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Steady Song of the Heart: Memoir and Meditation

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Steady Song of the Heart: Memoir and Meditation

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Susan Jean Perschbacher

December, 2013

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING


December 10, 2013

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Susan Jean Perschbacher
Entitled Steady Song of the Heart: Memoir and Meditation

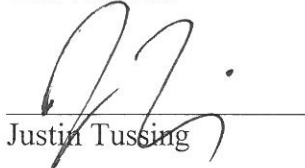
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Debra Marquart

Advisor (signature)

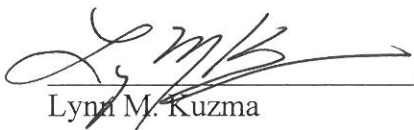

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Abstract

In these memoirist essays I interweave my life stories with sojourns in nature and my spiritual journey. Not a narrative of horrific abuse and trauma, it is an account similar to those of other women growing up the 1950's, a time of pretense that social problems did not exist, that the United States was a place of upward mobility—except if you were black, poor, female or otherwise removed from a life of privilege. It is a tale of political and spiritual seeking. It is a recounting of the consequences of repressed emotion in my life—of love held back or disguised in other forms, of anger and sorrow and fear. It is an inward journey to expose and examine my wounds, to hold them to the light. It is a story of healing, made possible by a writing practice and a meditation practice. Finally, it is a description of my desire to age gracefully, accepting my life—its mistakes, imperfections, fulfillments and joys—in order to find peace.

Acknowledgements

Many people have offered love and support along this journey—family and friends. The encouragement, “Yes you can!” and “Just keep going,” was invaluable. I am grateful for those who believed in me when I could not understand why in the world I decided to do this: Kathie W., Wendy, Ann, Paul, Carol, Madeleine, Bonnie, Amy, Kim, Jan, Cathy P., Gabriele, Pat, Nancy J., Ceci, Nancy P., Lynn, John, and my cousin Jeannie, a creative inspiration.

Assumption College graciously funded much of my studies. After twenty-five years I am Professor Emeritus and adjunct professor. I know this writing program contributes to my teaching and the way I help students with their papers.

My Stonecoast family has been a steady source of energy and encouragement. I thank all the workshop participants who commented on my work, faculty and student presenters, my comfort-seeking posse: Jennifer, Julie, Julia and Deb, and my cry-on-the-shoulder buddies: Terri and Kathleen and Linda. My mentors—Barbara Hurd, Rick Bass, Cait Johnson, and Debra Marquart—talented writers and empowering teachers who shared the craft of writing. It was for the opportunity to work with these writers that I chose Stonecoast.

Sharlene and I share a passion for writing from way back and we continue after Stonecoast. Thank you for careful reading, thoughtful comments and warm bolstering. Kathleen and Cathy, my writing team from Assumption, thank you for supportive words and insightful comments.

Jennifer Evelyn Melia and Elizabeth Irene Melia, you read sections, you commented in helpful ways, you encouraged, you are in my story most important, you are in my heart.

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Preface

Be careful what you ask for is my experience at the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA Program. In my application I stated: “Time for change. Time to venture out of social science peer-reviewed publication into the world of creative non-fiction and memoir writing.” Trained as a social science writer I hoped to learn to write more imaginatively about older women I interviewed over the years. This has been more challenging than I could imagine.

Each morning I read the daily quotes that scroll down the left side of Garrison Keillor’s Writer’s Almanac. John Edgar Wideman claims, “Good writing is always about things that are important to you, things that are scary to you, things that eat you up.” F. Scott Fitzgerald is quoted, “All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.” E. L. Doctorow, “Writing is like driving all night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole things that way.” Solitude, at times loneliness, terror, despair, tears, elation, exhaustion, pride, growth—writing is all those things for me.

I attended Stonecoast Writer’s Program for two summers, the first time I submitted manuscripts to workshop. The first summer, Abigail Thomas walked into class and placed my fifteen page manuscript in front of me.

“Redo this for the end of the week. We’ll workshop your piece last. I want to know about you—you’re much more interesting than these women.”

Stunned, I wrote feverishly every night for a week, attending the workshop by day. My memoir pages were a chronological ramble laced with a few scenes and stories. I put my toe in the water.

I came back the next summer for a memoir workshop with Ann Hood. The piece I submitted for workshop incorporated aspects of my life with those of two older women, our stories melded together by themes of graceful aging.

“Tell us your own stories,” workshop participants told me. “Make the older women three dimensional, your writing more lively.”

So I came to the Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing Program to learn to tell my own story, to develop three dimensional characters. During the first residency I realized I had to set aside my agenda to write a book about older women in order to learn to write.

My first semester I worked with Barbara Hurd reading memoirs by Gretel Ehrlich, Janet Burroway, Kelly Cherry, Patricia Foster, Mary Gordon Vivian Gornick, Patricia Hampl, as well as Barbara Hurd. To write my annotations I relied on Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, as well as Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*. In thoughtful detailed responses throughout the semester Barbara stressed: tell stories, set scenes, create dramatic tension, add humor, remove unnecessary exposition and reflection.

“I just can’t do this, “I told myself over and over.

Then I sat myself down to rewrite, to edit, and to rewrite some more. I could see what I was doing wrong, but I couldn’t figure out how to change it. I wanted to drop out. Barbara encouraged me otherwise.

I submitted pieces about my own life to second semester workshops. In the workshops I felt thin-skinned, vulnerable defensive. It was hard to listen to different perspectives. Then I learned to sit back, detach, to hear my own voice as I responded to comments, to see my writing through the eyes of others.

In a second semester workshop Deb Marquart opened up a new direction for my writing: “You write beautifully about nature,” she remarked, and the group reinforced this. Nature pulled me out of the telling mode into scene and sensory detail. It was a way to write about my life at a slant. I concentrated on nature writing second semester.

Rick Bass introduced me to nature writers: Peter Matthiessen, Edward Abbey, David James Duncan, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, John Elder, Bill Roorbach, David Rynick, and Rick Bass. I came to see nature as a backdrop for emotion, mood, reflection, spiritual seeking and environmental justice. The pieces I wrote my second semester bubbled out of some deep places.

He also introduced me to Eudora Welty’s, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, and in my annotations second semester I used her work as well as Hampl and Gornick. Rick, like Barbara, praised my annotative essays. While I was trained as an academic and analytical writing was familiar to me, I thrilled to the praise of my work in literature which years ago seemed daunting to me. Analyzing the craft in others’ writings also taught me about writing well.

Rick was a kind and demanding mentor, a stickler for craft, for showing not telling, for detail, for rewriting. He taught me about white space on the page, suggesting I break up paragraphs, freed me to be less wordy and to work with space

breaks. He also underscored that all good writing was based on rewriting and rewriting. I followed his directions and also began to read my work out loud.

Under his tutelage I reworked pieces with the benefit of his comments, seeing my own ability to critique my work improve. When he wrote on my last submission, “I am proud of this piece, I hope you are too,” I was thrilled. The praise was hard-earned.

Initially I scoffed at the notion of writing as therapy. A long-time proponent of counseling and spiritual direction, of interior work, I underestimated how explorations on the page about my life moved me into murky, unresolved places. For one presentation I read the book, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, by Louise DeSalvo. I was taken by her premise that writing is a way of healing—as the writing gets stronger the healing is more powerful as the writing gets stronger. I excavated for stories, and as I opened my life on the page—wrote and read my life—my writing grew. I grew.

Third semester, under the intuitive direction of Cait Johnson I wrote a research paper in which I closely examined the writings of Mary Rose O’Reilley and Terry Tempest Williams. Cait helped me explore craft books that were the spine of my project: A. Alvarez, Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Stephen Dobyns, Bonnie Friedman, Lee Gutkind, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, Elaine Scarry, Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, and James Wood.

That March I attended the 2013 AWP Annual Meeting in Boston. I chose sessions that helped shape my third semester project on voice, metaphor and image in

creative nonfiction. My interest in writing at a slant was supported in a session with Margot Singer and Nicole Walker. In another session four women writers talked about voice. Sessions on metaphor and image and point of view were also helpful.

Throughout third semester I read and re-read *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*, by Terry Tempest Williams, and *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker Buddhist Shepherd* and *The Love of Impermanent Things: A Threshold Ecology*, by Mary Rose O'Reilley. Immersion in these works and writing my third semester project, "Survival and Surrender: Intimate Voice, Image and Metaphor in the Writings of Terry Tempest Williams and Mary Rose O'Reilley," helped me develop my own voice

These women describe their world, share their feelings and their stories, and open up to reflection that is often painful. Their vulnerability in writing leads to moments of realization and reflection so energetic and electric for readers. Their writings encourage me.

Reading craft works has been one of the richest components of my time at Stonecoast. I recognize the courage and commitment required to write well. I no longer delude myself that I can skip the important signature of craft on my work nor that I can write without addressing the powerful elements that reflect the story I have to tell.

Working with Cait, I spontaneously began to write about myself as an older woman, about classes I teach on older women, about interviews I conduct with these women. Once I completed the research project I began writing and words poured out

of me onto the page. I recognized metaphors and images that weave through my life and my writing—nature and music and meditation. The piece I wrote became the final essay in my thesis.

My fourth semester mentor, Deb Marquart, reviewed writings I produced at Stonecoast. She held a vision for my work I did not see—a collection of memoirist essays. She recommended I edit my work to find where I repeat scenes in different pieces. She recommended revisions. She told me the pieces would become clearer, less repetitive and eventually I would begin to discern the order in which they flowed.

“Daunting,” I thought. Too daunting—once again I had thoughts of dropping out.

But then I did as she said. I edited and revised, rewrote, even added a new piece. I heard the chorus of my mentors: show, don’t tell.

It was hard work, dredging up stories. Just as the writers on *Writer’s Almanac* said, it felt like swimming underwater, holding my breath. I saw no further than the fog in front of my headlights. It called for appallingly hard work. It was writing about things that are scary to me, things that eat me up.

It was also, as Denise Levertov is quoted on *Writer’s Almanac*, “a form of prayer.”

And there was no turning back.

At times I couldn’t keep it all straight. What was I doing in this essay? Who is this about? Where did I say this already? Where does it best belong?

I began an internal monologue.

“You don’t need to tell the reader this. Show!”

“What did you see? How did it feel and smell? What did you hear?” Set the scene.

“Hold this thought in suspense no tidy ending.” Sustain the dramatic tension.

I read over and over. I read silently and then aloud. I saw “I” over and over. I read “was” and “is” over and over. Find active verbs.

“Damn, it’s too hard to unlearn the way I wrote for over forty years!”

“Just do it.”

Deb’s comments came in, essay after essay. I saw sharper introductions, smoother transitions, clarified sentences and references. Endings were abbreviated, last lines cut along with unnecessary details, even paragraphs.

I whittled and shifted and added and expanded.

Then I listened to my own voice.

Fourth semester for me is about finding my own voice. It is about a whisper inside my head: this is enough, end here, take this out, it belongs to another piece.

Fourth semester is about “Ah ha” moments when the memoirist pieces pushed my life onto the page and I faced the question: “What have I learned in my sixty plus years?”

Therapy, good writing, growth. Writing as discovery—the deeper I probe, the more I rewrite, the more I learn. I meet myself—my fears, my sorrows, my pains, my joys, my love, my strength, my peace. I write into an understanding of myself and others I never expected to find.

In my writing, as in my meditation, guidelines help me to know what I am looking for and what is happening: find an authoritative voice, know the meaning of the piece, locate the story in historical context, use your imagination so the story is quirky and intricate, develop the key moments or incidents by staying with events and linking images, develop a theme from the details (lots of vivid and specific details), write scenes with reflective moments (thinking out loud) between scenes to remind the reader of the larger story, dig deeper, struggle with elusive truth by exploration and discovery. Don't let the piece become static.

In Barbara Hurd's voice, become aware of what is "trying to wriggle its way through the hidden doorway the writing is trying to open." Focus on private life, on the heart and its yearnings and longings. Break my social science habit of broad sweeping summary: "Slow down and tell a story. Mull over an incident more. Raise the level of concern. Then stretch and connect the incident to a larger idea."

Pure scene. Pure description. Detail. Stay small. Let the reflections spin out.

Then Rick Bass' voice joins the mantra: rewrite and rewrite some more. Look for the echo sentence, word choice and metaphors and images, specificity of the senses, varied sentences without overlong sentences and paragraphs, stay in scene, pace by slowing down, let endings open an expanse of emotional territory or understanding for the reader so the writing leads to newer and deeper discovery, powerful and lyrical openings, vary rhythm and pace, characterization, establish tension, ask yourself what the piece is about—what is the emotional heart.

Rewrite. Revise. Read aloud.

Cait Johnson's counsel that writing cannot be all craft. Good writing is intuition and song and lyricism often learned by imitating writers that move me. Read, read, read took on a deeper meaning as I worked with Cait. The writing she commended seemed as much poetry as creative nonfiction. Her spirited sense of writing helped me break the habit of belabored social science analysis and conclusion, of proof. Let it be open-ended. Let it sing out on the page without belaboring the meaning. Cait opened me to writers who have become my muse, both in craft and creativity.

These directives from mentors worked through me as I came back to the material I wrote at Stonecoast. With the constructive guidance and editing of Deb Marquart, her encouraging voice, I envisioned a series of essays with sharpened focus and developed detail. As I edited the material each piece revealed its own meaning and intensity, and the collection of fifteen essays sustained a narrative arc that brought me to an emotional realization as I worked and reworked the material. Thesis writing was an "Ah ha" moment in my writing and in my personal life.

In a collection of memoirist essays some are stronger than others. I had the most trouble writing about my mother and about my father, writing about my childhood. The early pieces in the thesis, "Raising Daughters," "Family Traditions," "Stand Alone," and "Inheritance," are choppy, more disjointed. I read them as post-traumatic scenes that pop up when I least want to face them. There is room in these essays for more lyricism and sensuous detail, perhaps reference to other memoir

writings, and the braiding and incursion into larger ideas that Deb suggests. Perhaps I will polish these later.

“Those are comments for future life,” Deb told me, “When you got on to publish.”

Publish! Do I have the energy, the gumption to do this in a world that is new to me? I published in social science journals, but to see a piece of creative nonfiction in print would be thrilling! I have work to do.

Some of the essays make me proud. I love writing about nature. I love seeing my life as story. I love, especially, writing about late life and inspiring older women (which includes me!).

Deb suggested a writer’s colony. I would like to go to a place where writing is honored. I have done this by myself, but it would be inspirational to share with others.

More than anything, I always wanted to write a book. The book I want to write has to do with graceful aging and that topic has not left me. When I leave Stonecoast I am on my own to find the discipline, commitment and courage to keep on the writing path. The craft tools I learned at Stonecoast, the writing instruction from my mentors will inform my writing practice. Now I am on my own to become a writer.

When I was accepted into the program I asked to speak with Annie on the phone. I told her I wanted a writing program where spiritual writing was valued. I told her I thought of writing as a spiritual discipline.

“Wait a minute! Stop,” she insisted over the phone. “I know they say you should write every day. But my life is too busy—I never find the time to write every day. I write when I find the time.”

Her words come back to me often. I am not the daily disciplined person I thought. I write and then I flounder and then I avoid and then I sit down and pour ideas onto the page for several hours. Stop. Start. Erratic movement. But my style helped me through the program semester by semester, sustained my effort to write my thesis, and it will work in the future. I find my way to my voice, to my writing style, and to my words on the page.

I love to write. I love to read. I love the word.

Jo's Girl

My parents took care of me well—my own room in a house at the edge of an upper middle class community, excellent schools, more than enough clothes and food, lots of Christmas presents. I grew up in the 1950's, Dwight David Eisenhower and Mamie in the White House, people chanting, "I like Ike." World War II over, we, along with other veterans' families settled into new suburbs with shiny amenities. I swam at exclusive Crestmoor Pool, skied with the Eskimo Club, and for four weeks every summer rode horses at Geneva Glen Camp.

Beneath this prosperity lay poverty, discrimination, and illiteracy, social issues addressed by Kennedy and Johnson in Civil Rights legislation and the War on Poverty. As these problems simmered white children in families materially well-off were tutored in privilege. We knew the Cold War at school where we practiced air raid drills, diving under desks when the simulated drill siren went off. The threat of Communism translated into well-stocked homes: batteries, flashlights, canned goods and water.

Meanwhile, inside my home a silence grew, punctuated by my parents' arguing, my father's yelling, and cocktails mixed earlier and earlier each afternoon.

To escape the tension I retreated to my small yellow room at the end of the hall in our ranch style brick house where a window looked towards my mother's garden of white roses, larkspur, and blue delphinium. Cool in the dry summer heat, my room held a small bed, a four-drawer dresser, a child's desk and chair, and a bookshelf.

I closed the door to my room, curled up on my bed, blue stuffed bunny by my side, large brown-furred bear for a pillow, and read a library book from atop the desk, or a well-worn volume from my shelves. Turning pages I lost myself in a literary world of story and adventure, companionable and safe. With books as best friends I rested in my room for hours.

When she noticed my absence, my mother called to me.

“Where are you? Get your nose out of the book.”

Later, I took over the basement my older brother vacated when he left for college. Instead of the parties he held in the recreation room, I lay on the three-piece rattan sofa with light from two bulbs of the pole lamp shining onto my book. I stayed down there for hours.

“Susan, come up and set the table! How can you read like that? You’ll ruin your eyes.”

Books saved my life. With the omnipresent Cold War, the uneasy *détente* of my perfect middle class family, I escaped by turning white pages, crisp black letters clear and steady, satisfying and solid. Good books, an antidote to confusion, presented ideal worlds inhabited by imaginative friends. I traveled into homes where parents cherished the willful stubbornness and idiosyncrasies of their adventuresome daughters and threat of war faded away, nowhere to be seen.

Today we worry about literacy and education, important tools for social mobility. This has always been the case. Books, I argue, are also tools for emotional literacy, places giving birth to hopes and dreams, where emotions expand and flourish. Growing up in a family where appearances were not what they seemed I

gained the ability to feel, to laugh and cry and rage. I experienced things outside the bounds of my limited and perfect fifties family.

I loved Josephine March, heroine of *Little Women*, for her daring tomboyish ways, her hot temper and opinionated nature. I reveled in her plays and escapades. I envied her life: sisters and an adoring and industrious mother who did so much for others. Aunt March was my enemy for all the hurt and pain she caused Jo. I cheered when Jo went away to write and met Professor Baer, and angered when he did not support her magazine stories, until he turned out to be right and her book was accepted. He reappeared just at the right time, surprising her entire family with his proposal of marriage.

Once again Jo dismayed Aunt March, choosing love over money in order to stay with her “Professor Baer.” I followed Jo’s life, reading *Little Men*, and *Jo’s Boys*, entranced by her marriage and inspired when she founded a school, delighted by the antics of Jo’s boys. I wanted to go to a school for Jo’s girls, so, like Jo I could write and act in plays, never giving up my tomboyish ways. I minimized the pain in her life: insufficient means, the death of her beloved younger sister, missing out on a trip to Europe, losing the companionship of Laurie, and her father returned broken from the Civil War. Instead I chose the romantic spell cast by Alcott as I read *Under the Lilacs*, *Rose in Bloom*, *Eight Cousins* and *An Old Fashioned Girl*.

In sixth grade I adapted Chapter One of *Little Women* to a one-act play which took place in the March living room, the four sisters gathered around their mother in an easy chair. “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” stated Jo in her

opening speech. My teacher liked the play so much we produced it for the entire school with a set of the March living room, costumes from the Civil War period, cast members from two sixth grade classes, practices after school, and a dress rehearsal. Though I coveted the role of Jo, students voted for Helen, my best friend. The teacher told me not to feel badly—she put my name in bold letters on the program as writer and director.

In response to my pleas my mother enrolled me in a children's classics club and each month a bound yellow volume with red letters arrived: *Heidi*, *Black Beauty*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, *Kidnapped*. I devoured the works by Laura Ingalls Wilder, beginning with *Little House on the Prairie*. Then I was introduced to adults works: Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth*, Daphne DuMaurier, *Rebecca*, and Jane Eyre's *Wuthering Heights*.

It wasn't always classics I sought; I poured through every episode in the Nancy Drew mystery series with Nancy and her pal, George whose escapades thrilled me with daring and boldness. I tried to solve each mystery before they did, and as soon as I finished one I rushed to the library for the next in the series.

I loved books and I loved libraries. The librarian gave out reading lists at the Montview branch of the Denver Public Library where my mother took me weekly on our way home from Summer Bible Camp. In summer the children's librarian distributed colorful pages, blue, pink, yellow, with blank lines numbered one through thirty. Cheerful designs curved into the corners of the page: a happy reader under a tree or at the beach, a flower or bee.

Upon completion of each paper, the list of books read, a star with your name was tacked to a bulletin board in the children's section of the library. My summers were accented with as many books as I could read—I had two, even three stars. The kind of notoriety few children relished, nothing could stop me. I suppose you could say I was studious, but libraries drew me in—peaceful, trustworthy, reliable. In the silence I breathed a sigh of relief.

Two women at Palmer Elementary School, Missy McAuliffe and Miss Sloan, promoted my reading. Missy, our librarian, handed me book after book, more than my rightful limit to take home. In fifth and sixth grades I was her assistant in the library along with my friend, Helen. We sat in the library with Missy, a halo of white hair around her red spotted cheeks and blue eyes sparkling through thick lenses of her metal rim glasses.

The elementary school library, with its desks and metal shelves, bright bulletin boards and maternal librarian in a dark blue suit, was a warm haven. I arrived early to school and left late. In second grade I lived in Miss Sloan's second grade classroom. A thick woman with dark brown hair cut in an unflattering bowl shape around her face, she was devoted to two things: her mother at home and her class of seven and eight year olds. In her quiet and solid way she encouraged me to love reading and writing.

As she handed back the children's story I wrote, "The Little Red Wagon," with bright illustrations and a red yarn binding, she told me, "You are a writer." She fixed on me her warm smile, staring steadily down at me. In my mind's eye I stand transfixed by her gaze.

Irene Eklund, the crazy lady next door, shared my love of reading and let me sit in her small study, shelves spilling over with books. In her house, identical to mine, the study was the same room as my bedroom. Our collusion began when she gave me *Stuart Little* to read. She sputtered with laughter, repeating the line alerting the reader to Stuart's tiny size, small enough to be "rolled up in yesterday's newspaper." Right then knew her eccentricity was a good thing. She lent me book after book, thrilled with my enthusiasm for books, and praised me to my parents.

My parents held other opinions about my reading. At home I never saw my father read. When my mother read she preferred romance novels and best sellers, or the condensed volumes of classics sent to her for participating in great book discussions. My brother didn't read either, four years older he was busy with birds and stamps and models. He scoffed and called me four eyes. My mother nagged at me, "Get your nose out of those books and call one of your friends."

I was known as the bookworm. Bookworm. What a funny term. And we use it so readily. "Oh, she is just a bookworm."

I don't like worms. It took several summers under my father's glare before I could put a squirming worm onto a hook for fishing. I didn't like the slimy feeling left on my fingers. Bookworm. It has several meanings. Bookish. A person devoted to reading. A person who spends much time reading or studying. Too much time? Unusually devoted to reading and studying or spends a lot of time reading or studying. The slang definition: unsociable smart person. Like a nerd or a geek or a dork.

There is a second official definition. The larva of a wood-boring beetle that feeds on the paper and glue in books. Book lice. As if children do not have enough trouble with head lice as it is. A friend of mine in Maine recently opened a used book store. Before he could open his store and sell the used books he had to put them all in plastic bags so as to suffocate any bed bugs that were in the pages and bindings. Bed bugs! A scourge.

On a recent afternoon I Googled “bookworm,” only to find programs like Bookworm for Kids or Itty-Bitty Bookworm, both established to encourage children to read. I also found an on-line website sponsored by “Parents” magazine for, “Healthy kids. Happy families.” One parent queried, “Is it possible for my child to read too much?” The expert responded under the subtitle, “When does being a bookworm cross the line?”

A question with which I am familiar! The mother went on, “My fourth-grade daughter reads all the time: between classes, after school. She’d read at the dinner table if we let her. She has friends who she sees on weekends and does well in school, but is it possible that she’s reading too much?” Has this woman channeled my mother?

Our expert responded, “Every parent would like their child to be well rounded, doing well in school along with positive and appropriate hobbies, activities, friends, and athletic experiences. So here you are with a child who has her nose constantly in a book. Most parents would die for such a child. Yet you realize that she may be avoiding other experiences because of her seemingly obsession with reading.”

A check list followed, what to look for including: is the reading appropriate to her age; is she escaping or retreating because she is sad or lonely or angry—in which case she may need professional help; and do you set limits on her reading. In conclusion she advised, “You’re likely not going to talk her out of reading as much as she does, but rather you can guide her to make her reading the best experience it can be, of course, with limits.”

I am relieved limits were not set for me, that my reading was not rigidly monitored as a child. I might have hesitated to venture into Jane Austen and Willa Cather and Walt Whitman. Probably a professional would have helped me realize, as I did years later, that escaping from my home and family was a healthy response to the tension and unspoken emotion in the atmosphere.

I sing the praises of books and libraries and eccentric older women in dark colored suits with bright, probing eyes.

One summer in my mid-twenties I enrolled in a course at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, “Louisa May Alcott, a Feminist,” taught by a woman slightly older than me. She argued Alcott was a feminist, but middle aged women in the class would have none of it, claiming a feminist would not have made a living writing and selling books with such romantic notions. It was painful to tear apart the content of books I cherished so deeply: *Little Women* and *Little Men*, *Eight Cousins* and *Under the Lilacs*.

The instructor introduced us to *Work: A Story of Experience*, Alcott’s adult novel about Christie, a working class woman in the Industrial Revolution. Christie is

independent and ambitious, moving from job to job available to women, and along the way meeting a variety of people who educate her on issues of the time, including slavery and injustice. We read *Transcendental Wild Oats*, a scathing indictment of Bronson Alcott who founded Fruitlands, a failed communal utopian farm which lasted nine months. Alcott raged that the men like her father philosophized while she and her mother and sisters did all the work.

Alcott did not have an idyllic life; if not for her labor her mother and sisters, and father too, would have starved. She died at 55, possibly from mercury poisoning she incurred as treatment for typhoid fever she caught while volunteering during the Civil War—that or an autoimmune disease. The instructor argued that Louisa was a feminist in the life she led—single, bread winner, and concerned with social and political issues of her time including abolition and women’s rights. The debate raged on.

Five years ago in my book group we read *March* by Geraldine Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel which tells the story of father, Mr. March, at war during the years when *Little Women* takes place. Brooks was drawn to the tale of Father, “with the way a year lived at the edge of war has worked changes in the characters of the little women, but what war has done to March himself is left unstated.” After extensive research, Brooks wrote a novel depicting the misery and cruelty of slavery and of war as North fought South in bloody battles.

In his letters Mr. March chose to shelter his wife and daughters from the atrocities of war and insulated them by omitting much of what he experienced. He

never shared with his new wife, a passionate abolitionist, his connection with a slave woman that began twenty years earlier. At that time his actions served as collusion with slavery.

As the novel begins March writes home, thinking of his vow to write his wife and family and acknowledging he will perpetuate his deception, “Yet I am thankful that she is *not* here, to see what I must see, to know what I come to know. And with this thought I exculpate my censorship: I never promised I would write the truth.”

The conclusion of the Brooks’ novel is not a happy-ever-after ending: “As I set my foot upon the path leading to the little brown house, I felt like an imposter. Surely I had no business here. This was the house of another man. A man I remembered. A person of moral certainty, and some measure of wisdom, whom many called courageous. How could I masquerade as such a one? For I was a fool, a coward, uncertain of everything.”

Beneath the superficial surface of romance Geraldine Brooks looked into the complexity of life and saw truth that needed to be told. While the books of my childhood gave me permission to populate my world with imaginary friends and adventures, books I now read have complicated endings—things not always what they seem.

Books still tutor me in emotional literacy. Now I know books can also reveal what takes place behind denial.

Raising Daughters

I lay next to my mother when she died just before sunrise on June 21st, 1979. For the last few days we kept a round the clock vigil; my shift began at midnight. Around two was the time to call my brother, but I was wide awake, alert, and so I stayed on.

Just before she died I held my mother's cold hand, rubbing it to give some of my warmth to her. I pushed her hair out of her face.

In the previous weeks my mother and I did not speak of her dying. We could never bring ourselves to tell each other we loved each other, how we would miss each other. I spent my energy making sure she could die at home, making sure she was comfortable. I was too tired to know what I felt.

An unlikely gesture for me, unused to sharing spiritual sentiments in my family, I leaned over and with my right index finger traced the sign of the cross on her forehead. I gave a blessing and a release.

A few moments later came her last pull of breath, the well-named death rattle, then, silence. I noted, "Death smells," as her body seemed to deflate, giving off a stale slightly offensive odor.

I lay, stunned and relieved, unable to get up, unwilling to call my father and brother as I took in the moment, caught my own breath.

Then, slowly, coming out of her body, a golden light briefly filled the room, moved into the corner of the ceiling across from where we lay. I sat up, my eyes open wide. Then the light whisked away through the ceiling, leaving me staring at the pale bedroom wall.

My mother, Evelyn, lost herself from birth. The second-born of fraternal twins, she never could compete with her small-statured, dominant twin, born a few moments before her. Dressed alike through college until Louise married at age twenty-one, they followed their father's rules and bent to the wishes of the other. Louise gave up summer camp when my mother was too timid to go away overnight.

My mother gave up much more—her self-esteem, lost in the unfavorable comparison to her outspoken and dynamic twin. Whether or not anyone else in the family recognized this, I was not allowed to forget the regrettable forging, the clash of identities. Whenever I succeeded at something, asserted myself, stood out as a leader, my mother commented, "You are just like Louise."

Her bitterness, stored for years, poured over me at these moments. She asked me, "Why can't you be more like Ann and Jean?" My older cousins, Louise's daughters, were held up to me as shining lights. In turn, they adored my mother, finding her the more nurturing twin, and spending summers with us whenever possible. When we reminisce they complain their mother was too social, busy with activities outside the home. "Aunt Evelyn," they emphasize, "was the compassionate one. She had a warm heart."

It complicated the picture that twins married brothers. Uncle Chet, nine years senior to my father, Ray, was his hero. Following his role model, my father became a dentist and the brothers practiced together in Appleton, Wisconsin, propelling themselves into the upper middle class. Chet dominated the relationship, serving as my father's mentor. Chet and Louis also dominated the small-town social scene.

Ten years after Louise and Chet married in a big church wedding, my parents, Evelyn and Ray, were married in her parent's house. Given the backdrop of World War II, my mother wore a tailored gray-blue wool suit.

I remember a time I felt close to my mother, when I was four or five. Our family rented a cabin in Rocky Mountain National Park near Estes Park in Colorado. While my father and brother fished, my mother and I stayed behind where I played next to the small stream running by our cabin. I squatted close to the mud and stones and sticks, building water dams as my mother looked on. The sun swirled through the green aspen leaves, the same leaves that rustled in the wind as I lay down for my afternoon nap.

Mid-afternoon we walked down the dirt road to the little grocery store where each day she bought me an ice cream sandwich. Between two crisp sweet chocolate wafers they scooped creamy vanilla ice cream. My teeth snapped through the chocolate wafers, thin and crisp, to bite into the cold vanilla center. Then we walked back to play by the cabin until my father and brother returned.

It didn't occur to me that I was left in the world of women while men had the adventure. Near my mother and the clear running stream I felt content.

An earlier buried memory dislodged as the time neared for the birth of my first daughter. I sensed my own birth, my mother anesthetized as they delivered in the 1940's. As they dragged me from her womb with forceps I felt the pain of the world.

Next, in dream time, my mother gave me a bath in the sink basin, not in the Wisconsin home where I was born, but in Denver where we moved when I was three. She wiped my newborn body with a washcloth, as my brother stood outside the closed bathroom door, screaming, furiously pounding on the bathroom door.

I wakened from the dream queasy in my stomach—a familiar sense of being unwelcome.

My brother, almost four years older, spent a great deal of time with my mother, just the two of them, while my father served in World War II. Then I came along. On the first page of my baby book is a telegram: January 18, 1946 Stop Baby girl Susan Mother and child healthy Congratulations Ray.

Yellowed and frayed around the edges, this communication came from Framingham, Massachusetts, where my father was stationed at the end of the war. We met when I was four months old.

A therapist once told me I am unable to tolerate separation because I was abruptly parted from my mother at six months. Of this I have no memory, only family lore.

When they found a benign tumor the size of a grapefruit in her uterus she was whisked away to the Mayo Clinic, the best medical facility in the region. After a complete hysterectomy she stayed there to recover.

“How long was she gone?” I recently asked my cousin Jean, older my nine years. “Who took care of me?”

She couldn't remember. "Oh, I'm sure it was one of the women who helped my mother or yours."

"What was her name? Did she hold me?"

"How should I remember? Someone took care of you."

Shortly after her return from the hospital my mother lost her father, George Nathan Harder to a sudden heart attack. I never knew him, but my cousin tells me how she sat in his lap—she adores him to this day. In a family portrait he sits with a pleasant countenance while my grandmother, Iffy Beryl and their children stare straight into the camera.

About two years after my brother's birth my mother was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. We never talked about this in our family. I knew it was painful, my mother swallowed aspirin after aspirin and took up knitting to keep her joints active. But everyone said, "Evelyn is a trooper." I understood that pain was to be endured, complaining a weakness.

The first moment I registered her suffering came many years later, after her death, when I was looking through old family photographs. I saw a glossy print picture taken for a newspaper article about my family moving to Denver. In the picture my mother is standing on the stairs in a tweed wool suit, my brother to her right and me to her left. Three years old, I have my doll in my hand and stand looking out through the banister. Just short of forty, my mother has the lined, weary face of a sixty year old woman, the gnarled and enlarged joint hand of an eighty year old. The disease wore on her body.

When my father was stationed in Denver, Colorado for one year during World War II, before I was born, he brought my mother and brother. The climate there proved to be helpful to my mother. They returned to Wisconsin where I was born while my father served his last army stint in Massachusetts.

Not long after, when I was three, they borrowed money, packed the family, bought a new house, set up a new dental office, and moved to Colorado. My father loved the attractions of the Rockies—hunting and fishing and spending time in the mountains. My mother, never much of a mountain woman, spent time planting trees, maple and oak, turning our yard on Jasmine Street into a small oasis of deciduous trees in memory of home.

Occasionally the whole family stayed in a cabin in Grand Lake or Estes Park, or my mother packed gourmet picnics for day drives into mountainous terrain where we could sit streamside eating baked chicken, potato salad, deviled eggs, brownies and tropical dream bars.

All the visiting relatives from Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania remember those drives, the scenery my father showed them, the meals my mother provided. When those visits stopped my mother went on fewer and fewer mountain trips, my father on more and more.

My mother tossed questions at me as a child: “What will the neighbors think? What is wrong with you? Why are you always alone? Why don’t you fit in? Can’t you please your mother?”

When she was totally frustrated with me she added: “You are so selfish—I didn’t raise you this way. Don’t be so independent and headstrong. Don’t be so outspoken. Try a little harder—try to belong.”

At times I wanted to please to her. I wanted to fit in. But I didn’t know how. She died before I figured it out.

I can roll out one story after another about her devotion as a mother, about our seemingly perfect 1950’s middle-class life in a ranch house with a nice yard, two parents, two children, two cars and a dog. A stay-at-home mom and a father at work. PTA. Children’s choir at church. She did it all, driving me to dance lessons and drama lessons, even English saddle riding lessons.

My childhood seems idyllic.

I disappointed my mother. Not as feminine as she hoped, I preferred to roughhouse with the neighborhood boys or play with trucks in the dirt.

She tried to change me with permanents so my relentlessly straight hair would curl into ringlets, or, at least, into flowing waves.

Once, in desperation, I stuck my head under a faucet, rebelling against the stinging and noxious chemicals of the latest beauty product. That day she cried in frustration and tears, “You’re the most stubborn, unladylike girl! I don’t know what to do with you.”

For a period, when I was eleven or twelve, she and the doctor decided I was overweight and needed to lose fifteen or twenty pounds. They put me on Metrical—the dietary liquid meals made me so nauseous I gagged and stopped drinking it.

Deaf to all my protests, she took me to Merry Simmons dress shop, where sales women paraded around my dressing room, commenting with my mother about what looked good on me. I hated that shop and the frilly, prissy frocks they all thought made me such a charming young girl. Levis and tee shirts were my preferred attire. My mother was horrified.

During my high school years she felt proud of me because I earned high grades and the teachers' praise. I sang in the small madrigal chorus known throughout the city.

Still she asked, "Just try to fit in."

Spring of my senior year of high school the teachers voted me "Outstanding Senior Girl." I was totally surprised when a friend called me just as I got home from class, "Have you seen the year book?" I found the page with a big picture of me and a paragraph about my accomplishments. I knew about this award—given by teachers to a student not recognized by her peers as a prom queen or cheerleader. I felt proud as the phone rang all night.

My mother copied the year book page to send to all our relatives showing them I was a shining star, a testimony to her parenting. She never bragged about how I got there—not the route of popularity but standing out in other ways.

George Washington High School in 1960 was one of a few schools with private social clubs akin to sororities and fraternities and all the selectivity and exclusion that go with them. For two years I watched my friends pledge one or the other of these clubs

while I was never invited to join. I sat home during their meetings and gatherings and walked the school corridors in plain clothes while they sported outfits identified by colors and letters and pins. I felt numb—a defense to keep loneliness and pain at bay. I survived, all the while wondering, “What’s wrong with me?”

I studied, read, drove out to the foothills in my parents’ car, wrote poetry inspired by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. When they weren’t busy I hung out with friends from different groups. The hardest part was seeing the concern in my mother’s eyes.

By fall of my senior year I adjusted to my outsider status. One afternoon, I sprawled with my school books on my bed, studying in my new room vacated by my older brother off to college and decorated with white furniture, green and pink wallpaper, matching spread. Suddenly a din of cars honking accelerated from the corner of our street, four houses down, growing louder as they pulled into our driveway.

My mother, moving from the kitchen, opened the door and called out, “Susan, come here!” I rushed out to stand beside her looking out at the driveway as four cars pulled in, honking, followed by more cars pulled up curbside.

Four girls got out of the cars and walked up to our door, horns still blaring. Immediately I recognized the Bower twins, Susie and Joanie from my senior class. My mother opened the screen door and they surged in.

Joanie said, “Congratulations Susan, you have been selected to join this year’s pledge class of” I cannot remember the name of their club though it was one of the elite.

I was aware of people standing there smiling at me, especially my excited mother.

“Ah, can I have a moment?” I stuttered. I turned and walked back down the hallway towards my room, realizing my reaction was not what they expected.

In a flash I knew my answer and turned back around. Susie Bower, my good friend, was right there behind me as I spit out, “Susie, I can’t do this. I am flattered but I don’t want to join.”

“Oh, I knew it!” she exclaimed, “I told them you would say ‘No,’ but they wanted to ask you anyway. Good for you!” She hugged me warmly as I turned to go out and thank them very much, but to decline the spot.

They stared back, then smiled, all very gracious, glided silently to their cars, backed down the driveway, and went off honking toward the next house where they would extend the invitation, hopefully with more successful results.

I felt an enormous sense of relief until I saw my mother staring at me in shock, followed by a look of dismay, then hurt. She turned to walk back to the kitchen, speechless in her anger and frustration.

My relief was counter balanced by shame.

As I left for college the next year I felt obligated to heed my mother’s parting words, “Please try to fit in. Just once.” This time I chose to please her and, to my surprise, rush was fun—free food, glib chatter, entertainment, and new friends from the freshman dorm who trotted to the evening events.

I survived each cut up to the final night when I visited the Tri Deltas, Kappa Alpha Thetas and Kappa Kappa Gammas. Other girls in the dorm assured me these were the best so I dutifully reported to my mother who basked in my social success.

The night of final bids, three envelopes slipped under my door—I went to call my mother. Standing in line for the phone my spirits were deflated when Kit Andrews, the quiet rather gawky girl from the room next door, cried over the phone to her parents. She received one bid to a sorority she told her parents, but joining this group would forever seal her social fate—or so it seemed at the time. I remembered my exclusion early during my high school years—always the question, “What’s wrong with me?” When my turn came to use the phone my subdued spirits puzzled my mother and she told me not to worry so much about the other girl.

I suppressed my doubts, made her proud, and joined the Tri Deltas to become an overnight success in the “most popular” pledge class. My social standing was secured until I deactivated my junior year, unable support a group that discriminated against black coeds on campus.

My mother had a Saturday evening routine. After a certain hour, five o’clock, she had her first high ball. She made her drink, bourbon and water, and prepared her dinner, standing in her kitchen, moving between refrigerator, stove, sink and counter. She always ate well, some meat, a vegetable, a salad. She always had two high balls.

She did not eat in the kitchen nook, or at the dining table in the alcove off the living room. She set up a golden yellow metal TV tray, set it with a fork, knife and spoon, a nice paper napkin, and turned on the television before six o'clock. She sat

down just in time to watch Lawrence Welk chant, “Ah-one ah-two, wunnerful, wunnerful,” and introduce the Lennon Sisters.

With her dinner she had her wine. Saturday night television occupied her, one show at a time, until bedtime, after the ten o’clock news, when she retired for the night.

When I was in high school I tried my best to stay out until my curfew at midnight, but no matter how late, she was always awake, making sure I got home. When I was a freshman in college I continued to call on her solo Saturday nights; but I stopped calling on weekends as her slurred responses continued week after week.

When I went away to college, traveling out of state all by myself, I was able to do so only because my mother stood up to my father. He thought the local woman’s college was my best option—I could live at home and attend classes.

“After all,” he said, “She’s only a girl.”

In a rare act of defiance my mother took me to the guidance counselor asking him to help me find colleges out of state. She had guidelines: the school had to be social, not a school she labeled “too intellectual.” A school “Where I might be an ‘egg head’.” And I could not go too far—only to places where relatives lived nearby.

Sight unseen I headed off to a small college in Ohio. My mother shopped with me for bedding and supplies, for new clothes, helped me pack my trunk, and made sure I wore my new blue cotton suit so I would make a good impression. She bought my airplane ticket and, with my father, waved me good by at the airport.

I returned her courageous act by returning to Denver as infrequently as possible, busying myself with work and summer school. My mother visited me twice during college. The first time she came with my father on a trip to Washington D.C. The second time she traveled alone to my graduation.

For this second daring effort, motivated by her pride in me, she bore my wrath diverted from the father who did not accompany her to the ceremony, who never acknowledged my achievements. She was, as my father and others often commented, a good sport.

My mother died of cancer when I was thirty-three. She died before I remarried, before I had my two daughters, before my second divorce, before my six-year old daughter fought her own battle with cancer and won.

In the days before her death she asked me to sit with her as she wrote her obituary. While she listed being a wife and mother, her years with the Dental Wives Auxiliary and the PTA, she wanted me to emphasize the service project she created—dental wives gathered scrap amalgam from their husbands' dental offices, sold it and used the proceeds to help families in need. In her later years she proudly wore her Children's Hospital Volunteer pin—she worked fifteen years in the gift shop to raise money and talked with families as she stood at the cash register, always sympathetic to their sad and painful stories.

Her memorial service gathered family from across the country, friends, old neighbors, teachers and the librarian from my elementary school, the principal from

my high school, and volunteers from the hospital. The minister praised my mother's selflessness and compassion. We sang her favorite hymns.

As we walked side by side from the service my father stared around him.

"There were a lot of people here for a woman."

It was easy to underestimate my mother. I know I did.

Family Traditions

My mother lives on in music and food. When I listen to music or bake a casserole I think of my mother—these are her legacies to me.

She introduced me to music, took me to choir rehearsals, served as choir mom, and always played music on the radio and the television. Her favorites were Perry Como and Dina Shore. We sang to the radio as we drove in the car, she in her soft, sweet soprano and me in a melodic alto. We laughed as we sang, silenced only by my father who claimed we hurt his ears, damaged by the high fevered flu he developed while serving in the army. Hisses from his hearing aid were always an excuse for him to shut down the noise.

Still we found our outlets. In the summer we drove to Cheeseman Park in downtown Denver where musicals were performed outdoors on summer evenings. Our favorites were *The King and I* and *South Pacific*. We spread a blanket on the ground, opened the picnic basket and ate the cold chicken or the slices of ham, crudités and fruit. My mother always packed the drinks, sometimes her high balls hidden in thermos bottles. On the way home we sang “One Enchanted Evening,” or “I Could Have Danced all Night,” savoring the music.

We drove me to Central City in the mountains for the opera. Dressed up, we went to lunch, walked over to the barn where we clapped with the square dancers who preceded the performance, and climbed the stairs of the Opera House to watch “Madame Butterfly,” and “Carmen,” and “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” from the first row of the balcony.

I was her date for music.

Many years after my mother's death a desire came over me to take her to the *South Pacific* reprisal staged at Lincoln Center in New York City. I purchased an evening ticket, center stage balcony first row, sat down and envisioned her sitting next to me as the music flowed off the stage: "Bali Hi" and "I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair." I looked to where I pictured her sitting to see her smile. At that moment I felt love for her, love held back too often, too long ago. I knew that things were right between us.

I shared this legacy with my daughters, taking them to concerts—Nancy Griffith, Allison Kraus, Dar Williams—when they were barely able to sit on the edge of the seat and touch the floor with their feet. When they were very little they listened to Raffi tapes, never in the car without music, always singing along at full voice. Then their tastes expanded to folk music and blue grass, classics like Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, James Taylor, Paul Simon and Mary Chapin Carpenter.

When we bought our first new car, a bright silver Toyota Corolla, I slipped a tape into the player as we pulled out of the lot, Paul Simon singing, "Going to Graceland."

"Girls," I told them, "It seems an act of grace that we have this new car. What shall we name it?"

"Gracie," piped up one. "Gracie," chimed in the other.

Throughout that summer, we listened to the Graceland tape at full blast.

When I got divorced I thought my life with men was over—mid-forties with two small children was not exactly in the “looking for” category on dating websites. As it turns out, a man two years older, Stuart, a bachelor, took a shine to the girls and me—a package deal. Our first date was to take the girls to see Alison Kraus, who, as it turns out, was one of his favorite musicians as well.

He was a bit overwhelmed, and, at the same time, a good sport as he crawled down the row of the packed audience to get them one thing or the other—programs and drinks and candy. Then he watched me take them to the bathroom several times. But they paid attention to the music and to him, a bit suspicious of this new companion. The date ended as he helped me carry their limp bodies into the house and hastily said goodnight while I got them to bed.

Their personal favorite, each liking different songs, was Nancy Griffin. I bought all of her CDs and we listened to them incessantly—the girls clamoring to hear them in the car. Then she came to Boston, a concert at Symphony Hall. I made an executive decision to take Jenn to this concert, to have a special mother and daughter evening. Almost three years older than Lizzie, it was her turn first.

When I ordered the tickets over the phone I heard the warm voice of a woman on the line as I asked for two tickets with the best view.

“I want this to be special for my little girl—her first concert at Symphony Hall—just the two of us.”

“How old is she?” When she heard she warmed to the whole idea. “I took my young daughter to a concert once.”

As these conversations unfold, sometimes all the easier with a stranger on the other line, I told her how Jenn had just finished her treatment for cancer and how much she loved Nancy Griffith. It was my “make a wish gift.”

She opened up even further. “Nancy survived cancer herself.”

“I know,” I replied. “She was an inspiration for me.”

“I’m going to put you in the best seats in the house.”

We sat in a loge overlooking the stage, leaning forward over the balcony to look right onto Nancy and her band as they danced and laughed, changed instruments and tuned. When the concert was over a man came to get us and asked us to follow him. I was surprised, uncertain what to do.

“I am taking you backstage to meet Nancy Griffith.”

Speechless, we followed him down back stairs, behind the curtains and across the stage to a small room where Nancy and her band were relaxing. When she saw Jenn, Nancy came over.

“Is this the little girl?” She bent down to introduce herself and to shake Jenn’s hand. “I hope you enjoyed the concert.”

Jenn, her eyes wide as saucers, was utterly tongue-tied. Nancy stood up, tousled the short stubble on Jenn’s head. Then she signed an eight by eleven black and white portrait with a thick black pen, said good bye, and we were shown the way to exit.

That night it seemed to me that music saved my daughter’s life—the hope and spirit and resilience that Nancy Griffith gave her music from the depths of her own recovery.

It was almost two years later when I took Lizzie on her mother-daughter concert excursion, once again to hear Nancy Griffith, this time in Mechanics Hall in Worcester. Maybe I didn't splurge in quite the same way—front row balcony midway on the left side—but our view was clear and the acoustics in the magnificent hall produced immersion in surround-sound.

That evening was no less rewarding for me. Lizzie, like her sister before, was dressed in her finest, and behaved with uncustomary poise, accented by a few twirls in the hallway as we exited, much to the delight of many. We left without a special audience with the musicians, no signed autograph from Nancy. Instead I bought her a poster that she held tightly, rolled in its cardboard wrapper.

Hers was the gift of normalcy: no special attention, no life-threatening illness, and no sense that she had been deprived, during the grueling ordeal, of a mother's love.

Now my daughters bring me to concerts, introducing me to their music—new rockers and folk singers, music they tell me is on the cusp like Ani DiFranco, Ben Harper, and John Mayer.

They cook for me too, venturing further into culinary adventure with vegetarian meals, vegan dishes, herbs and spices fresh and plentiful. I expanded beyond my mother's cooking, building from her fifties world of meat and potatoes. But the girls introduce me to bok choy, kale, arugula, kale and coconut milk. To tell the truth, I would rather either of them cook a meal for me—by far the better cooks.

The last time we were together for Thanksgiving preparation, the girls cooked most of the meal, including their grandmother's dried bread, celery and sage stuffing.

Music and cooking bind us together, and bind me to my mother.

My mother ran the kitchen, her domain, with tight control. Each dish, pot and pan, the canned goods, spices and baking supplies was on its designated shelf. I knew it was her kitchen and I loved to linger nearby as smells emanated out into the house: pot roast and browned potatoes, spareribs and sauerkraut, chicken and gravy.

I wanted my kitchen to be a source of warmth for my small family, but I had to remind myself to lighten up when my daughters came in to stir a pot, to help to make the pasta or grab the tongs to toss the salad, to make their own snacks, and for my youngest, Lizzie, to make her messes of flour, water, food color, and whatever else she put in. Compared to my mother's my kitchen was messy—a single working mother had to let something go and I loved their company.

I liked to cook the girls their favorite foods: oven-baked chicken, meatloaf made with ground turkey, pesto, Kraft macaroni and cheese in a box. Then I felt like a real mother, and my kitchen felt warm like my mother's used to feel—all cozy with moisture and scent.

Each year at Christmas time, when the girls were little, we spent an afternoon making cookie batter, rolling out the dough to cut out the cookies with their favorite shapes, baking them, and then, carefully decorating the cookies. Lizzie liked the stars and the Christmas balls. Jenn liked the reindeer and Santa. Just like my brother and I, they never quarreled as they bent into this task.

When I was young I slathered cookies with frosting, loaded them with silver bells, colorful sprinkles, chocolate bits, and cinnamon dots. Passing on the tradition I felt my mother there with us, with the granddaughters she never met.

How she would love them—Jenn with her sober graciousness and Lizzie with her effervescent energy. I would have liked sharing the joy of mothering.

Sometimes, working in my kitchen I think of her, especially at the holidays when I open one of her cookbooks to a traditional recipe, only to find a note, in her jagged handwriting, advising me of just exactly how she put the ingredients together. Each time I eagerly show the girls.

“Look, it’s your grandmother’s note.”

When they were little we looked together, her handwriting a sign from the grave, from some place where she watched us. I missed my mother then and told the girls as we prepared one of her recipes, especially the turkey stuffing handed down from her mother and grandmother.

Every Thanksgiving, standing over the counter, I follow her directions, written on a stained index card, for mixing, kneading and rolling out pie dough. Once the crust is in the Pyrex pan, I follow her recipe for custard, perfectly duplicating my mother’s pumpkin pie. Proudly I gain fame for my pie-baking skills.

The girls didn’t favor the spicy pumpkin, instead they clamored in June for her strawberry glazed pie or, in the fall, for her cinnamon-laced apple pie. Year after year, as the fruits came in to season, we got out my mother’s recipes and made her pies.

One year, when she was in college, Jenn came to me and asked me to show her how I made my pie dough. She stood next to me, just as I had with my mother, and watched as I “pinched out” a little salt, a little baking soda, carefully sifted the flour, folded in the Crisco and slowly added cold water as I mixed the dough to just the right consistency.

I was patient with her, just as my mother had been. Jenn carefully followed each step: laid the rolled crust in the pan, filled the crust with the apples, and watched as it baked in the oven. She was excited, when the pie cooled, to cut into light and flaky crust, as good as mine and that of my mother before me.

Standing Alone

Love was sparse in my family and I rest blame on my remote father who hoarded love like a fearful banker in a tight money market. He might loan you some if he deemed you worthy, but the requirements were not clear, the application process was frightening, and there was always interest charged. In rare instances when love seeped out it was as if the bank inexplicably lowered rates and the depression was over.

Stern and judgmental, unpredictably he burst into angry tirades—pulling us into emotional quicksand of shame and embarrassment. It was hard to know how to act, how to measure up.

When I was five I beat up my best friend, Dickie Plus while we played cowboys and Indians. I insisted on being Geronimo and got my way when I walloped him with my fists. Bigger than him, he went off crying as I called after him, “Mama’s boy.” His mother complained to my mother and we didn’t play much after that. Years later I heard he was a doctor, married to his high school sweetheart.

I bullied Carl Eklund, the younger boy next door. When no one else was around we played with my bright orange tractors and trucks, Allis-Chalmers printed in black letters along the sides. My childless Uncle Myron sent these from Wisconsin where he sold farm equipment, never thinking trucks were inappropriate for girls.

Carl and I pushed and pulled them through the dirt pile in the side garden of his home, building roads and dams. When he didn’t do what I wanted I yelled at him,

then grabbed the trucks to move then another direction. His mother, reading on the back porch, got mad, and yelled at me to stop.

Possessor of an amazing library, she introduced me to my favorite books, including *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. When she yelled I shaped up quickly. With her books-on-loan policy, she was not someone I wanted to alienate. She also invited us to our mountain estate, Baerdom in the Rockies, every summer and winter where I spent hours on horseback or ice skating.

When I learned she died I felt regret—I wished I had told her I was sorry I bullied her son. Now that I was also a single mother I understood her fierce protectiveness. Sometimes my behavior wasn't so nice.

I still bully the nearest man—belittling, finding the sensitive spots, inflicting damage. Hurt him before he hurts me is a practice that keeps me at a distance.

Once, feeling lonely, I thought I would give eHarmony a try. I went outside my comfort zone to date Bill, a match they made for me, though he seemed far from my ideal partner. We went dancing, listened to music, attended the theater; he was generous and treated me well. But I couldn't see us growing old together—felt instead the ominous possibility of confinement.

One night, after a year together, he ventured a conversation about living together. In reply I surprised him: "No! I want to break up."

Bill cried out, "I didn't see that coming. You must be so wounded. What ever happened to you?"

I had no answer. A therapist once told me I do not do well with intimacy.

As a child and teenager I favored my father. A year or two ago, talking with my brother, trading our few family stories, we were surprised to discover we both liked the same family picture.

In the small black and white photo my father stands erect in his military uniform. My brother, seven years old, is at his left, dressed in overalls and a striped long-sleeve t-shirt. On my father's right, I squat, rump close to the ground as my three year old hands play with a flower. We stare solemnly out at the camera.

"Our mother wasn't there," he said.

"I know. I've thought about that. She must have taken the picture."

Why do we like it so much?

My first husband seduced me with his intellect and quick wit, with his respect for my intelligence. A junior in college, spending the year studying in Chicago and working with inner city groups, he took me seriously and I fell in love with him.

According to the conventions of my time, don't have sex or live together before marriage, and, for me as well as other coeds in the 60's, graduation with a BA was not enough for a woman—the engagement ring as important as the diploma. I didn't stop to think about ways I might change, the complexity of commitment. I never realized marriage could be as confining for me as it was for my mother, nor that I picked a man similar to my cold aloof father.

I forged ahead, returned to campus my senior year with a ring, and married two weeks after my college graduation, pushing up the wedding to qualify for married student housing at the University of Chicago.

My mother, happy to have her daughter married, balked at the hastily planned wedding in Chicago. She did her best to support me. I see the two of us trudging along Michigan Avenue on a cold early April day, 1968, pushing through a cold wind blowing our hair and skirts as we walked towards the Chicago Athletic Club to pick out invitations, menu and flowers for the small luncheon reception.

Over protests she bought a knee-length, inexpensive white eyelet dress and white pumps at Marshall Fields for my wedding gown, and scaled down the flowers for my bouquet and for the chapel of the Chicago Divinity School on campus. We cut the same corners on the wedding planning as she did years ago when she married during World War II.

I brushed off my mother as she tried to question me over lunch.

“Susan, are you really ready to get married?” She cautiously ventured.

“Could you consider slowing down a bit?”

Only after the divorce did I hear her as she told me she had real doubts about my future husband. “He seemed like a cold fish.”

I rushed ahead to embrace a future where I would be taken seriously as an intellectual, oblivious to the fact that he never wanted children, that he studied war and military tactics, or that he lived solely in the world of academia.

Five years later, when the marriage fell apart, my family blamed me. One cousin sent me an article from the *Denver Post*, fall 1972, “What Makes the Perfect

Child Go Astray,” claiming that underneath the perfect exterior of exemplary youth were cracks in the armor of perfection that were exposed in one misstep, one travesty of convention: dropping out of school, say, or getting a divorce.

My mother called my soon-to-be-divorced husband to ask him what she had done wrong. He called me to ask what was wrong with my mother—I bristled when he strongly hinted I took after her.

My Uncle Chet, family patriarch, summarized his reaction to the first divorce in the family: “Susan does not know how to support her husband’s career.”

Several years later, when joining the Catholic Church, I agreed to go through the annulment process even though the marriage was not Catholic. After gathering information from family and friends and my therapist it was the finding of the Marriage Tribunal that my marriage be annulled because, at the time, I was too immature to make the commitment. Fair enough, I thought. Then the presiding priest read some of the comments written by my former husband—the first time I heard some of them—comments about my neurotic mother, my supposed frigidity, my cruelty.

I sobbed. “I wish I had never done it.”

“Done what?” asked the priest.

“Asked for a divorce.”

Scowling at me the priest held the letter in the air. “You had to leave this man to grow; he sounds like a little boy needing to be taken care of.”

The priest’s words come back to me at times; still I feel the self-blame, a sense of failure and worthlessness. Of imperfection.

It took ten years to say, “Yes,” to marriage again. Without my mother I was on my own to rent the hall, hire the band, order the flowers, cater the dinner and make the guest list.

This time I bought a long white dress, asked my friends to be bridesmaids, and tried out several bands for dancing. At the reception, hearing the first strains from the Bo Winniker Swing Band Bob and I jumped to the dance floor, quickly followed by our friends.

My mother-in-law laughed and told me one of her friends said: “I never saw a bride dance so much at her own wedding!”

Dancing our first solo dance before family and friends, my new husband smiled, “This is the happiest day of my life.”

This time he was the one too immature to make a commitment. He left me with daughters eleven months and almost four, a large dog, a house in the suburbs with a sizeable mortgage, and a new part-time job.

When I learned he had an affair during my pregnancy, left me for this other woman, I felt a bright red letter bright red letter on my breast—W for worthless.

Downhill skiing was a sport my father and I shared. When I was ten years old we skied on a bitterly cold February day in Colorado. Wind and snow-like ice pellets blew into our faces, making glasses steamy. I fell when I failed to see a mogul ahead, my head down to ward off the stinging cold. He barely stopped, just glared up at me

lying crumpled on the slope. Each time I fell it took more time to get up and when I got down he stood waiting in the tow line.

The lines grew shorter as the day progressed, skiers heading to the warming house. I yearned to follow them towards the drifting smoke from the large stone chimneys. I imagined warm soup or hot chocolate and hoped he would see my longing and move in that direction. But, no, he returned to the line.

Finally I said, "Dad, my hands are cold."

"Stop complaining," he said, with a steely look.

I followed behind. Ahead, sitting on the tow, I knew was an unendurable few moments sitting exposed to the wind.

"Dad, I am really cold."

"Quit whining."

His loud reply turned heads; those around us stared and seemed to carry judgment of my behavior. I wanted to disappear, but stayed with my dad for two or three more runs. By the time we walked into the warming house I could no longer feel my toes. The pain was past.

Sixth grade at Palmer Elementary School was the year for the long-anticipated Father-Daughter Dinner Dance. Normally disinclined to shop, I put up no protest when my mother bought me a light blue taffeta dress, the bodice covered with embroidered lace, and patent leather Mary Jane's to be worn with white socks trimmed with lace.

Then I found out my father, President of the Denver Dental Society, did not feel he could miss the monthly dental meeting. He would not attend.

I cannot remember complaining—it was not permitted.

I learned then, if not before, I was not worth enough for my father to break a professional commitment, not even on this special night in my sixth grade life.

Sixteen years old, my brother Bob took me, wearing his tweed jacket, creased brown wool slacks, polished loafers, well-gelled one inch flat top. He took me to the dance so I would not miss it. I reminded him of this event last time we were together, remembering how proud I was to dance with him among the fathers and daughters. I imagined I was the envy of all the girls.

My brother had his own wounds. Often berated, he also took the brunt of our father's wrath.

One time when we were traveling, packing the car trunk, Bob did something my father didn't like. Suddenly my father began yelling at my brother.

"You are stupid! Why did you do that!"

He went on and on, spewing out his rage.

I stood shocked with my brother beside the car. A gawky boy, thirteen or fourteen, he stood speechless and then turned and walked away. When he sobered up, began treatment for addiction after the bitter ending of his second marriage, my brother confessed me he began to drink when he was sixteen. Not at the Father-Daughter Dinner Dance, but later on that spring.

Bullying ran in the family. My brother picked on me. Like other older siblings he rarely tolerated me tagging along after him, but his warnings carried a vicious tone. On one family outing in the foothills outside of Denver, my brother was allowed to take his new BB gun. I ran around, five years old, chasing him while he climbed among the rocks.

Suddenly I felt a sharp pain just above my right eye. I put my hand to the spot and felt some blood. I looked up, surprised. Bob was standing a short distance in front of me, behind a rock, BB gun in hand, his eyes open wide. I started to cry. My mother rushed to see if I was okay.

My father yelled, "You could have put out her eye."

My mother watched silently. My father looked down. My brother got to keep his BB gun.

A few years later, bored, my brother agreed to play with Dickie Plus and me. He took the lead and urged us to follow him across Sixth Avenue onto the grassy tree-line boulevard. Eagerly we followed where we were forbidden to go on our own. We walked a ways and then he climbed a tree and stood on a branch above us.

"Hold still," he commanded.

We giggled in anticipation. Then we felt the wet.

Looking up in the branches we saw him peeing on us. Stunned for a minute, we backed up and ran away shrieking. Dickie threw up in the grass as I stood with him.

I never told my parents.

I punished my brother, goading him to hit me, and then calling, “Ouch,” in pain. My mother, tired of endless bickering, yelled at Bob, “Go to your room and stay there. When your father gets home, I’m going to tell him what you’ve done.”

Our father walked in, five thirty on the dot, and my mother met him at the back door. Tired after standing on his feet all day looking into patients’ mouths, he walked down the length of the house, pulling off his coat and tie.

As he opened the door to my brother’s room he removed his belt. The door shut and I heard the sound of spanking muffled through the door. I heard no cries. My father came storming out, his face contorted by anger.

I stepped aside. I knocked on my brother’s door. “Go away. Get out of here. Leave me alone.”

My brother built up a powerful rage. At times he could be a mean drunk.

Still I always knew in my father’s eyes it was better to be male. I could have a car when I turned sixteen and another when I totaled that one. I wouldn’t have to beg him to teach me to drive; he would have expected me to be independent, to drive well.

I wouldn’t have had to prove a girl could be strong and independent.

He would want me to go to school and make something of myself—prepare to be the family supporter just like he was. He wouldn’t expect me to attend the nearby women’s college, and would have forgiven me for traveling to a school fourteen hundred miles away. Perhaps he would have driven me there, or given me a car rather than have me earn my own.

He might have attended my college graduation.

Especially he would have been proud of my graduate education, my PhD, my daughter the doctor, the college professor.

But I was born a girl and relegated to second class citizenship.

My emotional legacy from my father is not alcoholism as it was for my mother and brother. I push myself to be noticed, to meet with approval. I try to please, carefully gauging the moods and reactions of those around me.

It plays out, my favorite high school teacher once told me, as counter-dependency—a cocktail of insecurity and defiance. “I don’t need anyone!” my battle cry.

A few years ago I visited my eldest cousin, older by twenty years, who lives with his wife in the foothills outside Denver. With no daughters of their own they gave me special attention, treating me like a young lady when I was growing up.

He told another of his rambling stories, recounting how my father took him and his new wife on excursions to the mountains. He paused in his story, looked at me.

“Your father was a good man, not such a good husband or father, but a good man.”

Stunned, I missed the rest of his tale. Did he really say that?

When I was a young girl my father and I had a tradition on the last day of school for the summer. Wy piled me into the car after dinner, the two of us off to Dairy Queen.

As I got older I ordered my own banana split: no pineapple, all vanilla, extra cherries. I ate the whole thing sitting with him on the picnic bench next to the window stand.

And when I was little my father woke me each morning with a light shake on my bum. “Suz, it’s time to wake up.” With my personal alarm clock I loved to wake up.

This ended when I reached puberty. Then he stood at the doorway to my room and called out for me, “Susan, get up.” After a while I told him to stop. I shut the door to my room and began to use an alarm clock.

We stopped our visits to the Dairy Queen.

My father was different in his dental office, dressed in his white lab coat—professional, warm, he treated me as he treated his patients. I walked through the carpeted reception room with upholstered chairs and tables with magazines, past the counter where Dulcie, his receptionist sat, free to walk into his lab where he prepared dental models and did paper work. Over his desk hung portraits of my brother and me, smiling out at the photographer in our dressiest clothes. I had a place there.

When I was older I worked for him in the summer so Dulcie could take her vacation. I answered the phone, made appointments and drew out the patient files for each day. If it wasn’t busy I sat at the counter and read my book. The summer before college I sat in his office alone when he went on fishing trips. I liked when he said, “You run the office.” I liked the stillness as I walked through his treatment room, lab and reception area, stopping always to stare at those pictures, capturing me in a ten year old gaze.

My first marriage my parents came to Chicago for the midwinter dental meeting. One night my husband and I, knowing my father's fondness for German food and beer, took them to the north side, Zum Deutschen Ecke, a restaurant in the heart of Germantown.

As we ate sauerbraten and cabbage, drank dark lager and Weiss beer, my father sang with the lederhosen clad accordion player standing by our table to serenade. I laughed and sang along, pleased to show my father a good time.

Suddenly my mother stood up, pushing her chair away from the table.

"You never have this kind of fun with me! Why don't you treat me this way?"

As customers, waiters and musicians looked on, I urged my mother to sit down. My father, disgusted, threw down his napkin.

"Mom, stop, you're yelling. It's not true. Please sit down. We're all having a good time."

When she sat we became a frozen tableau.

Inside my clothes closet in a dust-covered and corner-frayed shoe box sit a pair of red Capezzio flats with pointed toes and a delicate strap which stretches across the foot to attach to a red leather button.

After my mother died my father came to visit me, sometimes for big events and other times to see Maine and Vermont, the ocean and mountains, to eat seafood. He came for my PhD graduation party, a raucous gathering of friends with dancing

and an impromptu march with Pomp and Circumstance played on kazoos. He came for my wedding and walked me down the aisle.

He bought the red shoes when he came for the baptism of my oldest daughter, Jennifer. As we walked in Newton Centre after lunch, he pushed the stroller and I leisurely looked into store windows. I stopped to peer at the red shoes on display.

“What are you looking at?” he queried.

“Those shoes look like fun!”

“Why don’t you try them on?”

I knew our one-earner budget did not include new shoes so I hesitated until he held open the door and we walked in.

“Do you have the red Capezzio flats in size nine?” I asked the sales clerk.

She returned with the small black box, one I was familiar with from childhood shopping with my mother who insisted I have colorful shoes to match my dresses and skirts.

“Try them on,” my father urged.

They fit perfectly. “Just like gloves,” I sighed.

My father said, “We’ll take them.”

I put them on and we walked out of the store.

“Thank you so much, Dad.” I stammered, utterly surprised.

I wore those shoes to the baptism. The shoes in their box moved with me three times in twenty-six years and sit in my closet to take out and remember.

When he came, three years later, for the baptism of my youngest daughter, Elizabeth, he told me he was dating a new woman. Over lunch, as I kept Jenn and Lizzie

occupied, I asked him a few questions about her. Too busy to read the signs, I didn't recognize he was responding with reserve, guarded. I failed to see his scowl.

"Dad, do you think you might ever remarry?"

"That's none of your business!"

He shoved up from the table and stomped out. Stunned, I looked around as surprised waitresses stared at me. I saw my father standing on the street outside the window, paid the bill, bundled up the girls, and joined him to walk silently home.

Three months later, around the twenty-first of June, the anniversary of my mother's death nine years earlier, my father remarried. He called to tell me about it a few days later. It was the same day my husband moved out, telling me he could no longer live with me because I was so controlling and angry, all along involved with his new woman.

I never really warmed up to my father's second wife. At his memorial service she retold the story of their elopement to Las Vegas, their marriage ceremony in a wedding chapel.

"We had a party with our friends when we got back to Denver," she told us all, happy in the remembering.

About a month before he died I was surprised to hear my father ask me, "When are you coming?" An innocent question in most cases, but unusual in my relationship with my father. His wife, Ginger, wrote, "I'm afraid. Your dad is slipping and we are losing him fast." I got the note on the day dad fell.

The fall, the blow to his head, resulted in inter-cranial bleeding. While he seemed to get better, he could not swallow. At the same time he was working to regain his strength at the rehabilitation facility, he was starving and dehydrated, never able to regain his strength or clear consciousness. He was dying for a month.

He was sent by ambulance to the hospital and I rushed to Denver. I entered his room to see two nurses, an aide, and my father's doctor. In the confusion my father looked up at me, panic on his face.

"I don't know her. Who is she?"

He kept motioning for them to get me away.

"I am his daughter," I announced.

His doctor, who had been away for a few weeks, was surprised at the turn of events. He advised they put my father on a feeding tube.

"No!" I argued. "He does not want any heroic measures. No resuscitation. He needs hospice."

The doctor, shocked by my insistence, decided not to argue with me; instead he returned to his office to read the medical notes. Meanwhile, my father insisted he did not know me. He continued to glare at me, even as the room calmed down. Later he recognized his wife and my brother when they entered his room.

Early the next morning the doctor called. He apologized, telling me he agreed with my wishes, those of my father.

"Your father will be moved to hospice later this morning."

I stayed with my father, sleeping on a cot in his room for the three nights he lingered. My brother and I were concerned that I might be intrusive—my father was such a solitary man. But I could not bring myself leave him lying in the room all by himself.

In the early morning of November 1st, I wakened from a cramped sleep on the uncomfortable mattress, surprised I slept at all. It was very quiet. I heard no breathing.

I went over to my father's side and found his body cold.

I sat with him in silence for about thirty minutes. In the last days I held on to a faint hope he recognized me, and at one point he seemed to gesture for me to come close. When I leaned over him I felt the faint pressure of a hug. I hoped so.

I called my brother from the room and went to inform the nurse.

"I'm sorry you were sleeping when your father died," he said. "Don't feel badly—it happens quite often."

"Oh, I don't feel bad," I said. "I am glad I didn't get in his way."

My meditation teacher recognizes many students feel unworthy. A poor self-image leads to self-judgment and the belief that she is unworthy to attain inner peace. He tells us the Dalai Lama calls this negative self-talk. In western terminology, our teacher (a trained and highly regarded psychologist) labels this attachment disorder. Western-born children, unlike children in Tibet are often made to feel they have to be perfect, to measure up in order to be loved.

I stare at him when he tells this.

I told another teacher I could not get past the feeling of unworthiness that keeps coming up. She reminded me to practice the Loving Parent meditation.

“You mean the Loving Mother meditation.”

“No, it is Loving Parent. It can be Loving Father.”

I heard only Loving Mother when we were taught this exercise.

During the next guided meditation I tried to imagine an ideal father who loved me just the way I needed to be loved.

I froze in my posture. It wasn't imaginable—a loving father.

I can only keep practicing. In time, they tell me, I will soften, tears will flow, and I will feel the love. I would like that.

Inheritance

My father introduced me to the mountains of Colorado, visiting them on weekend excursions to the western slopes near the Gunnison River, where my playground was a panorama of granite slopes adorned with aspen, juniper, columbine, and Indian paintbrush, serenaded by Stellar jays, mourning doves and mountain chickadees, and vast skies.

In turn, I introduced my daughters to mountains, bringing them to Colorado, Montana, Utah, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and New York. Our first excursion, July, 1989, a year after their father moved out, our three girl unit stayed in a rustic pinewood cabin in Glacier National Park on our way to visit friends in Helena. Two years old Lizzie rode in the metal frame backpack, peering over my shoulder, hands alongside my head pointing in delight. Let down she ran on chubby legs that just managed to stay upright over roots and rocks along the sloping path. Jenn, older by three years, walked at my side on smooth ranger-tended paths down towards a stream.

Here, at stream's edge, the girls played in detritus that washed up streamside, breaking up clumps of twigs and leaves to send into flowing water. Squatting butts close to water and mud, they stared intently as vessels sped off in the swift current.

Back in Massachusetts we hiked in hills in Hopkinton State Park, less than a mile from our house, where they maneuvered slight elevations and stone-studded, root-bound trails. I watched them ahead of me and slowed my pace to their determined steps, walking on their own. Sunday afternoons I packed a red backpack

with their favorite snacks—raisins, granola bars, apples—water bottles, apple juice boxes, jackets and the Hopkinton State Park trail map.

We drove up the main road to the park where I left the car in the lower lot by the entrance station. From there we crossed the road and picked up Fox Trot Trail which meandered upward about three hundred feet and three quarters of a mile to the top of the hill looking out onto Hopkinton Reservoir where the girls loved to play on the beach in summer.

The first part of the trail moves upward for a quarter of a mile and then flattens a bit to wend through a granite boulder field, memento of the glacial age. I could never move the girls quickly through this space of timeless stone. On each hike I desired to walk directly to the top of the hill and then drop down to stroll along the water. Each hike was thwarted by their propensity to stop and stay, lingering for longer periods of time. More often than not this was far as we got; they outnumbered me—two to one—and so we stayed.

Jenn jumped on and around boulders, while Lizzie toddled up behind her, picking up small stones. Together they paused to look around at flowers and twigs and rocks, down on their haunches, peering intently at whatever caught their fancy. They were happy to spend time this way, stopping only for a snack and a sip of juice. Watching them I relaxed, leaned on a warm boulder, looked up in dappled sunlight at just-turning oaks, maples, elms and birch scattered over the hillside.

Most afternoons, given enough time, they settled into building small villages for a nameless tribe of Indians. Knowing we would move no further I joined them to build teepees and pens, paths, gardens and gathering spaces.

A few larger twigs, seven or eight inches in length, made the cross poles. Thinner twigs were laid up against these for the sides. Last some moss was placed inside for the floor. They added interior design: small stones and tiny twigs for fireplace or beds, acorn shells for platters and dishes. People, one or two inch twigs, trotted around inside the teepees manipulated by their small fingers, and moved about freely in the gardens or village paths.

Jenn had greater dexterity to operate make-believe Indians, but Lizzie, totally absorbed, was content with conversations and activities she invented for her household. Sometimes the village was extensive, three or four teepees and a center where the people could come together. The girls built carefully, absorbed in finding the best materials for these native homes.

If you were watching us on Sunday, September 28th, 1989, you would have seen three of us move stick people through their daily pastimes. The village we made that fall, Jenn a few weeks short of five, and Lizzie two months into her second year was our best. Jenn nestled her tepee beneath a boulder eight times her size, while Lizzie was about three feet away on our left, her teepee next to a pine. She struggled to build her teepee but wanted no help. Construction over, you might have laughed to see all three of us jiggling the twigs back and forth on the trails, busying them at their daily chore, then coming together in a large area for communal meetings. We talked and cooked and worked and danced for these nearly alive pale stalks.

You would have seen the girls playing together, competition and whining suspended in the joy of the play. And you would have seen me content in motherhood. On this gorgeous day, we worked together for almost two hours until I

urged the girls back down the trail to drive home for dinner. I didn't know then we would not return together for almost two years.

Solo, I hiked the trail the next September, after a colder than average winter hosting piles of snow, after Jenn's diagnosis in May with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia, after an intensive protocol of cancer treatment with seven chemotherapies, brain stem radiation, steroids for healthy tissue growth and antibiotics to avoid infection. After Jenn's struggle to live, after my juggling of child care, hospital visits, school and work, and after Lizzie's enforced independence.

On a day the girls were with their father, I hiked up Fox Trot Trail, climbed the brief incline to reach the boulder field. As I stopped to look around I thought of two small girls, missed them, and remembered their vibrant good spirits just one year ago. As I made my way along the trail, out of the corner of my eye I spotted something against a large boulder. I peered closer to see. There they were—small structures. Teepees! Much of our village had survived the winter blast. Not lingering, without the girls to tarry, I leapt up the rest of Fox Trot to gaze out on Hopkinton Reservoir, mirror-like in the sun-quiet day.

As the girls grew older they, loved the mountains. On summer visits to Colorado we trailed beside grandpa, Uncle Bob, Aunt Sarah and the cousins, picnicking and playing in alpine meadow and mountain trailside. While the men fished, the women and children hiked alongside clear-cold streams, threw stones in the water, and played games until we tired from fresh air and exertion.

When the girls were six and eight we rented a cabin at Hemlock Lodge on Blue Mountain Lake in the Adirondacks of New York. For four summers, old enough to hike on their own, the girls grew bolder, climbing to the top of outlooks and vistas, scrambling over boulders.

If you were looking in mid-July, 1993, you would watch us steadily hike, then wait for a while, for Jenn to rest, compromised by lingering chemotherapy in her body and heart walls slightly thickened, or for Lizzie, to tend a banged knee or shin. You would see us on our favorite climb, onto a glacial boulder overlooking Blue Mountain Lake. Resting in the sun, staring out across the water, we listened to the chatter of birds, and ate our lunch of cheese and crackers and fruit and cookies.

Four years ago in June, Jenn twenty-four and Lizzie twenty-one, we met in Colorado for my niece's wedding in Manitou Springs. After the wedding the three of us went off together to spend three days at a dilapidated dude range adjacent to the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, altitude of eight thousand feet and surrounded by towering peaks. Our room was okay, the food was terrible, and the first night there we hung out with some of the cowboys in the bar drinking Fat Tire and Sunshine Wheat beer from the local microbrewery. When I decided to call it a day the girls stayed up drinking with the locals.

The next morning they reluctantly arose to hike the side of a nearby mountainside. After a few hundred yards on the steep climb from seven thousand to ten thousand feet, I could no longer keep up as Jenn and Liz ran up the trail ahead of

me like mountain goats, vying to be in the lead. I watched them disappear up the trail.

If you were watching us that June 30th, 2008, you would see me sitting on a bare rock looking out across the vista spread before me: snow-laden peaks above timberline and valleys covered with ponderosa pine and aspen. I sat listening to wind and mountain jay, leaned back on the rock to catch the afternoon sun, turned up my face to sniff the smells of pitch and sage carried in the wind. You would see the girls continue to climb, not quite to the top, to an outlook at nine thousand feet. All of us illuminated in bright sun.

Divided Heart

“Where did you come from?” my brother asked me the last time we were together. He was referring to my political opinions. “Neither Mom nor Dad thought the way you do.”

“I know.” I responded. “I don’t know why I am the only Democrat in the family.”

I wanted to tell him about the time Mom came with me to rally for the liberal Minnesota senator, Eugene McCarthy. She traipsed along, as ever the good sport, a slight smile on her lips. She laughed outright, “My Father would be turning in his grave if he knew I was here!”

I wanted to tell my brother she was filled with compassion and might find a problem with some of the hardline attitudes of conservative Republicans, much harsher than in the days of her beloved “Ike,” Dwight David Eisenhower.

At family gatherings I see the whisperings, the nodding of heads. “That liberal Aunt Susan, she’s kind of weird—always has been.” The same cousins say something to goad me, something about poor people deserving what they get.

I was born in an era of silence. For me it started in Wisconsin, a state split along political, religious and class divisions. The conservative Fox River Valley in the eastern half, where Joe McCarthy influenced his followers, and Madison in the western half which spawned William Proxmire, liberal successor to Joe McCarthy in

the U.S. Senate. Proxmire said of McCarthy after his death in 1957, he was “a disgrace to Wisconsin, to the Senate and to America.”

I am from Appleton, eastern part of the state 117 miles north and east from Madison. While I am proud to be of hearty Midwestern stock, I am uncomfortable with my WASP credentials: raised a staunch Republican, baptized in the Congregational Church, and solidly wedged throughout my childhood in the middle class. My father’s parents, from Kewaskum, Wisconsin were working class German descendants—my grandfather a blacksmith who upgraded his forge to a garage when cars replaced horses, my grandmother a mother with six living children who ran a boarding house. My father’s siblings settled in Wisconsin; he alone defected to Denver, Colorado.

My mother, from Pennsylvania and then Michigan, identified as half Pennsylvania German and one quarter each, English and Scottish. Her parents were relatively well-off, her father the financial officer of a lumber company allowing her mother to raise four children. The children from both families attended college, and all but two advanced to the middle class. My mother’s siblings lived in Wisconsin, Illinois and Ohio. What she missed most when we moved west were the lush deciduous trees turning from green to red and golden with the seasons.

Joseph McCarthy, born in the contiguous township to Appleton, won a seat in the United States Senate in 1946, the year I was born. After a reign of terror, evoking the specter of Communism and the red scare, after accusing actors and democratic politicians and military leaders of collusion with Russia, the Senate censured him in 1954. No longer could he strangle hold politicians and journalists with his smear

campaign. Led by Edward R. Morrow, the journalistic community began taking him to task. In 1957, dead from cirrhosis of the liver due to alcoholism a scattering of mourners saw him buried in St. Mary's Cemetery of Appleton in Outagamie County. While in power he reigned over the era of silence.

My family left Wisconsin and moved to Denver, Colorado in 1949. For them it meant freedom from social pressure and relief for my mother's health concerns. For me, I relished being removed from the tight categories of social etiquette that bound the Appleton branch of my family. Colorado hailed as the wide open spaces for my father, and, following him, two of his nephews. Our satellite family unit meant the roads between Colorado and Wisconsin were well-traveled in the 1950's.

As a child I loved annual summer trips to Wisconsin. On the long two-lane highway ride in a car with no air conditioning, my brother and I burrowed under tents we made in the floor between the front and back seats of the station wagon, no seatbelt laws to hinder us, until my father yelled, "Be quiet!"

He did all the driving while we played the alphabet game from words on road signs and billboards, or tallied state license plates. We knew most of the Dairy Queens and A & W Root Beer stands across the mid-west. Twice my mother insisted we divert our route, and unfathomably her wishes prevailed. The first year we stayed in the Chicago Hilton Hotel and attended an indoor ice skating show sitting rink side through dinner. The next year, our last trip, we went through South Dakota and saw the Badlands and Mount Rushmore. My brother, by then a teenager, scoffed at these

trips. Both impressed me—the glittery costumes of the graceful skaters, and the vast desolation of brown-gray mud cliffs in the Badlands.

What I remember about Appleton includes older cousins who entertained my brother and me, a small room of my own where I went to bed earlier than everyone else, children on the block of my Aunt and Uncle's big house who walked the few blocks through the woods to the Fox River, and lots of food. Evenings we barbecued bratwurst to eat with fresh-picked ears of corn on the cob. One summer I kept up with Uncle Chet—twelve ears of corn.

A treat was spending the night with Grandmother Harder, my mother's mother, sitting in her quiet apartment with her heavy walnut furniture, her mahogany vanity, a lace doily under her power-puff music box that played Brahms Lullaby, and her silver comb and mirror set. I watched her sit in front of her vanity combing her hair one hundred strokes, unrolling it from its white silver bun. She was short with me, her eighth and youngest grandchild, a bit too energetic for a little girl.

"You're so impatient," she scolded me. To get some peace she gave me money, taught me the walking route, and sent me around the block to downtown where I spent the money at Woolworth's Five and Dime.

My cousin Jeannie invited me for a drive. She was eighteen and I was nine, surprised, I thought she wanted to take me, until she scowled.

"My parents told me to watch you. You better not say anything!"

She took out a cigarette, lit up, and puffed out. It was exciting and scary—beginning to know family secrets.

My junior year of college I drove to Appleton by myself. On the outskirts of Appleton I noticed a sign announcing, “The Resting Place of Joseph McCarthy.”

I charged into my uncle’s house. “Do you know that Joe McCarthy is buried here and there is a sign outside of the city announcing this?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Uncle Chet, “We are proud that he was born here.”

Stopped silent in my tracks, I dared not challenge the family patriarch

Not everything changed after we moved to Colorado: we remained staunch Republicans in the hometown of Dwight David Eisenhower’s wife, Mamie. We worshipped as Presbyterians, an acceptable theological substitute for Congregationalists, and subscribed to a hearty version of the Protestant Ethic and its doctrine of the elect. Our house, located on the edge of a newly developing upper middle class community, was solid brick in contrast to the wooden houses of Appleton—no country club but my parents joined the Denver Athletic Club and the newly established Crestmoor swim club.

Our home, despite the “Leave it to Beaver” image of domestic tranquility of the 1950’s, often felt sterile, as cold as the Cold War waging without and as tense as the paranoia of McCarthyism. During dinner, the idealized occasion of family tranquility, we never spoke: not about what we felt, not about what we did each day, and not about what was meaningful to each of us.

We ate in the kitchen nook, at the silver metal table with a Formica top, my father at the head of the table, my mother to his left. Sitting opposite my mother, my brother was on the right closest to the window. This arrangement made no sense—

my brother, a lefty, bumped my right elbow at every meal, inciting us to break out in giggles.

“Stop that!” Inevitably this annoyed my father.

Sometimes we defied him—laughter was all that lightened an oppressively quiet dinner half hour.

My father was not a talker. Hard of hearing from an illness while serving in the military, he wore his “squawk box” strapped to his chest. Often he turned off and tuned out.

“Ray, turn on your hearing aid,” my mother complained over the years.

As a child I bubbled and chirped about my day or the latest book I was reading, but that was most often silenced when my father complained my voice bothered him.

My brother learned early not to communicate. I followed suit. None of us could wait to get up from the table.

“I like Ike,” our family motto, we cheered Ike and Mamie when they visited her mother in Denver, and watched Ike fly fish in the trout streams of Colorado. During the Republican convention we sat before the television with a group of my parent’s friends waving American flags and wearing elephant buttons provided by my mother.

I felt Republican to the core, but like so much else, that changed.

Once a week I put on a frilly dress, white gloves, beribboned hat, and black patent leather shoes—the Sunday uniform. Raised a strict Calvinist, I learned Protestant capitalists thrived throughout the 50’s because of the Doctrine of the Elect,

our material and spiritual grace exemplary of the Protestant Ethic. I had no reason to doubt my entitlement. Staunch members of the cathedral-like Montview Presbyterian Church, my family attended church every Sunday at 10:00; my father served as deacon, my mother brought coffee cakes for social hour, and I sang in the children's choir with my mother as choir mom.

Each Sunday we drove to church in our Ford Fairlane, my father at the wheel, ate a big Sunday dinner at two o'clock—roast beef or chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, salad and canned vegetables—then took a drive or watched sports on television. Sunday evenings my father prepared snacks—crisp potato chips sliced thin and cooked in the fryer, popcorn with butter, and chocolate malted milk shakes—as we watched Ed Sullivan introduce the latest musical talent.

My childish faith, formed as I sat in polished pews, looking up at the minister, Dr. Miller, changed in my teenage years. In my burgeoning cynicism I judged the self-righteousness of well-to-do people who espoused compassion for the poor while surrounded by granite and finery. I began to sense life chances were not equal.

One Sunday Dee Dee Harvey, the associate minister, sprang from his seat to jump to the podium for his sermon. Jabbing his finger at the audience, he leaned over the polished wood and yelled: "You hypocrites! You who espouse Christian beliefs, who worship and pray each week, but do nothing to help the poor right here in your city."

"Whoa!" I thought as I sat bolt upright.

I looked around to watch members of the congregation stare at him with blank faces that began to harden, jaws slowly clenching, as he continued to rail at them for

thirty minutes. When he finished the congregation was silent until the organist blasted out "Onward Christian Soldiers."

I never saw Dee Dee Harvey again, never got to talk with him about his ideas, nor to tell him he was my hero who influenced my evolving beliefs: luck, not hard work, helped the rich get richer. Luck, not merit, put you into a family where your material needs were met even if you starved emotionally.

My concern with social justice came from a restless desire to be heard, from my own unease. I wanted to stand up for myself as well as others.

My parents faced the same dilemma, fit in or stand out, when they moved to Denver, away from provincial Appleton with its upper middle class elitism. Not part of the Denver social elite, we settled into a solidly middle class neighborhood, and demonstrated a more liberal spirit than our relatives when it came to the Jewish and African American members of our community. But we never talked of it.

Like my Wisconsin relatives, we had a maid, Marlene, who came once each week to clean the house. She seemed a friend as we ate lunch around our kitchen nook. Marlene sat down from her house work, my mother served us soup and sandwiches, and she and Marlene chatted about her boyfriend, her engagement and her plans for marriage. My mother loved hearing the details because Marlene was planning a wedding in her parents' home, just as my mother had done. I felt a five year old excitement at attending my first wedding.

We entered a two-storied house with a central staircase descending to a foyer where Marlene's father greeted us at the door. I liked this house with the dark wood

stair rails and fireplace mantle in the living room to the left of the foyer. Other wedding guests gathered in that room, mostly adults dressed in nice suits and fancy dresses like my parents.

I felt shy, a very new sensation for me. Looking around the room I felt different. I moved beside my mother, hiding in the full folds of her navy blue dress billowed out by a fifties style nylon slip. I peeked around. Two other children stared back at me—black children. All the people in the room except my father, mother, brother and I were black. Marlene was black. My mother and father chatted away but I could not move.

Marlene walked down the staircase on the arm of her father and moved into the living room to greet her husband-to-be standing with the minister before the fireplace. My fear eased as I watched the wedding ceremony and Marlene and her husband greeted the guests, welcomed my family.

Marlene leaned down to my height and hugged me.

“This is my husband, George.”

“How do you do?” He shook my hand.

As they cut the wedding cake I stood alongside, next to two children. We stared at each other as we stuffed cake in our mouths, and then began playing, our differences set aside.

I also met black people at the Denver Athletic Club (DAC) where my father exercised and had lunch with friends on work days. On Fridays they served a seafood buffet which we frequently attended with our family and guests. The waiters and

waitresses, all black, dressed in formal uniforms with black dresses and white aprons for the waitresses and tuxedos with black ties for the waiters.

Whenever we came in Nealy, the maitre de, welcomed my father warmly, shaking his hand. “We have a table right over here, Dr. Perschbacher,” he said as he ushered us over to a spot close to the lavishly spread buffet tables.

One evening Nealy lingered to pull out my father’s chair. I heard a quiet “Thank you,” followed by my father’s brief hand gesture indicating unnecessary thanks.

Immediately curious I asked my father, “What did Nealy mean?” My father brushed me off with his hand as well.

I persisted. “Dad, what did he mean?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He favored me with his cold stare indicating silence. I was unable to contain my curiosity, ready to ask again.

My mother leaned over and quietly told me, “Your father helped him with some dental work.” As my father got up to fill his plate my mother explained that Nealy broke his front tooth and, being in the public eye, wanted a quality dentist for the restoration—and so he asked my father, a dentist whose patients included opera stars flown in from New York for dental work.

I got the impression my father charged much less than his normal rate and spent the evening imagining the scene: a white dentist leaning over, putting his hands into the mouth of a black man. In 1959 this was a brave gesture.

My parents did not censure my friends. My junior high school boyfriend, Ralph Clark, lived at Lowry Air Force base: he came by afterschool and on weekends

riding his red Moped along with his friend Curtis, the only African American student at our school. I swung onto the back of Ralph's scooter and the three of us rode around the neighborhood enjoying the wind on our faces, and, for me, the ability to move around so freely.

One afternoon they stopped by just after my relatives arrived in Denver to bring my cousin Jeannie to Denver for her first job after college. She asked if she could have a ride, then jumped onto the back of Curtis' black Moped. When we returned her parents were waiting.

"Why did you get on the back of that scooter with a Negro? What will people think? Never do that again!"

I was stunned because my parents never said a word to me except, "Drive carefully!"

At times I suspect my parents were proud of me for standing up for my convictions—they must have been because they did it too. My mother, a quiet and somewhat shy woman, preferred to stay out of the limelight. She turned down the office of President of the Denver Dental Wives Auxiliary and instead made up her mind to organize a project to benefit the needs of others.

Knowing the value of the scrap metal or amalgam that dentists used in molding false teeth, she put together a schedule for collecting the amalgam and delivering it to a buyer with the proceeds gathered into a fund benefitting families in need. She was also an environmentalist before her time.

My father served as president of the Denver Dental Society and the Colorado Dental Society. Twice the Governor asked him to serve on the Board of Dental

Examiners, convened to administer the dental boards certifying new dentists in the state. My father never told me—it was one of his friends who explained how my father worked long hours, patiently mentoring dentists who hoped to practice in rural areas of the state, including the Southern Ute Indian reservation, where there was great need.

In college I followed their examples of social justice; the first year I volunteered at a weekly program at the Juvenile Detention Center in Columbus, Ohio. Some Tuesday nights I was the only student to show up, so I drove myself in the school van, checked in, received a light frisking, passed through the metal detectors, and walked past the sliding and clanking steel gates into a large room.

As many as twenty teenage men, mostly black, stood in a haphazard half circle, staring at me with no guards except those watching through the glass windows of the surrounding doors.

“Hi guys!” I tried to sound confident.

“What’re we doin’ tonight?” Their looks were suspicious.

“An art project.”

“Wha’?”

“I’ll show you—here’s how it goes.”

Then I laid out the materials to make a collage, to paint a picture, to glue a wooden box, hoping a ringleader would back me up.

“Yea, ok, that looks cool.”

We’d work for two hours then eat the food I always brought along.

We laughed as we made projects or decorations for their rooms, sometimes played games. They told me stories and teased me, flirtatiously. A white college coed was a long way from their life exposure and they were a long way from mine.

I preferred the solo nights driving home alone when I could laugh or cry about their stories. Throughout my first year in college these visits were the highlight of my week—without the pressure to be cool, no need to prove my social standing.

I offered my mother white lies over long distance phone calls.

“No, Mom, I’m not doing anything dangerous. I am very safe when I go to the detention center with other students and staff watching over us.”

Beyond assurances of my safety she was not interested in hearing me tell stories about the young men.

In my sophomore year I outright lied as I covered an even bigger foray out of appropriate and safe conduct.

That Thanksgiving, spent in Cleveland with my aunt and uncle, I cajoled my cousin Doug to drive me into the inner city where I had an appointment to make arrangements for a group of college students to do community work over spring break. As we started out the door, Doug slipped and mentioned we were driving to Hough. Aunt Isabel, my mother’s older sister, perked right up.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, we’re just heading downtown so Doug can show me the city.” Doug, not too excited about this trip but embarrassed he almost betrayed me, piped in, “I want to drive her around.”

Aunt Isabel, suspicious, feeling very responsible to my mother, nodded as we walked out to the car and headed into Hough where my suburban cousin was nervous parking his car on the inner city streets.

On the way home he asked, “Why do you want to do that? Those people need to get jobs and get off welfare.”

The next March I returned to Hough with twenty college students and a chaperone to work at a community center. Neither my mother nor my aunt knew I lived for a week with a mother and her two young children, sleeping in her living room. The middle of the first night I woke with a start, certain something ran across my face. Sure enough, when I woke up early the next morning I saw cockroaches scurrying around the kitchen.

When I first got there her two children stared at me, the first white person to stay at their home. They clung to their mother. On my last day, during a trip to the grocery store, I bought the ingredients to make chocolate cookies together, thinking it a treat on their welfare and food stamp budget. We mixed the batter, added the chocolate chips, and started to drop them onto the pan.

I went about the project just like I did at home, arranging the teaspoonful blobs evenly by hand. The children glared at me—suspicion in their faces. I went ahead and put the pan in the oven. When they came out of the oven I slipped them off the sheet onto a plate.

“Take a cookie,” I urged as I took one myself.

The children continued to stand back, staring at me. Their mother came in.

“Have a cookie,” she chided them.

“Ma, she touched them and put some of the dough in her mouth.”

Touched the dough. With my white hands.

My tutelage in race continued in Kenwood Oakland, an impoverished south side community of Chicago, where I worked with black teens under the sponsorship of a white minister and his wife. I joined a theater group putting on a newly written play, “In White America,” which called for the actors to play the roles of the opposite race.

Dressed in a ragged faded gingham dress, hair pulled back under a white bonnet, my face darkened, I raised my arm night after night and I shouted the words of Sojourner Truth.

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man when I could get it and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? ”

Saying her words, along with those of Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks, looking out at the blur of mostly white faces, I felt the world of blackness in America.

Later that winter, stranded in the Chicago blizzard of 1967 at the home of the minister with some of the teens, I naively felt I shared this adventure with the black community.

The next afternoon, walking around snow-bound streets, quiet and still under serene blue skies in the wake of the storm, I looked around to see I was the only white person. People stared at me, curious and hostile, or with blank looks that contrasted the holiday-like mood—a reminder of race and inequality. As I passed by, children grabbed their parents' hands.

After those experiences I spoke to any group that would have me, exhorting them about the racial divide. One night, invited to speak to the English honorary society on William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and on my experience in Chicago, I heard myself.

“There is anger, so much anger. I know there will be violence.”

That spring Martin Luther King was assassinated.

The turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies drew me into political rallies, protests and marches of African Americans and mothers on welfare, women, anti-war protesters, and college students chanting for equal rights and social change.

On a spring day in 1969 I gave a ride to Penny, my graduate school friend, who, like me, spent much of her time in political work. She asked if I could give her a ride downtown.

As we sped along Lake Shore Drive I asked, “So where am I taking you?”

“The downtown Chicago Hilton.”

“Wow, that's a fancy hotel.” I was surprised my hippy friend would go there with her ragged jeans, dread locks and beads.

“I am a WITCH and today I am assisting in an underground abortion.”

I had no idea what I thought of abortion. Who were the WITCH’s? In a split second, unable to turn the car around, I made the moral decision to support her, let her off at the entrance, and hope one more woman would be saved from a painful experience and even death.

Throughout these years of turmoil it was one instant moral decision after another: Did I believe in pushing past the police line at the welfare office? No! Did I believe in setting off a bomb with members of the SDS in the administration building of the University of Chicago? No! Did I want to help the Black Panthers by supporting the childcare centers? What are they teaching the children?

With protest swirling about me I lived a dual life, a newly married first year graduate student, studying for a PhD in Sociology, setting up housekeeping, calling my parents to tell them all was well, and playing in the city with my husband and friends. Many days you could find me in the Chicago Welfare Rights office supporting the movement founded by George Wiley, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). I could not break through police barricades, but I could write and speak out for “Workfare” and “Jobs Now.” I could support local women like Ginger Mack and Nezzie Willis run the office, organize the welfare mothers, and drive them to the Mayor’s office to demand their rights.

“Do not be silenced!” I told them.

Meanwhile I grew silent myself—leading my dual life—no one sensed how angry I felt as I followed my husband to Boston, glad to move further east, away from my conservative roots. While he jumped further into college teaching and research, I

stopped working on my dissertation and concentrated on teaching college students to experience the world.

Then I followed my introductory sociology students into the community. One led me into the political campaign of the first black man to run for mayor, another into a Marxist study group. When the rift in my marriage grew wider, as my protest activities continued, as the peace movement accelerated, and as my husband pursued his interest in weapons build-up as a strategy of balance of power, we ran out of things to say.

I left my marriage to work as a live-in counselor in a group home for emotionally disturbed teenagers. This proved too challenging for me. Entering the wide front door one day silence greeted me. Two teens stared grim-faced, none of the usual sarcasm. One of the counselors came into the foyer from the living room.

“Susan, come in here so we can talk.” He shut the sliding wooden doors behind us.

“Rob committed suicide early this morning. His parents found him hanging in the basement.”

Rob, the disturbed young man we asked to leave the house when he was began hallucinating, talking to the voices he heard when he went off his meds. Rob, a young man I had a special connection with, lost touch with reality, and hung himself in his parents’ basement.

I remember little of the following days—meeting with his parents, attending his wake and funeral, trying to help the kids in the program, supporting the other counselors, talking with the staff psychologist. After almost putting my fist through a

glass door in the dining room, I was told to take some time off, to think about starting therapy myself.

I want a neat ending to this story but there isn't one. I burnt out on politics. I turned, instead, to religion and spirituality to give my life its purpose. I turned to nature. But I write about that elsewhere. I only know, no matter how frustrating and discouraging the liberal cause, I never waived. I carved out a political and social and moral life very different from my family heritage. When I left my twenty year college teaching career, I was pleased to be honored for founding and directing the Community Service Learning Program which oversaw the placement of hundreds of students in the community.

In 2002 I visited Appleton with my oldest daughter as she looked at colleges in Wisconsin. After touring Lawrence University my elderly aunt took us to dinner at the same Riverview Country Club I visited as a child. I learned, much to my aunt's dismay, that Appleton had become a rather liberal city with resettled immigrants and a population of college students and professors to temper the climate.

But it was Beloit College, located forty miles south of Madison, that captured my daughter's interest. She wanted to join other students in political action focused on the rights of black students, of gays, of women, and of town factory workers many of whom were immigrants. I visited her several times and we always drove to Madison to hang out in the hippy shops and ethnic restaurants. On one trip she

brought me to a drag queen show on campus. I had to laugh at the scene—my mother would be turning in her grave!

I returned to Appleton for my aunt's funeral in 2005. She was my last tie to Appleton. At the extended family reunion all heads turned to look at me when one cousin spoke out, "Cousin Susan, I Googled you and all kinds of activities and publications came up. I never knew you were so famous. "

Later he pulled me aside to whisper to me, "My wife Anne votes democratic."

In a twist of fate, after her college graduation my youngest daughter joined Teach for America and was assigned to Denver. There, in added irony, she taught for two years in my old high school, in the wake of bussing, now a low-income racially diverse school.

On my visits to Denver we walk in her neighborhood, Capitol Hill, an area once rundown and dangerous. She lives only six blocks from Tattered Cover, a sprawling independent book store with great lattes and spaces to sit and books and magazines to peruse. Sometimes she brings me with her friends to the old Ogden Theater, now an established venue for rock and alternative music; afterwards we go for a drink at a bar on Colfax Avenue. Over beer and wine she and her friends talk with me about educational reform and liberal Denver politics.

Recently I spoke with my cousin Galen who lives outside Denver. At eighty-six, he is the oldest cousin on my father's side of the family; at sixty-six I am the youngest. He asked me, "Do you still support that Obama?"

He shook his head in disbelief at my answer. Once again I had to argue that Obama is an American citizen with a birth certificate, and a Christian, not a Muslim.

A few years earlier, on Obama's election night in 2008, I received a call from Galen's brother in Texas. A gay man, in our family David remained closeted with his partner Ed, and I could only guess his politics. At ten o'clock that evening my phone rang.

"Susan, this is your cousin David."

"Hi David. What's up?"

"I am calling from Texas because I presume you are happy."

"You bet! I'm dancing around and drinking beer."

He laughed heartily. "Well, I knew you would be. You are the only one in the family I can celebrate with."

Happily we shared this historic moment.

I celebrated, too, because the liberal candidate, our first African American president, Barak Obama, was victorious in all the states where I lived my life: Wisconsin, Colorado, Ohio, Illinois and Massachusetts.

Seeking

These days an inner voice, whatever it may be—a sixth sense, intuition, a soul—tugs me from the busy world. But I know, from past experience, I can respond to the wrong call, the wrong person, the wrong community. How do I know where I belong?

I feel a pull to the Dharma Center headed by Rahob Tulku, Thupten Kalsong Rinpoche. On his website the face of a Tibetan monk in his deep maroon robe smiles out to the viewer, with these words underneath: “Do good, avoid evil, purify the mind.”

Rahob Rinpoche, as he is called by the Pointing Out Way practitioners with whom I meditate in Newton, MA, left Tibet in fear for his life under the Chinese occupation and came to rest here in the United States. He taught Tibetan Studies and Buddhism at several universities until he and his wife settled on a small farm in rural New York. He “graciously offers his knowledge and exuberance for life,” and instructions on “cultural, religious, and practical practice for cultivating the mind.” His website reference to mindfulness, self-improvement, reducing stress and anger and fear, healing habitual patterns, appeals to me—I seek what he offers.

I met Rinpoche at an eight day Mahayana Mahamudra retreat where I, along with forty other participants, received his blessings on my meditation practice. We each filed past him, bowing and handing him a white scarf or kata which he blessed and put around our necks. In just that brief close encounter I felt his kindness, and now I go to hear him teach.

I want to feel the joy I see on the countenance of people who meditate—their smiles contented and serene—what I felt two summers ago as I walked the streets of Upper Dharamsala, Hamajal Pradesh, India, residence of the Dali Lama and the Tibetan Government in exile. Several years earlier, I'd observed the same equanimity when the Dali Lama visited Emory University in Atlanta where my daughter attended school.

But I am worried Rinpoche will see I am unworthy for enlightenment, forever burdened with anger and jealousy and fear. Seeking is a hopeful word for this spiritual quest I am on; perhaps I pursue what I cannot grasp. I could seek my fortune through a lucrative job, my ideal mate, an elaborate home, exotic travels, the fountain of youth. Rinpoche will tell me to seek fulfillment in one place, right here, in a sense of awakened ever-present awareness.

Can I do it? My habits of mind are deeply rooted, my negative self talk, as the Dali Lama calls it, runs deep. I have tried before. And my background argues against success in this pursuit. Born to a legacy of the Protestant Elect, my extended family questions the sanity of someone who lets go the pursuit of material well-being in order to seek inner peace. "Work hard," they say, "God rewards those who work hard." Part of me agrees and tells me, "This is absurd." Yet another voice (that sixth sense?) prods me to seek spiritual wellbeing. The mysterious voice gets louder, clamors at me, making me restless.

I first felt this restlessness in March, 1975, just after my twenty-ninth birthday. A shell shocked and somewhat hardened veteran of the protest movements of the late 60's and 70's, I became an atheist when my Protestant belief in the doctrine of the elect failed to help me understand the roots of racial and class discrimination I experienced in my early twenties. Discontent, I felt I had no place where I belonged, the same feeling I had as a child, alone and lonely.

A boyfriend would solve everything.

I lived in an apartment with my best friend from college and worked with an odd assortment of hippies, politicians and scholars who met at Harvard Divinity School. They assured me students at their Divinity School did not have to believe in God. Among them were humanists and social activists impelled by injustice into human services and political action.

One Friday night, we held a birthday party for Bill, the director of the group home where we all worked with emotionally disturbed adolescents, and everyone gathered at my apartment, about six miles away from the program where we counseled. My home was a good choice for a gathering for staff and their friends who promised to supply drugs and alcohol for a decadent celebration.

The party was getting underway as I answered the door for one of the counselors, Craig, accompanied by his friend, Bob, visiting the Boston area on his way up to the White Mountains for a week of winter camping. Bob and Craig were college roommates from the University of Michigan and long time friends. After graduation Bob headed to Rochester, New York, to join the Zen Center started by

Philip Kapleau. He spent his senior year reading Kapleau's book, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, sitting in meditation and dropping out of the party scene.

Now, two years later, Bob, a monk, worked as a carpenter and lived at the Rochester Zen Center, deeply dedicated to his meditation practice and to his teacher. Bob, a serious young man with intense dark brown eyes, a thin sinewy body, and an aesthetic look, attracted me immediately; I felt an eye-to-eye frisson the moment he walked through the door. Somehow, as these things evolve, he and I ended up in my bedroom, off the hallway alcove to the right of the living room, sitting on my mattress-on-the-floor bed, leaning against big pillows which lined the walls. Aware of my short skirt, I tucked my legs underneath my knees as we talked for hours. I see me there talking, earnestly baring my soul, not remembering the specifics of my words, his comments, my questions, his answers. I vaguely remember *loneliness* or *yearning* were in the words or at least in the sentiment.

In a meeting so intense, I surprised myself by ignoring the party, all the people in my apartment, and the copious rounds of drug and drink. They hailed me out of the room when it was time for the birthday celebration with cake and song. Jests were made at my expense from the stoned and drunken crowd, teasing me about shutting myself off in a room with Bob. I smiled and thought: who needs drugs when this man and I talked as I stared into his intense brown eyes.

After Bob said goodbye to leave with his friend, I had no idea I would see him again. Agitated, I paced the apartment restless and unsettled.

When he came back through town the next Friday, I jumped at the chance to see him. After dinner with feminist friends in Harvard Square I met him on the street and we began a cross-town walk of several hours that ended up in my apartment where we did not leave until his departure late Sunday night.

Two months later, blind in in love, I rode an overnight Greyhound bus that arrived in Rochester at 5:00 am, sat in the White Castle around the corner from the bus terminal, and drank coffee with assorted men staring at me through weary eyes. All this eventually brought me to the Zen Center.

The first time I walked into the Center it was just in time for breakfast. Meditation and yoga completed, members stood quietly waiting for breakfast, silent in the moderately sized and sunny dining room. Later that morning I noticed the clean interior lines of the center, the creamy walls and polished wood window sills and panels which gave a feeling of being in Japan. The zendo or place of meditation of similar texture was lined with rows and rows of dark brown pillows and mats for sitting, all facing a raised dais on which stood a four foot buffed gold Buddha, the fingers of his right hand touching the earth in awakening, a large gong on a wooden stand, bells, and bowls of flowers. It was space I could relax into, where I could rest and let down my guard. Maybe I could belong here. At least I could begin to meditate. So I thought for the first few months.

In the low light of early morning we enter the zendo, brown-robed, bare feet. We carry our brown cushions to sit on our mats, staring ahead at the cream colored walls.

Quiet.

The smell of incense sharp and sweet.

A deep gong spreads a vibration into the air.

We chant ancient Japanese words whose unknown meaning sends our minds beyond their capacity to think.

Follow the breath in and out. Follow the breath down.

Calls ring out, stern commands encouraging discipline: "Sit up straight!" "No movement!" Ahead, where we dare not look, our eyes barely open and staring downwards towards the wall, sits a large Buddha situated on a raised dais.

Silence is punctuated only by the words of the teacher, an occasional cough or stomach growling.

Follow the breath.

At times it hurt so much it is all I can do to sit still, fervently hoping for the bell to signal the end of the round of sitting. My knees, my lower back, send out sharp pains. Often my legs feel asleep and needle-like sparks fire through my calves. When there is a tickle in my throat I suppress the urge to cough, sending tears down my cheeks. And I fiercely resist the urge to raise my hands to satisfy an intense itch on my cheek. On my arm.

Be still. I am determined. And then I begin to cry.

I began to cry soundlessly, my shoulders rising in frantic heaves. Stoically I held myself as tight as possible in order to be silent through this thunderstorm, and to let the tears stream down my face onto my brown robe.

I was totally unprepared for the intense and powerful feelings erupting from the still silence, and I did not know how to ask for help or who to ask for help or, even if I could, what to ask. I did not want to call attention to my emotional state. In over my head, the quiet, the vibrating gong, the low-toned chanting, the large peaceful Buddha, all seemed more frightening than reassuring.

An image flashed into my mind; I envisioned telling my parents, “I am a Buddhist,” imagined their startled, uncomprehending reactions. Part of my brain spoke out, “Enough is enough. This is really and truly weird!” The brown robes and frightening discipline, the serious young adults, many with shaved heads and eastern garb—my parents, most of my friends, would never understand. I heard them say, “What has she gone and done now?”

I found myself drawn to the smaller second floor meditation room graced with a statue wearing a kindly countenance. When I grabbed the courage to ask, I found this was the statue of Kannon—the Japanese Bodhisattva of Compassion. Sometimes I caught myself talking out loud with her; she never judged, just looked at me with understanding. She seemed to offer solace for my loneliness and confusion, and I mused that she told me to take care of myself, to seek comfort and security where I could find them. This was not what I felt at the Zen Center—there I felt unsupported by my boyfriend and alone in the community.

I ran away to a friend’s cabin in southern Maine to sort out my life. My abrupt departure sure to be a permanent rift with Bob, I didn’t look back. I told myself, “This Buddhism is not for me.” Still I felt unsettled, restless—what had the meditation cracked open?

Away from the silence, the gongs, the turning inward rather than outward—it all seemed so foreign to me. After all I was an achiever who functioned on the principal that I must do something, act in a certain way, to earn my peace. Just one month in Rochester showed me too much turning inward is dangerous—unexamined feelings are safer buried, covered over by busy-ness.

After a month I returned to Boston and settled into work in a weaving shop. With my new boyfriend, Gary, I began to sit with the Quakers, I tried to center down and feel the spirit of the meetings. Often I felt more entertained than spiritual. I wanted to laugh out loud at some of the utterly sincere and ridiculous proclamations from “the spirit”, and I was hardened to the comments from people I thought should seek psychiatric support.

This was not where I could nourish my spiritual hunger. And Gary, my new man, was not the answer either. He made this absolutely clear one evening when he grabbed me during a wild, angry fight. His grip was tight enough to bruise my arm in a tattoo of black and green. Then he pushed me across the room where I hit hard against the bureau.

A friend from the Harvard Divinity School crowd, a Jewish woman who recognized my discontent and restlessness, told me about the House of Prayer. “I go there all the time,” she told me, “and I fit right in. You should go meet my friend Isabel, so welcoming of everyone.”

I went, sight unseen, to the House of Prayer, a retreat center for women seeking spiritual refuge in Gloucester. Run by a feisty feminist religious sister, Irene, the participants represented a wide variety of religions and spiritual quests including liberal nuns and radical lay Catholics.

At the House of Prayer I meditated in a plain chapel before a drift wood cross ringed by sea shells, sat for hours on large stones by the sea, and walked the beach. I stared out at the slate gray water, quiet some days tinged in sun-splashed blue, roiling the next day with white-crested waves.

I sat in the small library and read about the lives of Christian mystics, men and women who gave up their worldly pursuits to spend their lives cultivating silence in order to seek inwardly for God. As I sat around the kitchen table or the dining room in the evening, talking with the eclectic group of women drawn to this house, I heard more stories of the mystics, and learned about the Social Justice teachings of the Catholic Church.

It was at the House of Prayer I met Marissa, who invited me to my first Catholic mass. “You’ll like this place. It’s not like any other Catholic Church I ever attended.” Walking on the beach Marissa shared with me her anger towards the Catholic with its rules and hierarchy, unresponsive to the needs of women and others not in power. She urged me to come to the one place she felt comfortable.

A few months later I accompanied her to the Paulist Center in Boston for the solemn, candle-lit, incense laden Easter Vigil service. The Chapel of the Holy Spirit, holding only about two hundred and fifty people, had a large cross hung suspended from the ceiling—no Christ figure pinned by nails. On either side of the cross words

to songs were projected onto the walls so everyone joined the melodic choir, filling the space with music and songs of praise.

I missed this music in the chanting at the Zen Center and in the quiet of Quaker Meeting. Some of the songs were my favorite Protestant hymns and others were new, lively, celebrating the love of God.

Unable to stop them I felt tears run down my cheeks—tears of gratitude and joy.

I returned the next week to hear a young charismatic priest reflect on the Zen koan asking, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” He used this as a metaphor to describe the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit in the individual heart.

This was new—in Protestant services I attended I never heard of the Holy Spirit. As I listened I stared at the statue of Mary standing on the left side of the altar, wearing the same beneficent countenance as that of Kannon, my one true friend at the Zen Center.

I came back each week, setting aside the criticism I heard in my head, evoked by the voices of my family, “How can you sit in that papal institution!”

Then it happened, another love affair—two, actually, and both one-sided. First I was attracted to the charismatic priest, David, who encouraged my involvement in the church. At that time he was not susceptible to defrocking, so enamored with spreading word of God’s love he didn’t question the discipline of celibacy.

He introduced me to Isaac Hecker, a nineteenth century man as alive to David as he became to me. “Isaac the Seeker,” the youngest son of the founder of Hecker flour in New York, was a German Protestant-turned-Catholic and founder of the Paulist Fathers. More important to me, I was drawn to his mystical beliefs.

In the Paulist Center, a Catholic community for lapsed and liberal Catholics and for spiritual seekers, I found a home for mystical Christianity. I felt at peace—at least for a while.

Looking back my spiritual maturity was on par with members of the high school youth group I directed with five other adult leaders, three men and three women. When we met to plan our weekly sessions and annual retreat with the teens, we gossiped and joked, our own spiritual questions and concerns filled with the same doubts and anger we heard from these younger members.

We prided ourselves this was a youth program that did not pressure young people to blindly adopt the faith of their parents and provided space for them to ask the question, “Do I want to become a Catholic?” I was always surprised their parents encouraged this—but, then, this was the Paulist Center.

On one retreat, a sunny weekend on Cape Cod, we set them up in teams of two and three, and asked them to talk honestly with each other about the church and their faith. No adults. No teachers leaning over their shoulders monitoring right from wrong. I was surprised it worked so well, and I can still see them in their roughly formed circles actively arguing and talking amongst themselves.

When we brought them together to discuss the issues and points from their small groups, there was a mixture of comments. One of the toughest young men, a cynic among them, talked about his love of God, asking how else he could express this. Some of them questioned dogmatic rules, railing against the conservative morality of the Church. This was not a “say No” to sex kind of group. A few questioned the existence of God—asking the same question that perplexed me when I was young—why there was so much pain and suffering in the world. One mildly retarded young woman asked, “Who is God anyway? Is He here?”

Part of the excitement of the program for me was Tim, a young man fervent in his religious beliefs and torn in his decision to become a priest. A tantalizing friendship developed between us as we flirted and talked, discerning his and my future while preoccupied by the desire we both felt.

After two years and some lusty, but unconsumed passion, he left to enter the priesthood. Sad and confused, instead of succumbing to loneliness I made the decision to join the Catholic Church.

I rested uneasily in the Catholic Church for twenty years—through one annulment (of my first marriage), one marriage (my second), another divorce, two baptisms, two first communions, two rites of reconciliation, many masses and holidays—rituals to nurture the soul and to preserve the family according to the Catholic Church.

For me the unrest was fomented by the hierarchical church, the rulings restricting women from full-participation in the church. I never wanted to be a priest, but I was happy to give homilies at the Paulist Center, talking about Isaac Hecker and

his mysticism, until Cardinal Law threatened to close the chapel if they continued allowing women this role.

When they came of age both of my daughters declined confirmation in the Catholic Church. One chose briefly to attend a Unitarian church and for a while studied Wiccan beliefs. The other swore she was agnostic. I alternately raged and cried at the increasingly repressive church. Where was the mysticism? Where was the social justice?

The last straw came during a Mother's Day homily in a local parish. The priest calmly asserted that children growing up in single parent families inevitably have problems. A cautionary tale against divorce, he went on to say that couples should work hard, very hard, not to divorce.

Not once did he acknowledge that sometimes the partner just leaves. What do you work on then?

Now, when I attend wedding or funeral masses, I sit on the edge of the pew ready to protest when I hear any slur about women, divorcees, homosexuals, Catholics who question the Pope. All the self-righteous claims for pro-life cloud over my belief in a mystical love spirit so I no longer feel nourished.

I meditate by myself, no charismatic man is involved (unless you count my meditation teacher in Newton who is happily married to another teacher, or Rinpoche, also married and almost eighty years old).

Why I want to meditate with a Tibetan Rinpoche? For one, I heard about Rinpoche from the social worker who works with me on my commitment and

intimacy issues. As I sat in her office wondering what was wrong with me, why I was unsuccessful in my relationships with men, she asked if my spiritual hunger was the truly unnourished part of me. She recommended Buddhist meditation practice, the Pointing Out Way, which she herself follows.

Now I follow my inner voice, never quieted, urging me to seek what I have not yet found. My mind asks: can I trust? Can I feel I belong? Can I stay?

Can look to see what is missing inside?

The Love Spirit

I fell in love with a dead man. I met him in the Holy Spirit Chapel at the Paulist Center in Boston. I sat next to him as I prayed in the pews of the church he built, St. Paul's Cathedral on 59th and 9th in New York City, one block from Lincoln Center. I kept him company in the basement archives of the cathedral where I spent eight weeks reading every letter, sermon, article and book he ever wrote. I talked with him in my head, asked him for guidance.

Here was a soul-mate, a man whose twists and turns in life, whose final direction, made my life seem to have a meaning I had yet to find. Like me he was German and Protestant. Like me his family moved from the working class to become well-established in the middle class. Like me he was overly-sensitive. Like me he had an alcoholic parent. Like me he was searching for where he belonged.

Born in 1819 from German immigrant parents, Isaac Hecker, a restless young man, joined liberal political movements to work for the rights of laborers and factory workers. Finding political activity unfulfilling, with the financial support of his brothers who ran the successful Hecker Flour Company, he turned to religion for his answers. He came to be known as "Isaac the Seeker." In Catholic Church history he is considered a mystic who wandered into the Church in the mid-1800's, converted, became a priest and founded the Paulist Fathers, the first American order of Priests.

I wandered into the Catholic Church in the mid-1900's. I turned this way as a last resort, discouraged in my political and religious pursuits—drawn in by Isaac Hecker.

Hecker's search brought him in contact with spiritual communities in the fervent period of religious revivalism throughout the 1800's—Quakers, Shakers, Mennonites, Transcendentalists, Protestants, Episcopalians, and an ever-expanding immigrant Catholic Church. He knew prominent Transcendentalists: Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Bronson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and lived for a while in an apartment rented by Thoreau's mother in Concord.

Hecker's spiritual quest brought him to Brook Farm, a Transcendental experiment in communal living which flourished for a few years in West Roxbury. When I first learned of this I went walking by the remains of the farm house, crunching through the thick-fall leaves and wild grasses, thinking it an odd coincidence we lived around the corner from one another, both of us there for only nine months. I moved from West Roxbury because a violent relationship ended. Hecker moved because the lifestyle was not spiritually centered in the way he hoped.

Next I visited Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, MA where Hecker stayed only three weeks, deeming the Bronson Alcott utopian experience completely impractical. I disliked Alcott too, for exploiting his wife and daughters, one of whom was Louisa May Alcott, letting the women do all the work.

On the bright, colorful fall day I visited the museum I walked across the land and looked from the high point toward Mount Wachusett close to Worcester where I now live and work. I imagined Hecker pausing from his work in the fields to savor this same view.

I tromped around Concord, swam in Walden Pond, stood at the foundation of Thoreau's cabin. As I lingered in the woods, Walden Pond to my back, staring at the

moss-covered granite stones I thought, “How small this cabin was.” I wondered about the man who chose to live here for a time in solitude, in contrast to Hecker who pursued an active life in church affairs. I thought of these two men, restlessly driven by spiritual desire, always seeking a home. Thoreau questioned Hecker when he learned of his decision to convert to Catholicism—challenged his participation in what he considered an oppressive church. Hecker, against the wishes of most of his Transcendentalist friends, joined the Catholic Church, convinced Catholicism was the proper home for his mystical yearning towards God.

A fellow seeker, his words, though dry to some, inspired me: “I investigated them all, going from one of them to another—Episcopal, Congregational, Baptist, Methodist, and all-conferring with their ministers, reading their books. It was a dreary business but I did it. I knew Transcendentalism well and had been a radical Socialist”

I recognized his need to find a home for the mystical vision he described in a letter for his Transcendentalist friend, Orestes Bronson: “[I saw] a beautiful, angelic, pure being, and myself standing alongside of her, feeling a most heavenly pure joy. And it was as if it were that our bodies were luminous, and they gave forth a moonlike light which I felt sprung from the joy that we experienced. We were unclothed, pure, and unconscious of anything but pure love and joy, and I felt as if we had always lived together, and that our motions, actions, feelings and thoughts came from one centre. And when I looked towards her I saw no bold outline of form, but an angelic something I cannot describe, but in angelic shape and image.”

I read everything he wrote as I sat, day after day in the musty and dim Paulist archives filed in the basement of St. Paul's Cathedral. The Paulist Father who served as archivist was as gray as the metal file cabinets surrounding him. His face in a permanent scowl, I found him slightly distasteful, flakes of dandruff on the black shirts and coat he wore each day. But for all his unkempt appearance, he, too, loved Isaac Hecker. Because I sat each day at the small desk he assigned me, facing the concrete wall. Because I arrived each morning just as he opened after morning mass, and returned again when he re-opened after his lunch, he respected my dedication. He shared anecdotal stories and selected his favorite passages, sermons and articles for me to read. Drawn by our mutual passion for Hecker I grew to find him rather charming as we enjoyed our time. He even smiled every so often.

Isaac the Seeker was a guide who made sense to me—a kindred spirit with whom I felt less alone. My love was uncomplicated because he was no longer alive. Still, as I read his letters to women for whom he served as spiritual director I felt stirrings of jealousy. To them he wrote intimately about his love of God and about the mystery of the Holy Spirit, encouraging them in their spiritual practices. I caught myself wondering, “Would he have been my spiritual director? Would he pour out the words of inspiration he shared with these women whose spiritual lives he guided? Would I be his favorite—his spiritual soul mate?” I so wanted to be.

It wasn't his reasoning that brought me to conversion, to Catholicism, his rhetoric often as dry as that of the Transcendentalists he critiqued. But his passion rang out when he wrote: “Follow the Holy Spirit, the Love Spirit.” The words of his constant prayer, “I want God's living work to do,” jumped from the page as if spoken

directly to me, a woman who longed to believe my heart-stirring vision was worthy motivation for a life's pursuit.

In my brief foray into Buddhism I was introduced to mystical yearning. After I left the secluded, small world of the Zen Center, I asked myself how can there be a mystic in our materialistic western culture. I hoped studying Hecker would lead me to an answer. I met Hecker when his conversion to Catholicism and founding of the Paulist Fathers became the topic of my PhD dissertation.

I was told to visit a professor at Boston College—a passionate and informed scholar of Transcendentalism. Hearing that I found Transcendental writings too dry and philosophical, Professor Bracht, with his thick German accent, told me I might be interested in Isaac Hecker who founded the church where I worshipped, and was critical of the Transcendentalists. Sitting in his book-lined office this dear man gave me a spark of insight that directed my life.

Drawn into Hecker's life I became an expert called upon to convey his beliefs to a wide variety of audiences, including Paulist novices and priests and members of Paulist Center congregations. He was alive for me and I brought him to life for others, quoting from his diaries, his sermons, his memoirs, and from letters he wrote, mostly to women for whom he served as spiritual director.

I was surprised one night when I was eating dinner at the Paulist headquarters in New York, sitting with officials from the Congregation. "Do you want to found the Paulist Sisters?" one of them asked. I sputtered, "No, I don't think so!" I wanted to shout, "Do you want to know my life story?"

Instead I responded to the call to conversion inspired by Isaac Hecker. His passion spoke directly to my yearning and I made the decision to convert as well.

Before my conversion I questioned if I was a true Catholic. Was I only committing to the liberal branch of the Paulist Fathers? Without a love life, no man around, was I promising myself to Isaac Hecker? I brought the first question to my confirmation class, my doubts assuaged when others assured me they did not accept all of the rules and teachings. In answer to the second, I took Hecker as my spiritual guide and entered the church without looking back.

The distinction I made between the Paulist Center and the larger Catholic Church had little meaning to my parents and friends, most of who thought I was truly crazy in my choice. To me it seemed more benign than when I thought of becoming a Buddhist. But Hecker also joined the Catholic Church against the wishes of his family and friends. He followed the call of his heart.

Easter Vigil, 1979—I am at the Paulist Center while my mother lies cancer-ridden in Denver. Over the past four months I traversed the country back and forth to be with her after her diagnosis—six months to live—still trying to attend most of the classes to prepare me for entrance into the Catholic Church.

The priest feels that my journey with my mother more than makes up for the content of one or two classes I have missed, and my sponsors, two of whom are good friends, keep me abreast of the material.

I am ready, unquestioningly ready, and so tired I do not have time to think about what I am doing. With my mother so sick, I am grateful for spiritual ballast, the supportive belief that love is the most important part of life.

I am joining my unseen guide, Isaac Hecker, accepting his certainty that the Catholic Church is the only place for mystical belief.

The lighting is dim, the stained glass window in the back of the church shines gold against the dark night, illuminating St. Paul, while incense wafts in the air, and the music is somber yet uplifting. I stand before the congregation, the chapel filled to standing-room-only, my sponsors by my side, and I respond “I do” to each of the questions put before me by the priest—now is not the time to question but, instead to set aside my protests and doubts about rigid beliefs, to affirm what feels like a larger truth.

I am overcome with emotion, not just because my mother is dying, but awed by some profound opening inside my chest. In the candle light, the incense, the chanted song, the dim recognition of people watching, I feel energy, a vibration that flows around and through me.

Mystics say love centered in God is the greatest of all love, and I feel this at the Easter Vigil confirmation. I am full of love and with the consummation of my love affair with Isaac Hecker.

As I stand in the candlelit chapel, surrounded by sounds of the chant sung in slow repetition, “Behold the son of God,” wrapped by the intense musty smell of incense, with oil smeared on my forehead and dripping into my eyes, I feel an ache in my heart, an opening, a surge of warmth.

Hecker's next step was to become a Catholic priest who, after studying in Europe, returned to New York City, into mission work, and then to found the Paulist Fathers, an order dedicated to bringing Catholicism to America. I was one of his converts, one of those longing to open her heart to the Holy Spirit.

Hecker was adamant that spirituality was a response to movement of the indwelling Holy Spirit freely operating in the human soul, so he asked for, and received, special permission from the Pope that Paulist Fathers would be required to renew annual promises to their vocation rather than take lifetime vows. Not a good person with commitment, I embraced his belief; I, too, felt safer making an annual promise.

The first Vatican Council was a turning point for Hecker. As a delegate he opposed declaring the Pope infallible on matters of theological dogma, a move which ran against everything he believed about the working of the Holy Spirit. When this doctrine was accepted he rested in an uneasy truce with the church.

My uneasy truce came when Cardinal Law of Boston threatened to shut down the Paulist Center for not following orders from Rome, for liberal practices such as allowing women on the altar, establishing a divorced Catholics group, and for sponsoring support groups for homosexual members of the congregation. The Paulist Center backed down and accepted the strictures of the Pope.

Disillusioned by the ruling of the Vatican Council, and tired of wrangling with members of his religious community over running the Paulist order, Hecker

developed severe headaches. By order from his doctor he traveled abroad, first to Europe and then further east, riding the waters of the Nile River. As he floated along he stared out at the devoted people along the shore and in the cities where he stopped. His letters and journals detailed the Eastern religious practices he observed and expressed his admiration for the devotion of Hindus, Moslems and Buddhists. He contrasted their faith practices to the frantic business of religious pursuits that occupied him at home.

The tone in these letters and diaries was weary and discouraged. The church he built in New York was not the spiritual home he envisioned, but more an institution whose upkeep ruled his life. He was heart sore, his energy depleted.

But dutifully, when called by members of the Paulist order, he returned to New York to live with his congregation for his remaining few years, dying at age 69.

A last vision suggests he experienced conversion once again: "I saw descending from heaven the Spouse of Christ, like a bride prepared for her bridegroom. Behold she appeared all beautiful, her interior beauty shone through her vestments. But her vestments gave form to her beauty but did not hinder its radiance. In the light of her countenance all things had been renewed, the souls of men, their entire relations with one another, their knowledge, their works, and their life. Everything that was old had been transformed by her divine light into what was new, in harmony, without destruction, and almost imperceptibly."

He died optimistic, hopeful, believing the reign of the Holy Spirit would rule and guide the hearts of women and men.

With no such supporting visions, disillusioned, I parted with Isaac Hecker, and pushed away from organized religion. Once again I was restless and very much alone except for my spiritual director, a Paulist priest and Jungian analyst who also studied Hecker and celebrated his mysticism. Bob Baer no longer practiced his faith in the organized church; his spirituality was fostered by individual practice, meeting people one-on-one, connecting, he told me, with their souls.

For months and years I recorded and analyzed my dreams, discerning their guidance for my life. I sat in Bob's quiet warm enveloping space, in a chair across from him. We talked about these dreams. While I was not, as Hecker had been, visited by gauzy love spirits, I accepted dreams as mystical guides in my life decisions.

Now, when I meditate, when I am asked to quiet my brain and listen from my heart-mind center, Hecker's words rise up: "Follow the love spirit." When I am guided to think of my teachers, my spiritual guides, Hecker is always there.

Lost and Found

June, 1976 — Boston, MA

I was almost thirty when I met Bob, a Buddhist monk in Boston on his way to hike the White Mountains. He stared straight into my face, his brown eyes intense, unblinking. A month later I boarded a Greyhound bus to travel through the night from Boston to Rochester, where Bob worked and lived at the Rochester Zen Center.

When I arrived I strode down the dimly lit street up the long empty block from the Greyhound bus station to the White Castle, the only place open at four in the morning. Exterior lights shone on white walls with black trim; through the large plate-glass window I saw a white-aproned waitress serve men at the counter. As I pushed open the door several heads turned my way, dull looks registered in weary eyes.

“Have a seat.” Indicating a spot the waitress placed a menu and a coffee mug on the counter in front of a stool, down a few seats from the almost-sober drunks and the homeless men seeking shelter in the early fall morning cold.

“How are you doin’?” She poured steaming coffee into the mug.

“Fine. A bit tired from riding a bus through the night.”

“Where you from?” “Boston,” I told her and she nodded. I felt the men listening, but they never spoke.

I drank surprisingly fresh coffee and picked at the greasy glazed doughnut.

A black woman, carrying cleaning supplies, stepped in, sat on a stool two down from me, between me and the men, and nodded.

Hung over from lack of sleep after riding the bus through the night, I put my face into the steam of the coffee, inhaled the aroma, and waited. I listened to the men banter with the waitress, knowing some of their conversation was for my ears, meant to shock me—tales of where they slept or drank or both.

“You never mind,” the waitress leaned over the counter to tell me. “They don’t mean nothin’.”

I nodded as if I were in the know. I hid my nervousness, periodically looking over and laughing at a raunchy joke or the men poking fun at each other.

Bob walked in at six thirty. I grabbed my backpack, paid my bill, and performed an awkward hug in the doorway of the White Castle. Suddenly it seemed I barely knew this man for whom I rode ten hours on a bus. I didn’t stop to question why he left me sitting for over two hours in an all-night diner. I knew he had an important prior commitment.

I watched him walk ahead to the car and wondered, “How do I talk to a Buddhist? It felt more stark and bold than in my low-lit bedroom, or in the evening lights of Boston. In my sleepless haze, jazzed on caffeine, I badgered him with questions, receiving minimal answers and nods. There was none of the easy back and forth of the fireworks weekend.

I chatted incessantly as we drove a few miles to a residential neighborhood and parked before a prairie-style house, when I stopped talking, tensed in the silence, and followed Bob to enter the Zen Center. He said nothing, just opened the door to an austere and quiet setting.

The dark buffed hardwood door opened into a foyer and a hallway with a large meditation hall through wide sliding doors to the right. The dining room, straight ahead, looked out onto a well-tended lawn and rock garden, and opened through a door on the left to a sizeable kitchen with industrial style appliances. Upstairs were offices and a small meditation room; downstairs were dimly lit changing rooms with brown robes hung from hooks. The texture throughout was light creamy tan walls with natural wood beams and trim, reminding me of the Japanese teahouse I loved to visit at the MFA. The floors shone of polished wood. The smell of incense lingered throughout. Quiet. Very quiet.

Silence was broken only by the ringing of the breakfast bell. I stood in line with twenty other people, many still in brown robes from the meditation session. I was given my food in a bowl and sat down next to Bob at a long table, kneeling on the floor. The flavor of the home-made granola and yogurt with fresh fruit, sweet with honey and crunchy with toasted nuts, contrasted with the bitter tang of the birch bark tea as we silently chewed our food facing out into the beginning green of spring in the well-tended backyard. Some eyes found mine, some curiosity I imagined—who was this woman brought to the center by Bob, a Zen monk?

Afterwards, while Bob had a brief morning staff meeting, I wandered into the empty meditation hall, walked in a ways to see a raised dais for the teacher ahead and pillows and mats lined in neat rows facing the walls around the room, everything evenly placed, all in straight lines. I had no idea how to behave, so I just stood still. That day, or whenever I asked, Bob offered minimal instruction and explanation, and with no answers forthcoming, I learned not to ask questions.

Bob took me back to his room, as tidy as the meditation hall and the same texture. It wasn't clear where I should put my things until he made some room in his closet for my book bag. I rested while he worked as director of construction, responsible for the upkeep of the interior of the Center, and now for restoring a large out-building into a gathering hall. I met up with him again for the vegetarian lunch when talking was allowed and Bob introduced me to several people as we mingled outside on the lawn.

They asked where I was from and how I met Bob. I could feel their curiosity, sense their surprise, and realized he hadn't told people I was coming. I had no clue what to ask back—I knew where they lived and what they were doing. I wanted to ask, “Why are you here? Why are you a Buddhist?” But this felt much too invasive and so I turned to small talk, to babbling about how beautiful the Center was and how I appreciated the food and the quiet. There was a good deal of silence during which they smiled and seemed at ease while I felt awkward. What do I say to Buddhists? What do I talk about at a Zen Center?

I took that same trip, from Boston to Rochester, via the White Castle and on to the Center, a half dozen times throughout the next year. Sometimes the waitress remembered me and smiled, and gradually I nodded to the men at the counter or the women coming in on their way to work. In contrast, interactions with community members rarely felt comfortable on my visits, and I was happiest when I had Bob to myself; in the cocoon of his room it almost felt like we slipped back to our first weekend, to our intense focus on each other.

My favorite visit that fall was Thanksgiving when I disappointed my cousin and chose a trip to Rochester over being with her family. Once again I rode through the night and sat waiting in the diner. On the day before Thanksgiving it felt gloomy there, so many people with nowhere to be. Not me—I was eating vegetarian Thanksgiving dinner with a houseful of Buddhists.

It was an amazing meal—squash tureen of stew, roasted root vegetables, sautéed greens, pearled onions, and pumpkin soup. The pies, traditional favorites—apple and pumpkin and pecan—were fragrant, spicy and sweet. Throughout the meal people shared good spirits and laughter. I joined in, relaxed under the influence of wine and beer, rich and abundant food. Glad to see them loosen up, I found more to talk about—movies and restaurants, music, alternative medicine, and hikes and families. When I commented to Bob it felt relaxed, almost familiar, he scowled, “What, did you think we didn’t have fun, couldn’t have a beer or two?”

I noticed that weekend how Bob watched me, even more closely as I loosened up, not with the pride of showing off his girlfriend, but with an air of appraisal. His cool, leveled, brown-eyed look wore a hint of judgment. I wondered, “Did I pass inspection?” I wondered about the criteria for evaluation.

I was intrigued by the Buddhists—they seemed so confident and assured, so superior. Maybe I could understand and cultivate that leveled look. Maybe it would mean I had the inner peace they seemed to have, and I could rest in the silence which thus far made me tense.

Back home in Boston I read excerpts from a book on Zen Buddhism Bob lent me. I sat with a group in Cambridge that was part of the Rochester Zen community,

transferring buses across Boston in the early morning to make it to meditation by 7:00. Stilling the mind seemed like a good thing. Freedom from suffering sounded peaceful. Easy, I thought, I can do that. But my mind kept racing.

I must have passed inspection from Bob's friends because I went back for winter hikes and spring excursions. Each trip was the same—the White Castle, the awkward hug, the quiet ride in the car, and stilted discussion of Buddhist practice. The one thing that changed was I began to attend morning and evening meditation sessions at the Center. I donned a robe and filed quietly into the zendo—weekdays, Sunday mornings, and once for a day-long sitting.

I threw myself into the scene, joining longer and longer meditation sessions to sit without moving, my lower back and knees aching, my legs falling asleep. I stifled sneezes and endured itching. Sometimes it brought tears to my eyes.

July, 1976 — Rochester, NY

The next July I packed up my apartment, put my meager possessions in storage, said good bye to friends and the close-knit group of people I worked with for the past two years, headed off to attend weaving school in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. By no means an accomplished weaver after two adult education classes, I imagined myself in a world of artisans of craft and color. After the class I was to return to Rochester. I thought I might be a Buddhist. Definitely, I thought, Bob and I would live together.

Just to make sure, I stopped off to see Bob first, to leave a few things in his room. I followed the same routine of all my visits since the previous October—riding the Greyhound bus through the night from downtown Boston to downtown Rochester.

Mornings in this White Castle with the clientele stand out in my visits to the Zen Center throughout the year. The all-night diner with its seedy clientele proved to be less frightening than the somber, smiling Buddhists who seemed more and more smug. At the White Castle I felt comfortable in my wrinkled jeans, shorts and t-shirts, my stained and well-used backpack stuffed with my travel needs. No one there had any interest in judging me.

When Bob came to get me I was always nervous about my reception, his brief sideways smile while he hustled me into the car to return to the Center. More often than not I met with silence or with nods and faint smiles. The days followed the same routine—I hung out while Bob worked, joined him for lunch, and accompanied him to sittings for meditation.

I intended to stay a few days before I headed south to the craft school, but something scared me. As we hung out with members of the community, one woman kept singling him out. Every time I looked she was talking with him, smiling and laughing, looking into his face—he returned the warmth. An attractive woman, a few years younger than me, she lived in the community, a regular practitioner, not a novice without a clue about Buddhism. She appeared so at home, fitting in where I felt so awkward. It seemed like it might be a good thing to stay in Rochester with Bob.

I learned of a month-long Buddhist-in-training program offered at the Center—open to people interested in seriously pursuing Buddhism. I changed my mind about leaving and signed up—moved by some inner pull, a mixture of inspiration, bravado, and desperation. I gave up weaving school to become a Buddhist in training, cancelled my bus ticket, got a refund, called my friends in Boston to alert them to my change in plans, and said goodbye to Bob as I moved into the trainee dorm where I was to reside in silence for the month.

I'd show him what a strong Buddhist I could be. I jumped ahead, never thought how it would feel to not speak with Bob for the entire month, to have no other friends there to keep me company, and, as I found out, at that time of year, in the August heat, to be there with no other trainees. I slept alone in the hot, airless dorm; during the day I performed kitchen duties and attended sittings. On my breaks I took walks to get away. I felt everyone watching me, wondering, would she make it? Does she have what it takes to be a Buddhist?

With Philip Kapleau, the head of the Center, away during August, I was without a teacher. Why didn't someone else guide me? What about the monk in charge of the Center for the month? I guess he had no idea what to do with me—the girlfriend, the seducer of his fellow monk. He probably wondered if I really wanted to be a Buddhist.

Even worse, it seemed on every occasion I saw Bob throughout the day—after lunch, late afternoon break, gathering in the robe room before morning and evening sitting—he was speaking with that same young woman who stared adoringly at him. I caught

him smiling back once or twice, and watched to analyze the intensity of the gaze. In most un-Buddhist-like feelings, I was beset with jealousy.

So I threw myself into the experience, turning the jealousy into a potent energy, becoming a zealot, sitting morning, afternoon and evening, hours every day, sometimes up to five hours, and attending all-day sittings whenever possible. I bought my own brown robe, my own sitting pillow to use in the dorm. I cut and chopped vegetables for vegetarian meals, kneaded bread, stirred batter, and put the warm milk mixed with yogurt culture into dark cupboards each night to set the yogurt for breakfast the next day. I stopped wearing my colorful and revealing skirts, shorts and sundresses—traded them for long skirts I made on a borrowed machine with dark and light blue fabric bought on sale at the downtown Sears. I cut my hair short, framing my face. I was a Buddhist makeover my friends from Boston would not recognize.

These changes made little difference in my ability to talk with people of the community. For one I wasn't supposed to talk much, but every once in awhile someone would quietly ask, "How are you doing?" I could think of no other answer than, "Fine." Held back by pride or just sheer competitiveness, I never felt I could share my confusion or doubts. No, I was there to show them—but, show them what?

I could have spilled out a litany of complaints about how lonely I felt in the community, about how jealous I was when Bob talked to a certain woman, about how scary it was when I meditated. What is this Buddhism anyway? What do you get from this? Do I fit in?

I found solace in the statue of Kannon—felt her compassionate kindness. Some afternoons I sat with her, talking to her; often I cried. I also preferred the silence of the herbal garden a block or two away, part of a grassy mall running between official-looking buildings. I chanced upon this spot, an easy walk from the Zen Center, close enough to get to after lunch, or in the late afternoon when I had a break from kitchen duties, before the light supper and the evening sitting.

Here I sat on the bench surrounded by herbs, full-grown in late summer, aromatic in the steamy heat. Thyme, chive, oregano, basil, anise, lemon balm. I felt the comfort of sitting in what smelled like a giant bowl of vegetable soup—unself-conscious and still. Sometimes I cried with no sense of being observed by others. Other times I sang quietly to myself. Sometimes I just sat.

When they needed me, I toiled in the Zen Center fields outside Rochester, where they grew vegetables for meals. Here I wore my regular clothes—tee shirts and shorts appropriate to the steamy heat and the dirty work. I lost myself in rows of broccoli, carrots and kale, pulling up weeds and picking ripe vegetables. I worked silently, wiping sweat with a red bandana I tied around my forehead, stopping only for water and lunch. Only one other person there, we talked very little, and when we did it was easy banter about the garden.

Afterwards Bob told me, some pride in his voice, “He says you are really strong and work very hard.” I got lost in the country where silence was natural in the still heat of the day. The work was a relief.

Sitting in the zendo, day upon day for an entire month, proved too much for me—sadness and pain bottled up for years began to arise. I felt shame and anger

from my divorce—the sting of being labeled deserter for leaving my marriage to an increasingly cold and distant husband buried in academic work. I blamed myself—I must be wrong—that’s what my family said.

I also thought about Rob, a young man from the group home where I was counselor the past two years. Judged suicidal, he was asked to leave the group home and seek intensive care. Instead, emotionally distraught, he hung himself in his parents’ basement. I cried then too, so hard they sent me to a psychiatrist, another cold and distant man who was no help at all.

I hated sitting still while tears ran down my face, not able to wipe them off, unable to move without retort or criticism, or being whacked by the stick. I couldn’t push down the sorrow. I had no teacher to talk with, no one in the community reached out, and Bob was unwilling to break the rules and talk to me. I felt they all heard me, throughout that stern, quiet room, crying with people I barely knew. The only compassion I felt was upstairs, sitting next to the marble statue of Kannon, or in the sweltering heat near rows of vegetables and herbs.

Everyday I tried harder and harder to fit in, desperate to prove I could become a Buddhist. I acted demurely, swallowed my voice into silence rather than blurt out my opinion, nodded my head in deference to those more enlightened than I.

Once, Bob told me of a woman in the community who set about saving a cluster of ants she found in her kitchen. Hers was an example of honoring all sentient beings. As it turned out, she was the very same attractive woman I viewed as my rival.

In an effort to match her example, I attempted to rescue all the flies that entered my dorm. Exasperated one night, all by myself in the stifling third floor dorm room, I grabbed a piece of paper and swatted the fly that kept me awake. As the fly lay dead at my hands, I looked down and felt giddy relief—glad at last that I could sleep. I was alone in my sweet act of defiance.

It became clearer and clearer I had to leave. As my traineeship came to an end I told Bob I was going home to Boston. “I can’t stay here. I don’t even know who I am anymore. I have to quit crying.”

In a surprising turn he pled with me to stay, apologized for being so distant and judgmental, for leaving me alone. Even with tears streaming down his cheeks I was unmoved. I packed my robe, my meditation pillow, my now-unsuitable long skirts, and returned to Boston.

August, 1976 — Limerick, Maine

I returned to Boston with no place to live, my things stored in a friend’s garage, no job, no boyfriend. My friends, utterly baffled, asked, “What happened?” I couldn’t give them an answer that made any sense. I didn’t want to say, “I started crying and couldn’t stop.”

Meanwhile, over the summer my best friend in Boston met the man she hoped to marry and they were moving in together. I stayed with them a few nights as I developed a new plan—a cabin somewhere in the woods—a place to get away, to decompress, where I could weave and read and walk. As it turned out, her new boyfriend had rented a cabin in Maine for the year, a place where he could study for

the Bar, and he offered me the month of September at the cabin. “Not a big place,” he told me, but the price was right for my unemployment budget, fifty dollars for the month, and I took it.

I retrieved some things from storage: my table loom, yarns, books, journals, bedding and warm clothing to take with me; I was still traveling light. My friend and her boyfriend drove me up to the cabin in Limerick, in the southwest corner of Maine. The cabin wasn’t in the woods like I hoped, instead it was planted beside a dirt road a mile out of town, and the cabin didn’t look like much from the outside—a squared off log structure which opened into one big room with an alcove for sleeping. But I liked the cozy space and soon found woodsy trails further down the road when it turned into a rutted dirt track with paths leading off in different directions.

Alone, at first I slept—exhausted from my month in Rochester, relieved by the cool air of early fall Maine. Then I warped my loom with basic white cotton yarn and began to weave simple, rustic tapestries. I started to read, to write in my journal, and took time to cook meals from the food I brought with me—vegetarian meals in silence which stirred a memory of the routine life I left at the Rochester Zen Center but felt more relaxing.

Then I began to wander down the road heading north into the Maine woods towards Sawyer Mountain. New England in September, leaves changed colors each day, red to yellow and orange, and fell from the trees to wither and die, making the walk a crunchy shuffle that brought comfort. There was little rain so the brooks I found deeper into the woods were slow-moving, gurgling an accompaniment to my pace. Wetlands were on the dry side, but still active with birds readying for

southward flight. I heard the woodpeckers still at work and the squirrels gathered acorns for winter.

Each day I ventured further, walking without maps, finding trails off the rough tracks, pushing up and down over rises in the hills, all the while Sawyer Mountain a distance away. I found the exertion healing, and tired, I awakened each day a little more rested.

Once in a while I smiled on my walks, talked to the birds and the squirrels the way I like to do when I am alone. I made feeble attempts at bird call—the low moan of the mourning doves and the sharp tatter of the chickadees. Often I found tears coming down my face. As my mind cleared in the absence of clatter I was faced with questions I hoped to avoid: What happened? What am I going to do? I ached for the relationship that had promised to answer all my questions, and wondered if I was making a mistake.

I tried to empty my mind, to listen: to the crackle of fall leaves blowing in the wind. To the birch and maple and oak. To the pines. To the wind. To my feet through leaves on the path.

To the brooks I found along some of the paths, chiming and peeling as they wound down small gullies—the tallest hill less than one thousand feet.

To the birds and their calls.

To feel stone and roots and dirt beneath my feet, sometimes cushioned by new-fallen leaves and those dropped and decayed from previous years.

I tried to empty my mind to smell the woods, the decomposing leaves on wet days and the dry crisp nutty fragrance on the days the sun shone.

When I returned from my walks I sat outside on sunny afternoons, brought out my loom or my macramé. To a basic warp or stitch I wove or tied in pieces of grass, twigs, feathers, from my walk. These pieces became my journal, as much as any words—fiber pieces as the story of my month.

I had no words for what I had been through, for where I was.

I could not meditate—I brought my pillow and I tried, but I was restless.

Walking became my meditation, putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again, day after day. When I sat it was on rocks streamside, accompanied not by bells and instruction, but by the ever-flow of water. My incense was the scent of pine and oak.

About two weeks into my stay I ventured on a different walk on another dirt road, just off to the right of my usual walk, still heading north and, this time, a bit east. I came upon rows and rows of apple trees. Stopped by the pungent smell of ripe apples, the sweet smell of rot from apples on the ground, I wandered over in hopes of supplementing my diet. I picked up a few apples from the ground, those recently fallen, and walked among the trees. Then I noticed ladders against some trees and big containers filled with picked apples. A bit farther I heard conversation and then saw men with canvas bags, some of them picking in the trees.

“How are you all?” I walked closer and smiled up to men on ladders. There were a couple nods, from further away a cat call. I started to back off, uncertain of my welcome.

“Can I help you?” A man approached me, coming from a few rows over.

“I’m just staying nearby and found the orchard on my walk. Hope it’s ok I took a few apples.”

Assured there was no problem, I stood and talked to this man who looked steadily at me. I noticed the other men, intent on their picking, alert, careful to avoid a direct look at what was happening below. I gathered I was talking to their boss.

“Do you need any more pickers?” The words were out before I thought about them. But it made sense: I could use the money, the apples, and the work high in the September-ripened trees. I could use the companionship and the adventure.

As it turned out, they were in need of more pickers—any day a hard frost could come and they wanted the apples off the trees. As I came to understand, not many people wanted to work with the jailhouse crew.

I spent most of my third week in Maine climbing into the trees, filling the bag slung across my shoulders and back with ripened apples. I picked Macintosh and Cortland, the earliest to mature and two of my favorites. In my cabin my diet included baked apples, applesauce, and apple crisp. I gnawed on apples throughout the day. I also earned enough to cover my living expenses for the month.

I liked the apple picking. I liked waking every morning to get out the door, packed lunch in my backpack, plenty of water, into the brisk fall air. That week it didn’t rain—no picking on rainy days—so I worked every day. I walked the mile or two down the gravelly road lined by grasses and, farther back, trees. Some mornings the deer lingered at the edge of the woods—heads up and alert, still until they felt it safe to return to their grazing.

On the first day the muscles across my back and in my hands, my fingers, were sore. I kept picking. Climbing the ladder with the bag, especially descending when it was full, was awkward—more than once I almost fell off backwards when the apple-laden bag was tugged by gravity. But I kept going.

Throughout the first day I could feel an eerie sensation of eyes on my back. I knew the foreman was watching me to see if I could keep up, to make sure I was safe. I dressed in baggy clothing—no hint of femininity as enticement—fitting in, just picking away. By the end of the second day I blended into the general rhythm of things, another back with a pair of arms. There were a few nods as we split off to leave—the men in the vans marked “Corrections” and me to my cabin.

The third day one of the men started working next to me. I did not anticipate his desire, the need, to tell me why he was doing time. “I roughed up a few guys,” he told me. “I didn’t mean to but here I am. I sure can’t wait to get off. This apple picking is better than sitting in that cell.” I found they were paid—and they were working for the money. Some of them sent it home. During the week a couple more guys mumbled their stories of “hitting on my wife,” or “robbed the corner store.” I knew they were not hardened criminals or they would be under tighter security. They were glad, I was told, for the fresh air.

Me too. And glad for the plain talk. We even laughed a bit. By the end of the week I sat by the dozen or so men with my lunch. It was nice for me, and easy, none of the strain I felt in Rochester.

They couldn’t figure me out, that was for sure. “What are you doing here?” more than one asked. “Alone? A woman alone?” I learned to listen to them rather

than explain myself, and that worked just fine. It was enough that they felt my acceptance—knowing they were not judged.

At the end of the day on Friday the foreman paid me in cash. “I am glad for your help in getting these apples picked in time.” He lifted the brim of his hat, loaded the men into the van, and they drove off waving to me as I sauntered behind, moving out of their dust.

That weekend Bob showed up—he borrowed a car to drive from Rochester. He cried throughout the weekend. “Don’t end the relationship. I am sorry this was so hard—maybe we should have gone easier on you. We can work it out.”

I was stunned, speechless. He seemed to take responsibility for how I was treated and that meant I didn’t make it up. My first impulse was to pack up and return to Rochester, to once again be spontaneous and bold. Instead I took him walking, showed him my trails, the woods, the creeks, the apple orchard, displayed my weavings, baked apple crisp.

“No.” I tentatively answered him. “No.” More firmly. “No. This cannot work. I am not a Buddhist. No.”

He left as sad as he came.

The last week I took longer walks as I strolled out each morning along the trail onto the paths in the woods, carrying my lunch, going for the sunlight. I thought I would ascend Sawyer Mountain, but it was further than I thought. Instead I found Pickerel

Pond one day, walked around on the shore. The land, seeming so flat when I first arrived, opened to water and hill and woods.

I picked dried grasses and flowers to texture into my weaving, working in a palate of fall woods: grays and browns and tans, hints of orange and red and yellow.

When the month was over my friends came to bring me home. I gathered my weavings, my few possessions, locked the door and turned over the keys.

I returned to Boston where I found a large room to rent on the sun-lit spacious and open third floor of an old Victorian house, and found a job working at a weaving store as a clerk with a generous discount to buy a small four harness loom, yarns in whites and tans, as well as yellow, gold, orange and red of New England fall. I found willing instructors. That winter I attended a local Quaker Meeting, learning to center down closer to home.

Now, thirty years later I meditate at the Rahob Dharma Center with my teacher, Rinpoche Rahob Tulka, head of the Rahob Monastery in Eastern Tibet. He urges me, whenever possible, to meditate in the woods—a forest temple. “All the churches, the temples, the monasteries, these are not necessary. Go out into the trees and sit. Feel the woods around you with all your senses.”

In our recent meeting he looked me straight in the eye, dropped the general chatter and jovial humor, no more mention of meditation in the woods.

“Don’t just meditate to have a clear mind. That’s not what I teach you. Investigate,” he commanded. “Investigate. I teach you to investigate. Look into the

nature of emptiness, let everything arise, look at it, and let it return to emptiness.

Look until you believe for yourself that it is empty.”

“But, Rinpoche, we have you as our teacher. You are our teacher who tells us it is empty. We believe you.”

“No! This is not enough! Believe it for yourself. Investigate until you believe it for yourself. No less!”

As I look into my life, look deeper into memory, these two months keep coming up and I investigate them detail by detail. I see myself tossed and turned by the same questions and needs that propel me today: wondering where I belong, banging against loneliness on the way to solitude, struggling to connect and fit in.

Lately the struggles and questions melt into some larger focus where I find my place in a more compassionate world. When this happens I stop struggling to find my place. It is strange, looking back at those two months, what I most remember: the diner, the herb garden, the statue of Kannon, the apple-picking, weaving, and walks in the woods.

Sitting Like a Mountain

“Sit like a mountain.” My meditation teacher exhorts the practitioners to be still, to be solid in our posture. I sit in the front row of four semi-circles around the teacher, comfortable on my kneeling bench and cushion, water and writing tablet nearby.

Above him hangs a Tibetan Tanka of Padmasambhava our guide and support as we clear our minds. According to Indo-Tibetan beliefs, Padmasambhava returns over and over to help those who sincerely wish to become enlightened, to attain Buddha-hood. I know what the teacher means: a mountain is strong and silent. Still, I am not sitting with a settled mind. Instead, my mind dredges up scene after scene of growing up in Colorado, the gateway to the Rockies; mountains weave through my memories of hiking, fishing, skiing and jeeping throughout the state, from the San Juan Range to the Gunnison River to Rocky Mountain National Park.

I know the daredevil challenge of a slalom run down a steep ski slope at breakneck speed. I know deep canyons where one wrong turn on a narrow road can send you plunging two hundred feet to your death. I know cold storms blown in by sharp winds above timberline in the harsh exposure of rock and tundra. I know the exhilaration of rutted plunges down jeep trails barely passable and all-the-more exciting because of it. I know fear and reckless abandon and challenge. Still I pause, wondering about this command: “Sit like a mountain?” I am not sure what that means after all.

I struggle to sit still. Just when I think I am on the right track, experiences of mountains fill my mind and my concentration shifts. Mountains were a source of

adolescent thrill-seeking as I careened down white water mountain streams sitting on a truck tire inner tube while flaunting my father's injunction against this sport which took several lives each year. Mountains were source of stillness and peace. It seemed, if only for a while, my troubles melted away as I lay on a sun-baked rock or listened to the chortle of a mountain brook.

I learned solitude walking in the mountains as my father fished in small streams for brook trout. While he was absorbed for hours with his rod and reel, beer in hand, I slipped away, climbing trails, walking a little bit further, and then a little bit further still. Each time I picked a destination ahead—the ponderosa pine or the quaking aspen, the big boulder or the hole where the chipmunk darted out across the path, the patch of bright wildflowers, blue columbine or deep Red Indian paint brush, or the top of a vista where I would gain a view. As I walked upward loneliness dissolved into wonder and I was alone with exaltation and mystery. Just when you climb to the heights or go down and around a valley, there is another range of mountains pushing up in endless array.

I am comfortable sitting with this group where movement is possible when I am stiff or cramped. Two times along this spiritual path I sat with Zen Buddhists who have strict rules about movement and silence. I found that practice daunting, too rigid for me after my stifled childhood, and I am relieved now to move more freely, easing my legs and butt on the padded kneeler. I am comfortable knowing no one will yell at me or come around with the stick. Still I long to tell the teacher, “My mind is full of mountains.”

In my sixty-six years I climbed on and around mountains in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota, Utah, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Maine, and India.

The Colorado Rockies have sharp snow-crested peaks. My father compared them to the Swiss Alps and always said, "Why would I want to go to Switzerland when I live in Colorado where the mountains are even prettier?" In contrast my mother yearned to see Swiss peaks, but never got there. I didn't share either perspective.

For my part I feel pulled towards the Green Mountains in Vermont, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, the Adirondacks in New York, and the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee; older mountains in geological times, rounded off with age and covered with deciduous trees whose foliage decorates each season with shifting color and texture. Most of all I prefer the coastal mountains of Downeast Maine. A gentle peak, Cadillac Mountain is topped by worn rocks round as the feminine breast. The summit of the mountain can be reached in at least two ways: the steeper, more direct climb up the south face, or the longer more gentler path through pine, deciduous trees, scrub oak and wind-swept low-lying shrubs and wildflowers. Along the way are abundant blueberry bushes.

On Mt. Desert Island I sit atop Cadillac Mountain and stare across the Atlantic Ocean, imagining Europe on the other side. Or, across Frenchman's Bay on the mainland, I sit on Black Mountain looking west toward Mount Katahdin following peak after peak across northern New England.

One morning I woke up early to sit on Cadillac Mountain for sunrise. It felt to be the first day of the world as light tipped over the edge of the earth and grew brighter with golden white streaming rays. I thought of Mary Oliver's "Why I Wake Early": "Hello, sun in my face. Best preacher that ever was to keep us from ever-darkness good morning, good morning, good morning. Watch now how I start the day in happiness, in kindness." I wonder if she was sitting like a mountain when she wrote her verse.

Did it take her a long time to learn to focus, to clear her mind? I am having a hard time as my busy mind chatters on like a squirrel or chickadee, certainly not what the teacher prefers. All I can do is follow his instructions, the pointing out way, hoping he can guide me to find the peace and joy he describes. Until I do it is hard to sit still and even harder to trust.

When I was younger I was my father's daughter. A mountain man, he preferred rugged challenges, and was happiest on the weekends when he traveled to the western part of the state to his small trailer in a trailer park alongside the Gunnison River. The trailer park included showers, a small shop for food and fishing supplies, laundry facilities, and a small pond for children to fish. As part of his fee the owners watched my father's trailer while he lived his dental and family life in Denver.

In Gunnison my dad relaxed from his busy week—dressing in sloppy clothing, a fishing vest, pocket flap covered with tied flies and fish line hanging from hooks. He kept his small boxy trailer neat and clean, cooking basic meals in the little kitchen or on his Coleman stove sitting under the small porch awning outside. He

“puttered around,” relieved to be without a wife telling him what to do. I could come, a willing companion, but I understood the terms: be quiet and stay out of the way. On my own I prowled around the trailer park and played by the river, while he fried our fresh-caught trout. It seemed an easy life.

When he didn’t fish with me trailing along, we rode around in his jeep. My favorite ride was a steep four-wheel-drive road above Telluride, an old mountain mining town. On a precarious and boulder-strewn trail we climbed in the jeep through the piney forest, over sharp rocks, and then dropped down into Schofield Pass, one of the most picturesque places in the state. We always laughed aloud at the sign posted on an abutting pine tree: 25 miles per hour. Somebody had a great sense of mountain man humor when he posted that sign—it was frightening to speed over 5 miles an hour! My dad and I slipped and jolted over steep rocks, holding our breath all the way down.

Four wheel drive jeeping was a risky undertaking. My father drove cautiously but the danger was there in the rocks, the pitch, the isolation, the reliance on a mad-made machine. Sometimes the roads off into wilderness areas were relatively tame—a poorly maintained dirt road with some larger sized stones cropping up. Other times, like on Schofield Pass, the roads were hardly distinguishable except for patterns of erosion from water run-off during storms and scrapes on the rocks from the undercarriage of a car or truck, or shiny bits of paint where the side of a vehicle scratched a boulder. We never had any real crisis, just a few unplanned jerks and jolts, and slippage on rocks wet from sudden summer storms. The danger, the risk,

all added to the thrill. I laughed in delight with each up and down and grinding of the wheels, the creaking of the axles.

Throughout this rough riding, my father and I never spoke. A man who said very little with the family, he saved his conversation for patients in his dental office, for colleagues at professional gatherings, and for his fishing and hunting cronies when they gathered on weekends attired in outdoor clothing. Even then he wasn't a big talker. He and I went for hours without a word, except for shared laughter on those daredevil dips. I learned the art of silence well, practicing interior conversation by commenting to myself on the passing flowers, on the steep pitches, on the scary ride.

Sometimes I counted everything on the road as we passed by, seeking solace in some kind of number games. Other times I imagined small worlds in the woods and rocky terrain or streams outside the car as we rode by, creating fantasies about the world in miniature. This worked the best during the slower paced jeep rides during which two inch cowboys chased Indians among the stones, or canoe-shaped leaves carried trappers and furs to trading posts, or small Indian villages were built on stream-side cliffs.

Too much imagination is not good in meditation I remind myself, shifting my weight on the kneeler and taking in a deep breath. Quiet the mind and focus the breath. I was introduced to Buddhist practice by a man I met one weekend at a party where we locked eyes and talked the night away. I vaguely recall pouring out my loneliness and what I saw as existential angst as he told me about his path from

college to Buddhism and about his life as a Zen monk. His life seemed way better than mine; he seemed so solid.

On his next break, we took what I hoped would be a romantic trip to a cabin heated by a wood-burning stove in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He was eager for me to try snow shoeing. He had lots of experience. I had none. With the temperature in the mid-teens and a steady northerly wind, the wind chill index that day motivated me to put on layers of clothing—long underwear, turtle neck, heavy wool sweater, wool pants, parka and snow pants. I had a thick pair of Nordic socks guaranteed by L. L. Bean to be extra-warm. Over these I put my old boots, which I forgot to waterproof. My appearance was comical to me, adorable—the abominable snow woman. Even with two pairs of gloves my fingers were cold. My toes, too, quickly grew numb.

With little help from Bob standing silently by, I put my boots into the leather strap bindings of the old wooden snowshoes that were stored at the cabin. The wide spread of the wooden snowshoes forced my legs apart in an awkward gait with knees slightly bent, thighs bowed out, and arms extended out to the side holding ski poles. Try as hard as I could to keep up the pace set by Bob, I was soon left behind as he charged up the snowy mountain side, never looking back. Cold, my upper thighs burning, I pushed on as long as I could. In exhaustion I dropped into the deep drifted snow making erratic snow angels with broken wings. I wiggled and tossed in shaky laughter almost giving way to tears. I relaxed my pursuit and stilled to the chatter around me: snow dropping from branches, chickadee song and crackle of wood, nature's winter symphony with mountainside chorus.

A little later Bob descended; his look, when he stared at me, made me feel even more cold and pitiful. He scowled and started back down. Clearly I was not a mountain woman.

After each sitting period the meditation teacher asks the students to talk about how it went for them. I tell how mountains evoke anger and sorrow.

In my late twenties on the most arduous mountain trip of my life, I hiked eighty miles for eight days into the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area with my boyfriend Gary. He envisioned himself a rugged mountaineer as I struggled to prove myself a mountain woman. Ever the optimist I held, once again, high romantic hopes for this adventure. I hoisted sixty pounds of backpack as we climbed Pyramid Pass over the Continental Divide into the valley of the South Fork of the Flathead River. Even though we picked the easiest access, the climb was grueling. Exhausted later in the day, we argued about where to stop. I was ready sooner than he, but we trucked on despite my pleas.

By the time we set-up camp we barely spoke. Despite the warm, dry days, the atmosphere between us remained chilled and communication non-existent. This is not the peaceful silence Buddhists extol, but after a while, day four or five, the quiet became mind-soothing and each day's walking was a meditation on tree, rock, river and wild life. Herons perched at river's edge and jays squawked up above. Gary, a birder, sporadically shared his knowledge as we stopped to call chickadees, swallows, warblers and ducks. My pack grew lighter as we ate our food, the trash carried out weighing much less.

Periodically Gary stopped by the river's edge to fish. Remote and aloof, he went off by himself. But I learned something on those trips with my father. I put together my own hand-me-down fishing rod and reel from my father's castaways. I attached a fly and cast upstream, watching the lure drift down stream. Though I was never much good at catching fish, the process itself—staring as the soothing water rushed by—was mesmerizing.

On day six we set up camp by Salmon Lake to rest and forage for fresh food. For most of the day I rested, happy to soak up energy and doze in the sun. I decided to fish in the lake once again connecting the pieces of my pole and properly attaching the flat water reel. Using a silver lure, I cast out into the lake—a good cast—moving straight and dropping sharply down. Within a minute I felt a strong tug—then a jerk. Holding the pole with both hands, I reeled in the struggling fish. Gary, on the rocks by the shore with his collapsible net, snagged the fish. “Five pounds,” he yelled. Huge! I was ecstatic.

Dinner was pan-fried salmon and huckleberry cobbler baked in the aluminum oven. Sated, our communication gap was spanned by well-being. It was one of our last meals together.

The teacher tells me the meditation will become automatic. To sit like a mountain is to be solid, rooted, unwavering. It means to have faith, even when faced with fear and doubt. It can lead from loneliness to solitude, from separation to connection, from anger to joy. He emphasizes radical responsibility: no one can do it for you. In the safest of places you may feel unsettled and alone.

One summer in Maine my boyfriend, Stuart, and I hiked up Cadillac Mountain. As we moved up the long north-side trail to the summit on a beautiful sunny summer afternoon, a sudden dense bank of fog rolled in. Visibility was less than five feet, opening only when a breeze briefly pushed the fog aside. With rock cairns of various sizes all around it was impossible to recognize which was the marker for the trail—which led up and which led back down. Disoriented, Stuart (who was not a mountain man) panicked and began darting back and forth between cairns in desperation. I choked on my fear, realizing we came unprepared with no coats or food, insufficient water, and, most importantly, no compass.

“Stop,” I yelled. “Breathe. Stay still and breathe.”

He stared at me in panic. I walked up next to him and just stood. Possibilities flashed through my mind: no one knew where we were, no search parties could come in the fog, death by exposure only 1,000 feet above sea level.

Perhaps ten minutes passed—or maybe it was twenty. Time had no meaning as the warmth drained rapidly from our bodies in the cold moist air. Then, as if to mock our flirtation with doom, three young people came out of the fog walking towards us in bare feet. In laughter and camaraderie oblivious to danger, they looked at us.

“We’re lost!”

Incredulous, certain of the way, they pointed behind them, “The path goes down that way.”

As we headed down they continued their upward trek vanishing into the fog. Within one hundred yards we returned to blue skies and sun.

My mind wanders. I struggle to return to my focus, to develop what the teacher calls an intimate relationship with my breath. In the Buddhist practice I am learning there are markers along the path of meditation; following the breath and quieting the mind, the path to inner peace.

The Buddha teaches liberation from suffering. Looking at the world with equanimity comes from emptiness, from cutting through our mental clamor. With intense focus a person can gaze into the mental states that are instead sources of dissatisfaction, sadness and anger. When sitting goes well a practitioner sees with a clear mind. Every so often I get a taste of this gaze, looking from the top of a mountain.

For six summers I went to Maine for a week or two while my daughters attended overnight camp. I rented a cottage from a friend in my writing group, covered the dining table with books and paper and wrote daily. I also hiked and biked and swam, finding favorite places north of Ellsworth in Down east Maine to return to over and over each summer. A favorite was Black Mountain; perched on top I gazed eastward towards Cadillac Mountain.

One summer I hiked solo for the day—my destination four miles up and down Black Mountain, two miles to the top of Caribou, and another six miles to return. Despite my fear of the unknown, I surrendered to an inner call to take this journey. Like the bear in a favorite childhood song, I went over the mountain to see what was on the other side. Cautiously, I reviewed the trail map, searching for difficult spots. I

packed carefully—food, extra water, and warm, dry, colorful clothes. Starting out, I eased my fears—of being lost, of being hurt and alone—by pacing myself, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, moving steadily forward. I sang aloud or listened to birdsong.

Bear scat! Right in front of me. Filled with the purple stain of blueberries. I looked around and found myself in the middle of bushes loaded with plump, ripe blueberries. *Ursus americanus*, the black bear. Just beyond these droppings I found a bear footprint, almost humanlike in outline of the sole, encrusted in the mud-dried trail. I recalled reading that bears are not likely to leave a spot as long as there is food. I imagined the largest black bear possible, six feet tall and weighing five hundred pounds, standing on its hind legs, watching me. I knew this bear could hear or smell me from a long distance. Most certainly I would not be able to outrun it.

My mind flashed to one of my favorite childhood books, *Blueberries for Sal*, written by Maine author Robert McCloskey. That author suggests bears are equally frightened and surprised by humans. Assuming this to be true, I continued on my hike, passing more bear scat and tracks along the way. I reviewed my response should a bear, perhaps with a cub, stand out on the trail or among the bushes. Stand still. No sudden moves. Look down—don't challenge the bear. Move slowly in the opposite direction. Hope and pray the bear, after a few moments, will lumber down the trail in the opposite direction or at least move out of sight, just as in McCloskey's tale.

Encountering no bears I reached the top of Caribou Mountain and wearily flopped my pack on the rock to eat my lunch while basking in the sun and absorbing

the view. Looking down the trail, coming from the other side of Caribou, I noticed a man hiking alone. My heart raced when I saw him walk towards me. I stood stark still.

He continued towards me. "How's the trail down the other side?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Did it seem fairly well marked?" he queried further.

"Yes."

"Well, this trail is good but very steep. I guess the way you came up was more gradual."

"Yes." As he talked my heart pounded. Was he a dangerous animal or another solitary traveler? Did he have a hunger he needed to appease, a journey to take?

With a slight nod, mimicking my cold reception, he walked on down the path. A few hundred feet away he took off his pack and settled down for lunch where I could just see the top of his head. Slowly my panic abated and I relaxed on the warm rocks, eating my lunch. Fears eased: about bears, about men, and about hiking alone, striking off from comfortable footing and secure scenery. I could look down to see what lay on the other side of the mountain.

Still my mind is scattered and mountain tales run across my brain like old newsreels I watched as a child. I follow the instructions as the teacher reminds us to empty our mind, to concentrate and block the thoughts as they arise.

"Wake up! Concentrate on the breath. Focus. Tame the mind."

Four years ago my younger daughter, Lizzie, and I traveled to India with Cross Cultural Solutions, a volunteer program for cultural exchange in Lower Dharamsala, Hamachal Pradesh, the northern Indian state at the foot of the Himalayas. In early June we flew to Delhi where, after a one-day orientation they drove us seventeen hours through the night from Delhi to Dharamsala. We arrived in pitch dark and fell asleep as soon as we got to our rooms.

I woke to watch the sun rise over the Himalayan peaks across the lower hills of the village. We lived at an altitude of six thousand feet in the foot hills of these majestic mountains. Two days later we traveled four miles up the mountain to Upper Dharamsala, home of the Tibetan Government in Exile. There were Buddhist monks everywhere and the Buddhist temple was open to all.

We set aside one afternoon to hike in the Himalayas. We weren't interested in one of the treks or expeditions I had read about in Jon Krakauer's descriptions of mountain climbers called to challenge the highest peaks. We wanted a short hike, like the ones we took together in Colorado or Massachusetts or Maine. We hired a cab in Lower Dharamsala to take us to Upper Dharamsala, loaded up with water and jackets, a map and some trail food. The cab driver left us off in the center of the village.

We chose the path heading up to Dal Lake, passing Tushita Meditation Center and Tibetan Children's Village on the way. The hiking was easy on a hard trod trail used by Tibetan monks going to the caves to meditate or to their huts away from the

hubbub of town. The greatest danger was wild monkeys running loose on the trail; we were told never to look these aggressive creatures in the eye.

We walked up the path beyond several small enclaves outside McLeod Ganj. A man going to the Tibetan Children's Village came up the path from behind and pulled alongside of us, slowing to talk.

"Where are you headed?"

After we told him we had no particular destination he told us of a memorial—the shrine to a teacher of the Dalai Lama.

"Look carefully to find it," he added.

Then he walked with us, worried we might miss it.

"My name is Tree. I've been here almost two years. I am heading to the Children's Village where a friend works."

A quarter of a mile or so up the trail he showed us the path—so well-camouflaged we would have passed it by. Gratefully we said our goodbyes waving him on his way.

Lizzie and I climbed up a steep mountain side for several hundred feet on a rough trail. We heard muffled voices from below when another party passed by but they could not see us through the trees. As we climbed higher we caught glimpses of monks who lived on the hillside as they scurried amid the rocks and trees.

Then peace flags appeared. Hundreds upon hundreds of flags hung on strings tied to tree branches crisscrossing from all angles. Some were faded and tattered, others resplendent in bright color. Rock cairns were scattered about, set on larger

boulders. As we neared the Tibetan shrine only bird song and rustle of the wind touched our ears.

There it was—just ahead of us. Shining white marble.

One other person was there, an old monk in his maroon robe, his face bronzed and crossed with lines. He chanted and poured tea into brass cups lined in front of the memorial plaque and stupa. Here in this sacred spot were interred the ashes of the venerable teacher to the Dalai Lama and other prominent Rinpoches.

When the monk saw us, Lizzie behind me taking pictures, he smiled shyly.

I bowed, hands together, uttering “Namaste. Tashi Delek,” smiling in return.

There is something about Tibetan Buddhist monks that brings out a childish sense of wonder in me. The look we exchanged was clear and bright. We bobbed heads and smiled and bobbed heads. Then we both stood companionably, ten feet apart, looking towards the memorial. He paused a bit and then went on with his ritual.

I wished I could speak with him, to learn the secrets of Buddhism and meditation. But all I could do was stand and breathe the pine-scented air of the Himalayas and feel the awe of a reverent space.

Lizzie has pictures so I remember we were there. I see the monk, beaming a radiant smile. I feel the peace and tranquility, the bright sun. I hear the flags waving with the wind. I feel the stillness like a mountain.

Badlands

*There is no mystery; there is only paradox, the incontrovertible
union of contradictory truths.
Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire*

The Badlands of South Dakota are a mystery to me, like my meditation practice and my desire to write. I look out across the tan-brown wash of sandstone mesas, canyons and pinnacles, sharp mid-October wind scuttling light cumulus clouds across the bright blue sky, only a few other people here this late in the season. Recently retired from college teaching, on a six week journey to visit old friends and national parks, connecting with my past, and opening to my future. Two days ago I left Wisconsin where I attended an eight day Tibetan Buddhist meditation retreat. When this trip is over I head to Maine to begin a two year writing program.

Standing at Canata Basin Overlook the wind sounds a throbbing low-pitched moan, carrying scents of dry stone and sage. I hear a strange rush of sound and feel a sense of movement. High above, hardly more visible to the naked eye than long black squiggles, hundreds of sand cranes pass over in their migration, cycling in four different bands. Faint to the ears their bugling call drifts downward as black spots fly in pattern, moving in unison. Suddenly the last group forms into a cyclone shape and begins soaring up with a faint sound of flapping. "They are funneling," someone nearby shouts. We are graced with a rare sharing of spiraled movement upward to the heavens.

I first visited the Badlands when I was fourteen, traveling with my parents on the annual summer drive, one thousand miles between Denver, Colorado and

Appleton, Wisconsin, heading to our family reunion replete with corn-on-the-cob, bratwurst, ice cream, and the Milwaukee Braves. I imagine I was sullen, sleepy and mono-syllabic for most of the trip. My brother, four years older, would not speak to us, angry he had to come along.

Every once in a while, my mother convinced my father to vary the trip we drove on tedious two-lane highways, lined with Brylcreem ads, “a little dab will do ya’.” The summer I recall, we drove a northerly route stopping at the Black Hills, Mount Rushmore, and the Badlands.

I woke up as we drove off the highway into Badlands National Park. It surprised us—the weather wet and drizzly in June, the month the area receives over three inches of its annual sixteen inches of rain. Then the rain dried up, and clouds lifted with the wind, light illumined shifting layers of tinted grays. We got out of the car onto reddish brown clay-like ground. The air smelled of electricity, the remains of recent lightning.

I volunteered to take Sandy, our yellow Labrador, for his walk. With him on a leash we walked down the designated trail as he strained and pulled ahead and I walked faster than I wanted on the wet, often slippery path. There was nothing for him to raise a leg to, no logs or protrusions. Finally, desperate to go, he squatted down and I watched as the stream of urine soaked directly into the barely wet ground. Hungry earth. Out of sight, I felt relieved to be away from my parents, felt awed by the land that looked at once so beautiful and alien.

I wanted to return to this place.

There are Badlands in all parts of the world: Canada, Spain and New Zealand, composed of sedimentary rock, loose dry soil, layers of sand and silt, clay pressed together and shaped by erosion. The massive erosion process began half million years ago, and carved the buttes one inch per year; in another half million years they will completely disappear. While this is short in geological time, it seems appallingly slow to me. I don't feel the wearing away, but on this second visit, without rain, the soil feels sandy and loose, and from the first overlook at Sage Creek Basin it stretches out as far as the eye can see.

An ecosystem of mixed-grass, of canyons, gullies, ravines, pinnacles, gorges, buttes—odd geological forms shaped by erosion—this was home to Oglala Lakotas who call it *Mako Sica*—land bad. Today, the modern pilgrim drives around the area on the Badland Loop Road, stopping at all the overlooks with names such as: Hay Butte, Pinnacles, Yellow Mounds, and Panorama Point. I hope to see bison, big horn sheep or prairie dogs, but today none are visible.

Just after White River Valley Overlook I cannot resist walking in a bit, choosing Castle Trail for a small sally. I move on the soft red soil over smooth coral rock, following gray faded pegs across the terrain. I know the Badland Loop Road is right behind me, but the still air under a wide blue, cloud-studded sky, keeps me alert, watchful. Adding to my suspense, the pegs in several places are lying beside the trail, no longer able to stand in shifting sand barely covering hardened sedimentary rock.

I walk, around one boulder, another, until I can no longer see the road. “How easy to get lost,” I muse with surprise, with a shiver of fear. What would it be like to get lost here? To run out of water and slowly dry, mummifying to the contours of the

land? This is no ordinary hike for me. I have known apprehension, lost in the woods without a compass, not sure which way I came. But in the woods something in me trusts I will find the right trail, I will reach my destination.

Moving only a short distance on the path, I am unsure of my way. I did not carry enough water. Out-of-sight of all people, staring out onto buttes and mesas, land dotted by boulders smoothed by sand, I turn and hasten to get back. Next time I will move deeper into the badlands.

As in my childhood naiveté, an ardent admirer of Geronimo, I imagine Indians sitting astride horses, long hair and feathers ruffled in the wind. They sit on the butte across from me, studying the land with what I imagine to be an inherent wisdom about this place which is sacred to them. I am glad the Oglala Sioux, are part-owners of the park. They will eventually operate their own park in the South Unit, now undeveloped and inaccessible without the proper road vehicle.

How they became part owners is not an idyllic story. Their land control expanded when the tribe agreed to allow the government to utilize of some of the area for a practice bombing range during WWII. Travelers into the South Unit are forewarned of undetonated bombs.

To me, this use of the land is bad. Perplexed, then angry, I thought, "Is this how we treat Bad Lands?" Who decided the Badlands were "bad"? Native American peoples called it "bad land," for the Spanish it was "waste land," and the French, "bad lands to cross." This place so bad for them—inhabitable in its arid landscape.

A frightening destiny seems to lie before the hearty soul who ventures into the vast expanse of red-brown-pink-gray crumbling rock and mud. Just one corner away

from seeing any other living person these morose lands swallow up a lowly traveler. And yet they sparkle with sun and light, immense blue sky with clear white clouds.

Diane Waddington served as Badlands National Park Artist in Residence in fall 2001. In her poem, “Badlands I,” she writes of her terror, lost one day, driving on the soft soil through prairie grass, able to look out over the vista, yet unable to find her way home. In “Badlands III” she tells of her experience in the park and I find her a kindred soul: “This land changes you/ if you let it. The wind is its voice/ and its creator/ and all things heed its messages/ There is no place to hide here/ from yourself and what you fear.”

It is the nature of mystery to live in the not-knowing—to remain perplexed. Rilke urged the young poet, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now.” When I remember Rilke’s advice, when I follow it, I seek to live in the mystery.

But like Rilke’s young poet, I want encouragement. Here’s a question in my life to live into: how to let go? And, what to let go of? I want to learn to write, to set out in a new direction starkly different from my social science training. How do I unlearn what I was trained to do—label and analyze and summarize? I must learn to be in the moment, to see and write in vivid detail.

My brother recently came to visit me. Sitting at my dining room table he poured over his financial assets and investments, now his hobby. He stared at the brightly lit computer screen, periodically commenting or swearing at the screen with a vocabulary I little know. Meanwhile, at the other end of the table, I looked over a packet of letters he found and saved, a manila envelope marked in my mother's handwriting, "Letters from Susan." Inside were year after year of anniversary cards to my parents, and letters to my mother about my work and studies and various boyfriends. I felt strange seeing my printing of thirty and forty years ago, neatly spaced on the backs of cards and note paper, emotional outpourings of a young adult trying to please her mother, something unstated in the neat penmanship.

In the bunch was a letter from Miss Sloan, my favorite elementary school teacher, dated June 28, 1978. She wrote in response to my note of congratulations for an award she received for teaching excellence. In tidy, efficient script she wrote to thank me: "Susan, you were always special to me. I admired your power and your creativity. You really have a flair for writing. You did so well with creative writing in second grade."

"What power?" I sat back and let the letter drop in my lap.

My brother looked over. "Are you crying?" He started to laugh. "Why are you crying?"

"She was important to me!" I blurted. Embarrassed he returned to his screen.

I saw Miss Sloan there before me with her thick ankles settled into sturdy black oxfords, her kindly smile that lit up her plain face framed in close cropped dark brown hair. I saw her standing in her classroom with pictures and bright letters of the

alphabet hung high on the walls. At children's eye level were all our writings, hung so we could stare at them with pride, so we could believe in ourselves. She talked to my mother, smiling at me all the while, telling my mother I am talented, telling her she enjoyed my story, "The Little Red Wagon," I labored over, carefully copying the words, drawing illustrations, finally binding the pages with red yarn.

Her encouragement many years ago lay dormant in me until I had no choice but begin to write in earnest. She quoted what I wrote to her: "You inspired me to write and do well—to dream and create. I could never give that up!" When I applied to writing school I told friends, "I had a teacher who encouraged me."

My stop-start meditation practice is another challenge. Off and on over the years I stopped meditating when I was asked to look deeper into murky depths, when I spent my time on the cushion in tears and rage.

Recently I did what the meditation instructor advised: let the thoughts slip out of my head, looked intently at my breath, focused on its channel through my body. The breath was gone, the world outside was gone, time went away, just as he said. I was inseparable from all around me. But then back it came, the muck of my life, my shaky sense of self. So familiar.

The mystery for me is how *not* to run, how to sit and face what?

Meditation is looking inward, maintaining this gaze, even when all seems arid and unfertile. I am told I will get to the end of impressions of anger and sorrow, that all becomes empty, staring into vast space, open to equanimity and to compassion. I try to trust, a prime basis of meditation. I sit, take my posture, call on the retinue of

my teachers, chant, and follow my breath. Even so I find myself in interior badlands of anger and grief, quicksand of despair.

Look deeply, the teacher repeats. “Eventually the negative thoughts will go away.”

Let go and walk further into the landscape, even without a marker to show the way.

Still I try to make sense of all that floats before me. I label: “This is bad,” or, “This is good.” I want to stay with what is good, desirable. Beware, I am told, it is easy to be deluded in seeking only desirable states. Move away from evaluating, good, bad, or neutral, or I will miss what I am looking for.

In meditation, in writing, I must ease up the censorship, look deeper, look carefully, eventually to become clear. In this way, concentrated and aware, I can awaken my true nature my true voice.

Deep Water

*So the sea-journey goes on, and who knows where?
Just to be held by the ocean is the best luck
we could have. It's a total waking up!*
~ RUMI

In my twenties I traveled for two months with a friend, from Laredo, Texas, across to California and up the Pacific coast en route to Seattle, Washington. On a whim we bopped up and down—Carlsbad Caverns, Mesa Verde, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, Baja Peninsula down to Ensenada, Mexico.

One of our detours was Crater Lake in Oregon. We drove up volcanic remains, over 8,000 feet, to a vista steep down the caldera rim. The lake, very quiet on a bright-lit summer day, reflected mountains and trees all around, the few thin clouds in the sky. Deep blue, indigo blue, cerulean blue, the water dazzled.

I gasped—Crater Lake terrified me. When I saw Grand Canyon I knew I wanted a canyon experience, an opportunity to ride through the deep red-brown-golden-gray cliffs on the raging, powerful Colorado River. At the edge of Crater Lake I had no desire to go in—standing far from water's edge, a thousand feet above, was my boundary. I was paralyzed by questions: Where is bottom? Will I be sucked in and pulled away from all I know and love, disappearing into where? When people focus on the disaster of the Titanic, the tragedy of a maiden voyage and a majestic liner, I think about the fate of the drowned. I fear being pulled into water, over my head, unable to breathe.

It happened to me once, when I was six years old at Sloan's Lake, just outside Denver, where my older brother, my cousin and I swam for the afternoon. First we

played in shallow water where I could join them, but they got bored and moved further and further from shore. I tried to keep up with them, not paying attention that I was moving beyond the safety of the sand beneath my feet, bouncing along until the water was over my head.

When I realized I could no longer touch bottom, I panicked, my arms held in the air, thrashing, until a lifeguard came to pull me from the water, choking, gasping, in tears. After it was over I lay sputtering on the sand, my brother and cousin looking down at me. Knowing my mother would be furious they had not watched me carefully, they ignored my tears, threatening, "Don't tell mother about this!" When she came to pick us up and we piled into her Chevrolet sedan, she asked, "Did you have fun." Bob and Jeannie chortled a chorus, "Yes," while I sat in stony silence. I found no comfort from my family in my confrontation with the unfathomable power of water.

According to the National Park Service Carter Lake is 1,943 feet at its deepest point, the deepest lake in the U.S., the second in North America, and the ninth in the world. The basin for the volcanic lake formed when Mount Mazama erupted 7,700 years ago, resulting in a steep-sided caldera. The caldera, a large depression, was formed by removal of quantities of magma from beneath the volcano, causing the ground to collapse into the emptied space. Afterward lava flows sealed the bottom to form the bottom of the lake basin, which filled slowly over 250 years with water from rain and snow. Scientists report there is still hypothermal activity at the lake floor, and warm water enters from the lake bottom. Another result of activity was the

formation of Wizard Island, a smaller eruption leaving a cinder cone of lava flow, a black volcanic block with a small crater inside. A volcano sits within a volcano.

Because no contaminating sources of water enter Crater Lake the water is clear down to 142 feet, which is the deepest Secchi disk reading. Sunlight penetrates the waters to great depths and the sparkling blue of the water is not due just to depth and clarity, but because scattered blue light is redirected back up to the surface. On a windless day the lake is a mirror reflecting back all that surrounds her banks. All beauty aside, all fascinating natural history and impressive size and depth, the lake was, for me, a terrifying and powerful force.

I face this same fear in meditation. Teachers tell me to quiet my mind, to let go and be drawn inside. I understand what they mean, but after just a small taste of this deeper opening, I panic and my mind, settled, empty, for just a brief period, fills again with rat-a-tat sound of my brain, spewing out thoughts, ideas and directions, giving me a mental road map. To where? That's just it, my mind does not know—I do not know. I like to know where I am going. Where would I land if I jumped into Crater Lake? What would happen if I weren't rescued by the life guard? What am I doing here at meditation? Where is bottom?

It is the same with writing, a practice that brings me to the blank page each day. Should I tread into the deeper water or stay on the shoreline? F. Scott Fitzgerald comments on writing, "All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath." I am terrified to go there.

One summer I swam in Echo Lake on Mount Desert Island in Maine. A glacial lake in Acadia National Park, one of fourteen Great Ponds on the island, the water is very cold. The lake, by Crater Lake standards, is shallow—only sixty-six feet at its deepest point. In the shadow of Beech Mountain and the overlooking cliffs a large part of the day, the water is dark blue, almost steely gray, and the reflections are smoke-tinted, as if to filter out light and warmth, even on a hot day.

There with my nieces and daughters who refused to swim because of the cold water, preferring to play at water's edge, I was warm enough on a 90 degree mid-August day to venture in. I didn't mind the cold after a few doggy paddle strokes, my erratic version of swimming without putting my head under water, but the farther out I went, I felt more and more fear, almost to the point of panic.

What lurked beneath the water? Would I be pulled in? Swallowed up, never to return? Was there a force, a current, a magnetism—even a Loch Ness monster or a Noah's whale? Moby Dick? I swam back as fast as I could kick and paw, my heart racing, and did not venture in again, my heart still pounding for a long after as I lay on the warm sand.

Because I like to keep my feet on the ground, I am not much for swimming. For almost thirty years I had a guide who teased me into warm, and sometimes even cold, ocean waters. Debbie grew up in New Jersey and vacationed each summer with her large raucous family on the Jersey Shore, and later on Cape Cod, Block Island, Prince Edward Island and Downeast Maine with her husband and three boys. When we could we slipped away from our families and headed out for our own R and R.

A forceful personality, she badgered, chided, and bullied me into the water. When it was warm on Block Island she succeeded and, with her by my side, I came to enjoy jumping the waves, giving way to the surge that pulled me along. It was a rush, and I learned to keep my mouth and eyes closed and to hold my breath against the salty tang. Every time I was caught under a wave I started to panic, wondering if I would get back above the heavy foamy water. But together it was fun, almost safe, and I laughed, watching for the next wave to come. Still I stood with my feet on the sand, waist deep, while Debbie moved farther away from shore to swim back and forth in her steady crawl.

After Debbie was diagnosed with ALS, and, in a few years settled restlessly into her bright red electric wheelchair, our ocean wave hopping days were over. The last time she went into the water five friends pushed her spongy wheeled beach chair into her favorite freshwater swimming spot, Lilly Pond on Deer Island. Using a life vest to help her arms support her paralyzed lower torso, she doggy paddled into the pond with me at her side. Surrounded by lily pads we chatted as we always did, summer after summer, and then she swam out alone, delighted in her sense of mobility, buoyant in water. As I watched, lingering behind, I was unaware of the depth of the pond.

The winter after Debbie died I vacationed in Aruba. I waded into the warm water alone and jumped half-heartedly, but found a thought spring out of the recesses of my psyche: "What if there is a monster here that is going to reach out and pull me down?" I stared into the dark, seaweed strewn, white foamed water and my heart

raced. I had to get out of the water. Without her encouragement, the dark unreadable water once again became a frightening abyss, monsters lurking just out of sight.

When I traveled in Scotland with my oldest daughter I made it a point to see Loch Ness. We rode by train from Glasgow to Inverness where we rented a car and ventured onto the United Kingdom highway patterns, driving for my first time on the opposite side of the road, steering, from the passenger seat. Though I almost caused an accident, turning the opposite direction from the flow of cars, we needed the car to drive into the highlands to hike for the day, to stop by Loch Ness, visit the museum dedicated to “Nessie,” and walk out to water’s edge.

Loch Ness is an impressive body of water in itself, although I almost overlooked that fact scanning the horizon for the monster to appear. The second largest Scottish loch in surface area, it is the first in volume with water over seven hundred feet deep. Dating from the end of the last Ice Age and formed by a glacier, the loch is long and wide, following the line of the fault still moving with activity, and earthquakes are predicted to continue.

I looked out over the gray water, riled that day into soft white caps by a gusting wind, hoping to see the scaly dragon-like head of the monster curl out of the water and roll her massive elongated body up and out from the depths. I wanted to see her, maybe to face my terror, to at least make sense of the belief, give the fear a basis in actuality.

The Loch Ness Monster was my obsession for many years; I paid careful attention to reports of sightings from locals, tourists and scientists. I wanted to believe that this mythological creature exists. Not like I believed in Santa Claus or

the Tooth Fairy, childhood mysteries that were exciting: I still feel the anticipation of their coming as a warm pulse of desire. Nessie, on the other hand, filled me with dread, a representative of all that is horrifying and terrible.

In my meditation practice, the Pointing Out Way of Mahayana Buddhism, my teacher guides me to follow my breath, to look into breathing with great intensity, to stay on the breath with great commitment. Slowly, very slowly, over time, my mind slows down—my active mind that has served as guide for many years. Each step of the meditation pushes me to empty my mind, to trust in a state of calm abiding and, then, emptiness. Bliss, you might think—she wants to bliss out. But this is not the point of meditation. I am asked, encouraged to gaze into the emptiness, to stare into Crater Lake with its calm deep waters, or perhaps water churned by wind and storm.

I am asked to gaze with intensity, with intimacy, with openness. But I resist. Just like I resist placing myself, vulnerable, on the page. Opening feels like drowning.

My know-a-lot brain, spells out a flashing neon sign: DANGER! No matter how much I trust the teacher, the fear of deep water impedes my practice. Maybe there is a Loch Ness monster inside. I will be eaten. I will disappear. A hard knot forms in my chest, right in the path of the breath in its downward flow. I hang suspended, unable to go deeper yet yearning, longing for what the teacher promises—opening my heart mind, equanimity, peace and joy, beginning to know some of the eighty positive states of an enlightened Buddha. But first I must face the fear.

I feel tugged, urged to look more deeply into the massive body of water that is Crater Lake. For a diversion I surf the internet in the safety of my study with the familiar pictures nearby, my meditation pillow, my solid oak desk, and swiveling black chair from the Back Store. I see the lake, then peer into water's edge—not up above from caldera rim, but down by the shore of the jagged lava beach.

Before me on the computer screen is a video clip from a group of divers who tell the video audience they are volcano diving. One of them tells the audience, “We are in the Caribbean water in Oregon.” I watch them hitch up their backpacks loaded with gear and hike down from the caldera rim to water's edge, and ride the tour boat furnished by the National Park out to Wizard Island. Once on the island they hike for thirty minutes more across sharp lava terrain. Then they don diving gear, cross the stone beach in their flippers, and dive into a lake which they tell viewers is more dangerous for them because of the high altitude.

“You are nuts!” I think, staring at my computer screen. They report the stunning clarity of the water disturbs the diver—it is disorienting.

There comes a surprise—hidden below the surface, as deep as 460 feet, “lush, thick, green wavy moss.” They also find peat moss, piled in thicknesses up to thirty feet deep—“as tall as three story buildings.” “Really old!” someone exclaims. The camera pans in as another person yells, “giant holes.” Divers enter the tunnels and report back, “They are spongy.” “So much moss!” The divers come to surface after sixty minutes, facing the same arduous trip out, to the rim of the caldera. I hear a parting comment, “Worth it to partake in Crater Lake.”

Next I googled, “fear of water,” on my computer. Aqua-phobia: “A fear of water. A non- resourceful state, negative feeling, an unwanted reaction, a pattern of behavior experienced by an individual, which prevents the swimmer from learning a water skill or freely entering a mass-volume water environment such as a swimming pool, sea, lake, ocean, or river.” My major symptom: not wanting to put my head under water,

Nessie sightings are monitored by an active group of followers on the website, nessie.co.uk. Explanations include—large eels, huge sturgeons, Plesiosaurs from centuries ago. Pictures, videos and sonar soundings are used as confirmation. What feelings does Nessie evoke for others? Sometimes I picture a dragon, a fire-breathing creature with mystical powers for good. When they were little, I read *My Father’s Dragon* to my daughters. They loved the tale of a captive dragon, chained and forced to pull a ferry across a wide river. The hero of the book frees the creature from confinement, and mounts his back to soar away.

Maybe I can befriend Nessie, coax her to give me a ride across Loch Ness. It would be an extraordinary ride, beyond my wildest imagination. But then she might dive into the blue black depths of 44 degree water. I might burst, gasping from the water, born again, with awareness of my true nature. Well, if I didn’t die, swallowing water in my last breath.

My mind in meditation stays active, restless, holding on to safety. In my mental activity, as my teacher calls it, I hug the shoreline, stay by water’s edge. My mind is full of “what ifs”—what if I fall in? What lies down there? Will I drown, lungs bursting for lack of air? Will I be swallowed by a monster? Is it a bottomless

pool of water? Maybe I will fall down a mossy tunnel in Crater Lake, or into the fault line that forms Loch Ness.

About a year ago I attended an advanced eight day retreat as part of my meditation practice. Prior to this I attended several retreats for beginners, learning to concentrate the mind. This latest retreat included students with established meditation practices, led by Tibetan Rinpoche Rahob Tulka, highly respected in his home land and now, like so many lamas, living in exile from his monastery. This was a serious group and I was quiet as I entered the meditation room, saying hi to a few of the people I knew, but quickly finding my place. I sat down with all my cushions and bench from home, my comfort items including my alpaca throw to establish my spot—my ground.

During the retreat I broke down several times into deep sobs, a public display of emotion foreign to my upbringing and life style. Dan Brown, our teacher affiliated with Rinpoche, talked about meditation by tears, a water practice. These were not the tears of gratitude and joy I hoped for in meditation. I was assailed with emotion and fear, monsters from deep within. The teacher asked me to tell him about my tears. “I am afraid,” I sobbed. “Talk about it,” he encouraged. “I am afraid I will fall apart. I am afraid of what lies within.” He smiled, and continued, “What are you afraid of?”

“I spent my whole life,” I blurted out, “keeping my feet on the ground. Now you are pulling them out from underneath me. It feels like I am drowning.”

In the Tibetan practice of Buddhism there is a strong belief in unseen support, ear whisperers, beings that lend help to those who seek a clear mind. I know of these beings, not because of what I read in a book, but from direct experience in that eight

day retreat. During a particularly tearful sitting late in the week, I felt a sharp whisper in my ear: “You can do it!”

I startled, broke my upright posture to look around. “Who said that?” I almost blurted aloud. No one moved. Heart racing, I settled my posture, feeling more encouraged. I followed the teacher’s instructions, looked into the water. I plunged into Crater Lake and saw what I had not been able to see: the water reflect back up in illumination

Mudpots

On my third visit to Yellowstone National Park I stared at geysers spouting hot water, rock formations hissing steam, and mudpots bubbling before me. Standing on the neatly laid boardwalk I saw murky tan-gray oozing mud bubble and plop, some like a pot of morning oatmeal my mother used to make, others more like her thickened Thanksgiving gravy. Plop! Splot! Splot! Explosions of mud and steam. A slight froth of creamy white around the edge of the eruption like a morning café au lait.

“Don’t go near!” the etched letters on the wooden sign cautioned tourists to stay on constructed trails outlined by handrails.

“Dangerous,” I thought.

But somehow the pots looked inviting—comforting. I wanted the mud to be the right temperature for a bath—not scalding, but tolerably warm so I could ease into nature’s soothing spa.

The second time I visited Yellowstone I brought my daughters, eight and ten and a half. We drove a rental car from Denver on a ten day adventure, stopping in Grand Teton National Park for two nights with a day to horseback ride and float the Snake River beneath the Tetons, then moved on to Yellowstone. The first night we stayed in a park cabin with erratic water temperature and paper thin walls. The girls undeterred in their enthusiasm, were rewarded our second night when we stayed in the grand dame of National Park hotels, the Old Faithful Inn.

Here we had one large room with a small adjoining bedroom for the girls. They moved right in, dumping their suitcases on the floor, jumping on the beds,

looking at the toiletries in the bathroom. Our room was down a long carpeted hall, their running track, which led into a high-ceilinged atrium and lounge with huge log beams supporting walls hung with stuffed heads of antelope, deer, bear and elk.

The stone fireplace had an opening large enough for all of us to walk into, and a roaring fire heated the space, shooting sparks up the chimney. I guarded it cautiously, making sure the girls did not move too close to the heat, more than once shouting, “Lizzie, stay back!”.

They walked into the elegant dining room, both girls in dresses, shiny patent leather Mary Jane’s, hair combed. They perched on the edges of their chairs, subdued by a child’s sense of propriety in the presence of white table cloths, low lighting in the room, and candles on every table. When the waitress came they smiled at her, smoothly ordered their Shirley Temples, asking for extra cherries, and proceeded to decorate the table with crumbs from crackers generously covered with cheese spread.

They were pleased to find what they liked to order—Lizzie her chicken nuggets and fries, Jenn, always more expansive and more daring in her food choices, the shrimp scampi, her personal favorite. I ordered pan seared trout, hoping it might be fresh caught from a river running through the park. After a leisurely meal, lively chatter, and a few excursions around the dining room and to the bathroom, we walked out to watch Old Faithful for the second time that day. The water and steam pushed upward into a dark star-lit sky.

The joy for me on this trip was walking in and out on all the side trails and boardwalks, as the girls ran ahead, happy to be out of lines of cars, to wander where fewer tourists jarred our concentration. They scoured the land for geysers, fumaroles

and mudpots. Lizzie, mesmerized, stared in fascination, reminded of the “messes” she made at home, conglomerations of flour and sugar, water and spices, mixed into various shades of gray to pinkish brown. Her own paint pots. Sometimes she baked them and the after effect was not unlike the dried, caked mud on the outsides of the splaying mud of the pots. Now here they were steaming before her.

Now, visiting the park almost twenty years later, it is I who was mesmerized by the pots, bubbling at different speeds, pop popping in staccato succession. I watched one simmer without release the entire time I stared down. In the background was a cacophony of rhythmic sound, each pot pulsing at its own beat. They appeared in array: pots of thick dense mud, barely lifting from the point of eruption; paint pots of bright hues from a southwestern artist palate; pots with looser mud that boiled slowly and expanded, opening to leave behind the rounded curve of a woman’s breast and nipple; some watery and bubbled like hot cocoa needing to be turned down.

I first visited Yellowstone National Park with my family when I was around ten, old enough to walk our yellow Labrador, Sandy, whenever he whined, my dad pulling our white Ford station wagon into a rest stop. We stayed in a motel adjacent to the park because camping was hard on my mother’s arthritic joints and my father loath to spend money on the fancy Yellowstone Lodge. I don’t imagine we hiked much, more of a tourist run around the park, stopping when an elk or a deer wandered near the highway, or for the major turn-offs along the way for sightseers to view the waterworks. Our family outings were not outdoor adventures—my mother couldn’t

go far and my father preferred his outdoor exercise on his weekend hunting and fishing trips.

I have no pictures of this trip—neither my father nor my mother was a picture taker. Vividly etched in my mind is Old Faithful Geyser. I was seduced by the predictable and showy water and steam explosion. Mostly, when I think about this trip I feel a knot of anxiety—the same one that came up when we spent time together. Following my father’s lead and my mother’s reticence, we ignored my mother’s infirmity, her discomfort, and her dislike of rugged adventure. When she spoke out, her excitement was muted by my father’s disdain for the scenery. He would instead comment, “It’s not as beautiful as Colorado. I don’t see why a person has to leave the state.” He reminded us he would rather be in his small trailer parked on the western slopes near Gunnison.

On trips with my father we watched carefully, aware that in any moment my dad could burst into a rage directed most often at my mother or brother. When it happened my mother sat silently in the front passenger seat. She learned not to intervene in the tirade turned on her. We learned she could not protect us. My brother slunk off; he learned not to fight back. My instincts were attuned to my father’s moods; he trained us all to watch for signs of an outburst at anyone who disrupted his plans or who didn’t match his expectations. It was hard to pay attention to the scenery.

On this third trip to Yellowstone National Park, now sixty-five, I traveled with a boyfriend, John, on a road trip from Boston to Denver, stopping along the way.

Driving from a friend's home in Helena, Montana, we were on our way to visit family in Denver, Colorado where I grew up. The end of October, there were very few tourists in the park, the roads and all the turnoffs strangely quiet. Our route through the park began at the northern entrance, Monmouth Hot Springs, heading towards the southern entrance and Yellowstone Lake. Our first destination was Yellowstone Falls.

As we pulled in at a stop overlooking the falls, a park ranger stopped over to talk to us. He rolled down his truck window and stuck his head out. "I've been working in the park for twenty years. It's these last two weeks before the park closes that are my favorite," he mused, "This is when the park is quiet. You are lucky to be here now."

We walked down to peer into the canyon and see the pulsing waterfalls. Next we headed to the basins of hot water and steam. Here we found ourselves with time to slow down, to be still, to enter into reverie. For me there were no father to second guess, no children to caution when they got too close to the heat. There were no hordes, fewer camera poses to jostle, and less press of people bumping past each other. Staring at the mudpots I saw steam in the crisp October air, winding up to dissipate against clear blue sky, sometimes drifting into light white clouds which skimmed by.

The sulfur smell had a holistic medicinal sharpness that cleaned the sinuses and made me breathe deeply.

The sound of the wind blended with hiss of steam, bubbling of mud, explosion of water, movement of streams over rocky drops.

I lingered to read the signs.

Mudpots are part of the geothermic activity which is so dynamic at Yellowstone National Park. “Why here?” I found myself wondering.

There are mudpots in New Zealand, Iceland, and Costa Rica, as well as in Lassen Volcanic Park in northern California. But the pots at Yellowstone are the largest and most dramatic. These pots are made of decomposed rock, turned into clay and mud by sulfuric acid, the source of the smell of rotten eggs. Also at play are factors of season and precipitation—these affect the amount of water which, in turn, determines the movement of the mud in response to the steam and heat below.

Splat. Whop. Drip. Burble. Slurp. Splish. Mud squirted over the brims of the mudpots. Mud dried, caked and cracked in the driest areas, bubbled up out of water where it was wettest. Sometimes it was slow, indolent, other times it was rapid, leaping higher up, spreading as it returned to ground.

Surrounding mudpots are hot pools with steam and bubbles effervescing from the underground warmth. I walked through them and my glasses fogged with steam. I was temporarily unable to see, only to breathe the warm air sulfuric and stinging, clearing my sinuses as in a sauna. Fumaroles hissed out steam from crevasses in rocks, discharging more sulfur into the atmosphere.

Next we visited geysers of all sizes distributed throughout the park where visitors can readily visible or a short hike into the woods, even on the shores of Yellowstone Lake. They blow at different times in varying heights. “Beware!” signs caution tourists.

At Midway Geyser Basin Excelsior Geyser Crater steamed and hissed, water splashing about ten or twelve feet into the air. Next to it was a picture of the last time the geyser had a large eruption—in 1888, the water gushed 100 to 300 feet in the air. After that explosion there followed one hundred years of inactivity, until 1988, when the geyser erupted again, bursting in a smaller display, 30 to 80 feet. The sign posted next to the geyser displayed the question: “When will Excelsior erupt again?”

I felt the ball of anxiety inside me—the same distress I felt on vacation with my father. “Could it be now?” I wondered, feeling the tension in my stomach. “What if the geyser blew right now?” First might be the shake of the ground. Then a whoosh. Then, in rapid succession, would follow an explosion of steam tearing up through the ground, spewing steam and water and mud and rock into the atmosphere.

In the Visitors’ Center, I learned that Yellowstone is an active volcano with heat pouring off its underground magma chamber. An ancient caldera, with the highest concentration of active geysers in the world, it is a hot spot capable of super eruptions. Below the caldera surface lies a great cove of magma, a lava flow with glacial moraines and the requisite rainwater and snowmelt conducive to geothermal activity.

Smaller eruptions are the result of built-up pressure—generated energy. But a larger eruption could come: a geological shift releases gases, the magma expands, the earth shifts to further release pressure, crusted material blows off the top of the chamber in a large gas explosion. Yellowstone, at any moment, has the potential to spew molten lava and ash and fire, to produce a conflagration blotting the sun for

years and years, spreading ash over the entire continent to exterminate life as we know it here in the United States.

Looked at the park from this perspective, it's strange that tourists skim over the surface of this geothermal area without stopping to think what is going on below. Then I thought, "Why am I lingering in this park when I now know it is the rocky mountain top that could lift up?"

I asked my friend, "Do you really think it could blow?"

He scoffed, "No. Not at all." He laughed at my suggestion. "We would have warning that it was going to blow."

I remembered laughter at my expense—it happened in my family all the time. I was the one who asked the unwanted question, who probed at ideas no one wanted to think about, who looked under the surface. I was told not to ask questions, to be quiet. It was my questions that often set off my father's outbursts and criticism that left me feeling like our family dog who crouched out of the room, tail between his legs, ears down. I should know better than to ask questions. I should know better than to delve under appearances.

We lingered so long over the pots and Excelsior Geyser we were late for predictable Old Faithful which erupted earlier than expected that afternoon.

Given my overactive imagination, my incessant mental activity, I tried meditation off and on over the past thirty-five years, meeting with varying success. As appealing as it is to still my mind, to stop over-thinking, it is not as easy as it looks.

When I meditate my posture is firm, knees and butt on the ground, straight spine, hands positioned in my lap, and I concentrate on following my breath. Over time my mind grows quieter, less cluttered with the counterpoint of my own ideas. I settle into emptiness, fewer thoughts and emotions to chase, then into awareness, into awakening. The teacher guides the meditation, leading me to stare into vast space. I hear him repeat, over and over, the groundlessness appearance is stable, indestructible, unobstructed, and invulnerable.

Still, I am afraid. My mind flares: “What lies beneath? What is out there?” I fear an eruption.

When the activity gets too lively, when my mind once again begins to chatter, “Narrow the gaze,” reminds my teacher.

It is like staring at mudpots in Yellowstone, focusing on the smaller detail in the bigger expanse of the park. In my meditation the atmosphere seems dangerous. If I am able to open to this groundlessness as my teacher guides, I could spin out to space, or, worse, pass right through molten lava in the earth’s core, through Dante’s inferno, to get to the other side.

“Tame the mind!” adjures the Dalai Lama. Then—if you’ve ever heard him speak you know just what I mean—he breaks out in delightful laughter until the audience joins him, laughing at ourselves.

Tame the mind and there is something deeper, more unfathomable, more energetic, more powerful. First the little mudpots, then the fumaroles, always the steam and hot water, and, finally, the blows—geysers small and large, erupting in seemingly random design.

Finally the volcanic eruption.

Dr. Fitzgerald, our pediatrician, surprised me, coming out into the waiting room where I sat watching Jenn and Lizzie play. She put her arms around me in a giant bear hug, speaking softly into my ear:

“Your daughter has leukemia. You have to get her to the hospital right away.”

What did you just say? I moved into action. I didn’t even have time to ask, “Why my Jenn? Why our family.”

During Jenn’s treatment with chemotherapy and radiation, the clinic psychologist called Leslie, a social worker who provided emotional support for the girls and me during Jenn’s treatment. “This mother is really in denial,” said the psychologist. I knew my meeting with the psychologist did not go well. I resented her telling me she was mother to two daughters just like me, assuring me she “could imagine” what I was going through.

I wanted to scream, “No you can’t!”

Leslie told me denial served me pretty well—helped me get by, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month. She knew the big picture was an outsider’s luxury, I didn’t have time to cry like the family and friends who visited, either at the hospital or home.

“That will come later.”

Jenn is now in her twenties, and my denial slips away. In PTSD flashbacks, I see the horror of twenty-five months of treatment, the needles and IVs and emergency room runs and pills and x-rays, followed by five years waiting to hear the words:

“She is cured. No more cancer.” Still, they followed her for ten more years—“to check for secondary cancers caused by chemotherapy.”

Denial is shorn away in meditation. The more my chattering mind stops recording my progress, the deeper I go into unobstructed view, the more I open myself to sudden exposure, to parts of myself lain dormant. On my last eight day retreat the teacher led us in guided meditation. I followed his words to, “see your body like a net.”

Suddenly a pain so sharp clenched my gut as an inner voice screamed, “Why didn’t I get the cancer! Please, give me the cancer. Take the cancer from my daughter’s body and give it to me. I am her mother and I did not protect her. Give it to me.” Horrified I could not stop crying and I move to the back of the room. How dare the teacher open me to that pain. How dare I be exposed—I wanted to leave.

But when he called us I resumed my meditation posture. Guided by the teacher, I found myself held in great compassion. Felt my older daughter held in great compassion. Felt my younger daughter held in great compassion. Each of them had a life to lead—I could not protect them. I felt relieved, the energy released. I felt cleansed. I felt exhausted. Now I know that seething energy lies beneath denial. It took that blast to let go.

I Googled “eruption of Yellowstone Volcano” and found four articles, written late summer, 2012, about the possibility of a big blow. *Huffington Post* reported, “Scientists don’t know,” and cited a 1 in 10,000 chance of a super eruption, adding

the volcano has an erratic nature. However, by calculation the eruptions of Yellowstone volcano have been 800,000 years apart--another is due soon.

The volcano is monitored at Yellowstone Volcano Observatory (YVO) run by the University of Utah, the National Park System, and the United States Geological Survey, to measure volcanic, hydrothermal or earthquake activity. Bob Smith, a geophysicist at YVO, claims a super eruption would be devastating. Following a large earthquake would be “a huge blast that would erase Yellowstone off the map.” Under clouds of gas, rock and ash, as many as 87,000 people would die. The ash blanket would hang in the air making it difficult to breathe, smothering vegetation, and polluting water. For the rest of the globe there would be a mild climate change lasting as long as a decade, chilling the world.

Other reports suggest that recharging in the deep magma reservoir could lead to rapid eruptions with no clear sign that the magma is moving to the surface. There is, in this opinion, no tip off.

No certainty.

When my father blew his rage spewed over our family. All love was blocked. He spewed despair that blanketed all of us who lived with him.

Later in that retreat I was shaken again—rage surged through my body and left me shaking and weak. I felt a blast of repressed anger that guided my life for years--anger at the mean-spirited, bitter withholding of love that ran through my relationships with family and lovers for many years. Anger at my father for the way

he treated my mother, my brother and me, anger breeding more anger, pushing others away, feeding on isolation and sorrow.

Denial was stripped away: no more myth of life with father, of life unchanged by cancer. No more pretense of a Yellowstone Park that exists solely for the delight of humankind—nature's amusement park.

In denial we miss seeing the fierce power of the energy repressed.

In her memoir *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams writes of her mother's life with cancer.

I have refused to believe that Mother will die. And by denying her cancer, even her death, I deny her life. Denial stops us from listening. I cannot hear what Mother is saying. I can only hear what I want.

But denial lies. It protects us from the potency of a truth we cannot yet bear to accept. It takes our hands and leads us to places of comfort. Denial flourishes in the familiar. It seduces us with our own desires and cleverly constructs walls around us to keep us safe.

I want the walls down. Mother's rage over our inability to face her illness has burned away my defenses. I am left with guilt, guilt I cannot tolerate because it has no courage. I hurt Mother through my own desire to be cured.

Twenty years after cancer treatment, my daughter faces scars from physical and emotional trauma which a five year old could not comprehend or cope with. I could not protect her. I cannot stay in denial about the emotional scars of my childhood. My denial robs my daughter of her own journey, her own healing. It robs me of inner peace and creative energy.

Recently I wrote in my diary:

Denial is gray shade upon shade of gray. We need as many words for gray as Eskimos have for snow, to cover the spectrum from light to dark gray, the lighter bleeding into white and darker into black. Denial isn't the gray of moderation, like a moral decision that is not black and white—denial is the gray of oblivion. Denial is

suppression—just as gray is the suppression of any one color. In denial a person is cautious, protective, keeping emotions at bay. Tamp down. Do not remember. Do not feel. Denial is limbo, suppression of light that seeks to find an opening.

I stare at the mudpots as they burble away, seeming such soothing mud baths until I feel the heat and repressed energy seeking release. Underneath the grass ever green at stream side, is molten rock, and five to thirty feet below the magma a mantle of plates and water that boils to the point of explosion.

It will blow when it blows—unleashed energy we do not control. Just as we cannot control cancer cells dividing relentlessly in the body, or emotions that burst from enraged fathers. Destructive fallout.

Yellowstone Volcano will blow and devastation will follow. And then life will return. The grass and the plants, the trees flowers. All will return and reclaim the rubble left by the super volcano, shaping a cleansed landscape with rivers and lakes and fields, all the while magma burning endlessly below.

Floating the Colorado River

I had the dream of floating the Colorado River since my mid-twenties when I hiked into Grand Canyon and peered from an outlook down onto foaming white rapids. I saw small rafts, their passengers nearly invisible, pulsing along—surreal in the heat waves and mist. I knew then this is the way I wanted to know the canyon, to be part of the river which carved it with force and persistence. When good friends asked me to join them on a float trip twenty years later I leapt at the opportunity, waving aside my reservations about leaving my daughters, ten and twelve, with a mishmash of childcare, including one boyfriend of four years, grandparents (former in-laws with whom I was still close), a one-weekend-night father and his female companion, and several good friends who together offered to tend to the girls, getting them to school, to voice lessons and dance practices and to all the other activities of their young lady lives.

I had a small window in early May when the trip was scheduled to leave before the onslaught of their end-of-the-year school activities, concerts and recitals and school programs, and this year, on sabbatical from my professorship, I had no papers to correct and no obligation to attend graduation ceremonies. Later this year, in June, my oldest daughter would be declared “cured” from childhood leukemia, five years in continuous remission after twenty-five months of chemotherapy and radiation. In April, the girls and I anticipated her cure with a celebratory trip to Disneyland, Sea World, and a two room suite on the beach by the San Diego bay. Free to go, I waved aside reservations about a motorized raft trip, opted for

practicality over the slower more challenging oar-powered boat, knowing ten days on the river was long enough to be away.

My Massachusetts friends and I rendezvoused in Flagstaff, AZ, for an orientation with the Arizona Rafting Adventures (AZRA) staff and our fellow rafters. We were a diverse crew mostly in our forties and fifties, including a married couple, Ann and Peter, three single women, Peggy, Candace and myself, and two single men, Chris and Paul. From New Orleans came two women in their sixties, Deanne and Donna, and Joe, unacquainted with the women, who coaxed along his brother, Stan, and his brothers-in-law, Rubin and Lon, from Texas, as well as his former co-worker and friend, Ginger, now living in Virginia.

We met our river guide, Tom, and his assistant, Matt, the next morning after a drive to the drop-off at the base of Glen Canyon Dam. Here we boarded the raft which would carry us 225 miles from the Lee's Ferry landing to our take-out at Diamond Creek, thirty miles above Lake Mead. Tom was younger, in his early thirties, with impressive experience as a river runner and guide in both oared and power boats. He was tanned and lean, not rippling with the muscles I thought it might take to guide one large raft carrying sixteen people and supplies for eight days and seven nights, but he exuded friendliness and confidence as he stopped loading the raft with heavy cooking equipment and coolers long enough to say hello.

The 15 x 34 foot steel gray inflatable rubber raft had blown-up sides high enough for an adult to sit with feet balanced on the floor of the raft. We sat on all sides and front of the boat, perched on the ballooned sides, our feet forward to the center. All around the sides ran a secured cord through hard plastic grommets, and

we were told to hold on at all times, one hand on either side, especially during the rapids. A large wooden platform spanned the middle of the raft loaded with supplies for eight days.

At times some of us sat on the huge food coolers in the center. Most often this is where Deanne and Donna, both overweight and in poor shape, perched safely inside the raft, less subject to jostling or falling over the side during intense waves. We were given instructions, what to do if we fell in, if someone else fell in, if the boat capsized and some of us were trapped inside.

We always wore life vests, bright orange and strangely comforting rather than uncomfortable. Mounted at the end of the raft was the Toyota outboard with Tom sitting alongside, hand on the steering mechanism. We laughed and chattered, clowning around during safety instructions, until the boat was shoved off from the shore—then we waved speechlessly to the AZRA staff who disappeared very quickly as they shouted over the water to wish us a good trip, and we moved into the powerful pull of the river.

Deanne, as if our raft was a vessel to another world, began to sing in her rich alto voice, “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” blessing the occasion, as we all joined in. I knew then others shared what I had silently acknowledged to myself: this was a spiritual journey, and I learned, a healing journey.

On the Colorado River, ahead of us in the canyon lay more than 160 rapids spread along a 1900 foot drop, with ratings from 1 to 10 (in Maine the rating scale was 1 to

6) in the medium to high water of early May. At 38 degrees, with strong currents, the river itself was formidable and I did not want to fall in.

The excitement of floating the Colorado River is not confined to an experience of water, to the thrilling rapids or the long sweep of water in the quiet sections. Most every day we pulled our boats to shore, mid-morning or lunch-time, mid-afternoon, to take a side trip. Sometimes we followed tributary streams up side canyons, hiking next to waterfalls and caves, seeing nearly extinct snails and ancient petroglyphs. Other days we played on riverside beaches or swam in the water of the Little Colorado River where it flowed into the larger river. We explored settler crossings, Mormon outposts, and Native American overlooks. Almost every day we had blue skies, a few rain showers, dramatic changes in temperature from noon to midnight, near-frigid water, blistering sun when the sun was right above us, and bright stars each night. Tom named birds, animals and reptiles, plants and rocks, pointed them out as we went along.

We adjusted quickly to the details of daily, sharing toileting areas with boxes as toilets, sealed and taken out with us. We bathed and shampooed in the icy river. Each night we set up camp with the cooking area and dishwashing lines. We helped with each meal and after dinner retired to sleep under the stars, serenaded by the fast flowing water. We ate amazing meals with fresh vegetables and fruit, chicken fajitas, barbecued steak, scrambled egg burritos and open-faced sandwiches with sprouts.

And we all got along. After two days we stripped and shed away illusions of identity as Deanne and Donna shared they were a lesbian couple joined in a spiritual ceremony held in their backyard in the Garden District of New Orleans. Joe shared

he was gay and still healing after the death of a close friend stricken with AIDS; he'd brought along Stan, Lon and Rubin for a time of family bonding, and Ginger for support. Stan and Lon looked down at the boat when Joe came out to us, not meeting our eyes. With the introduction of two gay men in our group, Paul and Chris, they looked up and around, nodded in acknowledgment. We were an eclectic group bonded in a mutual desire to experience the canyon. Making it special, this was Tom's one hundredth trip on the river.

There was also the unshared. I told none of my new companions about Jenn's cancer, about the reason for our recent family celebration and for my self-granted permission to leave my daughters for this trip. My old friends, while they certainly knew of the cancer, did not bring it up and were not tuned in to the significance of the five year cure. I joked during my introduction about being an exhausted single mom, off on vacation, and I talked about my daughters, bragging about them as any mother would. I did not mention my encounters with doctors and needles and hospital stays and emergency rooms and feeding tubes and night nurses and steroid psychoses. I, myself, did not want to think about these things. The course of treatment was over, I'd maneuvered the gauntlet of doctors and medical procedures, standing up in those moments my daughter's life seem threatened by the very procedures intended to save her, and subdued when the power of medicalization dictated that compliance was the appropriate demeanor. It was a rough journey and I was numb from the toss and turn. In the canyon the roar was an intense and peaceful silence.

We were jolly company, singing and laughing whenever an opportunity arose, and it was clear from the start well-experienced Tom loved our group—we never

knew the words to songs and fumbled through, even those who could not carry a tune. The river and canyon received these songs into the ongoing rush and rumble, and when we were in the flat stretches our singing gentled in calm water.

At times we were silent together, and we never brought up sensitive topics, knowing a vast chasm of beliefs spread from Massachusetts to Texas. All our meals were banquets and everyone pitched in to help in a spirit of campfire cooperation. One night, knowing he was missing his graduation for his recently completed Masters degree in environmental science, we staged a mock ceremony on the sandy beach next to the river. As Tom paraded in front of us, robed in a terry cloth towel, we hummed Pomp and Circumstance, held an official convocation with Peter, the officiating judge, followed by cavorting on the cooling sand with a bottle of champagne Tom's wife sent along for celebration. We toasted as the sun passed behind the canyon rim.

I admired Tom, and twenty years between us melted away as we conferred on rapids to run, hikes to take, and waterholes to swim. It soon became clear how much Tom loved the canyon and the powerful river, holding both of them in high esteem, always aware that he was a guest among the Native people, the ancient Anasazi, the Hopi, the Havasupai, the Hualapai, and the Navaho who came before us. He revered the beauty of rocks, of flora and fauna, of birds and animals, all the sites on our side trips through the canyon.

Early on he declared he would not show us sacred spots of the First People out of respect for their rights and beliefs, even a bit defiant as previous groups had pressured him to break his rules. Not our group—we heeded all Tom said and also

followed his clear guidelines for proper conduct in the canyon in terms of environmental hazards, trash and waste.

Most important to me was Tom's approach to the river. As a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club of New England a few years back I learned slowly how to whitewater canoe, first learning to read the river. In fact, I was much better at observing eddies and whirls, calculating the direction of the water, than I was at negotiating my vessel, especially when I was solo. The Colorado River was a tome, a classic novel compared to the river-cum-novellas I read in Maine and New Hampshire, the wild water much quirkier and deep with swirls of current, fast and forceful, at times even terrifying. According to Larry Stevens, author of our river manual: "The river reaches a depth of 85 feet at Miles 19, 130, and 135" (61). In some stretches of the river, miles 128 to 139, we quickly ran through consecutive rapids level 5 and higher, including: 128 Mile Rapid, Specter Rapid, Deubendorff Rapid, Tapeats Rapid, 134 Mile Rapid, 135 Mile Rapid, 137 ½ Mile Rapid, and Fishtail Rapid

Tom was a patient instructor as I sat next to him on the backseat talking over the twisting and turning waves, the pattern of water. I learned that AZRA, our rafting company was known for having the quietest motors on the Colorado River. We hardly heard the engine and I appreciated the faster speed in the quieter stretches of the river, the way the engine helped to power our raft through the wildest and deepest rapids and holes made by whirlpools spinning ferociously, churning down so deep the holes seemed bottomless.

Several times we saw oar-powered boats capsize, tossing the riders into rapid white foaming thirty-eight degree water bobbing until they could be pulled over to the side, sometimes as much as a mile down the river. Each time I feared for the loss of life, knowing people have died on this river. I was terrified of falling in, of fighting for my life like I did once before in a cold river, like I watched my daughter do for over two years. Tom was determined not to capsize, and I, for one, was deeply grateful.

But others had a different reaction, more naïve—Chris, Paul, Peter, and two of the Texans urged Tom towards a more reckless approach, cheered him on to head directly into the waves, the rapids, the holes. I shook my head, protesting loudly they had no idea of the power of the water, the sheer force and danger.

At first they laughed, even as Tom backed me up, but then they watched a boat flip dramatically over and upside down, catching one rider inside. All was well after a heart-stopping moment, and the person bobbed up beside the raft and held on until the raft was grabbed a half mile down the river and she was pulled to shore. Still, throughout the trip, they cheered like kids at Splash Mountain Disneyland where the danger is man-made. Tom smiled and laughed as he heard this frenetic encouragement, but he held his own course, not rising to the risky, even dangerous challenge, teaching everyone on his craft respect, and, for some, awe, for the power of the river.

He and I shared reverence for the power of the water—I was an eager pupil and he a grateful instructor. I sat with Tom, his hand on the motor till, our heads together in conference over the roaring water, as he charted the course, reading the

current, choosing the wisest course. I tried to convince my follower travelers the biggest thrill was to be one with the river, reading the water, tuned into its energy and flow. All they saw was Tom and I, heads down, staring ahead intently from the back seat of the boat, fingers pointing and Tom turning the rudder to follow.

After traversing a quieter section of the river for six miles we came to Mile 178 and Tom pulled back on the oars, trying to hold steady as we approached Lava Falls Rapid ahead at Mile 179. Rated a 10, this was one of the biggest rapids on the river and Tom considered this among his biggest challenges as a river guide. Stopping briefly upriver to step out on an overlooking boulder we talked aloud about the approach, watching the water churn to the left, then leading into a giant twirling, swirling mass of water pulling into a black hole.

“Tom,” I yelled over the sound, “that looks very dangerous.”

“Good for you. We have to look to find currents to the right.”

I peered intently into the water—sure enough there was a crest of waves that pulled right, a rift on which to attach the boat in order for the river to help Tom row towards a surge of water I could see would pull the boat up and around the hole and the spiraling whirlpool that threatened to trap us and suck us under. Following this rift, sign of a rapid pulling right, we could ride on the edge of the wave, hover over the edge of the hole, and then push away from the whirlpool unhindered.

Back in the boat I gestured to Tom, who, nodded and turned the engine blade solidly towards the right to follow the course. Expert that he was, Tom allowed just enough time for this maneuver and angled the boat so the water caught us, pushed us

forward and right on a surge of water that skirted the rim of the hole, pushed us above to look down, gasping, then surged over and out. It was brilliant! Even the passengers who normally cheered for the smash into the heart of the rapid recognized the danger and applauded Tom.

Around the campfire that evening Tom and I relived that ride through Lava Falls Rapid, discussing the water—the waves and the giant black hole that threatened to suck us in. The others applauded this conversation, appreciating the attention required by the river in order to experience the thrill without destruction. Tom and I high-fived, and I savored a moment of accomplishment, knowing the river could take lives, sucking them down into the depths, as well as deliver them up alive.

The Pueblo Anasazi people were among the first people at the canyon, followed by the Hopi Indians their descendants. For the Hopi this is an intensely spiritual area, the Center of the World, especially the Little Colorado, a tributary of the Colorado. Up into the side canyon is the bottomless hole in the Little Colorado, the sipapu where life entered the world. Tom reverently approached the junctions of the Colorado River with the Little Colorado River and with Havasu Creek (which is now part of the Navajo Nation). Aware of ancient and contemporary tribal connections and the ways in which the land is sacred, Tom refused to lead us up this canyon where Hopi mythology claimed the beginnings of the world. Instead we frolicked in the warm aqua water as it ran over smooth rocks, sliding like playful otters.

In between rapids I sat back on the inflated raft seat, sometimes straddled the rounded edge, and floated with spray in my face, feet wet from the water that spilled

over the edge of the raft, or sat with my head back, my face turned to the sun as we emerged from the canyon shadow where the air was cold even though it was in the mid-nineties at the canyon rim. I blocked out the almost constant banter of my companions and traveled within, in inner silence, while we moved deeper into the canyon. Sitting in the rear of the boat, next to Tom, the river drowned out all other sound. In these moments of quiet and solitude I felt the spirit of the canyon.

According to Hopi legends, the ancestral Hopi passed through a succession of worlds within the interior of the earth, eventually emerging into the surface through the Sipapu, a travertine spring in the harsh, barren Little Colorado River Canyon. Before the arrival of the Whites, the Hopi gathered salt from deposits that leach from the Tapeats Sandstone walls in the Little Colorado River and Grand Canyons. They still occasionally use the ceremonial 100-miles route to the Hopi Salt Mines which follows the lower Little Colorado River and runs downstream on the top of the Tapeats Sandstone. Out of respect to the Hopi tribe, the Park Service has placed the salt mines off limits to visitors.

I was grateful to Tom for his integrity, his respect for the aura of the canyon, the spirit of rock and cliff, sand and water, a vibrant energy which seeped in and cleansed me. I felt the life force that throbs upward out of bottomless depths. I felt awe, power, not just in the rush of water but in the wind and in the silence and in the light of day and night. At times I felt profoundly alone, opening to inexplicable and mysterious peace.

I saw this in others, especially Deanne and Donna, too heavy to negotiate out of the boat on precarious ledges, to hike on side trails to waterfalls deep inside

canyons, or to see petro glyphs and debris from earlier explorers to the canyon. They felt the canyon, and I often looked back at them sitting quietly in the raft or on the sand, staring into water or rock, as the rest of us perpetually moved, trudged up and around, frolicked in water and gazed at snails and animal droppings as Tom pointed them out on our hikes. In the silence, next to the rush of gallons of water, the canyon whispered its blessing to all travelers.

As our trip neared the conclusion of our run, approaching our departure point at Diamond Creek, on our last night together, an unlikely group with a bond formed on the river, we were jovial and melancholy. We ate another wonderful dinner, now down to pasta and pesto sauce, still fresh vegetables for a salad, as we sat before the fire made in a safe spot on the sand. We sang as we had on other occasions during the journey, and chatted, sometimes staring into the fire and sparks.

Tom asked us to share reflections from the trip, and around the circle we each said our piece. Deane spoke first, invoking the spirit of the canyon and river, leading us in song. The evening had a sacred feel of entering into interior canyons and waters that touched all who traveled together from distant places. A few people spoke of the beauty of the canyon and some about the power of the river with the thrill of rushing rapids and white water. All of us thanked Tom for his expertise, good nature, and for his depth of appreciation for the canyon and the river.

I broke my silence. On my turn I talked about the last seven years, about our family battle with my oldest daughter's leukemia, including twenty-five months of chemotherapy and radiation. As always when I mentioned childhood cancer, a hush settled over the group, so I quickly added she was about to be declared officially

cured after the countdown during five suspenseful years. Cured! I poured out a mother's love, my gratitude for family and friends, for pediatric oncology doctors and nurses, for one small girl's will to live.

That ride, I told them, felt something like the past few days, only reading the river was much more satisfying than the balancing act of a parent concerned for her child, negotiating with the power and bureaucracy of the medical establishment. On the river I celebrated and mourned, leaning into the fleshy arms of Deanne, tears pouring out from an interior sipapu. The canyon and river, honored since ancient times, brought healing on the journey.

Steady Song of the Heart

We all dimly feel that our transient historical identity is the only chance in all eternity to be alive as somebody in a here and a now. We, therefore, dread the possibility, of which we are most aware when deeply young or very old, that at the end we may find that we have lived the wrong life or not really lived at all.

-Erik Erikson

A few weeks after my mother turned sixty-nine, the two of us went out to lunch on my yearly visit to Denver. I asked her how she wanted to celebrate her next birthday. With party planning on my mind, I wanted to honor the milestone.

She stared at me across the table. "I don't want anything. I don't want to grow old. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to be seventy."

I had nothing to say as I stared back.

Her wish came true— five months after our conversation she was sent to the hospital in agonizing pain. Her celebration, held three weeks before her seventieth birthday, was a funeral. The minister gathered stories of her nurturing and feeding us, the dates of her volunteer work for local dental groups, schools, churches and hospitals, and spoke of her as a good Christian woman—giving selflessly.

My mother, more assertive about her death than her life, told me how she wanted to be memorialized. She wrote her obituary, listing her volunteer work before her roles of wife and mother. She told me the music she wanted in her funeral service. In a private gathering after the service, we followed her wish to place her ashes on a marble slab in the mausoleum.

"Cremate me," she had told me as we talked about her service, "With all the people on earth there's not going to be room for all these dead bodies."

The psychologist Erik Erikson wrote of a late life developmental stage, ego integrity versus despair. According to Erikson older people must look back over their lives and accept the whole of it—mistakes and all—in order to reach the ability to say, “This is the only life I could have lived. I am the only person who could have lived this life.” With this one can die with a sense of satisfaction and peace.

It is easy to carry bitterness into late life. I see it in people all around me: bitter about relationships, about their upbringing, about the chances they didn’t get and their bad luck in terms of health or work or money or love. Life can be fingered as a litany of woes, worrying the beads of remorse and rancor until joints gnarl and hearts harden.

I could hold onto bitterness as I know my mother did, but I want to let it go.

I teach a course, “Women and Aging,” focused on images of older women, their strengths and abilities, their capacity to empower younger women. In the early ‘90’s when I started the class older women were little in the limelight. Now there are more of them to draw attention. A collection of poems and stories, *When I am Old I Shall Wear Purple*, spawned posters, bags, women’s groups, and broader conversation about older women. Women in “Red Hat Societies” began to meet publicly, and radicals like Maggie Kuntz of the Gray Panthers spoke out in protest. The feminist movement was chided for ignoring their older bold and feisty sisters.

Meanwhile, in my class, a variety of students (mostly women—in fact, only two men over all the years) ages twenty to eighty-two, come together to read late life journals, poems, novels and stories, and to watch movies portraying older women—

some healthy and vibrant living long, some dying, some meeting new lovers, some widowed, and most learning that late life is more than a long loneliness and hardship. I urge students to celebrate the talents and contributions of older women and to realize aging can be a time for interior growth, creativity, spiritual reflection, and solitude. The class inevitably begins with a student calling out, “This is so depressing,” and ends with a sense of possibility, “I want to grow older and have all that freedom!”

I tell the students I embrace the older woman I am becoming: wrinkles in my face, sag in my chin, peppering of gray along the side of my face, arthritic joints beginning to show. Members of this class ushered me across two decades, forty-five to sixty-five, big birthdays which I shared, regaling them about parties without black balloons: at fifty a catered cocktail party at my house, at sixty a dancing party in a rented hall with a band—everyone encouraged to dance as I spun the night away. I turned sixty-five sharing tapas with friends who toasted my aging with fruity, rich sangria. Always, their comments “You don’t look that old.” So what does old look like? Over the threshold of sixty-five I am “young old,” hopeful for many more years ahead. I want to make these years count.

Sixty-five. A mental count down How long do I have? How many years of quality time? Will I outlive my mother who died, tired of life, just short of seventy? With all my doubts and fears, my evolving arthritic pain, I want to hang in, to savor every minute, to watch my daughters grow.

As long as I can remember my cousin, nine years older, complains she has to clear out the attic, go through her files, and get rid of so many things. I hear her refrain, “There is so much; where do I start? “How do I decide? What should I save?”

Here is my solution.

I keep a box for when I might reside in a nursing home, no one to visit me, no more adventures to take. I imagine myself alone, looking through my things, and I see myself less lonely as I browse through my boxes. I keep things that move my heart: letters and notes, thank you cards from former students, service awards, programs from my daughters’ graduations, newspaper articles about one or the other of us, daily planners for each year, old address books, maps and souvenirs from my travels, pictures, lots of pictures. I see myself looking back over my life, enriched in the moment by a well-lived life.

I learned this from a priest whose sweetness drew me to the Catholic sacraments—conversion, communion, reconciliation, marriage and baptism for my daughters. He saved the small mementos from people who enriched his life. I watched him, saw his goodness; his full life magnified—saw that wealth is not only in money.

Now I am on my second container, a computer paper box, with a fitted cardboard lid. When I want to save something I lift the flounce on the day bed in my study, reach my hand in to tap open the lid, slide the paper or item in, slip the lid down. Sometimes I sit and look at the papers: a letter from a former student, an award I received for starting and directing the community service learning program at the college where I taught, a love letter from an old boyfriend, a poignant note from

one of my daughters or a friend, a newspaper article about me or one of the girls, a music or dance recital program, an old report card, the obituary of a friend. There is room for more always another box.

These days I awaken around 4:00, no alarm needed. I ache. I have to pee and, when I get up, I swallow the thyroid pill which must be taken early morning. I settle back under warm covers, try to ignore the arthritic pain and rest some more. This is when my developing Buddhist practice eludes me and I find that I cannot empty my mind which spins on negative thoughts. What is happening to my body? Why am I lying in this bed all alone? Where is the energy I need to push on in a meaningful life. And I am not yet seventy!

4:00 A.M. is my dark night of the soul, when my faith is challenged, when I feel my heritage of imperfect love has left me depleted and spent, without the energy to craft a vital and meaningful old age. I yearn to deepen my spiritual practice, an early morning routine like mystics and monks who enter into early morning prayer hoping to ward off the soul numbing darkness not-yet-turned to light. I remind myself of emptiness practice, cutting off the negative thoughts as soon as they arise, looking into them to see them as having no independent existence. If that doesn't work I turn on the light and read in my warm bed—a good book. Sometimes I get up, jump start the furnace if it is cold for an extra hour of heat, and sit at my desk, composing on the computer or pouring my thoughts into my journal

Four a.m. is when my arthritis flares to a steady dull pain, and I become frightened and uncomfortable with the aching realization that age, wear and tear, and

genetics make a mockery of all the care I have taken with my body. I am aware, in all the forms—declining estrogen, dropping bone density, muscle deterioration, slowing energy—the aging process has wrested the control I thought I had. I am learning to be a penitent, to really pray, to open through despair to faith.

Low fat. Low carb. Moderate alcohol. No smoking. Daily exercise. Stretch. Rest. Stay away from contamination, from additives, from processed food. I know how a runner feels, dying of an untimely heart attack when she has stayed healthy her whole life to avoid the fate of her mother or father before her. Or the women who remove their breasts only to have cancer strike another area of their body. My body is out of control.

“What are you doing?” My doctor asked when she called awhile back. “Your bone density really dropped since your last test. “I quit taking hormones.” “Oh,” was all she said. I took those hormones for years despite the political furor. I knew I had to help the headaches and sweats; I knew early menopause was a signal for potential osteoporosis which besets the women of my family. And so I took the hormones. Now I don’t. The decline is rapid, her phone call told me.

What can I do?

My body betrays me. The pain signals me, alerts me to damaged tendon and bone, worn and torn. As I swallow pain killers and anti-inflammatories doubts flare—who will take care of me? Who can I ask? Can I burden my daughters? My friends? Oh, god, will I be in nursing care?

There is always something, and those 10,000 steps a day, hormone replacements, low-fat food, vitamins and minerals, glucosamine and fish oil, have not been enough. I know at 4:00 am, in the pain and confusion, that time marches on.

Hag. Crone. Nana. Granny. Wrinkled. Dyed. Fat. Bent. Stooped. Forgetful. Demented. Sharp. Set in her ways. Free to explore. Old bag. Young in spirit. In her prime. Senile. Kind. Thoughtful. Over the hill. Past her prime. On the way out. Coming into her own. A late bloomer. Has been. Bent. Gray haired. Silver haired. False teeth. Sagging breasts. Slow. Mean. I can't believe she's that old. Purple hat. Thin hair. Stout. Grandma. Red hat. Hits the gas instead of the brake. Dotty. Sexless. Wise. Sage.

I love riding to Boston on the train—only ten dollars from Worcester, two ways. It is half price. And the subway fare in Boston is reduced as well. I get discounts at movies, at some restaurants, in hotels, on trains and buses, even in some stores and performances. I smile and say, "Senior," as I prepare to pay. "It pays to be old," I tell the ticket seller. Most always I hear, "You don't look that old." But I am. I just renewed my AARP membership for five years. It's time for the long view with the savings discount.

Do people see older women? I used to think this a stereotype. No more. Let's face it—they recognize me for the wrong reasons. I am not invisible on public transportation because younger people now offer me a seat. While I am glad to see

courtesy displayed in our public spaces, I always ask, “Do I look that old?” In return I get smiles and small laughs. I guess I do.

The invisibility is sexual. I know I am no longer a sexual object and after all those years of protesting against treatment of women, I miss the possibility of my own attractiveness in the eyes of men. What an ironic joke!

I see lithe, attractive, glamorous, energetic young women bounce by, especially the ones on the bright stiletto heels. I feel the pheromones as men trail their eyes in the wake of the walker. I know I don’t incite those glances and, shamelessly, I am sad. I want the zing. I want the zest.

Is that what all those cosmetics are supposed to ensure—that we remain attractive in the eyes of others, in the eyes of men? I don’t doubt it. Since I never used makeup any way, and since it is hardly in my retirement budget, I scoff at the anti-aging agenda of the cosmetic industry. “Just try!” I gloat. Aging and gravity are not to be defied. And so my wrinkles come, the sagging comes, the gray comes, and the hands grow more and more gnarly. I know I can’t stop it. But I want to be attractive, and I don’t want to be invisible.

Thousands of dollars are spent on dyeing hair. The other day I idly wandered my mind around the cost of hiding gray hair. I know I am in the minority, my hair slowly graying, but I say, “Let it come! Celebrate gray!”

Here are my random calculations for the average woman whose roots are colored every five weeks at an average cost of, say, sixty dollars. She goes ten times a year, let’s say for twenty years. Twelve thousand dollars! Some women dye their

own hair with Revlon or another over-the-counter product, some go to more upscale stylists. I think my average sounds about right. Meanwhile, throwing out a wild figure, I imagine women in the United States spend billions of dollars in the vain pleasure of colorful locks and tresses. I ask you—what is a better use of this money? For me it brings up thoughts of starving women and children in what is known as the feminization of poverty. I press on you, this is of much more concern than the vanity of older women. Beyond the dyed hair, however, you cannot hide the gnarling hands—a giveaway every time.

In writing *The Last Gift of Time*, Carolyn Heilbrun wrestles with the meaning of late life, declaring to the reader she was prepared to take her life when she turned seventy. As she continued to find value and richness in her life, her home, her husband, her dog, and her friends—finished with domineering academic male colleagues, with skirts and panty hose, even with the role of doting grandmother—she chose to live her self-defined life, and relished the choice of life over death.

Reading this book challenges students in the class. When I report that Heilbrun, age seventy-seven, successfully committed suicide by swallowing pills then sticking her head in a plastic bag, it is a dramatic, if not cruel way, to emphasize the challenges of aging.

I like the moral to her story—each day we choose to be alive. I, for one, am sorry she left so soon. But we are each the authors of our own lives—every woman in her own way. We do have each day to live, one-by-one.

A major assignment in the class is a presentation on a well-known older woman. Over the years I have learned about Rose Kennedy and her white gloves, Sandra Day O'Connor elected to the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton and their bouts with depression. It can be surprising to learn the complexity of well-known women's lives—difficult marriages, infamous affairs, troubles with mothers and/or fathers, strained relationships with their children—who (maybe because of their rule-breaking) contributed throughout their lives on into older age.

I have some favorites among the presentations—a cake from a recipe in Julia Child's *The Art of French Cooking* among them. The most moving was on Georgia O'Keefe, an extraordinary woman who rafted the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon at age 74, camped in one of her favorite spots in New Mexico at age 90, and died at 98. For her, age was no barrier and O'Keefe challenged a middle aged student to change her life.

In her mid-fifties, Karen, mother of two grown and married children, longtime wife and companion, often traveled with her husband on his work-related trips. She admitted to the class that while he was working she never left the hotel, even taking lunch in the room where she sat reading.

One night after class Karen shyly approached me and asked if she could do Georgia O'Keefe for her project. She admitted she loved O'Keefe's painting. "Oh, so do I," I exclaimed, "That would be great." She knew that there were quite a few O'Keefe pictures hung in the Art Institute of Chicago and she and her husband would be staying downtown near the museum on his next business trip.

The night of her presentation Karen came to class dressed in black, white, gray, rust and aqua—colors frequently seen in O’Keefe paintings. She wore ornate turquoise jewelry carefully placed in silver settings. She brought coffee table books of O’Keefe’s work and a large picture in a frame. Her power point contained scenes from O’Keefe’s life as well as slides of her work. Then she told us her story.

“I left the hotel room, walked to the Art Institute of Chicago, saw the galleries and took myself to lunch.”

The class gasped and I, characteristically, broke into tears as she stood beaming before us, unabashedly proud of herself and preening for her captivated audience. She told in detail of O’Keefe’s life, including the scandals and achievements, chronicled her later years, and showed picture after picture. Her last slide was of an eight by twenty-four foot painting that hangs high on a wall over a wide staircase in the Art Institute, “Above the Clouds IV.” O’Keefe painted this when she was 78 years old.

Karen ended her presentation by telling us about her lunch, how friendly everyone was to her, what she ordered. She talked about her purchases in the gift shop and her struggle to carry all of it back across Michigan Avenue to her hotel. Better yet, her husband was so happy she ventured out, not staying cooped up in the hotel room with a book. Her children, she told us, were proud of her and urged her to try it again.

“I just might,” she smiled.

Alone. Four A.M. I lie in a king-sized bed, one small channel for my body, scarcely a fraction of the space. Alone. I have been alone for most of my life. I wear it well, happily making my independent way through life. Except for the yearning. Except for the loneliness. Except for the fear that sits in my stomach at four a.m. when I lie awake, staring into space.

I practice reiki, breathing air and light through the heels of my feet, bringing the energy up through my body. Sometimes I relax, release a deep sigh, let go of tension. Ahhhhh. I repeat. But my mind slowly, then more rapidly, brings up thoughts. Thoughts racing. I am alone. Always alone. Can I take care of myself? Will there be enough money? What will happen to me? Will I die alone? Who will find me? Will I always be alone?

In my meditation I am reminded over and over that all is emptiness; the ups and downs of thoughts and emotions will pass.

I attempt emptiness practice, wiping out the thoughts as they arise. While this works at other times of the day, the brain holds a powerful sway so early in the morning, groggy from insufficient sleep. I cannot concentrate and the fears and doubts pull me from the present into the future, in the four o'clock starkness of despair.

In my vulnerable state I see my emotional life with men as a string of failed relationships. That's how it looks in the early morning shadows, the pre-dawn ebb of energy. I practice loving kindness, sending out love to past partners and two former husbands, spread across the country in their separate lives. Do they think of me? How do they think of me? As I am told by teachers I practice loving kindness

towards myself. On the one hand it feels so selfish, like the self-centered little girl my mother called me. On the other hand it feels wonderful, to embrace my own life and aloneness.

“Forgiveness,” I mumble.

I did a lot of leaving—and I was left.

Some women in the class prefer the daily earthiness and spill-all emotion in the prolific journals of May Sarton (*After the Stroke*, *Journal at Eighty*, among others). Others, those who find Sarton self-absorbed, prefer the more intellectual stream of consciousness work by Florida Scott-Maxwell in her late-life journal, *Measure My Days*. Both women write of the awareness of time in old age, the vivid experience of emotions and the physical difficulties. Each, in her own way, because she is honest, contributes to a sense of late life as enriching, vivid and profound. I end the course with a clip of May Sarton giving a poetry reading in her early 80’s, just after her recovery from a stroke.

Scott-Maxwell, trained as a Jungian analysis in her late sixties, steadies her gaze at the challenges of age—uncompromising. Students particularly love her comment: “It has taken my whole life to become myself.” Each time I read this line I remind myself I am in the process of becoming.

This morning I woke to the “Hallelujah Chorus” ringing in my ears, drawn from my deepest memories. Some mornings it is like this—I am chanting to Padmasambhava for purification, I am sending out light and love to the people I hold in my life, I am

filled with compassion, with joy. These are the days when I know I am not in despair. I am not lonely. I am full.

There is an easy interpretation to my singing. Yesterday I received an email with the latest on-line newsletter for “Human Values in Aging.” I went to the recommended U-Tube site, clicked on the sound icon, and watched as a chorus blossomed out in a crowded mall food court at Christmas time, each member standing to perform the “Hallelujah Chorus.” The busy, stressed crowd slowed, listened, stood still, as I watched with tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Moisture practice,” my meditation teacher tells me. I have a lot of that these days. Tears pour out for any number of reasons, and, lately, with love and compassion. I am reminded of the Holly Near song about the abundance of love, “Filling up and spilling over, like an endless waterfall.” A rock, a mountain of stone inside me is cracked open and the tears pour out.

“Can this be it?” I wonder, “Is this grace? Sometimes I think it is just such a simple opening to the simplest of moments, opening to the present.

What is old age but a spiritual challenge to find that ever-important awareness to live in the present moment? How tempting it is, with all the stress and fears of age, to dwell in the past, to tremble for the future. When it happens I understand why I continue to build a daily meditation practice, to follow the breath, to quiet my mind, to investigate within the strong pull of emotion and memory that continually tug and shove me out of the present.

What is there in later life but one present moment, followed by one present moment? And so on. When I remember this I do not despair, realizing this is how all

life is meant to be lived—in the here and now. So much of my earlier life was spent galloping into the future. Aging and the proximity of death teach me how to live.

My meditation teacher advises, “Check your limiting beliefs.”

My limiting beliefs have been with me my whole life—old age is not their spawning ground. But this is the last opportunity to address these limitations, to push myself to grow.

I am always bewildered why May Sarton, so cherished for her creativity could not be nourished on her own sustaining energy. She did not need to swing between extremes of loneliness and desperation for solitude. The middle way comes from one’s own creative energy, the balance between belonging and loneliness is the subtle swing of a pendulum through time.

The other night I dreamt I was in an elevator when everyone around me began to collapse. “They’ve put something into the air,” I thought. “I must not go to sleep.” I fought to stay awake and to walk out of the elevator when the door opened. Then I dreamt a group of people were asked to ride over Niagara Falls as a publicity stunt. In my mind I thought, “That is impossible.” I didn’t want to go along. It is dangerous to follow the crowd—important to see that loneliness can give way to aloneness and then, to solitude.

Creative inspiration comes from women I interviewed. Edith began painting at 99—when I met her she was 101. I was introduced by a friend who taught yoga at the retirement home where Edith lived. She was not frail in any way and could manage

completely on her own in the supportive structure of a retirement community. She took all the classes offered, including yoga, and then she began her first lessons in drawing and painting.

As I walked down the corridor to her room I noticed the paintings hung along the wall. “It’s my gallery,” she proudly announced, waving her hand to encourage me to look, also, at the walls of her room, covered with her work. “My last goal is to have a show and sell my painting.”

Edith talked about her life growing up, with her husband, her work, her creative craft projects over the years, her religious beliefs, and her children. Now, a widow she sees one son twice a year on holidays, and feels deep sadness for her retarded son, so profoundly disabled at birth they were urged, as were many parents at the time, to place him directly in an institution. She had not seen him since. “I don’t want to talk about that.” Instead she stressed her creativity and artwork.

When I interview older women I ask them what they would still like to accomplish. Their answers surprise and please me. Some want to see their grandchildren grow. Edith wanted to sell her paintings. Others hope for a world at peace—without war and with concern for the environment. A nun hoped to see God. One woman, in 2004, wanted the Red Sox to break the curse and win a world series. At ninety-five she knew all the players and their positions. Some are content with the lives they led and feel there is nothing more to accomplish. I admire them, no longer in pursuit of goals, but content in the moment, the here and now.

Buddhist practice emphasizes that aging and death are inevitable. On my good days I like to think about this being my last day, about being content with my life and ready to go, trusting those I love will move on without me, carrying me with them in moments of joy and sorrow, trusting that I lived my life fully. At peace with my mistakes and regrets, I could die any day. With that thought I live in the here and now.

Then there is nothing to be restless about.

In interviews I ask older women, “What would you tell other women about spiritual practice in late life?” Almost unanimously they respond, “Find what you believe and remain true to your beliefs. As you live, so shall you age. As you live, so shall you die.” Their words are a yellow caution flag—slow down, beware—a call to reexamine my life now, not later.

How am I living?

In fear. The deeper I move into my meditation I recognize my fears: afraid of loss, of being alone, of loneliness, of love. These fears have been with me my whole life and accompany me into old age. Therapy helps to heal the anger and the deep sorrow, but I stay with meditation to address my fears: of losing control, of looking deeper, of becoming ungrounded, of the vast unknown. My meditation teacher tells me, “Meditate through fear,” but fear is hard to dislodge.

I see now I lived in fear all my life. When I was younger I masked it with defiance and boldness, with reckless risk-taking, and got into places I never wanted to be, mostly into relationships that were not well-founded because neither of us was

ready to really pull together, to make the commitment a lasting one. One divorce. A second divorce. Looking at my fear and at my accumulating pain would have been an antidote, but bravado quelled a cautious deeper look.

I am no longer quick with the assurances I used to give myself—it is not so easy to cover fear in late life. It is hard to feel the wound exposed, the hurt I caused others, the harm that was done to me. If Erikson is right I have to face these mistakes to come to peace with my life. Now, later in life, fears are compounded: dependence, incapacity, loneliness, lack of money, inadequate health insurance. The dying process frightens me as it does the women I interview. How will I die? Buddhist teachings seem more practical than ever.

I want to be certain my life mattered and I made a difference in the world, not disappear without a trace. I wonder, like many others, what happens when I die? Sometimes I subscribe to the light at the end of the tunnel perspective—being greeted by loved ones at the end of a channel of white into a moment of illumination. Sometimes I think, “What does it matter? I won’t be alive to know the difference.” Then I am afraid to face the void, the emptiness. Buddhist practice teaches me I will come back again, come back to work out karma I created lifetimes ago. One thing seems true—do the best I can right here and now.

Face the fear.

Enter into the emptiness of meditation and see what arises. Focus on the breath. Still the mind. Over time the emptiness opens to a larger space of awareness, awakening, and into love and compassion.

“These are the most important.” Rinpoche smiles at me.

As you live, so shall you age. A legacy of family love withheld. My father, niggardly with love, too depressed or frightened to share love freely, could not break out of his rigid Germanic shell to offer the loving support I needed as a little girl. I was told to behave, to be quiet, to stifle myself and to feel a sense of unworthiness. He went to his grave unable to express his love and caring, hurting himself and those who cared for him.

My mother had deep compassion with other people in pain, yet spread her self-doubt, anger and bitterness to her only daughter. Now I feel the connection between us, but when she died over thirty years ago we were blocked from an easy flow of love.

When I meditate I experience a deep pool of love, a reservoir from which I can draw. If I silence the fear love fills the space cleared in concentration.

As my Buddhist teacher repeats, “This life is a precious opportunity.” There is no choice—aging and death are not forgiving.

I received the name, “Steady Song of the Heart,” in a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist precepts ceremony at the 2009 Thich Nhat Hahn retreat held at Stonehill College in Massachusetts. Taking the vow to honor the precepts was not what I expected to do this week of meditation and dharma talks, but the name is what I remember most.

I was given this name by a tall, lanky twenty-eightish maroon-robed monk, Tall Tree, as he called me to receive my certificate for taking the precepts. “Susan, Steady Song of the Heart.”

I love the “s” sound, ssss’ing along into the warmth of the heart. I like the singing. I like the steady. More and more I like to think of my heart, to imagine it expanding. The name feels auspicious.

Each morning I sit, striving to reach an inner peace I thought I could never reach. Lately I begin to see the fruit of my practice. I am relaxing, feeling my way into support from unknown sources. “Just be,” says my meditation teacher, “Just be.”

What I see when I “just be,” is not a blissful spiritual life; it is none other than the broken life I have led. Practice shows me all of my life—pain and joy, sorrow and laughter, anger and love—all of it is my spiritual journey. Gradually I see the surprising richness of my fragile life: my mother’s wavering love founded in insecurity, my father’s withholding cold silence with glimpses of joy, my divorces, my broken loves, my stressful single parenting, my daughters’ struggles, one with cancer and the other as a younger sibling experiencing her older sister’s suffering, my lost friendships, my jagged spiritual path. And now growing older.

How many kinds of tears can be wept? Just like Eskimos, who live in wintery conditions most of the year, have many words for snow, I want to find expression for tears shed in sorrow, fear, anger, joy, gratitude and love. Moisture practice—these days it seems I cannot stop crying.

I empty, giving way to loving kindness and compassion.

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