

**In Search of Identity:
A Puerto Rican Dropout Tells Tales Out of School**

BY

GINI BLAUT-SORRENTINI
B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1977
M.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1999

DISSERTATION

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Defense Committee:

William H. Schubert, Chair and Advisor
William Ayers
Peter Hilton, St. Xavier University
Brian D. Schultz, Northeastern Illinois University
Michael Klonsky, DePaul University

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Summary

This dissertation is the study of how the educational identity of a Puerto Rican woman school dropout was shaped by key life experiences. The research consists of stories of formative life experiences that are both autobiographical and fictionalized. Therefore, it draws upon the life experiences of the author; however, to mask the involvement of others names and places have been rearranged to protect participants by piecing together composite experiences and adding fictional variations in ways that remain true to the medium studied. Nonetheless, times, places, events, and characters remain unidentifiable. Thus, the study draws upon an eclectic array of research methods prominent in the field of curriculum studies, including narrative inquiry, autobiography, teacher lore, arts-based research, ethnography, and fictionalized inquiry portrayals. Theoretically, the study theoretically draws substantially upon William H. Schubert's conceptualization of *outside* (of school) *curriculum*, the notion of curriculum as *currere* advanced by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet, pragmatic educational theory of John Dewey, perspectives on teaching by William Ayers, dimensions of critical theory drawn principally from Michael Apple and Henry Giroux, and memoir writing as healing by Louise DeSalvio. When integrated, these theoretical perspectives shaped the inquiry for this study by framing the fictionalized stories of my experience (both in and out of school settings) into forms of education, thus of curriculum, that address the basic curriculum question (What is worthwhile?) to illustrate ways in which "curriculum is the interpretation of lived experience" (Schubert, 1986, p. 33). The stories that portray such illustration focus on the following: life as a dropout because of Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking background; the saving grace of a school in the United States patterned after Summerhill School in England; a relationship with a gifted Puerto Rican artist; seeing the prejudicial treatment of Puerto Rican art, work with youths from

gang and prison experience; contrasts among education in lives of impoverished urban youth, an elite private university, and a major urban state university. In four concluding essays I amplify lessons from graduate studies, summary reflections, conclusions, and hopes that flow from the dissertation.

Just as in deciding
how to live our lives
we are all
perpetually students
of what it means to live wisely,
so in deciding
what a formal course of studies should be
we are all perpetually students of curriculum,
and we cannot escape this fact.

George Willis, William H. Schubert, Robert V. Bullough, Jr., Craig Kridel, and John T. Holton (in *The American curriculum: A documentary history*, 1993, p.1)

We should be reminded (as the women's movement so powerfully taught)
that the personal is political,
that we embody a stance and a social statement in our experiences, our choices, our daily lives.
We should also know that there is no politics without people,
that what we do or do not do matter in its detail.
We can, then, stop waiting
for the big moment
when we can be strong, courageous, and correct,
and get on with the business of living as if it made a difference.

Bill Ayers in J. Dan Marshall, James T. Sears, William H. Schubert *Turning points in curriculum: A contemporary American memoir*, 2000, p.196)

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Thesis with Theoretical and Methodological Concerns

This is a compendium of autobiographical essays. I wrote it as a graduate student in education whose schooling journey includes being branded mentally retarded in seventh grade, becoming a high school dropout, a Dean's honors college graduate, and being awarded a Trustee Scholarship for the Ph.D. Program in Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Inspiration for the writings was provided by Professor Schubert (1986) who wrote in his opus magnum encyclopedia of a textbook *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility* that "curriculum is the interpretation of lived experiences" (-p.33).

The courage was fed by Professor Bill Ayers on a story I shared about a gangbanger who saved my life. I had taken courses on curriculum and writing with Professor Ayers and in response to that Chicago gangs story he gifted me the praise I was a "most powerful critical personal essayist."

Autobiographical dissertations were not unusual from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Chicago at the time I attended. I was regularly impressed by the number of articles and books published written by fellow students while still in the pursuit of degrees. Many of the writings were based on experiences colleagues had as teachers in the public school system. Now considered a classic on sharing the experience of teaching and learning, *Teacher Lore: Learning from Our Own Experience* (Schubert &

Ayers, 1999) was created by a writing and teaching team, Professors Schubert and Ayers, who would in a most prolific manner make many outstanding historical contributions to the development of autobiography as a tool, a methodology, a vision, and a writing journey in curriculum studies. I dare say the full import of their pioneering efforts in this regard has yet to be adequately applauded, but there can be no arguing the number of their students who've become known for the quality of their writing and the power of the passion for their students that their autobiographical sharing demonstrates.

I was privileged to be a student along with Brian D. Schultz as he began work on what would become *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* (Schultz, 2008), a most phenomenal telling of the creation of political activism in the most unlikely of poor urban settings. It is also a story of love, broken hearts, passion filled teaching, the beauty of innocent idealism, and so much more.

I had the privilege of sharing classroom fellow colleague time with Gregory Michie (1999), who published *Holler If You Hear Me: The education of a teacher and his students*. His writings are as moving and beautiful as I got to know his actions as a teacher to be. One such incident that stayed close to my heart was a story about a kid and a gun used for hunting. The event and the story and the legal implications among other issues made Michie's decisions heroic for the chance he took on behalf of the student. He reminded me of missionaries that took life endangering postures against the powers that be.

Another teacher walking on the side of the angels and writing heart breaking narrative was Chris Liska Carger (1996) whose *Of Borders and Dreams: A Mexican-American Experience of Urban Education* - came out of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Illinois.

I confirmed how widespread the field's acceptance of autobiographical methodology while participating in meetings of the American Educational Research Association. It was the thrill of a lifetime to see up close and in person some of the field's rock stars. I wondered with delight and utter joy into meetings with writers from whom I'd held diverse discussions in my head. Joel Spring, one megastar I worshipped since reading his impressive *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Spring, 1972), had become a recurring hero as each of his outstanding revelatory publications became available to me. My own horrific experiences within public school made me completely relate to Joel Spring's (1989) analysis of the "sorting machine". Curiously, whatever fragment of my high school dropout to University of Chicago doctoral student journey that I shared to identify myself prompted immediate encouragement to write an autobiographical dissertation.

In *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995) William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet are given credit for introducing "an autobiographical theory of curriculum, denoted by the Latin root of curriculum, *currere*," meaning to run the course, or the running of the course. Pinar and Grumet (1976), in *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, elaborated a method by means of which students of curriculum could sketch the relations among school

knowledge, life history, and intellectual development in ways that might function self-transformatively” (Pinar et al, 1995, p.515).

I have benefited from books, conversations, lectures, and all manner of information delivery systems concerning matters of dissertation methodology, the theoretical perspective followed, what one’s personal educational philosophy entails, and what are my areas of interest with many of the writers contributing to the field of curriculum. Many philosophers I never met but with whom I had intense conversations in my head gave me strength, food for thought, and validation when wielding imaginary spears against enemies, both real and superficial. One my adopting Dad held in very high esteem, I would also fall for, brilliant book after book, the educational genius that is John Dewey. In *How We Think* (1933) Dewey wrote “the native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind” (Preface, p. v). It is that respect and genuine appreciation for the value of the unspoiled wonderment that is the innocent child’s mind that made me love him so. These secret intellectual relationships with writers and later, artists’ paintings, gave inspiration to this vulnerable child, kept under wraps for fear of ridicule and humiliation. Around fifteen I knew to seriously hide questions and all manner of quite conscious knowing. It got old hearing I was too young.

Books like novels in their graphic descriptions of the indifference of teachers and the unfairness of the educational system made me boil. I couldn’t understand - why if someone of a writer’s standing and power to show with

moving words the blatant injustice perpetrated against innocents - there wouldn't be some action in reaction. Decades later I would be reading some of the same great describers established as town criers against the abuse and failure of public education against the poor, the powerless. *Death at an early age* by Jonathan Kozol (1976) I read as a tenth grade dropout. Herbert Kohl's (1968) *36 Children* was known to me then. John Holt's *How Children Fail* (1964) was part of those heart wrenching truth tellers I read as a teenager.

These days there are new injustice fighters wielding mighty quills now inside machines. The graduate school of education where I found my thirst for sharing harsh experiences in autobiographical essays nourished produced contemporary story tellers published in articles and books derived from autobiographical dissertations. Based on teachers' heartbreaking experiences in the public school system, these naturally love giving teachers live Noddings' (1992) caring philosophy as illustrated in *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*.

It is noble to fight injustice. It is brave and decent to sacrifice to help students grow and have a chance. It is necessary to utilize any and all roads to progress, improvement, opportunity. *Lo ultimo que se pierde es la experanza*. It is a rare and beautiful thing to behold the aha moment, to participate in such a state of true grace, to be aware of the power to be the fertilizer, the water, the ray of sunshine that lets the little seed bloom. Teachers are either nurturers or gatekeepers. They either open the gates of heavenly possibilities or wickedly pitch the fork that is their power to cast the little vulnerable into hell. One can varnish

it, hide it, excuse it, disguise it. It is endless the ways “The System” can keep otherwise wise souls occupied so their energy is wasted in minutia. Fascinating discussions could be built on whether it is hegemony or conspiracy. Sometimes a trial and years of sacrificial lambs will prove legally and historically a true conspiracy as was the case with the assassination of Black Panther, Fred Hampton. Sometimes the leaders that could show and teach the sophisticated reach and automatic repeats of hegemony are eliminated before they have too much of an impact. Just label them *communists, dangerous, antipatriotic, un-American, community activists*, whatever is in fashion to feed fear and alienate.

I had noticed it happened in science and in medicine for all who challenge the existing status quo. History is full of the humiliations, the rejection, the accusations of madness, all that is alienating, destructive for so many revolutionary great thinkers, world changers. I had first noticed it happened throughout centuries of art and its masterful suffering creators. Threat to the powers that be. Be they challengers of thinking, or of money, or of power. Same difference.

So does it continue within education, the weeding out of all that isn't cookie cutter, the docile, submissive, please-let-me-exist-student or teacher within the system. Forget critical thinking skills. Public schools warehouse bodies while students become pawns of political ploys endlessly employing sadistic forms of evaluating, testing, judging. Even when the spirit isn't broken, the maimed student will internalize their inferiority, their intellectual limitations, their life's unlikely opportunities. Success by any means necessary, including cheating

and lying, is rampant in all schools regardless of social class. The commonality of the bully should surprise no one who sees an educational system that is constructed to recompense competition, not team or community building, not a life celebrating being of service, the humble smile of a kindness shared.

Schools, very sadly, have become ever more expensive day care centers that channel the different to the streets of self-destructive hopelessness or the same rage turned outward in the form of mischief graduated to ever more violence and all manner of crime. If you don't domesticate the animal, if you can't corral the sheep, you have to expel it. No lone wolf, no leaders, nothing alpha wanted. The Machiavellian beauty, the true wickedness is how successful the system is in convincing the lone student it is their own fault. Before I was irretrievably broken, I ran for dear life out of a beginning tenth grade class into what would become a never ending struggle with a questioning of the pursuit and processes of education. Hence the autobiographical bent finding encouragement in its utilization for storytelling, particularly when those may include educational travels or reflections on learning.

A little innocent frog was the last sigh that spilled me out of school into the exciting up in arms world of 1969. I knew there was no way I could suffocate snuff and mutilate a living beating heart. The pathetic crucified creature was this soul's exit visa. At fifteen I was terrorized into leaving school before I was formally flunked out. I had some inner strength not yet damaged beyond repair that genuinely didn't understand why it was so evil I was Puerto Rican. Not logical I thought that where one's family lived should determine so much. I knew

I wasn't retarded. The intelligence tests were in a language and format as foreign to me as a second language is to most Americans. I knew I wasn't about challenging authority, having come from a family of teachers who loved education and read serious books for fun. No logic for the rejection from school and kids, you'd have thought I was a contagious terminal disease.

But I knew enough to get the hell out of Dodge. There are some faces of broken spirits I see clearly in my heart who I saw destroyed beyond mending, saw the permanence of their goodbyes in a last look. All these decades later their memory hurts, tears out old wounds. This is as true of dead loved ones as of bright curious stilled spirits made into walking wounded. All joy squeezed as if bodies were toothpaste holders, not soul containers. Schools producing death, disease, destruction. Dropouts. The D before the flunking F.

People have teased I have been made to pay for dropping out by having to forever return for more credentialing. There is always some truth in a joke. Of the many mistakes I embarrass myself revisiting for its learning teaching usefulness, dropping out at fifteen is not a regret I would time machine redo. And once there was enough time, success in tough schools' honors validations, I have shared the pain and trauma of that vulnerable lonely retarded branded reject of an intellectual deficit of a useless garbage considered misfit to show the miserable failure that the system succeeds at being.

Not so for the University of Chicago departure. That is a regret to burden-carry right into the last storage vault. Though I did beggar inquire ways to leave,

no administrator, professor, office, individual, or information pursued by this misfit in attendance there was able to secure the vital option of how to formalize the exit into a master's degree in anthropology. It never has ceased to amaze me how the educational system sorts and gets rid of the pesky ones one way or another. In the end of course the institution is always right. All anyone said was they did not have or give masters' degrees as it was an exclusively doctoral program. Years later it would turn out I would find I was a few pages away from such a degree had I known to negotiate something equivalent to a plea arrangement. Agree to never come back and you qualify for the masters with two professors reading one of your term papers and saying okay, since I had the three secret keys completed: I had met the years of attendance residency, the necessary number of courses taken, and good A & B grades for good standing.

The lesson I have learned about schools is that sometimes they are more of a business, or a maze of administrative or bureaucratic stumbles, or an isolated tower of exclusivist blue bloods of the brain. Schools are not search engines looking for highly motivated, hungrily reading, curiously searching souls seeking answers for fixing problems or developing skills or contributing to history or analysis of problems. Sometimes the problem is the student doesn't know they are not supposed to ask questions. Better to be the quiet obedient invisible place holder that finds the key to the top grade, with no thought to learning or pose critical questions of any kind. Absolutely, oh yeah, as if the teacher were an animal, avoid eye contact lest they think you are challenging or wanting to speak. Unless directly challenged, then you have to look. Don't make the mistake of

shamefully looking at your shoes when accused as they interpret you are admitting guilt. For years I heard common sense let teachers read body language accurately and I recall how no one saw I was showing deference, respect to authority by looking away, as I reflected the shame of being corrected or reprimanded while the teachers were certain my not looking directly at their eyes meant admission of guilt. Look, don't look. Even with the supposedly apparently obvious turns out what you see is not what you think you see.

Schools are also increasingly complex mazes of bureaucratic administrative tricks. If you are not schooled in this area and lack the network or family experiences to process this, the system can be rid of you even if you have the intellectual hunger and possibilities to contribute. This is true in so many ways it would be comical if it wasn't so expensive and destructive. I have shared some of my tragic blunders in academia in the hope it may help someone avoid such a messy puddle.

What students need and use education for is an open ended concern for institutions. I started as I finished, with a basic survival need for employment and financial independence. It would have saved blood, sweat, and tears had I discovered early on one highly specialized thing to study. No such luck. It would have been helpful to have had some stability and encouragement from either school or the family base. No lottery hit there either. The use of such despair in autobiographical sharing is how easy it makes empathy and encouragement for the many who find themselves on the wrong side of possibilities.

As I completed a master's in education I observed two experiences repeating. A doctorate as beyond a key to university teaching has side effects not quite anticipated. It turns out a journey in the pursuit of learning and reading and satisfying self or challenges others imposed on one's intellectual capabilities may crash as a big life failure when the degree is not completed. I observed worthy students get derailed by being their family's steady captains out of financial and emotional shipwrecks. Useful skills and strengths that got students from backgrounds not historically numerous as academic successes also made them uniquely qualified for bailing out dysfunctional families going down in all manner of sinking ships.

The extra learning and opportunity that I idealistically thought of any educational pursuit made it a plus is not such a simple matter after all. In recent times I saw a hard working financially savvy Latina female bankrupted by her successful completion of two advanced degrees. I also have seen some of the hardest thinking and reading community activists who didn't finish graduate degrees lament it as the most regretful chapter in their life. Many wish they hadn't begun such degrees as it gave others a whip to sting hit one as lazy or intellectually incapable or worse.

The pursuit of learning is a complex matter that has and will continue to be studied in all manner of methods and perspectives. I have written autobiographically about some of these issues from my particular view and in a narrative format with writing that has at times flowed organic and at others feels artificially imposed upon in its creation. As I attempt to discuss this from an

exclusively historical and theoretical perspective I can't help sprinkling the presentation with stories from life in the autobiographical manner I've become accustomed to. It is a style, a manner of claiming a voice, an experience, an analysis of an experience that doesn't always lend itself to easy pegging. We are not a bunch of specimens that can be pinned to a bulletin board with identifying labels underneath.

Hence the value of autobiography. Its uniqueness. Its painful travel of learning and sharing. I do not enjoy pointing out my own foolish mistakes except as illustrations for others not to repeat. Don't go down that dark alley. In the process of the writing for this collection of essays I found the one speaking the loudest to my writing production issues to be Louise DeSalvo (1999) in her *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling our Stories Transforms our Lives*. As she makes clear, some writing can be damaging, and some of us trampled and mangled souls should be making such confessional deposits on a couch staring at a ceiling. I continue to be surprised how unaware of financial limitations many professors have become, as if just anyone can both locate and afford good mental health care. Perhaps there is some hidden magical place where psychiatrists don't cost an obscene amount an hour.

One of the sad little discoveries of my autobiographical writings was that they happened at a stage in my life and within family circumstances that made them awkward. It is easier to be bold in truth writings if you're setting is safe from repercussions. For those writing about their "at risk" students or subjects to observe in participant observation type of anthropological musings there may be

little to risk exposing. Not true for the student coming from the type of dysfunction that creates dropouts. It depends how deep the cut is going to go.

The kind of naked exposure of one's truths can produce healing and transformative writing. I found it can also be quite emotionally painful. It can also contain the potential to damage relationships with people who may feel alluded to in the writings in negative or critical ways. It turns out that for people, institutions, and experiences, there is practical usefulness for living in or continuing certain levels of lies and denial. As the power and rapid dissemination of information continues to spread at the speed of light at the click of an internet send key, one writer's work even if packaged as fictional can become quite the complication.

The examination of procedures, methods, and policies for contemporary creation of dissertations can hardly proceed without deep review as the existence of today's search engines and the rapidity of email communication challenges so much of past approaches in research. Once you could have a complex question take years to dig out of a dusty library and look to prove in far away field work that now any internet search engine blink of an eye answers with extensive listings of articles, research, experts on the matter in question, and countless contacts in easy compilations and access routes. When the question of originality in research is so newly challenged by what technology has facilitated and forever changed, the uniqueness of utilizing autobiographical writing as a way to tell a story, document learning journeys, and other sharing of lived experiences grows

in its appeal and usefulness. There is also the fact that one can hardly copy the autobiographical truths of another soul in an over the shoulder wink.

I wrote a story about a gangbanger who saved my life. I could say the lesson learned was to hit the floor when shots are heard. It is a literal truth utilized quite practically a few life saving times since that occasion. I've had readers ask me about my gang or prison experiences from that story. I felt I should add a disclaimer: I neither gangbanged or served time, ever. I was doing social justice community activism, though I didn't see it that way then or now. I was just living life, helping friends who could defend themselves from life even less than I. The story wrote itself. The process of the writing of essays is still new and what I have valued is that I learned about the creation of the writing itself. The process of knowing and the journey were more important than arriving at the destination. When I got a degree I knew there would be no applause at the end, and fortunately in my head I had already decided what was interesting was to notice how I went from not knowing to learning something.

I did not anticipate I would ever find a place or persons who would encourage or applaud my journaling the actual process of the traveling or I may have slowed down enough to keep a diary. I received criticism for the photography aspect of the documentation of my travels as lacking in artistic or commercial value, of it having little career possibilities, of it being an expensive luxury with little justification for being. I sought out and found positive corners for this and other creative pursuits. Nonetheless, there is a cost for energy expenditures. One of the truths I have learned from my writings is how much I

had to defend my very existence on earth, let alone what activities or ideas I pursued. This is not only often true for those who want to go after artistic paths not supported within the family, but those who know early on how much they were not wanted within a family, nor within a school system. Get out of Dodge and follow your intuition lest you live long enough to realize how right you were all along and how pathetically inside the most limited and useless of boxes the grumpy old failed institutions, paths, or family members were.

My experience within my family reminded of duels in academia. Both appeared to waste time and energy in endless intellectual spars to prove right on some silly position or another. They seemed enamored with constructing and defending some position the way others hold on to political stands. I wondered if those family members had been irretrievably damaged by schools and their narrowness. I also considered my disdain was rooted in my regard for social and political activism and practical problem solving. I thought to be fair perhaps I was the peg that didn't fit.

I had so many funny stories about my father whom I called Mister Theory and my mother Ms. Practice that when I got excited about Marxism and modes of production and social relations it sort of got enthused by dualities in life and nature. Day and night. Man and woman. Mister Theory wrote and lectured and didn't like getting his hands dirty. Ms. Practice only wanted to sell radical newspapers and yell at the authority paternal power figures wherever and however. I had great respect for physical labor and vocations that involved actual sweat equity. Mister Theory criticized I would promote dangerous dumbing

down for the minority masses by thinking vocational training provided practical and useful skills for life in general and employment in particular. The last dream job I aggressively pursued and was offered was to direct a vocational school which my father pleaded and forbade me to shame him by accepting. I went against the intuition and desire to please my destiny and pursuits and lived to deeply regret such a decision. But then he became truly ill and the sacrifice made to please him became a kind of last wish fulfilled. If only for his sake, again, not on my behalf or for my benefit, but in keeping with his political philosophies and self image.

It turned out that in my writings I did a great deal of reflecting on my family, my schooling, my decisions, philosophical stands, the paths chosen, and what I felt was right and what was a mistake. There were moments that felt like a life review. There were moments of insight such as the simple truth of the value of intuition and the high price to pay for going against it. There was much reflection on job opportunities and school options abandoned both to please and appease a father whom I did not realize was lost to such negativity; nothing in me or even in life would ever please nor appease. The wounds too deep. The disappointments too great. The anger too close to the surface. No one ever warned me “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

That was more my truth than that which I wondered about: why anyone would insist what’s meant to be is meant to be or “everything happens for a reason.” I did not think accidents that killed loved ones were predestined anymore than I thought life was so prewritten there was no point in fighting for

opportunities if everything is so ordained. The autobiographical narrative allowed for the sharing of some naked truths while underneath the state of grace that is forgiveness was found missing in action.

Chapter 2

Autobiographical Musings on Autobiographical Writing

It is a joy and a curse to be doing autobiographical writing at this stage of life and for dissertation purposes. Profound reflections based on awkward, painful truths are not for the faint of heart. It is sometimes easier to exist with a little conscious denial to cover nasty family scars. I made the public library my sanctuary for writing and hiding, as the chaos of an old crumbling home paralleled the need of repair issues for the mob of senior citizens residing under one very unruly roof. It was necessary to take cover from the continuing bittersweet soap opera saga I've in jest called the *Beverly Hillbillys* meet the *Addams Family*. Sometimes funny, often a little crazy. Hardly predictable. Unconventional. Consistent anarchy. *Mi familia*. Life.

One of the complex realities of this type of confessional depends on how much one is willing or able to share. I know there is sexual, emotional, and physical abuse not written about because of all the problems it creates for the author with those persons related to such negative past experiences, particularly if any of the villains in such sad family sagas are still near one. It is curious how those who have not experienced certain types of particularly ugly things question veracity (e.g. as in sexual abuse) and thus a certain salting of the wound becomes another reason for not exposing such realities.

The freedom of autobiographical writing may provide useful insights about the writer and reflections on educational paths and life experiences. Yet the dangers of sharing personal information have different ramifications depending

on your status at the time. Not everyone understands the consequences of standing your ground. While at Clark University, my adoptive father wrote books, published articles in geography's traditional academic forums, founded alternative publications, and created learning annexes with a new curriculum for third world and women's studies; he generated the most dollars from proposals and research; had the largest number of students in undergraduate classes, and advised more graduate students' doctoral work than any other professor. Yet his radical perspectives cost him tenure, his job, and his quality of life. The bitterness and unfairness of the entire matter festered in his heart and soul. The guitar playing, student buddy, usually celebratory, happy being would erode over time as the hurt and betrayal permeated his reflections on life, academia, and values of justice he held sacred felt violated.

I did not learn from his experience. I became as outspoken and questioning and feisty on societal, educational, and political matters as he had been. And worse, I did not learn you are supposed to secure your place at the table before you go shooting (or writing) your mouth off. Autobiographical is as dangerous as political postures when you have not secured your financial and power of standing baseline. I continue to be surprised by teachers who think students should want to spill their guts out when a degree and grades can so easily hang in the balance.

The danger and complexity of what is potentially compromised by autobiographical sharing can't be glossed over. Intention. Motivation. Values. Politics. Consequences. What one shares and how honest one is in the process

goes far beyond what makes a good story or even whether the story is truthfully told. I watched a writing teacher I admired as a master at his craft get frustrated with students he misunderstood as uncooperative. I was unable to get this writing leader I saw as an Indiana Jones (and not for the brown hat tilted with flair, but for his usual fearlessness) to see that those who were refusing to autobiographically share their stories were literally self protecting. There was criminal activity involved in the tales not told. There was an undocumented person afraid of deportation; why share their very vulnerable non-citizenship status. More than one person in the group could have been harmed in the job seeking mission that the writing class was a part of, if facts from their pasts were shared. It isn't paranoia if they really are after you.

In graduate school I had miscommunications when classroom sharing stories involving gang activities, as an audience of teachers preferred to stand in judgment against the gang's criminal nature rather than hear tales of gang members as human beings. Sharing stories mentioning gangs and prisons, I was asked how much time I served and how it affected my employment situation. The comments were not resented, as I understood they represented what others had not voiced. I clarified I visited prisons and knew (met, dialogued, shared with, not joined) gang members. It is not difficult to understand why a student's autobiographical reality may become off limits and self censored. Basic self preservation. Teachers who idealistically ask students to "share" of their non-traditional, or out of school, curricular learning and/or life realities should be sensitive to the depth of the ramifications of what they ask. The teacher,

regardless of grade level or age taught, should also recall that no one enjoys being humiliated in public, which is what a classroom is, a public space. Of importance and also often forgotten, whether it is verbal or written autobiographical sharing, is the power position of the teacher by virtue of grading. I knew a sweetly positive beginning teacher self-doubt her classroom abilities. She analyzed every variable but the students fear of grading. Her students were risking nothing until they knew what the game rules were. She bemoaned the students were full of apathy. She read it wrong.

Stories involving drugs I shied from sharing. I ‘misplaced’ my take no prisoners spirit under the weight of the politically correct, morally conservative stance I kept crashing into in classroom settings. Unfortunate because I believe some of the best teaching moments, and preferred juicy writing, comes from real life. Mistakes can offer a lot of learning. It is no fun reserving a “still-holds-regrets-corner” in the brain. Instead of a no-outlet-for-regrets bitter memory, is it not more useful to revisit pain as a lesson?

Once I thought to share stories on how uninformed innocence got someone locked up. One painful lesson was of the legal liability of good intentions gone awry. A winter storm, a kid freezing at the bus stop, the driver gives a lift in a warm car, and the well intentioned driver goes to prison for the dope on the cold kid at the bus stop the driver neither knew about nor considered lethal legal limbo. I have heard so many tragic life mistakes that at the moment of impact the main characters did not realize were little choices that change one irrevocably.

At a juvenile detention center in Chicago, I supported a musical theater group that helped young girls put together autobiographical stories to present to audiences inclusive of family as well as representatives of the legal system that participated in the evaluation of the girls. I don't think the average citizen is aware how easy it is for young people to end up in the criminal justice system that more often than not will have brutal effects on nullifying a future. Most of these horrid little stories are not told or confessed or reviewed in centers of teaching. Just experienced and surfacing as internalized or externalized rage most often in student populations from economically challenged backgrounds. Yes, the poor. There was one mother who wanted to teach her little girl a lesson and dragged her fourteen-year-old back to the store the girl had shoplifted from to return the shiny new merchandise. The store prosecuted, the girl got a record, future employment options dashed, and in the process, the girl got raped.

In the epoch of writing for graduate degrees in education, life got exceedingly difficult to manage. A curious parallel, the writing raised so many issues that I erased as often as I created. The original autobiographical short essays would go attention deficit disorder on me. They would meander off course easily. Or worse, I would put the brakes on the writing because it was too painful or too dangerous to share. I felt from the first time I read Professor Bill Pinar (1994) on autobiographical writing that it was a safe bet for someone who had secured their place at the table. Therapeutic and even cleansing. Fascinating in a confessional and uniquely original sort of way. Is it the same for an untenured, unemployed, minority female older student?

In my situation I realized that the risks for sharing the best stories would entail a level of exposure too great to make sense in letting them be. I feared the internet's world dominance of communication. Not so very long ago you could escape a local paper's story. That is no longer the case. Though I am not presently in the public eye, it is not impossible that someday I might have a position I would not want to risk. I became anxious about the current penchant for making the past public and destroying someone's reputation by exploding old stories or airing embarrassing things, particularly out of context. After all, a thesis does become public property in the library even if the author does not publish it. Anyone can quote from it. Autobiographical narratives, even if cloaked as fictional, can come back to haunt the author in ways not contemplated at the time of writing or making public. This possibility needs to be a consideration to be aware of just as the names and locations of real characters in writing fictionally are protected with disguised names.

Chapter 3

Autobiographical Method and Theory Addendum

Once upon a time I threw wailing tantrums trying to convince the adults around me to teach me to read. No dice. An expert said I was too young. I had encountered what would be a recurring theme in my life. Mistaken diagnosis. Erroneous theory. Bad expert advice. Some theory put forward as scientific certainty sounding an absolute NO! to some hope or wish or dream. I would resent the NO!'s and fight the so-called established expertise again and again. Negatively it would repeat in different forms over and over. But we get way ahead of the story.

I do not know if Faust and the selling of the soul to the devil was a story I overheard or invented from lifelike illustrations in a book I found. Trotting out the volume and repeating some version of the soul selling story to unsuspecting visitors proved to have the desired outcome. Someone finally taught me to read, lest I keep assaulting guests asking about this peculiar story and getting into hot water.

Begging, wailing, whining to be taught to read is the first memory I have of wanting and having big "NO!"s be the response. The important role of experts as intruding decisively and negatively was to be a recurring theme throughout my encounters with the process of learning. As a child I would explode fury red when forbidden to repeat Italian which I associated with love as the older males in the family sweetly called me "bambina" as they howled classic opera choruses

that echoed happiness inside my tiny ears. Some expert said I would get confused with too many languages and fail to develop proper language comprehension. As a child I thought some day may I fight these fools.

My first experience with schooling in the United States was to find me considered retarded because I flunked intelligence tests. Some “expert” forgot to notice I didn’t speak English. A heck of a battle ensued where my adoptive parents insulted the school so nastily, I resolved as a matter of basic survival to avoid getting them involved in school matters. They seemed oblivious to the fact that those within the institution have the power to destroy at will the powerless little victims left at their mercy. Shades of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*.

At the University of Chicago, I discovered I was fighting a losing proposition questioning the idea of objectivity in research. I had issues with the recognized pillars of the field. I questioned why pioneers such as Paul Radin who practically invented the method of oral testimony (e.g., for documenting Native American life histories) as legitimate research were literally erased from the annals of the field. Naïve of moi to continually expect academia to play fair. Paul Radin had been that monster of a boogieman, communist. It is still a disappointment to see the omission of Paul Robeson in history courses. Though if one looks at most great artists or contributors to change in science and medicine more often than not, they were vilified and victimized in their time. No matter the extensive and measurable accomplishments of a being, let they not be that horror of horrors, against the status quo.

At this moment in the journey of credentialing my learning, I need to revisit some matters of theory and method. It is part of the process of a pursuit of a degree that has sometimes been a bit torturous as I have by this old, odd stage developed quote fatigue. I used to joke about my adoptive Dad's fascination with footnotes. I think I always had a desperate hankering to just write my thoughts without other experts' quotes giving me permission to write or express a feeling or an idea. It seems a curious contradiction that you spend all of your studies quoting others. Do we not desire original thoughts? Do we not value creative perspectives and new ideas? When does one get license to be?

The rare occasions I wrote freely, it was in pain and in secret or in poems and not to be read out loud to fellow students. Quite the opposite was the experience at UIC's graduate education courses on qualitative research, where writing was encouraged to be as free and organic as desired. Once upon a time, a Puerto Rican painter I helped with basic reading, portfolio photography, and arts funding accompanied me to a conference at the Art Institute of Chicago. The blue bloods in attendance looked at his paintings and declared him an outstanding primitive artist. My self-taught gifted friend was left traumatized. He felt belittled and humiliated. For years this tall, confident, streetwise guy would tremble at the thought of visiting universities even though they sought him out and he desperately needed the honorariums to feed himself. I understood he didn't want to be labeled or cornered with words (*primitive* as *backward*) that slapped him into an "inferior" identity. I found my defense of unconventional ideas, females, radicals, or even the emphasis on the value of experience and intuition to be

frowned upon, as if there was something fundamentally wrong with my opinions. I spent years and mountains of book efforts finding experts to quote in defense of anything I wanted to say or do, thinking perhaps that would be the ticket to buy permission to speak or even exist. Autobiographical narratives began to let a little steam out.

In cold blood I have reflected and written on aspects of this journey called life and the curriculum experience creates. I am as mercilessly critical of myself as I am of mistakes observed or experienced in the educational system. It may have been less emotional to write from a different vantage point, but I don't believe the learning would have held as much naked truth if the process had been other than autobiographical. Getting that kind of exposed is not for the delicate frail soul.

Even before I attended my first AERA conference or my first Bergamo cocoon, I knew autobiographical writings as educational research had been and would continue to be easy prey to a great deal of pooh poohing naysayers within the field. I also knew, before confirming it at these conferences of the educational field in multiple exchanges with colleagues in the field and in exchanges with its rock stars, that though previously shortchanged in life and schooling with less than useful theories, this was not the case at UIC as I had landed in an oasis of autobiographical permission and nurturers of writing that would be the opposite of that stilted, boringly academic style that suffocates so many unconventional souls.

It is not by accident that the quality of writing, the autobiographical slant to the narratives, and the vividness of the storytelling shines so brightly in the publications of a Chris Carger, a Brian Schultz, a Greg Michie. These recent contributors to the educational literature of today were nurtured by the teachers and writers in the department of education at the University of Illinois. I am privileged to share with Carger, Schultz, Michie, Peter Hilton, and Terry Jones, among many others, the luxury of having pioneer Professors Bill Schubert and Bill Ayers as leaders through the otherwise horrific gauntlet that is graduate studies and, even deadlier, the confidence of thesis headed writings.

Since my first wailings fighting to be taught to read I began an invisible boxing match with the powers that be. The importance of degrees and conventional ideas, such as the desirability/necessity of a nuclear family were all terribly misguided ideas that played a part in forcing me into an adoption that was neither needed nor, in the final analysis, a positive implementation of traditional family psychology of the times. It was not at all odd I found refuge in the writings and paintings of those who were society's underdogs, victims, the ones at the mercy of those with power, money, and/or traditional conventional thinking and societal status.

I instantly identified with Arthur Miller's love sighs to Marilyn Monroe when he wrote *The Misfits*. In my first autobiographical notes to self I described this self as exposed nerve endings. But before I continue to digress into more of these little trips or vignettes of trauma or success in life, schools or self designed curricula, we will need to review some of the process and standing of

autobiography in education that bought the permission to share such observations of the journey of life and learning in such a format.

Begging the reader's indulgence, I admit to discovering the use of the autobiographical method to share experiences of a curricular nature in classes where writing was celebrated in many forms and voices by Professors Caroline Heller, Schubert, and Ayers. An embarrassment of riches. I never had any writing classes. I felt a release with "free writing" as if allowed to take off shoes to walk on cool wet grass for the first time, like jumping in your first sea.

I have followed twisted turns in my pursuit of studies. The only way I believe I can make sense and use of the regrets, mistakes, little joys, and crazy travels is to write. This is not where I ever wanted to end up. But it will have to be to get to who I am to be.

Once upon a time I read, related to, and fell in fascination with George Dennison, Jonathan Kozol, John Holt, Ivan Illich. I was a teenager, Puerto Rican, shuttled between social classes, countries, families, taken in and abandoned, dropping out of nightmarish tenth grade public schooling, dropping in to zero structure Summerhill-like alternative education. I asked myself then, as a sixteen-year-old at an alternative school, why if all these degreed published writers and educational leaders knew how bad schools were, didn't they do anything about it. When I met some luminaries in the field of education and they, along with my adoptive Dad, railed against the educational system, I agreed with them, but insisted it was their degrees that qualified them for employment as teachers and

permitted their criticism and protests to be given respect and credibility within the very system they participated in.

What was I going to have but a lot of the same I got as a dropout?

Nothing! Further unbalancing my faith in educational institutions was the growing level of understanding of the contradictions of what learning versus schooling meant. It would torture and make restless all approaches and paths of formal (degreed) study. It was very complicated to have family circumstances (given up for adoption), the sociopolitical times, and hardcore activism in the family influence my outlook on the world, the purpose of education, and my place in it. It became even more difficult to continue trying to be submissive sheep when feeling the wolf.

Sheep or wolf. Follower or leader. Working class public school versus the University of Chicago. No one ever explained to me any of the rules of the game. Of life or school or anything. I didn't get the memo on behavior or what initiative taking was permitted. In graduate school reading on education, I appreciated the now classic Jean Anyon (1980) research on social class as it related to the differences expected and reinforced for different economic settings of schooling. I experienced many of her observations *en carne propia* (in the flesh).

In graduate courses in education I developed an allergy to the term "at risk" because for me taking risks was a positive thing I did. Funny how terms get twisted when applied to those of limited resources versus those of more secure options in society. As I think of important contributors to the field of education and their influence on my person and this thesis process, I am often conflicted by

the feeling that I prefer to tell first-hand experience with a phenomenon versus analysis of theoretical perspectives already established by recognized scholars.

There is a text book I consider a thing of perfection, a brilliant masterpiece about which I can rhapsody in detail as it is so rare that someone has complete breadth and depth of understanding that they can communicate in simple and clear language a field as vast and complex as is curriculum. This text book has been my encyclopedia, my dictionary, my reference book, my guide. It was in this curriculum opus magnum lovingly confectioned by Bill Schubert that I found my theory, my method, my north star. He writes on curriculum as *currere* and states:

One of the most recent positions to emerge on the curriculum horizon is to emphasize the verb form of *curriculum*, namely *currere*. Instead of taking its interpretation from the race course etymology of *curriculum*, *currere* refers to the running of the race and emphasizes the individual's own capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography. Illustrated by Pinar and Grumet (1976), the individual seeks meaning amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions of his or her own future. Based on the sharing of autobiographical accounts with others who strive for similar understanding, the curriculum becomes a reconceiving of one's perspective on life (Grumet, 1980). It also becomes a social process whereby individuals come to greater understanding of themselves, others, and the world through mutual reconceptualization. The

mutuality involves not only those who are in immediate proximity but occurs through the acquisition of extant knowledge and acquaintance with literary and artistic expression. The central focus, however, is autobiographical. The curriculum is the interpretation of lived experiences (Schubert, 1986, p.33).

I have benefited from writings on education and autobiographical sharing within the field. My decision to utilize this method has many origins which I can not credit to one writer, though I developed my own interpretation of apprenticeship in a worshipful following of Professor Schubert's work. It is a humongous club that speaks in hushed reverence behind his back. Original writings would never have happened had it not been for the kind and encouraging teaching leaders in the graduate program on curriculum at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) who gently guided fearful students to express themselves in autobiographical narratives. *Teacher Lore* by Schubert and Ayers (1992) is an important classic encouraging such original from-the-field writing; these two fearless leaders generate feelings of great relief at the clarity of their sharing.

Professor Bill Pinar is a fundamental pillar to the development and acceptance of the autobiographical method and *currere* in the field of curriculum. Among the classics of this emphasis is *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, which Pinar co-authored with Madeleine Grumet (1976), and the major historical overview *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 1995).

I believe in the years I read these works they were appreciated for the classics they have become, and for the opening of possibilities they provided for those of us that have come to benefit afterwards. I found quite interesting Pinar's (1999) compendium *Contemporary Curriculum Discourses*, covering some twenty years of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. In this useful book there are articles by influential educational leaders whose books and ideas shaped generations of teachers. Most notable among these are Janet L. Miller, Nel Noddings (whose writings on caring I recall with a hug), Henry A. Giroux, Michael Apple, and Craig Kridel, whose humility made such an impression it still awes this admirer.

In the process of growing in autobiographical writing I found Louise DeSalvo's *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* to be a most useful guide of understanding what it is we are doing when we tell our stories and how to survive and understand the process. Pinar is a forceful masterful intellectual. In many of his confessional writings I found permission for the not so hidden feeling that I was performing a cheaper form of therapy by writing my experiences. Since so many of these stories were painful secrets kept under wraps, airing them on the pages served multiple purposes. If they were on that rare occasion, decently crafted in the telling, then the merit is additionally in the writing craft.

What is worth doing, learning, sharing? Professor Schubert wrote curriculum "is the interpretation of lived experiences (1986, p. 33). I have reflected on what troubled me so about writing about theory and method, and I

could not escape how close to my life so many apparently abstract notions continued to echo. I used to call my father Mister Theory, though never to his face. In my family I often felt responsible for common sense financial literacy with adults well versed in philosophers and literature and political ideology, but so woefully inept at surviving life. In schools I saw an alienating love affair with theoretical and academic differences that seemed to take up so much energy and brain space that practical applications to problem solving ceased to find space for consideration. I realize now that when I left school I was already being an activist in some endeavor I considered of worthwhile impact to living beings while waging a losing battle with mounds of pages of supposed exchanges between ideas that would not become live action and just float in the air like so many lost words. In conquering something as supposedly simple as the laptop, I wondered if I had finally become the mentally challenged individual I had so often been forced to fight being. Autobiographical writing reminded me of an image that showed me why it took me so damned long to master the little monster. Wracked with pancreatic cancer, my no longer robust adoptive father had dragged his frail frame to a computer outlet and bought me the first lap top writing implement he ever got me.

“Curriculum is the interpretation of lived experiences.” I now move into the realm of portraying and interpreting some of my key experiences.

Chapter 4

Dropout

Bewilderment. Seventh grade in Worcescheer, Massachusetts, the cafeteria turned into a giant test room teeming with screaming teens instructed to use their number two pencils on the little oval egg shapes. It felt as crazy as the resulting pronouncement I was retarded.

When I tried to explain I didn't understand (I didn't speak English), I was locked in a windowless storage room. I waited for the roar to die down, then ran home. My new stepparents, to whom I was on loan, hauled me back like an escaped convict.

The next year we were taught that backward countries were poor because their climate was hot and everyone took a siesta. Kindly Mr. Titan sought to drive the point home by asking us to remember those drippy warm summer days when we didn't feel like doing anything. Only my second year in the States I must have thought it a question and volunteered I felt lazy about going out in the cold. The classroom laughter told me it was the wrong opinion.

Ms. Coil, the math teacher, had breasts that pointed like missiles and it was apparent the crossed arms she religiously kept under them was the true source of their support and her comfort. She had an unfortunate teeth thing where the bottom row came up over the front ones, kind of like those yapping lap dogs.

When I got the correct answers to problems faster than other students, I was hissed out of the class for not following the long method.

Mr. Peecook taught music appreciation by having us sit still for an hour while he played pieces with no words. I wanted to know if the moods of the music writers mattered, whether they were sad or happy. Mr. Peecook raised one eyebrow, opened its eye, and went back into a trance where I suspected he hoarded secret information.

By tenth grade English we were to do a book report of our choice written by or about a Negro. I made a selection that had to be right because it was both. I read Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and was sent to the Principal's Office when to my chagrin the whole class had written on sports figures that possibility had never occurred to me.

I headed out the door never to return again.

Chapter 5

American Summerhill

Green rolling grass. White columns with a *Gone with the Wind* plantation feel. Water running down a noisy brook of rocks. Old wooden covered bridge over a picture perfect waterfall. At first blush, a slightly haunted feel due to the lack of sounds of kids. Peaceful like a monk's retreat. The tuition was a thousand bucks a year: in 1970. With constrained consternation, my dad screeched "How much?!"

Nestled in a very isolated country road quite a ways off Boston, who knew if it was the pretty of the real estate that was so costly. It could have been the fancy Ivy League education of the staff. Blueblood runaways from M.I.T., Princeton, Harvard founded and hung around the school. Among the parents in residence there were a lot of doctorates. Many couples had studied, as well as taught, at some of the most prestigious citadels of learning in the elite corners of Boston. This American Summerhill was a private school that risked all in its belief in the natural curiosity of the young. There were no classes. No bells jarring the peaceful oasis every so many minutes. No principal's office to be banned to. No homework. No grades.

My best friend Jericha told me about this place. She was older in every way. In years, appearance, experience, life traumas. A mysterious beauty with whom I would share some unforgettable travels. Her mother had hanged herself and some friends locked Jericha in a funeral parlor while high on drugs. Jericha

had huge cat eyes with long lashes, a mane of undulating long black hair, pert full lips, and a body that looked proportionately so perfectly developed and ripe, she had passed for legal since thirteen.

My stepparents and I coexisted like a sleeping volcano. At ten I was taken on a honeymoon travel safari adventure, presented with my first dog, and taught to fly as a co-pilot to a single engine Cessna 180, having just come from a family where the women didn't drive, animals were not lap pets, and I slept on a fold out sofa. The dog I named Whitey, the plane belonging to the new man in my life he named Ginita, the pet deer in the backyard from the outback of rural Upata, Venezuela, were part of a long line of firsts. There was the first dirt floor house, the first land turtle, the first food skewered on a stick over open fire. My new father sighed quite exasperated when I crinkled my nose at the brown sugar asking if it was dirty. Teaching, like learning, goes down better with patience. That was always in short supply. Not everyone can or should handle parenthood or teaching. Same difference: requires a saint's patience, consistently difficult, few rewards for the materially motivated.

Fast forward a few years and a couple of countries added to the travels and I started to question out loud what felt like a most unwanted situation. I was unhappily surprised to hear I'd be adopted, and forced to have my name changed. When they insisted on America as a middle name, I chose Persephone and wrote it on my books. There were no explanations forthcoming for my forced exile from family and country. In Puerto Rico when I visited and dared ask about this new, frightening, permanent change, everyone said I was better off in the States

because my new parents had money, degrees, possibilities, and back home everyone said there was no longer a place for me. The shouting matches with my new make believe family would yield emotional fireballs. Secrets and lies. That would have been the title to the soap opera my odd dramatic life had turned into. It made me distrust and resent my adopting “rescuers.” I already was out two live parents, a little brother, a whole huge bunch of spoiling loving grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. The “truths” hurled around during the adoption process felt like salt on an open wound. What was the point of telling me such ugly things about my real parents? I already knew how much I did not belong in this new American world, I didn’t need to feel how much I shouldn’t exist.

It wasn’t enough that I was in the middle of the hormonal horror that is teenage hood. I was being forced into adoption, being told dreadful things about my biological parents, feeling confused and unloved. I was starting tenth grade in a public school where I was the only Puerto Rican, barely hanging on to wanting life in a complicated situation I neither created nor understood. While I proudly strutted mimicked regional accents to show off my new English, the public school where I had just gone from ninth grade to high school, announced I would be flunked out with a permanent record of failure. I couldn’t stand the shame, fear, humiliation, the guaranteed F’s, and continued trips to the principal for transgressions I didn’t ever understand. I bristled when sympathetic adults whispered “adopted” as if I was something stinky rescued out of a garbage can. I wanted out as desperately as the school wanted me gone. Feeling like a squashed bug, I walked out a high school dropout.

Jericha was as much an outsider as me. As a kid, I had been pulled out of fifth grade to go off with these new parents-to-be, and bounced around schools all English wrong for an only Spanish speaking ten year old. Jericha had also missed real school for years, as she took charge of her younger siblings in the face of two child-like adults so evidently ill-prepared for life it was curious they had continued to procreate. Funny how barely of high school age, we outcasts of stability gravitated towards each other. Both of our early exits from normal schooling were the result of such tumultuous family drama it rendered soaps silly comedies. We both ignored celluloid stories or make-believe, knowing reality to be drama more painful and difficult. That sensuous dark beauty dressed like a bohemian gothic witch in 1970, and seemed forever recreating herself. She was pushed out of school just as I was, for not fitting in, for not being sunny and cookie cutter and submissive and quiet. Never mind being the offspring of freethinking beings with strong views and loud voices against "The System."

Jericha made it possible for me to go to this crazy American Summerhill. Dad hero worshipped this John Dewey writer and met with educational radicals, but risking his only daughter's future on this terribly unconventional experiment was more than he was ready to venture. I really didn't see any alternative. At the public school they were furious I wouldn't cut up a frog. At fourteen I had decided to stop eating meat out of a conscious decision I loved animals and didn't need to eat them. My dad dismissed it a stage. I discovered yogurt and cheese in place of meat and first heard the word and idea of protein. My advocacy for animals was born, though I would learn to hide it

throughout life, since it so offended people for all sorts of strange reasons. A private personal choice, you'd have thought I was trying to convert them to some extremist cult religion. I could hardly want to cut open the first little frog I ever felt breathing in my face as if begging for mercy.

I had tried desperately for approval from school and parents for the first three years of junior high school. Seventh thru ninth grades, I suddenly had new parents because they couldn't biologically reproduce, a new language I was to apparently get thru osmosis, and shocking New England weather no one noticed required serious wardrobe adjustments, not just a cute little navy blue pea coat. I felt like a cockroach at a chicken dance. I flunked intelligence tests in the first school I went to in the States, so for my welcome to seventh grade in junior high I got branded retarded. I was stunned by the large number of kids, lacked the language, and felt powerless to get anyone to give me a chance, to help, to explain. In classes I raised my hand to ask or answer questions, not knowing the teachers were only pretending to ask the kids, not really wanting interactions with the little nothings expected to behave zombie like. Reprimanded, shame made me look down with embarrassment. Wrong again. I was expected to look directly into their eyes, in my previous world, a clear act of defiance and disrespect for authority, learned as a child. Looking down at my feet assured I flunked behavior and attitude readings no one could or would translate. I wasn't getting it in the new setting.

Junior high meant beatings by other kids. Getting spit at and called spic. I didn't understand what I had to do with a floor cleaning product called spic-and-

span. Getting locked in the bathroom when I needed to get to class, or locked out when I needed to go. Once I hurt my finger when the gym teacher insisted in throwing a basketball at me. I'd never seen, much less handled such a big hard ball and being put on the spot in front of the laughing class further distracted me, the finger bent, made a funny noise, and to this day won't straighten out. It swelled and hurt but there was no point calling home. Nobody there and if there had been I already knew the guaranteed offending yelling of my stepparents towards the powers at school would only guarantee further misfortune for little nothing powerless me from the big bad wolf that school had become.

Yes, the American Summerhill (see Neill, 1992/1960) was the only game in town, even if an hour away from our house. Jericha offered to give me a ride. I'd contribute gas money. I don't know what anyone was thinking of. She was barely old enough to have a driver's permit and her father wasn't always going to let her have that big station wagon he needed to move around his other small children. No one looked too closely at our movements. We mostly hitchhiked to Farmingham and back. No one mentioned consequences then or in years to come. But then we both had busy parents.

It took a moment for me to figure out that lovely educational oasis. There were deep olive green and wine red plushy chairs velvety soft strategically placed in the room most full of books. I don't think they called it a library anymore than they called the main office anything in particular. They weren't just trying to break with traditions. They had succeeded. I detoxed from the rigid learning structures fairly quickly. Like Jericha, I knew my family situation guaranteed me

nothing. I needed to start looking for work, career paths, direction, something, because I was to be on my own, on survival mode, soon enough. I didn't feel I could rely on anyone for anything. The ground I stood on was consistently quicksand.

American Summerhill was really about self motivation for learning. It didn't take deep observational powers to notice a lot of the people there were related or that they were used to no structure whatsoever guiding their lives. It made sense the children of those moved to create this wildly alternative place were there easily immersed in their own pursuits. I didn't need to have it spelled out for me how ideal it was to have that much love envelop your development. These kids had been wanted and planned for and cherished. Their inner confidence of self-initiated pursuits fed on strong self-esteem nourished by the loving pride they saw in their parents' eyes.

I'd already experienced no one took notice as I waited forgotten at an airport. I taught myself to ask for an OAG (*Official Airlines Guide*) which I saw my Dad request when missing connecting flights. Naïve, idealistic and with my own applause track, I told myself I was learning to be strong on my own. The bravura I would thrive on was continually recharged at American Summerhill and the characters I befriended on the road. I asked for cheap-no-questions-asking doctors. Once I got my Dad the lawyer who got Country Joe of Country Joe and the Fish off for leading the bad swear "F" word chorus in our conservative Worsecheer town that thought it public obscenity or indecency or some such. Absent minded brilliant scholar professor Dad forgot to have a lawyer

lined up before he got arrested at a sit-in protest of the Viet Nam war. On his death bed he would recall being hauled off with peacock pride. There is a saying in Puerto Rico: “Dios los cria y ellos se juntan.” (“God creates them and they get together.”) Many in my family, linked by blood or marriage, share some deep passions for fighting injustices, our one peculiar commonality, as a love of God is in other families. Yet religion or politics, rather than a common denominator, more often than not divided. It would make for awkward gatherings and much infighting, as if truth, goodness, and being right only had one version.

I deduced from observation that apprenticeships were a way of learning at my new school. In the quest to uncover a new job path, I looked into being a translator. Maybe I could aim to get a job in the courts, facilitating language for those who knew no English. I volunteered and observed there was so much wrong in the shockingly unfair justice system, I was just asking to get in legal trouble myself.

I went with Jericha to Cambridge to WBCN radio to visit a friend of hers who did the news, wrote for *Ramparts*, and grinned mischievously when inviting my dangerous beauty of a traveling partner to underground rock concerts for yet to be discovered musicians. Years after the American Summerhill year we shared, I would hear of Jericha as the muse of some famous rockers who immortalized her in poetic lyrics of songs, photographs, album covers. Good thing no one was carding those days. Those were times of free drug experimenting, mind expanding thinking, and sex without deadly diseases. I was such an innocent I often didn't realize my own stupidity. Once, I saw these

brightly dressed, pretty, flushed with cash, and always surrounded popular girls. Still a virgin, the last in my teenage lot, their fun not understood, I thought it a potential employment path and harassed a friend if I could be one of them. My friend Flynt was a tall imposing black pimp with whom I had intense conversations on politics based on the books at the Peoples Bookstore where I had my first job, the wide storefront window of which looked into the fun girls home headquarters. Flynt put the word out that if anyone recruited me they'd have to deal with him. I felt upset *and* important. I felt not pretty enough for street fare, but thought he valued me enough to protect. We stayed friends. I would take long distance calls from Flynt from jail. He fed a desperate hunger to feel a sense of worth. I loved feeling his invisible protective shield around me when going to and from work. I was too slow to understand the kind of heat hiring me would have brought on his business. Still, he wasn't the only outlaw I befriended on the streets who told me I was meant for bigger things and rejected my attempts to break into a life of crime.

During my stint at the idyllic make-believe Summerhill-like school, I learned to bake bread. One was required to bring three-in-one packets of Fleishman's yeast. I went nuts over banana bread, and rushed to be in attendance around teaching leader Ms. Manny Pound's rotund cheeriness as she led us into raptures of smells and tastes. All ages succumbed when she held court in the school's kitchen. It was to be the only formally organized class I experienced at the free flowing learning refuge. My adoptive family, specially my Dad, smacked lips with my home experiments featuring the baking discovery. In Puerto Rico,

my Aunt Ivis had initiated this by letting me butter pans, lick wooden spoons, and pass sticky fingers over leftover condensed milk. Joe Louis, my aunt's husband would remain a memory of danger for her sake I buried. My new dad's friend, a geography professor I affectionately called uncle Arthur amazed us when he rigged up attached wires to the television way before anyone had a clue remote control was doable, but his claim to fame in my heart was showing the fluffing way to whisk eggs for a proper cheese omelet. Bearded round Uncle Arthur would die in a tiny sports car in Italy flying off a cliff. No one ever really gave details. Uncle Arthur, aunt Ivis, and at the alternative school, Ms. Manny Pound, who would eventually compile recipes into a published cookbook, all taught with warmth and enthusiasm. It didn't hurt you could smell and taste and share the profits of your learning.

The useful skill made me smiley happy. My new family became alarmed. As soon as the kitchen began to become a part of me, my stepmom/aunt Ms. M. declared it a shameful slavery to set womanhood back. She had just discovered women's liberation. My joy of cooking was suddenly politically and personally offensive to my new mother figure. I was crushed. *C'est la vie*. My stepparents politics or ideas of what was correct and good and permissible would be as unpredictable and changing as the weather. I was desperate to get their love and approval. It would take a lifetime to discover I would never have it. Kids should come with manuals. Parents should come with warnings of how much influence their very sighs and frowns and the slightest of comments have on their victims.

American Summerhill lasted the year I had to go, from fifteen to sixteen, to make it legal for me to be out of school. Once my dad saw I would no longer have science, he acted defeated and became disengaged in talking about my schooling. It was like my future was over.

American Summerhill was a window into another world. There was great beauty in the place and in the intentions of its founders. There was support of the staff for the kids they knew. I think they could tell I was a short term interloper. Perhaps they would have been warmer if my circumstances had been a little different. Maybe I had too many needs and too little time for a place of such vast reflective aims for education.

I found out that to graduate I had to write and defend a thesis in public. I wrote about the value of a high school diploma. I reflected on what would be the point of getting one that had no accompanying credits that would get me into college, or be acceptable as a high school equivalency, or represent a skill or vocation for sale that would define someone headed into a path with some financial independence possibilities.

The hall was packed for my thesis defense. I knew I wanted to be able to say I graduated, though I didn't think it would have any real value. After all, the school was not accredited. They didn't have make-believe diplomas, 'cause they didn't believe. For me it had to do with complying to make it technically legal to be out of school for my radical new parents, and for me to be out on the streets, not being truant, from fifteen to sixteen. Perhaps they'd be some potential ease in getting employment. In the end game, for possibilities for plausible lies, so I

wouldn't have to literally be or say I was, *gasp*, a dropout. That sounded worse than saying a criminal. It would be like admitting defeat, throwing in the towel. I hadn't even gotten into the ring.

The day of the thesis defense I was scared and happy and thinking freedom was within reach. Packed hall, all excited beelike buzzes, ages from 4 to who knows looking at the lone chair in front as if ready to pass judgment on the guilty. The founders with the fancy degrees I knew were not thrilled with me. After my one and only year in attendance, still an outsider, I was asking for a hearing they didn't believe I merited requesting, much less to present and defend a thesis.

The lifers from the school watched my brazen stance with curiosity. The snobbish visitors questioning the school's philosophy and apparently always evaluating, watching the school and its inhabitants as zoo creatures to be poked and prodded and observed with both enthusiastic and cynical glee, crossed their legs in detached feminine poses. The ones whose Ivy League education had driven them to sacrifice status for an idealistic haven for their children and others looked worried, foreheads full of lines.

I spoke from the heart about the meaning of a high school diploma. Why one needed it. It didn't take much for the first interruption. I didn't see it coming. The four year olds. Asking why. In earnest innocence and with righteous expectation. Why did I want a diploma? Why and as I answered, more whys. It would be two hours of cold sweat, a sinking feeling, some moments hoping for insight, a glance stolen out the open windows to the warm summer rays shining

outside the room onto the welcoming green rolling grass. It was brutal. Merciless. I wished it had been recorded, taped. Or that I had kept a detailed log of questions and answers. I remember when I saw the printed announcement that I would be doing this thesis defense, what I first panicked about was the transportation there. It had always been complicated, unpredictable, and without guarantees. I don't remember how I got there. But I wish I still lived in that naïve take no prisoners fiction, denial, ocean of possibilities that let me stand alone facing such a menacing firing squad. Youth.

Chapter 6

Mann A. Boy

On a grey rainy day like today Mann would look out the window and his gaze would fix on nothing in particular. I knew better than to interrupt. He was thinking. And this was important.

Mann A. Boy was the first photography teacher at the Instituto de Artes Bellas, Puerto Rico's equivalent to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, except most of the students came from the worst slums. He fought long and hard to create the position for at the time the other teachers denounced photography was not art. His salary was a joke, but even then he used as much of it as he could to buy supplies for students who saved the ten cents for the bus or 25 cents for the publico (a car shared by passengers getting on and off at unmarked stops) by walking for miles to get to class. He saved by forgetting to eat.

Mann was given a small storage room in the back of the abandoned Bacardi rum warehouse which housed the first art school in the capital. It was filthy and as is oft the case in the lush Caribbean, buried among overgrown vegetation of prehistoric proportions. We found three tarantulas that first summer, but I was conscious of the privilege and good fortune it was to attend his first classes.

Mann and his students produced things of poetic beauty. He worked light and shadows as if he were an impressionist painter. It made sense, he was a hopeless romantic. Often called Quixote as if that was an insult, he never seemed

to mind. Once, he created the Jornada Betances in the tiny fishing village of Cabo Rojo to teach poor kids photography, having them make their own cameras out of boxes they would prick with a pin to make a miniscule hole thru which the light entered.

Born in Cabo Rojo, Ramon Emeterio Betances was the leader of the abolition and independence struggles against Spain in Puerto Rico. Betances was painted by Francisco Oller as “The Student,” work owned by the Louvre in its impressionist collection, and it was Betances who convinced Oller to leave *la dolce vita* in Europe to paint Puerto Rico’s realities as a way to create consciousness in an illiterate people. Mann taught photography and created social consciousness as well as jobs. In Puerto Rico today’s leading photojournalists, artistic and commercial photographers are just some of Mann’s creations. For his moment in time, Mann lead like Betances and created images like Oller.

Like Oller, Mann also gave up a successful future of fame, riches, and artistic immortality in the “mainland” to be poor and ridiculed for the pleasure of teaching something new in the little colonized island that first saw him grow.

At the end of a course, Mann would lead critique sessions in which the students engaged in some constructive question and answer dialogues with each other and him. I looked at my work and in comparison to the sophistication of the others, knew myself to be embarrassingly not up to par. Mann said “what you have all the technique in the world and all the schools in the universe can not teach you – you have the eye.” I beamed.

Mann used to put cardboard in his shoes to cover the hole in the sole that all his travels cost him. One of the happiest and proudest moments of my life was taking him to the fanciest store in Old San Juan and buying him the most expensive shoes with the softest leather. A proud man, I convinced him he had to let me do this as it was his patient teachings that had made it possible for me to make it as a photographer. It was a complete circle, no?

Mann rescued a Frank Lloyd Wright jewel from demolition and converted it into the first academy of photography on the island. Casa A. Boy included a gallery on the first floor which became so prestigious photographers from all over flocked to show their work, including the likes of Linda McCartney. When the Pro-Statehood Republican political party was in power, they appointed Letsdel Rosario as head of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Her claim to fame had been as a physicist at the bomb institute at the University of Chicago. Mann's Casa A. Boy became the unofficial Institute of Culture.

It was already the headquarters for the Artisans Union, the Photojournalists Union, the Writers Union, and a whole host of other things Mann helped create. When Letsdel Rose sought as a budget measure to eliminate the Institute of Plastic Arts (the only art university and where Mann first taught), Mann organized a silent picket line surrounding the school. Instead of signs, marchers carried a work of art.

Many years later I got a phone call from his family on the island asking if he, by any chance, might be with me. I was working for Mayor Harold

Washington as head of the graphics department, big time job I owed in no small part to Mann's many lessons, including the merit of striving for quality against all odds ("contra viento y marea" – against the wind and tides) and to never let THEM (whoever or whatever it may be) stand in my way.

A few months before that phone call I had gone to Puerto Rico to see Mann. He was ill and losing Casa A. Boy to some greedy family members. I left him money and a plane ticket to Chicago. His family tried in vain to get him to wear a crucifix or acknowledge religion in some way. All I had left from my real father was a little porcelain medallion of La Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. It depicts three fishermen (one black, one Indian, one white) looking up to the image of this Madonna who ensures their safe passage out of treacherous currents.

La Caridad del Cobre is Oshun, or the Goddess of Love in the syncretism that is Santeria. Which is the way slaves dealt with keeping their beliefs: cloaked in Catholic robes. To my surprise I found an exact duplicate of my medallion in Old San Juan and gave it to Mann. There was no question of his wearing it as we had shared many miracles, the first one being our finding each other.

So when I got that fateful call from his family, I rushed to the island to find Mann had turned up as a John Doe. He was in a coma and only family members were allowed to see him for an hour a day, from noon to one. I talked to him every day. I told him his family was all there and that if some didn't talk it

wasn't because the doctors told them he couldn't hear, but because they were too broken up. Kind of like the way his mangled body was on the outside.

I marveled at his will to live. I cried at his side when I recalled a conversation we'd had when we were young and feeling invincible, about what each considered the worst way of dying. I told him my idea of hell on earth was to be in a coma, with my brain wide awake, unable to move. Or was that his worst nightmare. Perhaps we had concurred. I had known him since I was 14, and I no longer knew where one began and the other ended.

There were moments during that coma that I was absolutely certain he heard me. I asked the doctor about this since at some particularly heart wrenching moments, a tear would roll out of the side of his right eye. It would stop me cold. The doctor said it was an involuntary reaction. The doctor had obviously never known Mann. There was nothing involuntary about him.

During the first weeks I took care of his huge family the same as always, the same I cared for him. There were kids to do homework with and get off to school on time. There were dishes to be done, phone calls to return, journalists to shoo, keys to find, morbidly curious neighbors to politely freeze into shame.

But eventually the guilt and pain became more than the fragile package could bear. I feared for the survival of the rest of the pack and explained this to Mann, along with reminding him he had AIDS. We had a heck of a big life. We had really done it all and seen it all and felt it all. Instead of trying to get him to

open his eyes and come back to us, I began to ask him if perhaps it wasn't time to let go.

Every bone in his body was shattered. A face and body like a young Tyrone Power was swollen like a clown's nose. I wasn't sure if anything would be funny again. Mentally, I said my final goodbyes.

On September 8 he died. It was the day of La Caridad del Cobre. He had played Charlie Chaplin to the end, tipping his hat at us in the final curtain call.

Chapter 7

Hulk

Hulk was a Rican King who more than saved my life. He was tiny and looked like Woody Allen without the glasses. There was a big salsa extravaganza at the Aragon Ballroom and he asked if I would honor him by being his accompaniment that evening. Before I could invent an excuse, he interrupted my thoughts by making a little speech. He said he knew I was out of his league. He looked at his beaten up shoes as he said he would understand if I said no, but that he would like it if just once in his life he could be the one walking in with someone on his arm who would make his family's collective jaw drop.

I laughed so hard, but he didn't get a chance to get hurt by it 'cause I was nodding yes as I tried to keep the happy tears from running the mascara that would have made me look like a raccoon. I decided to reward his courage by bringing out the Marilyn Monroe special. This was a copy dress of the one Joe DiMaggio's jealous rage exploded into their divorce. In the "Seven Year Itch" the white skirt blows up as she walks over a subway crate revealing some of her more famous attributes. That dress and some honkytonk red lipstick had me ready to roll. At the Aragon his gang family hung on my every word as I told them how we had taken over the office of the President of Northeasterner with demands from the Puerto Rican students for faculty positions, more books for the library, scholarships, special counselors, and more.

Some noises out of place made me turn around to see what was going on when I felt Hulk's wiry arm grab my hair and throw me under the table. He jumped on me like he was a baby's blanket and indignant I yelled out some choice words that would have made a drunken sailor on leave blush. Don't move, don't even breathe, he whispered in my ear. I obeyed, still feeling like a grilled cheese sandwich.

Understanding that we weren't on a real date, Hulk had not touched me all evening, but now he locked onto my hand and dragged me as if I was some old Raggedy Ann. We ran thru some dark stairwells and eventually out, into the alley. The next day I heard the news. Two girls accidentally shot, one left blinded, the other paralyzed.

I saw Hulk one last time after that night. He had come to bring me a meticulously typed history of the Rican Kings, including a chapter of all of Hulk's biological family's role in the gang. He was leaving town, as the gang intervention unit of the Chicago police was framing him for the shootings. I argued if I couldn't be his alibi, a witness he wasn't anywhere near the shootings. It was no use he lamented. Indi, a brother from the Kings who had participated in the fight, had offered Hulk up to get himself out. The cops had wanted Hulk for a long time since he had turned political and was organizing the young hoodlums against drug dealing and the streets.

It was Hulk who first got me going into prisons: Statesville, Joliet, Pontiac. He was a tiny little guy with a great big heart. He didn't speak much, but

when he did, it was usually something worth hearing. From him I learned what had happened to my people. I wondered where all our leaders were. I wondered where the artists were. It didn't make sense that there were so few in the university. And then I visited the jails. There they were! Locked up like in a zoo. The very qualities that would have guaranteed them success had they been white and with a little money were the very character flaws that had guaranteed their being pushed out of school and on to the poisoned streets of poverty and mayhem.

While in college I made hundreds of presentations of the slide show I created after being forced to drop out of tenth grade. It is the history of Puerto Rican art, from pre-Columbian to contemporary. Now that I look back on those occasions, I recall the one that meant the most to me. I was invited by a prisoners' committee in Statesville Correctional Facility to present my slide show. I thought it was going to be a small group gathered in the library of the maximum security prison. I walked in flanked by more security than the President, except these all had numbers on their jackets.

The steel doors clanged behind me, two sets, then three, I lost count as I started perspiring, well, sweating like in a sauna would be more accurate. I looked around me; these guys were young, too young to be in such a hell hole. They spoke elegantly, respectfully, almost softly. They didn't stop thanking me the whole time I was there. Suddenly there was a wooden door and I walked into a huge auditorium. Oh, my God. It looked just like the ones in the public schools I had been flunked from.

But this audience was all male. As I climbed up the side of the stage I thought this must be how Marilyn felt when she waved at the ocean of testosterone while entertaining the troops overseas. There was no need to hush them. One of the leaders with me just signaled with his hand and the silence was deafening almost instantly. I insisted on their asking me questions as the slides went by, as is my habit with these shows, but no takers. I closed the presentation with the work of Puerto Rican photographers, including my own, that showed many scenes of Humboldt Park street life, sunsets on the island, Latino kids playing, and vendors selling fruity syrups.

There was no reaction when I said that was all for now. My back was turned to the audience since I had the gadget to turn the slides and was looking at the improvised screen they created out of a white sheet. I was sure I had bombed. I didn't dare look at the committee. This is one place where you pay dearly for humiliation and I wanted no part of visiting such a fate on my hosts.

The lights went on and I faced the audience. Muscles, tattoos, every shade of human skin, mostly hues of brown. Rico the ringleader of the committee rushed the stage and whisked me out. For once I was speechless. Then I heard them. Feet stomping, fingers in mouth to make whistles louder, applause so thunderous no wonder performers' egos get whacked. I gave Rico a look, he just told me to hurry. I was on my way out those interminable hallways with the clanging doors when someone finally spoke. "You almost started a riot." What? Why?

The guards went rushing by me. The kids looking world weary explained in the shorthand speak of those with no schooling but much knowledge. You told them they have worth. You gave them history they've had hidden all their lives. In a place like Nazi camps in its inhumanity with sophisticated games to strip one of all dignity, I showed them artists as rejected as they have been as delinquents. They saw they shared the same poverty in money and lack of respectable acceptance status in society as the artists. But they also saw the quiet shining pride of the artists who still struggle to make a stand, who dare to fight to have a voice.

I didn't quite realize what I had given them was more dangerous than money. I had taken a message of hope. I had shown them their cultural and historical family struggling to leave little notes on beauty for the next downtrodden to take umbrage. They had gotten it alright. They were seeing themselves in the art and in the painters. They had watched a Puerto Rican woman bring their story back to them just as surely as they registered that I had been as much one of them as if we had been partners in crime.

It was not lost on them I was a drop out, like them. It was not lost on them that I wasn't getting paid for doing this presentation, but was something from the heart I wanted to share with them. It was as if I had lit a fuse and suddenly all that anger and frustration didn't have anywhere to go. I had made the conference in as matter of fact a tone as I could muster. The kids on the committee were street and prison savvy enough to smell the insurgence in the air.

I was so full of myself that day that I don't think I worried if my little show would cause any problems. That reflection would come later. At that time there were all sorts of characters trying to help prisoners and I just slipped by in between religious folk selling their version of God. I continued to visit the jails for months, sometimes as often as twice a month. For someone who didn't have family or a loved one in prison it turns out that is not common, but I had so much fun I didn't think about it until much, much later. I learned about crime, poverty, the imbalance of the justice system, the multitude of ways of getting ripped off, the infinite variety of dysfunction in colonized mentalities.

I saw a most fascinating phenomenon in many of the prisoners I befriended. Jail had given them their first quiet time out. The very nature of the experience forced the kind of reflection and inner travel that no one on the hard core streets living in survival mode could afford. I often chuckled how many of my intellectual philosopher friends would envy this kind of reflection time. The wisdom and maturity it afforded those who understood the process and its impact on them made me sad only when I was forced to see how hard their lives would be when back to their old haunts. But that's another story.

One last story about jails before I land this puppy on the matter of where I find myself headed at this stage of my life and schooling. Harold Washington had more special elections called for during his years as mayor than any other public official I've ever read or heard about. Towards one of the very last ones, about the sixth if I'm not mistaken, I was deep in the trenches of precinct work in the heart of the Puerto Rican community of Chi-town. Smack on the intersection of North

Avenue and Western I spotted a bunch of elected officials in full regalia making the rounds of MY precinct. There was Alderman Mellon with Verdonot et al suited up in attire only appropriate for a day in court.

I watched from a safe distance as they tried in vain to get people to let them in the door. They looked like sharks circling prey. Perhaps it was the grey flannel suits or maybe the toothy false grins. No matter. They got nowhere fast and I went back to my door to door canvassing. There was a hot corner where drug dealing went on from early in the morning 'till way after night fall. I observed the expensive cars with white suburban folk with child seats in the back stop time and time again to make drug connections.

One time one of the kids on the corner followed me and asked if he could ask me a question. I said sure. He wanted to know why I was doing this. I went into rapid fire mode about the haves and the have nots, about power and the leadership of a Harold Washington, about why I had to admire a Black man who had fought so hard and so long to give fairness a shot in a city plagued with racism and political corruption. The leader of the bunch yelled at him to come back to the corner, to cover his ears and not listen to me. I looked at the kid and said did you think words could ever be so dangerous he couldn't hear them?

Then one day the corner's pee wee boss marched right up to my face. Jamie Roseone was blond with blue eyes. I thought how ironic he should find me such a threat. After all, I circled around them and did not interfere with their business. I am only too aware it is the only industry in the hood. No one else was

hiring, you know? He said he had a confession to make. This ought to be interesting I thought. Little did I know.

Turns out certain gentlemen had offered him money, five thousand to be precise, if he could scare me off the precinct. I blinked. Hard. They didn't want to know the particulars. Just that he got it done. I was wondering just how he proposed to accomplish this. He went on. There was more. He had talked to his older brother serving hard time in one of those maximum security correctional institutions. It was obvious from the way he told it he was hoping to impress his brother with this new assignment he had handed to him. His brother said when Jamie arrived at whatever prison he ended up in they were going to drill him a new orifice. The language was a bit more colorful than that.

Poor Jamie. It was pitiful to watch him talk. The mother hen in me wanted to hug him and tell him it was okay, but I knew better. Never interfere with the pride of a street kid. It's all they got.

Jimmy's brother apparently blasted a resume of who I was and why so many in the jails still remembered. He said that for the holidays I found a way to get Mexican and Puerto Rican food to them. That those who got out had gotten help with housing and jobs. That I had helped a program the inmates started to attain more relevant and interesting current books and magazines to their libraries. That I borrowed cars to drive speakers who inspired them about alternatives in making a living when they got out. That he had heard of kids who couldn't go

back to their old hoods for they would be dead on arrival, and I had found a way to get them out of town by bus or plane.

It had been so long ago that I was surprised anyone was still around to recall. I forgot I never asked the guys what they were in for, nor for how long. I didn't realize there were lifers in my clientele. Jamie said he had his marching orders. His brother said that if he heard I as much as stubbed a toe, there would be hell to pay and he would be first in line to collect. I thanked Jamie for the 411 and politely declined his kind offer of protection. I told him I always felt safest in these ghetto streets than just about any place else. It was home. Where I learned to survive and where I belonged. For the rest of the campaign I would use peripheral vision to ensure Jamie's concern did not interfere with my precinct effectiveness. In a wild rally celebrating the victory of that campaign, I spotted Jamie searching for someone. He wanted to congratulate me and to apologize for the hit thing. I didn't need to tell him no harm no foul.

Chapter 8

U of Z

It was a longing, simmering on the stove of life, full of unlikely ingredients. More lust than logic. It was an institution of higher learning that weaved its apparition left and right with consistent frequency from the strangest of unexpected sources. The thought of it provoked restless sighs, admiration, awe, curiosity, desire. The University of Z would become the Promised Land.

My adopting Dad had gone there at sixteen. He impressed all the bookworms in my family as a most informed character, full of travel, multiple degrees, teaching varied subjects in different universities, flying his own Cessna plane, while shyly humble about so much knowledge. The first intellectual, in the good and real sense, that I knew up close and personal. It was my first encounter with what U of Z produced. A serious scholar.

Then there was Felicidad, national culture creator and rescuer for the last colony of the Americas, Puerto Rico. While still in my teens, Felicidad became one of my first employers and a life-long mentor. His name meant *abundance of a joyous happiness*. Which in fact he created for thousands of decolonized Puerto Ricans. He studied anthropology and archeology at the University of Z while living in the International House. Professor Felicidad founded the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and was behind the creation of every museum on the island. Felicidad established the first arts university on the island designed to be

populated not by the children of privilege but by the poor. Felicidad developed the idea and creation of a local cultural center museum for each tiny town; an idea later reproduced in socialist Cuba as a pioneer concept to fight the high brow monopoly of only major cities being the exclusive proper place for important cultural institutions. He fought for the rescuing and rebuilding of Old San Juan to specifications that recreated it as closely as possible to Spanish conquest times. He became the first archaeologist to excavate the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico, publish extensively about them, both for the field's specialized academic audience and in children's books to create cultural pride and historical knowing.

As a teen I heard about the likes of a Jain Beno, who became president of the University of Puerto Rico and was terribly admired by my favorite aunt as a progressive pioneer in curricular matters for Puerto Rico. Intellectual brilliance, usefulness as public servants, creative administrators, over and again the same place seemed to have hatched them. U of Z Shangri la.

The architectural jewel that is Chicago was nowhere in my horizons. There was nothing even near resembling a conversation on the pursuit of a doctorate. There could hardly be such an ambitious goal in a family where such a category of thinking was as nonexistent as the concept of planning. My adoptive parents treated ambition as equal to being shamefully pretentious. Goals were too close to the idea of a to-do list, something organizationally basic my adoptive folk coughed at as if toxic fumes.

Once in the United States, my being Puerto Rican and female obsessed advisors who made each interaction devastatingly negative. The first counselor I experienced was in a public junior high school. She had a sweetly helpful expression as if she expected I'd jump with enthusiasm at her offering me secretarial training. She nearly choked laughing when I wide eyed innocent asked what if I wanted to consider being a college professor. She explained how unrealistic this was as she hadn't heard of there being any like me in such a profession. I said sure, I've met them. Suddenly I was a discipline problem: difficult, disrespectful, undesirable. Silly me, I thought I was just sharing some factual information, not some radical idea.

My stepparents forbade the school from letting me take typing. I snuck in to cover a few weeks on the basic keyboard before their wrath descended on the school. In eighth grade I thought what I still believe today, that any concrete skill could prove quite useful in the real world. But to my stepparents typing was political and dangerous and prejudiced and stereotypical. Typing was, gasp, vocational. Thus began a hiding from them for survival and thriving. What I should have learned, internalized, processed, was school and family as quite detrimental to progress, evolution, growth, and desires. Places of love, security, and nurturing for development aren't so if you are the wrong person who doesn't belong. Gays, artists, minorities, poor kids, the unwanted, misfits might do well to build a special armor for their exposed nerve endings.

I dropped out of a public school when I was to begin tenth grade in Massachusetts, having mastered English in three years. No one noticed. I

hitchhiked to the American equivalent of the radical Summerhill school with no classes, grades, structure, or the all determining transcript. By fourteen I had begun trying to run away from home and school only to find my parents forcing a formal adoption, name change, all the while grunting about paying an expensive tuition I knew was to keep all three of us legal as those days you had to be enrolled somewhere until sixteen.

I sneaked into Northbynorth Illinois University. I wasn't offended when someone said it was little more than a big high school. I didn't know they meant it as an insult on my intellectual capabilities. Academically a real nothing community college they snickered at me. I was happy to type lots of footnotes at the bottom of the page, learn to compile a bibliography in alphabetical order, accumulate my first transcript, practice public speaking in front of a classroom, learn leading, and employ proper interruptions with *Robert's Rules of Order* in student organizations. Hardly a bleep on the radar if one had dreams for a place of the stature of the University of Z. I didn't. I was undocumented. Just wanting first legal walking papers. A couple of years at Northbynorth provided opportunities that I used to package and market this new self as a product worthy of admittance to the University of Illin, then ranked among top public universities, or so I had read in the newspapers.

At Northbynorth I squeaked into the *University Without Walls* program where I invented a Puerto Rican Studies curriculum. For my principal thesis I wanted to write the history of art in Puerto Rico, using photography skills years in the making. For course work and major, anthropology was a discovery I thought

uniquely mine. Wrong. In things big and small I lived a family full of secrets and lies. It turned out anthropology was the one field aunts, stepfather, and others had in common as a first love. Perhaps if there had been exchanges over meals this curious coincidence would have come to light. But there were no shared morsels or words on fields of study. Everyone seemed to have too busy a life for sharing. People with lives too full of themselves shouldn't burden children with their company.

My first serious fulltime job in Chicago was as a photographer's assistant from 8:30 to 8:30 seven days a week in a sleazy stripper loaded sector by a jazz nightclub known as Mr. Kelly's. There were no school thoughts. The strippers were chronologically older but so beaten inside I felt more grown. Befriending the women in the area provided an advanced course on sex education and a glimpse into the effects of abuse on lack of self esteem on women.

Months prior I contemplated living in Puerto Rico to develop my photography. I had enjoyed a brief adventure residing in a Los Angeles commune off Wilshire Boulevard while selling Yoruba art with the distinctive three lines across the cheeks at a store where being 16 and waving a huge blond afro was nimpediment. In that housing's study group I got disappointed by feminists who wailed for the freedom of not staying home. I asked if that didn't constitute a luxury. The poor working class women I knew never had the choice to stay home. As usual I had the wrong opinion.

Visiting my parents in Chicago, all I wanted was work to earn a living and afford photography. There was a strange hole-in-the-wall photography studio on Delaware Place and I asked the owner if I could rent his darkroom to make prints for an exhibit I had been offered. Bartering my services on the spot, both Chicago and photography had suddenly become home. I needed cash and a darkroom, the owner an all purpose gofer, makeup artist, studio lighting technician, background roll paper selector, Nikon and box camera handler, darkroom chemicals mixer and user, over the counter salesperson, and nervous models hand holder. There was an underground pornography business, the blackmailing of some notable celebrities for shots that showed indiscretions these days would be laughable, and some suspect exchanges for the advertising glossies for the strippers on display in glass cases outside their performance establishments, but the trembling, lacquer hairspray using Mr. Masie didn't let on 'till my exit. That job was its own curriculum on life, the multifaceted exploitations of females, the sleazy side of commercial photography and the selling of beauty. I also thought the nasty moves shaking Mr. Masie proved apprenticeships still worked as well as I'd thought and learned in my early teens. He reminded me of the Waterbed King in Puerto Rico, taking me in to legitimate business with suspicious sidelines. Apprenticeship can be a practical educational experience, regardless if the learning of skills and behavior are in legal or illegal pursuits. But I digress into the seedier side of my stories, and that is not for this tale.

I had begun as a teen to compile a slide show on the history of the art of Puerto Rico: from pre-Columbian to contemporary. On that island, Professor

Felicidad introduced me to artists, facilitated access to professors of history and anthropology, secured passage to rare art and reading collections, and gave me original silk screens and collections of books, a serious luxury in a country without public libraries and school textbook stores. Felicidad's name in Puerto Rico was as open sesame as Einstein's for a protégé in physics after that wild haired genius was acknowledged the universe's true megastar. Professor Felicidad opened up a world of artistic riches, mansions with original artwork, the job of documenting every museum piece with photos and descriptive writing, introduced me to books, authors, passion for history, research, documentation, and a quiet calm love for reflection, analysis, and hard sweaty work done with a smile. My lifelong self-designed Puerto Rican studies was a curriculum that began at the feet of this master teacher, organizer, museum founder, anthropologist, writer, school creator, cultural father of Puerto Rico. The apprenticeship began in my early teens and was to last a lifetime of work and learning and friendship. This was an era when I stayed at the rooming house of my best friend Sandy, street urchin product of a prostitute mom and her own biological grandfather, whose rented rooms I did not know were a step above a whorehouse, and my claim to fame had been chasing a rat the size of a cat out of the stalls of toilets. Just as Sandy's pedigreed thin good looks would open doors for her, I had landed a connection with Dr. Felicidad that would help me varnish my thinking out of being as unprotected a kid of the night as my long legged, big eyed sad beauty Sandy. Ah yes, I digress. Apologies for these pesky background characters who keep interrupting the main plot.

Back in Chicago, scholarly Dad was slowly descending into a bitterly defeated hermit, a direct result of his cruel tenure firing caused by radical anti Viet Nam war and alternative curriculum politics at Notclear University. Neither of us realized how much his deeply internalized shock, rage, and pain weighed in on educational matters with me. That spirit crushing experience would color everything in our lives, though no one ever acknowledged it even mattered. I could retrace the construction of levels of denial that would suffocate our communication and love. The *joie de vivre* had been strangled out of him and he would without malice aforethought pass it on.

Professor daddy shifted into depressing negativity with clouded reactions, and things became more rigidly political, the way religious followers become rabid fanatics with horse blinders permitting only one way vision. Once I gushed for Daddy pride, thrilled to have gotten exceptional grades on advanced graduate courses for which I lacked high school basics or college beginning classes, and thus wasn't expected to enter or pass. This was for physics, geology, advanced physical anthropology, tough stuff at a top school. I had skipped the prerequisites, sought out the hardest professors on purpose, read up on the subject and the teacher's publications, and voila, in like Flint. With pride I thought, gee, I have no introduction courses and I'm cooking gourmet. I was bouncing with joy of the impossible accomplished, when Dad looked up from his glasses. Tsk-tsk. He said he was ashamed of me for being competitive and said I should feel bad for the kids in the class that didn't do as well. Duck and cover a sad new survival policy. It was my turn to feel the spirit squashed, misunderstood, trampled. Only a

few years earlier I had been a tenth grade dropout, so any inschool win felt triumphantly validating, but I was again crumbled into a nothing.

When I completed a B.A. in record time after accumulating, then passing, an embarrassingly big number of incompletes, from the toughest state university around to gain entry into, much less succeed to the Dean's honors list, I hinted to my parents I'd like to attend graduation to get those pictures with the judge's black robe and the funny hat so I could send Mother Sofia back home. Mother was my maternal grandmother, soul I lifelong worshipped, from the tender squishy love pouring out her hypnotically oceanic eyes to Red Cross imitating the mercy sandwiches she took to the *atomicos* (homeless drunks) by the Plaza del Mercado. Mother read the *Readers Digest* every day without fail to study the new vocabulary page. She had graduated from eighth grade, the furthest you could go in Cabo Rojo, a town of no libraries or movies. I was not to ever experience a graduation ceremony. It was as if my anti-everything new parents had been abducted by the Jehovah Witness' Stalin version. Birthday celebration, Christmas, and now, it turned out, graduations were all capitalist creations or bourgeois. Too bad.

When I applied to his ivory tower enclave alma mater in fancy Hidden Park, Dad pronounced I would never get in. I had a serious game plan up my sleeve for application, acceptance qualifying, and a plan b for rejection. No sale. Dad snarled they were too racist to let in a Puerto Rican. That if I got in he wouldn't pay for it. There was such a violent undercurrent to our conversations that if I hadn't been so desperate for his love and approval, I would have been

able to see it was time to move on, move away. His pain had turned into rage. His political righteousness into a snarling cynicism against hope. But I had already been forced into exile from my original large extended family, biological parents, country, language, culture. Some part of me feared another rupture would be permanent and potentially lethal. By adopting me they had turned me into an orphan. Brain and heart, thinking and feeling, knew I dare not risk any more. I loved my Dad and wanted him to think me good, smart, not the mental defective they claimed in Worsecheer Junior High when they branded moi retarded.

In my early twenties I had so much confidence, bravura, optimism, energy, anything is possible attitude, I often got joshed as being hyper or crazy. But by then I had so many concrete impossible odds under my belt few argued or bet against me. From dropout to honors university graduate, check. Written proposals and gotten funding for grassroots artists projects, check. Still a teenager, doing the news bilingually on an educational channel on television, check. Published photographs, published articles, edited and cofounded a literary journal, check. Never mind all the unmentionable radical political causes. And all the while blazing treacherous trails as the first Puerto Rican, and female, holding position long enough for others to squeak in before going sayonara.

I lost my breath the first time in Hidden Park. Thunderstruck the way true believers describe love at first sight. First formal inquiry was in Chairman Rayworld Jones' office in the Anthropology Department. Someone might have warned high heeled open toed platforms, poured into skin tight jeans, and a Puerto Rico flag t-shirt peeled over the chest goes over fabulously for a quickie sale on a

ghetto corner, not anywhere else. Lord have mercy, there was no one to help. Professor Jones had the ruddy complexion of a transplanted Britton in charge of a plantation in the Caribbean. Both of our appearances were deceiving. Jones had married a woman of color way before it was legal in parts of the States, and had scrapes in his past for identifying as a Marxist. Contrary to my for sale packaging, all I was baiting for was opportunity.

It was a mismatch made in make believe. The imposing professor barked talk. I nodded and smiled. My insides full of silly sheer delight with the Dracula castle architecture, the beehive buzz ambience, the meeting I'd secured out of naive boldness. Exasperated, he asked "why do you think you are University of Z material?" His sneering grin looked ready to set in place until I rapid fire verbalized god-only-knows-what that made him treat me a bit more legitimately. It wasn't the question that threw down the gauntlet. It was the way he put it. Guess tone and inflection got my goat. I didn't leave offended, I left challenged to answer the dare with so much force there'd be no question of the answer.

I got in. Maybe it was the way I flooded the admissions process with lots of extra letters of reference from ridiculously unexpectedly diverse sources. Perhaps it was my shiny good grades, honors dean list with four subspecialties after anthropology with the huge amount of advanced graduate courses unusual for a college kid. The avalanche of extracurricular activities and publications couldn't have hurt. And I know the fact my father attended was a big plus though he did not realize that would ever have been a factor in my application. Funny how anger blinds.

I had gotten into the more academically regarded U of Illin when a particularly difficult required course in physical anthropology was being offered in a concentrated summer class back at Northbynorth and taught by a University of Z doctoral student. I sought out the toughest teachers, even for advanced courses, sought out professors who wrote the books. Best to get it from the horse's mouth was my inner credo. Better learning before grading. It was particularly hurtful when my father said he was ashamed of me for getting A's or taking any sort of pride in any kind of success or development. I don't know if he thought I became powerful by his legally lending me his name. I don't know if he forgot I was in the States because my own family decided and told me they were too poor to keep me and that he, a fancy college professor, would guarantee an education it turned out he in fact did not believe in. I don't know if my shade of skin confused him. From the moment I got in to the University of Z I had declared war on his theory that the system would not give any Puerto Rican a chance and he was furious I had challenged his political absolutes.

I was not trying to challenge the school or my father. Only myself. I received a rare full scholarship from the trustees, and the first mistake I was to make was to appease my father by not moving on campus. It would be the first of many fatal errors. It would prove pathetic right up to the time of his incurable end. Never go against your intuition for anyone. Inner voice, God, spiritual layers of karmic information. Going against intuition will be hell to pay for though logic, well meaning loving parents, and scientific folk might say otherwise. I wished I

hadn't lied to myself so many times to beg outside the restaurants windows of love for crumbs.

In the spring before the fall I would begin my journey to the temple of knowledge I received a long reading list. There were some one hundred and fifty titles for one course. Books, articles, readings suggested some six months in advance of the required social and cultural theory course that would take two semesters to cover. I was thrilled for the heads up. I thought I'd died and gone to brain heaven when I discovered the seldom awarded Trustee scholarship gave carte blanche for book purchases. And then there were two bookstores that sent me into such rapture the intensely nonreactive staff actually looked up from their coke bottle bottom glasses to ask if I was okay. Power's was a second hand seventh heaven full of Aristotle, international photographers table book rarities, daily changing and organized rows of information to be had for absurdly low prices. There was a box outside the front door where they left books for free. Free! Semin Cop was tucked in the basement of a gothic cathedral feeling place where I saw myself a monk as I dove in all hushed tones. The selection of the one of a kind latest publication squirreled away in some awkward corner of the Semin Cop became a fascination. Who picked these books? Whatever was my latest thought or research, however far out, there was something there. Magical that place was. That out of control addiction I could never quite understand was the kind of reckless feeling that would take over when I visited these two haunts. Weirdly religious. Clearly out of control shopping and groping. Books galore.

During a formal meeting of those accepted to the Ph.D. program, the chairman of the department told us to look around at our fellow students because each year at least five wouldn't be back. There would be a nervous breakdown, a dropout, at least one suicide. I went blank blinking. Smiled, high on being at my dream palace of knowledge, thinking golly his words are not very welcoming. The chairman was the North Pole personified. Not cool, frozen.

The way a teenage boy might hide a *Playboy* rag from parents, I had hidden the fact I followed William F. Buckley's "Firing Line" television show and writings. I wanted to imitate his every laid back gesture, devastating oratory, spirit crushing intellectual superiority, vocabulary from Mars. No one from my crowd would have understood. Buckley was too Republican, mine were too communist. I had chosen the U. of Z. because I thought that was where they cooked up ideology. I had studied Buckley for the same reason, I was pursuing who concocted the ideology. After all, hadn't Milton Friedman invented all that economics mumbo jumbo that Kennebec and Anaconda Copper companies used to exploit, err, invest in, Chile? Harvard had the executive company officers, the lawyers, the robots, and technocrats that ran their daddy's corporations, but U of Z had more Nobel Prize winners, more members of the White House's cabinet, more true rebels in educational philosophy, more risk taking, outside the box thinking and acting hard core intellectuals.

Anthropology's Chairman was a tall aloof imposing scary fellow. No student dared look him in the eye, as if that might be life endangering. He went on about the mayhem ahead for this motley crew of doctoral wannabes in his

precious ivory tower of mental gymnastics. I thought to myself who would be foolish enough to put all their eggs in this school's basket. Death logical only if the last option. These kids were exceptionally smart and way young, in our early twenties. Surely not making it here just meant transferring elsewhere or taking up plan b or c. Though their jeans were torn, their hair matted, the girls unaware make up had been invented, or perhaps making a feminist point by turning their noses up at it, I knew this fashion challenged bunch was loaded. Rich. Economically and emotionally. Someone at home had nursed their schooling the way a drunk cuddled a drink. Their ideas and quirks winked at and their options padded with cars, real estate inheritance, cushiony mattresses to land on should things turn sour.

The chairman went on in his intimidating manner to lay out the perils of our dismal student life. Nothing was damping my enthusiasm. I thought it was too late to put fear in my only choice of learning stomping grounds. Chairman Jones went on about how professors would be hard to get a meeting with, forget their serving on a committee for the thesis because they would be too busy with research and publications, would probably find our interests unappealing, and other such gory commentary. He assured difficulty in cornering a committee chair. Wrangling hammerheads blindfolded easier. I noticed the goose bumps on the arms of the long haired dirty blond guy next to me. More than one trembled like the last leaf against winter's breath. I had found my advisor. I was the only one smiling in the room.

I read like crazy. Staindrain, the library, closed at one in the morning. The bathrooms had flat black leather couches privatized by white wrap around curtains reminding of those of emergency rooms that covered in an L shape corner in case one wanted to take a nap. The second floor had periodicals from all fields and from all over the world. I spotted *Verde Olivo*, it was the internal magazine of Cuba's army. I had died and gone to heaven. At one point I became fascinated with understanding the capitalistic nature of slavery in Cuba and a very buttoned up helpful librarian offered to show me the original blue books of plantations' record keeping. I had never seen the likes of a library with so much juicy material, knowledgeable available personnel smiling intently to serve you, such late, late hours open. Everyone lived in their own world, interaction a rarity.

It became evident my vocabulary was severely limited, so I daily wrote down dozens of new words as I heard or read them. I would be rushing to dictionaries and keeping definitions close by in my notebooks with classroom journaling of lectures. I made a mental note not to internalize this new knowing lest I should start spouting this Sunday sermon language to inappropriate audiences. I would assuredly offend or alienate in the ghetto streets I knew were my basic stomping grounds if I sounded pretentiously incomprehensible.

Still, fancy words with complex concepts behind them, for example, "dialectics," "hegemony," "hermeneutics," were so yummy they felt forbidden fruit. They made one think a lot and keep like a secret affair. I did not realize how out of sync I was with the student population. When some rare out of print article or source was assigned and I tracked it down thru research in the stacks, I couldn't

wait to share. One professor finally chuckled I was doing it all wrong, the point was to keep it to yourself and spring the rarity in class. I wouldn't get the nastiness of the competition until I had one foot out the door.

I didn't grasp why the other students disliked me, and tried to stay quiet, hidden, yet the professors would call on me. I was challenging their positions, deep into discussion on why did they think objectivity existed. My attitude was respectful of the professors vast reservoir of information, but still was I not the client and weren't they getting paid for servicing me with all that private stock of years of accumulated material?

I don't know if it was my euphoria with finally being inside the promised land of my dreams of the best ivy covered temple of knowledge. It took a while to realize when I spoke in the classroom, I was the only one challenging the gods, the professors. I thought I was at, literally, the horse's mouth, so I could, finally, ask. Wrong again, you were supposed to show reverence and make the questions as silly and little as possible, if dared to be asking at all. Mostly, everyone was to play empty vessel to the tall drink of words that was the professor obviously in love with the sound of his thinking.

There was one discussion about minorities not being able to study their own communities because they could not be impartial. I did not beg to differ. I questioned methods and approaches and consequences of past research exploited by missionaries to make converts. The class turned on me and an ugly whisper campaign began. The sneers were I'd been let in the back door to meet some

minority requirement. Not qualified. My feathers ruffled I fought back. I had probably qualified more than they and I wanted all the categories for admittance out in the open to compare and contrast. In the end the department's scary chairman, by then my official advisor, confided they actually felt some people had to over qualify a bit so they could risk the investment. One bitchy smarty pants said they let us in to prove their fairness, and then let us twist in the wind. She was a powerful administrator and the damage was done. My body still visited the classes but the soul was absent more often than not.

I had friends at Shush medical school and started hanging out at their lectures. A white lab coat, glasses, no one seemed the wiser and I had fun diagnosing once or twice faster than my friends. Not on live folk, on paper puzzles. I did not realize that it happened because I looked at disease the way you solve a murder mystery. Clues made sense though they came from strange perspectives.

Back at the scene of the crime, still enrolled in doctoral anthropology courses, there were these theories explaining economic underdevelopment which were as skewed as they were mono factorial. Absurd. I swatted them like flies. Culture of poverty, what poverty of thinking. Lack of motivation, what an obvious description, not an answer to poverty. I did not feel they should be called racist or ways of creating inferiority in explanations for other cultures not developing. I just found them limited and lazy and convenient creations for some academic wannabe to make a name for himself. I also thought how useless that type of thinking was for progress or analysis or understanding or change.

I discovered Paul Radin and ran around going nuts trying to figure out how come he wasn't included in any social and cultural theory readings. He had pioneered all manner of original methodology, oral and autobiographical narrative to name a couple widely used, and Radin published more than most, and had all this heavy original track record of teaching and research. No one would tell. In the end I squeezed it out of a few. Radin was called crazy. Later I visited New School for Social Research and they told me the truth. He was a communist who tried to defend the Native Americans he studied. Worse crime of all. Making a difference. Helping. Radical analysis of economic issues. Oh yeah, don't mess with the money or ideology. Lord knows you sign your death certificate. Paul Radin the radical anthropologist or Paul Robeson the crazy artist. Same difference.

The first idea for a thesis had to do with the research I'd begun on my own as a young teen on the history of Puerto Rican art, from pre-Columbian to contemporary. The slides, the research, it was all from very primary sources. There were no books, no libraries, all my information assembled from approaching artists, collectors, college professors in other fields as there was no such field as Puerto Rican art history.

The chairman sent me to an art history professor he said I would need on my committee. I sat thru his slide show lectures only getting knots in the pit of my stomach as I heard things I knew were not true. He said Cuba only painted social realism. I thought I heard wrong and went, in private of course, to offer him my books on the collections of art in Cuba that showed all the abstract art they were

into. He was furious and said I was wrong. I told him I would be happy to bring art history books and catalogs of art shows and magazine articles. I was so stupid I thought he'd appreciate it. He refused and told my advisor he did not want to see me again.

Once I had written comparing different theories supposedly explaining economic underdevelopment. Instead of clarity they appeared to be descriptions. It was like hitting someone and then blaming them for bleeding. When there are limited opportunities for schooling or skill development or options out of the misery of poverty why would we be surprised if people act out of despair or rage or lose motivation or feel opportunities are limited.

Chapter 9

Monster! Monster!

“Monster! Monster!” I ignored Little Santo as I walked into Tania’s. The six-year-old with long eyelashes and an impish grin looked deflated as I acted as if he wasn’t there. Little Santo’s brother, Santo was out of the hospital after a miraculous recovery from a drive by hail of bullets. And back to standing on the corner selling dope by the section eight housing where my friend Tania lives.

I had told Paps, Tania’s son still serving eight years in Danvillage that should have been his cousins’ time, I would try to stay the hell out of Dodge. It made him furious that his own blood would give me so much grief when all I did was drop by to help. Paps said his family would drive me away. He was right.

One time Rome and I were doing some basic counting on the kitchen table. I had talked to Rome’s teacher and he was being considered to be flunked from first grade. I didn’t know such a thing was possible. So there we were studying when Little Santo came in and wanted Rome to go out to play. I said he was still doing homework. Little Santo looked confused and left. A few minutes later he was back with Ire, his mother.

“I think you don’t know this is Rome’s and Little Angel’s time to play.” I told her Rome could not do his basic adding or reading and that we were catching up. Ire left in a huff, but not before I got to see her big momma attitude display. Just days before this she had been telling anyone within earshot on the sidewalk that Little Santo had been abandoned in the hospital, born of rape.

The showdown happened one time I went to pick up Tania to drive her to a job interview. She didn't drive and had steel rods in her legs. From the car I called to Tania to hurry up. I didn't want to get out and have to deal with the crowd hanging around. Ire said what was the big hurry. It was dripping steamy hot and I was tired and rushing. I did not feel like addressing the throngs of folk standing outside. I yelled out to Tania to bring her jacket. Ire said Tania did not have to wear any fucking jacket. I had seen Tania's revealingly tight low cut top. She needed a jacket.

I sighed and said we were going to a job interview. Ire is a short little thing with a perfectly pert nose and a missing neck to hold up her once doll like features. She boomed, "I don't give a fuck about any fucking job interview!" If I had been a cartoon, there would have been smoke coming out of my ears and nose. I picked up the cell phone to call the restaurant because now I was sure we'd be late.

Little Santo rushed towards me and started screaming something while I tried to talk calmly on the phone to Tania's potential employer. I put out my hand, palm open, to keep Little Santo away from being heard on the phone. Ire pounced as if her little cub was in mortal danger. Hands on her hips she swayed and screamed "You don't touch my kid!" Turning to the audience around her she wailed dramatically "She wants to choke Little Santo!"

A few days later I was talking to another cousin of Tania's and Ire who had since heard of the incident. Cookie and I had worked at City Hall and on

voter registration campaigns, so we had known each other for years and in the heat of political battles. I said to Cookie I was going to apologize to Ire because I didn't understand why all the hostility. I got it about someone getting touchy about someone they don't know well putting their paws on their kid.

Cookie saw Ire and relayed my message. Ire told her if I came anywhere near her to apologize "me partiria la cara." Which is to say she would split my face open. When I talked to Tania she said she admired Ire because Ire drove a car. Not easy when you're "analfabeta." Meaning Ire can't read or write. The light bulb in my head was clanging. I had spent all the extra meager money and time I could for years helping Tania's family. I had done it with love and hope. I had been a fool.

"Monster! Monster!" Little Santo called out when he saw me. Ire didn't want her cousin's family to have any of the benefits I was bringing. Jealous Ire didn't want her neighbor cousin Tania having her son Paps helped in prison, Tania's grandkids mentored, or Tania getting a job that would take her away from being Ire's unpaid cook and babysitter. Pearls to swine. Help was not wanted.

"Monster!" Ire smirked at me and whispered "I'm gonna say you hit my kid." It was over. I hadn't gotten myself out of the swamplands so some way over the hill wannabe queen bee could drag me into the mud with her nasty brood of gangbangers going back to the shooting gallery ghetto corner straight after getting patched up from the latest drive by. I left and Frankenstein stiff necked Ire won. Pearls to swine.

Chapter 10

Lessons from Graduate Studies

A not so amusing thing happened on the way to the thesis. I got so traumatized and overwhelmed I actually thought thru plans for quitting, dreamed of rejoining the International Red Cross for disaster relief, and had recurrent floating feelings of envy for hermit cave dwellers. I experienced equal parts prayer for peaceful writing time, as I choked on bouts of anxiety for the quality of the product. None of the feelings and handicaps resided in my psyche before. Cloudiness full of doom and gloom.

There were plenty of legitimate problems and impossible to anticipate crises to excuse the excuses. Health issues crippled as aging and complexity of insurance provided perplexing obstacles. What was originally an offer of rent free quarters turned into a house bursting with constant emergency repair issues. The supposed luxury of fulltime student status morphed into a live-in maid job. Senior citizen primary care provider, without applause. Hollywood assistant at the beck and call, without the perks. Wifely duties without benefits or cuddles. A mother's responsibility without the joy of the kids' laughter. You get the gist. Not an ode to joy.

Even in the depths of misery, I try to see what is the lesson. I don't mind wallowing in a bit of regret if I can figure out a benefit. An asset out of a liability. A plus out of a minus. Oh, you get the point. What was the mistake and how much can I get out of it for myself and/or others that make it less of a waste of

time/energy/opportunity. Turns out most explanations fall under the category of the road not taken, the advice not heeded, the question not asked, the risk not chanced.

Perhaps as release, perhaps as a cautionary tale, these words on trauma are shared with the feeble hope that one long suffering student may hear the tale of woe and skip some pain before and during the process of graduate studies.

Avoid negativity. I had so much bravado and encouragement from crazy artist friends in my errant youth that I didn't realize the amount of energy toxic people use up. The people that crushed my spirit were those I loved most, family members, best friends turned fiends, loved ones with issues that without malice aforethought inflicted the most harm. I didn't realize the power that love gives others to create havoc.

Selfishness is a necessity. Learn to take if you are by nature a giver. A friend in the turmoil of deciding whether to move ahead with doctoral writing and defense versus visiting his sick mother sought out my opinion. I told him to drop everything and everyone, run to the airport, and visit with his mom even if it was to yell at each other, get criticized by her for going, and disappointing family, school, and work colleagues. I told him the amount of therapy it would require to calm the guilt of not going to her and choosing to finish the degree would never balance out whatever pay increase the Ph.D. could guarantee. Nor would his sensitive soul let him have restful sleep if guilt attacked when death had closed the options door. With this exception understood, under regular circumstances, one used to giving, should shift to taking. Tough for problem solvers, primary

caretakers for other family members, the ones who clean up the mess others create.

Intuition trumps analysis. A realization I kept bumping into was how I would shout at my own heart to shut up and give power away by listening to spectacularly bad advice from loved ones. I did some of the stupidest things in my life not from hanging around criminals or crazy people, but by listening to intellectual, political, and other supposedly informed and well-meaning loved ones who, while well-intentioned, cajoled or convinced me away from paths of study and work that in the end would have had more meaning and worth. Think of all the artists whose parents kicked them out for choosing such a path. And I will give you a list of fulfilled folk laughing all the way.

Ask for help. No one ever took me to a library. I discovered its usefulness on my own, and this, in a family of hardcore, daily readers of everything from newspapers to philosophy. I got my first tutor when my advisor in graduate school secured one for aid with advanced statistics. Everyone kept reassuring me mathematics anxiety was like dentist worry, common place. I gave up trying to convince people I hadn't learned math since the first half of fifth grade in Puerto Rico, barely understood seventh thru ninth grade math classes taught in English, and having left school at the start of tenth grade, missed all high school mathematics. People thought it a joke, a lie, an impossibility that I had no high school or college math classes. The library can be just as school-saving a resource as a tutor, and doubles as a jewel of a hiding place for writing. A tutor was a surprising resource, equally rare in my repertoire, who made the difference

between life-and-death-feeling insurmountable learning of the befuddling advanced mathematics on steroids that was statistics.

Be a fool for knowledge. I asked a lot of questions that administrators answered *no* to in my pursuit of a chance to various programs, from getting into my first university to admittance to the University of Chicago doctoral program in anthropology. I learned to ignore or make light of comments or looks that hurt, humiliated, or discouraged. Whine, cajole, beg, hound. You are perceived stubborn until you succeed, then you are elevated, received as persistent. The point is to get the opportunity.

The tool not taken. Journaling is as useful as a second language. I did not do it for fear the diary would be found and used against me. My family has a history of overnight kicking out those who don't behave. It is like a shunning. Once you are tagged no one is allowed to speak to you lest they be shunned too. I have insisted and convinced others of the usefulness of journaling. This tidbit is one of those adages: do as I say, not as I did.

Chapter 11

Summary Reflections

This autobiographical thesis is a compendium of stories that emerged as lessons in life. They can be dissected as moments of small wisdoms or large learning. They feel like an accomplishment. They are also a failure. They had to be presented as fictionalized autobiography to protect identities and situations through developing composites or constructions that are still true to the medium. Yet while writing I lived what felt as a life review of tornado traumas swirling a very complicated family clouded by secrets and lies that seemed to scream out for truth telling.

There was notable growth in learning computer skills, and greater ease with writing flow that conveyed certain ideas and feelings in the stories. Yet there was such a perfect storm of obstacles that every modicum of progress in the learning process that would become the road to the doctoral thesis and the writing within was forever behind schedule, and late is hardly cause for applause. I had long felt very passionately about how much more interesting travel to a goal was than taking a bow at the finish line, but as years passed, the fascination with steps in a process lost their allure as I increasingly felt imprisoned by the pursuit of a degree while life created what felt as extreme and absurd and as complex a blockade as the decades old one imposed on Cuba.

There were complexities in the process that like death and disease could hardly be anticipated with a specific date of arrival. In the gauntlet that is the

road to getting this highly coveted advanced degree, I anticipated the pitfalls of some shortcomings but was often blindsided by the type of crisis and responsibilities that could not be put aside by sharing them with a wider support system or other problem solving devices. For relief I mentally listed lessons learned. I parked my anxieties of discovering the shame of irreparable mistakes by thinking of ways I would share a lesson out of a mistake as a lovely lemonade out of lemons story. There were life budget ledgers in my brain that kept pushing liabilities into assets columns. The simple truth was I didn't think my worst errors were such dreadful crimes. They were only harmful to my person and to the material lack of success in my life.

Note to self, if ever in a position to counsel others: emphasize the importance of getting degreed young, securing a stable, giving family base, and pushing thru when at the height of your most optimistic, as well as financially solvent. In other words, if you are flawed, different, or limited in any way, your odds of success are radically impacted in a negative way. This is not meant to make the sound of hopelessness. But I am often motivated to share personal perspectives because I am a Puerto Rican female high school dropout and I have noticed it continues to be uncommon to find many Puerto Rican female dropouts graduating college, or completing graduate school or doctoral studies.

The public school system is failing a large number of the minority population. This sad and dangerous failure has been true for decades and all over the United States. In Chicago I have known schools where half of the student body drops out of school straight into the prison system. This is particularly

applicable to the poorest neighborhoods in the city, but I also notice the students start dropping out younger since such studies began on dropouts, and also the way students are accounted for, or rather *not* kept track of, has gotten more sophisticated.

The advanced studies opportunities become a multi-tiered obstacle gauntlet that isn't just affected by the students' shortcomings within the school, or by the limitations of the school system itself, but also by what the family resources reality is outside schools. For some lucky beings family is their source of strength, stability, support, encouragement, and even financial backing. Quite the opposite is true within social milieus formed in dysfunction where one resides in behavioral chaos jungles.

It became evident as I traveled the lonely path towards degree completion how some personal issues were applicable to fellow degree and life travelers. I felt honored to share knowhow on senior citizen care which came from decades of personal experience. I taught fellow travelers that unburdening was not the same as whining. Some situations require a bit of sharing to make them survivable. The talking, the storytelling that might feel too painful harbored deep in our insides might just need some ventilating. Autobiographical storytelling created for its usefulness in dissertation writing would prove to parallel life review therapy, as I reflected on unique little nuggets of life survival sharing. I was constantly filing away a measurable value for autobiographical stories. The disdain displayed by certain statistics exclusivists or numbers worshippers towards anecdotal or personal narrative writing within academia must have hit this humble writer deep

for so much justification to rear its uninvited head in the essays of musings I pretended to pass off as life research writing. My thesis was to be compiled from a series of essays of fiction that began as a jumbled set of stories of one dropout's life travels, innocent narratives of the observations of a chronicler who chuckled her way thru turmoil but suffered its documentation on the written page. Even when clearly packaged, disguised, as fiction, there were kernels of life experience that still bled.

As a tenth grade dropout, I crashed between a way of being, of traveling life, and the documentation in photographs of frozen memories, or autobiographical writing of it. I didn't have to read fictional novels on self discovery while traveling. Or imitate any number of writer travelers of life as adventures to be captured on paper. It was the way I experienced life. The way I traveled life and survived surfaced as a doctoral student when describing the methodology known as "participant observation" in social and cultural anthropology. I found a peculiar commonality in the nature of my way of living, my organic journey of life, that could have been human research for an actor who observes closely and reflects deeply or a research methodology for anthropologists, or material for writers. A flash of Mark Twain dashed by.

Unfortunately I've found many of the very teachers and leaders and nurturers and counselors that the students could most benefit from are weeded out of the system traumatized. The system finds these misfits too unconventional for traditional schooling. Hegemony or conspiracy? As with other social limitations, the victim will be blamed. Maybe self-destruct. As I reflected, and read, and

wrote and analyzed, the unfairness of so many of the components of advancement in education became painfully clear, as did my many regrets and reflections on particularly personal mistakes and shortcomings. What solution, where to go for absolution? Writing, sharing, using lemons to make lemonade. Weaving little stories out of spilt milk.

As angry and disappointed as I was in both the system and its limitations, I knew that storytelling was a most useful tool, for learning as for teaching. It was also a way to keep it original, unique, memorable, and, ideally, visual, if able to create an image, tell a story, when sharing an experience. You can't copy someone else's life. You can learn, imitate, but not Xerox.

It did not puzzle me that certain invented arguments within academia, sometimes called theories, sometimes baptized discoveries, lost their appeal after a fairly short shelf life, but that classic literature and stories in all their various art formats continued to hold sway for generations of time after they were written or created. Another mystery was why academia appeared to perpetuate irrelevancy by making overspecialization an ideal. This was true within a field of study as it was in general, as I saw both cartography and geography as fields or school concentrations slowly die on the vine. One day I looked up and it appeared both journalism and bookstores were vanishing, in time quicksand obsolete as work possibilities. How many fields of study and work have to disappear for educators to take notice how drastic and rapid are the changes that assail our students.

I wondered if anyone was noticing, analyzing how profoundly radical the impact of internet search engines had become on how research is and would grow

to be conducted. “Google” had struck a serious death blow to traditional research approaches and the nature of library investigations. We may lament the moribund rites of passage for all manner of research and methodology. What we may no longer deny is how fundamentally different the new world of methodological possibilities has become.

Students I brought home are surprised to see books from floor to ceiling. Once upon a time this was true of ghetto kids I’d mentor at home. Now equally amazed ones are fancy private school students whose visits to my abode produce the same startled expression at finding themselves in a repository for books. Now both my economically challenged and financially blessed students have become unaccustomed to stacks of actual books. It is a strange feeling to see two worlds so astonished to see a roomful of books, as if visiting a museum of a rare new commodity, the written page in its original format.

Teachers will assuredly have to increasingly understand their role to include some guidance or counseling ability. The economically challenged students I taught or mentored benefited from life and employment coaching often far more than the specific subject matter taught or the test and homework reviewed for improvement. If we concede we are living changes in society as radical as going from horses to cars, or as is the change from agriculture based to industrial base, then we need to engage in some deep thinking to go along with such societal upheavals. How relevant, read here useful, will one’s position be if the teacher insists on limiting the scope of their individual responsibility? I see

dead end people. Jobs written out of budgets. Teachers being less than useful if, for example, only promoting limited approaches to research methodology.

The initial motivation for my going back to graduate school, hence this thesis, was getting a degree. The pure love of learning, the joy of getting lost in a sea of old classics at a used bookstore, the sheer glee at following a new idea or school of thought had been slowly, painfully suffocated out of me while pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. Its ghost had moments of resurrection, but I had so much innocence and idealism about higher learning strangled out of me during that adventure that the black eye from the beating gained in such a hopeless quest was still more covered by makeup that healed. I became quite gifted at lying to myself right up until someone yelled denial in a crowded classroom. Still, I didn't realize how deep the scars of cynicism and competition and alienation had wounded. There is something fundamentally wrong when we teach our students to stifle and muffle their imagination, their enthusiasm, their joy when indulging natural curiosity with the wonder of life and all in the world.

I had given so many humorous heroic versions of my escape from the ivory tower of intellectual blue bloods that is the University of Chicago's, the true nature of the failure of that experience did not truly hit home until I had to face writing about it for this dissertation. No one ordained it. It was a realization of facing a deeply buried secret. To heal, I had to face, name, and acknowledge the consequences. Same as the abandonments and abuse suffered within the family unit. I had expected love from places that didn't have it to give. I remained a

street beggar with my puny little palm held out for scraps that would never materialize.

The acknowledgement I was not aware I thirsted for within my biological family was the same sort of legitimacy or recognition I sought out within educational settings. Both were basic building blocks of a person's life that I mistakenly continued to seek refuge within. As a teenager I had a great deal of angst and rebellion that was in fact actually more attuned to reality than I had previously acknowledged. Intuitively I sought alternative families of misfits that accepted and encouraged my creative and non-traditional approaches to survival and progress. The gays, transvestites, street folk, small time criminals, these adopted and protected me. I recall many moments in misspent youth when I foolishly pursued what could have resulted in jail or death or worse, when a pimp or a junkie or a gangbanger or a street girl actually interfered on my behalf. Those stories danced around my head and wanted their place on the page. It was the same with those young beings who did not have a reason for public recognition but who meant so much to my education and whose glory I wanted to applaud as they had departed way too early and tragically. I had little stories I wanted to write that kept crashing into what I thought would be acceptable within academia. I kept having little light bulb moments that had nowhere to go and drove me mad with frustration. Why hadn't anyone let me pursue an art oriented school? Why hadn't I insisted on divorcing my family when every fiber of my being screamed toxic? Why did every creative outlet, starting with cooking, then hiding in prolific little writings, exploding with all manner of photography, commercial, artistic,

journalistic, fully assembled educational slide constructions, meet with disdain and disappointment?

The fact is that no pain went to waste in my life. I knew I opened up my heart to my delinquent alternative school students, to the prison audiences I addressed during decades of visits, talks, conferences, offering alternative motivational life paths, as I appeared to to ghetto public schools, gang club houses, during hundreds of visits of sharing. Apparently my need to autobiographically share was so deep that any of life's little wisdoms would pop out the seams. This was before the public confessional age when I noticed speakers reveled applauding their accomplishments, but not so fast the sharing of their stumbling mistakes. Students relished the stories of poverty, failure and personal mayhem when I talked of famous painters or crushed scientists and inventors. I did not see the point of teaching history or sharing about important historical characters without all the trauma and rejection they paid for their creations and discoveries. Not only did this make these huge historical giants more relatable, but presenting someone's accomplishments without the struggle to get there was to present something out of context. Mere mortals do not arrive fully formed without the necessary risk taking and life's exacting a toll.

Chapter 12

Conclusion

The intention of this fictionalized autobiographical collection of narratives was to put in writing a series of memories from journeys of learning as I fulfilled one last graduate school requirement, the dissertation. I hoped to write about people who had been great teachers, yet not at schools I attended. I sought to use the writings to exorcise torturous remembrances of impacting characters who had departed leaving behind no altars to their teachings, no memoirs of their fascinating lives. I wanted to share stories that applied to learning in that curriculum of life Professor Bill Schubert (1981; 2010) referred to as the “outside curriculum” or “non-school curriculum” or “out-of-school curriculum” in our classes, publications, and personal correspondence about education. This was learning decisive in my formation and of prized value in my arsenal of experiences logged as educational in a lifelong concept of what was curricular.

It was a sublime discovery to find the walking encyclopedia of all things curricular available for knowledge cultivation regarding policy, history, methods, key contributors to the curriculum field, that it felt a spectacular lottery win when I confirmed that the widely beloved Professor Schubert encouraged discussion of these less conventionally viewed forms of education by sharing them in autobiographical narratives. Professor Bill Ayers was another extremely sought after professor admired for encouraging what I considered “free writing.” The

treatment of students as colleagues was another peculiarity shared by these curriculum history makers and documenters, autobiographical writing encouragers, and pedagogical pioneers who were to decisively influence the development of writing narratives as the choice for a compendium of stories for the doctoral dissertation. To protect the innocent and the guilty I was to make it a fictionalized autobiography, so as to be in compliance with administrative procedural issues that would allow for greater ease of approval of research and its writing.

Both professors, Schubert and Ayers, had become legendary for lending their snowy owl wing spans to baby bird writers. The emphasis on encouraging this type of writing was the result of an uncommon group of professors of curriculum at the University of Illinois who shined nurturing the development of the quality and variety of work their students produced and often published. Dissertations and books originated in the experiences the graduate students of curriculum wrote about as they pursued their studies at the University of Illinois. The permission of the autobiographical narrative resulted in quite unique stories taken from real life, published as fictionalized narratives for all the legal, procedural, ethical, and other considerations when in thesis form.

Though I received approving nods when reading these writings, I did not volunteer how deeply painful some were to write, nor how unusual it felt to be that naked in telling. Some stories make one wafer fragile. Dangerously vulnerable, particularly when one fears judgment or disbelief. Stories pressed themselves to see the light of day and a warning alarm would scream stop the

presses, thin ice ahead. The reality was I had learned that intuition was the only sacred law for my life. Yet I violated my own inner code of knowing because of others insistence on their knowing. Of all of life's lessons, that would be the biggest I ignored to my own detriment. Many such life lessons sneaked into the writings, appeared as revelations, and the discoveries emanating from such deep analytical reflections on matters apparently so innocent turned the simple, obvious, or commonsensical into profound little nuggets of wisdom.

It didn't matter the apparent logic or decency of past decisions, there had always been signs and warning bells. To go against what that gut had told me was to have life come back to claim its prize in the form of sad regrets carried like an albatross strangling the heart. I suppose some souls have such financial, career, and family support stability, they are free to share all the deep, dark secrets they've survived. Survival issues are not limited to emotional or financial matters, and, like grief, may never fully feel that so-called closure. They can be as complex and varied as humans. Teachers who do not heed these warnings will make the grave mistake of telling their students there are no consequences to their writings, not realizing the dangers involved. The undocumented student can get deported, the criminal activity witnessed could be prosecuted, the unacceptable behavior innocently shared in autobiographical writing can get one expelled from a special jobs program, as I mentioned in one story about problems in a writing workshop. One's family members may not be ready to accept if one writes about sexual, physical, emotional, or financial abuse. You may make yourself homeless for the sake of telling the truth or just sharing a soap opera worthy juicy story. I

tried to explain to a writing teacher that I could not write what she wanted because I wasn't ready to publicly discuss sexual abuse by a family member. Though I knew she also wasn't ready to lead the type of classroom drama that would inevitably follow, she did not want to modify the specific assignment. I've long noticed the insensitivity of the entitled for the sake of the story without the writer understanding consequences. I saw such a published writer cost the subjects of his book their only source of income, welfare, by publishing that the man (husband of welfare client) visited the house. Power has privilege.

Some abuse and ugliness does not see the light of day, just as even loud wailings does not guarantee justice to the unfairly accused. When I studied statistics I kept saying I hadn't had a math class since fifth grade. Everyone thought it a joke just as they thought it could not be true I never had writing classes. *Truth stranger than fiction* is one of my many invisible tattoos. I now see how many survival mechanisms born of being part of dysfunctional families make terrific stories from horrible living that explained why even little anecdotes shared in passing resonated with my ghetto students from hard core poverty or prison settings. My audiences weren't just relating to my being a tenth grade dropout, not speaking English making for being branded retarded, or given away from home. The commonality was pain. Unfairness. Cruelty. Lack of love. Not belonging. Many kids learn acting to make adults feel competent with multiple shortcomings, out of control rages, out of bounds urges. At school I would tell truths so unexpected and uncommon no one thought it could be so. Perhaps only late in life did I feel I could risk telling little parts without incurring ridicule or

outright dismissal as if lies. Salt in the wound. Life had been such a disguising of lies, fictional narratives were a part of daily existence. I had lived a life so strange exaggerated soap operas seemed silly and tame. Trash television and serious confessional personal dramas quite familiar. This is what I hoped diversity could evolve into, students staying in school to better their circumstances and options, diversity to include proof of resilience and motivation. Autobiographical writing often provides that evidence.

What do I hope the stories herein teach? Complicated aims of education, complex outcomes, jagged learning curves. Food for thought for the reader. Humble hopes of quality in the writing. If the point of the process of this part of writing autobiographically had been to “know thyself,” then the process of creating the writings shared in these selected stories was, in my eyes, successful. Perhaps too personally painfully so. An uncommon experience, this writing freely opened the path for discoveries of self awareness, as well as insights into the writing process. The prized quality writing wrote itself. It was not the writing that had a purpose, a job for existing, born of analysis and premeditation. Like children, writing needs its own kind of nature and freedom, not the job to please others, to only be of service, or to be hemmed in by too many regulations.

The reach and desire of subjects to be included in this dissertation proved beyond overly ambitious. The incorporation of photography felt vital as it had been an important part of my atypical self created curricular journey for interacting with the world at large, developing language and identity for a new self, creating employment and artistic opportunities. Alas, there were technical

difficulties too overwhelming to overcome for photography to be included in even the humblest of forms. Not the least of the reasons was legal ramifications. My swimming in computer land was like a dog splashing on the shore and photography was an ocean plunge, way off my range. It was a bitter and embarrassing disappointment, one I kept trying to fix to no avail. Photography had been such an asset in life. Here it had become a liability to wish its inclusion for the dissertation, as my limited computer literacy would prove. It was English all over again. Once I jumped for joy, only four years in this country, entering tenth grade feeling I had mastered English to the point of mimicking the Boston drawl or an Atlanta singing lilt, using slang, getting jokes or puns, when the school system wanted me out for my flunking ways. I felt I had conquered a language in record time, but I was considered a failure, backward, ignorant, limited, not fitting in, not wanted, not intelligent, not up to par. English and computer literacy: ghosts of past limitations making a return engagement to impede my ability to succeed in school and hampering employment possibilities. Would there ever be a catch up? I tried not to feel the full weight of it as it created a fog of pessimism so contrary to the spirit of learning and growing.

The curiosity and creativity that were natural to my person were detrimental to success in academia. It was one of the many lessons school kept trying to teach me. Stay in your place. Obey. Do not question. Stay quiet. Be robot, no feelings. Lose the compassion for your fellow student, they are competition not colleagues. No one is your ally or your guide. Learn your inferior place. Inferior as student, only an empty vessel. Subhuman as Puerto Rican, the

intellectually handicapped. Born female, of limited use and potential as the baby producing, house cleaning maid or secretarial staff, the modern plantation equivalent of in house service. Problematic to be born a questioning soul. Dangerous to be a non conformist and to have a why at the ready for anything school, society, family set up as daily gauntlets. If you are born feeling an old soul, and have unspeakable hells hurled your way, you learn to find common sense and logic not just seductive but second nature. Even if the only one seeing things your own logical way is your own alone self. Not all lessons that resonated bloomed in the selected stories included in the dissertation.

I had confirmed the almighty power of intuition and how academic logic, parental and family advice, and other useless sources of commandments in life, career, and school choices often crashed in contradictory directions and intentions. I discovered that though I saw parallels in disparate things, it took effort and examples to make the obvious visible to others. My values were often in contradiction with standard school's measures of success and desired thinking. I didn't like competition, I liked sharing. I didn't seek credit, I sought to have others take it. I didn't look to make good deeds public. I didn't publish who or what I helped in the prison, the street, the non-profit groups. I felt the joy of knowing the universe had allowed me to help. I had been able to know I had succeeded. That was plenty of reward. I was foolish and naïve and would live to be shown and told and laughed at for such behavior.

What worked best in the traditional ways of schooling and society were not the ways I was wired. It was my intention to write about the lessons learned

from the stories included in this compendium, but my gut, my intuition, my heart resented it. Stories taken from my real life I would not feel comfortable evaluating in either the subject matter or the writing quality. No tango with false modesty. Only real humility need apply.

The reality is that some lessons are peculiar to the curriculum that is life lived the hard way. The gangbanger who threw me to the floor when shots rang out taught me the lesson that you don't poke your head out of curiosity when there's a loud bang. I believe this might have saved a bunch of ballerinas at an art center where I worked as a kid tried to hold up a late night greasy chicken joint in Puerto Rico that the wannabe robber didn't know was frequented by wannabe cops. I feel perhaps there is a chance I kept a couple of kids I mentored in still mostly a Chicago Latino gang riddled Humboldt Park and in other equally rough parts of the south side of Chicago in one piece as shots rang out and I squashed them to the floor of my car as their necks were playing submarine eye lookout. My mentored youngsters had a mother strung out on drugs, a dad dying of aids, alpha male family members imprisoned, so hitting the floor was a missing page from their social milieus' lesson plans. Good thing I was there to play grill cheese.

The story of that gangbanger was one that wrote itself. The subconscious took over, and when I came to, the story was written. Some writing came out of an inner need to see its secret tale of suffering on the page even when the subject matter recalled delicately thought forgotten pain. More profound lessons emerged in the writings here enclosed as I was forced to cold bloodedly look at decisions that impacted my life that emanated from the family and/or school settings and

that had marked the limitations of what my options would be. I realized as I wrote the stories on the alternative high school I attended and the ivy league citadel I was able to get accepted into how little encouragement or help I received at either one, and, sadly, how equally negative, critical, and self-esteem crushing my family had been with my pursuits of learning, career paths, job opportunities. As I wrote, my head and heart did a cynical life review that showed me it wasn't that no one ever took me to a doctor, had a conversation about goals, suggested I use a tutor, encouraged some field could be a hobby if not a profession. It was the crushing wall of disdain and we will be here to watch you fail and then laugh and remind you how foolish you looked aiming so beyond your boundaries. It wasn't a conspiracy or hegemony. It was well intentioned profound ignorance and arrogance. Alas, nothing has changed.

Those who are born into the lucky sperm or blessed womb club are delivered with the odds on their side. Everyone else is playing the lottery. Some get a grandmother that saves. A mentor that rescues. A teacher that shows the rare smile of love washing over the rejected ones wounds so wings can take flight instead of crash. The ones whose lives have food and shelter and relative stability with employment options as a given often just need a nudge to also get insurance on their soul by doing good deeds. At my ivy league ivory tower I met a Latino family who knew not there were poor and needy fellow travelers waiting to make them whole in a poor part of Chicago. When in the journey that is the curriculum of life I encountered uninvolved people with resources I became a tow truck. That family helped countless undocumented folk, domestic violence victims, and these

days are influencing America's policies on immigration. I did not stop by to ask for recognition for bringing social consciousness their way. But apparently you need to register these things as highlighted and underlined with the punctuation of awards if your actions are to be considered of value.

I know I am not wired properly because I get joy from things that cannot be listed on the resume. The green eyed Puerto Rican named Tanner who I say "hi" to with chump change by the post office is shooed away as a worthless homeless beggar in a wheelchair. No one has to tell me his beaten pride likes it when I address him by his name. Gena, the cross eyed skinny black young mother beggar from the Lathrop Homes housing project runs to bless me when I call her by name, the look of surprise stopping her talking to herself to focus her stare at me. The name recall gives dignity to an anonymous invisibility I like taking out of street begging. Can't fix their harsh homeless quality of floating, but for our moment we are humans with names that respect an identity, blessing each other and calling out sweet salutations. These typical daily tidbits remind me how academia should have remained a drive by visit for someone of my exposed nerve endings. Only good for actors, writers, and social workers. Compassion and empathy have very little usefulness in the real world of academia, financial success, and career development gone awry.

I know I am not wired properly as I get crazy happy when I happen upon a compendium such as the *Dictionary of Theories* by Jennifer Bothamley, "one stop to more than 5,000 theories." I love encyclopedias and dictionaries. As a child not yet in school, I wasn't taught to read until I told the story of Faust and the selling

of the soul to an unsuspecting visitor. I had tried smiling begging, negotiating, temper tantrums, to no avail. My family had then what would be a cross for me to bear, their worship of the almighty expert, always degreed, always inviolate, invariably wrong. Back then the expert pronounced I was too young to read. Thousands of books later I would use reading against the medical experts who announced the impending deaths of my adored grandmothers, whom I cherished spoiling with the practices the experts scoffed at (checking the PDR for counter indicated medications, vitamins and good foods, laughter therapy, many etceteras) and to my enjoyment lived years of high quality alert life they were not supposed to have.

The power of degrees to decree has been in this life an unwelcomed recurring theme. An expert insisted I was too young to read with no notice to the anguished hunger in my pleadings. Faust helped me win that battle but being allowed to learn other languages was verboten because an expert said it would scramble my brain and I wouldn't be able to then learn in any language. Experts are still using their power for evil not for enlightenment. The arrogance of certified ignorance! It is alive and well and these days saying that not being wired correctly can be controlled with medication. The danger with this is that one size does not fit all. Diagnosis is as much art as it is science. Scientists still pretend they are objective, when such an animal does not exist. People pretend politics, race, and class do not decide the fate of innocent children, when it always has. Hegemony is a masterful powerful monster. The number of students within four walls, the access to resources, the love or lack thereof at home, decide at an ever

younger and faster pace how soon the new victim will know hopelessness, anger, self-destruction. That old death will come at an earlier age not because those brilliant writers documenting the deterioration of the public school system one tragic story of wasted possibilities at a time did not write fabulously enough, but because children of color and of poverty have no advocates with political power and muscle.

Approaches are in their infancy when it comes to the brain, mental health or accurate analysis of what is proper behavior in the classroom, what is excessive energy, or how to tell if someone has a deficit in their attention span. How and who determines if one is so creative and energetic they ought be in art or athletic programs of study, schooling geared for alpha leadership and entrepreneurial self guided curriculums, or sent for mental health evaluation. Looking at history one finds the most revered and decisive contributors to the arts, the sciences, medical and societal historical improvers were not usually the successful beings, but often the ones considered crazy or problematic or financial, therefore societal, failures.

In seventh grade I was considered retarded because I flunked intelligence tests. No one noticed or listened as I tried to reason I didn't speak English nor had taken any such formatted tests with little egg shaped holes for number two pencils to mark. Never mind recognizing words such as sleet and hail for one just in from the Caribbean clueless about New England winters. As intrigued by the history of ideas and enamored of the possibilities of language as I am, I still recoil when I feel words are used to create distance cringes instead of mind yoga.

Alienation instead of inclusion. The day I finally could properly pronounce “recidivism” was exciting to my little inside self. I always knew what it meant and could talk at length on what the numbers meant for men of color, what Angela Davis had spoken militantly about way back in the days of old, and the meaning of profit in relation to the exploitation of prison populations. Yet in academic, and upper class milieus people inferred and acted as if you couldn’t understand the concept or the theories if you couldn’t pronounce it properly. Whether “sleet” as an unknown in an intelligence test, or domesticating one’s tongue to pronounce a big Sunday word full of deep implications as one such as what recidivism means to so much of the financially challenged male population of people of color, words have power to define us and impose limitations to how we are perceived, treated, and understood.

I had a discussion with a communist leader who insisted a poor man who had built a rickety pile of wood into a “piragua” truck with shaved ice and bottles full of syrupy flavorings actually was petit bourgeois because he owned his means of production. I don’t like words or ideas or theories used to entertain mental gymnastics competitors with no purpose or reason other than to win an intellectual argument or appear clever. Knowledge tastes better when at the service of humanity not to throttle progress or entertain the brain with pursuits going nowhere. My travels in academia have shown me the error of the ways of putting intelligence at the service of the ego, of the payroll check, of the almighty grant, of the competition, of the participation in playing gatekeepers against the diverse coming generations of societal folk and needs.

In Professor Schubert's courses, in our ongoing conversations over the years, and in correspondence, there was a fundamental curriculum question: What is worthwhile and for whom?

Chapter 13

Hope

The tale of two feelings. Despair and hope. To live and die in regret. To dream and thrive blooming. Simmering anger boiling old wounds. Floating lightness of fluffy feelings shining like the welcomed sun after a dark stormy night. Negative or positive. Life can be the best of the world or the worst of it. I still have the old nature or nurture issues knocking around the condiments in the mind. I still notice how blind those who have so much take it for granted. I still cringe at lack of empathy for the unfortunate so many feel entitled to live by virtue of the lottery luck of birth.

Living can rainbow the best of all possibilities or the rings of hell. An education can open doors of perception, develop leadership, give validity of voice, facilitate access to employment. You may learn skills or information you can use, you may be allowed to teach, and your ideas may qualify for publishing consideration. In the schooling journey you can accumulate an expanding vocabulary, become versed in the specific lingo sophistications of your chosen field and become adept at applying new theories to old problems.

School and family can be the pillars, the foundation where a person learns and develops values, the content of their character is formed, love and manners and common sense information is learned, accumulated, developed, encouraged. What happens if a child is beaten bloody at home, sexually or emotionally abused, and officially branded incapable of learning at school? The product of such

poverty of upbringing tends to self-destruct or turn such anger from the despair of powerlessness into violence on others. It is a common mistake to presume dysfunction mostly occurs within economically challenged communities.

Dysfunction and sexual abuse is like domestic violence, found even in the best of families.

I have found stories to be a particularly graphic tool for sharing learning with others. I have read or made up stories, true or fictional, to put children to sleep and ego-delighted at their glee with wanting more. Children love stories as if swimming in a pool of ice cream on a hot summer day. When I started teaching I only wanted the worst of the dropout delinquent rejects and it was intoxicating to watch them enthralled with my Puerto Rican art slide show tales of the misery of poverty and ridicule suffered by the creative ones. By the time we visited poor little Van Gogh at the Art Institute of Chicago they couldn't wait to inquire about what defined insanity while looking for clues in the paintings. I saw their expecting public rejection that didn't materialize as they howled street loud Spanish in fancy Chicago downtown airspace. They marveled at how instant the travel from ghetto drab Humboldt Park to a few miles south, a foreign land of smooth gleaming skyscrapers, a jump fast and easy like corner drug buys.

A teacher opens doors or slams down the future. A parent provides the nest of protection or fosters distrust. Society has to embrace love over money. You can't hug cash, nor will it squeal with delight as it develops. The level of aggression, violence, hatred, and destruction can be seen to grow from bullying to the daily murders of children and their innocence. Education needs to promote

and encourage thinking outside the box, creative solutions, intensions rooted in compassion. The reason for the writings and sharings of personal experiences and reflections in this fictionalized autobiographical compendium of short stories was to provide a forum for acknowledging some matters close to my own experiences as a Puerto Rican tenth grade dropout misfit female who continued to battle stereotypes, bad family advise, and lack of support within academia, to persevere in pursuit of learning opportunities.

There were many insights along the journey. I realized I was having an increasingly difficult time with the writing within this thesis because perspective was so compromised. It was awkward to let the stories tell themselves with the mega analysis perspective looming: the purpose of the writing, a dissertation and a public defense, kept pulling me into wanting to teach a lesson or simplifying a process, rather than let the stories carry the water by themselves. Then there were issues of the details of the stories being so peculiarly unique I feared I could offend or hurt feelings in those tales still identifiable by now elderly individuals, even though quite intentionally cloaked with sophisticated fictionalization. So I eliminated, disguised, totally fictionalized stories and even erased storylines altogether. Many issues were not anticipated in the original proposal of studies and writing. Discomfort in autobiographical storytelling was expected, deep pain and lingering anger and regret were not foreseen and were awkward to live with and muddle through.

There was a comedy of errors living reality that would have provided humorous fodder for strange family situation writing for television. A student and

circumstances in a bittersweet obstacle course full of falling apart housing situations, equipment malfunctions, technology snafus, eccentric family members. The original proposal for the thesis seemed every day to become a fainter memory of ghostly outlines of a path that once the journey commenced, that altered map proved of quite limited guidance. Photography: a case in point, disappointing from beginning to end. The technology for reproducing pictures from negatives and slides to actual prints, images to be used as part of a story of learning and of autobiographical sharing, had disappeared. Then, not only was creating the image a new science, but reproducing them on the laptop a difficult, technically complex skill. To add insult to injury, I discovered just how complicated a myriad of legal quicksand I was playing with, from individuals' publication permission signatures to copyrights. I had to finally give up on the idea of using photography, but it cost more than regrets, chagrin, and tears. It cost a chunk of the storytelling I had expected and counted on.

There were travels through a grandmother's colorful paintings, a chronology from a picture precise style to totally abstract, a rare tale of an early in the century, female art pioneer with decades of works ending in bohemian Greenwich Village in New York. There were visual teaching materials and photography slide shows that I had counted on to stand as art and to use as the basis of a story, but without the pictures I couldn't use for this thesis. There were loaded conflicts within the issue of autobiographical fiction not being compatible with the truth reality of photographs. What I had originally planned as creative new graphics enhancement within and as additions to storytelling became traps

too deep to explore. So complex a tangle of technical and legal issues kept multiplying with the desire to use photographic images, I would eventually write, call, and lament to my mentor advisor and dissertation chair I would have to give up on the addition of photographs. Deflated and defeated, it felt like one more punch to the gut. This one was all my fault. Nasty business having no one else to blame.

Begun within the journey of the creation of this thesis, I had anticipated enhancing knowhow related to computer technology including specialized classes in photography. It feels hopeful to decide, though I had to accept I would not write or publish certain storylines or photographs for the thesis, it did not have to mean the ideas had to be discarded in the altogether. Perhaps they could see a future for a different purpose, maybe for a humbler venue of publication.

I anticipate pursuing areas of personal fulfillment involving volunteer work with species in danger of extinction, Red Cross disaster services, and dog rescue organizations. I will search for new mentoring opportunities with young people. I have extensive life long experience successfully contributing to fundraising proposal writing, organizations volunteer recruitment, board of directors work, and a myriad of programmatic, policy, and evaluation work in the nonprofit sector which yearns to be fully engaged once again. There was an unhealthy imbalance in the later stages of doctoral work due in part to complex family, finances, and health issues, one of the casualties being those activities that nourished my motivation for being.

I long for a future where I am no longer sole primary caretaker and daily services provider for the fragile senior family members I share life with. There are delicate circumstances of economic and emotional import that need addressing before there is a clarity of options opened for future endeavors. I have not secured employment by means of specialized job paths in the past, nor have areas of studies and degrees directly dovetailed into enabling qualifications for work. There was a commonality of themes and experiences with educational issues, life conflicts, and employment problems I observed others going through that made me consider the potential validity of my sharing the herein autobiographically originated stories. There was a surgical life review feeling in the autobiographically originated reflections.

Once upon a time I reflected on the problems faced by Latina females wishing for university studies. I had observed that females in some families were expected to stay home, carry out household duties, care for the elderly, do maid service for others. From this commentary of something I saw unchanged thru many generations, I helped create a one hour special for an educational television channel. Still a teenager then barely sneaking into a university myself, the television station offered much my nontraditional highly degreed adoptive family forbade me to pursue and I obeyed. I did not learn the full import of that lesson then even though at the time I parlayed the reflections and television work into opportunities for Latinas, scholarship and minority admittance changes, extra counselors, Latino professors, importing materials for the library, special recruitment efforts for Latinas. This was many decades ago. Just as those that

have everything in life handed them may fail to appreciate the compassion they could have for those who do not, I am not surprised by females and Latinos in higher education who may take for granted the struggles that came before. No one is ever just handed the keys and welcomed in. History and struggle, much less the history of struggles, is hidden, just as is the plethora of unfairness, injustice, inequality, property stealing, minerals exploited exported, workers sweat undervalued and unpaid for. Even the empathy some are born with in excess others lack in the altogether.

The value of autobiographical stories varies as much as each individual life does. One size does not fit all. The lesson learned at one stage in life may not be the same years later. Some experiences that were sad mistakes at one point or for one person may well become a useful lesson for another. A young man I once knew had a tragic relationship with drugs, which he said he only felt relief from when he shared his sad tale with other young people he wanted scared straight, away from his dead end pursuits.

Once upon a time, I delighted in the doodles of a student whose eyes moistened as we both understood no one had so praised him, just damned his graffiti. I can't self proclaim the stories I've written for this occasion have writing quality, that is for others to judge. Like muscles warmed up and stretched for exercise, I did sense writing improvement, but time will tell if the growth continues to provide that school of learning as the practice continues. I can state most assuredly the process has taught me profound truths about my person and the journeys surviving many kinds of families, values of varying cultures, cutting

across social classes, and harsh learning from educational travels full of failure and success.

It is possible to extol the virtues of experience as a road map to learning and teaching. Volumes have been written, pages filled with quotes, footnotes, bibliographies on the subject. It does not feel logical that to state anything in higher learning study centers, you must quote someone else, as if one has no individual thoughts or useful observations or life wisdom or conscious learning of one's own.

I am loathe to pit book learning versus common sense. Theory versus practice. Little stories versus mega-analysis. Anecdotal evidence versus scientific study. Why does the thinking have to head towards mono-factorial answers? Is that a remnant of when science laboratory experiments combined one substance with another? Is it the simple one color with another making a new third color? Why can't everything be equally valid and useful? Or do sophisticated academic arguments exist to entertain the intellect away from pragmatic solutions to problems? Is it because at the root of so many problems is selfishness, greed? Is it that dirty nasty money, lust for status, the aggrandizement of competitive little egos are all that matters for those in power? Is politics the big boys gang turf warfare waged on the backs of the children of the poor, the immigrants, the ones with the wrong pigment, choking in crumbling tenements, waiting for a new depression era future?

It is too late to play ostrich. Turn on the news and the bees are dying so who will pollinate the world's food? Turn off the news as each natural disaster

gets bigger in size, damage, impact, human and dollar signs cost. Yet the pain of human selfishness, lack of sharing wealth and opportunities, runaway corruptions of abuse of power and privilege now makes even the façade of the attainment of middle class a see thru mirage.

What happened to the old if you work hard enough you own your home, get medicine when sick, give your kids a pushed start line full of educational options? The bleak nothingness that was the lot of the nobodies has taken over the middle class. Every day the news shows incontrovertible proof that life and possibilities as anyone remembers has disappeared and a brave new world is necessary if we are to save the planet and the human species, never mind the long suffering animal kingdom. It is not meant to sound apocalyptic. Change is always an adjustment as well as an inevitability. It is in the nature of things, people, economic systems. But if we are to be useful contributors to those we seek the privilege of teaching, we have to be leaders and not just of reading lessons of repeated regurgitated thoughts.

Hence the value of the autobiographical narrative, the unique beauty of original thought. You can not repeat a life. It may prove useful to write one's stories for innumerable reasons, and for the author to benefit as much as the reader. Some have pain to exorcise, wisdom to enlighten with, wordsmith gifts to demonstrate weaving into the artistic craft of writing. I believe the autobiographical perspective to share stories of teaching and learning is a unique view that has proven enduringly effective. I feel the voiceless and powerless should always be in our hearts and applaud all those teachers who, with their

hearts broken, have taken to their writing implements to share injustices and frustrations within educational settings. I celebrate those who raise puny fists in defiance and share victories. I cherish those who have the courage to fight for change and improvement of an educational system in desperate need of repair. Naked autobiographical truth sharing, even when cloaked in fictional garb, is not for the faint of heart. I can't pretend I am satisfied with a dissertation the aims of which I now realize were beyond ambitious in depth and breadth and scope and dream wishes. If I look at the attempts of the writings and questionings within about what is worth learning, living, being, I am recompensed with stories that speak to survival. Surviving school. Surviving family. Surviving life.

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Teachers College Press.

Vita

NAME: Gini Blaut-Sorrentini

EDUCATION: B.A., Anthropology, Honors, University of Illinois at Chicago,
Chicago, Illinois, 1977

Ph.D. Program in Anthropology, University of Chicago
Doctoral required courses completed, 1978-1980

M.A., Education, University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois, 1999

Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction,
University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois, 2015

SELECTED RELATED EXPERIENCE, RESEARCH, TRAINING:

- 2009 Presenter, “Love, Justice, and Education in an Acquisitive
Society”
UIC College of Education, Faculty Research Day
- 2002 Conference presentation “The Schubertian Center for
Curriculum Studies’
Bergamo Educational Retreat
- 1995 Shelter Operations Workshop, American Red Cross
Managing Individual Performance, American Red Cross
Developing Team Performance, American Red Cross
Interpersonal Skills, American Red Cross
Frontline Leadership Cores I-II, American Red Cross
Mass Care I & II, American Red Cross
- 1994 Administering a Small Disaster Operation, American Red Cross
Introduction to Disaster Services, American Red Cross
Standard First Aid and CPR, American Red Cross
- 1988 Federal and State Employment Regulations in Illinois
- 1987 Great Lakes Senior Executive Seminar
Women in Graphic Arts Management

- 1975 Archeological Methods/Physical Anthropology, NIU
- 1972-1974 Puerto Rican Studies, Self-created curriculum, University Without Walls
Northeastern Illinois University
Chicago, Illinois
- 1971 Artistic Photography, Photo Silkscreening
Instituto de Artes Plasticas, San Juan, Puerto Rico

SELECTED WORK EXPERIENCE:

- 2001 Research Assistant
Rafael Cintron Ortiz Latino Cultural Center
University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois
- 1999-2000 Research Assistant, Photographer, Translator, Writing Teacher
Center for Youth and Society, Publication of "Real Conditions"
University of Illinois University
- 1993-1995 Assistant to the Executive Director
American Red Cross, Puerto Rico Chapter
- 1990-1993 Administrative and Fiscal Policies Consultant
Public Relations for Quincentennial Celebration of Discovery of Puerto Rico
Center for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean
University of Puerto Rico
- 1984-1989 Director of Graphic Services
Mayor's Cabinet, City of Chicago
- 1980-1981 Administrator Community Arts Development Program
Chicago Council on Fine Arts
- 1977-1978 Program Director, Artist-In-Residence Program
Chicago Council on Fine Arts
- 1976 English Teacher,
Adult Learning Skills Program, Urban Skills Institute
City Colleges of Chicago

SELECTED MEDIA RECOGNITIONS AND AWARDS:

- 1988 “1988 Top 100 In-Plants in All Industries”
In-Plant Reproduction and Electronic Publishing
- “Departments in the News: Graphics and Reproduction Center”
 Personnel News, City of Chicago
- “1988 Top In-Plants Among Government Institutions”
In-Plant Reproduction and Electronic Publishing 1988
- 1987 “Ellas En Primer Lugar: Gini Sorrentini”
Mujer Hispana (Cover feature article with biography)
 Recipient of “Outstanding Hispanic Woman Award”

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS:

- 1988 Panelist, “Continuity and Change in Machine Politics-
 Chicago Style”
 13th Annual Meeting of Social Science History Association
- Presenter, “History of Puerto Rican Art”
 Slide Conference Curriculum Creator
 Centro Cultural Ruiz Belvis, Youth Program, Chicago,
 Illinois
- Keynote Speaker, “Minorities in Leadership Roles”
 University of Illinois at Champaign, Ninth Annual Graduation
 Ceremony
- Lecturer, “Cultural Sensitivity and Law Enforcement”
 Chicago Police Academy
- Lecturer, “Hispanic Women in Politics”
 Northeastern Illinois University
- Panelist, “Black/Latino Coalition, Towards a Progressive
 Agenda”
 Third World Conference Foundation, Governor State
 University
- Keynote Speaker, Illinois Department of Corrections
 Library System, Stateville Maximum Security Prison
- Keynote Speaker, Paper Industry Management Association
 Conference

Represented Mayor Harold Washington

1985 Guest Speaker, "Career Awareness Night"
Northern Illinois University

SELECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN JOURNALISM:

1976 Editor, Alternative Schools Network of Chicago
"Alternative Curriculum: Resources for Teachers"
Chapter on Bilingual-Bicultural Resources

1974 Staff Writer/Photographer, Illini, University of Illinois at
Chicago

1972-1976 Editor, The Rican Journal, Chicago

SELECTED TELEVISION AND PRINTED MEDIA INTERVIEWS:

1983 Jorge Caruso, "Cultural Baggage: Puerto Ricans' Search for
Identity
Hampered by Cultural Collision," Chicago Sun-Times

1982 Pepe Vargas, "Sorrentini Quiere Preservar Cultura Boricua
en Chicago,"
Chicago Sun-Times

1981 Carmelo Melendez, "Our People-Los Hispanos" WFLD,
Channel 32

1979 "Profiles in Chicago Latino Art," Chicago Artists Coalition
Newsletter

"El Show Jibaro," Channel 26

1978 "Entre Amigos," Channel 26
"Contigo," NBC Weekend Edition

SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHY PUBLICATIONS:

1979 Chicago Collection Photographic Portfolio,

35 Sundays, Chicago Omnation Press

The Chicago Maroon “University of Chicago Demonstrates”

La Raza: “Puerto Rico y Su Gente Visto A Traves del Lente de Gini”

- 1978 Visitante, National Catholic Weekly, “Los Muralistas de Casa Aztlan y sus Luchas por la Expresion del Mensaje”
- Chicago Defender, “Chicago Housing Authority Altgeld All-Stars,” and “Paul Robeson Choir”
- 1977 Nosotros Anthology: Revista Chicano-riquena, Indiana University Press: Vol.5, No. 1
- 1974 Journal of Contemporary Puerto Rican Thought. Chicago: Midwest Institute of Puerto Rican Culture: Vol. 2, No.1

SELECTED AFFILIATIONS, MEMBERSHIPS, BOARDS:

- 2000 Visual Arts Panel, Community Arts Assistance Program, City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs
- 1997 Eighth Annual Celebrity Charity Chair Auction Benefit Committee, Fundraising for Deborah’s Place, Erie Neighborhood House, Horizons for Youth, The Music Center of the North Shore, & Open Hand Chicago
- 1996-1999 Allocations Committee, Chicago Foundation for Women
- 1989 Board Member, Jane Addams Conference
- 1988 Board Member, Latino Chicago Theater
Board Member, Chicago Caribbean Arts Association
Member, City of Chicago, Chicago Office of Fine Arts, Local Cultural Development Grant Panel
- 1987 Board Member, Columbia College, Chicago Latino Film Festival
- 1983 Member, Chicago Council on Fine Arts Association
- 1982 Member, Chicago Council on Fine Arts Neighborhood Arts Projects Panel

- 1981 Consultant, The Community Film Workshop of Chicago, Film Festival “Self-Portraits: Films by Minorities”
- 1978 Exhibit Coordinator, Museum of Science and History, Hispanic Arts Festival
Illinois Regional Consultant, National Endowment for the Arts
Mistress of Ceremonies, City of Chicago Park District, Annual Gymnastics Performance
- 1977 Research Consultant, VIII Pan American Games, Technical Division of the Organizing Committee
Exhibit Organizer, University of Illinois at Chicago, Montgomery Ward Gallery, “Puerto Rican Cultural Festival”
Judge, City of Chicago Park District, Annual Junior Citizens Citywide Scholarship Competition
- 1973-1976 Member, University of Illinois at Chicago, Latin American Studies Department Curriculum Committee
Founding Member, El Taller Artists Collective, Chicago
Course Development Consultant, University of Illinois at Chicago, Latin American Studies, “Latino Artistic Popular Expressions”
Consultant/Contributor, “Crisis: Emigracion,” Puerto Rican Film Makers
Vice-President, Northeastern Illinois University, Union for Puerto Rican Students
Production Consultant/Participant, WTTW Nationwide, Public Broadcasting Television, Prime Time Chicago Special, “The Latino Student and the College Obstacle Course”
Newscaster, WTTW, Channel 11, Public Broadcast Television, Ahora, twice weekly news show