Memoirs, movements, and meaning: Teacher/student research in freshman composition

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MEMOIRS, MOVEMENTS, AND MEANING:
TEACHER/STUDENT RESEARCH IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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in

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April 26, 1999
DEDICATION

To my daughters:
Shannan and Dawn Zitney
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The path toward teaching weaves around many curves and bends. Along the way, I've been blessed by the guidance of many people. I could not have traveled so far without a lot of help. Therefore, I wish to acknowledge those who have walked with me along the way. Some have traveled greater distances than Others, but all have taught me what I needed to learn.

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ABSTRACT

MEMOIRS, MOVEMENTS, AND MEANING:
TEACHER/STUDENT RESEARCH IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

By

Carol A. Hawkins
University of New Hampshire, September, 1999

The author interprets her memoirs as a reader and writer to describe how the movement from I to We, a process of "repositioning," shifted her perceptions from "hating school" to wanting to teach. She begins by tracing her roots as a "white," working-class woman from Cleveland (1952-1970) and ends by disclosing "what worked and what didn't work" when teaching freshman composition at the University of New Hampshire (1994-1997). She draws on feminist, ethnographic, rhetorical, and critical theory to compose "thick descriptions" of her reading, writing, and teaching life. She juxtaposes her struggles with Others', like Min-Zhan Lu, to identify, interpret, and critique the cultural values and forces at work when coming to voice.

The author "thinks back through her mother" to note how gender and economic class contributed to her struggles. She "unveils" the disempowering narrative structures in fairy tales and romance fictions she read as a child and names five psychological needs that were never met in school. She recalls her father's utilitarian view of literacy and her difficulties with the foreign discursive practices of graduate school. She confronts more
"authoritative discourses" in Alcoholics Anonymous and discloses conversations among women who gathered to talk about what they couldn't or wouldn't talk about in an AA meeting.

She transforms her interpersonal memoirs into a curriculum for freshman composition. The author then focuses on the case studies of two students, Lyn and Connie, to illustrate the issues, contradictions and struggles that arise when she and her students move from I to We.

Lyn moved from I to We when her interpretations of her siblings' deaths led her to read to the terminally ill at a local hospital. Connie moved from I to We when her interpretations of her family's Christian values led her to participate in a discussion group at a battered women's shelter. The author then compares the two case studies and finds that Lyn "walked her talk" at her research site, whereas Connie contradicted herself. The author then juxtaposes her struggles with the struggles that Lyn and Connie encountered when moving from I to We. She then asks her students and herself to determine what knowing they value, where they obtained that knowledge and how they can use their own experiences to transform current language practices into acts of liberation.
INTRODUCTION

"Smart Mouth"

No one ever told us we had to study our lives.

Adrienne Rich
"Transcendental Etude,"
The Dream of a Common Language

What does it mean to live a life that includes the teaching of writing? Adrienne Rich's line reveals the root of my answer—that I had to turn to writing to study my own life. I chose writing because I tried everything else, from rebellion (sex, drugs, rock-n-roll), to compliance (marriage, children, housework), but neither side of the pendulum brought me to a resting place.

Then something happened, something shocking, that stripped me of all reality. After nine years of marriage and two children, my husband, Dave, admitted to me that he was having an affair. It wasn't his first. He had been living a double life of numerous affairs in his own struggle with restlessness and discontentment. We both reached a point where we couldn't keep up the facade anymore.

I felt like my whole life had been stripped away, not just my illusions of love and marriage, but everything I had ever been taught to believe in—that my role as a woman was to find a man, get married, have children, and protect the hearth while he went out to work everyday to "bring home the bacon." Feminists were actively recasting the roles of women during the time I was growing up in American society (1952-1970), but in my working-class
neighborhood, I seldom heard their voices. How could I? I never even bothered to listen to my own.

I turned to writing because nothing else worked. Once I had children to care for, suicide was no longer an option. I had to keep "it" together, whatever "it" was. I had to learn responsibility. My husband was too far into his own struggle with alcoholism to share any more of the load. I had no choice. I realized I had to pull myself together, but I didn't know how. All I knew at the time was that I couldn't help my children if I couldn't help myself. Writing became my way.

I remember the days after Dave left. My daughters would come home from school to find me at the sink, washing the dishes and crying my eyes out. There's something almost primal about washing the dishes—like sweeping the floor—ancient gestures of women keeping the hearth. In my loss, washing the dishes had become a ritual of meditation. All I could think about was how life was supposed to be and how I had failed. Then I'd cry. My tears would flood the sink long after the last dish was washed.

I finally stopped crying when I picked up a pen and a piece of paper and began to write. I felt lonely, but there wasn't anyone. My disconnection was totally complete. In desperation, I turned to myself for help, someone I didn't even know. I began by writing down my problems, the immediate ones (how to quit depressing my children by crying all the time), and the past ones (how to respond to my husband's drinking and affairs), and my future ones (how to support my children and stay sane).

At first my writing took on the form of a log where I recorded my thoughts and feelings, then questions began to emerge, questions that gave me a sense of where I needed to begin. Every time I wrote my way toward answering my questions, I began to figure out the nature of my struggles. In
the process, I uncovered something about myself that I didn't know before. I came to see how I came to be in the mess I was in.

Later, I would be introduced to *Women's Ways of Knowing*, where the authors gave names to women's perspectives, such as *silence,* *received knowledge,* *subjective knowledge,* *procedural knowledge,* and *constructed knowledge,* but these words meant nothing to me until I made sense of them by viewing my own life. *Silence* described how I acquiesced in a male-dominated world; *received knowledge* described how I swallowed whatever I was told; *procedural knowledge* described how I applied standard ways of doing things, like how to go about getting a divorce according to the laws of the land; *constructed knowledge* described how I realized that transcendence was not a final resting place, but a series of revelations that depended on the struggles I faced, the context, and how I responded; *subjective knowledge* described how I came to know me.

When I turned to letter writing, the early salutations read, "Dear Diary." I didn't know myself well enough to address my letters, "Dear Carol." I wanted someone to talk to, but talk was scarce at my house, and I didn't have any friends or family nearby to turn to for conversations. Consequently, those important and not-so-important events that make up daily life were only half lived without someone to share them with. Besides, my domestic life was so out-of-control, I didn't want anyone to know about my problems.

When I wasn't isolating myself from the outside world, I wore masks to cover up my shame. I feared that a friend might hear me cry, smell the alcohol on my husband's breath, or see my children's withdrawal whenever their father and I would fight. Consequently, I became invisible. I couldn't conceive of a friend as someone who might mirror back to me what she saw, and in a loving and non-judgmental manner, offer some support. My
feelings of alienation led me to believe that if friends saw the misery in my homelife, they wouldn't want to be around me very much, or they'd expect me to change the conditions of my life. At the time, even if I wanted to change, I didn't know how.

Adrienne Rich's poem suggests:

we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence

I began with "Dear Diary."

**Writing and Healing**

Once I wrote my way from desperation to critique, I was able to reshape what seemed like chaos into a constellation of moments, born of disruptions, that revealed a dream—my dream—to become a teacher. I didn't always dream of teaching. In fact, I was the angry little girl who hated school. My mantra growing up was "School Sucks!" I continue to hear this mantra as I find myself confined to the cages we call classrooms, but now, I'm there by choice. How did an angry little girl who hated school ever dream of becoming a teacher?

I discovered my passion for teaching by writing down my pain, asking myself why I hurt so much, and searching for answers. When I reflected on the situations that caused the pain, I learned my most valuable lessons. These lessons, in turn, inform my teaching. I teach what knowing I value and where I learned it, locating sites of struggle, both in and out of school.

I searched for clues about life by questioning, in my writing, the people, places, and things that made me unhappy. I had to find a way to quit walking through the door where the guy was waiting for me with the hammer to
conk me over the head. Somehow I knew that I could change my life, that I had choices between door number one, two, or three, but I continued to go through the door where the guy with the hammer waited for me. Repeated knocks on the noggin became familiar after awhile, but somehow I knew I was smarter than my choices. After all, every time I yelled out in anger "School Sucks!" my parents would yell back "Shut that smart mouth of yours!"

Back to School

Keeping a diary eventually led me back to school, where, at the age of twenty-eight, at a community college, I began to read and write with Others. Mary Daly describes "the journey into the Otherworld" as a world free of patriarchy, which "involves finding our way back to reality" (Gyn/Ecology, p. xxxviii). I certainly wasn't free of patriarchy when I attended community college, but I did seek out women writers to read. I wasn't quite ready to come out of my isolation by talking to anyone, but I did want to hear what women had to say, especially about their own lives and how they were making sense of them. Differences didn't matter; I just wanted to hear female voices.

Reading and writing allowed me to go places, to move out of one community and into another, but some movements were more difficult than others. Many of the discursive practices of home were different from those I encountered at school, particularly graduate school. I didn't notice the difference at first, when I entered the community college, or even a few years later, when I went on to a four-year college, but when I first entered graduate school, I received a real wake-up call.

Graduate school required that I assimilate to a world of words and ideas based on someone else's knowledge, none of it my own. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) named this alien language an "authoritative discourse," one I couldn't
decipher as I licked my wounds after a professor's insulting evaluation of my written work. I learned that discursive practices allow access to some but deny Others (see, Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 341-342). I longed for what Maxine Greene (1978) called "authentic speaking," (p. 69) forms of inquiry that "nourish the human conversation," but I found it difficult to enter these conversations in graduate school.

Studying my own life became a challenge in a crowded world where one has little power to question or speak. I had to seek out Others, in my neighborhood community, to enter the conversations I was only witnessing in graduate school. Maxine Greene affirms my belief that the role of a teacher must be grounded in an understanding of Self that "emerges in human experience over time as individuals engage with their social realities and as they communicate with Others and internalize Other's attitudes" (Greene, 1978, pp. 36-39, emphasis mine).

My "social realities" revolved around home, school, and community, where I discovered how language turned the wheel of life, but no "authoritative discourse" ever moved me anywhere. Trapped in stagnant environments, destructive patterns repeated as the wheel kept turning, but I stood still, unable to come to voice.

Deborah Britzman (1991) helps me to understand my struggle to come to voice, particularly in graduate school. She describes the demands of an authoritative discourse "for our allegiance, received and static knowledge, dispensed in a style that eludes the knower, but dictates, in some ways, the knower's frames of reference and the discursive practices that sustain them" (pp. 20-21). She draws on Bakhtin's analysis of how "the word of the father, adult, teacher" authorizes some to speak but denies Others because "the one perceiving and understanding this discourse is a distant descendent; there can
be no arguing with him" (1981, 344). Consequently, "language for the individual consciousness lies on the borderland between oneself and the Other" (1981, 293).

When I faced the dominant discourse of graduate school, I sensed a power struggle, reminiscent of the power struggles I had with my "father, adults, and teachers." I turned to writing memoirs because voices of authority never echoed my own, nor did they listen. I wanted to wrap my conversations around the written word as it pertained to my own desires and experiences; however, in graduate school, I found it difficult to "locate allies" who understood what it was like to be poor and single with children to support while going to college. Consequently, I turned my conversations inward as I wove the windfalls of my life into my writing. I spun out my own primordial alphabet, but I still needed Others to talk to. I needed guidance to move from thought to action.

Virginia Woolf suggests in A Room of One's Own that, as women, "we need to think back through our mothers." But what if we know little of our mothers? What if our mothers won't tell us about their lives? What if our mothers are draped under the heavy cloak of silence?

When I turned to my mother, she turned away. In desperation I sought out Other's mothers and daughters who, like me, needed to gain fresh perspectives. Eventually, with their help, I did "think back through my mother." In the process, I learned more about my Self.

Thinking Back through My Mother

Sometimes I would hide behind my father's brown leather recliner that stood in the corner of grandma's small, crowded living room, concealing the shelves of books that lined the walls there. I grew up in grandma's house...
with three adults and five children, all crammed into a tiny space, like a two-
layer can of sardines, only we had one floor to live on. I discovered just
enough room between my father's chair and the converging corners of the
bookshelves to disappear for awhile, so I could read my way to dreamland.

I read fairy tales and nursery rhymes mostly, in my search for magic. I
recall escaping on the wings of Mother Goose within the pages of an old, red,
leather-bond book that I found on the bottom shelf of one of the bookcases,
stuck into the corner. Dad's big brown recliner barricaded me behind its wide
arms and tall back, so I could escape in the lull of my fantasies. The corner
also provided me with protection. I remember crawling behind that big,
brown, recliner to hide whenever "King Kong" was playing on television.
Although I could still hear the screams of Fay Ray and the drumming and
chanting of the natives from behind my barricade, I could at least protect my
eyes from the scary sight of King Kong crashing through the trees in search of
his mate. He wasn't going to find me.

I loved that corner behind dad's big brown recliner. Sometimes when
I'd hide there, I'd read for hours. I'd pretend to read what I couldn't actually
understand by looking at the words. In those cases, I'd study the pictures. I
recall my knack for making up the stories as I went along from page to page. I
particularly remember an image of an old women with glasses, a black hat
and dress, riding a big white goose. I also recall pictures of "The Old Woman
in the Shoe." Her shoe always reminded me of grandma's crowded house
and my mother—she too had "so many children she didn't know what to do."
Then there was "Humpty Dumpty." He reminded me of my father, who "sat on the wall," and "had a great fall." Broken into pieces, he didn't know how to put himself "back together again."

I also loved the fairy tales. I imagined myself as the beautiful princess who meets the handsome prince. I longed for the magic of mice turning into coachmen and pumpkins turning into carriages. The image of the beautiful princess lured me until years later, when I read Anne Sexton's poetry, in a women's literature class. Her lines grabbed me by both shoulders and shook me out of my silliness with the warning: "Beauty is a simple passion, but, oh my friends, in the end you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes" (Sexton, 1981, p. 224).

One time my mother bought me the "Nancy Drew Mysteries" and what I faintly remember as the "Bobsey Twins," but I just wasn't interested. However, I give my mother credit—at least these books were about girls—but they didn't carry the same magic as a fairy tale. I needed magic then. Still, my mother would try to coax me out of the corner to read the new books she had bought me, but I preferred the safety and quiet of my retreat behind dad's big, brown, recliner.

I faintly remember one night my mother reading to me at bedtime, but maybe I'm imagining things. My mother was seldom home at bedtime. Come to think about it, neither was my father. Feeling alone in the midst of rowdy siblings, of which I was one, and my poor aging grandmother, unable to control us, I would "lay me down to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to
keep," because my mother wasn't there to protect me. On this one night, however, she came and sat on the edge of my bed, which wasn't easy, because I slept in a bunk bed, and I had the bottom bunk.

I slept wedged between the wall and my grandmother's roll-away bed, which my sister and I would lay down for her at night, blocking our path to any escaping doorway. My sister slept on the top bunk. A window at the foot of our stacked beds allowed the moonlight to enter our dark room at night. I sensed magic in that moon, as I stared up at its shining face, hoping to see the cows I read about, the ones that "jumped over the moon."

The cows never did appear, nor did my mother. How could she, when she worked at night during most of my younger years growing up, at a place called "Messengers," a restaurant at the corner of our street. She was usually there at bedtime, as was my father, who couldn't handle being left behind with rowdy kids and a mother-in-law who resented him for not putting a roof over our heads. Funny . . . my mother in her corner . . . I in mine. I wonder . . . was she hiding too?

Reading and Writing Memoirs

This memoir about my mother and my earliest memories as a reader helps me to throw a net over the fog of my past, as I search for themes that dominated my life as the daughter of working-class parents. Carolyn Steedman (1994) helps me to name and explore these themes, as I read her memoirs in Landscape for a Good Woman. In her book, she writes about how "psychological theory lends little space to the development of working-
class consciousness, nor for understanding of it as a learned position, learned in childhood, and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives." She explains how "children in particular have difficulty locating themselves among what Marx would call 'material conditions and class positions' located within the realm of production" (see pp. 12-13). Her memoirs helped me to understand the development of my own working-class consciousness.

When I move from Carolyn Steedman's memoir to my own, I am able to juxtapose our experiences. Reading her analysis of her memoirs, I learn "how working-class autobiography and people's histories have been developed as forms that allow the individual and collective expression of thoughts, feelings and desires about class societies and the effect of class structures on individuals and communities" (Steedman, 1994, p. 13). This interweaving of subjectivities disrupts my thinking as I begin to recognize my own position as similar to Steedman's and how working-class culture shaped my life.

I had to look back for the first loss of childhood, what for Carolyn Steedman was "the loss of the father," but this loss was not mine. On the contrary, what my memoir reveals is the loss of the mother—"Mother Goose" and "The Old Woman in the Shoe." The father's presence was felt through the character of "Humpty Dumpty," as I now recall watching my father standing in the mudroom by the back door of my grandmother's house, suitcase in hand, crying on my mother's shoulder, for quitting or not
getting yet another job, finding himself usually on the margins of the white-collar world where his envy was lodged.

My father was the working-class conservative Carolyn Steedman refers to in her narrative as her mother. My father was the truck driver who longed to be an accountant but struggled. To be an accountant one must go to college, and college was not required of the men in my father's family, who drove the loop between Cleveland and Chicago twice a week. A sensitive soul among rugged teamsters, my father was the one who did not hide his brokenness, reminding me of "Humpty Dumpty," but it was my mother who couldn't "put him back together again."

Of course, my father's empty brown chair does reveal his absence, but in many ways I wanted him gone. I loved my father, but his tears were out of place in a working-class culture of men who weren't supposed to cry. Somehow, even at a very young age, I knew my father did not fit the mold of manhood caste in our "white," blue-collar neighborhood, back in the 1950s and 1960s, on the edge of city/suburb in East Cleveland. He didn't "bring home the bacon" and he cried—often. As a child, I hated his tears. I often wished him away because of them.

So who was I longing for when I, like Carolyn Steedman, used my imagination to sit behind my father's empty chair (for Steedman it was an "empty grate") "reading a tale that tells of a goose-girl who can marry a king" (p. 11)? I contradict myself when I think I hid from my fears behind my father's big brown recliner, because it was in this same place where I looked
for magic—a coach to carry me to my prince. I contradict myself because it was behind that chair where I also hid from King Kong in search of his mate—"he wasn't going to find me."

Exploring the contradictions, I realize that, in the end, I longed mostly for my mother, who was also in hiding, in another corner, among men who surely must have found her pretty in the "material stepping stones of our escape: clothes, shoes, make-up" (Steedman, 1994, p. 15). "The cut and fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side: the fairy-tales tell you that goose-girls marry kings" (Steedman, 1994, p. 16). But, of course, my mother did not marry a king, and her skirt was a waitress's uniform she wore with her white-polished, rubber-soled work shoes, her hose thick and stretchy to hide and support the puffy veins that had pushed themselves up, from under her skin, just behind her knees. I now wonder, was my mother's escape preparing me for mine?

So I return to the language of the mother, who thinks it is not normal to perhaps not want her children at times, "not normal to find them a nuisance" (Steedman, 1994, p. 17). There were times when I too felt my children a nuisance, but I wanted them, even planned them, before I realized that their father no longer wanted me. Carolyn Steedman suggests that I interpret my struggles on a social/historical level. When I do, I realize that "we are living in a period in which mothers are increasingly living alone with their children, offering opportunities for new psychic patterns to embrace. Single mothers are forced to make themselves subject to their
children; they are forced to invent new symbolic roles" (Kaplin quoted in Steedman, 1994, p. 18).

As I continued the process of transformation, I realized that the only power men held in my life they earned by their absence, which, in turn, created a longing—an unrealistic longing, that I fantasized with the help of fairy tales. However, my memoir also reveals that I, early on, distrusted my own fantasies—hiding when the frog revealed himself as a prince, or when the ape stomped through the jungle in search of his mate. He wasn't going to find me. Of course, he eventually did, but that's another memoir.

Why Memoirs?

Memoirs help me to challenge dominant discursive practices that inhibit my ability to come to voice. When writing about my life, I focus on struggles, particularly those I faced as a reader and writer. I write memoirs to question authority, particularly the so-called "experts" in school whose standardized tests and canned curriculum only succeeded in taking me farther and farther away from myself. When I prepare to enter my own classroom, I remind myself of these struggles and the lessons they taught me. These lessons guide my practice as I, in turn, ask my students to compose and analyze their own memoirs as readers and writers.

When I step back from my memoir about my mother, I begin to critically analyze its content by accounting for the cultural values and forces at work, and how I responded to subsequent tensions in my life. Donald Murray's many books on writing process taught me a lot about prewriting,
writing, and revising, and I believed him, but he neglected to mention the
cultural and social contexts that must be considered when learning and
teaching writing. Memoirs invite students and I to study these social and
cultural contexts as we enter writing relationships where we call into
question what we've come to know and believe. We become engaged critics
of our own lives.

Students and I then move "beyond" our own lives when we design
and conduct site-based research in various locations (schools, battered
women's shelters, detox centers, hospitals, museums, nursing homes, etc.)
where we learn, while volunteering, to test the waters with what knowing we
value, a discovery we made when we critically analyzed our memoirs. Our
choices for research sites rise out of our own struggles for literacy. For
example, I spent one semester working with women in a family literacy
program, located in the low-income housing projects not far from campus. A
student, Mike, volunteered with me. While he played with the children, I
encouraged their mothers to compose their own memoirs, which became the
texts we studied in our literacy group.

Together, students and I call into question what we accept as "normal"
or "truth" or "knowledge" while considering time, place, culture, and
histories. Through this process we uncover what shapes and informs our
lives.

We each bring our own version of reality through the classroom door,
thus the struggle for literacy begins. Memoirs invite students to explore their
reality while considering the realities of Others, as we read and write about our experiences both in and out of school. Alexis De Tocqueville (1945/1966) once wrote, "Liberty is generally established with difficulty in the midst of storms; it is perfected by civil discord; and its benefits cannot be appreciated until it is already old (Vol. 1, p. 247). Embracing struggle, we take on the project of liberty by not shying away from discordance, but analyzing it. When we take a rigorous inventory of our struggles, we look at how literacy practices can make or break us. We reevaluate what knowing we value, where we learned, and how we can apply these lessons to our daily lives. We compose what Clifford Gertz (1973) calls "thick description," which leads to new critiques that guide ongoing actions.

Students and I move from consciousness to agency when we excavate our struggles for literacy within the context of our memoirs. We follow Clifford Gertz's suggestion when writing "thick descriptions," we try to figure out what all the struggle is about by tracing the curve of social discourse into an inspectable form. A written event becomes an account that we study, looking for the meaning of the event rather than concentrating on the event itself. We recall and record to render a cultural analysis, guessing at meaning while assessing the guesses, drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. We try to rescue the said from the perishing occasion and fix it in pursuable terms, noting the particular, not the privileged (see "Thick Description," pp. 3-30).
While I've learned a great deal about postmodern theory and composition from such notables as James Berlin (1996) and Lester Faigley (1992), their recent books tell me nothing about their own lives as readers and writers. However, Joseph Harris (1997) resurrects a memoir he wrote in 1987 that I can partially identify with for it functions as a point of departure, a lead into "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," an article he published in the CCC journal in 1989.

Harris begins by setting the scene, identifying himself as "working-class from Philadelphia." He explains how it wasn't until he left home for college that he heard the term working class, something I find hard to believe after my mother's recent visit, when after dinner one night at a local restaurant, I picked up the check and asked her to leave the customary 20% tip, to which she responded, "We can't afford that! We're working people!"

My concept of working people carries a blessing and a curse, the blessing comes from fulfilling a learned moral obligation—the Protestant work ethic, the curse comes from viewing life from the lower rungs on the ladder where one has to find the strength and courage to always look up. Harris recognizes the ambiguity, "that here too was a community whose values and interests I could in part share but to some degree would always feel separate from" (1997, p. 98). He draws on his experiences of working-class culture to present his vision of a community, "where beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least, in part, the sorts of things we can say" (1997, p. 98).
Gertz (1973) reminds me that thick description starts from a state of general bewilderment (what the devil is going on?) as the memoirist tries to get her footing, but one does not start intellectually empty handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly new, but are adopted from other, related studies, and refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. Memoirs require explanation, inscription, and speculation, setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors of those actions. We begin by uncovering the conceptual structures that inform our subjective acts, asking questions about what we were thinking and feeling at the time, as we construct a system of analysis, locating the sites of struggle, analyzing its nature by considering cultural values and forces at work, naming what is generic to those structures. We describe culture with the vocabulary offered by theory, so we can render mere occurrences as scientifically eloquent, drawing large conclusions from small but very densely textured accounts to support broad assertions. We learn about the construction of our collective lives as readers and writers and as individuals who compose memoirs with complex specifics. We take interpretation and theory down to the most immediate level of observation (see "Thick Description," pp. 3-30).

Gertz believes that when we commit ourselves to a semiotic concept of culture and the classroom through an interpretive approach using thick description as the context, we commit to a view of ethnographic assertion that is essentially contestable. He believes that ethnography and anthropology are
sciences whose progress is marked less by perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other while counting on some level of agreement (1973, p. 29).

Admittedly, interpretive memoirs will never fully help me and my students to answer our deepest questions, questions like: What does it mean to live a life that includes the teaching of writing? Or the deeper question raised by John Dewey: "How ought one live in a democracy?" Or the even deeper question raised by one of my students, Lyn, who asked: "What can the living learn from the dying?" However, interpretive memoirs do reveal answers others believe, which allows us to juxtapose our beliefs with theirs. Our best guesses allow us to contribute to the consultable record of what man and woman has said on a given subject (Gertz, 1973, p. 30).

The Radical Potential of the Memoir

The journal left open on the bureau by the young boy who killed himself and his classmates at Columbine High School in Denver tells the story. His memoirs, if read, interpreted, and responded to in a dialogic context, may have changed his violent outcry at school. Tragically, his feelings of alienation, anger, and hopelessness were not unique. Many of us also feel we don't "fit in," nor do we want to, particularly at school. However, our version of reality and those of our peers must become the center of discussion in the classroom, through reading, writing, talking and listening. Teachers must come to understand something they can't teach without—their own hearts and minds and those of their students. The time to seek this
understanding has violently arrived, as students progressively beat themselves, each other, their teachers, and those connected to their schools over the head in an attempt to get us to listen to them. Memoirs help students decide for themselves what they need to learn, so they can participate in the construction of their own lives. What students don't need are more lessons on how to build bigger bombs, make more money, or "get to the top." What we do need are lessons on how to "live and let live" and how not to destroy the earth in the process. We need to articulate the connections between education, culture, and democracy that are political and moral while acknowledging our disconnections and distinctions with and among each other. We need to take a rigorous inventory of our struggles, particularly as agents of schools (teachers, administrators, etc.), so we can critique the normative practices that clearly aren't working for our students, or for many of us who teach. The public debate on education needs to take place in our own classrooms, so together students and teachers can begin to articulate what we need to do to move "beyond" our present narrow conceptions of "knowledge." We need to develop new responses to cope with the struggles of our time. We need to reshape our roles as teachers away from foot soldiers and officers for the schools to stewards for those we profess to teach. If we don't get more imaginative, more creative, as we conceive public education, more children will blow themselves away and take the institution and those who prop it up with them.
Material interests create pockets of power that hold our schools hostage as we pretend to care about the development of our children to live healthy, conscious, and meaningful lives. Too many teachers have become "check takers," and too many parents don't care. We live the results of our pretending everyday, especially in our schools where competent teachers are disempowered, curricula canned, and troubled children occupy a landscape that is self-destructing before our eyes.

My own children attended Jefferson County schools, of which Columbine High School is one, the school where two young boys went on a rampage this past March (1999) and killed thirteen people in Littleton, Colorado. My daughter's friend, an already troubled young women who attends Columbine High School, lived through the four-hour ordeal of terrorism, but not until she witnessed the death of one of her favorite teachers, who staggered into her classroom after being shot by one of the boys. Her mother, a friend of mine, had moved from the inner city to the more affluent suburb of Littleton with the hope that her daughter would receive a better education. However, "privileged, white, male, middle-upper-class America" offers no solution, but instead represents the crux of the problem.

I welcome and encourage memoir writing as a way of taking a rigorous inventory of our educational struggles, a lesson I learned in Alcoholics Anonymous. These inventories help students and I to develop rational democratic responses to the resistance we face in school and beyond. Our memoirs are not romantic, nostalgic, or sentimental, but attempt to answer
the BIG questions, the who-am-I-and-what-do-I-believe-in questions that can never be fully answered but still shape the contours of our lives. Mary Daly helps me to explain how memoirs do not "make a public confession of victimization, or a public declaration of pain or anger, for these actions do little to break through the unthinkable Questions, questions like, 'who am I anyway?'" Instead, memoirs allow students to engage their "teaching Self." She believes women in particular need to engage this teaching Self, "without any man or male ideology as center object, confronting the prospect of women's freedom and setting ourselves the task of bringing it into the world" (Gyn/Ecology, xl, 1978/1990). I recognize these needs and feel the pain when I take in the accounts of the killing of students and a teacher, by students, at Columbine High School.

I must confront my own reality and "the prospect of freedom" so that my acts of "bringing it into the world" need not end in violence, as they did for the students at Columbine High School. I must attempt to answer the questions that arise out of struggle, so I can realize a sequence of contradictory thoughts, emotions, and actions. In the pages that follow, I recall these contradictions as I continue to spin a web of wider consciousness.

Lester Faigley (1992) calls attention to the sharp exchange of scholars whose work "attempts to find space for political agency in light of postmodern theory." He notes how postmodern theories that resist "grand narratives" offer an "ongoing critique of discourses that pretend to contain truth and serve to justify practices of domination, but they do not supply a
theory of agency or show how a politics is to arise from that critique." He adds how Marxists and feminists contend that "any attempt to end domination requires a theory of positive social action" (p. 20). I believe the movement from I to We addresses the issue of agency in postmodern times. We can "reposition" ourselves, as Min-Zuan Lu so accurately suggests, to "get our footing" as Gertz so accurately describes, in the midst of struggles that arise in our daily lives. From these new vantage points, we can pinpoint the hot spots, the sites of tension. We can then "analyze the nature of struggle by considering cultural values and forces at work," so we can respond by "using language to explore, reflect, formulate, and enact strategies for responding to ongoing tension" (Lu, 1992, p. 899).

**Foreshadowing**

The woman who sits watching, listening,  
eyes moving in the darkness  
is rehearsing in her body, hearing-out in her blood  
a score touched off in her perhaps  
by some words, a few chords, from the stage:  
a tale only she can tell.  

Adrienne Rich  
"Transcendental Etude,"  
The Dream of a Common Language

In the "tale" that follows, I trace my autobiographical roots as a reader and writer, particularly the struggles I encountered when traveling the distance between home, school, and community. I critique these memoirs to describe how I incorporate the lessons from struggle into my curriculum for freshman composition, a course I taught at the University of New Hampshire from 1994 to 1997. Two case studies represent "what's working" and "what's not" as I evaluate the course and my responses to students.
In Chapter 1, I recall my school days as a reader and writer and the early years that followed. I describe what I wrote and why I wrote to illustrate where I conformed, resisted, and why. I explain how I discovered Robert Scholes' notion of "textuality" and connected it to Paulo Freire's "conscientizacao" to expose the contradictions that challenged me as a reader and writer, which I juxtapose with the struggles of Other's. I explain how Carol Gilligin's five psychological truths, and Linda-Christian Smith's and Valerie Walkerdine's "unveiling" of romance fictions and fairy tales, helped me to understand the gender-specific nature of my struggles, both in and out of school. However, I moved away from conflict when I acted on my ways of knowing by writing my life down and analyzing the nature of my struggle. I describe how a process I call "moving from I to We" helped me to imagine myself as a teacher.

In Chapter 2, I focus on my struggles in my relationship with my father as I interpret his utilitarian view of literacy. I describe how I entered college long after leaving our working-class culture where few, if any, went to college. I juxtapose my experiences with those of Mike Rose, who also got lost traveling the distance between home and school. I lean on David Bartholomae's analogy of "inventing the university" to construct my interpretation of the difficult setting of graduate school. Moreover, I begin to move toward a more critical and expansive approach to literacy when I recognize the lessons from struggle, with the help of researchers Shirley Brice Heath and John Lofty, who insist that we consider the cultures of our students when teaching reading and writing.

In Chapter 3, I draw on feminist ways of knowing to celebrate and critique Alcoholics Anonymous. I reflect on the web of my spiritual growth and activism within AA's healing practices and beliefs, then I juxtapose them
to AA's silencing discourse, reminiscent of "authoritative" discursive practices I was facing, at the time, in graduate school. AA taught me the steps to move from I to We, from knowing my Self (by taking a "rigorous personal inventory" of my mistakes) to getting out of my Self (by performing community service). While I embrace these aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous, I let go of others, particularly the notion of "powerlessness." I narrate how five women from AA joined me to form a separate group, which met in my home for two months, so we could create a space where we could talk about what we were afraid to talk about in an AA meeting.

In Chapter 4, I juxtapose my memoirs with Min-Zhan Lu's (1987) to enter a dialogue with her about reading and writing instruction. I describe, in detail, my curriculum for freshmen composition, including each assignment, and the steps in the process of moving from I to We. I locate curriculum in my own struggle for literacy and in the struggles of Others, like Min-Zuan Lu, who also had to travel great distances between home and school shortly after the Cultural Revolution in China (1949). She faced extreme pressure while trying to switch language codes from those spoken at home to those spoken at school. Her home life was seeped in English and the culture of the West; consequently, she had to learn how to hide her English in school to avoid political persecution. I, on the other hand, didn't understand the language differences between home and school. However, when I encountered the "dominate discourse" of graduate school, I realized that my home language wasn't good enough. I didn't know how to enter the conversation and not lose my own voice in the process.

In Chapter 5 I recall Lyn, a student who found her way from I to We in spite of her resistance to write what she called "critical analysis." Lyn was in
my second semester course and chose to read to the terminally ill at a local hospital for her research project. She posed the question: "What can the living learn from the dying?" I cite Lyn's memoirs to describe how her question rose out of her difficulties when faced with the deaths of her brother and sister. With the help of Others Lyn read about in class and on her own, she designed a research project based on the lessons she learned when she interpreted the deaths of her siblings. Acting on her intention "to edify Jesus by providing loving and gentle care to those who are dying," Lyn reads to the dying at a local hospital, who in turn help her to answer her research question.

In Chapter 6, I recall Connie, a student who had trouble navigating her way between I and We. Connie was in my fifth semester course and chose to participate in a discussion group at a battered women's shelter. For her research paper she engaged in a double dialogue with herself she called "The Interview." She posed several questions to herself in her research paper and answered them by drawing on the discussions she had with the women from the shelter and reading materials on violence against women. She concluded her paper by identifying herself as a "victim of domestic violence," a contradiction to her earlier memoirs. Connie was a newly "reborn" Christian who struggled with the text I chose for her particular class, Malidoma Patrice Somé's Of Water and the Spirit. Malidoma's harsh critiques of Christians, which I often agreed with, caused Connie to respond defensively. I analyze
her resistance and my own to expose the nature of our struggle. I describe how I chose to change my responses to Connie.

In Chapter 7, I juxtapose my own memoirs with those of Lyn and Connie to locate places where we overlap and part. I explain how our memoirs influenced our responses to each other and the course. I zoom the lens in on my responses to Connie, in particular, because of the tensions I felt when I read her papers and wrote back to her in the margins. I describe my desire to help students to come to voice but the difficulties involved, especially when some voices remain silent, unauthentic, or clash with Others. I develop new approaches for teaching freshman composition, with the help of Connie and Lyn, so I can begin again the never-ending process of learning to teach.

I bring this study to a pause rather than a close, for the process of moving from I to We continues with each student, each class, each community action project I encounter in my role as a teacher. While I do not propose to suggest to anyone how he or she should teach composition, I do reveal how I do it, to uncover what I've learned from composing and analyzing memoirs about my life as a reader, writer, and teacher. As my colleague, Leaf Seligman, once said to me, when we worked together on adopting Some of the features of my course for her section of freshman composition, "I have to put my tweak on it." Sound advice from an
experienced teacher; however, I would add one more insight, a lesson I learned in AA and pass on to my own students: "Take what works and leave the rest!"
CHAPTER 1

WHY TEACHING?

I began my English studies in the early 1980s, long after I graduated from high school. A few young women in my neighborhood went on to college immediately following graduation, but I had other plans in 1970. College was for those with money, and the young women I knew only went to college to find a husband. I didn't have any money, and I certainly didn't need college to find a husband. A man who had a trade, belonged to a union, or had a decent job in a local automobile plant or service industry was my kind of man. These were the lessons I learned in a white, working-class neighborhood, on the east side of Cleveland, during the 1950s and 1960s.

When I graduated from high school, I got a job working at a boutique in the mall. I worked part-time, until my manager, a beautiful, flashy, exuberant Italian woman “with connections” told me about a job at a collection agency that a friend of hers owned. I needed the hours, as we say in the time card trades, so I took the job. I became a full-time bill collector.

One learns how to talk when trying to collect on overdue bills. One has to be persistent and persuasive, two qualities I honed under the uncomfortable gaze of my boss, who liked to comment on the blouse I was wearing while plotting tactics on how to catch another “deadbeat.”

Life was what it was—I punched the clock; I worked whatever jobs I could; I put up with the gazes. At that time, the only hope of imagining a different life rested on my boyfriend, Dave, who after dropping out of high
school, was drafted into the service and stationed in California. He would become my ticket out of Cleveland.

Once I graduated from high school, I never thought I'd ever want to crack open a book, decipher a math problem, or write a response to a teacher's demand ever again. Graduation from high school meant the end of all that for me. I hated school. I never found a reason to like it. Even the opportunity to meet girlfriends and boyfriends turned cruel once the cliques were formed. I talked back to my teachers, cut classes, and committed other acts of rebellion. Junior high was particularly difficult. One time I was caught smoking cigarettes in the bathroom. The vice principal, who served as the chief disciplinarian, asked me to leave and not come back unless my parents came with me. My mother usually covered for me, not telling my father when I was suspended from school. She never spoke to me about why I was rebelling; she just kept saying, "School should be the best time in your life." Who was she kidding!

I never really thought about my behavior; I just continued to act out. One time I was sent home for pushing my gym teacher. She had become frustrated with me for laughing while she was talking, so she grabbed me by both arms and squeezed as hard as she could. She wouldn't let go until I finally pushed her off me. I went home with bruises that day; but, of course, I was suspended—again.

I tried to give up my rebellion and walk a straighter line while in high school. I "behaved myself" because I began to realize that acting out and talking back didn't get me anywhere. I resigned myself to shut up and go through the motions. I took sewing and cooking classes, as I recall, but I wasn't very good at either. I was worse at typing. My typing teacher, an easily agitated man, used to yell at me from the front of the room: "Hawkins,
uncross your legs and put both feet on the ground—a typist shouldn't sit like a barmaid!” To this day, I can't remember a single teacher or class that stimulated me in high school, but I do remember my ninth grade English teacher, Mrs. Stamps.

**Ninth Grade True Confessions**

Perhaps I remember ninth grade English because Mrs. Stamps was kind to me. According to Tulku (1977), a student/teacher relationship depends on being “receptive, open, and devoted” (p. 155), allowing the teacher to “know our consciousness” (p. 163), by establishing “a very fine relationship that is based on honesty, caring, and confidence” (p. 162).

Mrs. Stamps was definitely caring. She never tried to silence me. Instead, she listened closely to what I had to say. Often she would lean toward me when I spoke, look into my eyes, and smile. She used to place her hand on my shoulder while I wrote in response to one of her prompts, eager to see my words as they sprung from my pen. Then, without a word, she'd pat my back gently and move on to the next student.

Mrs. Stamps used gesture to express her approval and smiles to show her respect. In this way, my relationship with Mrs. Stamps evolved from care to confidence, but it was the honesty that was lacking. I used to wonder if she knew the great lie I was living in her classroom.

Mrs. Stamps would always assign book reports. I hated book reports, not because I hated to read, but because I never read the young adolescent literature she would assign. My preferences were teen magazines, clothing catalogues, notes from friends, and those juicy “True Confession” magazines.

I remember how my friend Janet and I would escape off to the woods to read those “TC” magazines. Janet would sneak a pack of cigarettes from her mother's carton, L&Ms in the red and white box, while I bought the latest
issue of "TC" from the corner drug store near my house. We'd plan to meet at the "bridge," a famous crossing for kids in my neighborhood. The bridge was located in the woods between our homes and school. The bridge was small and made of concrete with iron railings on either side to keep walkers from falling over the edge into the creek below. The bridge provided a place for Janet and me to hide out.

At the bridge we could escape the eye of the teacher, parent, and clock, and do as we pleased. Some kids smoked cigarettes there, while others just gathered to talk. Sometimes here was a fight at the bridge, as the boys in my neighborhood proved their manhood by "duking it out"—their way of solving disputes that may have started in school that day. Others hid off in the bushes and exchanged kisses, acting like the grown-ups we saw on television or in the movies. But Janet and I went to the bridge to smoke and read those "sub rosa" texts that gained special appeal for their forbidden content.

Janet and I would sit on the grassy bank along the side of the creek reading stories of love, lust, and loss. Often we would read aloud to each other, laughing, wondering, fantasizing. We'd usually make an afternoon of it, packing our goodies, those nasty L&M cigarettes. I could never understand the tingly feelings that would come over me when I read these tales of passion. I never talked about these feelings—not even with Janet.

I can remember how lonely and confused I felt at this time in my life. Junior high seemed to me to be the age of cruelty: pressure from boys to have sex, pressure from girls to compete for boys, trouble in school from boredom or rebellion. However, Mrs. Stamps made a difference in my life because I believed she cared. She must have known I was lying whenever I gave my book reports, because I made them up as I went along; however, she would
silently indulge me. Perhaps she was trying not to discourage my independent actions, or perhaps she saw the significance of making up these stories as part of my moral development, particularly as it pertained to the life of an adolescent girl.

Carol Gilligan (1993) believes that women's moral decisions are based on an ethics of caring rather than on a morality of justice. Difference rather than superiority would imply different sequences for moral development. In Beyond Silenced Voices, she talks about the relationship between "political resistance and psychological resistance—both highly charged subjects in the twentieth century" (p. 144). In these moments of resistance, young women live on the edge of adolescence.

I felt this edge while in the woods with Janet. It was a time in my life when I desired relationships and knowledge, but I came up against a politic that I couldn't name. These moments of "unpaid for education" consist of times when "understanding of human beings and their motives . . . leave girls with knowledge that may well run counter to what they are told by those in authority" (Gilligan, 1993, pp. 144, 145). Understandably, a girl's knowledge of her body, of relationships, and of the world and its values—and a girl's irreverence may provide the grounds for resistance (Gilligan, 1993, p. 146).

How do we as women navigate these sharp edges of our public and private lives? What could Mrs. Stamps have done differently to acknowledge my world and still guide me in the classroom? I turn again to Gilligan for some answers.

Gilligan calls attention to five psychological truths that, if considered by Mrs. Stamps, could have saved me a lot of trouble:

(1) What was once unvoiced must come to voice in order to nurture a healthy psychic life.
(2) To want and not to have must be acknowledged and discussed.

(3) The dissociated and repressed must be made known.

(4) Associative logic must be honored (dreams, poetry, and memory).

(5) One learns the answers to one's own questions.

The stories I made up for Mrs. Stamps' book reports were based on traditional forms I grew to know as a child. Drawing on my love for fairy tales, they began with "Once upon a time," the main character, usually male, would prove to be the hero to the helpless victims that surrounded him, who were usually female. The stories centered on female victimhood and the man's challenge to save her. The endings implied there was such a thing as "happily ever after."

When I compare my relationship with my ninth grade teacher, Mrs. Stamps, to my relationship with my adolescent friend, Janet, I can see how much was never spoken. There was pain in this silence. I came to understand that, as women, when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid (Lorde, 1989, p. 129).

I wanted "authentic relationships" as Gilligan calls them; I wanted to feel the "human connection," but the messages that were sent were to keep quiet and to tell only the stories I was taught to tell. I felt the presence of a standard that did not come out of my experience, and my image of reality was at odds with what I was reading and writing.

The heroes I composed in my book reports for Mrs. Stamps and the "texts of desire" that I read in the woods with my friend, Janet, led me to feel at odds with my environment. I didn't realize how, as an adolescent female, I
had become idealized while remaining invisible and silent. I was, as Gilligan refers, "an emblem of loss" (p 158).

Valerie Walkerdine (1990) confirms that as girls we “appear willing to accept the position to which we are classically fitted.” However, she argues that these positions “tell us nothing basic about the nature of the female body, nor the female mind, but rather tell us of the power of those practices through which a particular resolution to the struggle is produced” (p. 88). The resolutions I sought were shaped by the fairy tales I read as a child and the romantic fictions I was reading in the woods with Janet. These tales offered me the hope of “happily ever after.” All I needed was to meet “Mr. Right.” Consequently, I dreamed that someday my prince would come.

Waiting for My Prince to Come

I waited up all night for him. He went out just after dinner to meet a friend for a “quick beer,” but his beers were never quick, and I never knew his friends.

We were living in Spokane at the time, the fourth state and second country we attempted to call home in our then ten-year marriage. My life progressed from home to school to Dave. We met in high school, but he soon dropped out of school and was drafted. The Vietnam war was in high gear back in 1969, and I feared I’d never see him again. I graduated from high school in 1970, and after another year of waiting for him to come home on leave, I decided to join him in California where he was stationed. I thought my problems were over.

My life revolved around my husband. We were married in 1971 and by 1977 we had two children. Funny . . . you’d think my life would have revolved around my children, but sadly, mothering never came easy for me.
Moving from the pain of childbirth to the pain of guilt for not meeting their needs, the children too were lost in the chaos of him.

I saw Dave as the “head” of the family. He was the focus. However, that focus began to blur as I watched him slip away, day by day, drink by drink. I didn't know how to take over the responsibility of the “head,” so I tried to hold on. I held on too tight, I suppose, as many of us do when we are afraid.

Eduardo Galeano (1989) tells me that “courage is born of fear, certainty of doubt. Dreams announce the possibility of another reality, and out of delirium emerges another kind of reason” (p. 125). I experienced these contradictions every time I waited for Dave to come home. His long absences didn't end once we were married and he was out of the service. My head and my heart were at odds with each other, but I needed both to function, to survive. Where once I feared I would lose him to war, I now felt at war with myself. I loved Dave but hated him. I neither wanted him, nor could I let him go. Mine was a story of estrangement. I didn’t have the language or knowledge I needed to make sense of my world.

My two daughters were in bed the night I decided I would wait up for him to come home. I sat in the old armchair that once belonged to my grandmother—another woman who was no stranger to waiting. I sat there all night, alone, staring at the coffee table. Occasionally I looked around the room to the objects that were reflections of him. They stood like sentinels guarding the silence (Grumet, 1988, p. 92).

The wooden box was full, a fresh supply of cheap Mexican weed purchased just that week. I picked up two sheets of the wheat straw papers, licked the sticky edge of one sheet, and pressed the two together. I took a pinch of the brown, smelly plant and crumpled in onto the paper. Folding the paper like a burrito, I licked the loose ends shut. As I lit the tightly rolled
joint, I suddenly saw headlights flash onto the driveway. My stomach lunged up into my throat. I choked on the harsh, grey smoke. Catching my breath, I realized that the lights were from someone else's car, someone who was turning around in our driveway, someone who was lost like me. My stomach calmed down a bit as I relit the joint, this time, inhaling deeply, as deeply as I could. I wanted the magic smoke to numb my body, quiet my mind, and comfort me.

Time passed slowly. It was 5:30 a.m. when he finally pulled into the driveway. I couldn't understand why he was getting so sloppy. He usually covered his tracks so well. Whenever I would suspect him of drinking or seeing other women, he was very good at convincing me that I was imagining things. He'd never get mad when I hurled accusations at him. Instead, he would just look at me and say, "I haven't been drinking" or "Don't be silly, Carol. There's no one else." Then he'd go off quietly to bed. I'd be so disoriented by the time I confronted him, I believed him. I suppose it was easier to doubt myself rather than him.

However, I was surprisingly sure of myself that morning when I again confronted Dave about his drinking and his affairs. I waited in the kitchen to look into his eyes as soon as he walked into the house. He fumbled with his keys, but finally managed to unlock the door. He stumbled into the kitchen. He didn't say a word when he saw me sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for him. Instead, he just looked down at the floor.

I spoke first. I begged him for the truth. He hesitated. I insisted, "Were you drinking again? Were you with another woman?" He broke his silence with a quiet, "Yes."

What did I know of the truth? I always sought its origins outside of myself. I depended on Dave to tell me what I already knew in my heart, but
failed to act on until "the truth" was spoken from his lips. I had denied the
senses of my own body, the authority of my own experience. I had put all my
faith and trust in male authority. This is what I knew. As a result, I felt split
wide open. I had to find a way to put myself back together again.

Life flashed before my eyes. Our first kiss, our letters of love, our
promises of devotion, our children. I panicked and slapped him as hard as I
could while screaming, "Now what the hell am I supposed to do!"

Nothing would ever be the same. With one "yes," I knew it was time
for me to be the head of my family. Perhaps I already was the head. Perhaps I
always was. I felt scared. As the head, I tried not to feel so much. I decided to
think instead. My first thought was to leave.

This moment of shock would provide the pivotal pain that I needed to
start me writing again. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't have anyone to
talk to. I had no where to go. The last time I wrote anything was when Dave
was in the service. While he looked to Vietnam, I looked to him, and our
future became uncertain, or even more frightening--nonexistent. I was left
with only our words on paper, exchanged with postage stamps on colored
stationary, written at a time of loss, in the absence of touch.

Now I was living this loss again. The absence of touch was only made
bearable by the movement of words that I placed onto scraps of paper, which I
then gathered in a yellow pocket folder and hid under my pillow each night.
I somehow knew that writing was an alternative to dying.

Walkerdine (1990) reminds me that as a woman my experiences are
not unique, that I too was taught to engage in cultural practices where women
look to men to solve their problems. Walkerdine suggests that we need to
examine how "those practices within the text itself have relational effects that
define who and where we are" (p. 89). I sought escape, affirmation, and hope
when I turned to reading and writing, but I had no idea how the seemingly innocent romance fictions I read as an adolescent and the fairy tales I read as a small child would shape my consciousness, subordinating me to a position of helplessness produced by the illusion that only a man could solve my problems for me. According to Linda Christian-Smith (1993):

These books are not innocent sagas of hearts and flowers, but are an 'area of negotiation' in the ideological struggles in the United States for young women's hearts, minds, and desires. These struggles are personal, economic, and above all, political (p. 46).

Writing my life down on paper did help me to reexamine who I was and how I came to be in the powerless position I found myself in then. I turned to writing as a way to make sense of my experiences, as a way to come to grips with my thoughts and feelings. I eventually came to understand myself better, but I needed to move out of my isolation in order to know myself more, in order to experience a connection to others.

Writing and Healing

Rebellion took on a quiet voice while I was in Mrs. Stamps' ninth grade English class, but in other classes my rebellion would roar, as I struggled to make it through high school. Gilligan (1993) writes that "school is the microcosm in children's lives of the public world, the public space that some of us see as the crux of democracy, the place where the natality and plurality, the ever new and always different nature of the human condition can flourish" (p. 160). If only it were so. For me, school seldom allowed me to be in connection with myself or others—not even in Mrs. Stamps' ninth grade English class or with Janet in the woods by the bridge. When I finally did graduate from high school, I never wanted to hear another bell ring or hear the sound of clanking lockers. I never wanted to smell the rank of cafeteria
food or the sweaty bodies in the girl's gymnasium locker room. I never wanted to look into the scornful gaze of a frustrated teacher or experience the wrath of a controlling administrator. I never wanted to sit in silence while watching the clock, first the big hand for the hour, then the little hand minute, then the second hand, counting down the moments when I would be free.

Ten years later I changed my tune. I eventually did return to school, when my marriage to Dave began to fall apart. Five years had passed since I slapped him in the kitchen for his drinking and affairs before we finally divorced. However, since that night, I started to make some changes—I began to take some courses at the community college. My interest in school was sparked by my determination to get out of my marriage and make a living to support my two children. I knew I couldn't support them on a secretary's salary, so I decided to expand my options by going back to school. I remembered who had money when I was a girl growing up in Cleveland. They were the privileged few in my neighborhood who went to college.

Although I believed college would provide an avenue of escape and redirection for me, I had already begun a process of coming to grips with my situation through writing. My losses inspired me to pick up a pen and jot down my thoughts. I turned to writing because nothing else worked. I'd already tried the gambit of getaways, but these superficial escapes never took me anywhere, and where I wanted to go was back to myself again, back into my own history so I could figure out how I got into the mess of a marriage I had found myself in. I had no one to talk to, prior to returning to school, so I talked to myself, not verbally, but in writing. One day I just picked up a pen, grabbed a piece of notebook paper, and started writing.
How did I know to write? I guess I always knew. I wrote a lot in school, but I didn't write for my teachers—I wrote for myself. As an adolescent, I can remember penning pages and pages of notes to my friends, words I eventually folded up tight into tiny triangle shapes and passed between the rows of desks when the teacher wasn't looking. My best friend, Sue, always wrote back. We lived colorful lives. Sue often wrote about her father, a one-time tap dancer in Vaudeville, now turned dance instructor. He owned his own dance studio. It was located in downtown Cleveland. There he hung pictures of himself on the wall, taken during his Vaudeville days. There was even a picture of him with Bob Hope!

Sue loved her father, so much so, that she would help him up the stairs when he came home drunk, gently pulling his shoes off, guiding his head to the pillow, covering his limp body with a wool blanket. Sue always forgave him, she told me so in her notes, but she never forgave her mother. Sue's mom was once a homecoming queen, voted "most likely to succeed." Unfortunately, she turned drug addict after years of shock treatments to "calm her down." Her mother was so calm, she hardly moved when I would come over to Sue's house after school. She sat on the same corner of the couch, day after day, her morning cup of coffee long turned cold beside her, the ashtray bulging with smoked-to-the-nub Salems.

I suppose I had my own brand of drama. Before I met Dave, I dated an older "biker boy" in junior high school, but my parents didn't approve. I had to sneak down to the corner of my block and around the corner to meet up with him. Tony would always be waiting for me there, either on his silver and black Harley or in his black 1957 Chevy. I counted on him to whisk me away, to what I thought was higher ground I guess. My friends thought it was pretty cool that I dated an older guy with a Harley and a "neat" car, but they
didn't know how he drank. Tony loved his Stroh's beer. He lost his temper easily when he drank. I remember the terror I felt when he would take his Chevy up on the freeway to "burn out the carbon." He'd drive 100 miles per hour and refused to let up on the gas no matter how hard I pleaded with him. Now that I think about it, I was fearful a lot in those days. I had to hide out in my house for weeks after I finally broke up with him. I was afraid he'd hurt me. One time, when he was drunk, he threw a knife at me right through the windshield of his Chevy. I thought he was going to kill me. I never questioned his behavior or mine. My life just seemed like part of the continuity that was my adolescent culture.

When my friends and I would read and write about our experiences, within the pages of our triangular notes, it was usually as an alternative to the reading and writing prescribed in school. We could figure things out better by reading and writing on topics we cared about. We wrote for ourselves. I guess we were trying to figure out our responses to the world and our place in it. Of course, our world rarely went beyond our own homes, school, or the familiar streets in our own neighborhood. I didn't realize it at the time, but these rap sessions on white paper, folded into triangles, were an important part of my development—the early artifacts of my life as a reader and writer.

**College Daze**

Looking back, I see the miles I traveled between my days growing up in Cleveland and my divorce from Dave. Our marriage began in California, in 1971, one year after I graduated from high school. From California we moved to Colorado, but we were always restless, so we just kept moving. We never stopped to realize we were taking our problems with us. From Colorado, we moved to Utah, then Canada.
My grandmother, on my mother's side, immigrated from Ireland to Canada before my mother was born, my grandfather did too, but their roots were far from where I found myself—in Medicine Hat, in the province of Alberta. My grandmother's family settled in Toronto and my grandfather settled in Nova Scotia. My mother once told me her father was a fisherman before he turned to photography and moved to Toronto where he met my grandmother, a seamstress who worked in a factory. When Irish Catholics (my grandfather) marry Irish Protestants (my grandmother), trouble was sure to follow. My family was no exception.

I mention this lineage because I tried to seek comfort in my Canadian roots when stuck in the endless flat wheat fields of southern Alberta. Developing a sense of home was difficult on the borders of Montana and Canada. Medicine Hat was a long way from Toronto or Nova Scotia.

Dave and I settled into a campground there, where we lived temporarily, until he decided Canada was not the place for him. I remember how he'd trudge off to work in the morning, leaving me with our two daughters for the day. While I played at the campground with the girls, Dave went to work as the production manager of a commercial linen supply. He did the best he could, but he hated his job. After a couple of months, he decided he couldn't stand not being on "American soil" anymore, so we moved back to the United States. We crossed over the border into Montana and headed west, but not until he got out of the truck, after crossing the border, and kissed the ground, declaring himself a "happy camper" glad to be back in what he called the "good old U.S. of A."

We ended up in Spokane. Dave found a job as a Maytag repairman, and I got a job at Gonzaga University. I worked in the students accounts office. That old job at the collection agency in Cleveland finally paid off. I got
the job at Gonzaga based on my experience as a bill collector. I also had relevant experience from when I worked as a loan clerk for a bank in California.

The job in the student accounts office was my first introduction to a college campus. After a year of disbursing loans, work study checks, and scholarship awards, I began to ask myself—"these kids can go to college, why not me?" I signed up for my first class shortly thereafter. I took accounting.

Accounting was my father's vocation but not necessarily mine. I got an "A" in accounting, which pleased my father, but I left my job at Gonzaga after the first year. By this time, my marriage had become a lonely place. I wanted to continue to take classes just to be around people, but I certainly couldn't afford to go to Gonzaga once I lost my tuition waivers—a benefit for having worked there. I continued to write in my journal long after Dave and I first separated. It was the only activity that helped me to cope. Ultimately, journal writing gave me direction and led me to take my first writing course, freshman composition, at Spokane Community College.

I must have been ready to write in a classroom setting because words poured out of me and onto the page so easily. I remember my professor sitting down with me in her office to discuss a paper I wrote. Just the intimacy of sitting with someone and talking, one-to-one, after the years of isolation in my marriage, was a big lift for me.

The paper I wrote was a memoir. I'm sure of this because I can faintly remember narrating some of my recent travels in it, how I bounced from one state to another with my husband and two small children. I remember writing about the idea of "coming home." I wrote about how I dreamed of seeing myself, sitting in a wooden rocking chair, on my front porch—
somewhere. I remember how I wrote about the morning sun shining on my face: "... and in this early light, I would know I had finally come home."

My teacher's reaction to my paper surprised me. She cried and passed along the name of her therapist. Is this a successful paper? I didn't even know my life was so sad. Writing and sharing my writing helped me to realize that I needed someone to talk to. I felt most comfortable talking through my writing.

The main reason I write is "to get my act together." Journal writing held me together for awhile, but writing for an audience, other than myself, helped me to form new relationships, just as it did during my note-passing days in school. However, I felt I couldn't just take courses out of loneliness and my need for connection. I needed to get an education so I could find a good paying job. I was convinced that my way to financial independence, after my marriage broke up, was to get a college degree. I learned this belief from my mom and dad. Both never went to college, but always wished they could.

My father convinced me, when I was growing up, that the reason we were poor and he had a hard time getting a good paying job was because he didn't have a college degree. As I mentioned earlier, where I grew up, college was rarely considered. Most of the women in my neighborhood worked in service jobs or factories, as did the men. The more highly trained men were craftsmen, mechanics, plumbers, or electricians, while the women were beauticians, office clerks, or factory workers. Some of my friends' parents owned small businesses in the community. They were more "well off" than the rest of us, but they too never went to college.

I continued to take courses at the community college in Spokane until Dave left. I finally asked him to leave. He didn't hesitate. He ended up in Montana. Once he was gone, I didn't know what to do with myself. Old
patterns die hard, so I ended up in Montana with him. We played this seesaw game for awhile, never quite getting the courage to leave each other. Our situation grew dim when I moved to Bozeman to join him.

I wasn't happy to be back with Dave, but I fell in love with Bozeman the moment I saw it. Surrounded by mountains, nestled in a valley near the western gateway to Yellowstone Park, it was a camper's dream. It was also the home of Montana State University. If reconciling with Dave was a foolish move, I would make up for it by signing up for classes at the university.

I still remember the circumstances that finally led me to not just ask Dave to leave but to divorce him. One night he came home drunk and threatened to kill himself with a 35 MM handgun he kept stashed between our mattress and box springs. I'd felt fear in the past, but this time I thought I was going to die. I looked at Dave with that gun pointed to his head, the barrel cocked, his finger on the trigger, and flashed on the stories I had heard about husbands going berserk, killing their wives and children before killing themselves. I realized that this could happen to my family if I didn't do something. I got the gun away from him with some prayers and talk, and immediately called the police. The first question they asked me was if there was alcohol or guns involved. At that moment, I realized I was typical; I fit the m.o. of those subjected to domestic violence. My children and I needed help.

**Finding Focus**

Dave left and moved on to Wyoming, but this time, I decided not to follow him. I stayed in Bozeman and began to attend Alanon meetings while my children went to Alateen and Alatot. Dave and I had sought “family treatment” for alcoholism while in Bozeman, but it didn't save our marriage. However, therapy did reshape my thinking. My therapist suggested I go to
Alanon meetings, and that I get my children involved, which I did, after I
realized how lonely and isolated we had become.

Attending classes at Montana State helped me to deal with my feelings
of isolation, but it took a long time before I made friends at school. Friends
came more easily in Alanon, but I continued to feel uncomfortable in both
environments for a long time. I was afraid to tell my story in Alanon, and I
was too insecure to share my thoughts with those I met in school.

Older than most undergraduates, I would often sit along the edges of
class, questioning why these younger students made it to college so far ahead
of me. When I was their age, I was already married with two children. I'd
forgotten how I blew off any thoughts of college once I graduated from high
school. All I wanted growing up was to get married and have children, but
now I was sitting in the classroom, like a fly on the wall, taking in my new
environment, trying to imagine my role in it.

I felt uncomfortable in Alanon too. I'd go to the noon meeting on
Fridays that was held in the basement of the Methodist Church—just a short
walk from the house I rented after Dave and I finally divorced. At these
meetings, I heard mostly women talk about their lives as partners, daughters,
mothers, and wives of alcoholics. Their stories seemed to echo my own, as
they talked about "what was it like, what happened, and what it's like now,"
but I had kept my secrets for so long, it took a long time for me to open up. I
just felt too much shame.

My junior year at Montana State, I decided to apply for a job in the
Writing Center. I'd like to say my motives were to learn more about the
writing process, to become a better writer myself, and to learn how to respond
to the writing of others, but that's not the whole story. I'd met another man
whose sister worked as a receptionist in the Writing Center, and it was my interest in her brother that brought me through the doors.

The rebound romance with the receptionist's brother didn't last long, but my commitment to writing and learning did. The director of the Writing Center, Mark Waldo, was a charismatic teacher with whom I shared a mutual love for the Romantic poets. His favorite was Coleridge, while mine was Wordsworth. We often talked about poetry between tutoring sessions. I still remember the first time I read "Tinturn Abbey." The pastoral scene, the melancholy mood, the "spontaneous overflow of emotions." Wordsworth's writing resonated with my own thoughts and feelings.

I remember walking home after class one day, a morning with Dr. Becker and the Romantic poets. Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience" spoke of idealism and imagination; Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" rendered fragments of visions from a dream; Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" caste poets as prophets, but it was Wordsworth who tugged at my heartstrings. I kept visualizing him sitting on a rock ledge, like the rock ledges that rose above my home in Bear Canyon, where I lived just outside of Bozeman while still married to Dave. Wordsworth's poems validated my need to reflect on my life and to express my sometimes-melancholy feelings. The only other time I ever felt this connection to poetry was while reading Ann Sexton. Her retelling of the fairy tales was a wake up call for me.

The Romantic poets inspired me by the way they wove the sensual with the physical, as Wordsworth did when he wrote:
Do I behold thee steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore,
...

I wasn't sitting under any sycamores, perhaps a few cotton wood trees that lined the rivers near my rented house in town, but he spoke to my feelings of seclusion and loneliness following my divorce. Wordsworth found solace in nature, as did I.

I loved sitting on the edges of the many rivers that flowed and converged in the valleys beyond my Bear Canyon home in Montana. I began to carry a pocket journal with me on my walks, so I could write while sitting near the water. Where once I waded the rivers and streams, taking fly fishing lessons from Dave on how to cast my line, dropping my fly gently, just before the rocks where the "lunkers" lived, this "wild and secluded scene" of the Yellowstone, Madison, and Missouri Headwaters now became a place to write.

The feelings of isolation continued to disappear as I attended Alanon meetings, read the Romantic poets, and listened and responded to the writing of others in the Writing Center. Alanon, Wordsworth, Mark Waldo, and the students in the Writing Center soon became my guides, as I focused on how best to respond to my world, in words, and to the words and worlds of others.

The Writing Center emphasized a method of inquiry and collaboration when reading and responding to students' papers. Tutors were advised not to take over a student's draft, but to read it first, out loud, from beginning to end, so the writer could hear how he sounded to his audience. I remember Waldo telling us that both tutor and student must hear the whole before...
focusing on the parts. I was then taught how to go back into the draft and ask questions for clarification and to wait for answers. My response was usually, "That's good. Why don't you write that down." Sometimes the student would read the fresh lines out loud to me and ask how they sounded. Other times no rereading was necessary. I liked it best when I kept my words off of a student's paper and provided an entryway for their own words. Inquiry and collaboration provided these entryways.

I was hungry for talk at this time in my life, and I had a desire to listen. Thanks to my experiences in the Writing Center, I had plenty of opportunities to do both. Unlike Alanon where I was asked to share my own "experience, strength, and hope," here, in the Writing Center, where the talk didn't center on alcoholism, I could talk about writing with other writers.

I loved my job as a tutor, and I was beginning to see my future in writing and teaching. Like Wordsworth, "I dared to hope, though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first I came among these hills." My interest in writing and teaching eventually took me beyond the poets and prophets of the Romantic period, Mark Waldo, and my fellow students in the Writing Center. My last year at Montana State, I decided to take a course in "teaching writing."

I had avoided education courses in the past, never imagining myself as a teacher, but more in the image of a writer who simply wanted to improve her own craft. In the "teaching writing" course I learned that good teaching is not just asking the right questions, waiting, listening, and responding, but also knowing when to put the right book into a student's hands.

The teacher was Ms. Becker, the wife of Dr. Becker, my former professor in Romantic poetry. Ms. Becker didn't always put the right book in
my hand; but, as I recall, she did have the good judgment to assign Robert Scholes' (1985) *Textual Power* as part of our course readings.

Scholes helped me to realize why I turned to reading and writing. Not only did I read and write to heal and connect with others, but I could read and write to raise my own consciousness, particularly about who I was, where I was, what I wanted, and the social structures that shaped my identity. According to Scholes, "Texts are places where power and weakness become visible and discussible, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts and actions become palpable" (p. XI). Scholes words would echo in my mind two years later, in graduate school, when reading Paulo Freire's (1973) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Scholes' "textuality" combined textual knowledge and textual skills with "each form embodying certain aspects of textual power: the power to select (and therefore to suppress), the power to shape and present certain aspects of human experience" (p. 20). Freire's "textuality" is embedded in his notion of critical consciousness.

According to Freire (1973), critical consciousness is an awareness of one's subjectivity:

Man's [sic] ontological vocation (as he calls it) is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This world to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a given reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved (pp. 12-13).

Freire and Scholes taught me to see the political importance of reading and writing. "We read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn" (Scholes, 1985, p. XI). I learned that we must teach each student to "say his own word, to name the world" (Freire, 1973, p. 13).
I was beginning to solve my own problems by reading and writing. I began to “read and write my world” when I picked up a piece of paper and a pen soon after Dave told me the truth about his drinking and affairs. I continued to “say my own word” when I told my story in Alanon and when I wrote my first memoir in a freshman composition course. Wordsworth helped me to seek strength from nature and to record my silent repose in the aesthetic form of poetry. I then began to move outside of myself and listen to the voices of young writers while I worked in the Writing Center. I learned how to improve my own writing by responding to them as a peer tutor. These colleagues helped me to re-visualize myself in the world as a reader and writer, a self-image so different from my earlier images of myself while reading and writing in school. Eventually I imagined myself as a teacher. My imagination must have run away with me . . . after all, I was the girl who hated school.
CHAPTER 2

THE STRUGGLE FOR LITERACY

I learned some valuable lessons when reflecting on my early life as a reader and writer. I learned that I needed someone to talk to about what I was thinking, feeling and experiencing. I needed validation—that whatever my needs were, they were not unique to me—other children and young adolescents, particularly girls, also had the same needs. I needed to unprivatize my life so I could make sense of it. I needed someone to tell me that logic was more than objective reasoning. I needed to be encouraged to ask my own questions and not merely answer the questions of others. I needed new forms for reading and writing so I could read and write my world and my place in it. I needed to feel more comfortable in my own skin, so my insides could match my outsides. My hope was that I could meet these needs by going to college, but college soon became problematic for me when I faced the “official” discourse of school.

I finished my B.A. at Montana State in 1988. I then moved back to Colorado where my mother and siblings still live to this day. My family moved from Cleveland to Colorado in 1973 after a tragic accident that left my brother, Rick, paralyzed from the chest down. He was living in Colorado at the time of his accident, attending Denver Automotive School. He, unlike me, did not resist the opportunities offered to him by a working-class culture. His dream was to get a job as an auto mechanic. Trade school would help him to meet his needs, but I turned to a four-year college to meet mine.
My father died in February 1987, a year and four months before my graduation from Montana State. My mother faced living alone, not easy for an only child who had five children, and began very young, to combat her persistent loneliness. My mother may have thought that marriage and children would attend to her needs too, but my siblings and I seldom saw her while growing up. She worked nights at the restaurant on the corner of our street in Cleveland. Her waitress tips provided the down payment on our first home, not far from the house where I had spent the first thirteen years of my life, my grandmother's house.

My mother longed for her own home, a new car, family vacations—after all, these were the 1950s and middle-class, "white" families were living the American dream, but my father could never fulfill these dreams, so eventually, my mother fulfilled her own. I'm sure my mother read tales of girls who married kings, as I did when I was a young girl, but these fantasies never materialized, not for my mother or me. She always tried to bolster my father's image though, telling me it was my father who taught her how to "keep a set of books," which eventually led her to get a job as a bookkeeper. She still keeps "a set of books" in a doctor's office two days a week. She thanks my father.

When I think back to how I started college by taking courses in my father's favorite subject—I feel sad that he never lived to see me earn my college degree. I know he would have been proud of me—the first and last of his children to go to college. Unfortunately, my father was disappointed when I switched my undergraduate major from accounting to English. Eventually, he lost interest in my education. Still, my father had a tremendous impact on my concept of literacy.
Defining Literacy

I began to examine my thoughts on literacy while in graduate school at the University of Colorado at Denver. I decided to go to graduate school after I was hired by Regis College in 1989 as the tutor coordinator for the Writing Center. The Writing Center didn't actually exist at the time I was hired by Regis; it was my job to help create it, under the supervision of a very bright Writing Program Director, Eleanor Swanson, and her assistant, my co-worker, Carol Rossini. I was hired based on my background working at the Writing Center at Montana State, but Regis wanted me to get an advanced degree. Consequently, I complied by entering the master's program in Applied Language at the University of Colorado at Denver.

In one of my first courses at UCD, I was asked to write about literacy. I chose to write about how I define literacy as a struggle, forged by my "upbringing," in a working-class community, in Cleveland, during the 1950s and 1960s. I particularly wanted to write about literacy and my relationship with my father and the influence he had on my early decisions when I began taking college courses in accounting. I guess I was looking for an excuse to write about my father. I knew that by writing about our relationship I could heal it somehow, or at least heal myself. I return to that narrative now, which I wrote in the fall of 1989.

One Story from Blue-Collar, Middle America

When my father found out I was taking a class in accounting at Gonzaga University, he was thrilled. Neither of us had ever dreamed I would be thinking about college after I struggled just to make it out of high school. Prior to my taking an accounting course, we were often at odds with each other. Things got so bad between us when I was a teenager, I decided to leave home shortly after high school graduation. I probably would have left
anyway. My sights were set on my boyfriend, Dave. I couldn't wait to get out of Cleveland.

Dave was in the Marine Corps in 1970, the year I graduated from high school, and stationed in a little town high atop the Mojave Desert—a place called Twenty Nine Palms. We were married at the city hall there, located just "off base," by a Justice of the Peace—an odd duck who kept forgetting my name. I wore white jeans and Dave wore blue. A friend from the base and his girlfriend witnessed the event. Dave and I then settled into our small house, just outside of town, to begin our "happily ever after."

The day I left home, my father stood in the doorway with a sad look on his face. He never said goodbye to me, but managed a half-hearted wave as I pulled out of the driveway. I was seated behind the wheel of my Volkswagen van, recently purchased after trading in his pea-green Ford Galaxy, the car he gave me for my high school graduation gift. Dad wasn't quite over the shock of seeing my van in the driveway instead of his Galaxy. He couldn't bear to watch when I loaded up its hollowed-out belly with some much needed supplies for my new life in California with Dave: pots, pans, dishes, and glassware from my great Aunt Jean; sheets and towels from my mom; "groovy" clothes and shoes from my hours of labor as a retail clerk at a funky boutique in the mall. I'm sure my father never dreamed that some ten years later I would be taking courses in college in accounting. How my father loved accounting! He never missed telling me how much, almost as much as he loved playing his accordion, which he did often, whenever he was sad. I can still see his fingers on the keys and buttons as they moved at ease while playing "Lady of Spain."

My parents had moved to Washington, not far from where I was living at that time with Dave and my daughters. We had moved to Spokane in
1980, after we left Medicine Hat, and a year later, my father and mother arrived. I had asked my father to come to Washington to look for a job. He was once again out of work and very depressed.

I wanted to live near my parents. I wanted to help them, but I could barely help myself. Perhaps after ten years, a disappointing marriage, and the responsibility of two children, I hoped I could go home again by living near my parents. Fortunately, my father found a job as an accountant for a small city in the southeastern corner of the state.

Now that we lived closer to each other, my father and I were able to get together often and talk about my accounting courses. We would sit at the kitchen table and go over my projects assigned in class that week. I treasure these last moments with my father. I didn't realize it at the time, but he would die a few years later. Looking back, what I savor most about these last days we had together were the conversations at the kitchen table figuring out those balance sheets. I felt I was fulfilling a dream of my father's that never came to pass. If he couldn't go to college, I would go for him.

I purposely chose to study accounting because of my father. He would always talk about how much he wished he could have gone to college. His dream was to become a CPA. His regrets became more obvious to me whenever we sat down together to set up a "chart of accounts" for my accounting class. I could feel his joy in tackling the subject, much like he would have done as a student himself if he had been given the chance. More than that, my father was anxious to share with me what he knew about accounting.

My father was self-taught, the silent bookkeeper sitting at his desk, like Bob Cratchett, crowded between rows of other desks in a small office. His daily goal was to be able to "stick it out" for yet another week in order to keep
the money coming in. He always managed somehow, even though he seemed frustrated at his jobs—advancement didn't come easy for bookkeepers without college degrees. He felt trapped into a work situation that offered little challenge.

I guess my father was a lot like me: He left home at an early age, married, and had his family before the age of twenty-five. Unlike me, however, he never felt it was possible to go to college once he was married and had children to support. I felt I was giving my father an opportunity to experience college through me. Consequently, I tried to please my father by taking courses in accounting.

My father often told me the story of how he attended a business school once, a strange thing for a young man with a family legacy of truck drivers. His father was the owner of a troubled trucking firm in which he and his two brothers worked. Together they were responsible for “running the loop” between Cleveland and Chicago each week. The only education my father's family deemed necessary was acquired in the “school of hard knocks” or at a teamsters meeting on a Saturday night.

My father was originally a blue-collar worker, like his brothers and his own father, but he longed for a white-collar job. But a white-collar job meant going to college, and college was not the standard for his family—no one in his family had ever gone to college.

My father quit business school shortly after he married my mother. As he used to say, “You kids just kept comin' and comin' one after another. A man with kids has no right to be in school. He has to work and bring home the bacon.” So what my father did instead was settle for any job he could get. However, working as the frustrated bookkeeper did give him one freedom: it kept him out of a truck driving the loop.
I'm sure my father never found his work as a bookkeeper very rewarding, judging from the way he'd quit one job just to find another, then quit that one for another, then another. I believed he was capable of doing more than balance a company's checking accounts and pay their bills, but without a college degree, he felt trapped. He used to say, "I'm stuck without that damn piece of paper."

College meant a good job, security, and status in my family, accomplishments that my father felt gave life meaning, accomplishments that defined the value of education for him. Literacy was whatever it took to "bring home the bacon." A high school education was a must, but a college education was a privilege few could afford. Literacy was a set of skills—the tools one needed to get a job and support a family. In my neighborhood that meant fixing cars, driving trucks, waiting tables, cutting hair, or, if you were lucky, the opportunity to carry on in the family business—the only absolute outcome needed was a paycheck.

Over time I became detached from my father's concept of literacy. I believed literacy had to be more than a means to an end. I was already beginning to question the knowledge of my past, and search out a new knowledge for my future, a future I grew to envision through critical thought while reflecting on my life as a learner. For my father, literacy was economic. If you could support your family, you were literate. Beyond this, literacy, especially higher education, was a luxury few could afford. This view was my family legacy—the legacy of many families growing up in working-class neighborhoods like mine in the industrial midwest during the 1950s and 1960s.

I learned early in life that literacy and economics go together. This utilitarian view was taught to me by my father and by a working-class culture.
that couldn't afford or even envision college. I set out to please my father and fulfill his dream by choosing to take courses in accounting, but as I continued with my education, I began to distance myself from my father's world. I found myself once again pulling out of the driveway, waving goodbye, as I did when I left home for good, while my father turned away discouraged. The first time he turned away because I left home to get married, or maybe it was because I sold his pea-green Ford Galaxy, but after I told him I no longer wanted to study accounting and wanted to take a freshman composition course instead, he lost interest in my education.

I wanted to determine for myself what it meant to be literate. I began to read the world subjectively and I wanted to reposition myself in it. I began to recognize some of the social and political forces that shaped my father's life, and consequently, his working-class consciousness.

In contrast to my father's utilitarian view, I wanted the bigger picture; I wanted to see the world beyond the steel mills and chemically-fired rivers of East Cleveland. But I soon learned that no matter how far I traveled away from home, I took my culture with me. As a nontraditional student, both in age (older), family status (a single parent) and in socio-economic background (poor), I struggled when trying to write for my professors in college, particularly those I encountered in graduate school. I had no idea that my ways with words were not acceptable. David Bartholomae (1988), in his article "Inventing the University," explains: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the University for the occasion... He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing (p. 273)."

The colloquialisms in my speech were particularly troublesome when writing papers for my English classes. One time I wrote the words "being
that" instead of "because" in a paper for a graduate English course. I could not understand why my professor made it a point to put a red line through my words "being that" and write the word "because" over my words. The only logic I could muster was that perhaps he was addressing the issue of economy as it pertains to style—why use two words when one will do. I researched the issue because it appeared that my language was always being judged as inadequate—my papers often coming back to me with the minus sign after my grade. I wanted to know why. I referred to a style guide, *American Usage and Style: The Consensus* (Copperud, 1960). I was shocked to learn that the term "being that" was listed as substandard: "the expression has a quaint, possibly rural flavor" (p. 31).

I never thought of my East Cleveland dialect as "quaint or rural." I was constantly reminded in graduate school that my language was "substandard" as I wrote papers using the same language I learned growing up in Cleveland. I wanted literacy to carry me back to myself, so I could reflect, gain perspective, and discover, but words became round pegs that wouldn't fit into the square holes when trying to write in the "official discourse" of graduate school. What I didn't realize at that time was that "every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, within the knowledge and the power it carries with it" (Foucault, 1972, p. 227).

I learned that some of the challenges I faced when trying to write for the academy were due to the differences between my home and school cultures. In her book *Ways with Words*, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) recalls businessmen and women, and mill personnel, who came to her college classrooms on anthropology, education, language and culture, with one central question: "What were the effects of preschool, home, and community
environments on the learning of language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings?” (p. 2). As these questions imply, new understandings for culturally-based literacy were sought.

I wish this understanding had been extended to some of my professors. Heath's ethnographic research on the learners in Roadville and Trackton focused on the “ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshipping, using space, and filling time which surrounded these language learners” (Heath, 1983, p. 3). She theorized that all of these cultural and communal aspects had to be accounted for “as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place” (Heath, 1983, p. 3). I needed this cultural understanding while writing papers in graduate school.

Although I was having a tough time integrating myself into the academic culture of graduate school, I don't believe my father ever had the opportunity or language to integrate himself or his abilities into broader ethical and historical contexts and concerns. Ethical contexts were limited to the family, not to society as a whole. Supporting a family proved to be difficult enough without worrying about the well being of those outside his own family. Historical contexts were limited to the working day, not the evolution of his generation or mine. Any choices he made were for the common good of his family. He was set up in an information structure that was linked to a text that read: Literacy is the acquisition of skills needed to acquire a paycheck. Any outside desires, dreams, or questions were not often considered. If they were, they were only in hindsight from a man, who after a medical diagnosis, learned he was dying.

My father's notions of literacy had been socially constructed within his family and within the culture of a blue-collar, working-class community, at a time in history when men returned from war to reestablish their ties to both.
My father's comprehension of literacy was relative to his own situation. The answers he knew were based on questions he felt forced to ask: How do I bring home a paycheck? How do I support my family? He was encouraged to be efficient in his pursuit of literacy.

Another ethnographic study by John Lofty considers the cultural notions of time when looking at language learning in a working class community in Maine. In his article, "Time to Write: Resistance to Literacy in a Maine Fishing Community," Lofty (1990) looks at the cultural values of his students and contrasts them with the values taught in school. Often overlooked are the students' fundamental concepts of time and space. Lofty defines time as "the stream of human activities in which we create self, for it is in the context of our daily lives that we construct and shape the contours of time to serve our primary needs" (p. 40). By identifying the cultural values of home and community and comparing them to the values of school, it became obvious that there were conflicts. The writing the students did in the classroom often reflected the local knowledge. Lofty encourages teachers to account for the cultural and communal aspects of students lives. "The challenge for teachers, therefore, is to promote a more inclusive literacy, a literacy that will empower students to participate in larger communities without diminishing the power of regional forms and uses of language" (p. 40).

My father looked to literacy as a product for trade in the marketplace; unfortunately, his ability to trade was limited because he didn't have a college degree. His experiences as a truck driver and self-taught bookkeeper could not be used as bargaining chips for a job as an accountant.

Literacy, for my father, was never a political activity like it was for me, nor did he see reading and writing as literacy's principal form. Although I
was seldom encouraged to read and write at home, educational systems have been designed with this definition in mind. Contradictions prompted me to ask how this view of literacy differed from other “ways with words.” When I thought of literacy as the production or comprehension of books, was I missing something? Didn’t anyone in higher education value experience?

Many answers were missing for me in graduate school. What about human relationships? I no longer knew how to define literacy. I wondered what counted and what didn’t when trying to understand how to use language to “name my world.”

Jay Robinson (1989) explains that there are four contexts that need to be considered when defining literacy:

1. Inherited concepts and values
2. real and socially perceived needs for literacy
3. ideals and ethics
4. institutions: who teaches what to whom? (p. 243)

I initially found it difficult to communicate within the context of the university. In my younger days, while in the public schools, and my early days on a college campus, I never envisioned finding a place for myself within the American Educational System. The “inherited concepts and beliefs” I acquired didn't help me to navigate my way through school. Instead, I had to unlearn and find a way to apply the new knowledge I was learning, particularly in graduate school.

Mike Rose (1989), in his book, Lives on the Boundary, describes the challenge facing students who come from blue-collar backgrounds:

There are some things about my early life, I see now, that are reflected in other working-class lives I've encountered: the isolation of neighborhoods, information poverty, the limited means of protecting children from family disaster, the predominance of such disaster, the resilience of imagination the
intellectual curiosity and literate enticements that remain hidden from the schools, the feelings of scholastic inadequacy, the dislocations that come from crossing educational boundaries (p. 9).

Mike Rose's lessons on literacy help me to understand my own life as a person who comes from a working-class background. He began with his relationships—his parents, his extended family, his neighborhood, his classrooms, then he moved out to other communities and to those he encountered in these places. He writes about his relationships in school and his struggle to "participate in the life of the mind" (Rose, 1989, p. 9).

Similarly, I had to begin to search out my own definition for literacy by examining the social contexts that influenced my life. I had to start with my family and chose here to focus on my relationship with my father, a focus I needed to cope with his death.

Looking back to my father's concept of literacy, I can see how it was inherited from his father who also believed that literacy was whatever knowledge was needed "to bring home the bacon." Any "ideals and ethics" beyond these utilitarian needs were not considered. There was not time or stimulus for such considerations. Just "keeping a roof over our heads" proved to be hard enough for both my mother and father. My grandmother's house provided most of my shelter while growing up, and she never let my father forget it.

I want to learn about the worlds outside of my working class culture, but I don't want to lose sight of where I come from. I want to be in a position to ask the kinds of questions that are important to me—questions that may have been important to my father, but ones he may have felt he never had the opportunity, language, or time to ask. Like my father, I too need to know how best to support my family. Some needs are immediate. But I want to go
beyond a utilitarian concept of literacy. Although I understand and honor my father's quest for a decent job and a decent paycheck, for me literacy is more than the ability to "bring home the bacon."

During my early days as an accounting student, I began to feel tense, like I didn't belong. I began to question whether it was up to me to get the accounting degree that eluded my father. Instead I wanted to read the books I had never read as a child and the books that had never been read to me. I also wanted to write down my own world and not just the worlds that I discovered in these books. I wanted to seek out broader contexts within which I could discover and create knowledge. I wanted to look at literacy as something useful beyond my own individuality, a usefulness that could be applied to societies and systems I now found myself in.

As an English major, I hoped to learn how to use language to free myself and to question my world and my role in it. My father, as it turned out, was more excited about my taking accounting classes than he was about my going to college. I know this because when I decided to major in English instead of accounting, our talks at the kitchen table ended.

Perhaps those talks were to share with me what he knew or cared about—those talks were his way of fathering me. Unfortunately, he may have thought he didn't know how to guide me once I switched from accounting to English.

Nevertheless, I continued to visit my father every weekend, always anxious to show him a poem I had written or share with him a story I had read. His response was usually, "Is that all you're learning in college?" Disappointed but determined, I'd rush to him again the following weekend even more excited to tell him about an invitation I'd received, to read my own poetry at a seminar on women poets that week on campus. But he
would say (in between comments on whatever football game happened to be on television that afternoon) "That's nice, Carol."

My father died before he could see my first poem in print, words I paid so dearly for—my poem about him. An excerpt reads:

Somewhere close to us, the past hangs like a dark veil.
But the breeze of time threatens to cease,
no longer causing a flutter in this sheer wall—
A flutter that permits glimpses of each other
when the Windmaker takes a breath in our direction.

(A Burning Match)

The publication was not a scholarly journal, just a small college press. Yet, I felt relieved. Writing that poem helped me to let my father go. In the process of publishing the poem, I formed new relationships with other readers and writers. As Jay Robinson (1989) states:

To advance our conversation with one another we must think of the words 'writer' and 'reader' as social roles in communities made through uses of the written word. We are trying to discover how, through social interactions, writers and readers inscribe themselves in a way that gives them a place in the communities they are constituting (p. 7).

My definition of literacy carries with it the conversations I had at the kitchen with my father while going over accounting assignments. It also carries with it the hopes and dreams of my father who never made it to college. My definition of literacy echoes a working class consciousness, which made it difficult for me to imagine a life for myself beyond the place where I was born while also working hard to maintain what little I had. My definition of literacy also carries with it a desire for new meaning that emancipates as well as illuminates. I believe a literate person is someone who understands the intimate relationship between thinking and making decisions while considering her own good and the good of society. A literate
person is someone who, when given the opportunity, can integrate his or her vocational skills into broader ethical and historical contexts.

I don't believe my father ever had the opportunity to integrate abilities into broader ethical and historical contexts. Consequently, his vision was limited to his own family, not to society as a whole. Historical contexts were narrowed down to the working day, not to his generation, or his father's, or mine. My father found it a challenge to live one day at a time. Any outside dreams, questions, or ambitions were canceled once he had a wife and children to support. If my father did have any other dreams besides becoming a CPA, they were only in hindsight from a man who knew his life was ending.

I often thought about my father when I worked late at my job in the Writing Center at Regis. Sometimes the "cleaning ladies" would come in to dust my office and empty my trash can. I felt guilty watching them work to clean up after me. I would often straighten things up before they arrived. I enjoyed their company as we talked about our lives. I felt more comfortable with them than I did some of my students and colleagues who had more privileged lives. Yet, I resisted my working-class culture and wanted to leave it. I no longer wanted to live in a structure that was familiar to my father and mother but sometimes uncomfortable for me.

When the trash can was emptied and the office dusted, my friends at Regis College would leave, going about their business as "cleaning ladies," while I worked alone, in my office, trying to plan my next day's business in the Writing Center. I wondered why things turned out the way they did. The contradictions between my working-class culture and the culture of Regis caused me to feel split and isolated, again. By pursuing the college education that eluded my father, I found myself facing new challenges. I wondered
where I belonged. Finding a place where I feel “at home” has been my personal struggle for literacy, a struggle that began in blue-collar, middle America.
CHAPTER 3

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: CELEBRATION/CRITIQUE

My father taught me to believe that literacy would solve my economic problems, but a college education was something few could afford, especially in my working-class neighborhood. Furthermore, my father couldn't understand my own need to learn to speak a new language (white, elite, male) and to use that language, along with women's "ways with words," to examine and critique my own position as a working-class woman.

Although I found myself at odds with my father at times, I came to accept his beliefs about what it meant to be literate (education for economic security) while also honoring my own (education for critical awareness and liberation), but not until home and school became sites of resistance. Bell hooks teaches me that "the site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire" (Yearning, 153). Struggle no longer meant victimhood and martyrdom, but an opportunity for growth. I had to learn how to struggle to confront the tensions of life, but I knew I couldn't transform anguish into agency alone. I needed help. I turned to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Where once I sought refuge in Alanon, counselors and other Alanon members suggested that I broaden my perspective by attending AA. My participation in the drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s secured my
membership. Although I resisted the label of "alcoholic," I began to attend AA meetings regularly in 1984. I stayed in "the program" until 1992.

Alcoholics Anonymous taught me how to understand my pain. I began by listening to my inner voice and the voices of Others. Listening allowed me to build new relationships within AA, particularly my relationship with a "higher power," a "God" of my own understanding. The spirituality offered by "the program" gave me a choice as to who or what my God would be, and offered suggestions on how to pray for guidance and acceptance. My inner life led me to renew my sense of purpose and responsibility. The forces of the outside world were tempered as I looked within for new direction. I found balance between my inner life and my outer life. I learned to acknowledge and act on my beliefs. With guidance from AA, I came to believe that "faith without works is dead."

AA names spirit as "God, higher power, and Him," but I chose to free myself from male concepts and the subsequent subordination to a "power greater than myself." I chose to embrace a Spirit that led me back to myself. The Spirit of my inner voice guides and protects me when I focus and listen. Unfortunately, I usually placed authority outside of myself and in the hands of men; therefore, it became increasingly important for me to shift that authority to myself. Once I made this shift, I began to grow.

While AA taught me how to handle my struggles through prayer and meditation, I encountered new struggles within the AA group. I embraced the silence that led me to my inner voice; however, I resisted the silencing I often sensed within one particular AA group. Consequently, I found myself moving in and out of AA.

The rhetorical structures of AA and those who enforce them became intolerant as my evolving consciousness moved me closer to the edges rather
than the middle of AA. While I recall what worked for me in AA, I also recall what didn't work. Ironically, silence marks both positions, as I learned to relocate myself between the two. I moved inside AA to find my through prayer and meditation, and I moved outside AA to find my voice through conflict and struggle. I learned how to shapeshift along the way, to use my voice to articulate my position.

**Silence: Moving within AA**

AA's most valuable lesson for me was on prayer and meditation. AA taught me how to tune in the silence so I could listen to my inner voice. As I opened my "Big Book"—a nickname for the central text of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). Inside, on the cover page, I wrote the words: “Spirit, please help me set aside everything I think I know about myself, this program, and especially you. I want to open my mind for a new experience.” I don't remember when I wrote these words, but I do know it was after a year or more in “the program.” I turned to the “Big Book” for answers that perhaps I had read before or heard at a meeting but hadn't acted on due to my resistance to AA.

I resisted AA for many reasons. Primarily, I didn't believe I was an alcoholic; therefore, I didn't believe I had a “disease.” Not seeing myself as an alcoholic was no problem in Alanon, but when I found myself at an AA meeting, my identity as alcoholic became a major issue. Whenever anyone at an AA meeting would talk about drinking, I could only hear what was said as it related to my husband, Dave, and his drinking, not my own. AA's term for this failure to see ourselves as alcoholic is “denial.” I prayed to be willing to break through my denial. I tried to construct myself as an alcoholic, but deep down inside, my inner voice reminded me that my “addiction” wasn't to alcohol, but to Dave.
Perhaps I should have stayed in Alanon instead of facing my resistance to AA, but I learned to lean into the program by “acting as if.” I wanted a church where I could learn how to pray, and AA became that church for me. I wanted to apply a spiritual solution to my problems. I wanted to develop my inner life. I believed that under my shame whispered a gentle voice. Under the mask, I hoped to connect with and honor my own true nature. Alanon had launched my journey. I began with detachment.

“Detach with love” was my mantra in Alanon, but to detach felt like letting go of a life preserver—I was afraid I’d drown if I let go of control. Yet, as I reflect on my life with Dave, holding on to him too tight had only brought my children and me close to death. I had to learn to let go to survive. I did well with detachment when Dave and I lived apart, but when I moved back to Denver from Bozeman, where we were divorced, Dave and I found ourselves living in the same community, and at times, we ran into each other at AA meetings. I detached, but my love for Dave held constant. I realized that even though I still loved him, we couldn’t be together.

I moved to Denver after I graduated from Montana State. Unfortunately, my economic expectations about a college education blew up in my face when I found myself in similar, low-paying jobs, like the ones I had prior to going to college. I made more money selling cosmetics at the local department store during the Christmas rush than I ever made at Regis College as their tutor coordinator. My economic situation grew worse instead of better following my college education, for now I had student loans to repay. I trained tutors in the Writing Center at Regis College during the day, taught English as a Second Language for the local community college two nights a week, worked retail three nights a week, and carried a full-time graduate student load. Once again, my children became lost in the shuffle.
I bought into the lie of meritocracy. My father was wrong—a college education did not free me from poverty—it increased it. Now I was poor with an educated awareness, a critical consciousness, and time became a valuable commodity due to its limited supply. I rarely saw my children. I barely paid my bills. Where once I stood in cheese lines as an undergraduate during the Reagan years, I now stood behind a class counter and peddled face powders to pay my way through graduate school and support my children. My situation pissed me off. In AA I was told my anger was fatal.

I needed an open mind. I wanted serenity. I turned to AA to build the foundation of a spiritual life and to let go of my anger. I tried to set aside my resistance to the notion that I had a "disease" and embrace the solution offered by AA. Yet, deep down inside, I didn't believe I was an alcoholic, but I "came to believe" that there was a power, not "greater than myself," but inside myself, that I had not yet tapped, I had not yet listened to, I had not yet fully realized. I wanted to communicate with that power. I believed that somewhere, within myself, I could find serenity.

I sought serenity through prayer and meditation, but when I entered AA, I needed guidance on both. Alanon's moral imperative on detachment echoed in other spiritual texts I was reading at the time. I could not "deny" that to contemplate reality required attentiveness and detachment (Goswami, 1993, paragraph 1), but being attentive to myself, taking that subject position was new and uncomfortable at times.

My dear friend, Mary, a woman I met in AA while living in Bozeman, wrote me a letter to offer some guidance and support. I had expressed to her in an earlier letter that I was struggling with my spiritual life. She encouraged me to "lean into the program" to resolve my struggles. I found her letter in my "Big Book." Once again, as when I was an adolescent girl

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seeking affirmation and guidance through reading and writing, notes from friends served as guideposts. Mary’s letter led me deep into the spiritual philosophies of AA.

AA’s many rewards included dear and loving friends like Mary. She believed that AA “is the answer to everything—no matter how big or insurmountable anything seems.” Her letter contained a list of pages to read in the “Big Book” to help me focus on my relationship with “a higher power.” She called these passages “the cure.” I once again turned them over, some ten years after Mary’s letter, six years after I left AA, to list and quote the pages and passages mentioned in Mary’s letter. I intersperse them with my own responses as I engaged in a dialogue with the text. The Twelve Steps of AA, which I list as Appendix A, once again became my guideposts.

Reading the “Big Book”

“p. 63—3rd step prayer a.m. and p.m.”

The third step of AA read: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” Those nagging male pronouns weren’t going to hold me back. I “leaned” into the text. “Spirit is all powerful. He provided what we needed, if we kept close to Him and performed His work well.” The pronouns disappeared when I remained open, when I reminded myself of the “power” within me.

The “Big Book” continued: “More and more we became interested in seeing what we could contribute to life.” I had become of consumer. I swallowed, spent, smoked, gushed and burned out my relationships with my insatiable needs. The time had come to give, to move from consumer to contributer. I wanted to be part of a solution. I wanted love.

The “Big Book” told me to “get out of myself,” that “faith without works is dead.” I recognized this moral imperative from my early lessons in
Christianity. In fact, in all of the Abrahamic/Semitic faiths (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) "the quality of one's faith is thought to deepen through a sincere practice of righteous acts; that is, waging justice is not an outgrowth of the spiritual practice but an inherent component of the core teachings" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 158). Within these traditions I recognized the "imperative of an active social concern" so prevalent in AA, and how "this imperative is linked with the quality of one's spiritual practice" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 159).

"p. 76--sixth and seventh step prayer"

The sixth and seventh steps read: (Step 6) "Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character." (Step 7) "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." My "defects" were recognized by taking "a moral inventory" of myself. The fourth and fifth step of AA suggested I make "a list of all those harmed" and be "willing to make amends to them all." After I identified my anger, AA suggested that I only look at my part, where I was at fault. "If we still cling to something we will not let go, we ask God to help us be willing." I asked myself: Was I willing to let go—to detach?

"I pray that you remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding." AA's call to action! My "restlessness and discontentment" would dissipate through "good work." I had to shift my role from spectator and chief critic to a participant who cared about Others. I had to learn humility.

While AA echoed the Semitic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it also resonated with Buddhism. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist: "In order to understand something, you have to be one with that something." I could no longer isolate from the world as I had done in the past. I had "to become one in order for right
perception to take place. Non-duality . . . not two also means not one” (Hahn, 1987, p. 39).

I discovered my purpose, to seek oneness. I entered the flow of life—I moved from I to We—from critical reflection to action. I discovered what to do, how to do it, and why. Consciousness and agency merged. I continued to pray for guidance. I got out of me and work with others. I realized freedom. “p. 84”

“We have entered the world of the Spirit. Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness.” Thousands of pages have been written on understanding, and as a graduate student in Composition, I’d been asked to read a lot of them. Howard Gardner (1991) wrote these:

Understanding involves a mastery of the productive practices in a domain or discipline, coupled with the capacity to adopt different stances toward the work, among them the stances of audience member, critic, performer, and maker. The ‘understander’ in the arts is one who can comfortably move among these various stances, just as the understander in the sciences can with suppleness alternate among several modes of knowing or representation, assuming the roles of experimenter, theorist, and critic of investigations carried out personally and by others (p. 239).

I interpreted Gardner’s words on “artful experience” as they related to my movement from I to We. I had to “master” certain productive practices, such as prayer and meditation; I had to become a better listener to gain the “capacity to adopt different stances” toward the world. I had to master the art of shape shifting: As an “audience member,” I had to listen. As a “critic,” I had to reflect. As a “performer,” I had to act. As a “maker,” I had to compose. These shapes shifted constantly as I sought my spirit, my voice.

I recognized the interconnections between I and We. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) advised: “To understand something is to take that thing up and to be one with it” (p. 38). I had to learn to shape shift and move across
cultures for clarity. Thich Nhat Hanh helped to show me the way: "The Indians have a wonderful example. If a grain of salt would like to measure the degree of saltiness of the ocean, to have a perception of the saltiness of the ocean, it drops itself into the ocean and becomes one with it, and the perception is perfect" (p. 38). My inner life, my voice, guided me to become that "drop in the ocean."

I began to offer tutoring services at the AA Club where I attended meetings. I shared what I had learned about reading and writing with AA members who needed to work "the program," to fill out government forms for financial assistance, to compose papers and reports for school. I joined in with a group who were writing literacy grants for a half-way house on "skid row." I became one with those I helped as they, in turn, helped me. I understood reciprocity, gratitude, and humility. I experienced love and understanding in my pursuits.

Sharing stories with one another in AA contributed to the flow of oneness, the movement from I to We. The "Big Book" advised: "When fears arise, we need to discuss them with someone immediately and make amends quickly if we have harmed anyone." Self-reflection went public in AA. Talk was important. Personal narratives were not narcissistic, romantic, nostalgic, or sentimental. Instead, sharing our stories with one another allowed us to enter the flow of oneness. When we let another person under our mask—we discussed intimacy. Intimacy! I was reminded of Kay Leigh Hagan's (1993) words:

Intimacy is not a candlelit dinner for two. It cannot be contrived. Nor is it automatic, romantic, or necessarily even comfortable. Intimacy is a wilderness of sudden unpredictability, a dynamic of awareness, assertion, and courage. Intimacy occurs when I notice I am alive" (p. 47).
I remembered that moment of truth in the kitchen with Dave when we lived in Spokane. I finally found the courage to confront him about his drinking and affairs, and he finally had the courage to confirm my suspicions. This exchange turned out to be one of our most intimate moments—unpredictable and painful, yet alive and real.

I sought "mutually beneficial relationships." The "Big Book" offered suggestions: "We resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our code." I had to become "mindful," in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, to become authentic by "working with others," in "oneness." My spiritual program became a "program of action."

I faced my struggles by entering the struggles of those I met in AA. I finally could see some continuity, some connection in my roles in and out of school. Ironically, as I continued to develop the art of shape shifting, I became more integrated. I felt more complete, less fragmented, isolated, and confused. To maintain wholeness, I continued to pray and meditate.

"pp. 85 and 86"

"Prayer and meditation. We shouldn't be shy on this matter of prayer." I've heard some say that to pray is to talk and to meditate is to listen. Journal writing was one way I talked and listened to my inner voice, and it continued to serve me, but I recalled feeling fearful at times. While I acknowledged my fears by setting them down on paper, other times I acknowledged my fears by getting down on my knees and asking for help. I recall many days when my knees would touch the ground before my feet in the morning, as I struggled to face another day. Once on my knees, I turned within myself, to listen and give thanks while I asked for guidance and care.

At day's end, I continued to engage in critical reflection. The "Big Book" suggested: "When we retire at night, we constructively review our
day. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? Do we owe an apology? Have we kept something to ourselves which should be discussed with another person at once? Were we kind and loving toward all? What could we have done better? Were we thinking of what we could do for others, of what we could pack into the stream of life?" These questions continued the cycle of self-reflection so pivotal in AA. Each question offered a potential struggle and every struggle a potential lesson. Critical reflection brought me closer to my own spirit, my own voice, which, in turn, led me to realize my usefulness to others.

The "Big Book" continued: "We ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives . . . We ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or decision."

When I reread these lines, I realized how much of my "inspiration" had come from feminists, like Adrienne Rich, whose words, taped to my refrigerator, read: "Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you. It means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts, hence, grappling with hard work." No stranger to hard work, I toned my "own brains and instincts" by continually moving from I to We.

"p. 449"

"When I stopped living in the problem and began living in the answer, the problem went away. From that moment on, I have not had a single compulsion to drink." To stop living in the problem required that I identify it first. AA taught me that most problems are caused by selfishness and self-centeredness. I asked myself: Was I selfish when I married Dave to fill the void in my life? Was I selfish when I had children to fill the same void? I realized that I could not be totally fulfilled by any person, place, or thing. I
tuned in my growing sense of spirit; I began to fill the black hole inside of me. Inspiration, imagination, and intuition began to overflow. I realized my problem was expecting others to do for me what I needed to do for myself. I'd hear those in AA say, "we'll love you until you can love yourself." Consequently, I learned to love myself so I could give love in return.

The "Big Book" then delivered its main message: "And acceptance is the answer to all of my problems today." Acceptance complicated my thinking. Did I have to accept everything? Did I have to accept abuse, neglect, hurt, silence? The "Big Book" stated, "When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation--some fact of my life--unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, or thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake...until I accept life on life's terms, I cannot be happy." I realized I had to embrace struggle, to accept challenges in my life as opportunities.

We came to be judged on my actions, not our intentions. Many of my actions were selfish and self-centered, and I wanted to change. AA allowed me to witness the struggles of those I met in the program, and, in turn, to interpret them so I could understand my own. I became active in a community where telling stories about "what it use to be like, what happened, and what it's like now" offered a sense of belonging that I so desperately needed. I moved from control to intimacy. AA taught me the importance of sharing my "experience, strength, and hope." I realized that I had something to give—my own story.

"pp. 552 and 553"

"If you have a resentment you want to be free of, if you will pray for the person or the thing that you resent, you will be free. If you ask in prayer
for everything you want for yourself to be given to them, you will be free. Ask for their health, their prosperity, their happiness, and you will be free. Even when you don't really want it for them, your prayers are only words and you don't mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do it every day for two weeks and you will find you have come to mean it and to want it for the person, and you will realize that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred, you now feel compassionate understanding and love . . . I have to ask first for the willingness . . . the only real freedom a human being can ever know is doing what you ought to do because you want to do it.”

I found purpose in AA and eventually reconnected to my own sense of spirit and responsibility, but I didn't feel free. A troubling silence stood in my way. Then I began to hear voices. They were coming from the fringes of AA. I sensed these voices, women's voices. They echoed my own; however, these voices were never heard in an AA meeting.

Silence: Moving Out of AA

My anger had become lodged in the stories I couldn't or wouldn't tell in an AA meeting. I needed to come to voice about these stories to locate and name my anger, to free myself from self-blame, to continue the work of recovery. I returned to words from Mary. She ended her letter with urgency: “For God's sake, go to meetings and TALK about it! You are not unique—your problems are no bigger or worse than anyone else's.”

Mary was right. My problems were “no bigger or worse than anyone else's,” but I didn't believe I could talk about my anger openly at an AA meeting. I needed a separate place, a safer place, a place among women. If I was to learn about myself, I had to hear what other women had to say about their anger. However, I wasn't hearing their voices in AA meetings.
Alcoholics Anonymous slowly became a site of struggle. I believed I needed to move out of AA to be effective—to develop a fresh view of myself in the world. Bell hooks (1990) confirmed my beliefs. She wrote: “We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (p. 153). I needed a new location, a "radical creative space" apart from AA. I needed to fill the silence by casting out my demons. They lived in the secrets of my past.

Silence took many forms, shaping my responses to the world. My responses were angry at times, particularly when I felt silenced by men. I once believed in a story that read a man would solve my problems, if not a man, then a college education, but many of these beliefs failed me, and I found myself turning to AA for help. In AA I learned new beliefs; however, I felt like a phony in AA because I also believed that I wasn't an alcoholic. Yet, my counselors believed otherwise, so I went to AA meetings and pretended—I "acted as if."

In spite of my charade, I learned valuable lessons about prayer and meditation, the movement from I to We. But as time passed and I continued to peel back the layers of my experience, I realized that I needed to find a more appropriate audience to talk about my secrets. I felt safer discussing my secrets with women. My instincts told me it would not be wise to flush out all of my experiences at an AA meeting. Ironically, in a program that taught "we are as sick as our secrets," I realized that there were many secrets that never came to voice in AA. Perhaps they never should.

My anger took hold while attending one particular AA meeting where men had control of the floor. I found myself turning to talk over the telephone after yet another AA meeting where men controlled the
conversation. Several women I spoke with began to hint to me that they too felt silenced in AA. Hoping we could find courage and support in each other's company, five women and I decided to form a separate group. The women's group became an autobiographical site where we dug into our lives to uncover our secrets. Artifacts from our past were dusted off with words we uttered and listened to in pursuit of our anger.

I continued to shape shift as I wove my private life into my public life. The women's group gave me permission to tape record our conversations. Our stories became the basis of my master's thesis—a feminist critique of AA. I found myself reading and writing to solve my problems; I was reading and writing to heal. I wanted to develop a sensitivity to power by interrogating my own subordination; I wanted to develop a new understanding of woman researcher and woman subject; I wanted to acknowledge my belief in moving from I to We, so I committed my inquiries to address the changing positions of women in society, particularly the positions of women in AA.

Kathleen Weiler (1988) helped me to see that feminist methodology focuses on the dynamics and interplay of forces of social reproduction, such as race, class and gender, on the one hand, and cultural production and resistance on the other (p. 57). She also informed me that "woman as subjects have the ability to act and to critique their own experience, even if that capacity is denied in structures of knowledge and in language itself" (p. 58). However, women often experience tension when denied subject positions, which leads to questions about the ability of male thought to address and adequately comprehend the experiences of women (Weiler, 1988, p. 58). Consequently, my own growing tension while attending AA meetings became a focus. My study of women's stories in AA began from a place of subordination, but I needed a new space to form my responses, "radical
creative space which affirms and sustains subjectivity” (hooks, 1990, p. 153). Consequently, five women and I moved outside of the AA group we had been attending and formed our own group. Here we began the struggle “to articulate our sense of the world” (hooks, 1990, p. 153).

Feminist research enhanced ethnographic inquiry which led me to learn about contextuality, participant observations, and the multiple perspectives of the women from AA who helped me to form our separate group. I had no hypothesis to prove when I set out to design my study, but instead sought to generate one based on my own experiences. I hoped to identify particular patterns as important and others as less relevant by voicing my secrets. I drew on feminist/textual analysis to interpret the collected data, and to formulate new ideas and questions regarding ways in which women construct meaning. Specifically, I became interested in learning about the stories women wouldn't or couldn't tell in an AA meeting and how those stories had an impact on a woman's ability to heal within the AA group.

What follows is revision of that study, revised once before, in 1994, shortly after I arrived at the University of New Hampshire, and again, in 1998, while writing my dissertation. My physical location changed after I graduated from the University of Colorado (1992) and I moved to New Hampshire to conduct doctoral research in reading and writing instruction in 1993. At UNH, a very generous teacher, Pearl Rosenberg, invited me to participate on a panel to present my research at the National Ethnography Conference, which I did in 1994. Following my discussion at the conference, several people approached me and requested a copy. Consequently, I felt encouraged to revise my master's thesis into a journal-length article.

I boiled down over two hundred pages of transcripts into twenty and submitted my study to a prestigious feminist journal for publication.
However, when the article was rejected, I became discouraged. Consequently, I never revised that article again until now.

Some narratives are more difficult than others to revisit once they're written. My own narrative that surfaced within the women's group was no exception. However, as I return to my study of AA and the stories of the women in our separate group, I can see how much I learned about the power of silence and how these lessons continue to influence my life and my teaching.

I voiced many silences in AA, but I learned to face my secrets in the women's group. I believed a chorus of women's voices awaited me once I freed myself from the dominant male voices in AA. The stories that follow echo the voices I never heard at an AA meeting. One of these voices is my own.

**A Feminist Critique of Alcoholics Anonymous**

**Rhetoric, Ritual, and Recovery:**

Silencing Women Stories in Alcoholics Anonymous

*Silence may indeed be a source of integrity, vitality, and even fertility, but it may also play out its subtle dialectic on the edge of nothingness and sometimes on the brink of collapse.*

*Henry James*

**Prologue**

How is the silencing of women's stories carried out in AA? What are the stories that women are not telling? Who benefits from silencing these stories? How does silencing hinder women's abilities to heal? These are some of the questions that were teased out of my experiences while attending Alcoholic Anonymous (AA).
As a six-year participant at the time of this study, I became suspicious of women's abilities to heal in a male-dominated culture like AA. I began to doubt. I began to question. I was particularly troubled by my interactions with the men in one particular AA group. Often I'd leave this AA meeting angry about the way men spoke about women (one man referred to his attraction to women as a "tit addiction") or the way men dominated the meetings (at some meetings not a single woman's voice was heard). I was becoming increasingly angry about these issues, but I was fearful to express my anger during an AA meeting.

Marilyn Frye (1983) helps me come to grips with attitudes about women's anger. She writes: "Men (and sometimes women) ignore it, see it as our being 'upset' or 'hysterical,' or see it as craziness. Attention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and the topic of our 'mental stability'" (p. 84).

Stable or not, I realized that I needed a place to express and examine my anger. I sought support from other women in AA to break my silence. I was pleased when a small group of female acquaintances from "the program" validated my feelings and expressed their own anger during our many discussions. I discovered that although we didn't have any quick solutions, we had similar concerns. Consequently, five women joined me in my home once a week for two months to talk about what we couldn't or wouldn't talk about in an AA meeting.

When one reads of these accounts, I would encourage the reader to keep key points in mind—they are based on my participant/observations of one particular AA group, as well as one particular women's group. These two groups met at particular places and at particular times. I do not pretend to speak of AA as a whole or of women who attend AA meetings across the
country or indeed the world. Although my research focuses on one AA
group and one women's group, the particulars I describe may be
representative of actions and attitudes beyond these mentioned groups. As
"white," heterosexual, poor and working-class women, ranging in age from
late twenties to early forties at the time of this study, the women in this group
represent particular standpoints but not necessarily preferred ones. I don't
pretend to reveal locations and perspectives of all women who attend AA.
Instead, I borrow from the words of feminist researchers, like Marjorie
DeVault (1996), who provide clarity on feminist methodology. She writes:

The aim of much feminist research has been to 'bring women in,'
that is, to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, and
to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the
ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives
invisible" (p. 33).

Consciousness raising was at the heart of the women's movement, and this
small group of women who came to my home once a week to discuss their
lives represented a "second wave" of that movement. Fundamentally
empirical, our gathering provided a systematic mode of inquiry, of our own
making, that challenged the knowledge we received in AA and allowed us to
learn from one another.

The knowledge of AA and the "Big Book" guards against anger, but it
was anger that launched this study. I believe that anger is a part of the
human experience—it's what we do with our anger that may be destructive.
For me, the choice to write about my anger was the healthiest response I
could make at the time. I longed to transform my anger into wisdom, but as
Sandra Bartkey (1990) notes, "Many feminists are perpetually wary lest their
own anger be transformed explosively into aggressive or hostile behavior of
the sort which would be imprudent or even dangerous to display" (p. 19).
Women are taught to avoid public displays of anger. Magda Lewis (1993) adds to my understanding about woman and anger. In her book, *Without of Word*, she writes: “Rage—a profoundly concrete human emotion, is often denied to women through a 'sleight of word' which, by equivocating on the double meaning of madness, transforms a woman's anger into hysteria” (p. 19; also see Daly, 1978; Gilman, 1973; Spender, 1980). Even though I believed I needed to be free of anger, I could not discuss my anger with the AA group.

**The AA Group**

While there is no doubt that AA has helped many to abstain from alcohol, the addiction to alcohol is often replaced by an addiction to the AA group where individuals are encouraged to conceal their emotions, particularly anger. Considering my growing awareness as a feminist and my own anger that was silenced by the rules of discourse within AA, I had to make a decision. Using the closing words I heard at many AA meetings I've attended over the years, that difficult decision was whether or not I wanted to “keep coming back.”

The format for AA meetings varies. Some are “open discussion” to allow those who do not identify themselves as alcoholics to join the group. Others are “closed discussions” where only those “with a desire to stop drinking” may attend. The participant/observations that frame this study took place six years after I attended my first AA meeting. They include four “open AA meetings” I attended at an AA club in a predominately “white,” working-class suburb of a western U.S. city, and four women's meetings that took place in my home, in the same suburb.

Before the first meeting of the women's group, I wondered: What ethos would evolve from the women's group? What common
understandings would we share? What topics would we discuss? What language patterns would emerge? Although many members in the AA community knew of my study, the women's group knew the specific questions I wanted to answer. My questions echoed theirs and provided the catalyst which started the women's group. The main question that frames this study is: What were the stories that women felt they couldn't or wouldn't tell in an AA meeting?

As both a participant and an observer in AA and the women's group, I had to identify my own experience with the men and women who were the subjects of my research (Mies, 1983). I knew that objectivity was difficult because of my feelings of uneasiness within the AA community, but I also felt that my uneasiness was attributed to several gender-sensitive inclinations I had about AA at that time: male dominance at meetings, male rhetoric, male structures, male suppression of emotions, and my own troubled relationships with alcoholic men.

I often found it difficult to relate to AA members who told stories in the typical sequence of how they "drank, threw up, passed out, woke up, and started drinking again" (the AA drunkalogue). Perhaps my difficulty was because, deep down inside, I didn't believe I was alcoholic, and I came into AA "through the backdoor" of Alanon after living with an alcoholic husband for fifteen years. But the "Big Book" advises "putting out of our minds the wrongs others had done . . . to resolutely look for our own mistakes" (p. 67). Consequently, in AA, where anger cannot be expressed, it does not get "uptake" (see Frye, 1983, p. 88). Women, in particular, seldom find healthy outlets for their anger in or out of AA—anger is not "lady-like" my mother would say. "Deprived of uptake, women's anger is left as just a burst of
expression of individual feeling. As a social act, an act of communication, it just doesn't happen" (Frye, 1983, p. 89).

Even though I found it difficult to relate to the AA drunkalogue, when I did hear members of AA talk about how they felt when they drank, I could relate. I too felt some of the emotions that were seldom expressed—I was afraid, angry, and sad. Unfortunately, talk about emotions was seldom heard in the AA meetings I attended, and as I mentioned earlier—anger is particularly silenced. For alcoholics, emotions account for "powerlessness and unmanageability," and for women, anger was pathological.

Carol Gilligan (1993) points out the need to move from psychological to political resistance and the importance of acknowledging anger. She writes:

Central to this journey is a recovery of anger as the political emotion par excellence—the bellwether of oppression, injustice, bad treatment; the clue that something is wrong in the relational surround (a fin on the horizon, a sudden darkening, a bad shadow) (p. 162).

Teresa Bernardez (1993) adds to Gilligan's discussion, who when writing about women and anger from the "two-culture vantage point of an Argentinean born, North American psychotherapist" (p. 5). She believes that "cultural injunctions against anger in women turn into psychological inhibitions that prevent rebellious acts. Women come to feel complicit in their own misery" (p. 5). The solution requires an engagement in a "process of psychotherapy" where women can experience "a kind of reverse alchemy whereby anger that has soured into bitterness and hatred becomes once again simply anger—the conscious response to an awareness of injustices suffered or losses and grievances sustained . . . [the anger] which involves self-love and awareness of responsibility for making choices" (Bernardez, 1993, p. 5).
How I wish feminist studies like these were available to the founding fathers of AA. Perhaps then women could express their anger in an AA meeting; consequently, explore their emotions to locate their origins. But women did not have significant numbers in AA to warrant such considerations, let alone basic respect. As a woman, there were times when I felt little or no respect from men in the AA group I attended. Frye (1983) writes: "One makes claims upon respect. For any woman to presuppose any such thing of herself is at best potentially problematic and at worst incomprehensible in the world of male-supremacy where women are Women and men are Men" (p. 90). I realize that when the "Big Book" was written, back in 1939, "a man's concept of Woman and of Man, and his understanding of what sorts of relations and connections are possible between beings of these sorts, to a great extent determined the range of his capacity to comprehend these claims, and hence of his capacity to give uptake to women's anger" (Frye, 1983, p. 90).

Anger wasn't the only red flag I encountered in AA. Whenever anyone would talk about "feelings" in general at an AA meeting, I would hear replies, usually from men, "We don't talk about feelings here, we talk about alcohol." Whenever anyone deviated from the prescribed topic, they were usually put back on track with a reminder that "our primary purpose is to stay sober" (AA Preamble). To me, "staying sober" meant talking about my feelings. To me, "recovery" meant acknowledging my anger.

Before establishing the women's group that met in my home, I sought out women-only AA meetings in my search for solidarity, a safe place to be vulnerable, an audience where I could talk about emotions, including anger. But even at women-only AA meetings, the rhetoric of AA prevailed over the needs of women to talk about their problems and/or feelings. The women of
AA that I met in these AA meetings were careful to safeguard the format, language, and tenets of the AA program.

Some of the senior women in the AA group may have felt it was their duty to uphold the rhetoric and rituals of AA regardless of whether or not a woman at a particular meeting needed to talk about a current and often urgent issue in her life (i.e., an abusive husband, an emotionally-troubled child, a negligent landlord, an ill-tempered social worker). The female voices of AA’s trusted guard would squelch these conversations by saying, “our problems should be discussed in terms of answers found in the Big Book” or “if it does not relate to alcoholism then it should not be discussed in an AA meeting.” Of course, who is to say that abusive husbands, sick children, inadequate housing, or over-burdened social agencies were not related to alcoholism.

Although the “Big Book” was instrumental when guiding me to prayer and meditation, it was not without contradictions. The images of the alcoholic that the book renders are male, with only one chapter telling a woman’s story, and an overtly condescending chapter written “To the Wives.” With female membership in AA numbering over one third of the total population of AA in the United States (total population for AA estimated at over one million), the “Big Book” is a poor representation of the female alcoholic’s experience; therefore, how could this text be used to guide and curtail the level of dialogue for women in AA meetings? If women could not find renditions of their experiences in the “Big Book” and couldn’t speak of their experiences in AA meetings, where were they to go?

Ironically, in my experience at women-only AA meetings, if members of AA’s guard were not present to silence stories women were sharing that fell beyond the boundaries of the “Big Book,” then the speaker herself would
apologize for talking out of turn, especially if her topic strayed away from the
central text of the "Big Book." It wasn't uncommon to hear a woman say,
"I'm sorry, I know I'm off the topic," when telling of her struggles with a
relationship with a partner, child, landlord, or public agency. Consequently,
many women's stories in AA were silenced.

Silencing signifies a terror of words, a fear of talk (Fine, 1992). In a
community that connects healing with storytelling, it seemed odd to me at
the time that some talk was honored while other talk was made mute. I felt
strongly that for those who were just coming into the community, the need
to begin their stories with tales of alcohol consumption and abuse may be
timely; however, one's story after coming into AA will hopefully change
over time. New ways of seeing ourselves would evolve, particularly after
long periods of abstinence from drugs or alcohol. In the wake of these
shifting identities, additional questions rise that explore the blank or secret
pages of our pasts. But these individual acts of reflection are moved backstage
(Goffman, 1959) in AA meetings.

Women's stories, in particular, moved "backstage" as male rhetoric
took control of the discussions I observed. The back region or "backstage" is
defined by Goffman (1959) as a place, relative to a given performance, where
the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a
matter of course . . . it is here that illusions and impressions are openly
constructed (p. 112). Conversely, the front region, in this case, the location for
male storytelling in AA, is the place where the performance is given, and
where aspects of a performance seem to be played not to the audience but to
the front region itself (Goffman, 1959).

Front stage in AA is often occupied by men alcoholics who, in my
opinion, talked in order to hear themselves talk. For example, after attending
a random selection of four open AA meetings, thirty-three men told their stories compared to fifteen women. When the speaking order was determined by the last speaker calling on the next speaker (tag meeting), men outnumbered women speakers seventeen to seven. Men also chose the topics three out of four times during my observations. Overall, men outnumbered the women at these AA meetings eighty-five to thirty-four.

Some men "talk the talk"—reiterating the jargon contained in the "Big Book," or the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, another sacred text in AA. The last female sponsor I had in AA once told me, "If you don't have anything positive to say, keep your mouth shut at meetings; otherwise, all that you're doing is spreading your disease around the room when you talk."

Many women seek sponsorship when they enter the program, asking those with continuous sobriety for support. Newcomers to "the program" often get this same advice and end up talking rhetoric at meetings and never getting down to "causes and conditions." I found my sponsor's words troubling, but I fell silent.

Storytelling in AA is laced with rhetoric that is embedded in western notions of individualism and classical rhetorical traditions. For example, the dominate narrative style in AA is to tell your story by describing "what it was like [while drinking], what happened [to make you stop], and what it's like now [since you have stopped drinking and joined AA]." Aristotle's rhetorical system has similar stages of invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery (Cooper, 1932). Consequently, AA's language system, as prescribed in its talk and its literature, is hierarchical rather than emotional. For example, those just coming into the AA community are often told to "take the cotton out of their ears and put it into their mouths" before talking at an AA meeting. Newcomers then hear stories that are recited according to AA's
particular format, limiting talk to "what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now." Furthermore, stories in AA are based on prescribed topics that are alcohol specific. At the meetings I attended, there is spoken and unspoken pressure to avoid any displays of emotions, which are viewed as negative or as self-pity. An open display of emotions could lead others to judge that the storyteller was "sitting on the pity pot." To use another popular AA slogan, the point is to "keep it simple stupid (K.I.S.S.)."

AA storytelling and the connections to Aristotelian rhetoric also include the unity of time, place, and action. These unities are acted out in AA with members describing themselves as the ideal hero (the alcoholic), whose attempts are to resolve a conflict (alcoholism), and after finally reaching the ultimate resolution (membership in AA), the establishment of individual values are reaffirmed (the Twelve Steps of AA, Appendix A), as members of the community continue to "carry the message." This Aristotelian style is not always conducive, however, to women's ways with words.

The women I spoke with wanted sobriety, but they also wanted acceptance, a sense of community, friendships, and an identity within the group; therefore, they quickly learned how to speak the language of AA. Unfortunately, in order to adopt the language of the group, they had to sacrifice their own voices in the process. Even worse, many women were making this sacrifice without conscious recognition.

Gilligan (1982), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), Tannen (1990), and others note that women often use language differently than men. However, some feminists, like bell hooks (1984), have observed that it is impossible to be part of our culture and not be part of a hierarchical and individualistic social process. And yet, I continued to resist the hierarchical models I encountered in AA. The notion of brevity (or K.I.S.S.)
was replaced by a feminine rhetorical style that relied on longer discussions in order for women to reach understanding and/or decisions (p. 27).

Culture also provides a lens to observe language differences and rhetorical styles. Paula Gunn Allen (1989), for example, describes Indian ethos as neither individualistic nor conflict-centered as indicated in white, male, western rhetorical traditions that permeate AA. Instead, "the unifying structures in Native American oral traditions, according to Allen (1989), are less dependent on Aristotelian matters of character, time, and setting as they are on a coherence among common understandings derived from ritual traditions that the members of the tribe unit share" (p. 6).

Women's stories told outside the traditional AA meeting reveal the same lack of dependence on character, time, and setting. Instead, more reliance was placed on the connections we felt, between our emotions and experiences. These connections were revealed when each woman shared her anger while telling her story. These very connections were submerged in the rhetoric of AA.

The Women's Group

To tell the stories some women felt they couldn't or wouldn't tell in an AA meeting, we had to shift our location. Six women decided to meet in my home once a week for two months. The language patterns that emerged in the women's meetings were markedly different from the language patterns in AA. We engaged in an active critique of AA when establishing the format for our group. Our resistance to AA's hierarchical model led us to emphasize no set rituals, nor was there a common rhetoric based on any particular texts, steps, or topics. Also unlike AA, there was never a chairperson. The format for talk was free-flowing dialogue based on multiple topics that were introduced by the speaker at that time. The talk was often spontaneous with
some women talking more often than others, depending on the willingness of each speaker to share the floor or the willingness of each woman to speak. Additionally, the women's meetings were not timed according to a sixty-minute schedule as were the meetings in AA. Instead, the meetings began after everyone arrived and sat down at my dining room table. The meetings ended after everyone got up to leave. This usually took one to two hours.

Unlike the meetings we had attended in AA, the topics discussed at these women's meetings evoked our feelings of fear, distrust, anger, shame, and hurt. Many of these emotions arose while each woman, including myself, talked about our relationships. The most troublesome relationships were with alcoholic men. Other topics included eating disorders, body image, sex, gossip, and feminism. I recall one meeting when we talked about the labels we had received while trying to form our women's group. We were called "cunts, gossips, or man-hating feminists" by certain male members of AA. There was definitely antagonism towards us for our efforts to form a separate group.

Marilyn Frye (1983) confirms for me that

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction" (p. 4).

I personally felt these restrictions when choosing to attend AA meetings that did not include men. The penalties were worse when forming a separate group outside of AA; but, I needed to step outside of AA to fully understand its structure. Marilyn Frye (1983) continues to help me understand the consequences of "not seeing" when she writes:
Without seeing the structure as a whole, and hence without seeing or being able to understand that one is looking at a cage and that there are people there who are caged, whose motion and mobility are restricted, whose lives are shaped and reduced, women would not be able to free themselves from the oppression (p. 5).

I had to shift my position to shift my perception.

Jackie, Sharon, Sandy, Rita, Tanya and I shared many secrets at the women's meetings; consequently, my perceptions shifted. I remember early on asking the group what they wanted from our meetings. Jackie responded: "I have no expectations of AA. I've always felt safe there. It's outside of AA that I feel fear. I say whatever I want to at meetings. I feel comfortable there, but I need to learn to be comfortable outside of AA. I can talk to women one-to-one, but I'm more afraid of women's groups."

Sharon's response was that she needed something outside of AA. "Whenever I'm at an AA meeting and the men outnumber the women, you know how the conversation is going to go—it's their meeting and I end up talking like they talk . . . I end up cussing more and talking the drunkalogue."

Reminding the group of how AA's structure, I asked the women what format they thought we should follow. "None," was Sharon's response. "Let's just talk about what's going on with us." The group wanted an alternative to AA, and that alternative included the meeting structure. They viewed our group as a "free" space in which to talk. In an almost defiance of AA rules, the group chose to go the opposite of AA in terms of topic, format, setting, and language.

Sandy started our discussion at our first meeting. She talked about her first marriage. "I married him to get out of the house, away from my father." She was seventeen years old when she first got married. "I ended up with the same thing," she added. "He'd have me followed after work. He accused me
of seeing other men. He hit me so hard one time I ended up in the hospital.” Sandy’s two boys were three and five years old when she divorced. Sandy said that her husband “never touched the boys.”

Sharon then talked about her marriage. She also got married to get out of the house. Her mother was a “lush” and her father was “seldom around.” She was the oldest child and became the principal caretaker for her younger brother and sister. For these reasons, she left home when she was seventeen. She was married for sixteen years and had three children. Her husband was also jealous, like Sandy’s, and accused her of having affairs. Although Sandy said she was too scared to have an affair, “even if I wanted to,” Sharon had affairs “out of spite.”

I posed a question to the group about change, as we all had acknowledged by this time that we were undergoing transformations. I asked, “What triggers all this change—pain? Do we have to experience pain?” I had just read Sandra Bartkey’s (1990) Femininity and Dominance where she talked about “double ontological shock” and “the realization that what is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening, and, second, the frequent inability to tell what is really happening at all” (p. 18). I too felt moments of profound shock that caused me to want to change my situation. I wasn’t fully conscious of what was under the pain.

Rita responded that change might have something to do with getting in touch with our shame:

My therapist pointed out all these shaming things. She said to me, ‘You feel ashamed a lot don’t you?’ And I said, ‘Yeah!’ A year ago I wouldn’t have known that; I wouldn’t have known how ashamed I felt. I knew I was ashamed about some things, but those were recent events. Now I was starting to realize things I was ashamed about when I was a little girl and how that shame affected my choices. It’s eye opening. It’s scary.
We talked about how telling our stories to each other helps us to get in touch with our shame. Even when we realize that our feelings are valid and not unique but representative of our subordinate positions as women, the pain lingers. Shame is difficult to shake off because what we are ashamed of is not our actions but our very position as women—a position that makes us vulnerable. Sandra Bartkey (1990) again helps me to understand this process of growing awareness when she writes: “Feminist consciousness can be understood as the negating and transcending awareness of one’s own relationship to a society heavy with the weight of its own contradictions” (p. 21).

The women's group acknowledged for me that we live these contradictions everyday, but when we become aware of how they contribute to our inner conflicts, we feel victimized. Our anger caused us to move from “not seeing” to seeing the roots of our shame. Our experiences lead us to respond to the world with “resistance, wariness, and suspicion.” Once we became “raw and exposed” we began to “suffer from both ethical and ontological shock.” We began to recognize how we came to feel like outsiders in AA and society as a whole (Bartkey, 1990, p. 21).

I suggested that joining a women's group helps to reveal a lot about what's going on inside, such as our resistance:

When we feel the need to get together in a women's group, it's not that we're here to talk against men, it's just that we need to get together and talk about what's going on with us. Then what usually happens is we start asking each other questions and hearing similar answers. We realize our stories are not isolated sets of circumstances and that we have something to share with each other. This brings us together. I feel I have power.

Sharon responded that it was "threatening" to men for women to form groups. She talked about her boyfriend, Jim, and his feelings about her
joining a women's group outside of AA: "Jim will be ok, I know that. If I had
done this with Sam (husband one) or with Jacob (husband two), I mean it
would have been an instant fight. 'How could you spend so much time over
there!' And on, and on. Then I'd be angry."

I sensed that we were beginning to understand what would make it
possible for us to change. We were raising consciousness; we were beginning
to see why we had such low images of ourselves. "Understanding, even
beginning to understand this, makes it possible to change. Coming to see
things differently, we are able to make out possibilities for liberating collective
action and for unprecedented personal growth, possibilities which a deceptive
sexist social reality had heretofore concealed" (Bartkey, 1990, p. 21).

My feelings of alienation were diminishing as I began to experience a
sense of solidarity with the women in the group. Robert Karen's (1992) article
entitled "Shame," validates my senses:

One of the important results of therapeutic adjustments (sensitivity
to shame . . . helping people see the connection between shame and
rage, obsessiveness, or overeating) is the creation of a safe haven
where people are able to speak the terrible "truths" they harbor
about themselves. Putting shame into words appears to be a critical
first step in freeing oneself of its damning logic" (p. 46).

I certainly felt I needed a "safe haven" when I helped to form the
women's group. Obviously, the women who shared their stories with me
expressed the same need. Again, Robert Karen (1992) confirms that our needs
are not unique. He writes:

. . . the opportunity to articulate attitudes and feelings about
ourselves that have always been hidden and to examine them
anew . . . to express a shunned feeling of shame can be like
emerging from a harsh, self-imposed regime where the voice of
contempt rules without check and where the self lives as a second-
class citizen" (p. 48).
I was beginning to feel a renewed sense of self as I came to voice my anger. Underneath the anger lay the pain. Perhaps if AA did encourage the articulation of attitudes and feelings, we could discover why we turned to addictive behaviors in the first place.

Jackie added to our discussion on shame. "I remember getting up for work last week and not fitting in my clothes and wanting to call in sick. I felt such shame." Jackie then told her story about a man she thought she loved, but how he rejected her, she believes, because of her obesity. (Jackie had gained over fifty pounds since joining AA.) She discloses:

I met him in AA. I told him that I loved him. He looked at me in a cold and condescending way, a hard look, as if to say, "who would love you." So I said to myself, "ok, I'm going to the liquor store." I didn't have any money but I still wanted to get drunk, so I called AA. They said, "get your Big Book out." Right! I can't even think. I called my therapist and she told me to check into the nearest hospital. I was put on a seventy-two hour hold. I was very disagreeable. The pain came in contractions, crashing against me. The psychiatrist came in and talked to me. I told him about the emptiness I was feeling. He said that I had to find a way to give out of what I didn't have. When you feel you have to be validated, it resonates out of that emptiness.

Shame caused some of us to turn to our sponsors for help. As mentioned earlier, AA sponsors are those who have over a year of continuous sobriety; they help newcomers to "the program" on a one-to-one basis. At our next meeting, Sharon spoke about her sponsor. She had been upset since she arrived. She had gone to a women's AA meeting the night before and the topic for that meeting was step one—"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable." She told the group she was having trouble admitting she was powerless: "I know I'm powerless over alcohol and drugs, but I have power to make choices!" Her AA sponsor, Nellie, who was a regular at this particular AA meeting,
called her a "defiant bitch." Sharon was crushed. Nellie had whispered this under her breath but loud enough for Sharon to hear. Then Nellie spoke to the group, "All I know is that I'm powerless and I have a God in my life."

Sharon did say some of the women at the meeting could relate to what she had said about admitting powerlessness, "but the comment from Nellie really hurt." Sharon said she went home that night, went to bed, and found herself getting back up, in the middle of the night, eating cupcakes. Then she went back to bed again. When she woke up the next morning she told her partner, Jim, what she had done during the night, then she started to cry.

Sharon's story made it obvious to me that not all women feel the same sense of solidarity as we were feeling among ourselves at the women's group. The women at our meeting suggested that Sharon drop her sponsor.

Sharon said how much she enjoyed talking to her therapist instead and found it very helpful as an alternative to talking to her sponsor or attending AA meetings. Unfortunately, her talks with Nellie often went from bad to worse. What made things worse was that Nellie's husband would make sexual advances toward Sharon and then Nellie would get angry with Sharon and accuse her of "fucking around with men." I was left wondering if this pain would ever end for women if we couldn't even trust each other because of our troubled choices in men.

Tanya listened closely to Sharon's story. This was her first time visiting the women's group. I couldn't help but wonder how she was responding to the open way in which we talked about our anger, critiqued some of the major tenets of AA, like sponsorship, and told of our experiences. She responded with equal openness. She shared a troubling secret:
I remember my dad leaving. I was the youngest in my family. The only girl. My grandfather used to come into my room and fondle me, but he never penetrated me. When I was older, maybe eight, nine, or ten, I remember feeling my grandfather follow me up the stairs to my room. I turned around and pushed him down the stairs. The touching stopped after that.

Rita then told her story. Like Tanya, she shared pieces of her life she had never told anyone before:

I remember my father going up the stairs to my sister's room. I used to sit on the stairs and play. I knew what he was doing. Then one day I walked up the stairs and my father looked at me in that 'lustful' way. It made me feel awful . . . There were uncles too. I'm not sure what happened there either. But they were all alcoholics.

Rita then talked about her new husband, Mel. "I don't trust him," she said. I asked her why. She said, "Because he's a man."

I then told my story. I recalled how a family member would coax me to spend time with him when I was small. He often gave me one dollar bills that I spent at the corner drug store on candy and gum. During our time together we would watch television or play games, but our games turned confusing whenever he would touch me. I remember how cold he was towards me afterwards, how threatening. I remember a strange smell. The strong aroma reminded me of the alcohol Grandma rubbed on her legs at night. I was confused by these smells. Some came from Grandma's sore legs and some came from my assailter's breath. I had loved and trusted this older boy, but I grew to fear him. I knew never to speak of our "playing" together. The dollar bills secured my silence.

Silence cloaked my shame, but once I told my secret, I freed myself from blame. Hearing the other women's stories allowed me to voice my experience. I now knew the stories we couldn't or wouldn't tell in an AA meeting. These stories shaped our core beliefs about ourselves—that we were "no good." They also shaped the emotional responses we were denied in AA,
and the contexts for those responses—our often troubled and abusive relationships with alcoholic men.

Men dominated our lives. Consequently, as women, we often felt controlled by men, and the AA group was no exception. Our stories reveal our experiences, in particular, the abuse we suffered because of our relationships with alcoholic men. These revelations led me to ask myself an important question: How can women, who have a secret history of abuse at the hands of alcoholic men, and who may not even be conscious of this abuse, be expected to enter an AA meeting, which is dominated by alcoholic men, embrace “powerlessness,” and get well? This question became my epiphany. I knew what to do. I detached from AA (with love).
CHAPTER 4

MOVING FROM I TO WE

From my window at the Salmon Lodge, I see the Narraguagus River. Maine’s cruel winter is almost over now, as I note the surging currents of spring run off. Clear water turns to brown foam, reminding me of the frosty root beers I used to buy in chilled glass mugs at the A&W when I was a child. The Narraguagus wraps its way around grassy islands and tumbles over granite boulders on its way down from the highlands—barrens covered in blankets of wild blueberries. Cherryfield, the town where I now live, boasts its status as the “blueberry capital of the world,” but it’s the river that captures my attention.

The Salmon Lodge was built just off the north Atlantic coast of Downeast, Maine, in 1850, on the edge of Tidal Falls. Here the currents switch direction with the incoming/outgoing tides. When the tide is in, the water swells onto the banks, reaching beyond the high water line. I watch the water and think of Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) image of the “swamping of psychological borders” caused by the rush of conflicting information and points of view that filter through perceptions (p. 79). I grab hold of what knowledge I value, so not to be rushed away by the incoming tide of memories. I realize the lessons from struggles. My teachers were those who listened closely, and, in turn, shared their struggles with me. One of these teachers is Min-zhan Lu.

As I sort through thoughts and feelings to articulate my own philosophy of education, particularly as it relates to composition, I think of
Lu's (1987) struggle, which she articulates so beautifully in her essay, "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle" (pp. 437-447). Lu's struggle began one year after the Communist Revolution, in 1949, when her parents sent her to a private school. Lu suddenly found herself immersed in a world very different from her home.

The official language of school was Mao Tsetung's Marxism, but Lu's parents, particularly her mother, "had devoted her life to education" in accordance with "Western humanistic traditions" (p. 437). However, Lu insists that "in spite of the frustration and confusion," the conflict ultimately helped (her) to grow as a reader and writer" (p. 437).

I agree with Lu, for in spite of my own frustration and confusion, the struggles of home, school, and community life helped me to grow as a reader and writer. Consequently, as I prepared to teach freshman composition for the University of New Hampshire (1994-1997), I asked myself, how can I help my students with what I know? How do I walk them through the steps, from conscious to agency, so they too can learn to transform struggles into emancipatory experiences as readers and writers?

I began to answer these questions by first understanding my own struggles and the rhetorical responses I developed to overcome them. By narrating and critiquing my evolving life as a reader, writer, and teacher, I realize how I was enriched by those who had the courage to disclose and critique their own struggles. These "teachers" appeared in pockets of groups I located in my community, like the women I met in Alcoholics Anonymous. I also found them in the poems, memoirs, and theories written by those who validated my experiences: Anne Sexton, Carol Gilligan, Mike Rose, David Bartholomae, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Min-zhan Lu. When I juxtaposed my
experiences with their experiences, I better understood where I stood. I could then successfully develop a course of action to change my position. I call this process moving from I to We.

**Juxtaposing Experience**

When I juxtapose my memoirs as a reader and writer with other compositionists, like Min-Zhan Lu, I am able to see and articulate my own theory and practice. Lu became “sensitive and self-conscious” (p. 438) about her struggles when trying to “switch back and forth between the discourse of home and that of school” (pp. 437-438). I, on the other hand, never quite understood the discursive differences between home and school. My struggles were more insidious, like the secrets I was manipulated into keeping to protect the molester of my childhood. Because the language of home and school was English, I never understood the distance between the two as issues with language, nor did I see how language was problematized by one's gender and economic class.

I felt ambushed by the language of school, particularly when I faced harsh criticism for my “colloquial” style when writing papers as a graduate student. Where Lu was able to “identify the differences between home and the outside world by the different languages,” these differences were blurred for me.

Unlike Lu's parents, mine didn't value English specifically, but they did value education. Lu references grandfather, who, like my father, often complained about not getting a “good-paying job” because, for Lu's grandfather anyway, he couldn't speak English; whereas, for my father, he couldn't afford college. However, unlike Lu, there were no success stories in my family's legacy regarding education, but her father's “fluent English
opened the door to success.” Consequently, I was taught to value something I believed, at the time, I would never have—a college education.

As I continue to juxtapose my memoirs with Lu’s, I note the demarcation zones we experienced as children. Lu recognized the different social identities in China during the Cultural Revolution, particularly as they related to issues of economic class (Proletarians, Petty-bourgeois, National-bourgeois, Poor-peasants, and Intellectuals). I, on the other hand, was not keenly aware of my status as working class. I knew most of the people in my neighborhood worked at “blue-collar” jobs, which meant they worked with their hands. Most had little control over their own labor unless they owned their own businesses, but class as an identity was hidden, almost consumed by other identities. I knew I wasn’t rich like some, or as poor as others, but I also knew I wasn’t middle class. Still, I had no clear class consciousness as a worker among workers, nor was I conscious of related issues of power, autonomy, and opportunities. This consciousness would come later when economic and social experiences of those in similar situations became known to me, like when I first read Mike Rose’s autobiography, Lives on the Boundary, 1989).

Lu became more conscious of society’s views in high school where she learned to conceal her English outside of her home when her family faced political pressure. She struggled “to put on and take off” (p. 441) her Bourgeois language when she went into a Marxist classroom. I struggled to “sit down, shut up, and do what you’re told!” However, we both struggled to be more spontaneous with words. Consequently, our voices became muted in the chaos of opposing voices entering our minds from home and school. Lu was taught to value language as a “tool for survival” (p. 444), whereas I was taught to value education the same way.
This utilitarian view came to dominate my understanding of what it meant to be literate. I had to “get” an education to “get ahead,” rather than participate in my education and decide for myself what I wanted to learn. Lu’s analysis of her experiences in China led her to “use the interaction between the discourses of home and school constructively, to see reading and writing as a dialectical process in which we work our way toward a stance that is based on identification and division.” But, as Lu explains, to “identify with an ally,” she had to “grasp the distance between where she or he stood” and where she “positioned herself” (p. 446). When taking a stance “against an opponent,” she would have to have “grasped” where her stance “identified with the stance of (her) allies” (p. 446).

When delineating the conventions of discourse, both Lu and I had to “synthesize the stance (we) saw as typical for a representative member of a community” (p. 446). Kenneth Burke (1967) calls this stance “god” or “prototype.” Raymond Williams (1977) calls this stance “official” or “possible.” Lu’s struggle with this dominant stance caused her to “stay out of the discussion.” I did the same when faced with the dominant stance of graduate school and that of AA. However, I resisted when I began to locate “allies” within these sites, like the women in AA, feminist writers like Tannen and Gilligan, and teachers like Bartholomae and Rose. Reading and writing to take a stand, to identify with a group whose experiences were similar to my own, taught me to use language to participate in the making of meaning.

Like Lu, I teach reading and writing as “an expression of an established stance” (p. 446). To identify and articulate this stance, students and I must dig into our own perceptions of reading and writing, then carefully remove layers of dirt by analyzing the cultural values and forces at work. We learn to
reposition ourselves, in relation to these struggles, by using language to “explore, reflect, formulate, and enact strategies” to respond to ongoing tension (Lu, 1987, p. 899).

I agree with Lu, that “students struggle to write in academia where they face conflicting information and points of view that do not come out of their experience.” Therefore, I propose that students begin at that place of omission, by “filling in the silences” with their own experiences.

**Composing Silence**

Looking back to my memoirs as a reader and writer, I realize that as a young girl in school, I seldom had opportunities to read and write as a way to make sense of my world and my place in it. These activities took place outside of school or in the notes I passed between the rows of desks while the teacher wasn't looking. I realized that, as I moved through school, I seldom encountered reading and writing as a way to fill my need for validation, guidance, and answers to my own questions. The literary acts assigned in school seldom forged connections between me and my world. School was not the only place where I felt disconnected. In my memoir about Alcoholics Anonymous, I note similar difficulties. I felt I could not express myself openly and honestly within the AA group without expressing my moods, beliefs, and emotions—aggregate forces that engender thoughts (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 150). However, these affective expressions did not fit into the framework of AA's dominant discourse, any more than they fit into the dominant discourse of school. Ironically, in a “fellowship” that espoused a sense of belonging, I often felt cut off from those around me in AA.

Home life was also a site of isolation. My mother used to respond to my emotional expressions with the plea, “Oh Carol, don't feel that way.” My father had a similar response but a different delivery. He’d disengage
whenever my interests or needs didn't match his own. I married with the hope of finding intimacy with my husband, Dave, but it's pretty difficult to find intimacy when there's alcohol and drugs involved. Although Dave never told me directly not to feel (like my mother), nor did he directly ignore my feelings (like my father), he did something much more directly—he told me that my feelings weren't valid.

I now pay closer attention to my feelings. My reflections on fear, in particular, teach me to trust my emotions to hone my perceptions. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) helps me to explain:

Fear develops the proximity sense aspect of la facultad (perception). But there is a deeper sensing that is another aspect of this faculty. It is anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual ground, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception” (p. 39).

These “breaks” provided a place for me to begin to unwrap my struggles. Home, school, and community sites “unveiled” the cultural contexts, but language itself became the site of struggle.

In Chapter One, the breaking point came when my husband, Dave, admitted to me that he was having an affair. My memoir revealed a contradiction in my relationship with Dave—my need for care and independence. When I felt lost in the world, I turned to my high school sweetheart to rescue me, like the prince who rescued the helpless maiden in the fairy tales I read as a child. However, when I married my prince and became dependent on him, I learned through struggle that I must rescue myself. When I took responsibility for myself, I gained independence.

In Chapter Two, the breaking point came when I found out my father was dying. My memoir revealed a contradiction in my relationship with my father—my need to please and to make my own choices. I turned to my
father for approval when I studied his favorite subject in college—accounting. However, I lost his approval when I discovered my own interests and chose courses in English. Moreover, this choice proved difficult when confronted with the dominant discourse of graduate school. When one paradigm broke down, another replaced it. I had to learn to act rather than react.

In Chapter Three, the breaking point came when I felt afraid to speak in AA meetings. My memoir revealed a contradiction in my relationship with AA—my need for silence and voice. I turned to AA to learn how to embrace the silence that guided prayer and meditation, but when my inner/outer lives collided, I fell silent in AA. AA helped me to discover I had something I needed to say, but I couldn't say it at an AA meeting. When I entered the silence, I found my voice.

**Composing Criteria**

When I was growing up, I envied those whose fathers worked, whose mothers stayed home and cared for them, whose families took summer vacations, whose siblings each had his or her own bedroom, whose lives felt less crowded, more protected and secure than mine. This envy sometimes caused jealousy and insecurity, but I seldom felt defeated. I gained hope from the promises of a democracy. After all, I was taught that "anyone could grow up to be president." However, home, school, and community life seldom demonstrated democratic principles, particularly the public schools I attended.

Alexis DeTocqueville (1945/1966) wrote of democracy, "nothing is more fertile in prodigies than the art of being free" (Volume 1, pp. 246-247). He cites the principles of a democracy which I cast here to compose the criteria for my classroom:

1. Students and I must articulate and develop "common interests that have no single benefactor, but contribute the whole."
(2) Students and I must "learn from our mistakes." When one's "interests begin to take precedence over another's, we must correct these mistakes."

(3) Everyone must "play a part" in the life of the classroom.

When composing criteria for freshman English, I think about my own reading and writing life and the functions of literacy. I realize that education needs to beg the question that John Dewey and other progressives in education have already raised: How ought one live in a democracy? Education must then provide the methods and the means to answer this question.

Although, as a child, I was taught that anyone could grow up to be president, I didn't want to be president then, nor do I now. But I do want liberty. I want to participate in family, school, and community life in ways that help me to forge connections with others while we honor our differences, as guided by the principles of a democracy. These principles include laws, rights, and virtues that I recognize in the envy of my childhood, the failures of my schooling, and the disappointments of my escapes into marriage, graduate school, and the fellowship of AA. I believe that literacy, like democracy, is a process that invites struggle. A literate person is someone who recognizes the inevitability and lessons of struggle which are inherent in the democratic process, and applies these lessons in an effort to build a better society while considering his or her own personal desires. The lessons come when we juxtapose our experiences and seek connections while honoring our differences. We compose more responsible actions.

Composing Action

I guide students to compose problem-posing activities as well as problem-solving ones, to engage in collaborative actions that work toward
shared interests, to narrate and reflect on their own struggles as learners, to listen closely to the struggles of others, to choose their own topics, to come to voice, to reinvent themselves by learning to see, question, trust, and understand their relationships. Ultimately, I ask students to compose what Min-Zuan Lu (1992) calls

a conjunction of interrelated but often conflicting lives—such as family, work, gender, religious and recreational lives, as well educational and future professional lives . . . (so they may) become more active, critical learners . . . (so they can) recognize the complexity of and innate contradictions within and between these lives . . . to situate themselves at the friction points of these lives . . . so to self-consciously uncover, at the level of the immediacy of daily existence, their need to contest and change rather than merely submit to and reproduce the “objective” stance they had been taught to enact (pp. 8-9).

What follows are the movements we compose to achieve these goals, orchestrated steps designed to move us from I to We.

Steps

To guide students through this process, I invite them to take six steps throughout the duration of the sixteen-week course. These steps include composing a freewrite, three narrative vignettes, a reading journal, an integrative essay, a research project, and a collaborative presentation. I describe these steps in my syllabus as follows:

1. **Freewrite**

   Definition: To freewrite is to sit down and let the writing flow; see if language will start to reveal something that unexpectedly interests you—an event, person, place, idea, feeling. Suspend critical judgment, as you do when brainstorming or mapping, and look for something to happen (*Write to Learn*, Donald Murray).

   In class, take ten to fifteen minutes and answer the following question: What is literacy?
2. **Narrative Vignettes**

   Definition: A short descriptive essay or character sketch. A short evocative episode in a play, film, etc. An illustration not enclosed in a definite border (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Write three vignettes that answer each of the following questions (provide examples to support your answers):

   1. How has your family shaped your concept of literacy?
   2. How has your school shaped your concept of literacy?
   3. How has your community shaped your concept of literacy?

   Due first quarter

3. **Reading Journal:**

   Description: For each reading assignment, write a response (2-4 pages) in the form of a letter addressed to the members of your reading group (to be announced). Answer one or more of the questions that I provide or elaborate on a particular point, question, and/or issue that you wish to discuss with your peers. I also encourage you to use this opportunity to write responses to each others' letters as you enter a dialogue with your peers about the readings. Copies of your group members' letters belong in your journal. (A two pocket folder is recommended—one side for your responses and the other side for responses from your reading group).

   Due first quarter

4. **Integrative Essay:**

   Definition: "To combine (parts) into a whole. To complete (an imperfect thing) by the addition of parts. To bring or come into equal participation in or membership of society, a school, etc." (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Write an essay (5-7 pages) that moves from autobiographical reflections to critical interpretations of your perceptions of literacy. Integrate
at least two of your vignettes and two journal entries (based on two different
texts read in class) as sources. Examine how you came to your current
definition of literacy and how (or if) that definition has changed since our free
write on the first night of class.
Due second quarter
5. Research Project:
   Description: Pose a question that is related to our course theme,
language and literacy. Attempt to answer this question (12-15 pages) by citing
two sources read in class and two outside sources. Outside sources include
field-based (observations, interviews, surveys, pamphlets) and library-based
research.
Due last day of class.
6. Collaborative Presentation:
   Definition: “To work jointly, esp. in a literary or artistic production”
(The Concise Oxford Dictionary). Choose a partner(s) whose research is
related to your own topic. Work collaboratively with your partner(s)
throughout your research project. How will each of you approach a similar
topic? What questions will you raise? What questions will your partner ask?
How will each of you go about answering your questions? Narrow your
individual questions to one and proceed to answer it based on your research
(see research project assignment). Conduct a ten-minute presentation that
combines your research question with those asked by your group members
and explain how you each attempted to answer them. Also describe what
you’ve learned in this collaborative process. In the presentation, let the class
know why this research is important. Due last week of class.
Researching Praxis

Researching praxis looks at ways to conduct a “critical investigation of accepted knowledge and beliefs” (Lather, 1991; Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995). Students actually begin their research projects on the first night of class. Their definitions of literacy reveal their conceptions of accepted practices, customs, and beliefs. These definitions become the springboard for all the discussions that follow. The literacy question casts the theme for the course, but this theme is not meant to limit students. On the contrary, the focus on literacy is meant to guide them by providing a place to reflect and act on what knowing they value, so they can discover where they learned and what they learned, and the possibilities such knowing brings.

Once students write their definitions for literacy, we discuss what we’ve written. Dialogue plays a key part in every class as students begin to participate in current discussions on literacy that ultimately influence their own experiences in school. Rose, Anzaldúa, and Lu encourage the use of dialogue as a “contextual approach” (Lu, 1992, p. 905) which helps students to “talk through their opinions” that may run counter to dominate voices (Rose, 1989, pp. 184-185).

Students compose narrative vignettes that answer the follow-up questions: How has your home, school, and community shaped your concept of literacy? I assign readings to accompany these assignments—the autobiographies of other readers and writers who have explored their own literacy (Rose, 1989; Angelou, 1969; Rodríguez, 1982). I ask students to respond to what they read in the form of letters, addressed to me and members of their reading groups, mini support groups they choose for themselves. They become immersed in the lives they read about, including
the lives of their peers. These rhetorical acts nudge them further into the apex of I and We.

Groups of four or five students each gather in class to share their vignettes and exchange their letters. I then ask them to note the struggles and joys in the memoirs they write and read.

We juxtapose our memoirs and reading responses with other opinions, authors who theorize about literacy and present conflicting views (Kozol, 1991; Hirsch, 1988; Heath, 1983). Students then compose their own opinions by comparing and contrasting what they think and feel with those they read, including those of their peers. I want students to take a critical stance, discover what excites and agitates them, so they can understand conflicting theories and how they are based on different experiences and perceptions which in turn influence the ways we read and interpret texts.

Throughout this process, we also read texts on craft (Murray, 1996; Lamott, 1994; Goldberg, 1986). We focus on aesthetics as well as ideas. We talk about what constitutes “good writing” as we collaborate on the qualities that establish the evaluative criteria for each assignment. I encourage students to recognize their strengths as writers, their own writing processes, and how to apply them as we compose curriculum projects.

We conduct writing workshops in class, where collectively, one-to-one, and in small groups, we discuss content and form. We talk our way toward developing our chosen ideas. We also interact during writing conferences, where I walk them through their drafts, one student at a time, not missing a word or line, as I learned to do with students in the Writing Center at Montana State, using a method of inquiry (asking questions) and collaboration (listening and responding to answers). Students then model inquiry and collaboration in the classroom, as we continue to revise for
clarity, in pairs, groups, or by holding class discussions on voluntary samples of student drafts. When we approach final revisions, we cut to the chase. I ask them: What's working in your draft? What isn't working? They learn to evaluate their own writing.

Moving from I to we helps students to form compatible relationships by enacting a reconstructive process that mirrors Dewey's (1938) principles of "continuity and engagement" (pp. 33-51). Once students complete the narrative vignettes, reading responses, and integrative essay, they are ready for the next step—to engage with the community. What students learn in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing more effectively with the situations that follow.

I invite nonprofit organizations and other literacy groups into the classroom to talk about the literacy needs in our community (the community that surrounds the university we now find ourselves in). We hear moving testimonials from adults who recently learned how to read. We feel the affect of these stories—the inability to fill out job applications, decipher simple road signs, or read to one's own children or grandchildren. These new readers tell us of the gift of literacy and how this gift was given to them—through their relationships with those who work in these community agencies.

Recognizing Teachers

I recall my Uncle Don. What a smart guy! He could build anything, blueprint or not. He could fix anything, manual or not. So kind and generous—he was the one who helped me prepare for my trip to California in my second-hand Volkswagen Van when I took leave of home. I was only eighteen at the time, in route to meet and marry my high school sweetheart. My father was so upset over my going, he wouldn't even talk to me, but my Uncle Don showed me some survival tips: how to check all the fluids in my
engine; how to change a tire. He helped me load all my worldly possessions to distribute the weight evenly. He gave me sage advice on how to cross the hot desert in a vehicle with an air-cooled engine. He shared with me what he knew about cars, and the information proved valuable; unfortunately, my uncle never realized the value of his knowledge because of the shame he felt because he couldn't read or write. My father told me how my Uncle Don had to drop out of school, to help with his father's troubled trucking business. I thought about my Uncle Don whenever I would listen to a community member talk about their struggle for literacy.

I recognize my Uncle Don as my teacher and how gracious he was to share his knowledge with me. However, I also recognize the power of reading and writing. Not everyone has that power. I respond by moving out of the classroom, with my students, to work as a volunteer literacy tutor. I hope I never forget the lesson AA taught me about “getting out of self” and helping others. Not only does the shift from I to We help me to cope with my own struggles, I learn from those I tutor in the community. Reciprocity activates the process of moving from I to We.

Students and I learn by our continued engagement in human relationships and from the teachers we find when tutoring in various community literacy sites (elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, adult literacy centers, daycare centers, English as a Second language classrooms, family literacy projects). As we talk to people, we listen, read, write, question, trust, and deepen our perceptions. We take copious notes and write them up as narrative vignettes. We juxtapose our experiences, as we attempt to answer our own questions, which arise out of our activism.

We come to class and discuss the struggles and joys of our research. I've become what one of my students dubbed, "the shock absorber," as I try to
encourage students to lean into struggles, so we discover our passion, which motivates us to develop gutsy, thoughtful responses. We move through contradictions when we engage in the dialectical dance between self and society. We seek out equilibrium between I and We. We reflect on the steps we've taken from home, to school, to community. We share our treasure maps with each other. We publish our discoveries by providing copies of our research to our community sites. We give back what we learned with the hope that those in these sites will “take what works and leave the rest.”

**Composing Lives**

Composing allows us to encounter “the vastness and novelty of life head on, to face the mystery that beckons human thoughts and emotions to produce metaphor, art, and ritual” (Spretnak, 1991, p. 126). Composing frees us from the pigeon holes of human conceptualizations, so we can express connections/contradictions. We learn that our roles need not be fixed nor determined. We discover we can compose our own responses to the world, and by doing so, compose our own lives.

“T” is a voice, an inner voice, what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls “the voice at the edge of things” (p. 50). This voice teaches me to think for myself, trust my feelings, and believe what I know. I hear this voice when I “collapse into myself.” Gloria Anzaldúa explains: “I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center” (p. 51). But this center is difficult to find in a world that tugs and pulls on our every move. How do we stop, if even just for a moment, to learn how we feel? I believe it’s by writing.

From center, I visualize the students I'm preparing to meet in freshman composition. I see them as me, border residents who must learn to
live on "a dividing line, a vague and undetermined place, in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3). Freshmen coming into the university will soon discover, if they don't know it already, that they are neither in nor out, but on the margins of academe. They must learn to "invent the university," in David Bartholomae's (1985) words:

> to define the various discourses of our community, since it is in the nature of a liberal arts education that a student, after the first year or two, must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes—to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and an experimental psychologist the next . . . finding some compromise between assembling and mimicking (academic) language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention (p. 273).

I'm still inventing the university. When teaching freshman composition, I choose methods of response and instruction that worked for me while advising students "to take what works and leave the rest," one of my favorite maxims from AA. Hopefully, they will leave my classroom with a capacity for language that will allow them to map their own movements, by knowing and believing they can compose their own lives through their actions in the world.

Lawrence Cremin (1976) writes about the conflict between what educators are trying to teach and what is learned from the ordinary business of living. His definition of education places learning in the hands of all of us—parents, peers, siblings, friends, etc., as well as other social institutions such as churches, libraries, museums, etc. I agree with Cremin. All I had to do was look back on the "ordinary business of living," and those oh-so-beige walls of the classroom in which I was asked to teach. Then I realized that my world was shrinking. I had to remind myself why I love to write. Anais Nin (1974) jars my memory:
We . . . write to heighten our own awareness of life . . . We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection . . . We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it . . . to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth . . . to expand our world, when we feel strangled, constricted, lonely . . . When I don't write I feel my world shrinking. I feel I lose my fire, my color (V.5, pp. 149-150).

I felt I was losing my fire, my color, in the halls of academe. I decided I had to move out of the classroom and take my students with me. I wanted to find a place where we could engage in authentic relationships and composing processes within actual situations. I wanted students to develop these relationships based on caring, honesty, and trust. I wanted them to realize the value of their rhetorical acts by putting them to good use in their own lives and in the lives of those they would interact with in the community.

I didn't know how students would respond to this curriculum. I suspected there would be some resistance, as their resistance would surely echo my own. Bell hooks (1990) helps me to accept resistance as part of the process of moving from I to We:

I located (myself) concretely in the realm of oppositional political struggle. Such diverse pleasures can be experienced, enjoyed even, because one transgresses, moves 'out of one's place.' For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination. Initially, then, it is a defiant political gesture. Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location (p. 145).

Bruce Hertzberg (1994) also integrated community service into his curriculum at Bentley College and disclosed his motives behind his methods: "to move students toward critical self consciousness—an awareness of the ways our own lives have been shaped . . . that what we regard as 'choices' are less than matters of individual will" (p. 309).
I want my "insides to match my outsides," another popular maxim I learned in AA. This conduct speaks to me of integrity. I want liberty, but I know I will never have it unless there is equilibrium between I and We. I recall what Iris Marion Young (1990) suggests as the actions of free agents in a just society: (1) developing and exercising one’s capacities and expressing one’s experience . . . and (2) participating in determining one’s actions and the conditions of one’s actions. Therefore, as a compositionist, my goal is to help students move from consciousness to agency by moving from I to We.

Current movements in English studies reflect poststructural critiques of hegemonic cultural codes and postmodern reflections on the construction of identity. According to James Berlin (1996), the influence of these movements are being integrated into curriculums that explore multiple texts from multiple perspectives, generating new interpretations and texts within a web of different ideologies. I want to enter the discussion on critical pedagogy in postmodern times by demonstrating that the shifting currents that ultimately shape identity also reveal complex locations, which, in turn, have the potential to activate rigorous civic responsibility and emancipatory action.

In the case studies that follow, I describe these shifting currents as they were described to me, within the compositions of two of my students—Lyn and Connie. Both identify themselves as Christians, but in very different ways. I juxtapose their positions from my own position as an eco-feminist, to narrate and critique the movements from I to We. Lyn came to my class spring semester 1995 and Connie spring semester 1996. Lyn came from a white, working class, single-parent home in Maine. Her mother had little if any control over her labor. Connie came from a white, middle-class, two-parent home in New Hampshire. Her parents owned their own business. Lyn was in her forties and Connie in her late teens. I read the struggles in
their autobiographies and how these disruptions moved them beyond critiques of cultural codes and identity to compose their own "literate" acts. I trace these movements for three reasons: (1) to locate the sites of their struggles (narrative vignettes; (2) to analyze their experiences in relation to cultural values and forces (integrative essay); and (3) to use language to formulate and enact strategies of responding to ongoing tension (Research Project) (see Lu, 1992). The concluding chapter repeats the process, but this time, by triangulating our memoirs.

What I see missing in current practices in English studies are the voices of students and descriptions of how those voices are heard by teachers when considering their own struggles as learners. I listen to these voices as I continue to revise the curriculum. My students teach me about what's working, what's not, and why—if I listen. These are the challenges I offer as a teacher of freshmen composition—a challenge I accepted myself when I examined my own memoirs and allowed questions to form. I discovered how I came to know what knowing I know, and the possibilities such knowing brings to my experiences and those of my students.
CHAPTER 5

LESSONS FROM LYN

“As ye think, so is it unto you”

Lyn came to class hesitant to read and write in an academic environment. Although she read a lot outside of class and kept a journal, she was insecure about writing critical analysis that would require her to take a stand. She was also nervous about sharing her writing with her peers; however, she felt reassured when she discovered that she would be writing about her own experiences.

Lyn chose to write about two great losses in her life: the death of her brother, Scott, and the death of her sister, Kim. She wrote about how she came to grips with these losses by reading the autobiographies of those who had also lost loved ones. One author she chose, Mike Link (1991), wrote an article called “Living and Dying with Risk,” where he described the death of his son, Matt, and his acceptance of his death. Link’s acceptance came by knowing Matt had died “doing something he loved.” Kim’s brother died “doing something he loved” too, riding a motorcycle. Writing about Link’s losses helped Lyn to accept hers.

Lyn also wrote about Kim’s death and how an assigned reading by Jonathan Kozol (1991), Savage Inequalities, gave her new insights into poverty and pollution, which Kozol blamed for the deaths of innocent children who lived in East St. Lois near sewage, copper, zinc, and trade waste sites. Lyn related how she also grew up with pollution in Livermore Falls,
sites. Lyn related how she also grew up with pollution in Livermore Falls, confidence and ability to develop a stance improved.

Lyn also wrote about her struggle to "keep the faith" after Scott was killed, calling herself "spiritual, yet not always believing in all that organized religion teaches." She re-affirmed her faith "in Jesus," through reading, writing, and praying, which helped her to cope with Kim's death. Lyn read to her sister, in the hospital, to comfort her before she died. She drew on this experience when she made her decision to read to the terminally ill in the intensive care ward at a local hospital for her research project. The question she raised to guide her research was: "What can the living learn from the dying?"

The excerpts that follow are from Lyn's narrative vignettes, reading responses, which are presented in her integrative essay, and her research project. Together they form a treasure map that reveal the steps she took to move from I to We, "beyond the personal." According to Kirsch and Ritchie (1995), Lyn moved beyond the personal when she "investigated what shaped her perspective and acknowledged what was contradictory, and perhaps unknowable, in that experience" (p. 9). Although Lyn had begun to answer her research question before she took my course, she demonstrated how the movement from I to We helped her to formulate new emancipatory actions while meeting the needs of others in the community.

I tease out Lyn's movements by posing the following questions: How does Lyn locate the sites of struggle and begin to analyze its nature? What cultural values and forces does she consider and critique? How does she use language to explore, reflect, formulate, and enact strategies for responding to ongoing tension? I answer these questions by analyzing Lyn's narrative vignettes, integrative essay, and research project. I note how she juxtaposed
her experiences with the autobiographies, essays, and critical theories she read and the lives of those she came in contact with in her research site. I also juxtapose my own experiences with hers. Moving from I to We is a give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power which implies reciprocity (Lather, 1991, p. 57). Lyn and I experienced reciprocity. As both student/teacher, teacher/student we helped one another to find our place on the "distant hill" of the university.

**Lyn's Vignettes**

Lyn’s narrative vignettes helped her to locate the sites of struggle—Scott’s and Kim’s deaths. When comparing Scott’s death to the death of Link’s son, Matt, Lyn wrote:

Matt and his father believe that when a person refuses to experience life out of the fear of losing it, that these people have already died spiritually. I believe that knowing his son was doing something he loved when he died made it easier to accept his death. I came to the same understanding regarding Scott’s death.

Consequently, Link helped Lyn to work through her resistance to accept her brother’s death. Scott’s death also caused Lyn to question the conflicting values and cultural forces that determined her faith. She admitted that her earliest desires included her will to “live my life serving humankind in a caring and gentle way as Jesus Christ did,” and her commitment to “service, humility, and social justice,” but these values were challenged when faced with the sudden death of her brother. Her pain led her to question the idea of “God’s will” against her own. She chose to read more about the life and teachings of Jesus to reconcile her doubts. She wrote: “I was angry at God for taking Scott from me. I realized God couldn’t be what I had always believed him to be.”

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Lyn was understandably troubled by the irrationality of her brother’s death. Consequently, she turned to the rationality of others, like Link, and the words of Jesus, for clarity. Lyn needed to develop a stance to understand the overarching and comprehensive nature of death. She needed specific rules of thought and action to help her respond to her loss. Reading about the life of Christ helped her to reestablish her faith. She wrote: “I realized I viewed Jesus in a different way. I began to see him more as a person, not only as the son of God.”

Not only did reading about the life of Jesus help Lyn to reestablish her faith after Scott’s death, but it also helped her to decide on a future course of action. She explained:

Everything I read about Jesus told how this one human being went out into the world and showed kindness and compassion. He fed the hungry and taught beautiful lessons, to all who would listen. He healed the sick and dying. Christ was referred to as “the light” and through trying to understand Scott’s death experience I chose to follow “the light.”

Lyn developed a sense of agency from her beliefs. She began to move from thoughts to action. She wrote:

I planned to edify Christ’s teachings by living my life serving humankind in a caring and gentle way. I hoped to cause some type of positive energy with anyone and all I would meet. Through my brother’s death, I developed a philosophy for life. In my search for answers about living and dying, I gained meaning and purpose.

The distinctions between thought and action begin to break down as Lyn continued to move from I to We. Her eventual acceptance of Scott’s death and her renewed understanding and faith in Jesus, also helped her to accept the death of her sister. She began her reflections on Kim with this narration:

We grew up in Livermore Falls, Maine, a small rural town on the Androscoggin River. Our neighboring town, Jay, had two large
paper mills that dumped their waste into the river. Nobody really made a fuss about it because the incomes generated from these mills provided jobs and a lifestyle for people in our community; that's why we didn't see the gradual changes in our town, river and environment.

Lyn explained how paper companies polluted the air, water, and ground and how "pollution was at its peak" during the years she was growing up in Livermore Falls with her sister, Kim. She didn't quote any statistics or qualitative studies—her narrative qualified her meaning: "Many people down river from the paper companies, along the Androscoggin River developed cancer and leukemia." Lyn's sister developed cancer of the lymph glands. Lyn blamed the paper companies.

**Lyn's Integrative Essay**

The pain of pollution and its probable cause for Kim's death became concrete in Lyn's mind when she read about the pollution that was killing the children in East St. Lois. Lyn theorized about pollution by integrating her experience with an assigned reading by Jonathan Kozol, (1991):

I feel there are many people, who live in places where they are dying without really living life . . . they are dying a secret death, due to the death of the environment. An example of this secret death is found in the city of East St. Louis.

Lyn explicated Kozol's observations of Big River Zinc, Cerro Copper, American Bottoms Sewage Plant, and the Trade Waste Incineration—one of the largest hazardous waste-incineration companies in the United States. She cited what Kozol saw as the effects of pollution on the children of East St. Louis:

East St. Louis has some of the sickest children in America. Of the sixty-six cities in Illinois, East St. Louis ranks first in fetal death, first in premature birth and third in infant death. Among the negative factors listed by the city's health director are the sewage running in the streets, the air that has been fouled by local plants, the high lead
levels in the soil, poverty, lack of education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, unemployment, and lack of hospitals (Kozol, 1991, p. 20).

She contextualized Kozol's analysis with her own—the "innocent children" of East St. Louis with the "innocent children" of Livermore Falls. She wrote: "My sister Kim was one of these innocent children." She constructed her analysis by writing "thick description," a term Clifford Gertz (1973) borrowed from Gilbert Ryle, to describe a microscopic interpretation of the flaw of a particular social discourse (pp. 20-21, 23).

I remember the thick, yellow colored foam that floated on top of our river as well as the dead fish that were visible. The smell of chlorine was something we inhaled daily. Thick black smoke rolled from the mill's disgusting smokestacks and the fallout from their lethal pipes was strong enough to eat a hole in the paint of cars parked outside the mill. The deterioration of the air, water and environment of our town happened over the course of about twenty years.

Lyn continued to develop a critical stance by analyzing her sister's death.

By the time the government cracked down on the paper companies it was too late for some. I believe my sister became a victim of growing up in the polluted environment from the paper industry, because the mill was allowed to pollute the air and water and soil in our area. The rain contained chemicals and so did the snow. We use to eat the snow as children often do. We breathed the air and drank the water. I believe pollution, coupled with not taking proper care of one's mind and body, can be a catalyst in a breakdown to the immune system. This is what happened to my sister Kim.

I recalled the many times I ate snow as a child, melting what I thought were clean white crystals into my mouth after a vigorous day of sledding near my home in East Cleveland. The snow became a vital source of refreshment when I grew thirsty after a day of winter fun. I also recall how my children made snow cones out of white powder that fell in veils from the sky above
our home in Montana. They'd press icy handfuls of snow into tiny cups from their plastic tea set, which they'd drag outside after a snow storm. I'd watch them from the window as they'd bite into frosty mounds of what I thought was clean, white, snow. Lyn took an ordinary experience like eating snow and turned it into something extraordinary, an epiphany that connected the innocent gestures of children to the violent gestures of industry.

When Kim was hospitalized, Lyn rushed to her side. She recounted the moments leading to Kim's death:

Halloween Kim found another lump in her groin. A week later she was admitted into the hospital with an infection in her lungs that quickly developed into pneumonia. I spoke with Kim on the phone the morning they discovered she had pneumonia. She explained that the doctors were going to heavily sedate her so they could insert some tubes into her lungs to regulate her breathing. She would have to remain sedated until the infection cleared. I told Kim I would be there by evening.

When I first read Lyn's essay, back in May of 1995, my references with death were not as clearly matched with hers. However, since that time, our experiences have aligned themselves. Kim's process toward death was very similar to Dave's, my children's father, who died from throat cancer three years ago. Like Kim, Dave developed pneumonia and had to be sedated so doctors could insert a respirator. I, like Lyn, know the painful wait for the mercy of death. Lyn wrote about how she “never heard her sister's voice again.” I never heard Dave's either, only his gaze, fixed on mine, spoke his words of goodbye.

Why is this connection important to mention? Because it changed my reading of Lyn's integrative essay. I had to pause, put her paper down, walk away, collect myself, before I could return to her vivid descriptions of her last days in the hospital with Kim. Her words had an affect on me—they informed the way I valued her writing. Lyn's narrative about her sister's
death validated my own experience with death. She helped me by allowing me to connect with her experience. I felt like Lyn was "reading my mail" as she nudged ever closer to my loss when Dave died, as Kozol did for her when he described the dying children in East St. Louis and Lyn thought of Kim.

I wondered how difficult it was for Lyn to write about her sister's death, yet I knew from my own struggles that she, like me, believed that writing healed. Other writers have confirmed this belief—bell hooks (1989) is one of them. She helps me to explain:

A distinction must be made between that writing which enables us to hold onto life even as we are clinging to old hurts and wounds and that writing which offers to us a space where we are able to confront reality in such a way that we live more fully. Such writing is not an anchor that we mistakenly cling to so as not to drown. It is writing that truly rescues, that enables us to reach the shore, to recover (p. 77).

Composing movements from I to We helped Lyn to face living so she could "live more fully" in the wake of great sorrow. Lyn's awakening also awakened me as her reader. I'm excited by the potential of these rhetorical acts to help us come to grips with great losses in our lives.

Lyn's identity as a reader and writer gave her a sense of agency when she witnessed the death of her sister. She wrote:

When I arrived at the hospital, the doctors explained the drugs they had given Kim enabled her to hear us but she would not be able to respond. I read for hours to my sister. Anything from poetry to the Bible, trying to reassure her not to be afraid. Unfortunately, her condition worsened and the doctors gave us no hope. Her body functions began to break down at a rapid rate and we asked for her to be removed from life support.

Lyn embraced the reading act to bring comfort to her sister. She also helped me to deepen my own understanding of reading, especially the comfort we give when we read to others, not just adults to children, but when an adult reads to another adult.
I recalled Jane Hansen's seminar on reading and writing instruction at the University of New Hampshire, which I took my first year at UNH. Jane often read to her students, men and women who taught reading and writing to children and adults in local schools and literacy centers. She usually chose children's books to read to us. I can still see her, sitting in the front of our circle of desks, holding up the pages so we could see the illustrations while she read, just as I would do when reading to my children. I found this experience unusual at first, but then I realized how comforting it was to be read to—something I never learned in my childhood home. Lyn, like Jane Hansen, knew this comfort, and applied what she knew. Lyn offered comfort while moving from consciousness to agency as she read to her dying sister.

**Lyn's Research Project**

Lyn drew on her experiences with Kim's death to design her own research project. Furthermore, when she chose a local hospital for her research site, she determined her own role in that site—to read to the sick and dying in the intensive care unit. She wrote in her letter of commitment:

I am motivated to commit to this site because of something my sister, Kim, told me before she died of cancer. She explained that because she had a reason to live and people who loved her and supported her, she found strength to face each new day. She told me how she saw so many others who had no purpose or support during their illnesses. Her enlightenment and courage helped me to choose my mission for community service.

Lyn's research question, "What can the living learn from the dying?" revealed the authenticity to her project, for it rose out of her experiences. She determined what she wanted to learn and posed a real problem indeed—how to reconcile death when someone we love dies. She already began to answer her question when she reflected on Scott's and Kim's deaths in her narrative vignettes, and when she composed her critical analysis of those deaths in her
integrative essay. She moved "beyond the personal," by "reinterpreting her reading responses on Savage Inequalities by Kozol and her own experiences through the eyes of others" (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 8). She then immersed herself in a community hospital.

Lyn wanted to live according to her beliefs, so she set out to "edify Christ" by administering to the sick and the dying. She narrated her encounter with one patient, in particular, Howard. She began:

On my fifth week of reading at the hospital, I had said a prayer for God to direct me to someone who needed me that evening. Kathleen was a nurse on duty and she told me she had a special patient for me to read to. Howard was propped up in bed and hooked up to oxygen to help him breathe. He was extremely thin and it looked as if his skin was pulled over his bones, with nothing in between. Still his face was kind, and he had large bright eyes that smiled at me. During the time I read to Howard, he had a lot of difficulty breathing. The end of the story came and I thanked Howard for letting me read to him. The fact he laughed outright several times during the reading made me feel as if he had a good sense of humor, despite how sick he was. Howard showed much courage. He held my hand for several minutes before he released it, so I could tell he was happy I had come.

I was deeply moved by her encounter with Howard, so reminiscent of her last days with Kim. Once again she turned to reading to provide comfort and care. Reading, for Lyn, was an expression of care, part of her response to the world. I thought about all the different reasons we have for reading and writing, all the different values we hold for literacy. Lyn continued to inform my own values. She saw Howard as her teacher. She wrote:

As I left Howard that night, I found myself thinking of the importance of a good attitude and sense of humor. I hoped that if I live to be that age, I can hold onto both. All week I could not get my mind off Howard.
Lyn's encounter had meaning, but I wondered, did she (or I) romanticize Howard? Do we appropriate people for our own ends when we reinvent them as our teachers? Toni Morrison (1998) asked similar questions: "Why would we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why would we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?" (p. 70).

I believe that when we move from I to We, we experience consciousness to agency. These movements have the potential to bring all sides of our nature together in harmony, so we can choose more meaningful actions in the world. In Lyn's case, moving from I to We allowed her to give out of her pain, to act rather than react, so she could help those with similar struggles, and so they, in turn, could help her. Lyn held no claim on Howard. She acted according to her beliefs, which broke down many walls between I and We, to help her to experience reciprocity between her beliefs and her actions.

Lyn's lessons from Howard continued as she reflected:

... when I returned the following Thursday, I found his nurse, Kathleen. I eagerly inquired about Howard. A sad look came over her face, and she said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news about Howard, Lyn. He died the night you read to him, hours after you left." At first I felt my knees buckle a little. Then I realized that Howard is in a better place. A place where he doesn't hurt anymore or feel the heaviness and age of his body. His spirit was free. All I could think was, "God bless you Howard."

My knees buckled too as I read about Howard's death and his last moments with Lyn. I felt overwhelmed by Lyn's movements and the meaning she brought to her visit with Howard. Then I recalled a criticism I once received from a colleague at a conference on service learning. This criticism raised the question: Shouldn't the classroom be a safe haven, a place where students can read and write in peace, away from their overwrought
engagements with a continuously conflicting world? I would sometimes think about that question when my students faced struggles in their research sites, but Lyn answered this question for me when she wrote about how much she valued her experience with Howard and the lessons he taught her: “Discovering what the living can learn from the dying has been a labor of love for me.”

Lyn’s commitment to her research question became crystallized in her final analysis where she answered her question. She wrote:

Scott’s death caused me to rethink my philosophy of life as well as my belief in God and Jesus. I learned from my brother’s death . . . at least Scott lived life while he could. I also learned that many people die without really living; like the children Kozol speaks of who live in East St. Louis.

Lyn then recapped her thoughts on Kozol’s Savage Inequalities, particularly his reference to East St. Louis; she commented on the pollution and its effect on those living there. She blamed pollution for causing her sister’s death. She wrote about “the importance of a clean environment” and “the importance of taking charge of one’s own life.” She added:

My sister found strength in herself even though she was dying. This strength and courage she found, through her illness, made all the difference in the amount of life she did experience those last few years. I know some people never do live life.

Lyn ended her paper by citing her core beliefs, which she clarified and reaffirmed when she committed herself to read to the dying at the local hospital, which, in turn, allowed her to locate connections between Howard’s life and her own. She wrote:

I feel we are all here to serve God and humankind. I realized how important life and people are. That’s what living is all about—recognizing the gift of life as well as sharing and loving other human beings. The lesson that we learn is that with death comes the rebirth of life. People, as a result of finding out they or someone
they love will die soon, often discover their purpose in life. I think when you lose someone very close to you, it changes you from that day forward. It causes you to question life itself and your reason for being here.

Lyn discovered purpose and meaning as a reader and writer, the agency to activate her research. She formed reciprocal relationships with those she met in her quest “to love and serve.” She shared her lessons from struggle:

For those of us who believe in God and life after death, we realize our loved one is in a better place. The actual passing of my sister’s spirit was a beautiful experience. One I will never forget. Death is truly a part of life.

She ended her paper with a poem by Maya Angelou (1969), “Caged Bird.” An excerpt read:

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

I see Lyn as that “free bird,” but with liberty comes losses. Death brought many losses to Lyn, but death also became her ultimate teacher.

Angelou’s poem continued:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for, the caged bird sings of freedom.

I see the university as that “distant hill,” one that Lyn and I both sit on as we engage in reading and writing together with our colleagues in my section of freshman composition. From here we set out for “things unknown and longed for still.” Lyn “set out” with this self evaluation:
I learned that literacy is much more than I first realized. Doing the community service made the course more meaningful. I learned about critical analysis, which at first was very hard for me. I feel I have moved beyond that now. I enjoyed and learned how to better express myself. Helping students to have a voice is a key issue. I especially liked writing about things that were important to me, like the vignettes we wrote. I understand why we need to write about what we read, which is where I ran into trouble at first. Throughout the course I moved beyond where I thought I would. I am a better writer because of it.

Lessons from Lyn

Lyn taught me a great deal about the cultural and ideological influences that qualified her research project, her intentions as a writer, her vigor and intuition as a reader. Her compositions helped me to find my place and helped her to find hers within the structure of the university.

My immediate representations of Lyn were sentimental—she reminded me of me, the only student close to my own age, someone who juggled home, children, work, and school lives. My respect for Lyn deepened as she described her experiences with death which, in turn, resonated with my own. I felt validated by my decision to ask students to do community-based research. I believe Lyn's research project helped her to engage in a dialectical process that is not without tension; however, this tension had creative potential that allowed her to move through her experiences to document the heuristic moments she encountered along the way. These movements gave flesh and blood to her analysis, as she critiqued her readings by filtering them through her own experiences.

Together, students and I must come to understand our own perceptions. We must transform doubts into points of departure. As we entered the community, we faced problems which caused us to question our own ideological assumptions, but we came to recognize what Tom Newkirk calls "our own sense of 'quality' as arbitrary, time-bound, culture-bound, and
yes, class bound” (1997, xii). Lyn’s “sense of quality,” particularly as it related to her own writing, changed when she had an opportunity to explore her experiences and juxtapose them with those whose lives connected to hers. Composing these connections allowed her to re-evaluate herself as a reader and writer. She honors herself as both. Consciousness and agency merged for Lyn as she echoed the words of her favorite teacher, Jesus: “As ye think, so is it unto you.” Consequently, when reading, writing, and researching everyday life, Lyn was able to “name the sky her own.”
CHAPTER 6

LESSONS FROM CONNIE

"To Hell and Back"

. . . With one foot out of the car I was dragged the rest of the way by my shoulders and slammed onto the hood. "I have already been to Julie's house and you were not there, where the hell were you?" he yelled. After already lying, why should he believe a word I say. Tears began to run down my face, I . . . I was at a bar with Kate, I bumped into her and . . . "

My hands and knees hit the ground with an amazing force. In a state of shock I was unable to move. I was dragged back to my feet by the collar of my shirt, only to be thrown back down even harder. I felt like a rag doll, so limp and weak, unable to move, unable to speak.

I woke up to see his face above mine, it felt like someone was hitting me with a hammer. After lying there for a minute, I attempted to get up. Very slowly I made it to my hands and knees, but all it took was a push and I was back on the ground. "Bob, Bob please help me, forget this for a minute, I think I'm going to pass out," the pain in my head was unbearable, my world began to spin. Bob stepped back and I managed to drag my body onto the hood of my car and take some big deep breaths.

After regaining a little energy I walked over to him, "Bob, Bob, do you know what you are doing? You need help. I want to help you!" With this my shirt collar was grabbed again and suddenly our heads met with a crash. He head butted me.

Nancy, the student who wrote this narrative, chose A Safe Place for her research site—a community organization that helps victims of emotional, verbal, sexual, and physical abuse. Nancy, along with three other women in my freshman composition course, attended support groups for battered women there. Although students chose this site for their own reasons, only Nancy, and one other woman, Connie, wrote their research projects based on their own experiences with abuse.
Students who attended meetings at A Safe Place together also met as a group outside of the shelter and the classroom to discuss their projects. During these meetings, it became obvious to the other members in her group that Nancy was in trouble. I knew she was too after reading her narratives. I had hoped that A Safe Place would be a refuge for Nancy, but my hopes were short lived. She withdrew from the group, her research site, and eventually the class when she found it difficult to leave her abuser. She did manage to finish the course, but not until she wrote her final research project on all the reasons why she chose to stay with her boyfriend.

In addition to learning about Nancy’s abuse and her subsequent resistance to leave her boyfriend, there were other points of tension. Although Connie was a competent rhetorician, her arguments professing Christian fundamentalism and her resistance to indigenous beliefs, as presented in a new text I had chosen for the course, Malidoma Patrice Somé’s, Of Water and the Spirit (1994), were problematic for me. I wrote tough critiques in the margins of her early papers, responding more to what she had to say than to how she was saying it. I'd catch myself getting edgy with Connie, contradicting the very principles I professed to guide my classroom practices. I invited students' ideologies into the classroom for discussion by raising a new question: What are your beliefs? Then I found myself struggling to develop a repertoire of responses to them, particularly when Christian fundamentalism entered the dialogue with the competence of a bright rhetorician like Connie.

As if these disruptions weren't enough, more problems arose in the research site. The director of A Safe Place telephoned me to express her resistance to students attending support group meetings with pen and paper in hand. She was concerned that they would jeopardize the safety of the
women who were living at *A Safe Place* by taking their stories out of the shelter within the pages of their field notebooks. I began to question our participation in the site and our research ethics. My responsibility to students included protecting the confidentiality of the women who sought shelter at *A Safe Place*. I wondered whether or not students could raise consciousness about abuse without breaking the code of confidentiality. I questioned whether students could conduct their research while enforcing silence.

Ironically, it was Connie's research project, an autobiographical analysis of her own abuse and the process she underwent to end it, that had the most profound effect on her site. She did raise consciousness without compromising the safety of women in the support group she attended, proven by the fact that the director from *A Safe Place* requested permission to duplicate her research paper for women at the shelter to read.

In this chapter, I focus on resistance, to argue that the democratic principles that guide the course made it possible for Connie to find her place in the curriculum while also resisting it. Additionally, these same principles helped me to reformulate my responses to Connie.

I will support this argument by drawing on Connie's writing, including her written comments to me and her peers, and her self-evaluation of her research project. Furthermore, I will include an analysis of my own responses to Connie's writing, disclosing my resistance and how I worked my way through it.

The problem that drives this inquiry rose out of the questions: How do I, in my role as a teaching assistant for freshman composition, respond to the ideologies of my students in a liberatory classroom? How can I challenge students to express their own beliefs and to locate their origins, while also
trying to move students to question the epistemological issues that construct their beliefs?

I begin by situating Connie's beliefs within the context of my classroom, which underwent changes over the course of five semesters. My fifth and last semester teaching freshman composition at UNH, I had decided to change the focus question for the course. Instead of asking students for their definitions of literacy, I asked: What are your beliefs?

Revising Curriculum around Knowledge and Beliefs

I met Connie fall semester of 1996. I changed the autobiographies and critical readings on literacy I had assigned the previous semesters, and asked students to read Malidoma Patrice Somé's, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* instead. Students also chose new locations for their research sites that went well beyond my established literacy sites. For example, one student volunteered in a nursing home; two other students chose a detox center; eight students designed an after-school writing club for children in a low-income housing project; one chose a home for troubled teens, and another chose a children's museum.

The new focus question, text, and research sites felt risky. When I asked about beliefs, I didn't intend to engage in conversations about religion, specifically, but I did want to open up discussions on cultural beliefs that shaped social attitudes and actions. Furthermore, I wasn't sure how Malidoma's autobiography would be received, any more than I was sure about how my students would be received in these new research sites. I contacted and met with each community organization that students decided to work in, but this meeting did not prevent some of the tensions that surfaced within *A Safe Place*.
I reminded myself that I was teaching a composition course, but my question on beliefs, my choice of text, and student choices for research sites seemed justified. I decided to make these changes for three reasons:

(1) Student evaluations revealed that some grew tired of the literacy question and subsequent readings about literacy. I didn't want to violate the principle of "common interests." I questioned whether literacy had become more my topic than theirs. Consequently, I chose a new focus question, one I had hoped students could relate to, one that would sustain their attention for sixteen weeks and connect reading and writing to their tacit knowledge and beliefs.

(2) I had been discussing beliefs with my colleague, Leaf Seligman, who also teaches freshman composition. We agreed that everything we do, say, read, and write is a reflection of our beliefs; therefore, students would learn more about their own perspectives as readers and writers by focusing on their beliefs and where they learned them. Furthermore, curriculum theorists like Henry Giroux (1979) advocated for a new sociology of curriculum that questioned "the traditional model of objectivity, which proclaims forms of knowledge and methodological inquiry as untouched by the 'untidy' world of beliefs and values (p. 101). Theorists, like Giroux, echo the thoughts of Habermas (1971), Zinn (1970), Freire (1973), and feminist researchers like Lather (1991), Kirsch and Ritchie (1995) who each point out that to separate values from "facts" or social inquiry from ethical consideration is pointless.

I've come to recognize, particularly from my analysis of my own memoirs as a reader and writer, how schools function to reproduce, in both the hidden and formal curricula, the cultural beliefs and economic relationships that support the larger social order (see Giroux, 1979, pp. 102-
Therefore, I believe that both students and teachers need to bracket their own basic assumptions about knowledge and the fundamental interests that influence them.

(3) I had just read Malidoma's book Of Water and the Spirit and felt his central theme of navigating two worlds and the lessons he learned from both connected to my own purpose when teaching composition: to move from I to We by noting the disruptions in written autobiographies, to show how these disruptions nudged writers to go beyond critiques of cultural codes and identity to compose new literary acts that served the larger society, to trace the movements of these acts, to apply knowledge (once tacit, now explicit). Furthermore, I believed that Malidoma's worlds, particularly the world of his native Dagara tribe, would provide a distinct contrast to the worlds of my students, perhaps causing an epistemological and ontological shock that would move them to express their own knowledge and beliefs and where they learned them. The call to critically analyze the epistemological and the ontological by examining experience and beliefs suggests that experience is historical and ongoing, constantly reconstructing itself (see Lu, 1998).

Moreover, I saw similarities as well as differences between Malidoma's experiences and those of my students, who were themselves border residents, and who were also undergoing "tests of initiation." Malidoma articulated his beliefs as a reader and writer who challenged western thought, particularly Christianity, after he returned to his native tribe and underwent a series of initiations which reestablished his identity in the Dagara community. Consequently, I believed that Malidoma's autobiography would help students and me to "humble" our "Euro-centric system of meaning" to include those of indigenous peoples, so we could note "the similarities of Afro-centric and
American Indian" ways of knowing to our own (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 42). Consequently, I began the course by inquiring into the basic assumptions students hold about knowledge and the fundamental interests that influence them.

**Connie's Beliefs**

Connie disclosed that the knowledge she valued originated in her interpretations of the Bible, which she learned in what she described as a "sheltered" environment of "overprotective" parents. Connie was homeschooled on Christianity. She read many of the books her parents sold out of their Christian book store, which was also located in her home.

Connie chose to write about character when she articulated her beliefs:

I believe in constant improvement of one's character

... One of my personal goals in life is to continuously strive to be a better person. I hope I am never content with who I am, for if I am, I will have reached a point where I think I am either perfect or that who I am doesn't matter.

Although Connie emphasized her desire to build her "character," she mentioned later, in her family vignette, how she "had become very skillful in masking" her resistance to authority: "I became a sweet innocent angel as soon as I set foot inside my house. As soon as I left, I would seemingly develop another personality." These admissions of "masking" color my interpretation of Connie, particularly when I went back and reread her beliefs. I saw a contradiction between her process of building character and her need to wear a mask. I became suspicious of her sincerity. Connie wrote, "Most of us put on some sort of outer skin. We show the sides of us which we choose to reveal to the judgmental outside world..." As the course progressed, I came to see Connie as the one wearing an "outer skin" and myself as the "judgmental outside world." Connie continued, "Good moral character
stems from a person who acts out of generosity and selflessness, a person who
does not seek personal glory or praise. People of this kind do not need to hide
behind any mask.” I noted the irony, as I continued to question whether or
not Connie was wearing one of her “masks.”

Connie explicated the Bible to support her beliefs. She wrote,

In Corinthians chapter 13, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Love is patient,
love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is
not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no
record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the
truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always
perseveres. Love never fails.”

I was not surprised or put off by Connie’s reference to the Bible. I’d had
similar encounters with students who embraced Biblical teachings (i.e., Lyn,
Chapter 5), and I had these same words taped to my refrigerator in my own
quest to understand the meaning of love. However, I began to seriously
question Connie’s moral high ground when I suspected she might have
plagiarized part of her paper. She wrote, “I believe love is the root from
which a good character derives the essential nutrients it needs to thrive and
grow unceasingly . . . we, as people striving to improve our character, need to
journey back to the road that leads to freedom, letting our moral compass be a
lamp for our feet and a light for our path.” These may have been Connie’s
sentiments, or her ultimate goals, but I had serious doubts whether these
were her own words.

My responses to Connie’s writing were not tempered by her other
vignettes, where she painted a picture of a “Christian Home” she “adores,
cherishes, and honors” and community life based on “traditional values.”
My suspicions rose from the continued contradictions I noted in her
vignettes. For example, in her family vignette she wrote, “My parents were
two case examples of people who had been happily brainwashed (about
Christianity). I grew up in a family where teenage rebellion was inevitable, and for the most part expected." I was confused, which was it? Did Connie really "cherish family" and "traditional values," or did she rebel? Was she wearing an "outer skin" or wasn't she?

Connie and I both lived in Lee, New Hampshire, at the time, and, as a resident of Lee, I had no reason to doubt the high moral character of those in my community. However, Connie's narrative vignettes read like an ideal fiction to me. Her autobiographical writing revealed contradictions that were difficult to reconcile. Her school vignette disclosed the heart of her struggle.

**Connie's School Vignette**

Because Connie was home schooled on Christian ideology, she chose to write about a Christian retreat she went on for her school vignette:

I had grown up in a Christian home, but never really cared for God or church. Since early winter of 1995 I had turned my life back to Christ (she wrote this vignette in October of 1996). By this, I mean I had realized that there had to be something more to life than what I had filled it with, up to that point (smoking pot, drinking, stealing, pre-marital sex). That realization led me to the conclusion that God was the missing piece in the puzzle. Without Him my puzzle would never be complete . . . The boy I was dating was the key reason why I wasn't able to dedicate my life to God completely. He tore down my beliefs on a daily basis, leaving me speechless and devoid of a fulfilling life with Christ. I told myself time and time again that he would change and see the light of the truth that God has to offer. Little did I know that God had a different plan for me.

Connie then described what she called "the breaking process" that led her to be a "treasure for God." She wrote:

The term faith has three levels: 1) the chiseling tool, 2) the refiner's fire, 3) the polishing belt. In the first level, faith is the chiseling tool that starts to chip away the 'rough edges' or the rebellion against God. This begins the process of molding us into the image of Christ. At the second level, faith is the refiner's fire that drives us closer to God. He allows us to go through trials and experiences that either
bring us closer to him or drive us away from him. This is a process of weeding out the true believers. In the third level, faith is the polishing belt that fine tunes our relationship with God. At this level our relationship with God reaches a level of maturity.

I began to pose questions in the margins. My questions carried a confrontational tone: "So you choose to be 'molded'? Not everyone has membership—only the molded? Does maturity mean "the willingness to be molded?"

Connie's narrative continued: "I needed to let God 'break' me and release my treasures. My main treasure was this boy I was dating. I had refused to let him go, and I still hadn't quite realized that he was the thing I was holding onto and hoarding."

My questions got more confrontational: "So, is this 'breaking' an act of a loving God?"

Connie continued: "I knew God had spoken to me, and that he knew what was best for me." I responded in a didactic tone: "You believed; therefore, your beliefs shaped your perception."

Connie wrote: "I began to truly live. I started to become a woman of integrity I had so longed to be and I had finally put my trust in God to lead me wherever he wanted me to go." I wrote in the margins: "So you were broken?"

At the end of Connie's narrative, I wrote these comments:

Dear Connie,

Your writing is based on your beliefs which obviously guide your thoughts and actions. I have raised a few questions about these beliefs—I'm particularly interested in the concept of being "molded," who the "chosen" are, and how "being broken" is a loving act. Molding implies what? The chosen implies what? Being broken implies what? An interesting belief system but I wonder how one feels empowered when "molded and broken."
I don't feel good about these comments. Did I violate Connie's position when I raised questions about her beliefs? Was I privileging my own knowledge and beliefs as free of false logic while I questioned Connie's? Foucault (1977) warned against "the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself" (p. 162). My intentions were to move Connie to locate the origins of her beliefs so she could question the epistemological issues that contributed to their construction, but instead I questioned what she believed with a confrontational tone. My original intention was to welcome tension, but I chose to avoid an ideological tug of war. I believed it would push my own version of reality as "official." Clearly, I felt put upon by Connie's Christian fundamentalism, but I decided to temper my future comments.

Connie responded to my tough questions with apparent accommodation. I wondered, was she wearing her mask? Was she that "perfect little angel" she presented to her parents while secretly feeling rebellious? She wrote in her self-evaluation of her vignettes, dated September 26, 1996:

Dear Carol,

I appreciate honest critiquing. I like the positive along with the negative. I need to know what works and what needs work. Thank you for your honesty . . . I have become used to criticism and I do accept it with an open mind. Be as honest as you can with my papers. I need feedback to grow as a writer. I thank you again for your input.

Connie's self-evaluation, written early in the semester, sounded appreciative of my tough critiques and tone, but her responses intensified when she confronted Malidoma and his critical analysis of his violent Christian education in a Jesuit seminary in West Africa.
When narrating my encounter with Connie, I will "bring the teller of the tale back into the narrative" and disclose my own resistance (Lather, 1991, p. 129). Consequently, I will locate Connie’s resistance, and my own. Ongoing contradictions were confronted within the democratic framework that guided the course; however, it was difficult to maintain any equilibrium because I didn't believe Connie and I were equal. I believed Connie had more power.

I felt threatened by my limited position as a teaching assistant “on loan” from another department (Education). I also felt insecure about the support I would receive from my English Department supervisor if she heard I was discussing “beliefs” in the context of a composition course. Also, my own limited experience teaching this curriculum became a risk factor. My fears were elevated by Connie’s active participation in two Christian groups on campus, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and Christian Input. Clearly I believed that these groups had a stronger foothold in the university than I did. Furthermore, I worried whether or not Connie discussed my curriculum and my comments on her papers with her Christian parents and friends. Obviously, I questioned my academic freedom and didn’t want to underestimate the power of these groups.

My lack of power and insecurity about this new curriculum caused me to doubt myself; but, I wanted to demonstrate some integrity by acting rather than reacting. I wanted to “walk my talk” as they say in AA. This required that I move out of my confrontational dialogue with Connie, and toward developing responses in line with democratic principles of “common interests” that would “contribute to the whole,” which in this case, would include the classroom and the research site of A Safe Place, where Connie eventually conducted her research. I had to find a way to “correct my mistakes” with Connie by listening rather than silencing her beliefs.
Furthermore, I had to temper my suspicions and judgments about Connie. All students had a right to "play a role" in the classroom, including those who didn't believe what I believed and those who didn't value Malidoma's story as I did.

Connie ended up revising her school vignette into a full blown conversion narrative. She talked about how she ended her relationship with her boyfriend and how she entered a Bible study group through a referral from a woman who used to come to her parents' Christian book store. She quoted the Bible to support her position. She reaffirmed her beliefs: "The hope I was now unknowingly searching for, was the hope of eternal life. This hope could only be attained by turning over the reigns of my life to Jesus Christ."

My response was softer at this point, as I tried to honor Connie's narrative by listening to her beliefs. I wrote back to her:

Dear Connie,

A well-written piece. You've come so far through the reflective process and I'm sure writing about your revelations will continue to impact your learning.

I decided that the best way to get Connie to honor narratives of those whose beliefs were different from hers was to model this behavior; however, Connie's resistance grew as she encountered the magical world of Malidoma. I was challenged to find a way to respond to her resistance as I grew increasingly insecure about whether or not I had taken on more than I could handle in this particular composition course. Ironically, her questions regarding the authenticity of Malidoma's accounts were reminiscent of my responses to hers—I didn't always believe Connie and she didn't always believe Malidoma. Consequently, our struggles continued.
Connie's Response to Malidoma

Malidoma began his autobiography by narrating the scene of his grandfather's death:

The funeral participants had barely recovered from the display of the magical arrow when the next wonder appeared. Because my grandfather had been a very great medicine man and the leader of our family, it was fitting that the supernaturals who had befriended him and aided him in his work would come to pay their last respects. Within the world of the Dagara, so closely aligned with the worlds of nature and the worlds of the spirit, these beings are commonly seen—just as angels and other heavenly apparitions were once commonly experienced by devout Christians in the West (68-69).

Connie did not respond well to Malidoma's comparison of the "spirit world, to the "heavenly apparitions in the West." She responded:

October 1, 1996

I chose to read Malidoma as though it were a fantasy . . . the recounting of the grandfather's death and the funeral procession which ensued amazed me. I am not going to sit here and call him a liar, for this was his life story, but the facts are a little hard to swallow . . . The grandfather at one point in the book said he believed that God drank a lot of wine all the time, for He drove His own people out of their land. That's funny talk for a man who believes in little red men who live in invisible caves. His statement about God struck me as sounding very closed minded. The beliefs that Malidoma and his grandfather talked about often had convenient explanations. As outrageous as these sounded, the Dagara held them to be truth and fact . . . Malidoma's mystical history is intriguing . . . I don't believe it is too far fetched that his grandfather might have been the one drinking a lot of wine all the time.

I interpreted Connie's tone as sarcastic, even hostile at times. Her resistance increased and my own tension mounted as we read and wrote our way through Malidoma's autobiography. Throughout the text, Malidoma compared and contrasted the world of the Dagara and the modern world—the world of the West. In Malidoma's efforts to regain a place for himself within
his Dagara community, and a sense of his own identity within that community, he came to the conclusion that, after fourteen years at a Christian seminary, "religious people are people who want to avoid hell; spiritual people are those who have been to hell and back." Connie, at this point, had heard enough. She wrote:

October 8, 1996

I was appalled and discouraged to read these last few chapters from Of Water and the Spirit. I had a hard time swallowing the realities that Malidoma Patrice Somé illustrated in his story. I was raised in a Christian home and I am a Christian myself. To hear accounts of the actions of supposed missionaries, such as the ones Somé talks about, make me all too aware of the false reputation with which Christians are pegged . . . to be a true Christian one must have accepted Christ into one's heart. To do this one must be completely dependent on, trustful of, open to, and sincere with God. Christians are filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Joy is supposed to be the mood of the true believer.

Connie showed her skills as a rhetorician as she continued her response:

In the Bible, John talks about how love is the distinguishing mark of Christ's followers. An interpretation of Nehemiah 5:9 concludes that failure to treat others, especially fellow believers, with compassion is an insult to God . . . The word Christian means "those belonging to Christ." The Jesuit priests Somé described were not filled with joy, love, or compassion. They were false prophets serving themselves. The Bible is the word of God, the law by which His followers live. I barely heard mention of the Bible in Malidoma's experiences."

Connie's argument built as she cleverly put the blame on the missionaries for Malidoma's abuse while at the seminary, claiming they weren't "true Christians." She appeared to sympathize with Malidoma's treatment by the Jesuits while she bolstered her own views on Christian beliefs:
These missionaries didn't teach the word of God, and what they did teach was merely a mockery of the truth . . . Only God can decide one's calling. He has a place for everyone in His divine plan . . . only Christ can come to the rescue. In the Bible Philippians 2:1-3 says, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

Connie quoted the Apostle Paul, who addressed the Philippians about imitating Christ's humility. Her mention of humility reminded me of why I believed it was important for us to look at all forms of knowledge (and not just what we profess as our own), which included those of indigenous people. Connie did not take kindly to Malidoma's attempts to unmask Christian ideology; consequently, she dug in her heels. Humility appeared lost as her debate continued with Malidoma:

In Chapter 8, Malidoma talks about how rhetoric was thought to be a tool used to prove something that was obviously wrong, was right, and that this was used to defend Christianity. By this statement Malidoma is saying that Christianity is obviously wrong, so they are being trained to prove it right in the face of any contradiction. The sad thing about this statement is if the missionaries had taught the Bible to any extent then the students wouldn't need the tool of rhetoric, they could see for themselves that the Bible was its own defense."

I wanted to point out to Connie that the Bible is indeed "a tool of rhetoric" which presents a particular point of view, but I remained silent. She herself exercised many of its rhetorical strategies as she critiqued the arguments of Malidoma, but I didn't say it; I tried to listen instead. Connie ended her response to Malidoma's story with these comments:
I am deeply disturbed by the revelations in *Of Water and the Spirit*. I know we tend to live in sheltered communities. In general we hear the statistics and these horrifying stories on the news, but we tend to desensitize ourselves to the harsh realities. We say, "Oh that's terrible" or "I can't believe that," but we can not actually experience these truths until someone like Malidoma bares his soul so that we might understand.

Connie was indeed a master rhetorician. She refuted Malidoma throughout her analysis, and throughout her reading of his text, but she ended her paper with a suspicious tribute to him. I wondered, was she being humble or was her rhetorical strategy designed to win her argument? Was she once again wearing a mask? Connie wanted to defend the validity of her beliefs, but to do so, she may have decided that she needed to develop a sympathetic tone toward Malidoma. However, I didn't buy into her sentiments, but I must admit, she was very good at composing that "outer skin" to fit her situation.

Connie's rhetorical skills cannot be denied. She considered audience and purpose in her argument with Malidoma's text; however, she failed to take into account the larger context: how Christian missionaries in Africa imposed their ideologies on indigenous people, how indigenous beliefs have value, how power was constructed within relationships between colonizers and native people, and how this power was grossly out of balance. I needed to provide the materials for this larger dialogue, so we could situate Malidoma's knowledge and beliefs, but I had hoped his own autobiography would do that for us. Unfortunately, in Connie's case, it didn't. I wanted to suggest to Connie that no abuse of power will ever lead to wisdom, but I fell silent, due to my own lack of power, my insecurity about this new curriculum, and my precarious position as a teaching assistant. Connie, on the contrary, felt far
from silenced. Her voice gained momentum when she took on Malidoma's beliefs.

Connie defended her position:

Malidoma experienced horrors that were Christian in name only. Evil (more specifically sin) comes from Satan, not from our God who is Holy. We often choose sin over following God. He allows us the freedom of choice so he also allows us to feel the consequences of our sin. In the same way a parent allows his/her children to make mistakes so that they might learn to grow from them. I believe this is why God is often referred to as the "Father." The "Fathers" in this book chose sin for whatever reason. A fancy title and white robe do not a follower of Christ make.

Connie believed that to question her faith was to be unfaithful. When her beliefs failed to minimize her struggles, she blamed herself and the weaknesses of her own "free will," whereas I viewed Connie's struggles as systematic of oppression. Whatever my interpretation of Connie's beliefs, the underlying principles that guided the course led me to step back and give her more room. I had to guarantee her the same rights that I wanted for myself—the right to ask our own questions. Connie's research project exercised that right.

**Connie's Research Project**

"The Interview," the title Connie chose for her research project, was not an interview with anyone she met and spoke with at *A Safe Place*. Instead, Connie chose to interview herself. She expressed her need to engage in a double dialogue with herself. Elaine Showalter (1980) writes of women's shared participation in a moment of inquiry:

The specificity of female writing will emerge from the study of the woman writer's interactions with both her male and female literary heritages, for in the reality to which we must address ourselves as critics, women's writing is a double-voiced heritage of both the muted and the dominant . . . and in some sense, revisionist (pp. 2-3).
Connie's research project moved her away from religion and closer to revision as she began to articulate a new theoretical stance. She began, "For your own protection, and basically for the sake of anonymity, your name, and any and all specific names, dates, and/or facts will be changed and kept completely anonymous. From this point on I will refer to you as Sarah." Connie then began to ask questions of Sarah, a persona she created to find her way into her own narrative on abuse. She asked Sarah: "When did you first realize that you were a victim of domestic violence?" Sarah answered:

I first realized that I was a survivor (not a victim) when I attended a support group meeting (for battered women). I was researching domestic violence for an English paper and had gone to a support group as a way of doing primary research. Through observing the women in the group and listening to their stories, the light went on, and I realized that I too had been a victim.

Connie was demonstrating the insights of juxtaposition, when we situate our own narratives among the narratives of those whose experiences may or may not appear similar to our own. She also demonstrated her interviewing skills, asking for descriptive responses that required more than a yes or no answer. She then asked Sarah: "How would you define the healing process?" Sarah answered,

The research project (I told you about earlier) was the most important influence in the progression of my healing. If I had not taken an in depth look into domestic violence when I did, who knows when I would have started identifying the reality of my story."

Connie began to validate my own experiences with juxtaposition. I was horrified and surprised by the narratives of abuse I heard among the women who gathered at my house to talk as an alternative to talking at an AA meeting (see Chapter 3); however, as I listened more intently, I discovered their experiences were similar to my own. I felt incredibly sad and
relieved that my memories of abuse were real and that I was not alone. When I sought to better understand the lives of other women, I better understood my own life.

Just as the women in AA helped me, the women at A Safe Place helped Connie. She was able to name her experience within the realm of their experiences with domestic violence. Sarah continued her response, "I look to God to find my strength and power, and to myself. I had determined that no boyfriend, parent, or friend was going to get me through this." However, Connie contradicted this statement when, as Sarah, she later stated: "Going to the support group did help. I feel like I have realized a lot of truths about myself, as well as my abuser, through listening to the women talk... the support group helped a great deal."

Connie felt validated by the women's group at A Safe Place when she, in turn, shared her story of abuse with them. Sarah added: "The women there confirmed that what I was going through was real, I didn't dream it up."

When Connie heard her own experiences spoken from the lips of these women, she experienced a shift in consciousness and a sense of agency. Sarah continued, "They allowed me to talk about it, and offered their own experience, in order to help me to decide the course of action for myself... Hearing about other women's similar ordeals is very therapeutic. Listening to them allowed me to understand my own ordeal much more."

Again Connie confirmed a belief—students have to find their own teachers and it's not always going to be me. Clearly, the women at A Safe Place were Connie's best teachers when she sought dialogue on domestic abuse. I'm relieved that she found the audience she needed and the responses she found most workable for her. Our earlier dialogues about Malidoma were pushed to the background, along with her Biblical references,
when she wrote in her research project about the power of other women’s stories and what they taught her about her own experiences with abuse. I too felt validation for the method of juxtaposing experiences to move students from I to We—from consciousness to agency.

Connie then made an admission, when she asked Sarah, “How did you meet him (abusive boyfriend)? Sarah answered: “Ironically enough, we met in church . . .” Connie didn’t elaborate on the context for this meeting, nor did she pause to question the significance of this context. I realized that for Connie to question her Christian beliefs while, at the same time, coming to consciousness about having “survived” an abusive relationship with her boyfriend, was more than she could handle at that time. Patti Lather (1991) helps me to explain: “Many speak of “shoulds” that add another coercive discourse to student’s lives, a discourse designed to shake up their worlds but which often loses touch with what that shaken up experience feels like” (p. 143). I hope to never “should” on any of my students. I felt more empathetic toward Connie. After all, I had also “survived.”

Connie got to the heart of the matter when she asked Sarah: What did the support group and the research for your English paper do for you specifically? Sarah answered, “Through the support group I realized that I had been a victim of emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse. What I came to understand late was that I was also a victim of sexual abuse . . .”

Connie was able to “reinvent” herself by juxtaposing her experiences with those of the women at A Safe Place. Sarah added:
Many women in the support group had similar stories to tell. Their husbands and boyfriends had started off being the same kind of guy as my ex had started out to be. One woman, in particular, talked about how she had dated her husband for years, and that the day they got married he turned into the man she was now seeking help to get away from. Each woman had a different story to tell, but we all shared the same basic emotions and fears.

Connie again reaffirmed what my own memoirs had taught me: we learn to see our “shadow,” Patti Lather’s metaphor for “the unthought and the thought” (1991, p. 125), when we engage in reciprocal relationships where we feel both the tension and safety of these shadows. My curriculum fosters these relationships within the classroom and the community. When Connie and I sought our shadow through reading, writing, researching our lives, we “shifted the focus to how data escapes, exceeds and complicates the direction of meaning on the unfolding narrative” (Lather, 1991, p. 125).

Connie saw her shadow when she decided to write a case study on herself. She gave her thoughts on case study research when she commented:

In the article, *Why Case Study?*, Glenda L. Bissex says that, “traditional research, even on human beings, has sought to make generalizations based on similarities in behavior. Large numbers of people are studied in order to wash out the effects of particular individual differences. Case studies, by contrast, enable us to see individuals; and when several individuals are compared, common traits as well as differences become apparent.” Through doing a case study I have learned more about domestic violence, and more about myself, than I could have ever learned in a book.

**Lessons from Connie**

I too learned more from “doing a case study than I could have ever learned in a book.” I learned more about myself, my role as a teacher, and domestic violence. I particularly learned the importance of listening. I learned to live the principles that guide my classroom, consciously, by juxtaposing my experiences with those of my students, “conflicting
representations" where "foregrounded tensions help us to understand what is at stake in creating meaning out of 'data'" (Lather, 1991, p. 150).

Connie wrote in her self evaluation of her research project: "I have learned more about myself through this paper, in and of itself, than from anything I've ever experienced before . . ."

I recalled how Malidoma said the same thing about initiation. I too had to undergo a "breaking process," an initiation which eventually led me to admit that I had shut down when trying to listen to Connie's Christian beliefs and her responses to Malidoma's autobiography. Perhaps we both were defensive, but I had to humble myself enough to see, that my problem with Connie was that I continually judged her, disbelieved her, and underestimated her ability to move through the course, blaming her Christian fundamentalism and her resistance to Malidoma. Perhaps I had even romanticized Malidoma's indigenous beliefs at her expense. Through this analysis, I'm able to see my "shadow." Furthermore, when reading Malidoma's autobiography again, I would situate it within the current social conditions, which determine student, teacher, and school knowledge, and the larger culture. I would expand our juxtapositions to include other authors, such as Native American and African American writers.

Still, Connie managed to see her "shadow" too, in spite of her resistance, when she moved out of the world of the classroom, Malidoma, and the Bible and into the Scriptures and into the shelter. At A Safe Place, Connie learned, as I did from her, that it was her turn to listen. However, I still have my suspicions about Connie. Was she really "a survivor" or was she, once again, wearing a mask?
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

"Walking My Talk"

The Narraguagus River looks low as summer lingers on and I notice the newly exposed rocks that I didn't know were there before. Memories live in stone, compositions that record time past for future generations to see. As I shift my thoughts from the rocks on the river bottom to time past, I recall my mother's visit in April, her first since I moved to Maine three years ago. However, my mother didn't come directly to Maine to see me. She flew into New York from Colorado to attend my daughter Dawn's college graduation.

My mother seemed proud of Dawn's accomplishment, but she never mentioned mine, as I had just successfully defended my dissertation the week before with little response from any member of my family, except when my mother asked: "When are you going to be done with all this so you can start working?"

I felt the sting of failure as I heard my mother's words. I compared my own accomplishments to those of my siblings. Don, Barb, Rick, and Jim have all accomplished the American Dream, but they didn't have to travel far from home to do it, whereas I traveled great distances in pursuit of my dream to become a teacher. But in my mother's eyes, I was on a wayward journey with no end in sight.

When I think back through my mother, I recall all the times she used to coax me as a child to go to school. I usually rebelled in anguish to her pleas.
by shouting out, "School Sucks!" I often felt ashamed of these outbursts, after all, my mother was the one who covered up for me whenever I was kicked out of school. She never told my father. Instead she would quietly go with me into the vice principal's office and ask him nicely to take me back. Now she couldn't understand why I was still in school.

My mother did her best to tolerate my rebellion, but she would only put up with so much lip from me, particularly when it came to my defiance about school. Now I recognized the contradictions. They reveal lessons that give me new insights about my encounters with Lyn and Connie. When I reflect on Lyn's case, I can accept my choice to travel the long road that led me to teach freshman composition at the University of New Hampshire. Reading, writing, and involvement in the struggles of our community worked for Lyn as they did for me. We were able to analyze the nature of our struggles and compose new actions in the world. Consequently, we both experienced a sense of fulfillment and well being from our dialogue and our individual struggles for literacy. However, when I reflect on Connie's case, I recognize how tensions strained our dialogue, particularly my own ability to respond to her writing. My struggles with Connie reminded me of my earlier struggles with my mother, when in frustration she would put an end to my outbursts with the words "Shut that smart mouth of yours!" Perhaps in Connie's case, my mother was right!

The movement from I to We requires that I integrate my insides (I) with my outsides (We)—or what Bakhtin calls "internally persuasive" discourse with "authoritative" discourse. I believe that the movement from I to We activates the ideological becoming of a human being as we assimilate the words of Others, making them our own. Bakhtin (1981) explains: "The tendency to assimilate other's discourse takes on an even deeper and more
basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming . . . Another's
discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models
and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological
interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here
as authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse (pp. 341-342).

Connie, Lyn, and I called in "authoritative and internally persuasive"
discourses as we moved from epistemological introspection to conscious
action. We moved from I and We by tracing our beliefs back to home, school,
and community sites. We juxtaposed our ways of knowing with those of
Others. We integrated inner and outer voices to fine tune our own, as we
projected them, in the classroom and beyond, and through conscious actions
we wrote about in our research.

Lyn "walked her talk" when she read to Harold and Others at a local
hospital. She demonstrated the movement from consciousness to agency, the
essence of what Paulo Freire called conscientization, "collective action in
transforming reality toward the goal of a more just world" (Britzman, 1991,
p. 26). Implicitly political, voice ushered Lyn to compose her own classroom.
She "repositioned" herself so she could intervene in her world (see Lu, 1990).
She discovered what knowing she valued, where she learned, and how to
perform conscious acts, both in and out of school. She transformed her pain
into passionate responses and then wrote about it in her research paper.

On the other hand, Connie traveled her own distance when moving
from I to We. She often wrote about what she believed she was supposed to
write rather than what she needed to write. When she read Malidoma Patrice
Somé's, Of Water and the Spirit, she became defensive, her tone angry, as she
fired back at his critiques of Christians. His words poked holes in her reality,
as did mine, when I fired back at Connie with tough questions in the margins

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of her papers. The combative nature of my response caught me off guard, as I realized I was in a power struggle with Connie. I had set out to help students to identify their struggles, so they could move through contradictions, but when I interacted with Connie, my own anger and fear came up. I had to pay attention to these emotions, for when I'm defensive it takes me away from "my habitual grounding and causes the depths to open up" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 39). Consequently, I adjusted my responses to Connie by repositioning myself. I moved away from responding as a critic and began to listen.

Coming to voice starts with resistance, and Connie and I did resist, although many times we both put on masks. Connie wore a mask to disguise her discontent, but who am I to judge? I did the same thing with her. I knew the performance well after acting it out for several years while I was married to Dave. The chaos of our marriage became tucked under layers of disguise that we both found difficult to maintain after awhile. Our energy drained, we couldn't find the power to come to voice.

When Connie resisted Malidoma's view of the world, she encountered my own opposition to patriarchal systems of power, particularly Christianity. But Lyn gave me a fresh perspective on what it means to live life as a Christian, when she "walked her talk" by reading to the terminally ill. She looked into the faces of death and accepted the goodbyes when they came with grace and courage. I recalled Lyn as I noted my responses to Connie. I realized the vast differences between these two students and between my own responses to them both. Recollections of Lyn helped me to realize that I had to back off and listen to Connie.

Coming to voice involves struggle, as inner and outer voices jockey for position; however, when Connie composed her memoirs of home, school, and community life, she didn't acknowledge her struggles, and I couldn't buy
into her ideal world she wrote about in her narrative vignettes. Therefore, Connie never established trust. According to Donald Murray (1996), "Readers are attracted to a writer because they believe the author's voice and are moved, entertained, persuaded by it" (p. 40). I didn't believe Connie when she quoted the Bible as her defense of Christianity. Her arguments lacked "thick descriptions" that would allow me, as a reader, to see the context for her beliefs (Gertz, 1973). On the contrary, her memoirs bubbled with contradictions, which she failed to recognize. Did she live her Christian values? Did she "walk her talk?"

Donald Murray again reminds me that voice requires "revealing specifics," which Connie attempted to do in her research paper, but still I questioned her authenticity. Connie would have to "discover something she knew that she didn't know before, see a familiar subject in an unfamiliar way, contradict her most certain beliefs, burst from expectation and intent to insight and clarity" (Murray, 1996, p. 147). Although she found the courage to take some of these steps, she struggled for control. She admitted she desperately needed help and got it, but she couldn't quite recognize her connection to Others. She wrote: "The research paper was the most important influence in the progression of my healing because I took an in-depth look into domestic violence," then she wrote "I confront all my fears and frustrations by talking to John (pseudonym for her new boyfriend), then she wrote "the support group helped a lot," then she wrote "a brochure from a rape prevention group on campus helped me to realize that I had been a victim of emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse . . . also sexual abuse."

Clearly, all of these voices gave Connie the courage and power to intervene in her world, a desired outcome when moving from I to We, but she discounted them when she once again contradicted herself in her
conclusion: "I have determined that no boyfriend, parent, or friend is going
to get me through this. Going to the support group does help to a degree . . .
(but) for the sake of my sanity and self esteem, I need to do it own my own,
and with the help of my true Savior."

Connie never questioned her "most certain beliefs," because as Connie
herself wrote, "Living in denial was the only thing that got me through the
breakup. Had I been dealing with the pain and the reality of the truth right
away, I would have either gone back to my abuser, or checked myself into a
nut house." For Connie, a recent born-again Christian, to question her beliefs
would have caused her to lose her footing, at this particular place and time.
But the women at a Safe Place did trip her up, as she reconstructed her
relationship with her former boyfriend by juxtaposing her experiences with
the experiences of Others she listened to in the support group. Eventually,
Connie did attempt to write with more authenticity, especially when I
compare her research paper with her earlier abstractions from the Bible. Still,
I continued to doubt her, but I also grew to understand her as I juxtaposed her
experiences to my own.

I recall how painful it was for me to "get real" and leave Dave. I had
wrapped myself around his world for so long, I didn't know how to let go.
From the time I was fifteen years old, until some fifteen years later, on that
night in the kitchen, when he "got real" with me and told me the "truth"
about our marriage, I couldn't find the courage to leave him. Now that I look
back, I realize my inability to leave him was due, in part, to what he had
taught me, particularly about his love for nature.

I can still see him wading the rivers of Montana, fly rod in hand, as he
skillfully drew back his strong arm then brought it forward again, just so far,
to land his fly gently on the water, in the placid pools of the Yellowstone

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River. Dave connected with God in the rivers that ran through the Rocky Mountains near our home, and he passed that lesson onto me. I live on a beautiful river because I feel at peace here. I think of Dave whenever I look out my window or sit along the banks of the Narraguagus. I thank him for showing me where to find peace.

If I am ever to help my students express themselves more openly and honestly, I need to consider their vulnerabilities when I look at their drafts. I need to ask myself whether or not my responses are moving students from I to We. I also need to ask myself whether or not I'm being authentic—do my insides match my outsides? If not, then my responses lack integrity.

However, I didn't trust Connie and she didn't trust me. How could we have gained each Other's trust? How could we both come to voice with integrity?

I believe there are times when I have to rely on students' responses to each other, but early in the semester, I jumped right into Connie's drafts when I noticed how students did respond. They wrote glowing remarks about the surface features of her writing (grammar, punctuation, organization), but they never challenged what she wrote. I believe many of my students interpreted these "skills" as the most important criteria for "good writing," whereas I agree with Murray: "Voice is the single most important element in attracting and holding a reader's interest" (Crafting, 39).

While I need to refine my responses, I still believe the design of my curriculum works well to help students come to voice. In the previous memoirs I have followed my curriculum to demonstrate the movements from I to We. I recalled moments of struggle I encountered as a reader, writer, and teacher, which I locate in home, school, and community sites. I analyzed what worked, what didn't, and why. I discovered what knowing I value, where I learned it, and how to apply it within the context of a
freshman composition course, but I stumbled at times. Now that I've acknowledged my mistakes and interpreted the nature of my struggles, I can begin again to teach.

Next time, I will expand the choices for texts we read so I can provide a wider range of voices; I will guide students to define their roles in their research sites while we consider reciprocity, a dialectical stance, and validity. Patti Lather reminds me that "reciprocity requires a give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power; theoretical guided empirical work requires a sensitivity to people's lived concerns, fears and aspirations to emancipate and energize; validity requires a systematic approach to analyze ambiguity." When moving from I and We, these "self-correcting techniques will check the credibility of data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence" (Lather, 1991, pp. 65-66).

The most important lesson I've learned from interpreting my memoirs is to pay attention to moments when it is preferable to speak and moments when it is preferable to listen. I recall Lyn and her "gentle and caring" responses. I recall Connie and her struggle to come to voice. I want to learn to respond like Lyn while honoring the words of Connie. I can't expect students to be open-minded if I'm not. I must be careful not to force solutions but to initiate dialogue. I must guard against my own autobiography butting up against the autobiographies of my students, as I recognize glimpses of myself in their responses that most trouble me. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) wrote in Being Peace: "Human life is more precious than any ideology, any doctrine" (p. 89). That includes my own.

Literacy initiates struggle as students and I gather in the classroom to begin the process of coming to voice. To integrate our insides with our outsides is no easy matter when "internally persuasive" discourse counters
"authoritative" discourse. However, I've learned from my students and teachers that I have to consider Other's points of view while I reconsider my own. Min Zhan Lu (1990) reminds me that education is a matter of location, the ability to reposition ourselves when necessary. As I prepare to take my seat in the classroom, I will remember that to live a life that includes the teaching of writing requires constant repositioning as I move from I to We. My need to talk must be tempered by an ability to listen if I'm ever to "walk my talk" in or out of the classroom. Knowing this, I realize more about what it means, to me, to live a life that includes the teaching of writing.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

TWELVE STEPS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.