note on *Independence Day*. It is ironic that it was the campaign song used by Sarah Palin, a conservative Republican who ran on an anti-choice platform. McBride consented to its use and donated all of the royalties to Planned Parenthood.

#### Rural Realities

Sheldon Hackney (2005) has built a career around analyzing aspects of the region and has learned some interesting facts about how and why we tend to settle our differences by violent means and the use of force. From the onset of settlement of much of the Southern frontier, isolation was a typical characteristic. Frontier justice became the norm due to the fact that law enforcers were seldom readily available when needed. I recall the story of my uncle Hampton and the accusations of pig stealing that abruptly ended his life and the subsequent retribution of his brother in killing his murderer. Uncle Hampton took the law into his own hands and his justice was swift and unmerciful. The driving philosophy could be found in the "...eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth" scriptural foundation that virtually granted biblical permission for such actions. It does seem that "turn the other cheek" has been lost somewhere in this translation. This type of justice was still in effect as recently as the early 1900s in rural areas of Georgia.

Historically speaking, that is simply not that long ago, and many areas of the region are more isolated today than they were then due to the failure of economies in the areas. The tendency toward violence remains and is supported in many cases by the isolated condition of the area.

Of the twenty-five cities that ranked the highest in violence in America twenty-three of them were Southern cities, New York City and Detroit being the non-Southern departures from the norm (Reed, 1982, p. 139). This fact was a bit of a surprise to me as I had always felt relatively safe in spaces in the South. One long-term study by Hackney addressed the rates of homicide and suicide in the region compared to other parts of the country. Hackney (2005) found that high murder and low suicide rates constitute a distinctly Southern pattern of violence (p. 3). His study found further that in the South in relation to the North, “there are high rates of homicide and assault, moderate rates of crime against property, and low rates of suicide” (p. 2). It seems that we are far less likely to kill ourselves and, if we do kill someone else, it will most likely be a dispute in which one feels compelled to defend his honor or a dispute related to a domestic issue. It implies that if you can steer clear of these volatile situations [mostly those involving women and money] in the South then you will most likely be safe. He found that the South is the area in which people had the least propensity to destroy themselves. Although he looks at conditions such as poverty or the conflict that impending modernization often initiates, he could come up with no clear reason why Southerners tend to resort to violence to resolve conflict, just that it tended to be not only accepted in some circumstances but even encouraged.

He pointed out that in many cases violence seems to have become a societal norm. In matters where one's honor comes into question, it appears to be almost an expectation that violence is acceptable, even expected. The members of this society would actually consider one who would step away from a fight cowardly. Between the two authors, Hackney and Reed, one interesting fact emerged. Despite the fact that both have researched and written extensively on the topic of violence in the South, neither addressed the issue of violence specifically perpetrated upon women. They have little more to say concerning the use of violence against children.

### Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child

As has been the case in the maintenance of patriarchy in the region, as well as the use of force to maintain and subdue slaves, people in the region are quick to reference the Bible in both the promotion and support of the use of violence to subdue children. Almost everyone can cite the scripture, "Spare the rod, spoil the child," be they Christian or not. It is a scripture that I became familiar with from a young age, as there was no aversion in my family to spanking. My first recollection of a spanking was when I was probably four or five and had been repeatedly warned to stay out of the street. But when my ball rolled out of my reach, I ventured into the no man's land of Woodland Way after which time I was swiftly reprimanded with a stern swat to my bottom. It would be the first of many swats, some not so loving, to come. Ironically, my husband recalls being spanked for the same infraction of the rules many miles away in Claxton, Georgia. There is, however, a great deal of difference between a spanking and a beating. That is a distinction where the waters muddy around here. At the same home where I received my

first atonement for disobedience, I remember witnessing a disturbing event just across the street from our house.

My parents were friendly with most of the people living around us. We lived in a subdivision and my daddy knew some of them from his work at the mill and others simply because they were neighbors. However, we did not associate with the people across the street, and I do not recall why. Perhaps they practiced some weird religion or worse yet, no religion; but for whatever reason they were social outcasts on the street. What I do recall was that on multiple occasions the children living in that home would be playing in their front yard with their father in close proximity. I was too young to discern the precipitating events that prompted his outbursts, but it was a regular occurrence see this man beating his children in the front yard with the closest weapon at hand, which was the garden hose. How that must have hurt on those tiny wet bare legs. Clearly, this is where spanking crosses the line into a beating, and discipline moves into the realms of abuse. Although I do a lot of threatening to spank, I do little actual spanking. I am, however, not above swatting a bottom with a wooden spoon on extreme occasions such as when danger to the child may result—like running into the street or venturing near the water.

My own experiences with abuse increased in intensity as I grew older. My stepmother Margie regularly employed violence in her child-rearing practices. In her case it was rarely used for teaching children to behave, but rather as an outlet for her own personal frustrations. She employed the belt as her weapon of choice but a hairbrush or any nearby object would do; and I remember vividly jumping around on my bed to escape her reach, hopping like a cat on a hot tin roof to avoid the strap's stinging contact



with my bare legs or back. A temporary reprieve could be gained by hiding under my bed to escape her hateful wrath; but even then, I had to come out sometime, and my escape just sent her into a deeper rage making the results more painful. There was a price to be paid and on many days I went to school with welts on my arms, legs, and back that later turned to black and blue reminders of her hateful disposition. As my sister and I came to learn over time, the best way to survive her brutality was to simply avoid being in her presence. To this day I never understood how my father could allow her to abuse us so. I would much rather have taken a spanking from my father than her because at least his spankings were tempered with a measure of compassion because he loved us. Her spankings were not spankings; they were beatings and they were compelled by white-hot uncontrolled rage. I contend that this woman was devoid of love in any capacity, even in her twisted shows of emotion to her own dysfunctional son. We were often told when we got spankings by my father that we were getting them because he loved us; as a child it seemed like a most perplexing form of love, and I had great difficulty with the philosophy of “this will hurt me more than it is going to hurt you,” but as a parent I have come to understand its meaning. I see little relationship between violence against the helpless and love. To avoid violence, my little sister and I spent as much time away from this house as possible. Ironically, our safety was found in the solitude of the island’s forests and even in the presence of complete strangers at the island marina - far from our stepmother’s reach. Although Susan Schechter claims that it “is much more likely that the man who batters the women is also the batterer of the child, especially in cases of severe abuse” (Suh, 1991, p. 231), hooks addresses the issue of violence against children

and the culpability of women, those nurturers in our society, in the abuse of helpless children.

Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultures of domination children do not have rights...ours is a culture that does not love children, that continues to see children as the property of parents to do with as they will. Adult violence against children is a norm in our society...the reality that women are often the primary culprits in everyday violence against children simply because they are the primary parental caregivers...the fact is that masses of children are daily abused verbally and physically by women and men. (hooks, 2000, p. 73)

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this type of domestic violence is how there are many who are aware of it but, despite this fact, choose to ignore it. It is as though it is so commonplace that we are desensitized to the brutality. What goes on within the sanctity of home's four walls is sacred, not to be broached by those from the outside. Although I do recall the police being called on several occasions to the house across the street, there were many more times that it was ignored by those aware of the episodes. I do not know what became of those poor children, but my guess is that by now their grandchildren are beating their own children, perhaps in some front yard somewhere for the world to see and ignore. It is the fact that in the South, perhaps other regions as well, violence has come to be seen as simply being a part of the landscape. It is an ordinary part of our existence, and it is generally seen as a live and let live mentality. I have touched on one facet of violence, and that is violence against children inflicted upon them by their mothers. So often when we think of violence, our images of the perpetrators automatically turn to men. However, as we have seen in the account given above,

women can be equally as brutal to children as can men.

Emphasizing male domination makes it easy for women, including feminist thinkers, to ignore the ways women abuse children because we have all been socialized to embrace patriarchal thinking, to embrace an ethics of domination which says the powerful have the right to rule over the powerless and can use any means to subordinate them. In the hierarchies of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, male domination of females is condoned, but so is adult domination of children. And no one really wants to call attention to mothers who abuse. (hooks, 2000, p. 74 )

In his text on Southern violence Hackney (2002) cited a study by Martin Gold that related differences in child rearing practices in the South to our preference for hostility. He concluded that “there was a positive correlation between the incidence of physical punishment commonly used in the child-rearing practice of certain groups and the rate of homicide for that group. He concluded that physical disciplining of children leads to aggression against others rather than against self” (Gold in Hackney, 2002, p. 12). When considering this question of tolerating violence in the region, the history of the area must be addressed as a causal factor for its casual acceptance. Have those who live in a place that has historically used violence as a measure to subdue other human beings become, at least to a degree, desensitized to its dehumanizing effects on others? Another study he cited was one undertaken by William and Joan McCord in which they found there was no strong relationship between methods of disciplining and criminality except when the child is rejected by his parents or they provide him with a strong deviant role model; harsh discipline does less damage than does neglect (McCord & McCord, in

Hackney, 2005, p. 12). Studies often reveal confusing and contradictory conclusions; but in the absence of studies one can suppose that common sense must prevail, and that in most cases violence breeds more violence and perpetuates the use of power and force against the powerless, especially in cases where children are the victims. Clearly, whether the heads of households are men or women, dysfunction and stress often lead to the abuse of children.

There are more mother-only families living in the South and poor children are more likely to live in mother-only families, to have parents who are younger (under 30), less educated, and unemployed (Rogers, 2000, pp. 1-3). These are all mitigating conditions that breed violence. Violence adversely effects everyone under its influence; but since there are so many mother-only families, more attention needs to be directed to ways impoverished women can be supported in their climb out of poverty. Clearly, women and children are a segment of the population that is severely impacted. “Lower rural educational attainment typically translates into reduced access to existing occupational opportunities and lower earnings” (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 37) to those who need it the most, the region’s young women. Whether or not it can be found that in the South violence is culturally patterned, one conclusion is certain: violence leads to tragedy for those involved and in turn contributes to the oppression of entire populations, as has shown to be the case in the South.

In addition to the casual acceptance of the use of force to remedy conflict and shape the behavior of children, members of the culture convey socio-cultural attitudes in more subtle ways to their members. Stories told by the dominant cultural group (the in-group) with a shared reality depict its own superior position as natural. In order to

comprehend the legitimacy of women's stories, one must first understand the specific power structure (economic, political, and social institutions and dominant ideologies) in which they are constructed and told and then frame them within that context (Romero & Stewart, 1999, p. xiv). From this vantage point one can begin to understand the cultural distortions that we, as women, have come to view as natural. Within this structure the influence of the rural nature of the region is articulated not so much through the use of words but rather by a subtle feedback mechanism imbedded in people's daily practice.

Several studies were located that focused on the effects of poverty on rural children in the South, including the research conducted by Harris & Zimmerman (2003), *Children and Poverty in the Rural South*, Blackwell & McLaughlin (2002), *Do Rural Youth Attain Their Educational Goals?* and Rogers (2000), *Child Poverty in the Rural South*, among others. In these studies were found a number of interesting trends related to the tendencies of rural youth and, more specifically, young women who grow up in rural areas of the South. These studies conclude that residents of rural areas typically have lower educational attainment levels than do urban residents, and for children under eighteen, poverty rates are higher in the South (18.9%) than in any other region of the United States (Harris & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 1). Forty-eight percent of poor children in the rural South have parents with less than a high school education (Rogers, 2000, p. 3). The majority of the poor children in the rural South are white (Harris & Zimmerman, p. 2) and of those a larger share are 'severely poor' (family income less than 50 percent of the poverty level). That having been said, Harris found that "family income remains the single most important factor for determining the overall quality of a child's present life and long term well-being" (p. 3). Family background tends to matter more to young

women than young men, and rural girls gain more from family background and resources measures than do urban girls. For girls having college-educated parents (mothers particularly), tremendous dividends are afforded to them. Even having parents who have a high school diploma is beneficial compared to having parents who did not finish high school (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 40). In conjunction with Blackwell's findings, Harris (2003) found that teens drop out of school most often where the adults in their sphere of influence have also not finished high school. Related to these findings concerning violence, Hackney (2005) found that "...education is the single greatest predictor of a country's suicide and homicide rate (p. 6)." Based on his findings, it would then be logical to assume that the rural areas of the South have a greater tendency to violence and to suppose that if inhabitants placed more value on education, many aspects related to the quality of our lives would rise as well.

Studies by Blackwell & McLaughlin, (2002) *Do Rural Youth Attain their Educational Goals* and Shoffner and Kenkel (1986) *On the Way to Adulthood: Changes and Continuities in the Life Plans of Low-Income Southern Youth*, found data that supports the supposition that socio-cultural influences found within the culture tend to impact young women in very specific ways, ways that tend to counteract positive outcomes. Many characteristics and attitudes about education and work are shaped not only by the family but also by the community in which they live. However, family characteristics are critical determinants in the educational goals they set as well as their ultimate educational attainment. For young women, attitudes toward women's roles may influence their educational aspirations—attitudes communicated by family (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 38). Shoffner and Kenkel found that intrinsic features of the rural

subculture have been cited as affecting career choices of the rural students. For example, girls living in rural areas had access to only a very limited number of female role models in occupational careers that were outside of the expected norm. Of the respondents in this study who worked outside of the home (about half), most were employed as service workers or in other low-prestige jobs offering the girls access to few role models who could inspire them to pursue an occupation that might be viewed as unconventional in the area. Another factor in the rural subculture revealed traditional attitudes toward women's employment and found that the lower the occupational level, the greater the tendency to gender type occupations (p. 133). Kenkel reports that studies have found that girls seem to aspire to a more restricted selection of jobs. Specifically nurse, teacher, secretary, and social worker have been found to be the primary occupational choices of girls surveyed. Females also tend to make decisions related to education and employment based on family-centered values. For example, girls report not wanting to move away from family and friends in order to get the job they want. He also reports that in rural areas of the South a division of labor by sex exists as a result of women having greater responsibility for management of the home and primary care-giving responsibilities related to child rearing. Hence, perhaps the reasons related to their career choices are in anticipation of dual roles they are likely to encounter; perhaps women choose occupations that are compatible with their domestic and child-care roles. Despite the presence of formidable barriers found in rural areas, there is a trend resulting in more women than men being enrolled in colleges.

### Son, You're in a World of Trouble

In a report, *The State of the South* (1998), by Autry, Bishop, Cunniff, Guillory,

Mitchell, Rubin, & Totten, the closing decades of the twentieth century were marked by a growing feminization of the workforce, as well as the region's institutions of higher education. Some of this growth has been fueled by women being willing to work on a part-time, temporary, or contingent basis whereas men have been employed in occupations in the region that have seen a slow decline since 1980. In many cases for women this meant holding down a number of part-time jobs to make ends meet or trying to work their way through college or technical school. Very often women's marginal jobs have opened doors to greater economic opportunity that increased their economic prospects. In the past, as has already been discussed in previous chapters, Southern men with high school education or less had stable, low-skill, blue-collar jobs with decent pay or they have had the military. Some examples in this region were men who were employed by the railroads or their supporting institutional structures. However, as has already been explored, low-skill jobs are disappearing. The military is downsizing and closing slots to those with little education or criminal records. "Too many Southern men see their careers based on their ability to do specific things: make things, drive things, dig things, lift things, or pick things. The economy, meanwhile, is rewarding those – regardless of race, gender and ethnicity – who have the ability to *think* things" (Autry et al., 1998, p. 36). Of the women in the region who have attended colleges, most have put their degrees to work.

Despite the fact that women in the region are making progress on many fronts, culturally-conceived notions such as stereotyping – the preconceived notions about the capacities of people based on the irrelevancies of color, class, and gender – continues to plague the South (Autry et al., 1998, p. 36). In rural areas of the region (perhaps other



areas as well) women often continue to function within a chauvinistic vacuum that they often choose to tolerate rather than dare to buck. At this point I will offer an example in which such thinking is found to exist despite the presence of contentious litigation within employment settings. In the past I worked for a principal who was a good-ole-boy, knee slappin,' redneck, albeit a redneck with a college degree and a leadership designation. Probably the only thing that saved him from the situation I am about to describe is that, despite his lack of judgment, I do think he is a good person; but he is also a product of his culture, just as we all are. He has a good wife and two handsome boys, and he is not a pervert or a skirt chaser, just a redneck with poor discretion. Recently, he proudly came into my office to share a little south Georgia backwoods humor with me. He posed a question, "How do you tell a woman with two black eyes, no?" At this point I braced myself, I felt the blood rushing to my face and I knew my cheeks were beginning to redden—I could feel it. I tried to thoughtfully consider my response...I am not one of those people with a quick wit; however, under the right circumstances, such as this, I can be one with a quick temper. I thought to myself, "He is about to get himself in a world of trouble...I have the power at this moment to file sexual harassment charges that could end his job...surely he is NOT going to say something terribly offensive, as he is frequently known to do." I was amazed in his confidence of his perceived power over me. Of course, I had no idea of the correct response but was quite sure it would be one which was derogatory to women, for this was not the first off-color joke he had shared with me that debased women. I responded that I had no idea and with that he replied, "You don't. You've already told her twice!" I later found out that this same man had publicly told a teacher that the reason she always had headaches was that she needed a

man (he was not implying that it was himself, however). I was infuriated by such washroom humor and found myself in disbelief that he would foolishly risk his entire career, at least in this district, with a sexual harassment claim filed against him by not one woman but two, and one being the superintendent's wife! At the very least he chanced his record being unalterably tarnished. Although this man was responsible for clearly offensive behavior, in my best estimation what I tolerated was probably mild next to what many women tolerate to keep their jobs or advance. He told this joke in the presence of two other men, our school resource officer and an assistant principal who were both bent over slapping their knees with disgusting glee as I silently turned and walked away.

Stereotyping hinders communities economically and socially and interferes with educational and individual opportunities. Perhaps most perplexing in this circumstance was why I tolerated it, why the other teacher tolerated it. I ask myself this question and, much like the abusive marital relationship in which I was a participant, I think it often goes back to the path of least resistance and rocking the proverbial boat. She asked for it...she is just a troublemaker. Just as I underwent an evolution in my failed marriage and was moved toward a place of greater empowerment and understanding of the dynamics of that situation, I also have moved in my professional career. I suspect should I be put into a similar situation in the future, I would respond somewhat differently. It seems for me it has all been a learning curve. I am coming to understand that I can control only that which lies within personal control.

Autry et al. (1998) asserts that "there is now no more prejudice in the South than in the rest of the nation offers little comfort" (p. 36). Lynxwiler & Wilson (1988) in their article, *The Code of the New Southern Belle: Generating Typifications to Structure Social*

*Interaction*, assert that from whatever region of the nation they extend, stereotypes do have an impact on our lives. For women in the South the typical stereotype depicts us as being child-like and of less value than our male counterparts. Clearly, the previous example of the woman with two black eyes vividly illustrates this point. According to the authors, stereotypes function as controls in the sense that individuals internalize them. Societies begin to view them as the cultural norm and individuals begin to monitor their own behavior and constrain their public presentations in a manner that reflects the accepted ideal. Over time such behaviors are mutually accepted and become viewed as the norm (p. 123) and are directly reinforced by those with whom the Southern woman is associated. The South is a curious place; for within its borders are found those women who adhere to mass media images and classifications of Southern stereotypes that reduce us to the lowest common denominator. In reifying such stereotypes they restrict female mobility and maintain gender stratification within the region. This, in turn, lends support to the continued glorification of the Southern belle persona, which like the typical Southern woman, is typically white and relatively well to do. Such stereotypes are by nature restrictive to those to whom they are applied, and while they may serve to support the code of the South for middle and upper class women in the region, clearly they serve to undermine women in lower classes. Women in lower classes are not concerned with a reliance on traditional sex roles; they are attempting to maintain all roles in an effort to survive. Clearly there are few poor Southern belles. Adherence to traditional values and fundamentalist religious values are often credited as being to blame for the pervasiveness of gender inequality in the region; however, attitudes maintained by women in the region cannot be overlooked. In pulpits on any given Sunday one is liable to hear a sermon on

women being submissive to their husbands, and the implications such mechanisms of control exercise are not taken lightly. However, Lynxwiler and Wilson (1988) found that, for some women, traditional roles are actively sought and nurtured (p. 124), such attitudes being found as a possible explanation for unsuccessful efforts to achieve greater gender equity through legislative processes in the South. bell hooks speaks to the issue of class as having greater implications than did the issue of race as a point of division in the feminist movement, even early on.

A growing class divide separates masses of poor women from their privileged counterparts. Indeed much of the class power elite groups of women hold in our society, particularly those who are rich, is gained at the expense of the freedom of other women. Already there are small groups of women with class power working to build bridges through economic programs which provide aid and support to less privileged women. (hooks, 2000, p.52)

As I work with my students I am too often able to see the growing class divide that hooks references in the above passage. Many of my students are bright but they are poor, and I wonder how bridges can be built that will enable them to access needed resources. For women, the problem is more far reaching because it appears that class, rather than race, is the great divide. Not only are they poor, but also they are women very much under the influence of archaic traditions. While the support of both men and women is necessary, the support of women with class power is needed to make resources more accessible to all.

#### Who Then Will Lead?

Who will lead them, I thought, as I looked into their eyes this week and pondered

the fact that another year is on the brink of coming to a close. Collectively they are as vulnerable as sheep being led to slaughter. Three quarters of them come from families that live below the poverty level. Most receive free or reduced lunch and think that *everyone* receives a government subsidy check each month. This ragtag group are the students that make up our eighth grade leadership team. They are not elite, they are poor for the most part, and they know little of white privilege. They must be recommended by three teachers and two people from within the community. They must maintain no lower than a C in each class and have no behavior referrals. They must want to be a member of the team and be willing to spend the year serving others in various capacities. We meet twice a week and have lessons pertaining to leadership. They have weekly reading assignments pertaining to people who have shown great character and we watch a relatively current film that portrays the character trait we are studying. This week the character trait was perseverance. Our movie was *Rudy* and our person of outstanding character was Booker T. Washington. These are not students with marginal leadership capacities. These are shining bright stars, each of them holding great potential. Most have little family support and worry how they will navigate the waters of higher education, whether it be technical college or traditional college. All nineteen of them want to move into an educational setting beyond high school. A number of them have one or more parents who are in prison. Many live with relatives or grandparents who are doing the best they can to provide them with needed support, but many times for these families the every-day struggle to survive supersedes enrichment opportunities. I am their point of contact -- the bridge between where they are and where they want to go. Every year it is difficult to let them go and even harder to trust their fate to others at the

high school who do not know them like I do. I worry that they will get lost in the masses and give up their dreams in bitter frustration. In an effort to bridge that gap, last year I began to work with the leadership advisor at the high school to create a transition for these students that would allow me to recommend them for the ninth grade leadership team. Hopefully, this will provide them with a built-in opportunity for additional support in the form of a relationship with at least one adult in the building-upon transition. This has made handing them over to others easier. Although my best intentions are to keep up with each and every one and provide continued support and encouragement, albeit from afar, the dictates of time often sweep them away from my protective watch just as a torrent of water washes unsecured objects down its path. Soon another group of fledgling leaders will be entrusted to my care, and I will have but a limited amount of time to make a difference in their lives as well. It is always uplifting to see those that have moved on at events like our high school football games and see that miraculously they are surviving, even exceeding, without me. After all, that is really what we want for our own children, and it is what we want for our students. We want to be able to toss them into the air and watch with great satisfaction as they fly away and eventually soar to the heights of mountains, all by themselves. Clearly, when we are able to celebrate these moments with students, we can rest in great assurance that we have done our jobs.

In our lesson on perseverance we were able to glean some tangible life lessons. The students learned that Booker T. Washington achieved an amazing level of success despite his humble beginnings as a slave and that Rudy too, through perseverance, managed to set a goal and persist until he achieved it. Neither Washington nor Rudy were born into homes where they were given much support from their families.

Washington lived with a step-father who insisted he not go to school and instead work in the salt mines, and Rudy was taunted by his Irish-American father and brothers about his pipe dream to attend Norte Dame and play football. Still they both succeeded and realized their goals. While most would agree that support from our families makes life much easier, it gave my students hope that they might still have a chance to reach their goals if they could, like Rudy and Washington, muster the strength and courage to persevere despite their humble beginnings.

In the last several decades educational opportunities have become more accessible to mainstream, middle class, American women and many have forgotten or perhaps never knew the harsh realities of educational disparity that faced women as recently as the 1980s and the time period preceding that. However, according to Stone,

This obvious opportunity for some women hides the discrimination that continues in many private and public realms and also masks the unevenness of women's advances. A quick consideration of the conditions of minority single mothers living in poverty dispels myths of vast, wide-ranging improvements. Moreover, even in education inequality persists today. (Stone, 1994, p. 1)

One objective of this work has been to analyze particular aspects of Southern culture and to make an effort to understand the implications those cultural traits have for the region's inhabitants, especially young women. While the emphasis of this work has been on rural white women, one can assume that all women in the region share in some common maladies stemming from the results of patriarchy. Clearly, with each layer of difference between women, be it color, economic status, or educational level, a tier of complexity follows, along with the incumbent burdens wrought by layers of difference.

As I think of my students and celebrate the fact that they have been given intellect, I bemoan the fact that they and their caregivers are, for the most part, in unfamiliar waters when it comes to navigating the halls of higher education. There are power structures in place that will prevent their passage when all through their lives they have heard that education is accessible to all. Does the South have the capacity to help more of their region's families improve their prospects in life, especially those headed by single parents? "Such capacity comes primarily through education, an asset that leads to increased economic well being" (Autry, et. al, p. 47). A research study, *The State of the South*, suggested some ideas targeted at those who are most disassociated with the navigation of power structures found within institutional setting, which include the following: beginning in middle and high school steering all students toward postsecondary education of some kind; beginning as early as middle school to give them exposure to a variety of careers, especially focusing on groups whose educational attainment is low; using interest inventories to steer them to pathways that help them explore their own unique talents and interests; bringing young people to campus for enrichment opportunities, tours, and summer programs; encouraging and supporting economically dual enrollment among qualified high school students through state policy programs; community colleges and universities should working to raise students horizons, especially making an effort to help those potential first-generation college students negotiate the pathways that lead to higher education, including increasing students' awareness of financial aid opportunities making materials and access more parent and student accessible; and exposing students to postsecondary and career options as a comprehensive community effort for it is the community at large that benefits when



students succeed in finding a place of contentment within society. Finally, states should fund their community colleges to reach out to those who need their services most, such as older workers, single mothers, non-English speakers, and high school dropouts, and provide them with the instruction and skills required for success in the workplace. In many ways this litany of intervention ideas meant to support at-risk marginalized students seems somewhat like a pipe dream. We are facing days of deep budget constraints in which our own jobs are threatened. Some educational institutions are operating within bare bones structures. Such conditions insure that marginalized students will face even greater difficulty navigating the waters of higher education in an effort to improve their economic status in the days to come.

## Epilogue

Many stories have been told in this work. They are simple stories of survival and the life of a child growing up in the country surrounded by home folk and family, just as most in this region do. They are stories about a life filled with contradiction lived in a beautiful place along the shores that border the Atlantic; it was a place that offered refuge from the harsh realities life often brought. They are not recollections of heroism, nor are they stories of compelling events. But in many cases they are stories that were difficult to recount. Recapitulating one's life brings with it an uneasy tension. Salvio (2001) in Whitlock speaks to this tension, "the tension between telling stories and sustaining family loyalties, articulating family secrets and properly mourning a traumatized past" is a difficult balance to strike (p. 168). They are stories of how events were responded to by people living within the region on a day-in day-out basis, and there is not much glamour here. The stories do tell of a life that emerged from an interesting set of cultural circumstances, in what I still consider to be a unique region of the country, the rural South. They illustrate the effects customs have upon the lives of those living in these spaces. From the stories a number of findings have been gleaned. For example, there continues to be a class divide among women in the state that limits opportunities for less affluent women. Although women in more metropolitan areas of the state may enjoy increased opportunities related to educational and employment opportunities, those in more rural regions continue to be deprived of such opportunities and are, in fact, hindered by cultural constraints such as family, community, educational, and religious institutions in which they interact. Conditions such as these breed and reinforce cyclical poverty from which escape is nearly impossible especially in the absence of outside supports.

Those marginalized within rural areas are often deprived of necessary agency needed to improve their living conditions. In rural areas of the state there are often entrenched thought patterns that suppress human potential based on race, class, and gender and such thought patterns continue to dominate thinking. Females here are often socialized in a way in which they continue to ascribe to sexist thinking and values and fail to understand the detrimental effects of such cyclical thinking on themselves and subsequent generations. Before women here can change patriarchy we have to change ourselves and economic self-sufficiency often gained through education is needed if women are to thrive. Finally, in the final analysis it is believed that family and community carry tremendous potential to influence young people with regard to dominant thought patterns and influencing social change. Although often confining many of the stories told reveal that within our culture there is reason to hope.

I struggle to tell stories of self *and* stories of the South, but they are difficult to separate. It is often impossible to isolate one from the other because as we live our lives each day they have been encapsulated, each by the other; they are inseparable. We live in a strangely wonderful place, and the stories offered in this narrative present ample opportunity for cultural criticism and cultural analysis. “Narrative analysis assumes that a good story is itself theoretical...when people tell stories they employ analytic techniques to interpret their worlds and using stories as data and using analysis to arrive at themes that illuminate the content across stories” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 196). In looking back, paying attention to my feelings, thoughts, and emotions, I have tried to understand the experiences I have lived through. Re-imagining the stories of our lives allows us to show others how they can resist the forms of social controls that threaten to silence or

marginalize themselves or others. They speak to the transformation from an old self to a new one, and the transformations were almost always the result of fractures which occurred in my life.

Fractures inevitably involve a painful break and a subsequent time of healing. Left to their own devices, they will render one deformed if not attended to properly. After adequate healing has been allowed to transpire, a new mended limb is the result. While the limb is mended, where that fracture was made, a weakness will always exist. Perhaps others will not be able to detect the weakness, but for the one who bears it, the pain often resurfaces at the most unexpected times. Over time we learn ways of soothing the pain, of coping with past events. Writing stories allows me, and perhaps others, to re-imagine our lives. According to Whitlock (2007), “our living selves are located within the fractures; telling and understanding and re-imagining demythologizes the cut-off lives. Likewise, silence—not telling—upholds mythologies of a cut-off, Lost Cause, South. Hope for a progressive South lies within the stories from fractures” (p.74). Our stories never end.

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