

**MOURNING TO JOY:  
WRITING TO TRUTH IN A TEACHING LIFE**

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## **Abstract**

This project is about diversity. It shows diversity by telling stories. The stories are those of teachers and students, woven together into a single narrative to give some expression to the diversity, variety, and richness that exists in most teaching environments, inside and outside of schools, in teachers and in students.

The stories are woven together to illustrate a central theme, a teacher and his students working to come to terms with themselves, with their uniqueness and with each other. It is about moving from fear to acceptance, from ignorance to understanding, from hiding to truth, from mourning about who and what we are to accepting ourselves with joy. It is about finding the integrity to be, the integrity to let be, and the integrity to teach.

Topics addressed or illustrated in these stories include addiction, suicide, physical and emotional abuse, sexual orientation, narrative writing (therapy), poetry therapy, journal writing, healing and faith.

The themes and stories presented through narrative are further illustrated and strengthened by quotations, poems and journal entries.

## **Dedication**

To Cynthia, for getting me started.

To Leah, for getting me through.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the staff, academic and support, who helped me through my year at the University of Lethbridge. In particular I wish to thank Dr. Cynthia Chambers for encouraging me to look at myself, to keep looking, and learn to express it. I wish to thank Dr. Richard Butt for providing the first educational opportunity for me to look at who I am as a person and connect it with who I am as a teacher. It was a startling and worthwhile examination that I know has only just begun. I thank Dr. Brian Titley for making me look at the “big picture,” not just isolated events and seek to understand the connections. I am grateful to Dr. Rick Mrazak for insisting, many times, that my final study to be something that mattered to me.

Most of all, I wish to thank Dr. Leah Fowler for forcing me to kill the censor, muzzle the critic, and tell the truth. Thank you, Leah, for listening to the still, small voice that suggested you take a chance at the University of Lethbridge.

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## **Introduction**

Buddhism tells us to work out our salvation with diligence. In the New Testament, Saint Paul tells us to “work out our own salvation with fear (awe) and trembling (wonder).” Salvation, I have discovered, is not an event, but a process. This project is about that process. It is about knowing and integrating who I am as a teacher and educator with who I am as a person. It is, ultimately, the uniting of the sacred and the secular; harmonizing the body, mind and spirit.

\* \* \*

I had to keep a writing notebook for Education 5200, one of the required courses for the master’s program at the University of Lethbridge. We were directed to explore, examine and discover what our “inquiry” would be. I had a few preconceived “inquiries,” but found that other ideas kept working their way into my writing. I tried to keep the real focus of my own inquiry safe and acceptable. I focussed on issues such as justice, tolerance, diversity, career development, racism, equity, gender, counselling and writing.

A line by one of the writers listed in the course bibliography stuck in my mind. Ueland (1987) states, “Now this is an inevitable truth: whatever you write will reveal your personality, and whatever you are will show up in your writing.” Could I discover the real focus of my inquiry and understand myself through writing? I took up the challenge.

All the areas I thought were the focus of my inquiry were somehow related, although at first I did not recognize the connection. As I read back over my writing notebooks, my journals, my papers and the topics I researched during my year at the University of Lethbridge, I began to understand a single, simple theme that tied them all

together. The real subject of my inquiry had indeed been revealed in my writing. I had actually been writing my way to truth, to revelation, to acceptance and understanding. The focus of this inquiry is me - the need to integrate who I am as a person with who I am as a teacher.

The following entries from my writing notebook for Education 5200 and the instructor's comments illustrate the process that led to this inquiry.

Journal Entry of Wednesday, October 8, 1997.

*I got my journal back from [my instructor] yesterday. Great comments - thanks! What's been nagging me is the question, "Where would you like to go next?" I had no idea.*

*As I look back at what I've written and what I've been reading, there are some recurrent themes. The major one is "diversity." How can we include diversity issues - and support for diversity issues - in our schools? I seem to be very much aware of the issues, but that doesn't mean I'm doing anything about them. I get very angry with intolerance, but what am I doing to promote understanding? I guess that is my major issue: what can I do to promote diversity issues in teaching, counselling and education in general?*

*The other thing that keeps coming up is writing/journaling. I've picked out (from the curriculum lab) most of the articles on that topic. I'm not sure at this point why it is so important, but perhaps I'll understand as the course progresses. (In the above passage, the underscoring was done by the instructor.)*

**Instructor's Comment: *Maybe - for this course at least - you are the subject of the inquiry.***

Journal Entry of Wednesday, October 15, 1997.

*Class, as usual, was interesting last night. There was one issue that came up a few times that was meant for me. I really have no focus yet on what my own inquiry is - or even what it should be. I guess I haven't really found my "home." This idea came out in my writing and in [the instructor's] story and in our group. I do know that I am very interested in the areas of justice and diversity. But those are hugely "diverse" topics. What about justice interests me? I guess it is the anger I feel*

*(RAGE?) when I see injustice. And I have a real concern for making sure we all benefit from the various cultural, religious, racial and other diversity possibilities in our society. How can I focus? What is my focus? Why am I so fascinated with these topics? What do I want to know and what do I want to do? These are some questions I need to answer.*

**Instructor's Comment:** *As I wrote a few pages ago, maybe you are the topic of your inquiry, at least for now. Write the stories of intolerance.*

Journal Excerpt from the entry for Monday, October 27, 1997.

*So what is the nature of my inquiry? I still can't put my finger on it, but I know it has certain themes running through it. What keeps coming up are diversity issues, writing, and... and what? I guess the what is my focus. So what are my issues around diversity and writing? I believe writing can heal and lead to hope and understanding of the self. I'm not sure how. (My instructor had written **aha!** beside the second to last sentence.)*

**Instructor's Comment:** *I sense your angst, but you are searching for something right in front of you - your inquiry is already here - in your notebook and it is just fine.*

I kept examining topics and issues which were related by a common theme, diversity and understanding the self. They were, however, topics and issues that were merely tributaries of my main inquiry. Education 5500, another required course for the program at the University of Lethbridge, directed me to focus on the influences and interactions between my teaching life and my personal life. This was a new and interesting direction. Education 5300, another required course, encouraged me to look at the "big" picture - how does one event influence another? What forces interact in society, religion, education, industry and politics? The crowning admonition came in Education 5400, the last of the required four courses, when I was told I needed to find an inquiry about which I felt passionate. To feel less, I was told, would lead to boredom and likely an unfinished thesis or project. Right up until the end of that course I focussed on a peripheral issue -

career development. On the last day of that course I went into the library and using some of the search techniques I had learned in Education 5400, did a search on a topic I had been pushing aside - writing as a means to self-awareness, self-acceptance and healing.

I have kept a personal journal for over twenty years and have a filing cabinet full of tattered notebooks. I felt the need to go over them, pull out the themes and deal with the issues. I need to face the inquiry toward which I have been writing for years.

It is my experience at the University of Lethbridge that encouraged me to look at who I am as an individual and as a teacher and to unite the two. I need to examine what I have experienced, what I believe, and what personal truths I have come to understand about myself, about life, and about teaching.

**Chapter 1**

**AIMING TO PLEASE: THE PERFECT TEACHER**

**Victor's Story**

## **Truth and Lies**

How do I tell the truth about a lie? It may not be possible to untangle the layers of truths and untruths that have been used to weave my life. There are the daily stories I have told that slightly distort what really happened in order to keep secrets. As truths and lies go on over time, a lie often told becomes indelible and nearly impossible to erase and turn back into truth.

There are some truths I know. My mother allowed my father to beat her and to beat her children repeatedly. I make excuses for her allowance of the beatings, such as her own fear of being beaten or her lack of ability to survive on her own or to make a living to support four kids. Today, free of my father, free of financial concerns and children, she still finds men she can abuse or who abuse her.

Another truth I know is that my father lived and died by violence. He died by putting a shotgun in his mouth and pulling the trigger. At first I thought his death would end any chance of resolution. It only hastened it. Once again, in the universal theme of things, it is death that brings new life.

## **Sitting Ducks**

The truth is, I killed a sitting duck once. I also killed a baby girl. I don't talk about those things much, but they are part of my guilt.

A boy of eight in blue overalls, I go hunting with my Dad, excited by the game of it and owning my father's presence. I collect the empty shell casings as he ejects them from the shot gun. It is a double-barrelled shotgun belonged to his dad, my Grandfather,

**UNTITLED**

In trying to find  
the answer to my question,  
I've grown so afraid  
of the answer  
that I must have known  
it all along.

by Charles Eastly  
August 15, 1978.

that kills the ducks and him. As I pick up the ejected shell casings I catch the scent of burned gunpowder. It smells like fresh struck matches, only milder, gentler on the nose. It is the same smell without the burning sulphur, acrid but not painful. It is deceptive that such a pleasing smell can kill. I take the shell casings home and line them up in two rows, pretending they are soldiers shooting each other. Soldiers shooting soldiers, shells shooting shells, and every once in a while I catch the scent and stop and smell the powder and see my father wring the neck of a duck not killed by pellets or the fall.

Dad knows and heeds the sportsman's creed - never shoot a sitting duck. On one trip, he allows my older friend, Albert, to come with us. Other people's sons are always wiser, more mature. Albert has a gun. Dad sends us off alone. We waddle through soggy bull rushes toward the slough. I see the duck sitting on the shore and beg Albert to shoot it. I think we can take back a dead duck to Dad and see his pride. But we are too close and after the shot there isn't much left. Blood and feathers, lead and shock fly over the once still water. I never go hunting again.

I killed Bobby's little sister, too. I learn in school that vinegar, baking soda and water react when mixed. I put them in a bottle and wait for the cork to blow. Bobby is from the wrong side of the street. In small prairie towns, one street can make a lot of difference. The house where Bobby and his little baby sister live is an old school house moved into town and dumped onto a poorly matched foundation. The guy who tried to make it fit never finished his own house and was not a real builder.

My best friend, Sharon, and I take Bobby's older sister in one day and clean her up. Sharon does Pam's hair and puts some make-up on her. We make her look good to

“Each person is a repository of stories. To the degree that any one of us reaches toward autonomy, we must begin a process of sorting through the trash and treasures we have been given, keeping some and rejecting others. We gain the full dignity and power of our persons only when we create a narrative account of our lives, dramatize our existence, and forge a coherent personal myth that combines elements of our cultural myth and family myth with unique stories that come from our experience. Whoever authors your story authorizes your actions.”

Sam Keen in the preface to *Your Mythic Journey*.

the boys. We make her look good enough for sex. She gets sent to visit an aunt. When you don't have much self-esteem, the attention that comes before a moment of sex can make you feel needed, useful, respected, and for a moment, whole.

Bobby's mother has another baby too. I overhear the adults say they do not look after the kids they have very well, but they have another one anyway. It is fall when Bobby's little sister is born. The autumn days are warm but the evenings, like the leaves, turn crisp in a hurry. Bobby comes over to my back yard one day as I am playing with the vinegar and baking soda in bottles. I do not like him much. He is less than me, a scapegoat for my own feelings of inferiority and need for power. He is interested in what I am doing and I suddenly feel superior and want full ownership of my project and my yard and Bobby. I threaten to spray him. He stays. I put some vinegar into the soda and water solution, put my finger over the end of the bottle and wait for a reaction. Bobby stands there as the liquid sprays, my thumb directing the flow. I chase him until he is soaked.

Bobby gets a cold. His little sister catches a cold and then pneumonia and dies. I know they all blame me because Bobby tells me so. I laugh it off, but it is still there.

Years later I hear Bobby has joined the army and that he eventually commits suicide. I wonder if he feels guilty about giving a cold to his little sister or if it is because I never allowed him to cross the street. Maybe it was something else he could not resolve.

This is a truth I know. Bobby and Dad made their own decisions when they took their own lives, but they did not make those decisions in a vacuum. I may not have built the haystack, and I am sure I was not the "final" straw. I know, however, that I am not an

## LAST HUNT

Dad tells us to be careful  
as he crushes out his Player's butt  
with rubber boot into the damp, dark dirt.

My two year older friend and I  
crouch, waddle, slide  
through mud-logged reeds and rushes  
toward the stagnant slough.

A single duck  
stands still as death  
alone along the shore.  
    Shoot it quick before it flies.  
I know he'll never hit one taken flight.

All sense but sound  
is for a moment gone  
until we see  
blood red feathers fall  
water ripple into life  
as leaden pellets lose their deadly force.

Dad does not ask about the shot.  
Perhaps he is just glad  
to see us both alive.  
Or maybe, deep inside,  
the hunter in him knows  
and does not want to know.

by Charles Eastly

innocent bystander in their lives. Some of the straws are mine.

### **Difference and Control**

As I grow older, I become aware of my differences. I know my difference is deeper and something I fear cannot be changed, although I cannot name it. Perhaps we all feel we are different - not as smart, not as attractive, not as talented, not as normal. In a small town differences are exaggerated. My father is afraid I am going to turn out wrong, so he works hard to reform me. He beats me and often criticizes me in order to make me better. I learn quickly he will use any excuse to keep me in line. I try hard to please so I will not get beaten. I learn that pleasing others gives me some control over the consequences in my life. Control and pleasing, pleasing and control are somehow closely related. I try to keep everybody happy. I try to keep Mom and Dad from fighting and Dad from beating my older sister. If I do everything right I may be able to control everything. I learn to do what I am told to do and more. I help around the house and the yard and never say "no." I develop a degree of control over everyone in our house. I learn to keep everyone happy most of the time.

Thirty years later, I still try to keep everyone happy, still try to fix everything. The hardest lesson I learn as a teacher is to stop trying to "fix" everyone and make everyone like me. I finally learn that trying to solve others' problems is impossible, for them and for me. Giving advice and presenting solutions merely gives them my answer to their problem and puts the pressure on me.

This is a truth I know. I am not responsible for the choices and decisions of

**Journal Entry of Sunday, July 19, 1987.**

*I am an artist. I can paint a life for God. My life. What can I show the world except this painted life, this fading life, this life of joy and pain that colours all my being and lifts me from the slime to the sublime in splashes of my brush and draws me back to slime to paint my way back out again.*

*What is a life that cannot rise or fall - a life that lingers on the growing edge? What must I sacrifice for life - my need, my greed?*

*The only picture I can paint is the one for which I have been given the colours. I cannot paint a life of hunger or of poverty as yet. But I can paint with words of suicide, and doubt, of having lost my way, of widows and handicapped sisters and sex. I can paint of searching endlessly for truth and love and recognition. Of cigarettes and drugs and the destructive fear of criticism. A life that seeks direction, finding none, and seeking it again. A life that knows that life is good today, yet seeks a better one and often ends up less.*

*My life and my experience. A precious gift. My only gift. The only brush and palette that I own.*

others. When I let go of the outcome, I am free to be involved in the moment and to really listen as my students, friends and family seek their own solutions to their own problems.

My need to please makes me work hard to become the perfect teacher. I have to make up for the sins of my father, my own sins, for killing ducks and babies and even fathers. If I work hard at teaching and do good things and keep everyone happy, then my secret sins will go away. I go to Sunday School and church, play the piano, sing in the school chorus, learn to behave at the dinner table, wash the clothes, clean the house, keep the yard, paint and wall-paper and cook. I work to become perfect, to earn my way to freedom.

### **In the Beginning**

In my first year of teaching I learn a great lesson. I am assigned the grade seven class as my home room, Elsie has the grade nine's, and Eldon has the grade eight's. I teach language arts to all three grades, Eldon teaches math, and Elsie teaches social studies.

It is a textbook autumn. The warm Indian Summer lunch hours are spent with Elsie walking around the school, the golden swaths of wheat on one side of the road, the school on the other. Most autumns feel good to teachers. It is time to begin again and renew commitment to teaching and to busy classrooms before the winter huddles us together in cozy cubicles.

Elsie has incredible classroom management skills. Eldon has none. A tiny Asian

## NOW

Like Sisyphus I tried to push the burden  
of my imperfections, fears and failures  
up that hill in vain.

But my control, commitment faltered  
and like a stone  
I tumbled down again.

Can grace shine through this failure?  
Is there be meaning in a tree  
stuck on the hill I climb?  
I can't believe the whisper  
it is finished  
now.

by Charles Eastly

Australian, Elsie has an infectious laugh and a tight, round smile. She is confident, lively woman with a sense of sophistication I admire. I sit at the corner of the staffroom table that first morning of school in early September in grey slacks, a white turtle neck and blue blazer. We are talking about the weather and the harvest when the door bursts open and Elsie flattens herself against the door frame.

“It was a great summer in Turkey,” she projects dramatically. “His name was Twinji. He is gay, but we had a wonderful time anyway. Who’s the sailor in the corner?” she asks, nodding at me. Elsie takes me home for lunch that day. When she sees me reach to open a brown paper bag and extract a sandwich, she insists I go to her place where she serves me a steak sandwich flipped with chopsticks.

Elsie’s students know she is in control - in control of herself as well as her classroom. Her control is different than mine. Hers comes from confidence, mine comes from fear. She expects her students to follow the rules. She is constantly meting out punishment. One weekend the school board dumps new gravel in the parking lot. Elsie drives an Austin Mini and the larger boulders are tough to navigate as she has trouble seeing over the steering wheel. As punishment, she has some of the gum-chewing farm boys in her class gather up the larger rocks and move them to the side. A few days later the same boys repeat their crime. We are all in the staff room enjoying a Friday luncheon before the promise of the long Victoria Day holiday. We know the knock on the door is Elsie’s students reporting for punishment.

“Right,” she says in a flippant tone through her Australian accent. “Let me see. What can I get you to do today? Right. Remember those rocks you piled up for me last

## **Rules for Journal Writing.**

I've heard it said that the first rule of journal writing is that there are no rules. And that is certainly true. However, I have found some things that can help make it better and easier.

1. Note the date and time on every entry. It is amazing how often the details of day and time can bring back the moment vividly.
2. Write about everything. I find that the weather and even a note about world events is a great help when I read over my journals.
3. I buy smaller journals than I used to. Journals that cannot be carried around or that take too long to fill often end up not getting used at all. It is also easier to read back over a short journal than a long one.
4. Number the pages.
5. I always buy a journal that will lay flat and has a solid back cover for ease of writing when I can't find a desk or table and have to use my lap.
6. I had to give up worrying about privacy. If anyone does read it, I tell them all the bad things are about them.
7. I do not feel guilty for not writing. I just enjoy the writing I am able to do.
8. I try to vary what I write about by including emotions, events, beliefs, confusions, frustrations, pleasures and joys - and anything else that moves, bores or enrages me.
9. Detail is important and I try to use as much detail as I can. While travelling I have put the name of a hotel and not the town in which it is located and the memory is gone. I use a first name and not a last name and then can't recall which "Larry" or "Beth" I am writing about.

by Charles Eastly

week? Split ‘em!” We all look up in surprise. Elsie does not make light of her punishments. She laughs, partly at her line but mostly at the look on the faces of the teachers sitting in their usual corners.

“No, never mind,” she says. “I’m in a pretty good mood today, so I’ll give you the day off. Next time I may not be so generous.” The kids love her sense of humour and always report to her for their punishment. It is a way to get special attention from a respected teacher.

Eldon is an insecure, nervous man. Everything that happens in his class he takes personally. He believes the kids are out to get him and he struggles to maintain control. He struggles in vain. He is the only teacher in the school who still uses the strap. It is a few years before the strap is banned. The rules for strapping are so formalized that it is not really worth the effort, from a practical point of view or a disciplinary one. At first, I play witness to Eldon’s venting of his rage. It gives me a sense of power and authority to be part of such brutality. I have grown up with violence, and in some ways it feels comfortable. A witness is required if the strap is used. Fortunately, it is not long before witnessing becomes more painful for me to watch than being strapped is for the students. Like hunting, it soon loses its flavour.

### **Classroom Basics**

There are some truths I learn about teaching from Eldon and from Elsie. I learn that you can be in control without using violence. I learn that being in control of the classroom is how a teacher is judged. I learn that either the teacher is in control or the

“The essential intent in journal writing is self-understanding. Your journal is a perfect guide: It listens without judgment and reflects who you are back to you when you read it. It is a trusted and versatile traveling companion that will be a true friend along life’s path.”

“The simplicity of the journal is beyond compare. It consists simply of a blank book (or blank computer screen) and a pen or pencil (or keyboard). The only necessities for keeping a journal are: the blank page, something to write or type on, and yourself.”

John Fox. (1995). *Finding What You Didn't Lose*, p.148.

“The process of journaling allows you to write about everything that occurs to you - you are free to write your most original thoughts as well as cliches. It is an unconditional place to be truthful, fantastic, off-the-wall, dreamy, romantic, practical, philosophical, boring, and confused. There will be times when you’ll be insightful, dramatic, and incredibly creative - and days when you’ll be dull and uninspired. All of it is all right and all of it can be worthwhile. Living side by side in your journal, this disparate chorus of voices inside you will begin to resonate more and more clearly.”

John Fox. (1995). *Finding What You Didn't Lose*, p.152.

students are. Eldon reacts to everything and shows it. The students pick on him because, like Bobby, he is an easy target. Size or gender have nothing to do with teaching. There is some other quality that is vastly more important. It is a secret Elsie knows.

Elsie tells me some truths she knows about teaching. She tells me to make sure I always know what I am talking about. She tells me to do my homework and stay a book ahead of the kids, not just a chapter. “You need to know the ending if you want to effectively teach the beginning,” she instructs. She tells me to be fair. “Don’t let your own prejudices stop you from seeking the best for any student.” She reminds me that we all have prejudices. She tells me the most important thing is to do it all with a sense of humour.

I learn another very important but generally unspoken truth. I learn that to outsiders, a quiet class is a sign of a good teacher. I hear the noise from Eldon’s class. Kids are yelling, dropping books, going to the washroom and slamming the door. From Elsie’s class I hear only her lectures and her laughter. I want to be like Elsie. I want to be in control. In my need for control I begin to rule with absolute authority. I will not let my students see me get upset. I will not let them get to me. I will not take what they do personally and I will laugh now and then to show I am well balanced. I say with pride to a colleague, “One of us may have a nervous breakdown, either me or my students. It won’t be me.”

One truth I know about teaching is peers and principals judge good teachers by externals - classroom control, noise level, tidy rooms and beautiful bulletin boards. Students judge teachers by different criteria. Students judge teachers by their confidence

**Lines from Personal Journals.**

*There are many truths that I have discovered in my life. The problem comes not in finding a truth, but in living it. April 5, 1978.*

*Maybe life does not involve trying to develop an immunity against it. April 5, 1978.*

*These truths have undoubtedly been discovered by many before me, but to me they are new and vital. May 14, 1978.*

*There is no answer, but there are answers. June 12, 1978.*

*Running always is fine, but I'd like to be running free. January 27, 1981.*

*I had no idea that learning to depend on myself could feel so free and secure -- and so lonely. February 6, 1981.*

*Even though we may not know it consciously, we will usually make our plans fail if we don't really want to head in that direction. February 18, 1981.*

*Not until life becomes more important than security will I start to live. February 12, 1983.*

in themselves, by their knowledge and love of their subject, by their joy and by their sincerity and by their personal integrity.

### **Taking Control**

Glenn, the assistant principal in my new school, leans over the bookshelf that divides our classrooms in the open area. There are five classes and the library in the same room. We try to separate ourselves into areas by setting up bulletin boards and bookshelves as barriers. There are three classes along one wall. I am in one corner and Glenn's class is between mine and Julie's. Glenn has pretty good classroom control, but Julie has none. The kids push her to the limit and she quits teaching at the end of the year. I feel proud. I am only a second year teacher and already I am a success. I have control.

"You're not teaching in a military college," he says. I look at him blankly for a few moments. Is he criticizing me? Surely not. I laugh it off.

"Better than letting them swing from the rafters," I say, letting my eyes roll toward Julie's class. He shrugs and walks toward the office. But I have heard him. Maybe he is jealous that I have more control than he does and he has already been teaching for eight years. The message stays with me, however. I do not really hear what he is saying but I hear his disapproval. I hear his criticism. I hate criticism. I react violently to criticism. Inwardly violent. Towards myself. I punish, condemn, chastize myself for being so silly as to make a mistake. A mistake may cause others not to like me or to lose respect for me. Perhaps they will think I am not perfect. Often I recall silly mistakes weeks, months, years later and live the humiliation all over again. I must learn to please. I must learn to

think before I speak, to control what I do and say. I will work harder to become the perfect teacher. My desire, my dream, my need to be seen as the perfect teacher take the joy out of teaching.

### **Wishes, Dreams and Desires**

People who need to be in control find it hard to make changes, even when they want things to change. Psalm 37 suggests God will give me the desires of my heart. In Biblical language the heart is the centre of the human spirit from which everything else finds its source - emotions, motivations, thoughts and actions. I wonder if that phrase means that God will fulfill the desires I already have, or if God will put them there in the first place so that they can be fulfilled. Either way, a truth I know is that I need to be careful about what I desire, dream about or wish for, because somehow, divine or otherwise, I usually find a way to make it happen.

I want a year off to study. I do not want particularly to go to the University of Lethbridge and have no idea why I apply there. When I go down for the interview, the place feels right. I stand on the sixth floor patio, looking out over the city and know that this is the place I am to be. I do not know why. I let the feeling make my decision.

This is a truth I know. It is easy to blame others for my decisions because I do not want to take responsibility for my own choices. I blame things on my parents, my teachers, the government, my students, my job or God. Who I am may have been influenced by all these things. I can, to some extent, blame these influences for the person

## PROPS

I work so hard  
to make myself  
secure  
and pure  
and proud.

And then I meet  
somehow  
some thing  
someone  
to knock down all my props  
and for a moment  
set me free.

by Charles Eastly

I am, but I cannot blame them for the person I become or for the choices I make. I find things, situations or people that force me in a new direction because I cannot consciously force myself. I find a way to set myself free and let the desires of my heart become reality.

### **Family Secrets**

Perhaps my Dad's way of setting himself free was to join the army. Mom often tells me he was different in England than he was when he got home. He was free over there with no expectations or preconceived roles placed on him by family or by tradition or by community. Do fathers really pass on the sins of one generation to the next? I suppose they do unless someone takes the time to learn what those sins are and deliberately makes a choice to stop them.

I've been told that my Dad could never please his father. Grandpa was a stern, fearful, image-conscious man driven to bouts of depression and rage. I've seen it in my father and in my brother and in myself. Grandpa owned and ran the newspaper in a small, dusty prairie village in East Central Alberta. He also led the local concert band and dictated God's will to the preacher and the board of the local Severe Church. Only obvious sinners and outcasts did not go to church, like Charlie the alcoholic or the two men who lived at the edge of the village who were discussed quietly whenever they came to town for groceries or their mail. Although I did not understand why, I knew from adult conversations the one Catholic, the one Jewish family and the one Chinese family in town were not as acceptable as the rest of us.

Grandpa had four daughters and two sons. My father was the youngest.

Grandpa's children knew how to behave. They learned quickly not to embarrass their father in public. The beatings were frequent and brutal. One daughter was sent off to a home we found out years later. We found out quite by accident when her outcast child, now a man of fifty, showed up at my sister's place unexpectedly one spring afternoon. We used to talk about this aunt with a smug feeling of superiority, laughing at her inability to enjoy life. Now we began to understand. Her child and her love were taken away at the command of her father. She was a disgrace and was finally forced to marry a man her father found acceptable. Grandpa must have been violent with rage when she betrayed his love.

My father, like his father, was a driven man. He was driven to please his family, but he was never independent and never content. He could not leave the small town he was born in after he got home from the war. He could not leave the family or the sisters or the brother who told him what to do, who told him how to discipline his family, who told him where to work and how to live. He was the youngest, babied, but not encouraged. I wish I had known my father in England as he played the bass fiddle in the band with the 49<sup>th</sup> Loyal Edmonton Regiment. He met Mom at a dance he was playing for one evening at the Haycutter Pub near Oxted. She loved to dance. I'm sure they loved each other then, before the prairie winters and the village roles and the beatings and his family became part of her life as well.

### **Family Interference**

It is a Saturday evening when Aunt Violet calls. Donna, my "younger" older

## WAR BRIDE

A soldier finds his freedom  
on a foreign shore.  
His accent and his uniform  
give dreams a chance --  
free from family  
expectations, limitations,  
abusive power control.

Do you think of England?  
Close your eyes before  
all dreams are shattered  
by approaching war.

Shipped home an invalid of war  
in duty, love, hope or need  
he sends for you.  
No choice.  
Two kids in hand you come  
in love, in hope,  
in duty or in need.

He is out of uniform.  
The accent yours. The freedom  
that you'd loved in him surrendered  
to a war he'd lost at home.

His family rejects you  
(seductress of their youngest brother/son)  
and leaves you, isolated  
on a foreign shore  
just another war bride  
casualty of war.

by Charles Eastly

sister, has been at Violet's watching television. After she leaves, Aunt Violet cannot find some money she left on her table. She phones to tell Dad my sister has taken it. My sister denies it, which really angers my father. He pushes on, the tone in his voice becoming more threatening. Then he raises the hand in threat. Still there is denial. My sister gets a backhand across the face, a simple measure necessary to bring out the truth. My sister screams, "Honest, Daddy. I didn't take it. Honest, Daddy." The rest of us scurry around the house, horrified, drawn like moths to a lamp. We are glad it is her, not us. Dad yells at us to mind our own business. We are scared to get involved, afraid to leave, afraid to protect or save or call for help. The next belt across the head knocks Donna to the floor. In the corner by the front door, screaming, curled up fetal is my terrified handicapped sister. "Don't hurt me, Daddy. Please don't hurt me."

Aunt Violet phones back to say she has found the money. Dad does not apologize. I never forget the pointless brutality. Years later we are still caring for my sister. She never learns to be independent. She cannot please so she gives up. My mother looks after her until we get her into a sheltered environment. Perhaps looking after her for twenty years is Mom's way of saying she is sorry for not knowing how to be there, that she was not capable of being there, that she was frightened too. Although it is never discussed in the family, I know the violence has more to do with my sister's inability to cope with life, than her inability to cope with life had on the violence.

Some of the violence ends the day I stand up to my father. My little brother has not yet been the object of Dad's rage. It starts with my oldest sister, then moves to Donna and then to me. Mom always receives her share. Mom leaves once, for a few days, but

she comes back. The relatives see to that. When she is gone, I have to stay with Aunt Violet. Auntie tells me I will never see my mother again and I cry all night. I do not know she cannot leave for good without money or education or her kids.

My brother and his friend are pulling a wagon down the street past Smith's store when they find the package. As curious seven year-olds, they are more interested in seeing what is in the package than in trying to find its owner. When they open it and find only a pair of bedroom slippers they throw them in the garbage. But the eyes of the village see and Dad gets a call that night during dinner. My brother is accused. Dad begins to do his job. He seeks the truth. The tone in his voice is rising, becoming more accusing. The dinner grows tasteless, turns bland as the fear parches our stomachs. *Not my little brother!* In a foolish surge of protection, I jump up and challenge my father.

“What are you going to do? Beat him and then find out he never did it and not apologize just like you did when you beat Donna for taking Aunt Violet's money and then finding out she didn't do it?” I am breathless and shaking with fear and anger. Dad does not recover. He tries to splutter a few words, but he has lost. Five pairs of eyes look at him and then at me. He never beats any of his kids again. From that day on, I become my Mom's best friend. Dad can do nothing about it when I am there, but I later learn he still beats Mom when I am away at university.

After I graduate from high school and leave for Edmonton to attend university, Mom decides to go back to school as well. Dad takes away the car keys the night she has to drive fifty miles to the college to write her final exam in English 200. My sister comes to get her and Mom takes my sister's car. The next day Mom buys her own car. She

## NEXT IN LINE

Dad never picked on him.

Mom  
my older sisters  
me

but never him

the timbre  
in the accusation  
tension  
rising  
food turns pasty  
taste turns pale

anger-rage  
inside of him  
inside of me  
my little brother now  
the next in line

confused combined emotions  
fear, protection, love and hate

will you beat him  
take your rage against your youngest son  
(because you did not live your dream)  
and find he did not do it  
leave him beaten in a corner on the floor

shocked a moment - ashen faced  
anger rises red but rage is ruined  
he sputters on about who's boss  
then weakens, pokes at pale potatoes  
cold meat raw like fear as all are silent

late that night comes home a drunk  
defeated father

by Charles Eastly

never listens to my father much after that. When Mom decides to move to Red Deer to continue at Red Deer College, Dad follows her. It is in Red Deer that he kills himself, a defeated man. His anger and violence fail to control his world. The fear and the anger turn inward and become depression and in the end the violence is the victor. Perfectionists need to be in control, and when they lose control, violence towards self or others often becomes the solution.

This is a teaching truth I know. It is important to believe in what I teach, but it is also important to believe in who I am. When I know and accept who I am as a person and as a teacher, I can go into my classroom with a sense of integrity that requires no explanation and no apology. If I do not know who I am as a person or as a teacher, I cannot allow my students to find out who they are. I will fear honesty, truth and emotion and I will teach what I fear. A student's presence in my classroom requires no explanation and no apology. I must allow them to bring their experiences, their failures, their frustrations, their fears, their dreams and their differences with them. Together we will find a way to weave a sense of individual integrity into all our lives.

It is by knowing myself that I learn to set standards but not expect perfection from my students or from myself. It is by having experienced violence and facing it that I am able to encourage students in a non-violent manner. I become a better teacher when I give up trying to be the perfect one.

Students do not walk into my classroom as blank slates. They are controlled by the many experiences of their lives. They reflect the values, ideas, and beliefs of their parents and of television and of friends. It is impossible to lead them forward unless I

allow them to acknowledge their past. It is my job as an educator to let my students discover who they are in the context of where they have been and to give them tools to create a new and better future. The tools I give them - literacy, numeracy, self-esteem, confidence, honesty, integrity - may not be used today, but they will have them when they are needed.

**Chapter Two**

**FILLING THE VOID: SCHOOL AND SUNDAY SCHOOL**

**Lee's Story**

## **Seriously Seeking Salvation**

When my own attempts at achieving perfection fail, I turn to other resources. Christianity makes such an offer. No problem is too big or too small for Jesus to handle so I choose to become a Christian. At first I am star-struck. It is later that I see the hatred, injustice and intolerance meted out in the name of religion. In the name of Jesus I see women abused and kept subservient and kept out of leadership positions. I see children sexually abused by religious leaders, divorced people shunned and other races forced to live secondary lives merely because of who they are. I hear religious leaders coerce their members into believing gay and lesbian people are hated by God. Hatred usually arises from fear, fear of the unknown in others as well as in myself. In a religion that talks constantly of love, I find such hatred incongruous. I learn my fears diminish when I am comfortable with my beliefs and free from the fear that others threaten who I am. It is said the world will know Christians by their love. Unfortunately, most of the world knows us by our hatred and our fear.

It has been said the majority of people in mental institutions are there because of unresolved guilt. Perhaps it is the fear of such an outcome that makes me want a cure for my guilt, a resolution to the shame society and religion pile on me. Surely loving Christians would not condemn without offering a solution. So I convert. I fast and I pray and read the Bible and go to church. The outside of the Cup takes on a whole new appearance.

My conversion may have been made out of fear or out of weakness, but it is sincere and it is real. Conversion, I am learning, is a daily experience. I have tried to

## THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

I met an ancient man today  
who said,  
    Truth comes in shades, like grey.  
    And ignorance  
    and fear  
    and hate  
arise when one won't tolerate  
another point of view.

And as he turned to walk away  
I knew, somehow, his world of grey  
    was much more tolerant  
    and merciful  
than mine of white and black.

by Charles Eastly

explain my commitment, but there are no real concepts to describe it. The closest I can come is to say it is one of those fleeting moments when I know completely that everything is okay. The sunset, the clouds, the smell in the air, the setting, the company and the world are all perfect, and I know, deep inside, that everything is just the way it should be. There is a purpose, a direction, a reason, a God. I cannot make the moment last and I can't recreate it. Some who experience such moments build shrines to them, or start new churches or cults or run seminars on how to make the moment happen again. I believe, however, that it was just a moment, a gift, a glimpse into another level of awareness and move on with my life. I do not forget, however, that the moment took place.

I read of Westerners who travel to Eastern countries to seek enlightenment and then come back and tell the rest of us how to find it too. They come home from a year or two of travels in India or Tibet with all the answers to life. I was raised with Western beliefs, values and standards. No matter how hard I try, I will always interpret another culture or religion or belief in light of my own experience. I am learning to be more discerning about whom and what I allow to be the sources of my personal truth.

### **Letting in Some Light**

I join an evangelical church in the city where I am teaching. I wander into the Christian bookstore one afternoon in October to browse through the section on "Authentic Christianity." The owner introduces me to her two sons and I eventually join their church. One evening there is a quest preacher. He is an out-of-towner and retired, but he tells us he still has a burning need to spread the word. When he gets to the altar

## **BORN AGAIN**

I got born again.

Something must get in  
get out

the anger  
pain and rage  
I cannot strike out

and so I swallow  
whole  
the cross of Jesus  
nail my anger  
to the hope  
that something of the healing  
promised  
Jesus, God, faith, fantasy, belief  
will take away my fear

take away the need to kill  
my feelings  
kill my father's  
powerful control  
the need to do it right

my mother did not save me  
Jesus will

the belt across my back  
my legs  
I pee the bed

but now I'm born again  
into confusion  
disappointment  
unbelief belief

by Charles Eastly

call, something I have never seen before, I am sure he is talking to me. He keeps saying there is someone in the congregation who needs healing. It has to be me. I am new and need to find the healing I know the other members of the congregation have already found. This is the break I am waiting for. In anticipation, hope or ignorance I go forward. I know God will heal me right there and take away all my imperfections.

A young boy follows my lead. Fortunately, the evangelist first asks the young boy why he has come forward. The kid, about fifteen or sixteen, says he is doing things at night that he is ashamed of and he cannot stop. The evangelist praises God for this boy's confession, raising his hands to evoke the power of God and convince the congregation of God's presence. He lowers his hands to the boy's head and prays for God to take away this terrible affliction. He tells the frightened young man he is healed.

I often think about that kid and wonder if he finally left the church because he could not stop doing something perfectly natural. He is promised healing for a disease that does not exist. The congregation let a stranger come in and destroy one of its children.

When the evangelist gets to me, I am so angry that I cannot tell him anything. I know I will not confess to anything. Instead I tell him I have just become a Christian. He is excited about that. He has saved another sinner. Little does he know he saves me in a different way. He starts me on the best journey of my life, a journey that teaches me to ask my own questions and seek my own answers.

I do not understand why so many Christians let their beliefs and fears get in the way of compassion and truth. A few years ago at a Christian college a new-born baby

**Journal Entry of July 25, 1991.**

*Many Christians are, in a sense, lying about what God is doing in their lives. They tell what they believe or want God to do - speaking only in faith. It's like saying "I am healed" when they are still feeling the pain. They are not really lying -- they are only hoping -- afraid to admit the truth because it will show they lack faith. Faith covers our sins but it does not make them go away.*

*We must admit who we are, what we are, and how we are really feeling -- to ourselves and to God. By denying the truth, we are denying the channel through which help and truth can come.*

*We cannot find truth or perfection by denying what we really are. We cannot find truth if we are so afraid to find it that we isolate ourselves from life and the real gifts of God by hiding in religion.*

was found stuffed in a garbage bag outside one of its dorms. The college blamed the girl and society's permissive attitude toward sex. The question was never asked about how the institution had placed such evil on something so perfectly natural that it drove a young girl to dispose of her baby. Out of fear our churches develop rigid rules and expectations that limit their ability to show God's grace.

This is a truth I know. The needs of individuals are more important than the needs of an institution. It is fear that makes us inflexible and judgmental, not love or compassion. Churches sin by offering cures for diseases that do not exist. As a teacher, I need to understand that the needs of my students are more important than the needs of the institution. My students need to leave my classroom believing not in their limitations, but in their possibilities.

### **The Art and the Craft of Teaching**

It has been said that good teachers are born, not made. It is only those with a sense of humour and a sense of personal integrity who seem to last the years. I can learn techniques for teaching math or science or reading or music or art. I can even learn some ways to manage a classroom, how to control a group of students, and how to follow a curriculum. But teaching requires a deep integration of self and subject matter that cannot be taught.

Many of us learn the craft, but we do not learn the art of teaching. Some of us survive as teachers, but never really love what we are doing. We do not look forward to each day with excitement. Instead we live for the retirement plan and summer holidays

because we lack the confidence or courage to believe in something better.

There are many teachers, however, who do find gold. They experience the love of subject and the love of seeing someone learn and get excited about the possibility of discovery - in themselves and in others. They find those moments when teaching and learning and student and teacher mesh, and magic happens. It is the interaction of learners sharing in learning, of adventurers discovering new ideas together. It is when we get more excited about the students who learn than the few who don't and we working hard to help those in the middle fan a spark of passion and burst into flame.

A fellow teacher and I tried to run a motivation group for kids who were intelligent but not achieving at potential. The kids showed up faithfully week after week, drawn by juice and cookies and release from regular classes. We talked of goals and dreams and had them plan their futures. We had them discuss and diagram what was blocking them from achieving their goals. They were encouraged to things or ways to overcome their blocks and begin to work through, step by step. We did not accomplish much. At the end of the year, the achievement levels of the kids had not changed. We managed to increase their awareness of their short-comings and their sense of frustration. We did not focus on who they were, but on who the "system" - parents, teachers and society - thought they should be. We needed to give them a chance to understand themselves and to love and accept themselves. We did not help them develop a sense of personal integrity or teach them to be honest and accepting and tolerant of themselves and others. They came forward to be healed of a disease we had forced on them, and all we gave them was a sense of guilt for what they were not doing.

“The moment you begin to tell your stories you may find that memory is a trickster who picks and chooses scenes. What happened to you in the past has yet to be determined. Ninety-nine times you tell the story of the day you were whipped for stealing apples you didn’t steal. Then, in the hundredth telling, you remember that you *did* steal them and the whole scene changes.”

Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox in *Your Mythic Journey*.  
(Page 35).

## **Rules and Roles**

I work with a fat kid who will not go to gym. He refuses to change in front of other kids and be subjected to their ridicule. He has been sexually abused by his mother and is not comfortable with his own body. It is January, half way through his final year of high school and he will not get a diploma without physical education credits. A teacher is supervising a fitness class in the fitness centre early in the morning. I ask the student if he will consider working out in the mornings. I do not think he will follow through, but he shows up every morning for the whole semester. When the physical education department hears about it, they try to stop it. There are times when rules do not make sense. A kid is more important than rules, and a kid is more important than someone's fear that if we break the rules once, we open the gates of hell.

## **Scapegoats**

It is a Sunday morning during a service at the Evangelical Church that I vow never to wear a mini skirt again. I join the church because they have a large college and career group, a group for those not yet married who really should marry within the church. I am still very young in my faith, excited and naive.

The guest preacher is from a fundamentalist Bible Institute. The sermon, lecture, admonition, self-admission of guilt - call it what you will - is about sex. And the sexual sins that men are caused to commit are, of course, the fault of women. This guy is preaching on Matthew 5:28, which states, "...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (*NIV*). He tells us that women who

### **A Dozen Reasons for Keeping a Journal\***

1. Discover the writer within you.
2. Keep a record for the future of how your life unfolds.
3. Get to know all the different parts of yourself.
4. Take advantage of “a friend in need” and a valuable tool in the therapeutic process.
5. Heal your relationships.
6. Access information stored in the subconscious and unconscious minds.
7. Access information from your superconscious mind - the collective unconscious of your higher self.
8. Explore your dreams in the journal.
9. Recognize the symbology of your life and develop your intuition.
10. Maximize time and business efficiency.
11. Explore your creativity.
12. Track the cycles, patterns, and trends of your life.

\*Source: Kathleen Adams. (1990). *Journal to the Self*, 14-23.

make themselves attractive and wear those “mini-skirts” are causing men to “lust in their hearts” and “commit adultery.” I turn to the friend sitting beside me and whisper, “I guess that’s the last time I wear a mini-skirt.” We both begin to laugh. It is one of those laughs that takes on its own personality and gets harder to control, mostly because we are supposed to be attentive and respectful. The laughter consumes us. Others begin to look at us and I am sure the preacher thinks he has the devil’s children in the congregation. It is hard to believe that such men are allowed to speak to captive audiences. It is hard to believe that such audiences exist and that I was part of one of them.

This is a truth I know. There are intelligent individuals everywhere who get taken in by fancy speakers, philosophies, ideas, organizations and cults. I live in a society that likes to blame others for its problems, mistakes, weaknesses and failures. It is easier to focus our fear on something external than deal with the truth of who we really are inside. “Yes,” we chorus. “It’s their fault that we are having all these problems. Crucify them!” We try to save ourselves by destroying others.

### **Learning to Teach**

My addiction and recovery from fanatic religion (believing everything I was told) pushes me to try and teach my students to think for themselves. I am driven to help them see beyond, around and through what they are hearing, reading and learning. “Think for yourselves,” I want to shout, but I keep it more subtle than that. “Other’s experiences are valuable, but no one has a corner on the truth. No one has the right to force you to accept their answers to your questions. Ask your own questions. Find your own answers.”

“If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique - and if we want to grow as teachers - we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives - risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”

Parker J. Palmer. (1998). *The Courage to Teach*, p.12.

“[I]n every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood--and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning.”

Parker J. Palmer. (1998). *The Courage to Teach*, p.10.

My students learn to question a writer's background, motives, experiences, insights, beliefs and values as they try to analyse what an author has written within the context of what has been learned about them. We discuss not only what is said, but why the author may have said it. We decide whether or not we, as individuals, agree with what an author is saying. They are learning to see.

This is a truth I know. Truth never has to be forced on anyone. I always seek truth that is relevant and real to me in my present situation. In the end, it is the truth that sets me free. If I reject something or accept it, I need to know why. My students give me a plaque at the end of the year. "Thank you for teaching us to see," it says. Students know when they have been allowed to discover their own reality and they appreciate it.

### **Bleeding Heart Liberals**

Who I am is what I have experienced. The answers I have found are only for me and only for the time I find them. They are not universal and they are not static. As I learn more, my understanding and my truth begin to grow. It has taken me many years to realize that who I am is also how I teach. When I teach a poem or a story or an essay I teach the part that speaks to me. I encourage others to find the part that speaks to them. I encourage others to discover who they are and to accept themselves because that has been my personal journey. I teach from that journey.

I teach about diversity and about tolerance and about accepting others and about seeing the world in shades like grey because I have lived the fear of being different. I can be an outcast because of something I do not choose - my gender, my race, my height, my

**Journal Entry of October 16, 1987.**

*The appointment was at 7 a.m. I had another cigarette before I left. The tranquillizer had not taken effect yet. I glanced at my watch again. One minute before seven. I am going to be late again. It takes me longer to warm up the car than to drive the six blocks to his office.*

*There is always a parking spot at that time of the morning. I turn in, slam the car door and walk up to the office. My teeth are brushed and Scoped - no trace of cigarettes. No one else is there, except him. Waiting in the inner room. I pause. Wait for him to usher me in. His expression is void of emotion. Professional.*

*I sit in the chair by the desk. He sits facing me, at an angle. I glance at the couch. I am not ready for it yet. I fear it. It makes me feel vulnerable. Sitting I can talk freely. Talk as an equal. See his expression. Respond. On the couch I can't see his face. His reaction.*

*I tell him of my father. Of his suicide. My guilt. Of our poor relationship. My insecurity about his love. I recall how I hugged him once and he walked out of the house and drove away. He never mentioned it.*

*I tell him of my first high school dance in grade ten. I tell him of the friend from math class who asks me to go for a ride during the dance. I know what to expect. We leave the community hall and drive down the one block main street and out of town. We park on a deserted road.*

*I take off my shirt. R. does the same. We touch each other, uncertain what to do. How to do it. Where to start. How to end. We wrap our arms around each other. Move in. The headlights crashing up the road. The red flashing light. It's the city cop. Out of the car, shirtless, cold.*

*R. passes out. I help R. up. The cop tells R. to go home. He keeps me there. He knows my parents. Says he'll drive me home. I get into his car. Will he tell?*

*Then he starts to preach. Tells me I'm a sinner. What I do is wrong. It is unnatural. He quotes Bible passages. He lets me out*

*two blocks from home but only after I promise to go to his place Sunday after church.*

*Sunday after Sunday I go. I knock on the door. He is shorter now. No hat. No boots. Invites me in. I go to the couch. His wife sits timidly on one end. Hymns playing on the record player. No TV. I listen to Bible passages. Hear how evil I am. Hear condemnation. There's only hope in Jesus.*

*One Sunday, he walks me out the door. He tells me he was so concerned because he understands. I ask him what he means. He says he understands because he also had the same problem when he was younger. He is shorter now. My height. I do not go back again.*

*I look at the psychiatrist. He responds. He tells me I never went back because now I was in control. I have nothing to fear any longer. If he tells, I can tell too. Now I have my own evidence. I am in control.*

*I look at him. I have really told him nothing. I already know what he tells me. I always gain control. It is security.*

*I smile. I tell him he may be right. I know he is. I look at my watch -- before he looks at the clock. Three minutes to go. I tell him I should leave now. He rises. I stand to leave. I see the couch as the door opens. Maybe next time. My choice. On the couch I may lose control. Or I may gain control. I will take the couch next day.*

parents, my religion, my sexual orientation. I have learned to teach the themes of tolerance and acceptance of diversity, hoping, deep inside, that if others will learn to accept me then I may learn to accept myself. I have proudly become a bleeding-heart liberal.

This is a truth I know. My understanding and my truth are not the same today as they were when I was “saved” twenty years ago. I see now I was saved from seeing the world in extremes of black and white. I now believe in a God who believes in me and accepts me just as I am.

### **Honest to God**

It is my “schizophrenic” behaviour that helps me focus. I am like many new converts, awed by the hope of love and salvation, of belonging. I register for a weekend retreat in another city with a group called Faith/at/Work. It is a four and a half hour drive from where I am living to the city where the retreat is being held. The threat of a blizzard in the forecast forces me to take the Greyhound Bus. I do not remember much about the retreat, but I do remember what happens on the bus ride home. I have to change busses and have an hour to wait in the bus station. As I am waiting, an attractive well-dressed person keeps looking my way. I try to be too spiritual to notice but it does not help. I glance over from time to time, just enough to keep interest and hope alive. I am relieved at the possibility of escape when my bus is announced. My fear climbs aboard the same bus and sits beside me as we take the three hour ride to my destination.

As winter’s darkness settles early on the prairie, hands begin to creep across the

“Self-esteem cannot be built on a foundation of self-alienation. The consequence of such attempts is the sabotaging of one’s ability to enjoy life, the inner sense of some nameless fraudulence and self-betrayal, the anxious need always to be on guard against the dark, frightening forces which might erupt from the limbo of one’s denied self to threaten the structure of one’s existence - and the subversion of one’s self-esteem.”

Nathaniel Brandon, (1971). *The Disowned Self*, Bantam Books: New York, p. 72.

“In a culture such as ours, in which human relationships are permeated by unreality on the part of all participants and conformity to socially acceptable madness is the norm, the psychotherapist is or should be the most passionate guardian of personal integrity and personal authenticity. His job is to guide men through the fog of unreality back to their real selves.”

*The Disowned Self*, p. 42.

seat. I forget about the weekend retreat and fall into the secret excitement of superficial intimacy created by real human touch. It makes me feel needed, wanted, desired, and strangely whole. There is a certain excitement about having some kind of sex under coats as strangers in the dark. Perhaps I am telling you too much about what it is like to be in need of intimacy, to be in need of some kind of tangible human relationship, no matter how superficial or fleeting it may be. After a weekend trying to create a spiritual relationship, the reality of human touch can quickly bring me back to reality.

I am given a phone number when we get to my stop. I toss the phone number away as I walk home. As I toss out the phone number, I try to push any memory of what has happened to a hidden corner of my mind. Before I go to bed that night, I kneel to say my usual prayer. I begin to pray. "Father, I love you and thank you for all you've done for me." It sounds phony. It sounds rehearsed and foreign. I stop and lean against the bed, looking out the window, unsure of my feelings. I sit for along time as the truth of what I am seeps back into consciousness. I am playing a double role. I am playing the role called Christian very well and I have only been in the church for a few months. I know the language, the quotes, the image to maintain. I am living a "schizophrenic" existence.

"God, I do not love you. I do not even know who you are. I do not even know who I am. I ask one thing. Forgive me for lying to you and to myself, and forgive me for using that person on the bus. Help me to be real from now on. If I can't have a real, honest-to-God faith, then I don't want it." The confession is not for God. I need to know and accept the truth. I have been learning how to integrate my multiple selves ever since,

## LEARNING TO LOVE

I got down on my knees one night to pray  
my usual evening prayer. But when I tried  
to say, "I love you, Lord," I knew the words  
were empty and untrue. Surprised by this  
awareness, drawing back, I struggled how to tell  
God, carefully, "I know I do not love you or know how."  
Prayer has become a duty -- mere routine.  
A friend dropped by to share his pain. I helped  
to ease him through and then I understood.

by Charles Eastly

to live the truth of who I am. Knowledge plus acceptance equal freedom.

### **Careers, Fears and Detours**

I want to work in the church. I begin studies in theology and hope that somewhere, somehow, I will find a way to get involved. My belief that I have to be perfect and pure, however, keeps me from taking an active and committed role. I stay on the fringe, contributing just enough to keep me involved but not enough to let others see my fears.

My secret desire to work in the church explains some of my fascination with career development. I am looking for a way to include my faith with my love for teaching. Fear keeps me out of the church, a fear I might end up like the pastor in my home town. He is a married man with three children, but he has a secret too. A young man he is with tells on him. My uncle and the church board give him and his family twenty-four hours to get out of town. A creative way for men to solve a problem is to get rid of it. I wonder if he or his wife or his family ever get any kind of counselling. I wonder if any is offered to the young man as he struggles to deal with his own guilt; guilt about the sex and about the consequences of this telling. I have a feeling it is never really mentioned again except by those who talk of such things over a few beer in the local bar or at the Legion where men cover their own sins by exaggerating the sins of others. Society must take some of the blame for the desperation of people who hide behind marriages and children to hide the love they dream about.

This is a truth I know. I am guilty. It is not my guilt that is the most important

## GRACE

I cannot say that I've been pure  
or stayed away from sin  
Or always kept myself secure  
and separate from the world.  
I stumbled in.

My weakness and humanity  
help me to understand  
Grace can set me free  
to make mistakes get up  
and start again.

God will lead me home some day  
when I have learned from life  
to sing at last in harmony  
the songs of the adventures  
we have shared.

by Charles Eastly

thing, however, but how I deal with it. I can repress it or I can confess it and face it, forgive myself and pick myself up and continue on my way with renewed humility and hope. If I repress my guilt, it turns to fear and becomes the demon that destroys.

### **God's Will?**

I'm sure Riley thought he was doing God's will. Doug and I are both in the wedding party at Riley's wedding. Six years later, I run into Doug and his friend at a shopping centre. When I see the two of them together, I sense their uneasiness and later ask Doug about their relationship. It takes him a few months to tell me the truth. Doug and I renew our friendship and he begins to attend the same church I go to. Doug and Darryl decide to tell Doug's family about their relationship. The reception is not a positive one. Doug's parents attend the same church Riley does and the whole congregation takes to praying for Doug and Darryl. Doug and Darryl receive stacks of evangelical literature through the mail pointing out their evil ways.

A few months later Riley calls and asks us out for dinner. We enjoy bringing each other up to date on what is happening in our lives. Riley pays for dinner, no doubt with money obtained through much prayer and dedication on the part of the faithful. At the end of the dinner, he looks at us quietly and tells us that he cares for us a lot, but that our life-style choice is sinful and evil.

"You need to repent and ask God for healing," he says as he rises and walks out of the restaurant. Three men are left sitting in a suddenly chilled Italian restaurant, stunned that such a friendly dinner has turned so evil, so sinister.

## MUTATION

I like me  
until I hear another  
more committed  
more respected  
vocal  
tell me  
the way I am  
is not  
the way  
and so I try to change  
and end up  
some mutation of myself.

But I will learn  
to love me as I am  
to present  
just what I am  
to others and myself  
I'll learn not to sway  
to mutate  
or change directions  
with the wind.

by Charles Eastly  
July 9, 1986.

This is truth I know. I must learn to accept those who let fear and ignorance limit their acceptance of others. It will be hard for people like Riley if one of his children strays from the fundamentalist way or if he or his wife make a mistake the church cannot forgive. If I judge others harshly I will find it tough when judgment inevitably turns my way.

### **What Goes Around**

Brenda goes to her family church and hears for the third Sunday in a row a sermon on the evils of being different. She prays and fasts and begs God for healing. In desperation she prays that God send someone to help her within a week or she will commit suicide. Brenda is told over and over by her church and by society that what she feels naturally is wrong. When youth get constant reminders that who they are is a choice and the “choice” is evil, suicide is often the answer. Even without a religious background, many gay and lesbian teens end up taking their own lives when they cannot change. The fear of rejection is so strong and so real. Parents kill their children because their children hear them condemning gays and lesbians in church, often never realizing they are shouting their disapproval into the ears of those who sit in the pew beside them. Teachers contribute when they fail to instruct students that calling others names, any name, is not acceptable. Society contributes when it allows citizens to get away with hateful words and actions.

Brenda and I meet waiting in line at a theatre the Monday after her decision to give God a week. We talk and she asks me out for lunch the next day. It is an uncomfortable lunch as she tries to tell me her terrible secret. When she finally tells me, I tell her I accept

“You need to see clearly how you victimize yourself over and over again by trying to control people, places, substances, and God.”

Father Leo Booth. (1991). *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse*. p.164.

“Many men with sexual identity problems seek to hide in, or cure themselves with, religion. They may become almost violently homophobic-hating in others what they fear in themselves. Men who fear that the least bit of sensitivity in them might mean they are gay often become bullying macho men; homosexuals leading double lives are often the ones who speak out most loudly and visibly against homosexuality.”

Father Leo Booth. (1991). *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse*. p.74.

her. Brenda and I become good friends. We join the same church, begin cross-country skiing, cycling and talking together. I tell her God accepts her, loves her and does not condemn her. I convince her suicide is not the way to deal with this issue.

I may convince Brenda, but I learn I have not convinced myself when I decide to take a course in Old Testament theology. The professor's credentials are impressive and I feel the course will be a wonderful chance to explore my faith. The course starts out well and I enjoy the discovery of characters, events and themes in the Old Testament. One day during lecture the professor throws in a comment relating to gays and lesbians. He tells us the bible clearly condemns such individuals. He says those who read the bible and justify such behaviour do so because they read it with their minds already closed. The next day he informs us the bible also supports and demands capital punishment.

That weekend I am sitting in my condo looking out over the city. It is a clear spring day, but I do not feel settled. Something is wrong. What if this man is telling the truth. I begin to wonder if everything God has taught me about accepting myself and others is wrong. Have I only believed what I want to believe? I begin to doubt everything I have experienced, learned, believed and thought I knew. My world tumbles about me and my beliefs and fears crumple into tears. It is out of fear and desperation that I call Brenda.

As we talk, I began to find myself again. I begin to reconstruct what I have been taught and what I have learned and to deconstruct what I have heard recently in the lectures on Old Testament theology. I realize if I find what I want in the bible, then he is doing the same thing. He finds words and lines and stories to support his predetermined

**Journal Entry of July 17, 1991.**

*I do not know if I am acceptable or not anymore. Am I acceptable in the eyes of God if I allow the real me to show through - to express itself. Can I ever be anything but who I am, what I am? How much of who I am is a choice? That is the big question.*

*Teach me, Lord, what you want me to know and what I should do. I have no idea or confidence in myself. I need some teaching and some direction.*

**Journal Entry of July 18, 1991.**

*I've been wondering about my liberal beliefs relating to sexual orientation and capital punishment since I started this course in Old Testament theology. I need to face my beliefs squarely and to decide if they are okay or not. I really do need help with this, but I'm not sure it will come from anywhere else but God. How will I know?*

*Does God really care? Or is it just the church who cares and believes its institutionalized rules are more important than the people with whom it is to share the good news. Is it okay for someone to be involved in a monogamous relationship other than one called marriage? Is it okay to be gay or lesbian? Is it okay for the state to take a life? Should I believe everything a respected teacher tells me? I need answers to these questions.*

*I'm scared, Lord. What if the answer is different than the one I now have - then what do I do? Should I even be asking these questions?*

*I am really confused about what I want, want to know, want to believe and how to live.*

views; he finds support for what he believes. I suddenly know and accept the fact that he has no more authority to speak to my experience than I have to speak to his.

I know he is wrong about capital punishment. We have a justice system influenced by power and money and position and fear. Such a system cannot be given the right to sentence people to death. He supports capital punishment based on verses from the book of Leviticus that are taken out of context, out of time and place. I survive that day thanks to Brenda. The events of that week long blitz of Old Testament theology prepare me again to question and to work out my own salvation with fear and trembling.

This is truth I know. No matter how confident or right I think I am, others can throw doubt into my mind and cause me to construct my defences all over again. Each time I am forced to rebuild my defences, however, I build them stronger. It is a good thing to question what I believe. It is fear, not faith, that stops me from doubting.

### **Awe and Wonder**

It is the July first weekend three years after my father's death. Mom comes for a visit. She is not dealing well with being alone or with the guilt of having a husband who has taken his own life. After picking her up at the bus and driving home I offer her some tea. As we talk, I watch her literally sink into a depression. The expression on her face changes, her colour pales and her posture begins to slump. I am not sure what is wrong, but I get annoyed. I tell her to snap out of it, one of those wonderful counselling techniques I often use when I deal with members of my own family.

Mom is gone the next morning, a note on the dining room table informing me she

**Journal Entry of March 23, 1977.**

*I used to get upset with all the different ideas, religions and philosophies around. It was somehow confusing and threatening. I couldn't understand why God would allow such diversity. I assumed all had to live by one standard. I am beginning to see that one system may really motivate one person and totally destroy another. God knows that. We are to be of one mind and one spirit. That does not mean total agreement. It means one mind and one spirit of love in the middle of diversity.*

*God allows me the freedom to develop my own philosophy and system - one that works for me. In my freedom, I am not to destroy or belittle another's faith or beliefs. That's where love is needed. If I have that freedom, I must allow that freedom to others. In trying to push my ideas on others, I am assuming that I have the only answer, that I am God's channel of truth, and that their relationship with God is so poor that I have to set them on the right track. I think the problem with believing you have the only answer would be the burden of feeling you have to convince everyone else of the same answer. What a cross that would be.*

has some things she needs to do. In my frustration and anger I go upstairs to the sun room, look up at the clear blue summer sky and let God have it. Where is the help and support in times of need? I am tired of trying to be perfect, of trying to do everything right. I am tired and I want a rest.

I tell God to get out of my life. If all this pain is the result of faith and so-called truth, it is certainly not setting me free. I want out. I am getting out. I quit going to church, quit praying and quit reading the Bible. I quit. I surrender!

### **The Gift is Free**

One afternoon ten months into my vacation from God, I am driving through the neighbourhood where I live. The elm trees are full and branches with dappled leaves stretch over the street like children playing London Bridge. The spring-green lawns, flowers and bushes are vibrant in the alternating stabs of light and shade as a light breeze touches the leaves. It is breath-taking and the wonder of it fills my entire being. I have one of those moments when everything is perfect. I do not doubt my own existence or my purpose. I am peaceful. I am loved. I am accepted. A warm, gentle presence fills the car. I know I am fully known and fully accepted by this presence, naked and loved. I sense a still, small voice that tells me it is all for me. This beautiful day is created just for me. I can do nothing to earn it. The gift is free. And then, as if the voice knows me and knows my fears, I realize there are no strings attached. There are no conditions, no rituals, no programs, no rules or sacrifices, no changes I need to make.

This is a truth I know. I am not loved because of what I do, or what I have done,

or because of how good or how bad I am. It is just because “I am”. I am not given to life. Life is given to me. I will live the life I have been given and work out my own salvation with awe and wonder.

There is a teaching truth I know. Teaching is like faith. I need to believe in it and my belief needs to be real. I can have the best equipment, use wonderful textbooks and work in beautiful schools, but if I do not believe in my students or believe that I can make a difference, I am nothing. As a teacher, I am the one who can take those books, computers, classrooms and the equipment and turn them into tools and places that let kids discover learning and life. It is the spirit of a teacher that breathes life into a classroom, not the latest theory of learning. If all I let my students experience is frustration, they will give up. It is only when I encourage and support and praise and believe in what I am doing that I convert students to learning. It is not as a know-it-all teacher that I am effective. It is when I allow my students to question and doubt and express their frustration with learning that they really learn.

**Chapter Three**

**FIVE DAYS TO GRIEVE: BULLETS AND BLESSINGS**

**Martin's Story**

## **You Should be Over That**

When my father puts a twelve gage double-barrelled shot gun into his mouth and pulls the trigger, the school board gives me five days off. In reality, no amount of time would be sufficient, especially when a death is violent and unexpected. Some memories are indelible, influencing the rest of my life. I move on, however, hoping time will eventually offer some release. In five days, the shock does not even settle into awareness. I go back to work, knowing each morning as I wake that something is wrong, something has happened. I struggle out of bed, the voice from the radio alarm drones on as if the world is still the same. Then my father's suicide rises into my consciousness and my stomach parches and I push myself through motions and routines, regular and required to get to school. Everything is different now. My responsibilities have changed. I begin to feel some guilt but my five days are over. I push back the emotions that try to surface as I punch the elevator button and drop down to the parking level and drive vaguely to school. Weeks, months, years later the emotions pop up unexpectedly when a memory or a smell or an image juggles my memory and tugs at my emotions. I try to let my feelings out by telling someone about my father's death but I am told I should be over that by now. So I push my emotions and my fears and my questions and my doubts and my guilt back down because I feel guilty for feeling.

## **Real Men**

My father is a bald, plump man with a round, soft face. Not fat, just plump and out of shape. He has a lopsided smile, the result of an operation to restore some of his

## HUSH

When asked to join you Sunday on the step  
I came because I had a certain need for love  
but was uncertain how to make it understood  
between a father and his son.

But we were both in need, afraid to ask,  
hoping, knowing love existed, wanting proof.  
The tension grew, it almost showed, and then  
you blurted, "Promise you'll take care of Mom."

"Of course," I said. What could I say?  
The question/answer unexpected came  
as sons and fathers rush to hush each other up  
when sex or love or death make talking real.

The next day by your hand you forced the promise,  
and left the need for proof forever raw upon that step.

by Charles Eastly

hearing. The operation damages the nerves in his face and leaves his smile slightly twisted. Until the operation, he wears a heavy plastic and metal hearing aid clipped in his shirt pocket, two thin grey braided wires running behind his head ending in yellowish prongs stuffed into his ears. He is shipped home from the war a year early because of his deafness. My Mom comes over a year later on a ship with other war-brides, two baby girls in tow.

My Dad tries to be a real man, but he is not a very secure one. He needs the approval of others all the time. He treats his own family with extremes of anger and kindness, but he always has time for the know-it-all, sophisticated stranger. Outsiders are smarter, better educated and more worldly than his wife and kids. Once the visit is over, their departure leaves new standards for us to try and achieve. "Now that's the kind of person you should try to become," my father says after the strangers leave.

Dad tries hard to "fit in." He is part of everything -- the Legion, the scouts, the church, the choir, the Masons, the Kinsmen, the golf club -- but he is only part of them and never really owns a secure place in their ranks. He tries hard to please, to belong, to be liked.

My father wants me to fit in, to play football and hunt and laugh at jokes about women and sissies. He tells me once that all one of my cousins needs is one night with a good man. He says it more crudely than that. "What she needs is a good poke," he says. According to my father's philosophy one session with a "good man" is enough. Real men, I am given to believe, have magic penetrating powers and women felt better when they allow men to drive home their dominance. I repress the trepidation I have about my

“Before we are old enough to defend ourselves, parents, preachers, teachers and advertisers systematically teach us the myths, morals, and manners they believe we need to know in order to be civilized. But learning often takes place unconsciously and informally. ...The things we learn by ourselves...strike deeper than the lessons that were formally taught to us.”

Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey*.  
(Page 50.)

unwillingness to participate in such an act of domination.

Society wants me to conform as well. Carefully crafted and socially defined sex-roles clearly suggest differences are not appreciated. Such has been the lot of women, and of races and of the handicapped and of the sissy boys and butch girls for generations. The media presents unreal images of women with thin bodies and perfect, blemish free complexions, standards that are unreasonable and unhealthy. Men are shown in positions of authority and discouraged from showing emotion. Social values are carefully and forcefully constructed by everything around me. My textbooks relate stories of families with two parents with mothers in aprons and fathers in suits. The family is white and has one boy and one girl and a dog named Spot. This is normal I am told over and over and over again. This is normal. This is normal. A boy asks for a doll and is given a football. A girl asks for a pair of hockey skates and is given a Barbie doll. Through subtle words and actions I learn to conform to the expectations of my father, the people in the small prairie village, my teachers, my church and the media. I learn to follow most of the rules most of the time.

This is a truth I know. Society works very hard to make sure its socially constructed ideals are known and accepted. Acceptance and conformity are more important than the lives we destroy because we fear difference.

### **Sons and Brothers**

“You know,” my brother sputters between breaths as we jog down the dirt road south of the city limits, “If Dad hadn’t died I wouldn’t be in university now. He always

**Journal Entry of June 17, 1991.**

*Saw Jungle Fever with Andre on Saturday night. It was good, but the racism, prejudice, addiction and violence were so real that it upset me. How long will it be before we begin to understand that differences are a wonderful gift? People of different races try to get together and society makes their lives impossible. How often have I heard that I should not get involved with anyone of a different religion - let alone a different race. "Be ye not unequally yoked." What the hell does that mean? Such ideas spring from fear and ignorance.*

*I realize [from this movie] there is much about my father I did not face or let penetrate my being. The father in this movie is so tangled up in his religion and his fear that he ignores the needs of his wife and his children - and even himself. I hated him. Such a bigoted, frightened man. His god has become a burden, not a blessing. Who needs that kind of God? The idea of prejudice that limits all people was really evident. And a lot of that prejudice comes from religion. It is religion that is so afraid of life that it squeezes the life out of it.*

thought we should get one job and stick with it until we retire. Maybe it's because he never had the courage to make any changes for himself that he discouraged us from taking chances."

It is the first time I really know what my brother thinks about anything. We do not share much. He is the tough one, the "real boy" in the family. He plays hockey and football and fixes cars. He is becoming a teacher after being a carpenter for seven years.

Ten years later on a hot August night my brother and I are walking down the Strip in Las Vegas. We have been to see a performance by the Coasters, Drifters and Platters. We enjoy the show, although I know more of the songs than he does. Five years can make a lot of difference when they separate kids from teenagers or older and younger siblings, although we seem to be the same age now.

"I always wanted to be a musician," he says. "I wish I had done that."

I look at him, surprised. "A musician?"

"Yeah," he says. "I always wanted to play and sing with a group."

"Why didn't you?" I ask.

"Because you played the piano," he says looking into the lobby of the hotel, avoiding my gaze. "Everybody in town figured you were a bit of a sissy. To prove I was different, I had to do things to look tough. Playing and singing in a band would have branded both of us." We are silent, standing beside each other looking in opposite directions, neither of us knowing what to say next.

"It wasn't easy growing up in a small town with a misfit for an older brother," he says breaking the silence as he heads into the Mirage. I follow quietly. We stop and lean

**Dealing with Loss\***

STAGE 1 Denial

STAGE 2 Anger

STAGE 3 Bargaining

STAGE 4 Depression

STAGE 5 Acceptance

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\* stages as defined by  
Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

over the rail to catch a glimpse of the white, caged tigers of Siegfried and Roy.

“It wasn’t easy growing up different in a small town,” I say in my defence. “It’s like living in a cage and only being allowed to participate if you perform properly. You’re not free to be what you are born to be.” We stand in silence, watching the tigers pace.

### **Dreams and Fantasies**

“Do not follow the dreams of your parents or of your friends or of your teachers,” I tell my students. “Take your interests and tie them all together and dare to dream that somewhere, somehow you will find the perfect way to use all your talents and fulfill all your dreams. Do not let your fears destroy your careers.”

“Do you have a fantasy?” I ask whenever I begin a career presentation. Eyes and minds come alive. “A career fantasy,” I continue. “I mean it,” I say as they begin to snicker. “If you were to take away all the limitations - parent’s wishes, peer pressure, friends, fears, image, money -- what would you do?” It is amazing what they tell me. I have them write their dreams secretly on a piece of paper and hand them in. At the end of the presentation I read them out, no names or gender attached. My students always have dreams that surpass the stars. I encourage them to follow those dreams. “Don’t let fear get in the way,” I tell them. “Dream the impossible dream!” Disappointments, set-backs and realities may slow us down or stop our progress, but dreams should never die.

“Giving voice to those aspects of ourselves which usually remain hidden - the sensitive, beautiful, vulnerable, and courageous as well as the dark, the shadow, the rage, the anguish - this is what our attraction to poetry is all about. Our connection to poetry is deep and very personal. We are not likely to reveal this depth readily to others, if at all. Whether we’re a successful, powerful person or someone struggling with self-doubt and lack of direction, this hidden part of ourselves is essential to our being. It takes great courage to reveal this side to others - or even to ourselves.”

John Fox. (1995). *Finding What You Didn't Lose*, p.25.

## **Critical Love**

A child learns quickly to hide his or her talents when what is offered is rejected or criticized. I am asked to play the organ for the junior choir. My Dad, in spite of his impaired hearing, is the choir director for the senior choir. I want him to be proud of me. The junior choir sings on the last Sunday of the month and I am expected to play for the entire service. One Sunday we are planning a special joint service with the senior choir. I know Gwen will play for the senior choir. I work hard to learn the rest of the hymns. The night before the service I ask Dad to listen to me play to make sure I have them right. He looks at me blankly and says, "You're not playing. I didn't think you could handle it so I asked Laura to play tomorrow." I never play the organ or the piano in church again. I am afraid to join the senior choir when my friends do a few years later because the fear of being put down by my father in public is too great. I keep taking piano lessons, however, and a few years later, at the insistence of my teacher, revive the courage to play in a talent show. I ask Dad to come. I place first. On the way home, Dad says, "You were pretty good, but that kid who stumbled a few times really should have won. He was terrific." I never play for my father again and I lose the confidence to play in public.

My father's critical attitude profoundly influences my philosophy of teaching. I work hard to make sure I never put down any of my students and I discourage them from criticizing each other. I believe, somehow, that if I fail to react to any cruelty against others, I give support for tyrants to rise to power in this world. There is a subtle connection between telling racist or sexist jokes and giving consent to women being raped

## FATHER'S DAY

I have no money for a gift  
or maybe I forget  
but one thing is for sure  
I do not get you anything.

Wrapped up in the quilt he bought  
to keep his child warm  
I cry until my mother hears  
and calls you in

to show you how I care  
to show you I am sorry.

"Of course it matters,"  
you ramble on but I hear nothing more  
from you, my child father.

Would I have bought a tie? A pair of socks?  
Something silly like a child's fears  
or maybe one more chance  
for you to take the gift I bring.

A father never dies  
if there are sons with memories  
of giftless Sunday nights.

by Charles Eastly

and Black churches being burned. If I do not stop others from making fun of faggots or dykes then I am giving permission for gay and lesbian individuals to be bashed or killed. My words can be destructive, but my silence can be deadly. As an educator I need to realize a moment of acceptance or a word of encouragement can help a student move in a new and positive direction.

There is a truth I know. My relationship with God and the way I teach are deeply influenced by the relationship I had with my father. I know my Dad loved me. He gave me food and clothing and wonderful gifts at Christmas. But I could not fully trust his love. There is fear that if I make a mistake, or fail, or do something wrong, I will be punished. I cannot believe I am truly loved and accepted “just as I am.” It is because I want so desperately to be accepted unconditionally that I offer unconditional acceptance and support to those I teach.

### **Coping and Healing**

My father does not ask for help, especially if the problem is psychological. He tells Mom once of a family friend who has a “nervous breakdown.” He is critical that a person, a man, cannot face a problem head-on and win. I remember the look on his face as he tells Mom. It is a fleeting look of betrayal, of fear.

We find out after my father’s death he has been to his doctor and is diagnosed with depression. We find a bottle of antidepressants in the medicine chest, untouched. My father believes real men do not have emotional problems. Mom says Dad did not sleep well for a number of months before his death. She thinks he is finally okay because he

## **Warning Signs of Suicide**

- threats, talk of or joking about suicide
- making final arrangements, giving away possessions, saying goodbye
- expressions of hopelessness: “You’d be better off without me.”
- sudden mood swings, abrupt changes in personality, sadness, frequent crying
- loss of interest in hobbies, sports, work, school
- withdrawal from family, friends, peers
- focus on death which may surface in art work, poems, or stories
- inability to concentrate, make decisions, or accept alternatives
- excessive feelings of guilt, self-blame, failure, worthlessness, poor self-esteem
- fatigue, sleep disturbance
- increased or decreased appetite
- noticeable behaviour changes ~ risk taking, skipping school, running away, sexual promiscuity, impulsiveness, rebelliousness, restlessness, agitation, indifference, destructiveness, illegal activities
- self-criticism: “I can’t do anything right.” “I’m too fat.”
- increased use of alcohol and drugs

Source: Suicide Information and Education Centre, Calgary.

sleeps well the last week before his suicide. There are other changes in him that week. He tries to give me his coin collection and he seems content for the first time in months. He gives Mom cash to pay the taxes on the house. The signs of suicide are there, but it is hard to recognize or admit to them when our lives and our emotions get in the way, when we do not know what to look for or when relationships get in the way of feeling.

After his death, we carry on for a few years as if nothing has really changed. It takes a few years before the changes settle in and take on a permanent quality. It is when they become real we react to them. Mom is the first to crack. She is okay for the first few years, living with my brother and attending university. When she moves back home the reality of her aloneness hits. Her desire to make a life of her own is developed out of reaction to an abusive relationship. Without it, there is nothing to react against, and determination and drive diminish. It is hard to start over when being left takes away the need to leave.

### **Group Support**

I discover a bereavement group sponsored by Canadian Mental Health. I suggest Mom attend and offer to go with her the first night. On the way home, Mom says, "I think you need to find a group as well." I am embarrassed she has seen my need. Mom continues with the group for spouses whose partners have died by suicide. I join a group for those who have lost a parent.

It is because of that group I become a counsellor. I learn counselling is not a sign

## **COPING**

Captured by Christmas  
within these winter walls  
we dance around your suicide  
like popcorn kernels  
plunged in boiling oil  
afraid to let  
the heat of our emotions  
penetrate  
the shell  
of our coping.

by Charles Eastly

of weakness, but of strength. It takes courage to ask for help. I realize my father's attitude left him few alternatives to suicide. I learn statistics indicate having a parent who commits suicide increases the possibility other family members may choose the same solution and so I ask for help. I find talking with others about their experiences and concerns is healing. The group gives me permission to look at my fears and to deal with my guilt and my confusion in a supportive environment. One evening, a member of my group asks me an unusual question.

“Have you found the blessing in your father's suicide yet?”

“Blessing,” I ask in a doubtful manner. “How can there be a blessing in having a father who blew his brains out?”

“There's always a good side to every bad thing,” she says matter-of-factly. “All you have to do is look for it.” Although there are some positive changes I am sure are the result of my father's death, I am not sure I can ever call his death a blessing.

This is a truth I know. It is not until I let go of the negative and look for the possibilities and pleasures that I move on. Changing my focus from my father's death to my own life does not negate the tragedy of his suicide. It does help me move on with my life instead of trying to understand his death. What I look for is usually what I find.

### **Life Influences Life**

I send in an application to become a suicide intervention trainer ten years after my father's death. I think about it many times, but it takes ten years for me to get the courage to apply. The training course is difficult, but teaching my first workshop is much harder.

## AND YET

statistics say  
the chances  
that a son or daughter  
of a parent  
dead by suicide  
has a higher risk  
of dying the same way.

And yet  
my greatest fear  
is not of suicide  
but fear of dying  
as you did  
one day, one hour  
one moment  
at a time.

And yet  
in spite of such  
a masculine facade  
I know you loved me  
wanted to be loved  
to risk exposure  
tell the world  
this is me  
accept me  
as I am.

And yet  
I am not sure  
that I'll be saved  
by telling  
by naming  
by facing all my fears.

by Charles Eastly

Two days of working with people who have been given permission to talk about suicide is emotionally draining. There is usually someone in the group who has not dealt with his or her own issues around suicide and once given permission and a place to talk reveals suppressed suicidal feelings, attempts, or faces for the first time the loss of someone close.

Teaching the workshops is a way for me to deal with my own feelings about my father's suicide. I never make a point of telling any group how or why I am involved, but it sometimes comes out in small group sessions and I tell parts of my story. It is not until this year that I facilitate a workshop where the money and desire to work with others is more important than my own cathartic needs. It does not matter whether the group is made up of teachers, parents, students or community agencies, as long as I am honest and sensitive to the needs of the participants, the workshops go well. It is a time when my personal life and my professional life work together perfectly. It is a time of truth.

### **Risky Business**

This is a truth I know. There is not much one can say about a father who kills himself except, perhaps, thank you. Thank you for giving your life so I would be forced to look for mine. There is a sort of blessing in all that happens to me as it is the events of my life that push me in new and unexpected directions. There is no death without life, no life without death.

There is a teaching truth I know. I teach who I am. I teach acceptance and understanding and encouragement because I felt their absence in my own life. I encourage students to follow their dreams because I let my fears get in the way of mine. I teach

## DISCHARGED

The years of questions asked to ease the pain  
Through counselling and prayer did not bring peace,  
And so we made the trip, went back again,  
to try and find some answer, some release.  
Descending from the car we moved alone  
Past worn and weathered markers, seeking one --  
A father's name, a husband's, struck in stone  
Above the granite words, "Life's work well done."  
We sensed this time the years had now decayed  
The need to ask again if God forgave  
His suicide, our pain. And so we laid  
Our guilt, with his, upon that silenced grace.  
Released, we knew how freedom could be won --  
Complete our lives, the work he left undone.

by Charles Eastly

suicide intervention classes because it has been part of my life. Only in teaching can I share my being, my heart and my soul. Students destroy teachers who leave their heart and soul outside the classroom, and teachers who leave their heart and soul outside the classroom often destroy students. Teaching is a delicate balance, a juggling of who I am in real life with who I am in the classroom. It is risky business this integration of public and private selves into a being of integrity so I can be a true lover of life and teaching.

### **Addicts**

A fellow teacher and I advertise for students to join our drug discussion group. We do not get any response for the first two weeks. One lunch hour as I am walking through the Resource Centre, a tall, thin girl with long, dirty blond hair approaches me. She does not have any make-up and she looks pale and sallow. Her light blue sweat jacket is badly in need of a wash.

“I want to know about your drug group,” she says shyly. “My English teacher said I could talk to you about the notice in the bulletin.”

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s go down to my office.”

“No,” she replies quickly, glancing around to see if anyone is watching. “I’ll stop in later this afternoon, when there’s no one there.” She turns and slides away into the corridor.

Melissa does stop by that afternoon. “The purpose of the group,” I tell her, “is not to tell you to stop or to lecture you or to squeal on you. Our purpose is to get you to examine your own drug use and to look at the possibility of change. There is no pressure

and no one will force you to keep attending. We also guarantee confidentiality.” She seems reassured and interested. She says she has a friend she will talk to. That week we hold our first meeting with Melissa, her friend and two counsellors. Three of them are struggling with addiction.

**Chapter Four**

**CLASS CONTROL: PILLS AND PUPILS**

**Stories of Melissa and Searle**

## **Names and Knowing**

One of my favourite prayers is the Serenity Prayer adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a very simple prayer, profound in its message. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Knowing the difference is the real key. I waste a lot of energy because I do not take the effort to determine the difference. There are times, however, when knowing the difference is only possible after I have tried in vain to change what cannot be changed.

One Saturday morning, a few weeks after the drug group has started, I am having a coffee and muffin in Devonian Gardens. As I sip my coffee, I notice a poem etched with black ink into the gray cement wall beside my bench. The ivy, sprouting new green from the lengthening days, hangs across the top corner of the writing. I move the ivy and read.

I have nothing more to say  
Living for nothing day to day.  
Drugs comfort my deathly thought  
Snort some crack I just now bought  
Hate and anger are my life  
I could end it with this knife  
But I love the drug too much  
To give up its loving touch  
Tears of empty pain inside  
In a corner I confide  
To my drug I love you so  
I could never let you go.

Signed “Lady Midnight”

“Through your journal, you can develop awareness, confront denial and tell the truth as you know it about your wounding, whatever it may be. Writing helps you gain useful distance and detachment from the painful events of your past. Without comparison, judgment or acrimony, you can simply observe and report your experience. In your own perception, you can even change your past.”

“When you use your writing to heal the past, you give yourself a safe and private place to empty out.”

Kathleen Adams. (1994). *Mightier Than the Sword*, 118-19.

Steps in dealing with our wounds adapted from *Mightier Than the Sword* by Kathleen Adams.

1. Name the wound.
2. Tell the story. Try not to be perfect about it, just tell it.
3. Try to see it with adult eyes.
4. Create a relationship of equals. You can't change anyone else's position, but you can change your own.
5. Find ways to move on.

I copy the poem into my journal, anxious to show it to my students the next week. "Is this an exaggeration?" I want to know.

"Yes. It's like that," one student volunteers. "It's the only way I can relax or forget about all the things I have to do. The drugs help me let go. It's the only thing that helps me feel good anymore. I do get pissed off with myself after I do it, but it feels so good I can't say no."

"No it's not," another scoffs. "It only takes control if you let it."

I have heard it said that self-interest distorts our perception of the facts as well as our interpretation of them. Denial is an obvious distortion of the facts. It is a refusal to face the truth. When a problem is admitted to conscious awareness, it is capable of being dealt with. I must, however, recognize and name it first. In *Mightier Than the Sword*, a book on journal writing, Kathleen Adams (1994) says, "Naming exerts control. When we name something, we recognize it from then on" (p. 105). I am not sure naming really allows me to exert complete control, but naming does demand a response. A thing named can never again be totally repressed or ignored. I wonder if naming the animals gives Adam some control over them or if it merely allows him to recognize them the next time they wander by? It is like naming my sins. I name them not so God will recognize them, but so I will.

My students begin to name their relationships to drugs. They name their love of it, their need for it, their addiction to it, the pleasure it gives, their inability to go without and their increasing need. Never again can they just get high and escape. New labels have been attached to their choices, labels that will someday demand some degree of resolution.

**Journal Entry of February 19, 1994.**

*A picture or a metaphor of what I am. I picture a beautiful snow-covered cross-country ski trail in Kananaskis Country. The scene is white, clean, crisp and bright on the surface, but unproductive. Boulton Creek is open in places, but the water flows like liquid glass, languidly along it is so cold, not quite frozen, seeking desperately a lower plane - pulled by gravity (the laws of nature). I know there will be spring, but then will come the summer and the fall and then -- another long, cold winter. Perhaps I'll stay just as I am. No promises to fulfill, no dreams to share and care and crush. I don't want to feel anymore. I have given away so much of me already that there's nothing left for me. My tracks are set by others. This winter surface may be cold, solid, but it keeps me safe, untouchable - frozen.*

## **Bikes and Bridges**

It is a few hours before my six o'clock class as I cycle through the park below the University of Lethbridge. I stop on the paved trail to watch two deer standing still as death, staring past me with wide, brown, alert eyes as they assess whether or not to flee. I turn my head slowly and notice how the flood of the Old Man River a few years earlier has left debris lodged a few feet up in the trees. Twigs and grass and weeds hang in the forks of the branches, new growth poking around and between. There will likely be some trace of this event forever. I know the wind and rain and sun will finally remove most traces of the flood, but its influence on the growth of the tree will be permanent.

The deer flee, gracefully bounding on pogo-stick legs into the trees under the railway bridge. I look up. How many stories have I heard about the bridge during my few months in Lethbridge? One story tells of the many lives lost during the building of the bridge that lead it to be called the "death bridge." The name is eventually shortened to remove the dark image of the description. Another story suggests the engineer who designed the bridge commits suicide just before it is finished, his way of dealing with his certainty the bridge will collapse with the first train that passes over it. There are other stories as well. I see a book by the Lethbridge Historical Society in the Club Cigar Store one afternoon, but I do not buy it. I look at the cover and place it back on the shelf. There is a certain comfort in holding onto the myths I have been given, as long as those myths are about things like bridges.

I watch a train crawl onto the bridge, moving east to west, like a caterpillar on a twig. I listen as its engine tugs the cars along. I stand until it stretches across the entire

“Perhaps the most rewarding and fascinating part of journal therapy is this: it spreads out before you in black and white the contents of the heart, mind, and soul. You simply cannot appreciate how healing and powerful this is until you have experienced it.”

Kathleen Adams (1990). *Journal to the Self*. p. 8.

“Religious addiction entails using God, a religion, or belief system as a means both to escape or avoid painful feelings and to seek self-esteem. It involves adopting a rigid belief system that specifies only one right way, which you feel you must force onto others by means of guilt, shame, fear, brain-washing, and elitism. Thus religious addiction nearly always results in the abuse of someone in the name of your beliefs.”

Father Leo Booth. (1991). *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse*. p. 2.

valley from bank to bank, held in place by fragile stilts. I wait for the bridge to fall.

### **Looking at the Cost**

The numbers in our drug group continue to grow. After a month Peggy and I have to stop letting new members join. Once a group begins to share and relationships are forged and secrets and lies are told, it is hard to let in new members. New members bring new doubts and suspicions. They do not know what has already been shared and do not know the rules that have been put in place, spoken and unspoken.

For the first few weeks, we spend most of our time listening to “horror stories” about drug use. There is a strange pride in relating the worst story. Peggy and I learn about the different drugs available and how easy it is to get them at school. It is easier to get drugs than to get lunch. The kids are careful not to name their suppliers as they do not trust us much at this point. After a month of meetings, one member sets the trust issue squarely on the table when she says, “Oh, you guys, quit watching what you say. If they were going to squeal they would have done so by now. We have to trust them at some point.”

For two months Peggy and I try to get the group to focus on the possibility of change, to look at the idea of abstinence and examine what abstinence would mean. We are getting nowhere. In frustration I call a friend who works with addictions programs at a hospital.

“What am I doing wrong?” I ask. “So far no one has even thought about making a change.”

“Another thing you should watch out for are the questions. If you can write a question, you can answer it.”

Natalie Goldberg. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*, p. 86.

“Don’t be afraid of the questions. You will find endless resources inside yourself. Writing is the act of burning through the fog in your mind. Don’t carry the fog out on paper. Even if you are not sure of something, express it as though you know yourself. With this practice you eventually will.”

Natalie Goldberg. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*, p. 86.

“The cake is baking in the oven. All that heat goes into the making of that cake. The heat is not distracted, thinking, “Oh, I wanted it to be a chocolate cake, not a pound cake.” You don’t think as you write, “Oh, I don’t like my life, I should have been born in Illinois.” You don’t think. You accept what is and put down its truth.”

Natalie Goldberg. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*, p. 46.

“You have to get them to identify the cost,” he says. “If it’s not costing them more than it’s giving them, they are unlikely to change.”

The next time Peggy and I meet with the group, I ask what their drug use has cost them. The room is quiet for a few moments. Then we get the safe answers like the financial cost, the incomplete assignments and even failed courses and terms. After half an hour of superficial answers, Benita brings a whole new depth to the conversation when she says, “It cost me my virginity.” Her supplier offers to give her free drugs if she will have sex with him. “I really needed the drugs and sex seemed like a small price to pay. It was more than once,” she says as the tears come. “I hate him.”

### **A Rose is a Rose**

The day before father dies he asks me to look after Mom and my handicapped sister. I shrug off his concern at the time, but his death the day after the promise turns it into a dark duty. When the pressure of this new responsibility gets too great I go to see a doctor. He gives me a prescription for tranquilizers. They are the answer to a prayer. I take half a milligram of Ativan a day and float away from everything. Within a year the half milligram has worked its way up to six a day. I begin taking Tylenol 3 to control my migraine headaches. I love the feeling of release and freedom the pills give me. My addiction grows.

I do not think my pill-popping is a problem until one weekend when I decide to visit my mother north of the city. I am an hour and a half north of home on the number two highway when I remember my pills. I pull over to the side of road, trying to convince

**Journal Entry of April 5, 1990.**

*I am waiting for the release. I have taken 2 mg's of Ativan and a Tylenol 3. Knowing they are going to hit me soon has already relaxed me. It's a high just knowing I am going to be high.*

*I know I should not do this. I even want to have a glass of wine - just to make sure it all works. But I am a bit too scared to go that far. One step at a time. There has to be some control.*

*How can I say what this feeling is like - except wonderful. Such a silly word. Released, let go, free, unbound, not worried about anything or anyone or even myself. I wonder if Heaven will be a place to use drugs without the fear of addiction and without the fear of not being able to get more. It is beginning to happen. Maybe a wine chaser at this point would not hurt.*

myself turning back will be silly. I can survive one weekend. Three hours later I am back in the same spot, the pills more important than the time I waste on the road. I begin to realize I am no longer in control.

My students tell me addiction to prescription drugs is a minor problem. They tell me I have no idea what real addiction is like. And yet, in some ways, I do know how drugs can take control. I know how trying to quit is a thousand times more difficult than going on a diet. I see the silly excuses I use whenever I try to cut down. The combined effects of psychological, physical and chemical addiction are overwhelming. I try to blame the problem on my doctor, on my mother, on my sister, on my job, on God and on my father. It is not until I own my addiction, name my problem and go for help that change begins.

If my student's addictions are stronger than mine they are going to need a lot of support. I tell them of the mind-games I play with myself. I tell them how I bargain with myself, trying to convince myself this will be my last pill; one more pill to get me through one more day and then I will stop. Together, we begin to talk about the ways we fool ourselves into believing we are in control. We name our addictions and examine how those addictions influence our lives. It is the beginning of change.

### **Hard Core**

I know my own addiction is minor when Melissa comes to the group one day looking grayer than usual. She has not been to classes all morning but manages to show up for the group. I ask about her weekend. "I spent it high," she says. Melissa likes to

## MELISSA

Veins black  
veins blue  
scars permanent  
dull the needles  
dull the pain  
maybe dull desire.

Hooked  
on needs perverted  
like acid  
are the thoughts  
of her.

Neither choice acceptable.  
One to kill the other  
the other to kill the one.  
Suicide to kill them both.  
Courage is not there  
and so the drugs in vain  
to dull the pain  
and take away desire--  
her breath,  
her breasts,  
her scent,  
her sound,  
so natural.

Acid kills  
the loneliness  
the guilt  
need for acid  
need for love.

by Charles Eastly

do acid. "I even squeezed the cottons," she says. "I tried to stop. I use a dull needle because it hurts more and I hope the pain will make me stop," she continues. "But it doesn't. Not until it is all gone. My pusher delivers it to my house. I haven't slept all weekend and coming down is such hell."

Most of my students use acid tabs. A piece of blotting paper is drawn into squares like graph paper and is then soaked in acid. When the paper dries it is cut into squares and sold for a few dollars a "tab." Kids put the squares under their eyelids or under their tongue, waiting for the high. It's easy to do in school as it does not require needles and the high only lasts a few hours. "It gets me through English class," one student says. Melissa has moved past blotting paper highs.

In an effort to be helpful I tell Melissa if she is going to shoot up, she should at least use a clean needle. "You need to try and avoid infection," I offer.

She takes off her tired pale blue sweat jacket. The veins in her arms are black and blue and red and yellow. It looks like she has been beaten and burned. I stare at her arms. I have read about it and seen it on television. I have heard the kids talk about it, but I have never seen the truth of it. Drug use is suddenly much too real, much too evil.

"I'm hoping that it will kill me," she says. "Society and my parents and everyone would reject me if they knew I was a lesbian. I'd be better off dead." I look at her, stunned at her revelation. It is hard to understand how society has made death a better choice than being lesbian.

"There's nothing wrong with being a lesbian," I tell her. "It's just another expression of love. And there's certainly nothing wrong with love."

“Grace, thank God, can break through to us regardless of our intent. God graciously awaits our assent and our participation in transformation, but God does not wait to give us good things. No matter what our primary dedication may be at any given time, God’s love can burst though upon us, miraculously. In my experience, these special miracles happen with uncommon frequency in the course of addictions. Without any evident reason, the weight of an addiction is lifted. ‘I was walking to the grocery store one day,’ said one alcoholic man, ‘and there, on the sidewalk, I discovered equanimity.’ He had suffered from alcoholism for many years, and that particular day had seemed no different from any other. Yet in a simple, wondrous moment, his life was transformed. He hasn’t had a drink since. He did not describe his experience with religious terms. All he knew was that nothing he had learned, and nothing he had done, had made it happen.”

Gerald G. May. (1988). *Addiction & Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*. p. 152-53.

“One good test of whether you are addicted to something is to see how you feel when you try not to engage in it. If the result is anxiety, irritability, and moodiness, and the sense that those feelings will go away if you just have one of whatever it is, you are probably addicted. If you react with indignation or anger to someone’s questioning how much you drink, eat or go to church--or how consumed you are with work or significant others--that is a warning sign of addiction.”

Father Leo Booth. (1991). *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse*. p. 58.

A spark of light flickers in Melissa's eyes. She looks me directly in the eye for a few minutes, as if examining the sincerity of my statement. "You know," she says, "I've had people tell me that before, but this is the first time I believe one of them."

This a truth I know. Tolerance and acceptance are not the same thing. I cannot love the sinner and hate the sin. The minute I attach conditions to my love, it is no longer love. It is impossible to separate the singer from the song, the dreamer from the dream, or the story from the teller.

### **Birds of a Feather**

When I get back to my office I call AADAC, the provincial drug service. I ask if they have a counsellor who understands gay or lesbian issues and addictions who can come and talk to the group. They are surprised by the request, but say they will get back to me. The next day I get a call from a counsellor who says he will to talk with the group.

It turns out to be the support Melissa needs. The counsellor shares the story of his own addiction and his own struggle with his sexual orientation. Melissa listens with stunned interest. She stays after the session is over to talk with him. Peggy and I excuse ourselves so they can talk privately. He gives Melissa the number of a support group for gay and lesbian teens, and suggests she join a gay and lesbian branch of Alcoholics Anonymous. She meets other gay and lesbian youth and other addicts trying to stay sober and she gets clean.

During the last week of June, Melissa drops in to say goodbye. "I just want to thank you," she says, "for bringing that guy in to talk to me."

## ARYAN LIGHT

Hate comes in colours.  
Gay rainbow flags  
to show  
that even though  
we are one people,  
one creation,  
origin,  
once given to refraction  
come out  
into colours  
buried in the light of us  
expressions  
of diversity.  
Some use difference  
as reason for their hate.

There is no prism  
for an Aryan light  
reducing brightness  
fusing them together  
back to white  
black to white  
to white.

by Charles Eastly

“Wasn’t that a lucky coincidence?” I ask.

“Yeah, sure!” she smiles and leaves.

I do not see Melissa again until the following spring. I am invited to the opening of a new restaurant. The opening features the work of a local artist. Melissa has continued with her painting and is becoming involved with the art community. When I arrive at the restaurant it is stuffed with people. Through the crowd I catch a glimpse of Melissa. She has cut her hair short and has studs rimming both ears. I recognize her smile in the dim light and manoeuver my way through the crowd and walk up behind her.

“What’s a strange girl like you doing in a place like this?” I ask. Her friends straighten at my remark. Melissa turns around.

“It’s you,” she says as she throws her arms around me. “This is the guy who saved my life,” she tells her friends. They soften their reaction to me.

### **Addiction and Grace**

There are many addictions besides drugs and alcohol. Some people are even addicted to education, or work, or love or even religion.

I stand up in church one Sunday and let my anger pour out on the small group that has met for study session between services. A group determined to return the church to its true roots, a group called “Anglican Essentials,” is presenting their document. The first two thirds of their paper sound good, talking about the foundations of our faith. The tone changes in the last third. The document states my standing in the church is in question if I get divorced or if I have sex outside of marriage. Abortions are strictly forbidden, except

“When you have been abused, the need to escape and be safe is overpowering. Sexual abuse survivors in particular try to cleanse their sense of feeling used and dirty with religion. The belief that sex and our bodies are dirty becomes an explanation for the abuse. The magical thinking and fantasy aspects of religion, the twin lures of escape and fix, are powerfully attractive to those who have been sexually or physically abused.

“The same applies to people who are suffering from sexual identity problems: homosexuals, asexuals, or people with severe body-image problems. People with sexual dysfunction or sexual-identity problems frequently try to cure themselves by turning to religion. Many homosexuals, fearful of rejection by families and society, struggle to hide their sexual orientation in religion. Sadly, the guilt and shaming messages most religions dispense about homosexuality only serve to increase the guilt, shame, and torment. Often they are unable to seek help from a therapist; some commit suicide as a direct result of their attempts to cure themselves with religion.”

Father Leo Booth. (1991). *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse*. P.86.

in cases of rape or danger to the mother. Gay or lesbian love is condemned.

“It irritates the hell out of me,” I say, “when someone tries to tell me what I must believe and how I must act to please them instead of God. Paul tells me to work out my own salvation, and I will do that. What you are presenting is a gospel of exclusion, only letting in those who follow your rules. If you have a gospel of exclusion, then you really have no gospel at all.”

Leo Booth (1991), in his book *When God Becomes a Drug*, says,

[Religious addiction] involves adopting a rigid belief system that specifies only one right way, which you feel you must force onto others by means of guilt, shame, fear, brain-washing, and elitism. Thus religious addiction nearly always results in the abuse of someone else in the name of your beliefs. (p. 2).

It is fear that initiates the drafting of documents such as *Anglican Essentials*.

Diversity and change threaten the routine and beliefs of those who have done it the same way for many years. It is our own fears that drive us to deny the rights of others.

This is a truth I know. If I cannot accept myself or those around me, then others will never accept me either. I have been taught to believe that until I let go of who I am, I am not free to see who I can become. I am learning, however, that until I let go of what I have been told I should be, I am not free to be who I am.

### **Variations on a Theme**

Searle is a different kind of addict. He is raised in a fundamentalist family in a

### ATTRACTION ADDICTIONS:

Anger	Drinking	Intimacy	Relationships
Approval	Drugs	Jealousy	Responsibility
Art	Eating	Knowledge	Revenge
Attractiveness	Envy	Lying	Scab Picking
Being Good	Exercise	Marriage	Seductiveness
Being Helpful	Fame	Meeting Expectations	
Self Image	Being loved	Family	Self-improvement
Being nice	Fantasies	Memories	Being right
Finger drumming		Messiness	Sex
Being taken care of		Money	Shoplifting
Fishing	Movies	Sleeping	Calendars
Food	Music	Soft drinks	Candy
Friends	Nail biting	Sports Cars	Furniture
Neatness	Status	Causes	Gambling
Parents	Stock market	Chewing gum	Gardening
Performance	Stress	Children	Golf
Pets	Sunbathing	Chocolates	Gossiping
Pimple squeezing		Suspiciousness	
Cleanliness	Groups	Pistachio nuts	Talking
Coffee	Guilt	Pizza	Television
Comparisons	Hair twisting	Politics	Time
Competence	Happiness	Popcorn	Tobacco
Competition	Hobbies	Popularity	Weight
Computers	Housekeeping	Potato Chips	Winning
Contests	Humor	Power	Work
Death	Hunting	Psychotherapy	
Worthiness	Depression	Ice cream	Punctuality
Dreams	Image of God	Reading	

Source: May, G.G. (1988). *Addiction and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, p.38.

small town west of the city. When he is fifteen, his parents kick him out of the house because he continues to smoke and drink after he has been warned. Where does a fourteen year old, inexperienced kid go when he cannot go home? Such kids are easy targets for cults or gangs or for men who want sex. The offer of food and shelter and love disguised as intimacy, even if temporary and superficial, is often the first step into a life full of addictions.

Searle hitch-hikes to another city during the spring of his fifteenth year. Unable to get a job because of his age, his lack of education and experience, he becomes a male hooker. Searle is already at war with himself over his sexual orientation. His church and society have seen to that. Without a job or a home or a family, Searle falls into the promises of the first person who pretends to care about him. It is a chilly spring evening on the corner of Portage and Main when the car slows down and the driver offers Searle a ride. In exchange for sex, Searle gets a place to sleep, food and a fleeting feeling of security.

After a year on the street, Searle decides to finish high school. He completes his registration at the school with the counsellor who works with his section of the alphabet. About a month after he starts school, he makes an appointment to see me. When he walks into my office, I ask him why he is not seeing his assigned counsellor. He mumbles something about wanting to see me, that someone has told him to see me.

“Actually,” he says shyly, “I’m gay and I’m having some troubles coping with school. A friend of mine told me I could come and talk to you.”

“I have no idea why someone would send you to see me,” I say. “Who sent you?”

## CONDITIONAL LOVE

Christians must not drink or smoke.  
Blond and innocent, guilty  
of them both in 14 wondering years  
your decent god-like parents kick you out.  
You hitch-hike east alone  
in need of friendship  
warmth or touch or love.

All you have to give is youth  
and innocence and golden hair  
and innocence and youth  
and innocence  
used by men  
used by you  
for friendship, warmth, or touch or food or love-  
some sense of security.

Another wondering year  
where friendship, love and touch turn cold  
as men abuse your innocence  
your appetite, your need  
to satisfy their own.

Here, let me pay you-  
Don't make love of it.

A student once again  
you find it hard to sit, listen  
watch or read a story or a poem  
that you've lived beyond.  
The theme is loss of innocence,  
coming purely, quietly, respectfully of age.  
You cry into my office  
hot cold memories of how you came  
so brutally  
of age.

by Charles Eastly

When he tells me, I realize it is a priest I volunteer with in an AIDS support group. I tell him he should continue to see his own counsellor. I reject a kid who needs help because I am afraid someone might label me. I have been well socialized by a society and a religion and an educational system that hates difference and teaches conformity. Searle leaves my office quietly. I know he will not come back.

The following week, I call Searle to my office.

“I owe you an apology,” I say. “I was so caught up in my own concerns the other day I did not offer you any support. If you ever need a place to talk, you are welcome here,” I offer apologetically.

Searle does stop by my office to talk occasionally, although he never really trusts me after our first meeting. My initial rejection reinforces his belief that he is not acceptable. He does tell me about his addiction to drugs and his addiction to sex and within a few months he is back on the street. He wants to finish school and working the streets is the only way he knows of to make enough money to continue his education. I encourage him to apply for student finance. He moves in with another of the street boys and is able to finish the semester.

It is difficult for Searle to stay off the streets even after he gets financial support. He needs more than money. He needs love. He needs older men to love him, to tell him he is acceptable, a replacement for the father who rejects him when he is fifteen.

Searle is a brilliant student. He manages to get honours marks in the classes he shows up for. His teachers like him and often gave him extensions when he misses classes and assignments. He pushes the boundaries of the school almost to the breaking point, but

## AVERSION ADDICTIONS

Airplanes	Commitment	Mice	Public speaking
Anchovies	Conflict	Needles	Rats
Anger	Crowds	Open spaces	Rejection
Animals	Darkness	Pain	Responsibility
Dentists	Sharp instruments	Dependence	
Slimy creatures	Dirt	Snakes	Disapproval
Spiders	Doctors	Storms	Embarrassment
Strangers	Evil spirits	Success'	Failure
Tests	Fire	Birds	Germ
Tunnels	Blood	Guilt	Vulnerability
Boredom	High places	Water	Bridges
Illness	Writing	Bugs	Independence
Cats	Intimacy	Closed-in spaces	

### **Being:**

Abnormal  
Alone  
Discounted  
Fat  
Overwhelmed  
Thin  
Tricked

### **People of different:**

Beliefs  
Class  
Culture  
Politics  
Race  
Religion  
Sex

### **People who are:**

Addicted  
Competent  
Fat/Thin  
Ignorant  
Neat/Messy  
Rich/Poor

Source: May, G. G. (1988). *Addiction and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. p. 39.

his teachers believe in him and encourage him.

At the end of the year, Searle still needs to finish English 30 and math 30. He tries to get student finance to support him during summer school, but they refuse. They offer to pay for him to go back full time in the fall, however. Searle will not go back in the fall. Summer school is his last chance. After numerous calls and talks with several different levels of authority, Searle gets the financial support he needs.

I do not see him again for several months. I am walking down 8<sup>th</sup> Street past the Husky Service Station one cold February night and I hear someone call my name. I see a skinny form holding open the door of the convenience store, fog hiding recognition as the warm air pours out into the cold night. As I walk over, I recognize Searle. He tells me he completed summer school and passed both courses with honours.

“You might be eligible for some scholarships,” I say. “I’ll bring you some forms.” I take the application over a few days later and show him how to fill them out, hoping that some financial aid will force him to continue with his education.

The next time I go by the garage Searle is not there. I try a few times, but he has moved on. I hear about him again in early June. Coming out of a movie one Tuesday evening, I run into the priest who told Searle to come and see me in the first place.

“He’s back on the street,” I am told. “He’s pretty stoned most of the time. Now he’s addicted to drugs and to sex,” he says.

I am quiet as I step onto the escalator wander out onto the street and feel the fresh rain cleansed spring air that promises summer.

Leo Booth (1991) suggests that, “[w]hen you have been judged mercilessly or

“Because their existence is less visible than those minorities based on skin color, national heritage, gender, or disability, youthful homosexuals are often ignored. Crossing every boundary of race, religion, and class, they have sat through years of public school education where their identities have been overlooked, denied, or abused. They have sat quietly due to their own fear and sense of isolation as well as the failure of their parents and adult gay men and lesbians to take up their cause. The result has been the creation of a group of people within our schools who are at high risk of dropping out.”

“For many young gays and lesbians, school is a lonely and frightening place to be. Ridicule from teachers, harassment from students, and other discriminatory practices interfere with their ability to learn and frequently cause them to leave school altogether. For too long, these youngsters’ options have been crippling self-hate, substance abuse, and suicide.”

“In 1989 the United States Department of Health and Human Services issued a report on teen suicide that noted the startling fact that as many as 30 percent of all teenage suicides may be linked to conflict over homosexuality (Gibson, 1989).”

“Schneider (1988) notes that the descriptor *homosexual* is often allowed to obscure everything about a person.”

Source of above information: Virginia Uribe. (1994). “The Silent Minority: Rethinking Our Commitment to Gay and Lesbian Youth.” *Theory Into Practice*, 33:3, 167-172.

have done it to others, you end up people-pleasing, avoiding responsibilities, or hearing shame and condemnation where it may not exist” (p. 68). Having been judged mercilessly Searle cannot let go of his shame. He piles shame upon shame, proving to himself he is not worthy of love, reinforcing his father’s need to reject him. It is hard to understand sometimes why religious rules can become more important than loving our friends, our neighbours, our children or ourselves. Why is it that having a son who smokes or drinks or who is gay can be so much worse than kicking that child out of the house to survive on the streets?

### **More Addictions, More Grace**

Addictions involve more than drugs. I’ve heard talk of the addictive personality, as if such a trait applies only to other people, people who have obvious addictions, like drugs or alcohol. I believe we all have addictions, just like we all have a god. I have been addicted to money, love, education, religion, work, fear, success, failure, family, relationships and even theology, just to name a few. Gerald G. May (1988) says “addiction makes idolators of us all” (p. 4). All addictions, he states, “are a deep-seated form of idolatry. The objects of our addictions become our false gods. These are what we worship, what we attend to, where we give our time and energy” (p. 13).

May (1988) divides addictions into two main lists, “attraction addictions” and “aversion addictions.” The lists are quite extensive. I find myself listed many times. If I keep working at it, eventually grace will help me become a little freer. All I really ask is grace; grace to recognize my addictions and grace to face them. I ask grace for Melissa

“...40 percent of gay men and 39 percent of lesbians surveyed had either made attempts or seriously considered committing suicide.”

“Gay men were six times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual men, and lesbians were twice as likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual women.”

“Several studies have identified risk factors associated with gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth suicide, including low self-esteem, social isolation, depression, negative family interactions, and negative social attitudes.”

“Schools can educate and advocate for youths by providing literature in the library system that portrays gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations as acceptable. Many school libraries have books or literature that misrepresent homosexuality or bisexuality, and public systems that have provided gay-oriented literature have become targets of attack by the conservative backlash. “

Source of above quotes: Curtis Proctor and Victor K. Groze. (1994). “Risk Factors for Suicide among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youths.” *Social Work*, 39(5): 504-513.

and grace for Searle.

This is a truth I know, freedom is never free. I fight to get it and I fight to keep it, over and over and over again. There is one thing that is free, however, and that is grace. Grace is the gift to go on, the opportunities that arise when I most need and least expect them. It can be a phone call, a friend, an idea or a thought, a book or an opportunity, a feeling or a fear, or anything that comes just when I need it and when I think I least deserve it. It is something freely given with no strings attached and I know, deep within, that it is not merely a coincidence. It is the gift I know will at some time, in some place, be given to Melissa and Searle.

There are some teaching truths I know. It is my job as an educator to help “all” my students. I can help them by showing understanding and compassion, by helping them find the support and love they need. It is part of my job to make sure the rules never become more important than the students with whom I work. My students do not come from perfect families and they come to me with myriad problems and influences. In spite of where they have been or what has happened to them, I need to help them believe that life is worth living and they are worthy of living it. I need to listen to them and be honest with them and provide a safe environment where they can explore the questions of their lives. I offer no healing with condemnation and criticism, but much healing through understanding and acceptance, through love and support. It is tough to be a caring teacher, open at the heart. Caring involves being vulnerable and vulnerability opens my lives to pain. It is a risk worth taking.

**Chapter Five**

**COMING TO TERMS: TEACHING STYLES, LEARNING STYLES,  
MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES, ORIENTATIONS AND ROBIN WILLIAMS**

**Mike's Story**

## **A Time for Everything**

It is through keeping a journal and writing poetry that I have been able to work my way toward some level of personal truth. Why I first begin to keep a journal I am not sure, but I have come to know my journal is one place I am able to examine, express and begin to accept who I am. As I read back over journal entries written years ago, I notice there are moments when the questions and doubts touch on unresolved issues and then back off, as if even my pen is hesitant. The themes are there, however, and they appear over and over again. The themes are of anger, doubt and confusion, depression and self-condemnation, a longing for acceptance and love often expressed through repetitive petitions to God for healing and for understanding.

The journal entries are not often deeply profound, but they are deep in their significance. At the time they are written, a superficial reading suggests they are trite and insignificant. When looked at over time and in the context of an entire journal, however, the significance of each entry takes on new meaning and gives new insight. It becomes clear that there is a time to write and a time to understand. There is a time to record our lives and a time to interpret them.

## **Discipline**

Punishment in the home of the well-respected church-going family who live in the new house on the hill is never simply banishment to the bedroom without the luxury of dessert. That penalty comes only after the violence. The preliminary to being denied dessert is a belt across my bare backside and down the back of my legs until I wet the bed,

**Journal Entry of January 20, 1998.**

*Last night my blood pressure went up to 170 over 105. I was scared, so I went to the clinic late at night to get checked out. I met a strange doctor who told me to go home and relax and learn to take it easy. He was not too concerned. He told me the pain in my back was also the result of stress. So I need to learn to reduce my stress somehow. Who the hell does one do that when everything that causes me stress seems to be external? Relax! Get over it! It must piss people off when they are told to "get over it" when what they really need/want is a different way, a different answer, a faster solution, some help.*

*He also told me to trust in my religion a little more. I wish I knew how to do that. Am I a Christian because I want to escape from myself? Because I am afraid not to be? To put the focus and responsibility of my life on someone/something else? Is it the only way I can find to feel somewhat good about myself and find some forgiveness? Is it escape? Did I kill my father? Did he kill me? It's the imagined dangers and questions that are the hardest to deal with.*

*How the fuck can one be thankful or positive when things go wrong? And I really don't trust God at all. The way I am feeling these days is just too frightening.*

my pants pulled down to my ankles before Dad pushes me onto the bed. After his fury is released I am forced to apologize to Mom for being so bad and then ordered back to my room without dinner or dessert. I drag myself back to bed, wet face and crotch, fully emasculated.

The discipline is often for nothing more than having a candle for light in a fort I have built with lumber stolen from the old church. I hear Dad tell me not to play with fire as the belt comes down. I wonder why playing with fire is more evil than stealing lumber.

Years later, after Dad is dead, when I finally allow myself to see the insanity of the excuses Dad uses for his rage, I try to talk with Mom about it. “Oh,” she says, “he didn’t mean it. He just wanted to make sure you knew right from wrong.” I look at her, surprised she cannot acknowledge the violence, stunned that she will not, cannot, entertain the truth of it.

In my room I curl into a ball on a dry corner of the bed isolated by my sin. I know I have to be punished, not because of the candle, but because I am evil. I deserve this brutal punishment because I know, somehow, I am different. My father is only trying to cure me. I cannot say for sure how I know I am different, but I hear suggestions of it in the comments of classmates, in the tone of a teacher’s voice when I do something out of role. I see it in the faces of relatives, a look of concern and pity.

This is a truth I know. Society often tells children what they should be instead of letting them discover who they are. I let society’s need for conformity become more important than my own needs. I let my fear, my fear of being different, control my life and turn into anger and depression.

**Journal Entry of November 12, 1987.**

*I came home from work early today - at lunch. Had a nap about 1:30 and dreamt about my father.*

*Dream: I was visiting with Dad and my Uncle, Dad's oldest brother. Talking about not carrying on the family name. "I shoot blanks," I said. Dad told me not to be so silly. I yelled at him for not understanding me and my life. Ran out.*

*Later he came to me, said he was sorry and offered me some pills to get over it. Said he got them from the hospital. I took the pills and threw them at him, saying that is not what I wanted. I wanted him to talk to me -- listen to me. I ran out again before he could offer to talk.*

## **Chaos and Peace**

Often, too often, there are nightmares about chaos. At seven years old I am flying through space trying to free myself from the tangled, dull gray mass trying to trap me. It is like steel wool, swirling around on all sides, trying to catch me and tangle me in its grayness and its confusion and its noise. Somewhere in that maze I know there is a place of quiet, a place of peace and silence and rest. I can see it and I reach and pull and beg my way toward it. "Please, God, get me through this mess. Take me to that quiet place where I will be acceptable and good."

I do not leave my room in the morning until Mom calls me for breakfast. Those are the only mornings she makes breakfast, the mornings after discipline. The house is strangely quiet for the next few days like a rainbow after a storm as everyone tries to integrate the rage and violence with the continuing routines of life. I have some peace, some control over my world for a few days. Dad is cautiously gentle with everyone for the next week as he tries to convince us of his love in the wake of required discipline. I learn to interpret his mood and begin to understand when to avoid doing things to set him off. I work hard to take control, control of my father, control of my behaviour, control of the home, and control of my life. I learn to control as much as possible what I say, what I do, and how I act. I learn to please, to give others what I think they want. I learn to hate myself and deny my feelings in an attempt to control my external world.

## **Playing to Win**

One Sunday morning my father accuses me of using a whole tank of gas the

### **Eight Suggestions for Satisfying Journal Writing.**

1. Start with an entrance meditation.
2. Date every entry.
3. Keep what you write.
4. Write quickly, and don't worry about your penmanship.
5. Start writing, keep writing.
6. Tell the complete truth faster.
7. Protect your own privacy.
8. Write naturally.

Adapted from: Kathleen Adams. (1990). *Journal to the Self: Twenty-Two Paths to Personal Growth*. New York: Warner Books, pp. 27-43.

previous night when I borrow the car. I tell him it was nearly empty when I took it, but he does not believe me. I learn not to argue with Dad's version of the truth. In frustration, I decide never to take the car again. Three weeks later, on a Saturday night, I am alone in the rumpus room watching television. Dad comes in to tell me I can have the car. "I don't want it," I say and turn back to the television. My Dad wants me to be like other kids, to go to parties and drink beer on Saturday nights. He knows it is his anger over the gas that makes me stop asking for the car. He offers me the car several times that night. I enjoy rejecting his offer, rejecting him, rejecting his control.

A few weeks later on a Saturday afternoon he tosses the car keys and some money across the table. He tells me to take the money, use it for gas, or whatever I want. I do not understand at the time what game we are playing, but I know I have won.

My father has been dead for over a decade and as I tell these stories I still feel anger and rage. I want to yell at him and tell him to leave me alone. It is because of the anger and rage and fear that I have to tell these stories. I tell these stories in order to let them go and be free of them. Sheri Reynolds (1997) in her book, *A Gracious Plenty*, suggests that it is my stories that keep me down. It is my stories that make me heavy and burden me. It is not until my stories are told and shared and understood that they let me go and I "lighten up" enough to move on to the next level of my redemption. Whether or not anyone else agrees with the direction or purpose of my stories is irrelevant as I am telling them for my own healing. I am letting go of a frightened past in order to move into a freer, less fearful, more adventurous future.

“You must be a great warrior when you contact first thoughts and write from them. ... You may feel great emotions and energy that will sweep you away, but don’t stop writing. You continue to use your pen and record the details of your life and penetrate into the heart of them. Often in a beginning class students break down crying when they read pieces they have written. That is okay. Often as they write they cry, too. However, I encourage them to continue reading or writing right through the tears so they may come out the other side and not be thrown off by the emotion. Don’t stop at the tears; go through to truth.”

Natalie Goldberg. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*, 9-10.

“Recording the details of our lives is a stance against bombs with their mass ability to kill, against too much speed and efficiency. A [journal] writer must say yes to life, to all of life: the water glasses, the Kemp’s half-and-half, the ketchup on the counter. It is not a writer’s task to say, “It is dumb to live in a small town or to eat in a cafe when you can eat macrobiotic at home.” Our task is to say a holy yes to the real things of our life as they exist - the real truth of who we are.”

Natalie Goldberg. (1986). *Writing Down the Bones*, p.44.

## **Heading South**

It is without a sense of control that I head south to Lethbridge for the first class of the 1997 fall session. Why I have chosen the University of Lethbridge over other schools I am still not sure. The most wonderful gift of being a full-time student again is the gift of time - time to read and reflect and think. I have time to relax during my two hour drive to and from Lethbridge every week. I have time to think about what my inquiry might be, to examine my past and dream about the future. I listen to tapes, sing along with the tunes on the radio and explore the country-side. I discover coffee shops and cafes in little towns and villages where I stop for coffee and write in my journal. I explore secondary highways leading to and from, around and between the university and home. One clear fall night in October on the way home, I pull over to the side of the country road and lay down in the back of my truck to look up at the stars. The stars multiply and stuff the night sky when seen from a quiet prairie road without the competition of city lights. The stars are bright, visible and my direction is clear. I am where I am supposed to be and doing what I want to be doing. How free those fall months are. They are like the calm before a storm.

## **Teaching and Fear**

I have had a great many fears and troubles in my life, but most of them have never become a reality. I fear being a failure as a teacher. I fear not being able to reach and support and encourage every student in my classroom. I believe if I want to be a good teacher, I have to learn to let go of the fear. There is the fear of subject, fear of the student I cannot handle, fear of losing control, fear of my inability to meet the needs of all

### **Gay athlete tired of living 'double life'**

**F**ormer Calgarian and Olympic champion Mark Tewksbury had his national coming-out day Tuesday on prime-time TV, saying "it's time to share my whole story."

The former swimmer, a gold medalist at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, talked about being gay in the world of sports on Newsworld's Pamela Wallin show.

"My worlds are finally integrated," he said. "It's too painful to live a double or a triple life."

*Calgary Herald*, Wednesday, December 16, 1998. Article by Helen Dolik. Section F, page F1. "Olympic hero Tewksbury at peace with revelations."

my students.

In many ways, it is also my fears that make me a better teacher. The intolerance, criticism and condemnation I fear makes me more compassionate. My fear of personal judgement helps me listen and try to understand. But the fear eventually takes away my joy. I work to create an acceptable image and get tired and angry. I need to expend more energy to hide my anger. I am afraid of my anger. As a child I learned only that anger brings violence. As an adult I abhor the violence so I repress my anger and sit in fear. The fear and anger turn inward and depression creeps in.

There is a truth I know. It is fear and anger resulting from having been abused that make me determined not to abuse my students. In my need to be everything to every student, I abuse myself, expecting perfection from myself and chastising myself when I cannot meet the needs of all my students.

What fears do my students bring to class? Are they feeling different, unacceptable, scared? Perhaps kids get violent when the educational system we make them participate in merely reinforces their differences, using difference as a reason for hate. Those who are different or are perceived to be different are teased and ridiculed and isolated. Imagine what it is like to feel different, to be an outsider, to be unacceptable and to try and hide that difference. When children or adults are pushed away and ridiculed they learn to live with fear, to be insecure and scared. It is fear because Matthew Sheppard can be beaten on an isolated road in Wyoming, tied to a cross-like fence and left to die because he is gay and the Family Coalition responds by saying, "Don't blame Alcoholics Anonymous because a drunk gets beaten."

“I believe we must rebuild strong and healthy two-parent family systems. ...Right now family break-ups, broken promises, marital infidelity, bad parenting, child abuse, male domination, violence against women, and the choosing of material over family values are all combining to make the family norm more and more unhealthy.

Jim Wallis in *Who Speaks for God?*, p. 129-30.

## **Courage to Heal**

I register to take an independent study course on gender and inter-cultural counselling. The reading material is extensive, so I round up the books and articles and begin reading before the Christmas break. A number of the readings have to do with issues of abuse - physical, psychological, and sexual. As I continue reading though the material I find myself feeling agitated and ill-at-ease. I manage to keep focussed until I am about half way through a book called *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. One morning in January, I make a cup of tea and sit down on the couch to continue reading. I begin to read another case example of an abused woman when I feel a ball of anger well up in my stomach and force its way out of my mouth in a gasp. It begins to happen over and over. I try to read, to ignore my feelings, but I lose control. I begin to cry. I spend most of the day crying, afraid to call anyone or let anyone know what is happening. I am frightened. I think I am losing my mind.

Hours later, at 9:30 p.m., I put on my coat and drag myself to the Walk-In Clinic on Fifth Street. The only patient in the clinic, I huddle in a corner while the receptionist takes out my file. I keep my head down as she ushers me into the antiseptic cubicle. When the doctor comes in I tell him I am stressed and need something to relax. I tell him of the pain in my back and how I have spent the day in pain. He examines me quietly noting my blood pressure, which is 170/110, and checks my back.

“What’s bothering you?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I reply. “I’m just over-worked.”

He refuses to give me medication. He tells me to go home, have a cup of tea and

“Once I take responsibility for my past I realize more clearly the measure of control I have in shaping my future.”

Sam Keen. (1970). *To a Dancing God*, 70.

“Love may never rule in the city of [humankind], but education could teach us that we need not kill one another in order to establish our identity.”

Sam Keen. (1970). *To a Dancing God*, p. 66.

“Education is not the filling of a bucket but the lighting of a fire.”

W.B. Yeats.

find a way to relax. I want pills, but I do not get them.

“That cross you’re wearing around your neck, does it mean anything to you?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess so. Sometimes.”

“Then why don’t you go home and believe in it,” he suggests. “It will likely give you more help than I can give you.”

I manage to get some sleep that night after a few glasses of wine. When I get up the next morning, the tears return. This time I call the associate priest at my church. We spend the rest of the day going from coffee shop to restaurant to coffee shop as I cry and question my way through stories of violence and tell him of my fears that God is out to get me. I tell him of my desperate, obsessive need to be good enough to be loved and accepted. I tell him how I have used sex to manipulate and control others and my fears of letting the world see the real me. I tell him of my anger at myself and my Dad and my Mom and my career and God and the church and society. I say how I am tired of living in fear and I want to find the courage to heal.

This is a truth I know. It is often easier to heal the body than it is to heal the soul. It takes courage to heal and I spend a lot of energy repressing my need to heal inside. I seek a temporary cure for the symptom and not a permanent cure for the source of my pain.

I am grateful for the day Rev. Plume listens with his heart. He does not give advice, but allows me to express my feelings and my fears and my frustrations. When I get home I feel relieved that someone has heard parts of my story and has accepted me. I

**Journal Entry of February 21, 1994.**

*There comes a time in life when one has to be true to one's self - when it is no longer possible to play the game that keeps the real person hidden. I am getting to that stage. I need to be real with myself in order to move on with my life. If others cannot accept it, then that is the price I have to pay. It will be less painful to do it now than to try and do it later when someone or something forces me to do it.*

know I am never going to be healed in the way I asked for healing. I begin to mourn the loss of hope. In order to accept myself I have to give up the myths that have been hammered into me by society, by my church, by my relatives, by schools and textbooks and by community social events and by newspapers and magazines and television and movies. I mourn the death of a dream, a dream that someday I will be exactly what the world wants me to be, the way I want me to be. I mourn for the perfect image I now know will never be realized.

This is a truth I know. I need to accept those things about myself I do not choose. The only real choice I have is how I am going to deal with the reality of my God-given identity. Children do not choose who they are. They do not choose their height or their colour or their intelligence or their parents or their sexual orientation or their abilities. They must choose, however, how to deal with who they are. Much of life is learning to accept things as they are.

### **A Step Further**

In spite of all that happens during those two unsettling days I know there is still something that needs to be resolved. I sense there is more to come, but I do not know how to go on or where to turn. Something has broken through from my subconscious but what it is I cannot name.

Vinh calls to ask what I am doing. I hint about what has happened during the previous few days. He says I need a break and suggests dinner and a movie. During dinner, I tell him about my experience with Rev. Plume and about what I have begun to

**Journal Entry written for Education 5200, September 23, 1997.**

*I don't want to write about my fears. There are times I just feel like I can't do this anymore. I don't want to get up, don't want to go to bed. I don't want to write another paper or read another book. I don't want to see anyone. It can be a general sense of gloom or a real sense of doom. I know something is wrong, but I can't really put my finger on it. I don't want to understand it. Yet I will sit and try to remember what it is that is bothering me - and I will sit until it comes to me. I don't want to tell myself it is silly, or stupid. I don't want to tell myself it is just part of the depression that runs in my family. There, I've named it - depression. I don't want to write about how it can immobilize me at times. Times when I must literally force myself to make a decision and force myself to do the thing I decide to do. If I can only decide. Go for a walk - if only I can decide which coat to wear. Go get some groceries - if only I can decide which store. Go out for coffee - which coffee shop? Call someone. Put on some music. These decisions may sound like simple ones to others, but to a person suffering from depression, they are major decisions, major events. A friend once told me her depression at times was like standing in front of an elevator and not knowing whether or not to push the button or even which button to push.*

*My father pushed the button. His depression led to suicide. I don't want to write about how my father and my mother and my brother and grandfather all suffered, because it lessens my hope...*

understand. I try to put the story together for him, but it is incomplete. The pain is real and evident, but healing has not taken place. When Vinh asks me what the real problem is I cannot put my finger on it. I tell him it is related to the violence, the brutality, the inability to please my father, my need for perfection. After dinner, we check the movie listings. I do not want anything too heavy, so we select a movie starring Robin Williams, one of my favourite comedians. The name of the movie is *Good Will Hunting*.

The movie is about a boy who is physically abused by his step-father. Robin Williams, a psychologist, is brought in by special request to work with Will Hunting, a brilliant young man who believes he is not worth much. Near the end of the movie, Robin Williams tells Will Hunting (played by Matt Damon) that the abuse he suffered was not his fault. Will replies matter-of-factly he already knows. Robin Williams keeps telling him, forcing him to accept the truth of what he is saying. "It was not your fault," he repeats over and over again. The message breaks through and Will Hunting breaks down and sobs in Robins Williams arms.

I sink into my seat, the words of Robin Williams whirling around in my head. I try to control myself, but I crumple like a wad of paper about to be tossed into the garbage, and the sobs begin. I turn to Vinh in the darkened, still movie theatre. "Oh my God, Vinh, it wasn't my fault either." Vinh helps me out of the theatre and we stumble down the escalator toward the main floor of the theatre. He cannot carry me and I collapse behind one of the pillars in the mall. "It was not my fault he killed himself, Vinh. It was not my fault." Vinh stands patiently beside me, telling strangers who look our way that everything is okay.

The quotes below are from Henri Nouwen. (1976). *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*. Doubleday: New York.

“Just try to be more alone--that will help you to find solitude.” (p. 34).

“Wherever you go, you always take yourself with you.” (p. 47)

“...the Hebrew word for God’s Spirit, *Ruach*, is both masculine and feminine, and thus emphasizes that God is male and female.” (p. 81).

“...how much have we already sold our soul to the opinions of others.” (p. 92).

“We have to struggle to prevent mercy from becoming lack of justice, and justice lack of mercy.” (p. 138).

“And I wasn’t evil and didn’t deserve to be beaten,” I cry. “It wasn’t my fault. I did not deserve what I got. It’s not my fault! I wasn’t bad! I wasn’t bad!” I yell at the pillar, at the world, at God, and at myself. “It’s not my fault!”

Later when I apologize to Vinh for embarrassing him in public he just laughs and says, “Actually, it’s nice to see you not in control for once. Now I know you’re just like the rest of us.”

I am thankful for the friendship of this Buddhist man from Vietnam who is my friend, who at the age of twelve saw his sister raped and his brother killed by pirates as they made their escape on the South China Sea. His pain has allowed him to listen to mine without judgment.

### **Mourning and Images**

I find it easy to call on God during the extremes of my life. It is the in-between times that often leave me isolated. I limit God in my life by creating him/her in my own image, in the image of my father and in the images of Sunday School. And yet it is my faith, imagined or not, that gets me through my doubts, my fears and my failures. I am beginning to believe in a God who says, “I forgive. Get up and try again. You have my permission to live. You have my approval and my support. You have a right to continue.”

I have spent many years mourning my relationship with my father, before and after his death. I mourn because, although I know he loved me, I know he did not accept me. I mourn because I am not be the son he wanted. I mourn because he killed himself and he

“Is there a reliable guide to when we are really hearing the voice of God, or just a self-interested or even quite ungodly voice in the language of heaven? I think there is. Who speaks for God? *When the voice of god is invoked on behalf of those who have no voice, it is time to listen. But when the name of God is used to benefit the interests of those who are speaking, it is time to be very careful.*”

Jim Wallis in *Who Speaks for God?*, p. 7.

“Virtually every religiously based social movement of great historical significance has been *on behalf of others*. Slaves, women, children, oppressed peoples, racial minorities, exploited workers, political prisoners, refugees, disenfranchised populations, persecuted believers, and victims of war have all been the subjects of religiously and morally inspired social movements.

“On the other hand, the religiosity of movements that merely advance the economic and political interests of their own constituencies is far more suspect. Religion has been used in the self-defense of slaveholders, dictators, conquering warriors, captains of industry, security police, and the rules of both church and state.

“The crucial difference is who benefits from the voice of God being spoken and heard. Indeed, answering that question helps to tell if we are really hearing the voice of God at all, or just the self-interest of the religious voices.”

Jim Wallis in *Who Speaks for God?*, p. 8-9.

tried to tell me and I did not know how to listen or what to listen for. I mourn because now that he is gone I cannot change our relationship and make him learn to love me just as I am. Most of all, I mourn for our denied relationship because our fears kept us from finding joy in each other.

I mourn also because of wasted time. I waste time trying to be perfect instead of enjoying life. There is time wasted trying to control my world and others who happened to get into it. I waste time trying to please others and to do things to make myself acceptable in other's eyes. In mourning the image of what I cannot be, I fail to revel in the image in which I have been created. I let the voice and image of God be interpreted through the agenda and needs of others. It is time for new images.

### **God-Incidents**

I often wonder if my days and the University of Lethbridge were divinely given. Perhaps the image I have of myself standing free on the sixth floor terrace looking east over the Coulee is an image whose time has come. Perhaps it is my time to heal, and healing would have taken place no matter where I spent the year. The focus of the program at the University of Lethbridge, however, forcing me to find my own inquiry, is influential. The independent study course, with its emphasis on abuse and healing, is appropriate. The subject and timing of the movie, *Good Will Hunting*, is a fortunate coincidence. Yet in spite of all of this, I have still not found my true inquiry.

During the research course in May and June, I focus on a safe topic, career development. The instructor keeps insisting if I do not find a topic that interests me or has

“So long as human beings change and make history, so long as children are born and old people die, there will be tales to explain why sorrow darkens the day and stars fill the night. We invent stories about the origin and conclusion of life because we are exiles in the middle of time. The void surrounds us. We live within a parenthesis surrounded by question marks. Our stories and myths don’t dispel ignorance, but they help us find our way, our place at the heart of the mystery. In the end, as in the beginning, there will be a vast silence, broken by the sound of one person telling a story to another.”

Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey*.  
(Page. 128).

meaning to me, writing a thesis or a project or just doing the research will be a great chore. It is during the last week of this course that I finally realize what my inquiry will be. One evening I am looking for an article in one of my filing cabinets. I look at the pile of journals I have stacked away in one of the drawers. I pull a few of them out and start to read. As I read, my inquiry begins to take shape. I will look at my writing and see if it can be used as a means to discover personal truth and to find healing from the past. I will write about writing my way to truth. My inquiry, I realize, will be me - my past, my journey, my future, my hope.

### **Toward Joy**

Once I accept the truth and embrace healing, there should be change. At first glance, I wonder if anything is different. I must remember healing and truth, like conversion, are a process, changing with time and experience. I do notice I laugh more often now and I no longer feel the need to fix everyone who comes to me with a problem. There are other changes too. The anniversary of my father's death passes and I do not even notice it. I teach a suicide intervention course not out of need, but out of greed. I do it for the money. I apologize less often for not fulfilling the needs of others. In the fall I join a singing group. I am tempted to quit many times because I do not sing perfectly. I stay, however, not because I need to be the best singer in the group, but because it is time to sing again. And I have given up looking for coincidence. It is time to take charge, but I hope the coincidences keep happening, at least often enough to keep my hope alive.

“One of the keys to the development of autonomous living is parting with the luxury of considering oneself a victim of the past. When critical events of the past are bombarded with fantasy, alternative possibilities of response emerge. It becomes obvious that I was not merely a victim of the decisions made by others. Rather, I chose, at least, my style of response. Once I take responsibility for my past I realize more clearly the measure of control I have in shaping my future.”

Sam Keen. (1970). *To a Dancing God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 70.

## **Coming to Terms**

So how does all this relate to teaching? Quite simply, it has made me the teacher I am and has given me a simple truth about my teaching.

I have learned to adapt my teaching style to learning styles of my students. I help students to recognize the way they learn, to understand their way of knowing, and to use that intelligence to their advantage. I work with students and parents to help them come to terms with ADD (attention deficit disorder) and other learning disabilities (LD). I work with ESL (English as a second language) students to help them learn the images, ideas, connotations, denotations and myths of a new language and culture. I do not, however, always allow my students to tell their stories or to come to terms with themselves and the realities of their lives outside and inside the classroom. This is the simple truth. My students and I must come to terms with ourselves. This is true knowledge and the true purpose of education.

The truth is, it does matter who my students are or what family or cultural setting they come from. It does not matter if they are male or female, Buddhist or Christian, white or yellow, gay or straight, skinny or fat, rich or poor. It is my joy as an educator to provide my students with a nurturing, non-judgmental environment where they are free to find out who they are and to enjoy the diversity of life. It is a tall order creating a place where the children are free to come to terms with themselves. It is a place where differences are not diminished or feared, but celebrated. It is my joy to encourage and nurture all truth that helps set people free.

## Conclusion

### Moving On

I will not be telling these stories again. There is no need. Having been told, they no longer twist and turn inside me, waiting to get out. It is time to move on to new stories. For too many years I have lived out the myths pushed into me by my family and my church and by school and society. My experience at the University of Lethbridge is the first time I begin to enjoy learning. I want to give full credit to the instructors and the program, but I am aware much of it has to do with my readiness to listen and my need for change. There is, after all, a time for everything.

My journals have changed a great deal over the past year. My entries are more hopeful and the whining and snivelling and begging for change have ceased. Some of my addictions are no longer showing up openly or even between the lines of my writing. They are replaced by newer, healthier ones, like retirement plans, creating a home, cycling, singing, and convincing myself that everything will work out well. I have new passions, like my future plans to conduct workshops in journal writing and my desire to change careers. I am learning to accept the truth of who I am and I am learning to listen less to the censors and critics of my past.

I have mourned enough for the things I cannot be and for opportunities avoided and missed. I was once told that if I had no shining vision before me, I should stick to the task at hand and finish it. I stuck to the task at hand. I asked for help and waited for a shining path to open up before me. I cried and prayed and yelled at God for acceptance. I fasted and prayed, spoke in tongues and found myself flat on the floor, slain in the spirit. I

walked away from every experience with the same questions, the same desires, the same fears. Finally I heard an answer. I am acceptable the way I am. I will move on. I accept myself. Acceptance is my healing.

I have mourned enough for what was, for what is, and what cannot be. I will not mourn the future. I will find joy in who I am and what I can become. “Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5, *Good News Bible*).

It is early on a chilly spring morning during the Easter holidays as I pull into the west parking lot, a short drive into Lethbridge from my friend’s place at Diamond City. I climb out of my truck and walk across the campus, down from the student’s union building into the valley and up again towards the concrete block that is the university. I stand on the sixth floor deck, arms outstretched, looking east across the Coulee, over Whoop-Up Drive, the golf course and over the city of Lethbridge. I am ready for the sunrise.

**Psalm 139:13-16.** The Message, The Old Testament Wisdom Books in  
Contemporary Language by Eugene H. Peterson.

Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;  
you formed me in my mother's womb.  
I thank you, High God--you're breathtaking!  
Body and soul, I am marvellously made!  
I worship in adoration--what a creation!  
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,  
how I was sculptured from nothing into something.  
Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth;  
all the stages of my life were spread out before you,  
The days of my life all prepared  
before I'd even lived one day.

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