

**IT GETS INSIDE YOU: MINING, A METAPHOR FOR TEACHING:  
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY PROJECT**

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to  
my father, Eric Dayton Prentice,  
who taught me to face challenge with  
grace, dignity and humour.

## Abstract

This project is an endeavour into Narrative Inquiry as a form of educational research. In attempts to explain how and why I have become the teacher that I am I have compiled significant parts of my life history to explain the relationship between a life spent mining and one spent teaching. It is my assumption that I have become who I am as a teacher because of the life that I have led living, working and learning in three mining communities of Canada. My work as an educator, building community in my school setting, is a direct reflection of my life's experiences.

I began with the premise that long before I was born my roots were established in mining through my grandparents and parents. The life they set for me was one of community. My own childhood, adolescence and adulthood have been shaped extensively by the towns in which I lived. Those influences enter my classroom and play a role in shaping my curriculum.

The work is phenomenological in nature, narrative in style and from the perspective of the research subject. This multi-genre work utilizes poetry, narrative and exposition to present my life story. In writing through my life it became apparent that the communities I lived in not only shaped my character but also created in me the desire to replicate or create similar community in my classrooms. This is evident far more in "how" I teach than "what" I teach.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*The unexamined life is not worth living*

*Socrates*

As a teacher of Language Arts I have spent the last 15 years encouraging and instructing young readers and writers to “connect themselves” to what they read. Most periods in my class are spent teaching journaling and personally responding to literature. I read countless pieces of writing and then attempt to draw out greater connections, instill a stronger sense of voice and push students to connect on a deeper level. In studying literature, pre-reading discussions attempt to get students to consider themselves in terms of the themes contained in the piece about to be read. Responding and extending questions draw out the personal connection they might have to the story and/or characters, and get them to take it further. In my educational framework I acknowledge that reading and writing is all about oneself in relation to others. We place ourselves in the world, in real and imaginative ways, by connecting our person and our experiences to what we are learning.

In their book *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Clandinen and Connelly (2001) remind us that John Dewey believed that “education, experience and life are all intertwined” (p. xxiii). At the simplest level, when I read my students’ writing and observe how they connect themselves to the assignment, I am observing who they are and what has shaped their lives. I am learning ultimately why they learn and react the way they do, and get a glimpse of what their lived experience is. Similarly when I interact with them they are seeing my life experience and how it has formed to make me the teacher I am, and how I interact with them.

Each year I teach hundreds of adolescents, each one unique and in the throes of gaining life experience. There are few uniform standards in my teaching world. Every class is different, and although the content may be similar from semester to semester, the methods of delivery, success and learning change every time it is taught. When I interact with students each situation is a new combining of my lived experience and their own lives. No two lessons will be predictably the same. All of the elements of that day are “wild cards.” The weather, the time of day, the day of the week, the class before mine, what will come after, the situation at home that morning, the breakfast, or more often lack thereof, the relationships that each of those 25 bodies are currently involved in, and their past experience in Language Arts or school in general, are all influences on how the lesson will go. There are many more intangibles that affect every class on every day. The chance that a lesson will proceed the way I plan it is wildly unpredictable at best, mildly chaotic at worst.

The only constant ever – is me. It is my lived experience, my life and growth, my values and my attitudes that are the most predictable from semester to semester. In this milieu of hidden curriculum in my classroom, I am the only steadfast and constant variable and the only one which I have any control over. Who I am becomes paramount to how I teach.

Walking along a narrow road not far from my home, I wound my way around the rock bluff leading to the western annex of our community. The afternoon sun blazed into my eyes and I put up my hand to shield the glare. In the warmth and brilliance of the sun I stood looking south. Before me loomed the blue corrugated metal ruins of a coal tippie; a processing plant. Like a monolith it jutted out into the azure of the sky and the beauty of

the mountains. The reclaimed slag piles behind it juxtaposed nature and industry in one of the most pristine settings of the Rocky Mountains. The coal mines in the south western corner of Alberta, in the community of Coleman, have been still for close to twenty years but we still live in a mining community. I hadn't thought about it much, but on that day it struck me that I have spent most of my life living and working in mining communities. The triangulation of my life has consisted of birth in the atmosphere of the northern Ontario gold mines, childhood in the northern Alberta coal mining town of Grande Cache, and adolescence and later adulthood in the coal mining area of the Crowsnest Pass. My entire life has been touched and shaped by mining. Like most people who live within a reality, I had never given much thought to my development as a person as a result of having lived in the communities that I had grown up and chosen to live in. It was just something that I did. It was where I was from and certainly not something to think about.

Canada is, geographically, a vast land sparsely populated by people who have historically made their living from its natural resources. Canada's rich natural resources have dictated where we live and what we do when we are there. A country of diverse regional differences, the population often defines itself in terms of where it comes from. Indeed the land shapes culture more than any other influence. Settlements in Canada sprang up, historically, where settlers were able to meet their needs. Fishing camps along the coastlines were needed to supply boats with food. Farming communities sprang up where the land was fertile and conditions right. Logging communities met demands for housing and lumber. Where you lived dictated everything else in your life. Canada developed as a country comprised of very distinct regions. Indeed the greatest challenge to our nationalism is our regionalism and the unique identities that exist within these



enclaves. These identities were established primarily by the place that housed the people. Residents of the Atlantic Provinces have very different concerns and attitudes from those who inhabit Central Canada, and those people vary greatly in identity from the Canadians on the Prairies, in the mountains, and on the West Coast. What makes us all unique and specific to our region is the land that has shaped us and the industry in which our region participates.

The question of what influence my background has had on my practice has led me down some unusual roads and into some tumultuous conversations with myself and others. Following the sagacious comments of mentors and friends, I began my journey toward my M.Ed., and while broadening my knowledge of current educational thought I have become more reflective. Most importantly I have begun to look at how I teach, and I realize that my roots and identity are critical to who I am as an educator. In a journey to become more reflective in my craft, I have examined my identity more closely.

Journaling has allowed me to examine the way that I teach, the value I place on elements of my instruction, the pedagogical foundations I follow, and my vision for education and my classroom. Writing has also allowed me to be introspective about myself and question why I approach my practice in the ways that I do. "It may be suggested that the act of writing itself is a critical adjunct in clarifying experience" (Thomas, 1993), and examining my experience has empowered me as an educator. It has helped me find a voice as a professional and reminds me that my voice is one that is important to be heard by other teachers. At this point in my career I have finally taken the time to analyze why I have developed into the teacher that I am. I am amazed at the knowledge and understanding that this has given me.

When I began to first examine my personal roots, and attempted to understand how my life has shaped me to be the teacher I am today, I confess I was stumped. The more I read and wrote the more I understood that what has shaped my life more than anything is having lived in mining communities all of my life. Both of my grandfathers worked in hard rock mines in northern Ontario and virtually all of my male relatives of my parents' generation, including my father, worked at the mine in some capacity. My mother and father moved to northern Alberta in 1969 where my father worked for a company which ran coal mines, and we began our life in Alberta in coal mining communities. One of my elder sisters, my brother and I all have worked at coal mines. Driving a coal truck enabled both my brother and me to pursue professions of law and teaching respectively.

I cannot think of any one thing that has affected me as much as where I have grown up and the people with whom I have traveled through life. When I began to formulate a question to direct my project I realized that what I must examine is the relationship between my life in mining communities and the educational community which I now focus so much of my life on. Teaching, like mining, has gotten inside me and directed my life. The parallels between my teaching and the life in mining communities are many. If I were to seek a metaphor through which to develop my ideas of my identity I would find it in mining.

In the realm of autobiographical writing, experts now say that in life writing “autobiographies fill silences and spaces and in so doing construct new understandings” (Wilson, 2002, p. 1). Rather than simply report the events of the writer's life, new narratives and new understandings of life unfold when one writes about them. It is a shift

of the paradigm that says writing is reporting. Writing is actually not recall but creation. My writing seems to unify my life and generate a new story within my story. The understanding that I gained allows me to look at many of the things I have never known about my roots.

In her article “Exploring Autobiography: Getting Lost and Finding Myself,” Sylvia Wilson summarizes the thoughts of contemporary autobiographers who feel that “the process of constructing a self story is also one of creating new understandings of self” (Wilson, 2002, p. 6). Such writing goes beyond recanting everyday experiences into creating new knowledge of one’s life. Writing the self story and piecing the narrative together in a new time and a new context, along with knowledge of forethought and the benefits of distance and clarity, allowed me to see my life in an entirely new way. My story became one of gathering the treasures of my life and bringing them with me into my present rather than escaping the blue-collar atmosphere I was born into. Very often people wish to escape the life they are born into, especially if it is a situation which is not very high up the socioeconomic scale of their culture. My own story did not turn out to reflect this at all.

Mine is not a story of escape from socioeconomic suppression nor is it the tale of a woman breaking traditional sex role barriers. My narrative is of the pride I take in my roots and my attempts to bring the values and strengths of my mining background into my teaching community. In the spaces of my poems and between the cracks of my sentences is the desire to hang on to the memories I have of living in mining communities. The strength and conviction heard in my writing of teaching and mining is grounded in those experiences. A space sounds like something that is empty or vacant. In

this case however, the spaces in my life are those that are the most full. Looking into those spaces, those things I am not saying and often not even understanding, I can see that is where I am. Shining the light from my hardhat into what exists within my self, I can see that I am always, consciously or unconsciously, a miner first and foremost and that is what affects my teaching.

I want my students to know what it means to work hard and honestly, to take pride in what they do and find challenge in even the most tedious tasks. I want them to feel they are part of a team and know that relying on each other is important and I want them to learn from the lessons the people they meet can give them. I want them to feel safe and content in a community that is made up of many different people and I want them to learn respect. I want all of these things for my students and I work to be part of the community that will give them these things. I am not escaping my background, I am trying to replicate it or at the very least create it in a new setting.

My days at school are spent creating community, attempting to make students feel important and feel that they fit. There is nothing more meaningful than one person who knows you and reminds you that you are worth the time to get to know. When roaming the halls during the day and moving around my classroom, I am trying to give the comfort of a community, or the security of a small town, or a neighborhood because I have learned that that is important to who I am. When I tell stories about my childhood and experiences I am not simply glorifying the “good ol’ days,” I am telling my students that what is important is being a member of a community. The advice I pass on is made up of wisdom gained from many people I have been fortunate enough to know and of mistakes I have been unfortunate enough to commit. Lectures on tolerance and respect for differences

come partially from knowing that in our community we are often too similar, but that when we leave this community cocoon, there are people who are different and wonderful. Although there certainly is the stereotype that we must all “escape the life of the mines” and better our future and that of our children, that is not my purpose. I do not look critically at our community and see it as a place to escape from. I acknowledge that there are tremendous benefits to living in a small, close community. I also see that our core values and beliefs, our history is very different from those traits in other communities. I hope that the community I develop in my class and our school will replicate those I felt lucky enough to have lived in most of my life. In attempts to recreate a place of solidarity and closeness, I try to establish communities that foster not only learning but belonging.

In the field of curriculum studies, contemporary researchers pay a great deal of attention to the things that are difficult to measure but are so important to the curricular whole. The “hidden curriculum” is essentially everything except prescribed materials and policies in a classroom. It includes “teachers’ personalities, values, strengths and weaknesses” (McCutcheon, 1988) and is all the things that affect what is taught in the classroom. Through narrative inquiry and other qualitative methods, teachers are beginning to write their life stories, their individual narratives in the context of social, cultural, political, and other metanarratives, and examine the forces that have shaped their teaching. By looking into their own identity or self, they can see more clearly what effect the hidden curriculum is having on their teaching.

As I strive to become more reflective and look more closely at my own praxis, I find that the answers often lie in my past and “my sense of who I am and how I got that way” (Linde, 1993). A large part of that examination is looking at where I have come

from. In his article *Treasonable or Trustworthy Text: Reflections on Teacher Narrative Studies*, David Thomas states that “there are assumptions about the ways in which the individual’s past affects present attitudes and behavior. There is strong evidence that what teachers ‘know’ about teaching derives from the links between personal life history and professional career” (Thomas, 1993, p. 58).

My life story holds much knowledge in terms of who I am as an educator. My life history is a narrative of growing up in mining communities. My experiences in the period prior to entering the field of education traveled with me and entered my classroom. More and more, educational researchers are examining the narrative stories of educators as valid forms of research into practice. In his writings on teacher’s life histories Goodson writes “The story of my life is always embedded into the story of those communities from which I derive my identity” (Goodson, as quoted in Dhunpath, 2000, p. 446). My working research question is: In what ways has my experience growing up in mining communities influenced my lived curriculum, the hidden curriculum and my teaching environment? My belief in the importance of establishing a positive sense of community is directly related to the towns I lived in as I grew up and the people involved in my life.

It is my hope that in examining my family roots, my life growing up and my own experiences working in an open pit coal mine for three summers, I will be able to uncover more about myself and the teacher I have become. Far from being a life story of attempting to escape the mines and forge a better life for my children and my students, my life story would be a reminder to young people to learn from the community in which they live. They need to be reminded to draw from the sense of solidarity that surrounds them in their communities and carry with them the solid values and friendship that are missing in

so many other places. It would also be a reminder to teachers that we have a responsibility to create a community in our schools and to offer those values that close knit towns once provided. Even in times of educational confusion it is possible to create schools which offer security, safety, respect, and tolerance. Classrooms filled with talk and laughter, hard work and diligence are successful and positive communities

## Methodology

*Writing separates us from what we know and yet it unites  
us more closely with what we know*

Max van Manen

It is fitting that I have chosen to use, as a method of research, a qualitative method such as narrative inquiry. If I am to look at my life story and its influence on my practice, what better way to research than through my writing? Human science qualitative research, such as life writing, is “the curriculum of being and becoming” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7), and that is what I am attempting to examine when I look at the process by which I have become the educator I am. Van Manen goes on to say that phenomenology “aims at a deeper understanding or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 8). In looking at my past experiences I hope to clarify my own approach to education.

In their book on narrative inquiry, Clandinen and Connelly (2000) state that “experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 54). This circuitous rationalization is important to my research. In attempting to look at my present through my past, I am dealing primarily within the realm of stories and personal memory. My experience is best studied narratively. I “slide backward and forward temporally” (Clandinen and Connelly, 2000, p. 54) yet stay within the boundaries of my own place and my own identity. In order to travel in time, anecdotal writing is an appropriate format, for “anecdotes form a concrete counter weight to abstract theoretical thought” (van Manen, 1990, p. 119) and present many layers of meaning and thought in a less threatening manner. They should be seen as a “concrete demonstration of wisdom,



sensitive insight and proverbial truth” (van Manen, 1990, p. 120). In reflecting upon my classroom and my own life experiences, looking back into my memories is a logical process.

By recounting narrative experience from the three mining communities I have lived in over more than 40 years, and looking at the relationships I have had, I can look more reflectively at how this has impacted my classroom teaching. In doing so I will utilize the four existentials that van Manen presents and that “are especially helpful as guides for reflection in the research process: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality)” (van Manen, 1990, p. 101). Clandinen and Connelly (2000) agree that the multi-dimensional consideration of experience makes it most valid.

As a form of action research, life writing has direct benefits to my own classroom. Reflective thought and examination will strengthen my educational voice and empower me as a teacher. Looking at the influences that have directed my development as a teacher involves using Glaser and Strass’ concept of grounded theory wherein “grounded theory does not seek to force data to conform with existing theory but rather develops theory and interpretive categories that are grounded in the data itself” (Thomas, 2000, p. 58). My life experience serves as the data that will assist me in creating the theoretical understandings as to why I have evolved as the teacher I am. Using contemporary methods such as narrative writing should allow me to achieve Eisner’s “methodological pluralism rather than methodological monism” (Eisner, as quoted in Dhunpath, 2000, pp. 543-546).

Laurel Richardson (1994), in her chapter *Writing: A Method of Inquiry* examines qualitative writing as a form of research. As a postmodernist form of research personal or

narrative writing is one way which I find allows me to make sense of my development as a teacher and writer. Rather than examining my pedagogical roots and educational background as being keys to how I teach I chose to examine my roots in a mixed genre format. According to Richardson, in the realm of sociological writing, “There is no single way – much less right way of staging a text” (p. 523). Once we determine what our purpose is in writing, it is a writer’s choice what form or way that will be met.

For me a mixed genre approach evolved. Much of my writing took the form of what Richardson calls “narrative of the self.” In this form “the reader relives the events emotionally with the writer” (p. 522). I also chose to dabble in “poetic representation” for often prose did not convey the intensity or feelings that I was presenting. Using poetic form allowed me to further develop the metaphor I was using as a framework. I agree with Richardson that “poetry may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets in prose”(p. 522). My experiences, especially those from later in my mining career, are best represented through the rhythms, spaces, images and cadence of poetry. The power of the writing seemed to intensify when the form changed from the narrative prose to poetry. My voice as a writer and a miner was released most strongly in poem.

In writing this project I hoped to gain more understanding about myself and my craft. I wished to accentuate my reflective practice and develop my writing skills. Most importantly I had hoped to illustrate the importance of building community in a school setting.

The work of Max van Manen speaks of human science research as “the curriculum of being and becoming” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7). Looking at

phenomenological research this way shows us that the life experiences of the teacher are a critical part of the curriculum that is not normally discussed. Often it is the unexamined that is the largest contributing factor in a classroom. By writing about his/her life experiences a teacher delves deeper into the quest for understanding and learning about his/her influences. "The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try and grasp the meaning of something" (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). In reflecting on my own roots and experiences I find I am better able to relate to the students whom I find myself with in a pedagogical community. Our roots and experiences are similar despite the many years that separate us.

In a profession where being able to relate to youth is so important, knowing that I share experiences with my students is very enabling. Although society has changed tremendously in the past four decades, the experience of those involved in mining has not changed drastically. Small town life still affects adolescents the same way it did in my youth and the youth of my parents. We still experience the same types of economic stresses, limitations in terms of opportunities and amenities, benefits from close relationships and deep friendships and camaraderie that exists in communities which suffer adversity. As van Manen states "one's own experiences are also possible experiences of other" (p. 54), and the acknowledgement of this shared experience allows you to build community and bonds.

### Metaphorically Me

*“Explain it again. I don’t get it.”*

*“OK. It is a metaphor. A comparison between two things that aren’t really the same.”*

*“So, why would you compare them if they aren’t the same?”*

*“Mostly to make people understand the similarity.”*

*“But you just said they weren’t really the same. They’re not similar.”*

*“Well no, they’re not similar but you can make them similar so you see the connection.”*

*“But, why not just use two things that are similar. Wouldn’t that be easier?”*

*“ You aren’t getting what I am trying to show you here. It is the power of the metaphor; the sheer power of it.”*

*“Mmmmmm you’re right! I don’t get it. I’ll use a simile.”*

*“But you’ll lose the power.”*

*“Thanks Ms P, I’ll chance it”.*

Midway through my Master’s program I read an article that brought my work to an abrupt halt. After reading Laurel Richardson’s article on metaphor I suddenly began to piece together all of the snippets of information and discussion that had been going on in my curriculum class. Looking inward I began to see that my teaching was not only a profession I value, but also an extension of my entire life’s experience and the way that I

had evolved. There was a metaphor for my teaching experience. I hadn't noticed the dissimilar similarity between the two halves.

Mining emerged as the metaphor for my teaching as I began to participate in extensive journal and creative writing. The themes that emerged as I allowed myself to examine my past and the influences on my teaching uncovered images and stories related to mining and my roots. Discussing my own educational journey and my hidden curriculum it was very hard not to revert to narratives about the communities I grew up in. If the hidden curriculum of a classroom is defined as "what students have an opportunity to learn through everyday goings-on under the auspices of schools, although teachers and other school people do not intend those learnings" (McCutcheon, 1988, p. 188), it becomes clearer why looking at the hidden elements of a classroom is important. A teacher should take a close look at how and why he/she teaches the way he/she does. Why is his/her pedagogical style the way it is, and how did his/her instructional methods develop? These are the keys to hidden curriculum. The Program of Studies for a class, the recommended and required texts and the prescribed material are all set and mandated for each classroom. Standardized tests, assessment measures, and formative and summative evaluations, all keep teachers on track and check their students' progress, but how teachers manage the material and how they relate to students while they manage their classrooms falls under the umbrella of the vague, the ambiguous, and the oh so personal.

Like everyone who is caught up in the life of teaching I didn't have the time to stop and reflect on why I approached things as I did. Only when I allowed myself the luxury of reflection and began to realize how critical it was did I really look at what I do on a day-to-day basis. Looking at the weaknesses in my teaching, the abstract random

nature of my organizational skills (or lack thereof) and the off-the-cuff way I tend to handle things, I also was able to confront the strengths of my teaching. I teach the student, not the content. I relate well to young people. I care deeply and lay bare my feelings about what I teach and those who are learning it and I draw my students together into small learning communities. Most of my school day is spent talking to students individually. I listen and develop relationships with them that are nurturing and encouraging. Roaming the halls, it is important to me to include as many students as I can in the school culture. I will seek out those who hide in the doorways and try to connect with those who might not connect easily to anyone. The personal nature of schooling is my main priority. The phrase “safe and caring schools” to me is the most apt description of what all schools should be and that is what I attempt to do.

Learning about hidden curriculum I began to wonder why I do teach this way. It is not necessarily the way I was taught to teach. Most secondary school teachers do not approach things as I do and many don't think that what I do is rigorous. In my journal writing I spent a lot of time writing about my experiences working at a local coal mine during summers. Slowly I began to make the connections that led me to formulating a metaphor for my teaching. The associations were many. I could easily compare digging through rock to trying to reach my students. Clearing overburden is similar to discovering what is important in life or in lessons, uncovering gold or coal to uncovering the richness in a classroom, the diversity of the miners to the diversity of a classroom and the creation of knowledge under pressure to the creation of coal. The metaphor became a natural. As a young woman I was a miner of coal, a natural resource. Now I was a miner of knowledge in young people, the greatest natural resource. Eureka!!! It made sense to me.

The metaphor suddenly became very powerful. As a way of understanding it gave me a framework to see myself and my craft clearly. I became aware that these students and I all lived and learned in a similar environment and I could relate to them for that reason. I reflected on the type of community that I created in my classroom and examined how it related to my metaphor and it began to come clear. Suddenly the stories that I had heard and told all of my life, about my parents, my grandparents, and myself, all melded together as stories of mining. These narratives were the key to my life and my life was an intricate part of my profession. Piece by piece the metaphor grew and I began to live the metaphor in my classroom. It was a powerful image of where I came from, what I do and who I am.

### Digging Deep

My life is a life in progress.

Every year I uncover  
more and more of myself.

Scraped back like the earth  
to reveal riches untold.

Every year I go deeper and  
deeper into myself.

Hitting jagged seams, empty  
rooms of cold rock or at times  
rich vibrant fields of self.

Unmined riches, untapped life.

I continue to delve into the core,  
scraping back more layers.

Exposing more.

Always unsure of what is me.

Always unsure what the swing of  
the pick will uncover.

Always uncovering more riches.

Armstrong (1987) reminds me that I don't have control over everything that happened to me, but I do have control over my interpretation of what happened to me. My life has been dotted with experiences and I choose how to connect the dots.

**I know they are here somewhere. Just a sec.**

That's me there. Second from the left, third row. Red dress with the Peter Pan collar. Pony tail a bit askew and maybe a bit too tight. No glasses but they came soon after this photo, explains the squint maybe. Tendrils of dirty blonde hair falling out all over the place. A bit buck toothy but smiling. I loved school. It's grade two in Schumacher, Ontario; Miss Dreadheart's class, 1967.



**Here hold the album. I want to show you another one.**

Here it is. This is grade six. Grande Cache, Alberta. Mr. Evan's class. I should be here, back row around the middle somewhere. Yeah there I am. That was a green coat dress sent to me by my cousin Leanne. It was nice but didn't fit in with everyone else's jeans. I didn't quite blend in yet. See the glasses? Very 1970. Tiny, rectangular horn rimmed frames. Long, poker straight hair, parted in the middle. Teeth still big but I'd grown into them a bit. Still smiling, though much more subtle this time.

**OK. Last one. This is it. This completes my school life.**

So, this is 1974. Grade ten in Coleman, Alberta. I made that shirt in Home Ec. See how the collar won't lay flat. Aviator glasses this time. Poker straight hair still, a bit longer but no body to it. The look of me and every girl in the school. I'm looking quite sardonic and cool, a definite grade ten look. There is a smile there but it faded. Probably when some boy came into the picture room.

**Yeah, I guess we did move around a bit for a while there.**

**Nah, it wasn't hard.**

There were short moves that were hard but not these three towns really. Actually, when I think about it, they were all the same town.

**We were miners.**

## Chapter Two: The Head Frame: Defines the Mine

In the northern part of Ontario the Canadian Shield is at its richest. Deep deposits of minerals meant mining communities sprang up wherever prospectors found good samples. Driving along the highways of northern Ontario you see evidence of mining in the form of head frames which identify exactly where the mine entrance would be. The huge tower-like edifices housed the hoist and ventilation systems, elevators to enter the mine itself, and waste and handling services.

### The Cornerstone of the Triangle: Schumacher, Ontario

When the earth was undergoing tremendous geological activity and the Canadian Shield was being formed, the area of northern Ontario that came to be known as the Porcupine was particularly enriched with precious minerals. To speed up the geological lesson and to paraphrase Michael Barnes in *Timmins: The Porcupine Country*, “the ancient folded rock which predominates the Porcupine is known as the Greenstone Belt...” It is an area which has “received an extraordinarily large share of both precious and base miners” (Barnes, 1991, p.11). Due to its mineral-rich land, the area became a prospector’s dream and settlements were inevitable.

Between the years of 1890 and 1930, the Porcupine area, was one full of cinema-inspiring tales of prospectors and mining. Like all areas on the cusp of a gold rush, it was a rough community where you could gain or lose a fortune quickly. However, by the time my maternal and paternal grandparents settled in the Porcupine, the area resembled a settled mining community. Both of my grandfathers worked in the mines. My

father's father, James Prentice, worked underground at the McIntyre Mine from the 1920s to the late 1940s. My mother's father, William Mawhiney, worked in the mill at the Dome Mine from the 1930s to the early 1960s.

Both my father and my mother grew up in the small mining towns of Schumacher and Dome Extension respectively. They lived in small mining houses, like everyone else, with about five feet separating properties, all within walking distance of the head frames which housed the entrance to the mines. Everyone in the vicinity had fathers who also worked at the mine. Few mothers worked in those days and each family had four to six children on average. No one had a lot of money but everyone had the same things. Women who were widowed by the mine often became landladies and, putting children into shared bedrooms, rented out bed and board to single miners.

The most important aspect of my roots, where I am from, is the people who live there. Any community is formed of people who experience similar situations and complications. What makes a community is how the people deal with those successes and those complications and tragedies. Most communities will be centered on one economic activity and all occupations relate to that common activity in some way or other. This is especially true in Canada whose base is predominately resource related. The economic base of a community also dictates how people spend their leisure time, how they manage and value their education, their families, their health, and virtually all aspects of their culture. A community often creates its own culture and a mining community has distinctly unique traits.

Because mines usually exist in physically isolated areas you find that the people who live there have a strong attachment to the outdoors and the wilderness. They are often

hunters, fishermen, trappers, or campers. Perhaps the open spaces erase the feelings of being confined by the rock and earth. They live in small towns and find city ways to be untrustworthy. When you know everyone in the community and trust many of them with your life, outsiders are looked at with suspicion. Miners are team workers. They work and live in groups, relying on each other for safety, support and often survival. They are a tight-knit group who work and play together, out of desire as much as necessity.

Far from being an idyllic lifestyle, mining was fraught with adversity, both economic and personal. Living with boom and bust meant however, that the communities relied even more heavily on one another and helped each other make it through the tough times. When a family was struck with death due to the mines, the miners were quick to take care of the family of the dead. When individuals were not called to work, those around them helped with food and shelter, knowing their time might soon come. The solidarity of the miners gave rise to labor movements and true union thinking. Since mines and their surrounding communities were made up of workers from very diverse parts of the world, tolerance and bigotry were both present in mining communities. Everything was not always perfect in these small mining communities but they were unique.

The lure of employment drew my two sets of grandparents to the Porcupine area in the early part of the 1900s. Together they raised ten children and later 24 grandchildren who were influenced by the life of the mining communities. Even those of my cousins who never lived in the north were affected by the way they were raised and the stories they heard of life in the Porcupine Camp. It is part of who we are.

In looking back at my early years I fought hard to ensure that I did not simply romanticize my past and write only of that place and about the golden years of northern Ontario. Although the majority of my childhood memories are happy, it was not my intent to simply create a perfect childhood in a quaint northern mining town. Life was not idyllic or I would not find so much in common with the students I teach today. Their lives, as adolescents in a small town, are not wholly golden or carefree, nor was mine. It is my presumption however that we have similar core experiences. Remembering them all is beyond the scope of this endeavour).

As a writer I situate myself in my life as one narrator. It is from my position or situatedness that I tell my story. Where there are gaps in my memory I fill in what I have heard or come to believe is true. There are indeed places in my stories that my siblings tend to contradict. From their position they saw things very differently. From their position as an elder child, a male child, a mature child, or a child of different birth order, they saw our experiences differently. Paul Armstrong (1987) points out that the life story I write is in my control and I choose what and how I reconstruct it. I make decisions about integrity, detail and meaning. In a sense my story can no longer be part of a grand narrative, it is only my story. It is a selection of my history to be continuously constructed and reconstructed.

It is important to position myself in my writing. I was a child growing up in a small rural mining community. I was the fourth of five children, a white Anglo Saxon female raised in a blue collar environment. My position is important not only to retelling my life history but to understanding it. My reality is very real and concrete from my position in my culture. In constructing memoir I write, for half the document, as an

innocent and my memory reflects that. Like Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my memories are reminiscent and nostalgic. As a child I was naive to the cynicism of life and the harshness of the some of the events I lived through. Later, as I experienced new events as a young adult, my social and political perspective had matured and changed, and my memories reflect that new persona. It was however, my life and we shaped each other.

Growing up in northern Ontario in the 1960s allows me the unique position to reflect those times, socially and politically. Although I am by no means a social or political critic, my narratives contain the influences upon society at that time. According to Pascal (1960)

autobiography involves the reconstruction of a life within the circumstances in which it is lived: its primary focus is the self, although, clearly, the self must address the external world, through which, in interaction with the individual, the personality comes to acquire its unique shape (as quoted in Thomas, 1993, p. 4).

In that respect the world that I saw, as a six or eight year old, may differ from that of others, because it was my world. The events and situations are those of that time and perhaps they were different the very next day.

### In My Life

There are places I'll remember

All my life though some have changed

Some forever not for better

Some have gone and some remain

All these places have their memories  
With lovers and friends I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life, I have loved them all.

The Beatles, *Rubber Soul* (1965)

I remember:

Looking down at an old and cracked sidewalk I saw two bright yellow dandelions growing along the space between the two slabs. This small gap, of about an inch or so, was dull green in color. Grass had taken root and thrived in this tiny margin between the two slabs of concrete. The head of one flower was leaning slightly toward the left, almost as if it bows toward the small puddle of dirty rainwater a few feet away in the lane. The second blossom stood straight and tall, stretching into the hot afternoon sun. The concrete itself could tell a story if it could talk. Old and decaying, it was most likely hand-poured by the original owners. The sand was probably trucked in from the hills surrounding one of the lakes north of town and the gravel likely carted in by pickup from some nearby gravel quarry. I wonder if you listened if you would hear the conversation the makers of the slabs had as they toiled in the northern Ontario spring. I thought further of the years of service the cement has provided. Thousands of feet had trod upon this small piece of land in my yard. Miners, hockey players, the young, the old, families and the remnants of families, all standing firm on my sidewalk over the years.

In my memory though is the snapshot of this crack between the two slabs and the hardy weeds that flourish there. Like all children I thought dandelions were a flower and a beautiful one at that. I have always loved the color yellow, a trait I later learned I shared with my father. Summers were a time of beauty because I could gather both dandelions and buttercups and make vibrant bouquets for my mom. These treasures were invariably alive with small bugs and found their way into the garbage can very quickly, but I would waste away hours looking for the perfect long-stemmed flowers. My friends and I would play the “do you like butter” game and hold the blossom of a buttercup under each other’s chins. If the yellow reflected onto the chin of your friend, you’d giggle and laugh and say “you love butter.” We’d squeal in glee as if this revelation actually meant something but if it did, we had long forgotten what it was. It didn’t matter that the meaning was lost, the game stayed with us for an entire childhood.

Crawling along the stems of the dandelions which lined the cracks of my sidewalk, were thousands of ants. Luxuriating in the warmth of the cement the insects seemed to be sun tanning among the tiny hairline cracks in the stone. Littered in with the active ants were the incinerated remains of those tiny creatures my brother and his magnifying glass chose to eliminate. I never understood the fascination boys had with killing things and destruction in general, and admit to being baffled that they could spend hours frying ants with glass. I could see that it was fun once in a while to attempt to start a small piece of paper on fire because you could see the forbidden nature of actually starting a fire, but to simply fry an ant, seemed pointless.

I am puzzled that I can remember this one memory so vividly. Indeed on warm days I can close my eyes and recall, some 40 years later, every detail of that crack and



those two weeds. I have often thought about it and wonder if it is metaphorical for me, in some respect, and for that reason I can see it so clearly. As an English teacher I can certainly make the extended metaphor work. The sidewalk is the one outside my house in Schumacher, Ontario in about 1966. The “house” is the lower floor of a two story apartment building. Upstairs lived our landlord, Mr. Basset, while my family, four children and two adults, lived in the three-bedroom apartment on the lower level. The backyard was my world at six years of age although I now know it was only about 15 feet long and 20 feet wide. A wire fence kept us safely in and off the street and a lane framed the yard on two sides. Leading from the gate to the back door was a sidewalk. And this is my memory.

I must have walked on this sidewalk hundreds of thousands of times from age one to age seven. I must have looked down and I walked, stumbled, crawled, tripped and rode along it day after day. I probably saw that crack in the sidewalk more often than I saw anything except my own two feet. So it is engraved in my mind. And surely I must have sat one hot summer day and memorized every detail of that crack and those flowers. In my perception those ants are not the manifestation of anything. They simply were there the day that I memorized the crack. The symbolic nature of the flowers may exist, but not to me. I thought they were pretty and I was so taken by them that I stared at them for a long time. The scene is important to me because it is one of the most vivid things I remember of being six in Schumacher. I must have been blissfully happy to be able to lie there long enough to memorize this. I must have been alone, and warm and just content. Maybe that is why I love this memory. It reminds me of how content I was at six, in that

place, with my family, inside the boundaries of a secure world and so alive that staring at dandelions brought me pleasure.

There are specific places that are archetypes. They are important in most cultures and have significance to most people. Those are the places which, no matter where they are situated, everyone can relate to or identify with. "Place is the most pivotal fact of connection" (Cameron. 1998, p. 120). Knowing a similar place connects you to the events even if you were not actually there. Your understanding is increased because you have been there yourself. An identifiable place in a mining community is the bar. Most people who hail from a small mining town can tell stories which revolve around bars. Myths are created in these settings.

#### The Grandview Hotel

It is an unimposing structure. Drab grey front, fake brick and concrete façade. It is a place where stories flowed like the draft that was dispensed from the taps behind the bar. People who live in mining communities across Canada boast that their town had more bars than stores. If you drive along the main street of any small mining town this seems to be true. In a town with a population of 3,500 people, there were often 16 different drinking establishments. All busy after shift end; all chaotic on payday.

The scourge of housewives, the bars were the reason that the mining companies built recreation complexes. They tried to keep the men out of the bars as much as they could. My dad always went for two or three beers and then came right home. Later I learned that this was not entirely true but it was what we believed. When he was young he stayed later. Then too, after a hockey game the team went for a few. The image of athletes

sitting in a smoky bar drinking beer seems incongruous, yet times were different then. In one spot of our lives however in one area of our memories, there was the Grandview Hotel.

The place has little “real” meaning for me except in stories. I was young when we left the north. Far too young to visit a bar, but I grew up hearing the stories. My favorite one is of the day my brother was born. My older brother Jim was born in 1956, on a hot July day. For whatever reason, his birth was difficult. Perhaps as the third child, and the coveted Crown Prince, the birth of this male child had to be remarkable. Perhaps, as my mother feared, the cat that had lunged at her in her sixth month and clawed her swollen belly, had jinxed the pregnancy.

Whatever the cause, after a long and arduous labor, my mother safely gave birth to Jim but promptly began to hemorrhage. The doctors were unable to stop the bleeding for quite some time and as quickly as it ran into her veins it seemed to flow out again. Not surprisingly, the stock of blood in the tiny hospital was quickly depleted. The family doctor who attended my mom knew that blood had to be found and fast.

As in most small towns, the word of my mother’s predicament reached downtown before it even reached my dad deep underground at the McIntyre Mine. My father had dropped my mother off at the hospital in the middle of the previous night and had intended to pick her, and a new baby, up a few days later. As far as he knew things were fine when he headed off to work.

My dad, due to his gentle nature and ties to hockey, was one of the favored sons of the community. When everyone got wind of the situation with my mom they immediately headed to the hospital to give blood. The wonderful part of the story, the part

that I romanticized so much as a child, is the image of my dad's friends heading to busy places sounding the call for the need for donors. Obviously one of the busiest places was the Grandview Hotel. Lore has it that someone headed to the bar and simply said, "Doc Prentice's wife needs blood," and the place cleared out.

My mother recovered and went on to have me and my younger sister years later, but for me the story was a powerful one. It spoke of friendship and community. That is the way I remember growing up in Schumacher. The community was always there for one another and always helped when the need arose. There must have been conflicts and unpleasantness but they weren't apparent to me. They aren't part of my stories or of my memories.

When I travel east in the summer my family and I do the obligatory tour of my childhood haunts and we slowly drive by the Grandview Hotel. I tell my children the story of Uncle Jim's birth and how everyone helped out. They ask why people would do that and I have a hard time finding an adequate answer. They just did, I say. That is what people do, they help each other. Remember that. And I think they will.

When one of my sisters traveled east a few years ago she and her husband stopped in at the Grandview for a beer. Having left here as a young woman she did not know anyone in the bar at that time. As soon as she said who she was however, and who her parents were, she was "home."

This is what community is. I grew up in this atmosphere. I always thought that my childhood was unremarkable. I see now that it is remarkable because of the community itself. I was raised to believe that I had hockey in my blood. It seemed to be a powerful

thread, but now I know that it is the mining that is in my veins. Gold and coal shaped my life as much as any other force.

### The Cost of Mining

Years after leaving the Porcupine area my father struggled with chronic breathing problems. As we searched for diagnosis and cause, we were forced to look back at a life spent breathing in rock dust and consider silicosis. It was a reality, said my dad. Many men died from it when they were quite young. His illness, later confirmed as emphysema and Lou Gehrig's disease, could also have been from swimming and playing in lakes infused with cyanide. Tailings were cleaned and the cyanide and water flushed back into Pearl Lake, Schumacher Lake, and countless other swimming holes. Numerous chemicals were used to treat and clean the gold or machinery and no one seemed to know exactly what they were. We always knew the life of a miner was one of adversity and hardship but suddenly the words of "Mining for Gold," by the Cowboy Junkies, (1987) meant much more to my family. Ghosts of miners long departed seem to linger in the minds of those who lived in mining towns.

#### Mining for Gold

We are miners, hard rock miners

To the shaft house we must go

Pour your bottles on our shoulders

We are marching to the slow

On the line boys, on the line boys  
Drill your holes and stand in line  
'til the shift boss comes to tell you  
You must drill her out on top

Can't you feel the rock dust in your lungs?  
It'll cut down a miner when he is still young  
Two years and the silicosis takes hold  
and I feel like I'm dying from mining for gold

Yes, I feel like I'm dying from mining for gold

Cowboy Junkies, *The Trinity Sessions* (1987)

## Christmas Presents

In 1923, there began at Schumacher Public School a unique tradition that speaks to the generosity of the men who mine. Frederick Schumacher, an entrepreneur and founding father of the mining camp that bore his name decided to give back to the community and help those who struggled to live in the climate of boom and bust. Under his direction Christmas gifts were bought for every child who attended Schumacher Public School. A trust fund was set up for this very purpose. We all grew up knowing that every year on the night of the Christmas Pageant we would receive a large bag of candy and a beautifully wrapped gift. It was a magical part of our childhood.

On a recent trip to Ontario my sister and I traveled up to her office to find curriculum material for my new courses. We chatted as we drove along and I mentioned remembering the Christmas presents.

“They still do it,” she said.

“Still do what?” I asked.

“They still give the kids gifts. Every year; every student.”

Gifts are still bought and distributed from the Schumacher Christmas Trust and given to the children who attend the school, some 91 years after the tradition began. I can remember, even at age seven, that these were real Christmas presents. It wasn't an inexpensive toy which would break in an afternoon. Children received a coveted Barbie, or a real Dinky toy. These were toys which endured for many years and stood out in the minds of kids who might otherwise not receive one. Even during the years that the mines were in a slump, the Christmas Trust provided for all children. In the late 1920s, when my

father was a student at Schumacher Public, Mr. Schumacher himself was a regular visitor in the school and was proud to be the benefactor of the building that bore his name. When I was a student, however, all that remained was his portrait that hung in the hallway of the school. We grew up with his image around us. He looked a bit like a young Santa Claus, which to many of us he was.

I can remember ripping open the carefully wrapped package in school, after having rooted through the paper bag that contained Mandarin oranges, hard tri-colored candy, and sweet chocolate, marveling at the wonderful gift. I can never remember being disappointed or hearing anything else other than squeals of delight. This is one of the strongest memories I have about elementary school and about living in a mining town. All the other memories I have however, have the same flavor to them.

In communities like Schumacher, Ontario, and some 2,500 miles to the west, Coleman, Alberta, the mines were our lives. Every facet of our lives was shaped and influenced by the mines which employed our fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers. In most mining communities, even in the early 1900s, the companies knew that if the community members had recreational places to be together they would be happier and more productive. More men playing hockey meant fewer men in bars. Subsequently every community had recreation facilities provided by the mine. In Schumacher, McIntyre Mines built the arena complex and for many years paid for memberships which allowed mining families to skate, curl and play hockey free of charge.

Since my father was a professional hockey player, and later a coach, my sisters, brother and I literally grew up in the McIntyre Arena. To keep us clean my mother strapped skates on us at a very young age so that we crawled around, on ice not the floor,



while the older kids skated. My feet still ache when they get cold, a result of frozen toes night after night as we begged not to go home. I learned I needed glasses when, at an appropriate age, I was asked to read the numbers at the end of the curling rink. Like all of my siblings if I we could not see the numbers we were taken the following week to Dr. Wigston for an official eye exam. I have few memories of evenings spent away from the arena or in the summer at the ball park or the playground. Those memories always contain family and friends and, in some strange way, the mine.

Another memory is the scene of Croatian picnics in Schumacher Park in the summer. Most of my recollections of these events come from photos and stories told by my parents as they recapture the past for me. If I enter a room and the smell of roasting garlic is thick and aromatic, I can picture the sheep, feet bound, slowly turning on a spit over the hot white embers of an open fire. I can hear the sound of laughter and different languages shouted from group to group. It must be an illustration of the closeness of the community that we, as a family of Anglo Saxons, were always invited to attend these special picnics celebrating a culture so different from our own. Miners are a close group of men and friendship seems to transcend many barriers.

### The Raiders

“Run,” screamed my brother Jim. “Run fast. He’s got a pitchfork.” One of my earliest memories is the sheer terror and the thrill that went along with that terror, of running to get away from an angry old man who lived near our playground. It was a hot summer in northern Ontario. The flies were thick and the gardens lush. One of our

favourite summer past times was raiding the gardens of the old people who lived in our neighborhood.

The year was 1966, and I was six years old. Although much of North America was in the midst of civil rights unrest, our small town was still simple and slow. "The gang," which roamed our small corner of the world, consisted of my nine-year-old brother Jim and his friends. A subset of the gang was whatever small "brats" they were forced to watch over that day. I was a member of that subset. We lived just off Third Avenue. The population of the town was made up of many different nationalities and they each retained their heritage and language while also living in the Canadian culture. Immigrants, new and old, lived in distinct communities within our small town. Although everyone mixed and lived together, ethnic groups settled in neighbourhoods to provide their own sense of community to each other. New immigrants arrived constantly and were welcomed and eased into Canadian society while living among their own people. In Schumacher there was an Italian section of town, as well as places where the Finns lived, the Slavs, the Croats, the Chinese, etc. The Anglos, like my family, were interspersed everywhere.

Old Man Defelice lived near our house. We lived just south of the Italian neighbourhood and a back lane or two separated us from the huge Italian families that lived there. The Defelice family was very close to mine as we were both third generation residents. Our parents grew up together, stood at each other's wedding and visited frequently. The only difference between us seemed to be that my family all spoke English while some of the Defelices did not. I can remember thinking that someone in their family must have always just died for both the old man and his wife were always dressed

in black from head to toe. From babushka to boots. They were somber and scary to a six-year-old.

Another remarkable thing about the Defelices was their garden. It was beautiful, immaculately tended and full of succulent vegetables. It was a favourite enterprise of our gang to sneak in, pull a few carrots, grab some fresh peas and get out uncaught. We were generally quite skilled and even the smallest member of the gang knew the routine. This day however, we were surprised by the old man, just as we were entering the yard. Had I known at that time who Federico Fellini, the Italian director was, I would have thought Mr. Defelice Sr. was comical, but I didn't. This old man was short and stocky, somewhat hunched over, totally without humor or compassion, and dressed in the customary black overcoat, black suit, black hat, black shoes, and white shirt. He yelled to us as soon as he saw us but since none of us spoke Italian we had no idea what he was saying. Well, that is not totally true. We did have an idea what he was thinking from the gesticulations he made as he yelled.

It was easy to tell, for example, that he was angry. He screamed and yelled, waving his arms in the air as he ran towards us. We turned to run, and at that moment five large, ten-year-old boys proved the theory of self-preservation once again, by shoving me out of the way as they scrambled out of the yard. As we frantically tried to run, the old man grabbed a pitchfork. That was when my brother began to yell: "Run, run fast."

I tried to run as fast as I could but even at six I was not tall and had remarkably short legs. No matter how hard I tried, I fell further and further behind. There was no way I could keep up. The irate old gardener gained on me. Suddenly I saw a white blur in

front of me and I felt a hand grab mine and start to pull. It was my big brother, and as he ran he dragged me along behind him. My feet barely touched the ground as I skipped along like a rock tossed across a northern lake. I was now more scared I would trip than be pitch forked.

Eventually we made it to our yard and only then did Jim let go of my hand. We never told my parents about our escapade for it would mean certain punishment. We never talked about it again but I do not remember ever doing it again either. Later that summer we found a vacant lot we called the Ponderosa and there we spent endless hours playing ball and games.

My brother and I spent most of our childhood together and our closeness is still a vital part of our lives. The friends we had, the experiences we shared, and the values we learned together created a strong bond. Sometimes now, when he comes down from Calgary and takes my daughters for a walk or a ride, I see him hold out his hand for one of them to grab. When I see her hand secure in his, I know that nothing can happen to her.

Sometimes it isn't a story that reminds us of things important. Sometimes it is an image, a smell or a taste and sometimes it is simply a loud sound that suddenly erupts and then stops.

### Twelve O'Clock Blast

At lunch the doors crash open into the sun/light.

Energy bursts through the thres/hold and floods onto the play/ground.

Schumacher Public, emptied of its charges, sits si/lent for an hour.

Up Third Avenue we trudge or skip; the weather dictating our speed.

We am/ble home for lunch. There is somewhere for everyone to go.

No bag lunches or con/venience stores to fill us up with empty calories.

Hot lunch at home with parents, grandparents – some/one to share time.

Lunch is a walk, a sandwich, Campbell's soup, and play/time.

Sidewalks hold trea/sures and adventures for the young mind to en/counter.

Puddles, mounds, rocks and crys/tals burst with know/ledge and quest/ions.

We poke, prod, dam and re/build as a block becomes a mile and a world to explore.

Suddenly there is a horn and every/one stops for the twelve o'clock blast.

Feet planted firm, everyone quiet, we wait.

The thunderous noise of the blast rips the air amid the tin/kle of glass,

the shudder of walls and the rustle of leaves.

We stop for a mo/ment and then carry on.

It is a familiar in/tru/sion and we know it. It means the men are working.

Home is a difficult word to define. It is an abstract set of memories to describe a simple edifice, a wooden structure or domicile. It is where you became who you are and what you will ultimately become. "Home: what you visit and abandon; too much

forgotten/too much remembered. An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures, the derivations of your dream geographies” (van Herk, 1990, p.13).

### Blueberries and Blackflies

Picking blueberries in the sweltering heat of a northern Ontario bush in August is, not only an experience, it is a tradition. Like hockey, the Canadian Shield, and frigid winters, berry season is a part of who northern Ontario folk are.

A friend of mine once told me that he could tell northern Ontario girls from all others.

“How’s that?” I asked as we walked in the warm, fall afternoon.

“They always have their hands tucked up inside their sweater cuffs,” he replied. I looked down and sure enough. It’s part of being a northerner.

The clichés I have heard about the cost of a quart basket of hand-picked blueberries ramble through my brain on this particularly hot afternoon as I fight off the incessant buzzing of blackflies and listen to the smacks of my co-picker hitting mosquitoes. These berries are as expensive as caviar I muse, as I examine my indigo-stained fingertips and stare up at the blazing sun.

It was a clear, hot afternoon and my sister and I squatted near an ideal blueberry patch on the Hershey Lake Road. It was ideal due to the near perfect conditions for great berries. We were surrounded by the thick treed bush that is typical to the region, but we were seated in low mounds of white sand, on the sunny side of a hill which was not so long ago ravaged by fire. It seemed ironic that such sweet and juicy fruit grows from land scorched by fire. From destruction comes succulence.

My eldest sibling is the keeper of family tradition and she has learned where the best spots are for picking. She has a knack for knowing, or perhaps she just has done it for so long she just knows. As we sat in misery picking small blueberries and dropping them into empty ice cream buckets, I marveled at our glee. Two female educators, papered and pedigreed in our profession, deliriously happy with each echoing thunk as the berries hit the bottom of the pail.

We told our father, later that night over the phone that we picked for four hours and got some beautiful berries and lost a pint of blood to bugs. He, in Alberta, said for the umpteenth time that the berries in the west do not compare to those in Ontario. I, in Ontario, offered that perhaps the cyanide in the tailings and the poisons that had leached into the ground added that extra flavour. He called me a smart ass and we laughed and returned to talking about pies, jams and bugs.

Everyone in my family was obsessed by berries. I remember my grandmothers having innumerable conversations about berry bushes in their gardens, patches by the lake or the “camp” and tasting thousands of berry confections. One aunt and uncle seemed to be the gurus of berries at their camp and had secret patches no one else knew of. More “barries” than you could ever pick and every one as big as your thumbnail, my uncle would brag. Of course this spot was five feet away from someone else’s secret patch and just yards from some very visible landmark or head frame. During the hottest hours of the day, when the bugs were at their worst, everyone headed out to their secret spots hoping to hit the Eldorado of bushes that day. Weekends, when fathers had time off from mining, everyone headed out onto back roads combing the bush for picking spots. It was as much a cultural thing as anything. It was what my family did.

My mother explained that when I was a child it was a family tradition, a fun and inexpensive thing to do as a family. It was similar to driving to the dump to watch the bears, but more socially acceptable. When she was a child, however, it was a necessity. If families desired dessert in the winter they picked and preserved whatever they could in the summer and fall. Before large transport trucks began delivering produce to remote communities there was not a lot of choice in fresh fruit and vegetables. I remember going to southern Ontario as a child and seeing, for the first time, roadside stands selling wooden baskets of berries. It seemed so strange that people would pay for blueberries when they were so plentiful. My parents explained the fundamentals of supply and demand and how there was apparently no supply in cities so the demand was great. Very briefly I imagined picking berries and bringing them down to sell and making a fortune. That flickered out of my head as I remembered the bugs and heat. I also wondered why people would want blueberries when there were so many more exotic things in grocery stores in the city. It was another real life lesson in economics.

As Karen and I sat that afternoon in the oppressive heat, ants crawling on our legs and feet and flies driving us insane, I asked her:

“Why the hell are we doing this?”

“You tell me. You were the one who said she wanted to pick blueberries before she left Timmins,” she replied as she spat flies out of her mouth.

“Why did I want to do that?” I asked (SMACK).

“It’s what we did as kids, I guess” (SWAT).

“Did we like it then?” I asked as I wiped blood and mosquito from my leg.

“Hated it,” she said. “But Mom and Dad liked us to do it, so we did.”



“Why in God’s name would you subject your kids to the sand, the heat, and these cursed bugs?” I asked as I picked black fly remnants from behind my ear.

“Because your parents did and theirs did as far back as we can remember.

Remember those pictures of Grandma Prentice with her berry bushes and the cobbler and muffins Grandma Mawhiney made?”

I did think about those things and I thought about my mom and dad in Alberta trying to like the dry tasteless Saskatoon berries that grew near the mountains. Being a transplanted easterner, my dad always missed northern Ontario. We moved west for a better opportunity and never regretted living in Alberta, but my dad did always miss what he felt was home. When my sister, who stayed in Ontario to teach, came west in the summer she’d bring a “two-four” of Northern Ale for my dad – a taste of home. Thirty years later as my dad faded away with Lou Gehrig’s Disease, she mailed out jars of blueberry jam made from berries she’d picked (tasting slightly of bug repellent we’d joke), jarred and sent off at a cost of \$60 per jar. My dad, by this time, couldn’t eat the jam, but he liked to think about her sitting there in the sun, in his favourite spot, swatting flies and lovingly dropping the berries (THUNK) into the bucket. It connected him to home and to her. It connected her to her roots and her family.

### Chapter Three: The Tipple: Things Processed in Childhood

In coal mining the “tipple” is the term used for the building which receives coal. Coal cars once were brought to the tipple and “tipped” or emptied of their load for processing. Today the tipple often refers to the surface structures which also clean and process coal. Preparation plants are usually attached to the tipple. A tipple resembles a head frame somewhat in structure but it is greatly different in purpose. It is not an entrance to the mine and the actual mines are often miles away from a tipple. Conveyor belts or trucks bring the coal and rock from the mine itself and deposit their loads for cleaning and processing.

I tend to think of Grande Cache as the tipple of my life when I apply the mining metaphor to myself. During my formative, middle school years in Grande Cache, I learned a great deal about life. I began to separate the knowledge I was gaining and sort out the waste from the product. I received a lot more information here than I had when I was younger and more sheltered. I grew up and I began to see my community with insight. The actual mine and tipple were located 15 miles from town, but I carried the mine closer in this community than I had in Schumacher because now I was an active part of it.

#### Another Vertex: Grande Cache, Alberta

A remarkable thing about mining communities is that they form as people arrive and leave. Mining is an industry characterized by boom and bust. There are times of great economic plenty and there are times of depression. The community will swell and thrive, or diminish and die depending on the market for the mineral being mined. In that sense

mining has not changed much in hundreds of years. Those involved in mining have always lived a life of uncertainty, totally at the whim of the mining companies for money, housing and location.

It was the bountiful economic climate for coal in the late 1960s that led my family to Grande Cache, Alberta. My father had worked his way into lower management at the McIntyre Mine in Schumacher, Ontario. He was involved in accounting and we were living in a company house for the first time in our lives. Like all company towns there was a definite stratification of people depending on your position within the company. My father had begun underground and worked very hard to move out of the mine itself into the office. The move from a small apartment to a large house signaled that my father's hard work had paid off.

Things were going well and although most of my parents' siblings and their families had left northern Ontario, my grandmothers both still lived there and life seemed content. Nothing had changed significantly since my parents began their family. We had stable friends and family relationships, all attended the same schools my father had and played in the same places my parents and grandparents had most of their lives. The changes in gold mining had not been profound so our lives were static. To the children nothing had changed and things would always be the way they were.

Within the company structure, however, things were in a state of flux. A change in the level of management above my dad meant that some promises made to him were not fulfilled. Bitter and discontent he considered a rather drastic move from Ontario to Alberta. We moved from gold to coal. McIntyre Mines had recently expanded west and were opening a new mine deep in the mountains of northern Alberta. Blissfully ignorant,

we children were not told anything about the prospect of change until it was almost definite. At one point my parents flew to Alberta to look at the site but I don't remember even knowing where they were off to exactly. When the decision was made, which I later learned was a very difficult one, we were told. Like the Beverly Hillbillies we loaded up and moved west.

I do remember what limited knowledge of the west I had. At nine I imagined cowboys and Indians. I got small pieces of information about Grande Cache mixed up with generalized ideas about Alberta and was sure there were no paved streets and wagons anywhere. What my dad had said was that the New Town of Grande Cache had no paved streets yet and the streets were like wagon ruts. The town itself was being carved out of nothingness. There were no buildings in the townsite when my dad first was sent out to work. He stayed in a trailer and worked in another trailer. What an exciting chance this was. We were truly going to be pioneers as they built the town around us.

My family, at this time, was made up of one sister who was 20 and had just began her own teaching career, another sister who was 18 and just finishing high school, my brother who was 13, my baby sister who was 2 and me, a precocious 9. A move meant all sorts of things for each of us. Karen was beginning a professional life and decided to stay in Ontario. Jo-Anne came with us and enrolled in high school in Edmonton where we lived until our house was built. When we moved to Grande Cache she moved to Hinton, a nearby community, because there was no grade twelve offered in our new school. Jim, Nancy, and I headed off to be pioneers.

## Layers

One of the “existentials that proves especially helpful as a guide for reflection in the research process” is lived human relations or relationality (van Manen, 1990, p. 101). In the exploration of my life, relationality has been both a social and political avenue.

I heard the insidious sing-songy cackle the minute I stepped into the hallway from Room 6 to head up to my locker. “Oh Christ, not again,” I groaned as my gut tightened. Up ahead I could see where the coven was situated. They stood right up at the end of the hall by the main exit door that led onto Hoppy Avenue and my route home for lunch. Lately it seemed every day these girls cornered some poor defenseless underling for five minutes of taunting and teasing before we all ran home for lunch. I hated it. Every day I tried in vain to get through or past them unnoticed but, of course, I never did. They’d see me coming and one or two would grab me by the arm and drag me into the epicentre of the bullying. I definitely needed new best friends.

“Amy Lee smells like pee,” they chanted at the tiny target who cowered into the corner. “Another stinky day for the trash from Glace Bay,” they continued and then erupted into peels of laughter.

I grew more sickened as I looked at the blanched and tear-stained face of this tiny rumpled girl. I didn’t know her but my guess would have been she had recently arrived from the mines in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. Her dad was probably an underground miner, she most likely had seven or eight brothers and sisters and perhaps an overweight mother. Otherwise my friends would not have made her the target of the day. This was the type of kid the coven seemed to choose this month.

I pulled away from Judy’s grasp and started to back towards the door. Oxygen

suddenly seemed to have disappeared and my chest was tight as I sought fresh air. I wanted no part of this and no part of those who were the perpetrators. Once I got into the street I ran as fast as I could as if the physical exertion and penetrating cold wind would erase the ugliness I felt. I even passed my brother and the other grade ten boys who normally were far ahead of me. My mom was setting lunch out as I burst through the door. My little sister sat on the couch mesmerized by *Sesame Street*. She didn't look up or jump to greet me as I came into the dining room. Just as well. Her three-year-old sweetness would have made my skin seem dirtier.

At eleven I had not yet begun to journey into adolescence so I still talked to my mom. I tearfully told her what my friends had been doing to Amy Lee McNeil. As she listened she walked behind me and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“You know,” she began, “last night at curling the same thing happened.”

“Really?” I said in astonishment, as I imagined impeccably groomed women cornering some not so groomed curler against a wall.

“Well, not exactly like you described, but laughing at and criticizing another woman.” She paused. “And of course the woman wasn't actually there, she'd never be allowed. But it was the same sort of thing and it bothered me too.”

“What do you mean she wasn't allowed?” I asked.

“Thursday curling is for management,” she said uncomfortably.

“Oh, I see,” I replied, but I didn't. I didn't know then what management was, just like I didn't know what the big deal was about Glace Bay or Cape Breton. Just like I didn't see why my friend Judy, who was something called a Jordy from northern England, was not as important in the circle as the English girls whose dads were engineers. It didn't

all make much sense. The teasing was hurtful and I hated it. Inside I think I wondered when I would be the next target. Later I learned I never would have been because my dad was middle management, we dressed nice, my brother was one of those gorgeous high school boys, and my dad was the coach of the beloved local senior men's hockey team. I apparently was special. I was perfect to be one of those doing the taunting and perhaps even a ring leader, but I had also been well raised and would never have been inclined to hurt others.

Prejudice, in the form of classism, was and presumably still is widespread in mining. In the communities I lived in it was even more evident because we came from all over the mining world to be sorted and assigned a place. In Grande Cache, a new town virtually carved out of the mountains and mud, management lived in specific areas in homes larger than those for miners. Our parents participated in distinctly different activities and even our health care had two or three different levels. Many of us went to Jasper to see the dentist, some families went to the pulp and paper town of Hinton for their dental care, and the Amy Lees probably never went at all because they didn't have a car.

The classism was re-enforced constantly. In terms of stratification, at this mine, the British were at the top, self-appointed I assume, since we had British mine managers. The next level included my dad, central Canadians who'd been involved in hard rock mining but performed the business side of the industry. Then there were the fire bosses or pit bosses who often came from southern Alberta and ran the mining operation and finally at the bottom were the miners who kept the place going and often died for their labor. It was very layered, very pronounced and as far as I could see very unfair.

They drill a hole for the core sample deep into the mine face. How far in do you  
have to go to get coal...or truth?

### The Rodeo

Into the robin's egg blue Mercury station wagon  
we tumble.

Off to the rodeo at Dularme Flats.

Feet bound in new cowboy boots,  
too excited to sit still.

"We're gon-na see In-dians" I sing.

Over and over again.

Hush up I am told.

"We're gon-na see In-dians"

"We're gon-na see In-dians"

Bounding out of the car mom's words fly.

Don't stare, don't point, be polite.

Remember to use manners. Be nice.

Don't say anything stupid (my dad, knowingly).

Rushing to the railing, hanging on to my Robinson's  
cowboy hat (\$3.99 no P.S.T.).



Bouncing and yelling, looking for Geronimo,  
Sitting Bull, scalps and peace pipes.

I see no one. Cowboys.

It is all cowboys.

The rider jumps from the horse after the horn.

He raises his hat releasing his braids.

Everyone cheers but me.

He's just a person.

#### A Frozen Frame of Time

The picture is of three couples. They are each in their late thirties, early forties. They are at some sort of social function and are all smiling gaily and enjoying time out away from children and work. One of the three couples is my parents. They look so young, so thin and so different from what I saw them as. Maybe people look different when their children are around. What strikes me now looking at the picture is that they are the same age then as I am now. They have five children, a happy marriage, and an exciting future ahead of them. I have two children, a failed marriage, and a somewhat daunting future ahead of me. I sit and think about the times that the picture reflects and remember what a truly exciting time it was for my entire family. Transplanted miners, on a new shift.

Living in Grande Cache was a remarkable experience and one which few people had a chance to experience. It is not often that a town is literally carved out of wilderness

and springs up from nowhere overnight. However, it is typical for Canada. Once the exploration had been done, a coal mine established and plans made, a town had to be built in the Smoky River Valley. There was nothing and then there was something: a town. Every building in town was brand new. There was no history, no community, and no context. Those of us who were there at the beginning were pioneers of a type.

The town was speedily built in stages. The first stage my mother recounts, was mud. A crew came in one day, and dug basements, a few days later the houses were framed, then finished, and the crews moved on. To my mom's chagrin landscaping came many months later and thus the need for a tolerance for mud was necessary. The speed with which things were built was nothing short of amazing. A beautiful new school opened in the first few months of the first year, populated with children from all over Canada, wherever mines were, and from Great Britain. The teachers were primarily new, recent graduates of the University of Alberta, all teeming with excitement and "radical ideas." The schools in Grande Cache swelled to reflect the growing population. In October 1969 there were 134 students in grades one to twelve and by September 1970 625 students were enrolled (Sharlow, 1999, p. 295). People moved in constantly and some weeks at school you would find five new friends in your class.

It was 1970 and open concept classrooms were the rage; no walls and no boundaries. We marched and protested, we danced to The Archie's "Sugar Sugar," the Beatles' "Revolution," and we learned to kiss behind the Akasaka Sports Complex. We created worlds in the woods and had fun watching Elvis movies in the prefabricated Community Hall on Hoppy Avenue. My parents partied for the first time that I remembered. Their families and family responsibilities were far away so they did not

have to spend as much time with parents and grandparents. They made new friends and began a social life of their own. I remember a lot of laughter and houses full of families enjoying themselves.

This was a very different environment from the old, established mining towns in Ontario. This was where I first heard stories of hard drinking men, rough families, and the working poor. It is where I learned about prejudice. Because it was an isolated town, 100 miles off the major highway, there were other problems to contend with as well: bears that roamed the town freely, power shortages that lasted for days on end, feeling cut off from civilization, and the lack of amenities and choice. Hinton was the closest town and it offered shopping and pavement, but if the weather was bad it was not an option. We learned to make our own fun and our own entertainment.

The life we had here for a brief three years changed the lives of my parents and siblings. My brother, younger sister and I became westerners as our ties to the east drifted away. We learned a great deal about different types of people, and we learned it at an age that left an impression on us. The empathy and compassion that I have I believe came from this period of my life. My parents taught us about what was important and what was not. More likely than not it was who a person was that made them a good person, not where they came from or what they had. We were also taught that being a member of a community meant working toward the good of that community and being a good person. My parents were very active in volunteer roles in Grande Cache and my elder sister constantly brought home young adult friends who had no family of their own and limited resources. Dinner was usually more than the six of us as Jo-Anne's base of friends grew and grew.

I had an ideal middle school experience in Grande Cache but many of my classmates did not. Some students who came from the remote areas of Nova Scotia, or whose parents moved around a lot, struggled with reading and lessons. They were often ostracized by fellow students and ignored by teachers due to their economic shortfalls. I learned to be friends to everyone and stay out of controversy but I also learned to feel for those who didn't fit in. School isn't easy for all students and I learned that by watching from the sidelines.

I learned about life in Grande Cache. The mine isn't foremost in my memories because it was the people that shaped the memory. If Schumacher is characterized as the birth of my life in mining communities, Grande Cache is the reality. It was a rough-and-tumble place. People flowed in and out hastily, some stopping momentarily, others staying a lifetime. Families from all walks and places of life came together and found ways to exist. My young eyes were suddenly unshielded from the real things in life: smoking, drinking, swearing, lawlessness, and vulgarity were a shock to me. My parents had been able to shelter us from this harsh reality by surrounding us with simplicity and family. Here it accosted us from all angles.

### Barbie's Got a New House

The click of the camera captured the moment in my mind forever. It was July, a rainy day in northern Alberta. The beautiful sunshine of the day before had been replaced by cool drizzle.

The weather system had settled in the valley and the rain seemed relentless. Alberta's blue skies are famous, but when warm air hits mountain ridges it falls on the

leeward side in the form of cloud and moisture. Until a wind came along we were stuck with this inclement weather.

My friend and I sat in her sub-basement on a cold concrete floor. We were arguing over the possession of an Exacto knife. The coveted maker of doors and windows in our breadbox Barbie mansion lay on the floor as we debated who was more mature. I was older, by six months, but she was far more sophisticated and had access to forbidden things, like Exacto knives, much more often than I had. Her mother had always worked and so she had used knives and stoves all her life, it seemed. Nothing in the grown up world was alien to her while I was naïve and innocent. It seemed that not being left alone often creates passivity so I did not argue with conviction. Experience trumps age, in the real world, so I eventually was relegated to offering suggestions. I was not too surprised by the outcome of our argument. It was the same one we had every time a choice about who does what arose. I always lost because of my inexperience. Even at ten I wondered when I was to get experience if I was never given a chance.

For hours we sat in the basement and created, from a three foot by three-foot cardboard box, a wonderful Barbie house. In the process we talked and argued, giggled and planned. We learned about mathematics and spatial design. We played with color and texture in the form of carpets and paints. Sociologists would say that we were also learning about roles and cultures as we discussed whether or not Barbie needed a garage or would Ken always drive from his house to pick her up. Most importantly we learned about our own relationship and how to interact with each other. By the end of the day she relented and let me hold the knife and cut out a small window, teaching me how to do so correctly. We spent a lot of time talking about our lives, indirectly through narratives, and

assessing each other silently as the other talked. It is how we learned about life. Barbie was incidental. In fact she wasn't even in the room. I can't really remember her ever entering her house and living in it. Maybe Barbie got fed up waiting for Ken to pick her up and left on her own. After all she was a high fashion model and an astronaut and an accountant. It was the building of the house and the interaction that we loved. One weekend we tackled a two-storey house and all that it entailed. We ended up having a huge fight and I stormed home. We made up the next day and carried on.

Our stay in Grande Cache came to an end in the spring of 1972. At that time my father was offered a transfer to head office in Toronto, Ontario. We moved to the suburbs and to a townhouse in Mississauga, Ontario. The promotion my father received was tremendous but it brought many unwelcome changes to some of the members of my family. Jo-Anne was now a career woman and settled in Edmonton, working and living happily on her own. My brother Jim was about to begin grade twelve and the decision was made for him to remain in Alberta, complete school and then rejoin us in Ontario to attend the University of Toronto the following year. He lived with very close family friends but he wasn't with us and that was a huge hole in our family.

I was about to enter grade eight and the move was devastating for me. I loved my home, my school and most importantly my friends and the security that my life gave me. The move to Grande Cache had not been too difficult because one mining community is similar to the next. The move however, to the largest city in the country, brought about drastic results for me and consequently for my family. I could not adjust to life in a school of 2,000 students and no friends. I was utterly disconsolate the entire time. We

lived in Mississauga for a year-and-a-half and my selfless parents moved west again to save me. We headed for another small mining town.

## Chapter Four: The Face: Uncovering the Riches

The term “face” in mining refers to the exposed area of rock actively being mined. Coal is extracted from the face of a coal seam, along with rock, and trucked off to be cleaned and processed. In underground mining a face might be quite small since miners were only able to mine a small area. In open pit mining however, a face was often a huge wall of rock and coal. Enormous shovels would gouge out tonnes of coal after blasting had loosened the rock, and trucks removed the overburden, rock and soil, which hid the coal.

In my mining metaphor I consider Coleman to be my “face.” Firstly it was while I lived here that I was actively involved in mining. As a truck driver I would truck primarily overburden week after week during my summer job. Periodically I would be on the coal run and would dump coal directly into the prep plant, but I was generally given the longer trips on rock dumps. This meant I spent entire shifts backing into the face and being loaded by shovels or loaders. Metaphorically this is where I also trucked most of what I learned about life as a young woman. It was here that I learned the most about mining and community, about teaching and learning. During this four-year period I learned or uncovered more about myself than I ever had before. At this time I was also attending university and learning about not only teaching but discipline and compassion. I gained knowledge about curriculum and organization but mostly I was learning who I was and where I was going. That is why I feel Coleman was the “face.” Mining here held all the riches and much overburden.



### The Apex: Coleman, Alberta

In February of 1973 my parents, my younger sister and I moved from Mississauga, Ontario to Coleman, Alberta. Located eight miles from the Alberta/British Columbia border, Coleman is a picturesque mountain town nestled at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Amazingly beautiful on a bright summer day it did not look overly scenic the day we drove into town. It was early February so there had been snow. However, a Chinook wind was blowing so everything had melted into small brown or black banks along gravel-strewn roads. The tippie, which was situated not far from the middle of downtown, was still operational and black coal dust and smoke blew along the valley making everything appear even blacker.

As we drove to the motel we were living in until our house was ready, I am sure my mother must have been devastated. We had left a nice area of Mississauga and all the amenities that Toronto had to offer. She had a job she liked, her family was close and now here we were again, 2,500 miles from her two eldest daughters, her sisters and everyone she knew. My mother and father had made this move for me since I was miserable in the city. I am sure they questioned the wisdom of indulging a theatrical thirteen-year-old.

Coleman came to be the home which had the most significant impact on my life. Growing up there as a teenager was quite uneventful. When I listen to my students lament the lack of things to do I understand because I felt the same way. It was in Coleman however, that I became a miner and began to understand the significance of extracting a resource and the labour of love it led me to.

## Digging

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests: snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft

Against the inside knee was levered firmly.

He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep

To scatter new potatoes that we picked

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Just like his old man.

My grandfather could cut more turn in a day

Than any other man on Toner's bog.

Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Seamus Heaney (1966)

### Bog People/Digging

It was Christmas Eve and my sister, my brother-in-law, my niece and I walked along the warm wormholes, known as “pedways,” in downtown Calgary. We were snaking our way from the parking garage to the Glenbow Museum. We were off to see the

Bog People exhibit. We had joked on the way downtown that no one except teachers would visit the Bog People on Christmas Eve. A travesty, we wittily assured ourselves, no one, not even Bog People, should be alone at Christmas. But almost certainly no one except a Social Studies teacher, and her husband, an English Teacher and a Concurrent Education student at Queens, would indeed visit the Bog People at Christmas. I wasn't even sure what we were going to see, we were just enjoying being together and going to see mummies or something. It was undoubtedly something I couldn't see in Coleman and probably something I could tell my students about.

There was no line up to get in. Indeed no one else in the entire city, save the workers, shared our sentiment that the Bog People shouldn't be alone on this day. Perhaps it had to do with the pagan nature of the European Bog People or the fact that they predated Christ by some two thousand years. At the entrance to the dark cavernous exhibit was a cardboard sign which held words from Seamus Heaney's poem "Bogland" (Geddes, 1996, p. 536)

The ground itself is kind, black butter  
Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They'll never dig coal here.

I stopped, borrowed a pencil and wrote this snippet down. I do this in museums where ever I am and end up with purses and file folders full of papers with pieces of life written on them. I thought it was too coincidental that I had been working on my mining writing just days before coming to Calgary and now the Bog People exhibit began with a reference to coal.

“You never know,” I said to myself as I fell back behind the others. “You never know.”

Weaving our way through the eerie exhibit it became apparent that the bogs of northern Europe have held the secret of an ancient people for centuries. Found inside the moist peat were the bones, clothing, artifacts, and weapons of people who died violently, probably sacrificed and entombed in the bogs. The display began with the geological importance of the peat itself and why it was able to preserve things so well. The bones of a moose dated to 10,000 BC and yet looked more intact than those that hang above the garages in my community.

We walked along, nervously joking in the reverent quiet of the room. It was dark and dank and uncomfortable to be viewing history, knowing that these were people who lived and loved. It was stranger yet because we knew that ahead in the display were the people themselves. Breaking the silence was the shrill triple ring of my cell phone as the real world overtook the historical. Below Seamus Heaney’s poem I wrote a grocery list of necessary last-minute purchases, and ended the call. Life getting in the way. Onward we quietly walked.

The Bog People themselves were indeed mummified. It was difficult to imagine that they were full-sized people at one time except that parts of them were eerily preserved. The annotation with one of the displays explained that some bodies still had skin intact when they were unearthed. As soon as the air contacted the bodies, of course, preservation became a problem. These exhibits had also been affected by the unearthing but you could see the anklebone of the young man, hands splayed in death, or the fragility

of the 16-year-old girl who had been hung and still had a rope around her neck. Morbid fascination kept us weaving through the display area.

Equally as interesting as these tragic people themselves was the forensic description of how scientists studied these finds and what the results told us. It was not holiday fare but it was soberly fascinating. My mind became a swirl of related and unrelated ideas.

Why would they never dig coal here? Why would Heaney say that? Why look at a bog and relate it to coal? I suppose it was almost like mining coal. It was dark and dirty and involved scraping back layers. The rock held fossils trapped like this peat held artifacts trapped. They were both layers of history, one moist and preservative, one dry and fossilizing. As we entered the gift shop to lighten our moods I pondered and then promptly forgot. We bought Bog People stocking stuffers and marveled at “how great a gift shop this was. We must remember it is here,” and hurried off to complete our last-minute jobs.

Later, home in Coleman, I sat down to write. I remembered the scrap of paper from the Glenbow and grabbed it from above the dryer. Unfortunately it had gone through the washer and unlike peat machine washing does not preserve things well. Faintly seen in the creases of the paper, however, was the name Seamus Heaney. An Internet search uncovered a list of Seamus Heaney’s poems and as I read them I fell in love with the language and the images. How English teacherish. I found a copy of *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics* (Geddes, 1996) and uncovered more of Heaney’s poetry and an article he had written about poetry.

As I read “Digging” I experienced a kinship with this Irish poet. Although he writes about his father’s potato digging and I write about mining we both write share the metaphor of digging.

Between my finger and my thumb

one squat pen rests.

I’ll dig with it. (p. 533)

A common metaphor unearthed in a rather unusual way. The Bog People led me to Heaney and his poetry. In his article “Feelings Into Words” (Geddes, p. 829) Heaney describes how the poem “Digging,” which I began this narrative with, was the first poem where his feelings were the words. He wrote with his own voice and states that he felt he “had let down a shaft into real life” (p. 829). Reading his theory of his own poetry led me to examine my writing and the metaphor that created this project. The foundation, it seems, had been laid long before I came to write. Like Heaney the landscape of my life is unique. He writes about the bogs, the mines and the potatoes because his landscape encompasses those things. My metaphors, of mining, rock and teaching are reflective of my landscape. My place.

Between the years of 1982 and 1985 I spent my summers working at a coal mine at Corbin in southwestern British Columbia. My father was employed by Byron Creek Collieries Ltd., a locally owned coal company, as an accountant. It was their policy to hire university students, the children of employees, to help them afford university and give back to the communities and its workers. This was a common practice of small locally

owned coal companies. My brother had helped finance his law degree working under the bins of the plant at Coleman Collieries Ltd. a few years earlier. When my father suggested I apply to Byron Creek when I began university I did so with little enthusiasm. I needed a job, I wanted the type of money they paid, but I had little interest in working at a mine. I was a 22-year-old woman. What could I possibly do there? I was raised to listen to my parents. Maybe I wouldn't get the job.

After completing the application process I hit my first stumbling block. I was informed by phone that they needed my driver's license number which I had forgotten to record on my application form. Even though I was only going to be a shop laborer I needed to have my license on record. Unfortunately, I did not possess a driver's license. At my advanced age it was embarrassing to have to get a license alongside all the 16-year-olds, and worse yet I was not a good driver. I had existed quite well in the city taking transit or traveling with friends. I took the test after a few quick lessons with my dad and did abysmally. I ended up receiving the license by explaining my circumstances to the young female tester and assuring her I would not drive until I practiced a lot more.

I then began a job that represented the most important and significant years of my life. Nothing prepared me for the experiences, friendships, challenges, and successes that I had over the course of those four summers. It awakened in me a part of my life that had been suppressed for many years. I was a miner. I toiled in the mines and worked beside and with some of the best men and women I have ever met. I became a part of my community. I became a miner.



### It Gets Inside You

The relentless wind dries everything out.

Lips split, caked with dirt,

nostrils crackle with coal dust and mucus.

A throat raw with cigarette smoke

and stale air.

2 a.m. atop Eleven Pit, time for coffee.

Pushing my hard hat aside I smear dirt

across my cheek.

I look in the mirror and rub at it uselessly.

God Damn coal and

I give up as I roll the window down.

An entire load of coal, it seems,

blows into my cab.

Another filthy night under the shovel.

The wind makes the dust from the coal face swirl and

carries it everywhere.

My eyelids are lined with the oily residue.

By shift end I will be coated in coal.

The Irish Spring will not remove the grime, only the fresh layers of skin.

I hate the penetration of the dust in areas I cannot reach.

My neck is discolored from coal rubbing into the skin under the back of my T-Shirt and the soft areas of my ears wouldn't be fit for sweet nothings should the occasion arise.

There is even a line of coal between my breasts, bisecting me.

I scrub until my skin is clean and raw.

I spit and feel the coal leaving my throat.

Blow my nose and the black dust fills a Kleenex.

My brain feels full of the dirt.

It is inside me on hot windy nights.

Where else has it gone?

My lungs feel tight from the smoke and the air but I imagine it is Black Lung.

I'd cry but the rivets of tears would cleanse part of my face and it would show.

Miners shouldn't cry and anyhow

I love the quiet and the darkness,

the solitariness and the independence.

But oh Christ I hate the wind.

At a coal mine the few buildings on the claim take on great significance. For those who work on the mountain the two main buildings are the wash house and the dry. When you arrive at work you enter the dry where you change from clean street clothes into your clean coveralls. At shift end you enter the wash house, discard the coveralls encrusted with coal, shower and then enter the dry where you put on your own clothes to leave. The hiring of women at mines meant that they had to have places where the females could change and shower. Rather than duplicate systems of elaborate wash houses and dries, small ATCO trailers were set up for the women to use. The trailer became a refuge for me when I sought a place away from boisterous miners and dirt.

### The Dry

The door of the dry hits its jamb and cracks the stillness of the night.

5 a.m.-----shift end. I lean against the lockers and slide to the bench which lines the wall.

The dry is hot and clean-----but most of all it is silent.

As I sit I can hear the men next door.

There is no silence in their wash house.

In their world there is a dry where you enter to go on shift and a wash house where you clean to leave.

In my world there is only my trailer. Clean, quiet and apart.

Often there are treats left for me. Like cats bringing mice to their owners, no one owns up to it.

One time there was a rat left. Everyone was angry; it only happened the once.

Tonight there is just me. No noise. No treats.

I hear the crew cheer and laugh in a shared joke. I know I will hear about it later. I always do.

As I haul off my boots and the coal dust spills onto the stark white floor, I laugh to myself.

Thinking of the night spent learning to back under a shovel.

This is probably what they are laughing at too.

Everyone watched in amusement as Armando made me try time and time again.

Each attempt a shovel full of coal dumped on my cab. It dumps now onto the dry floor.

They'd cheered though towards the end of the long, dusty evening when I had finally succeeded.

The horns of their trucks sounded in triumph and over the radio they'd all cheered when Armando growled his approval.

As I shower I can still hear them speak. They are not quiet men for all their working in darkness alone.

I hear shouts in Italian and retorts in English. Cultures melding early in the morning.

Stepping out from the steam of my shower, I think about the process that led me here.

A conversation with my father that very first night shift months earlier.

“Keep your head up,” he gruffly advised. “And always be aware of your line.”

“Dad,” I sighed in exasperation, “That’s hockey.”

What would he know of being the only woman on a claim with a hundred men deep into the night?

“No,” he said. “That’s life. Keep your head up.”

Dressed, I slump on the bus waiting for the men to board.

As each enters he taps and nudges me, too awkward to show emotion.

I nod each time, I know not to do more.

No one sits with me tonight. I have worked hard.

I need space and the way I am sprawled across the seat shows it.

There will be no bus pranks tonight. I have earned the quiet.

My line, it seems, is keeping its eye on me too.

Although I was able to steel myself against the unknown at my summer job, nothing could prepare me for the experience of meeting the men with whom I worked. I was wary at first of the senior miners but soon found that it was not them I needed to be cautious around. The men who were 20 years older than me became my teachers, my friends and my protectors. The young men that were my age or slightly older were not receptive to my presence. They disliked me and made it clear that I was intruding. Summer students tended to stick together, but I learned quickly that the miners I most enjoyed were the men who were the fathers of miners my age. They became my mentors and surrogate dads.

### The Bucket

For hundreds of years miners have eaten like this.

Food stored in a metal container. Some rounded like a bucket, some square.

Covered in stickers advertising machinery and tools, dented and scraped,

they hang from a heavy chain and are slung over the shoulders of the men.

Most packed with care and pride by a wife. Opened gently and relished in the dark and the dirt.

Bologna for me, for 90 straight days. White bread and  
mustard – true Anglo fare made by me, not a wife.

Maxwell House instant coffee granules mixed with a freeze-dried  
petroleum product into a thermos of boiling water.

Cold, mountain water in an orange Coleman jug.

My bucket tossed onto the seat of my truck, not gently.

Sitting beside their lavish buckets I salivate over  
sweet homemade buns, spicy kolbassa, pickled cloves of pale  
white garlic, hot red peppers and curry.

Cabbage rolls, herring, sauerkraut and onions all assault my senses.

My white bread soaks up the sweat of onions, garlic and  
unknown eastern European spices.

“Eat,” they say “skinny girl – eat. You blow outta the truck, need  
muscles.”

Offers of sweets and homemade delicacies thrust at me from thick,  
dusty fingers.

“Mama packs too much.” “For you, you like.”

Kind offers of prizes from home.

I try samples as we talk and laugh. These fatherly men talk of their  
homes and mining.

They are careful with me, unlike the young men who talk lewdly  
of women and sex.

They talk loudly to shock me and make me feel uncomfortable.  
I've heard worse, I assure my lunch companions.

My bland sandwich, tossed into a knapsack, is flattened to paper  
thinness.

There are no metal walls of a bucket to protect the bread.

Embarrassed, I will wait until coffee to eat alone in my cab.

Now we smoke.

The lead hand drives by in his pickup, a signal lunch is over.

As I fling my knapsack over my shoulder there is a tap on my hard  
hat.

Looking up I see the smiling face of Victor. "They are pigs," he  
says "and they are afraid of you.

They cannot go home and say how hard they work.

A skinny little girl does their job. Their wives know."

His hand shakes my entire head under his palm.

I nod and climb my ladder.

I sit in my truck and drink my freeze-dried granules waiting for the  
shovel to start up.

No dark sweet espresso for me.



It is bitter and lukewarm.

I grab for my book and turn on my cab light. My copy of *Sons and Lovers* is stained by the grease of bologna.

I imagine the collier would understand.

In the pit the other cabs are black, save the cherries of cigarettes.

I see the young faces scowling and swearing at me as I sit reading.

I don't care. Many of these men were boys with me in high school.

They were ignorant and afraid then, often because they couldn't keep up or understand.

They still don't.

The young are full of fear and the experienced share their buckets of knowledge and food with me.

I began working at Byron Creek Collieries afraid of many things. There was not a lot I knew about open pit mining, working shifts or even about forming work relationships. I was eager to learn but often wary of what I didn't know. I came to realize that my co-workers were indeed there to help and guide me. I felt secure and safe knowing that someone always "had my back." The one thing that I couldn't be protected from however, was the mountain itself and my reactions to it. I learned that at great cost.

## The Cost of the Coal

The dry earth splinters and cracks solidly beneath mounds of rubber

as I creep up the haul road into a pit, and pull into line.

A long queue of yellow conveyors of coal waiting for a load.

85 tonne leviathans dragging themselves slowly from pit to pit.

I sit and wait while the clouds roll in and the air begins to smell of rain.

An hour and the rain begins to fall with relentless force onto a receptive road.

Descending, the dirt greases up, and the road takes on a different countenance.

Moose Mountain sandstone, thrust up from folds of limestone.

Slicker than loon shit, the soil a million years old takes over and brakes are useless.

A tire catches and pulls me towards the bank and then she is gone.

The numbers play in my head as the truck spins out of control:

28% grade, 360 donut, 30 RPMs, 40 MPH, 9% ash content, 1/4 of a life lived.

Elongated lights of the claim below whirl to the right.

The body of the cab pitches and sends me sprawling as

I grab the wheel and hang on. Full torque I move with the truck.  
But with a full load on I am powerless. The retarder brake is  
useless to stop a hunk of metal turning with tonnes of rock  
propelling it.

Seconds become hours as my brain searches for anything I know  
about what to do.

Nothing. Hang on. Eyes closed.

At 25 I do not pray. Nihilism allows me to believe only in that  
moment and the will of the truck. Hang on. Heart pounding.

Suddenly a back tire nudges the berm on the inside of the road.

I stop with surprisingly gentle force.

Eyes opened I orient myself. I am facing uphill on the wrong side  
of the road. Stopped,

I sit in the lane of oncoming traffic so I release the brake and  
touch the gas.

Beneath a groaning weight it slowly moves and I cross into the  
right lane.

I head up.

Once at the fuel dock I sit and cry in the darkness.

Salty tears mix with coal dust and Moose Mountain sandstone on  
the back of my hands. Tears dropping in rhythm with the rain,  
gulps of air gasped in time with the wind.

The radio crackles and a voice asks me where I am. Silence.

Again Henry asks, "Where are you?" The voice of a father  
demanding information.

"Fuel dock." I reply. "I am OK." Silence.

Then a series of clicks as trucks let me know I am not alone. They  
are there.

At lunch, in the darkness, I become a part of the grand narrative of  
miners.

Stories are told of donuts, runaways and accidents.

More tales of underground mining before strip mining began.

Loss of life, loss of limbs. Heroes of mining.

I am part of the club.

Meant to comfort, I laugh along but my hands shake as I light a  
smoke.

Years later, Henry long dead, the crew no longer a unit, the  
mountain no longer the same formidable shape,

I think about the club and its place in my life.

The challenges I overcame, the men I knew, the things I learned about myself.

The pride I feel to have been a part of it all and the mine in my veins.

But when I drive in the rain I only remember Moose Mountain sandstone.

## Chapter Five: The Metaphor Revisited

The metaphor of mining and teaching only became clear when I brought the knowledge I had gained into my teaching. My first teaching position was in a small Alberta farming community. Looking back I am sure I thought about my job in terms of sewing seeds and nurturing students, and watching them grow. I created metaphors along those lines. It wasn't an easy comparison for me however, since I knew nothing about farming and I wasn't terribly comfortable there. Teaching back in the mountains I grew up in, and among the people I mined with, allowed me to better understand my pedagogical path and my hidden curriculum clearly. The mining metaphor was a natural fit.

### Loading the Trucks with Waste Rock

The trip up the mountain is monotonous.

Ten minutes up I do not remember the road.

Mechanically I swing hard to my left,  
come out ahead of the shovel and back in.

The huge bucket dumps rock into my box.

Boulders the size of cars land with tremendous force.

Heavy and huge but empty of value.

The load heaped upon itself fills the space.

Waste to be trucked and dumped.

Down the haul road I travel again mechanically.

Deep into the night along the rim of the mountain.

I pull close to a bulldozer which blinks lights in recognition.

Again I swing hard to the left and back up.

The beep of his reverse horn signals I am at the edge.

And I stop.

Once into neutral, brake on, I gun the motor to raise the box.

The RPMs lift the huge load into the night as I light a cigarette for  
the ride down.

Tonnes of rock tumble into the blackness of the night,  
crashing into oblivion. Creating dust and sparks.

I head to the fuel dock for coffee and insight.

At the sound of the bell I enter the classroom,  
to face boys who dwarf me in size.

I turn and mechanically open the basal reader.

I follow the practices of my profession and they follow the  
routine. Mechanically.

Set: Lesson: Discussion: Writing Assignment.

I teach as they receive the waste rock.

It is heaped upon them and fills the space.

When their heads are temporarily full of arbitrary knowledge  
I send them on their way.  
They dump the waste into meaningless assignments and questions.  
Following Bloom's Taxonomy into a world they have no connection  
to.  
Huge pieces of insignificant literature fill their thoughts and their  
binders.  
They comply, they back in, they gun their motors and empty the  
load.  
They head to my desk at the end of the class, for shared talk and  
insight.

### An End and a Beginning

It was late, and dark. The cherry of my cigarette was the only real light inside the cab of my truck. Swirls of dank smoke filled my small space, making my stomach feel more nauseous than it had been a few minutes before. Realizing how smoky it was, I cranked open the driver's side window and let in the cool predawn morning air. It was early or late, depending on how you looked at it. It was 3:45 a.m. and it was coffee time. I had eaten and was sitting enjoying a coffee and choking on a cigarette. I never had smoked much but boredom had driven me to it. The joke was at the beginning of the summer I could only smoke going up hill, as I needed full use of my hands to control the retarder brake with my left and clench the wheel tightly with my right. A seasoned pro, I



rarely even remembered trips up and down the mountain and drove like a pack-a-day smoker.

I gazed out the windshield as the sun began to peek above the Flathead mountain range to the south. This was my favorite spot. It was the top of Five Pit, far away from anyone else. I usually sat here in the early morning for coffee because I loved this range and the sunrises were spectacular. I jabbed at the door latch with my knee and kicked the truck door open without loosening the grip on my coffee cup or smoke. Yes, a seasoned pro. This was my third summer at the mine my final one before I returned to the University of Lethbridge to complete my final year of university and began my life as a teacher. It was, I realized, a bittersweet experience. This was my final night shift on Coal Mountain. It was the last time that I was to see the spectacular sunrise or sunsets of the Rockies this close. I spent much of my childhood living in the mountains, but until you sat atop a mountain as the sun rose or set; you never truly experienced beauty.

I flicked my cigarette out the open door and stretched out my legs. A minute later I got out of the cab and get down off the truck. The things I once feared were no longer obstacles because over the course of three summers, I had experienced most of the worst and have lived through it. I had lost a drive shaft going uphill and gone backwards downhill at a great speed. I had burned up brakes and taken runaway lanes, and I had experienced the sheer terror of driving in the rain.

I got out of the truck, slung my red backpack over my shoulder and tossed my bright yellow hardhat onto my seat. I hated wearing the hat although it was a safety issue. That night however, I wanted the air in my hair. There was little wind to speak of and the dawn was beginning. The air smelled mountain fresh and, except for the drone of the

large shovel in Eleven Pit, it was quiet. I climbed down the ladder, hoisting my coveralls as I hit the last rung. I needed longer legs than the baggy pants afforded me, so I held them at the waist and jumped to the ground. I walked slowly to the berm in front of me, and I looked out and then turned around to look at the mine behind me. The lighted open pits, black windy roads, and the fuel dock crowded with trucks on break, lay behind me.

This had been my world for three full summers and although at times I hated it, I knew that deep down, I loved it. In many ways, it was my means to an end. It was what allowed me to pay for university and to attain the career I had always wanted. But, it was more than that. It was challenges that made me grow as a person, friendships that made me richer and more knowledgeable, skills that made me understand parts of life unknown to many teachers. Most of all, it connected me to my history. Many miners had tried to convince me to stay at the mine. Financially it was smarter. I argued back that it wasn't that I was too good for the job or that I didn't like the money, but how could I tell my children that their mommy was a loader operator. They laughed at this and agreed. I should teach, they told me. I have to teach, I told them. It is what I am.

I am also a miner, by birth and by trade. I participated in an industry as old as the Industrial Revolution, and as much a part of Canadian development as farming or fishing. Long after I left the Corbin mine site, I carried with me the values and knowledge that the privilege of mining gave me. I still live in a mining area and I share that with many of my students' parents and grandparents. Few of the children that I teach now stay in the area and work in the mines. It is becoming a dying industry and that is a shame. A line from a Cowboy Junkies song "We are miners, hard rock miners, and we toil the soil for gold" (1986) always reminds me of my roots. It is a haunting melody of men who work the

earth and toil alone and who are connected to the veins of precious metals. I romanticize that that is me; I know it isn't.

### Veins of Gold/Faces of Coal

One black lump of history.

Tapped in time.

A fossil of a leaf,

preserved intact, veins flowing.

Coal its captor.

Petrified, mortified,

transmogrified, horrified.

Trapped forever,

in blackness of time.

Coal its creator.

A tiny insect

trapped in amber.

Captured threads of life.

Resin its sealant.

My DNA and history,

held in pieces of Pre-Cambrian rock.

Generations of miners.

Preserved intact, forever.

Gold and coal its conduit.

### The Garage

Professional development is an enriching experience, often in ways you never would imagine. In frigid winter temperatures I traveled to Edmonton to participate in marking Diploma Exams for Alberta Learning. The trip up was uneventful, getting settled was smooth and the marking was invigorating. It is always a tremendous opportunity to touch base with old friends, learn about the teaching practices of others, and expand your knowledge of what the exams are testing. And sometimes there are unexpected benefits of marking.

I was oddly comforted by the atmosphere of the gas station where I found myself. To avoid a long story, suffice it to say that smack in the middle of the capital city of Edmonton, I was sitting in a community disguised as a gas station. In -38 degree C temperatures I sat quietly in the “waiting area” and had little to do but observe the surroundings as I waited for my recently deceased minivan to be reborn. The station was a bustle of activity because, like me, many people were foolishly unprepared for the Arctic front which assaulted the city this January. As I watched, I noticed the intense community atmosphere of this business and at the heart of it is its leader.

The patriarch of the Central Tire Service Station was an older man in his late 60s. He appeared to be a man who has worked hard all of his life and at this stage of his career he now oversaw everything that took place in the garage. He still hoisted tires, four at a time, and carried them from bay to bay effortlessly. He moved quickly and constantly from wing to wing of the station, arranging work orders, getting parts, and relating to the customers and clients who enter, wait or leave. He knew it all, knew exactly which mechanic was working on what, what each work order was planning and he circled, coordinating, relating, and kept things moving. He had a manner, a confident knowing of exactly what was going on and what should be happening. He addressed clients by name, related to them and explained carefully exactly what was being done to their vehicle.

At one point I was given a short lesson on spark plugs and another on batteries. I welcomed his friendly and soothing but business-like manner. I felt I had met him before or known him and that was the key to his role in this community. He was busy but he made you feel he cared about who you were and what you were experiencing. He had a close relationship with his staff that seemed a natural and genuine relationship. As I watched I was calmed and felt safe. It was strange enough to feel this way in a gas station but stranger yet was the way I saw links to my own community.

The way that this business was run is very similar to the way I manage my classroom and how I co-exist in the school. The need to move constantly, roam the halls and know what is going on was the same in both situations. Like Larry I touch base with clients/students and get to know them personally so that I can better work with them professionally. As I circulate I see those teachable moments, when I can stop, take a few minutes and clarify, teach or explain. Relating closely to students gives me those

opportunities to get to know them personally and build learning relationships that are so essential to reaching them. Floating from wing to wing in the school allows me to interact with many different kids, including those I do not currently teach but will eventually. If I have established a relationship with them before I get them in a class, part of the work is done. Establishing a teacher/student relationship after that is much easier.

When my car was ready Larry came over and talked to me about my travel plans. By then the other men in the garage knew my circumstances and were eager to get me on the road safely before dark. We talked about where I was from and their experiences in the Crowsnest Pass. When I finally went to get the car, it was nowhere to be seen. An attendant ran around looking for it and found it outside where Larry was filling it with gas. He told me to drive safely and sent me on my way. It was not unlike the end of my day when I stand in the gathering area and send kids off home, telling them to zip up their coat, and tie their shoes. It was not unlike the end of my day when I spend time with one of the members of the janitorial staff with whom I worked at the mine years before. It was not unlike the minutes before I leave the building when I talk about my day with other teachers. It is all about creating a community and living in it.

M[in]e

This is the mine in me.

The m[in]e.

Veins, faces, seams that

hold the richness of my life.

Mills, plants, tipples and head frames  
process the things I know.

Beneath the surface lies  
the richness of my experience.

You travel down into the darkness to seek  
the payoff.

Layers of compressed living that hold  
the me formed in mining.

Open pits and shafts hold danger.  
Unaware you will tumble in and disappear.  
Lost within the earth and rock.  
Some will be choked lifeless,  
others will look in the dirt and see richness.

I take the mine with me.  
Hidden as I move through life.  
Apparent in all that I do.  
Strength of mine timbers support  
me when the structures around me falter.

The folds and faults house my path and

are revealed when excavated and blasted.

I know the patterns, the strata and the layers

Only I really know

The m[in]e in me.

Once it Gets Dark, you Can't See Anyone Anyhow.

There is something oddly comforting about working alone at night. Although the darkness isn't so black that you cannot see anything, the night seems to provide a buffer or shield and protects you from everything "out there." Standing at the door of the heavy-duty equipment bay, I looked out into the blackness. I could only see as far as the floodlight allowed me – some 20 or 30 feet of illuminated yard. Beyond that it was just space. Above there were more stars in the night sky than you could count. This was the infinity that math teachers referred to when they were introducing the concept of an integer set. I realized that unlike most watchers of the universe I didn't find the night sky comforting. I found it overwhelming and it made me anxious. Too many of some things cause me anxiety. Like endless possibilities, the idea of no parameters or boundaries caused my breathing to increase and my pulse to quicken.

Maybe that was why I liked mining at night. The blackness of the road shut out everything save what was illuminated by my headlights. Walls of darkness established definite parameters and boundaries. There was not too much of anything when you could not see past your truck.

Although I loved the panoramic view of Coal Mountain I was a bit comforted by the obliteration of the mountains late at night. In the early dark and twilight



the mountain ranges seemed to encroach upon me. They loomed closer and at times seemed to tower over me like a stern authority. Did I feel guilt to be stripping one of these geological giants down each time I come to work? Perhaps they advanced on me each evening to show me their displeasure. But at night they were quiet as I poured a coffee into my Thermos cap and sat back to stare at the blackness and think.

I had come down the mountain to the mechanic shop to have a weekly service check done on my Triple 7 (Caterpillar 777), 85 ton coal truck. After I pulled into the bay and shut the truck down, I backed down my ladder, knapsack slung over my shoulder, and jumped the last three feet to the cement floor below. It was an hour rest from the tedium of driving the short haul that I had been traveling that night. I looked forward to sitting and “shooting the shit” with my friends in the shop. As I wandered through the bays it became apparent that everyone was busily working and their coffee break was a while off. So I sat alone just outside the bay door and drank my coffee.

Except for the clink of tools and sporadic shouts of men working inside the shop, it was quiet. I drew a cigarette out of the coal stained Player’s Light package, crushed from its position in my left breast pocket and that pocket’s proximity to the railing as I entered and left the truck. The flicker of my red Bic lighter illuminated my face for a brief second and then I faded back into the darkness and smoked, safe inside the black.

At 2:30 a.m. your brain seemed to be dulled by the sheer exhaustion of being awake. I was comfortably adjusted to shift work but could not control the slump in brain activity which occurred between two and four o’clock in the morning. Thoughts were slow to form, lingered fuzzily, and then vanished. I heard the beeping of the coal truck that was dumping its load into the breaker above me and wondered if I would miss the

mine when I returned to university in a few weeks. In other years I had been glad to leave work and get back to school but this year seemed different. I was content to work and deposit the large pay cheques. My classes at school were demanding and student teaching had worn me out in the spring. Darkness wouldn't hide me from the limitless possibilities of a classroom. Moments of solitude during a school day would be rare and nothing would be as simple as a coffee, a smoke and "shooting the shit" with co-workers and friends. I liked the solitude at the mine and there were no pressures or responsibilities to take home every night. It would take a long time for me to earn as a teacher what I was earning as a truck driver. Still, I wondered.

I flicked the cigarette I had just finished into the darkness and then dutifully followed to stamp it out. Looking up at the stars I pictured myself as the one directly above me. Small, insignificant, and holding a place in the universe. By just being, it didn't seem intimidated by the limitless environment it was in and it wasn't moving because others encroached upon it. It just stayed there and held its place. I looked back into the shop at the men who were leaning on brooms, washing filters or just holding a place. Maybe I could be part of both of these worlds.

### Hanging On

The unimaginable brings us together this day.

A community shoulder to shoulder in grief.

Wringing paper in hands tense with the discomfort of death.

We join a family lost in the horror of burying a child.

Sharing the loss and pain.

Nine hundred hearts hurting and needing to be together.

Watching balloons fly heavenward and hoping the pain  
will rise with them.

Looking for solace our eyes dart, seeking others, seeking answers.

We move to protect our own.

Later, at the Legion, the town releases its sadness  
and joins together in laughter and stories.

Smoke and heat cloud the tear stained faces and  
embraces ease the emotional ache.

Students long moved fill me in on lives lived elsewhere.

Goals realized or dashed, babies born and heart breaks endured.

The photo of a 1914 Hillcrest mine scene  
surfaces in my memory.

Women and children waiting.

Waiting to find if their men came out of the mine.

Bodies swathed in tarpaulins, lined up.

The town joined together.

Later the community shoulder to shoulder.

An image of Westray mine in 1993.

Canada watches on television.

Bodies on stretchers coming out and families waiting.

Waiting to see if their men are coming out.

From Nova Scotia to B.C. the miners wait.

Joined together across a country.

And when the toll is final we grieve.

The community shoulder to shoulder.

Community and home.

The space where we belong.

Knowing that at the most raw moments you are not alone.

The space between alone and smothered.

Room to be alone and space to be comforted.

Feeling that there are people who care, who know you

And are there.

Shoulder to shoulder in life.

All of the things that I write about, all of the things that I live daily in my community have gone together to make me the person and teacher that I am. My community is a big part of my life and now I know it is a big part of my teaching and my classroom. If perception is reality then my perception that community is key to building a

positive and effective classroom and school is my reality.

### A Personal Vision of a Good School

Much has been written lately of the importance of building community in schools. Volumes of educational literature reinforce the idea that improving learning communities results in strong schools for students and teachers alike. One of the leaders of this type of thinking, Roland Barth, postulates that in order to build an effective learning community you must begin with a strong personal vision for your school (Barth, 1990). What do you see when you visualize a good school? Closing my eyes I see the school I want to teach in, the one I want my students to enjoy and the one I want my own children to learn in:

I see a school that is full of people excited to be in the building. I see teachers greeting the students as they arrive in the morning because they too are seated in gathering areas, sharing a coffee and talking before their day starts. I see students who greet each other, and sit to begin their day in similar ways. At some tables I see students and teachers sitting together talking. I see sunlight and the mountains in the background reaffirming where we live. I see learning taking place in classrooms but also in labs and in halls.

I see teachers, not sitting at desks, but moving about interacting with students, modeling and talking. I also see a constant movement in and out of classrooms as teachers share and consult, team teach and combine classes. I see and feel energy as classes empty and students prepare to move to the next period. Bodies congregate in the gathering area and talk, not about sneaking out for a cigarette, but about meeting and working over a coffee. I see movement in and out of the central library as students are able to access the

materials that they need and bring them to their work centres. I see members of our business and support community moving about in this mix too. My idea of a strong environment is one in which many adults work with children. We have in our midst many people who can contribute to our school. They should be present. I see a welcoming environment where doors are open, space is plentiful and students feel at home. I don't see posters of platitudes about striving for excellence; rather I see spaces where students feel they can excel. Perhaps the strength and beauty of the mountains behind them gives them that feeling more than any poster could. And always I see teachers moving in and out of the mesh, talking, touching base and learning along with the students. I see those teachers sharing knowledge and connecting because they share the same community. They know and respect each other because they have a common bond. This is their school!

That is the community of learners that I envision as my idea of a good school. Key to my vision is interaction with students. When students leave the building to interact with each other and other adults, it signals to me that we are not engaging them. Although the bulk of the learning in a day takes place during the minutes spent in the classroom where the curriculum is taught, much is learned by interacting with others outside the classroom. My feeling is that students will stay on campus and be engaged in learning, either in the form of schoolwork, research, conversation or dialogue if the opportunity to do it with others exists. Students that linger in halls, aimlessly loitering, potentially looking for some trouble to get into, generally do so because they are bored and looking for someone to talk to. If there is a place where it is possible for them to linger productively, they will. If there are tasks that they can work on together, they will.

The vision I have for my good school comes from years of watching students and teachers and seeing what doesn't make sense in what we do. It also comes from a lifetime of living in mining communities in Canada and benefiting from that environment. The strength of a rural resource community is the proximity of its people. Because it is a close population people will naturally help each other when it is needed. Residents know one another and share common history and experiences. Without the amenities that large centres have, small communities work to create their own events, and traditions. Citizens teach one another and school their youngsters. The senior members of a club teach the new members the skills and knowledge needed to participate. And as you walk about people talk to you, share a moment of conversation, and touch your life.

That is what small communities are like and that is what I feel schools should be like. Whether this climate exists in a school of 200, 400 or 1,300 students, it doesn't matter. Community can exist regardless of the actual size of a school. The community atmosphere is a creation of the people in the building, not a function of size. Within a large city or school, smaller communities develop, but not without work. The work falls initially to the administration and teaching staff in a school. As the adults in the building they must create that atmosphere of closeness, and approachability. As possessors of tradition and knowledge they must lead and common sense dictates it should not be the children in the building.

Teachers must see the merit in community building. On a logical level they all would. Who would not agree that when you feel like you belong somewhere you are happier and more likely to learn? My personal vision of a school is not a recreation of a school I once attended. Like most people I came through relatively traditional school

settings. These were not the optimal learning institutions. Control was the key to learning in these buildings and student needs and individuality were second to maintaining that control. When I look back, however, at each school I attended, what was generally positive was a sense of community. That is what I carry into my discussion of schooling and community.



## Chapter Six: Conclusion

The fall colours set against the brilliant blue of the sky were a dramatic backdrop for my walk up the Miner's Path. I had been struggling with the final chapter of my writing and decided to clear my head in hopes of finding an appropriate ending to my project. In his book *Writing in the Dark*, Max van Manen notes that "writing is best done in special places that we seek out" (van Manen, 2002, p. 2). Walking up the path that winds along the creek near my house was a favourite activity of mine when I was stuck for words. The Miner's Path certainly qualified as a special place. The ghosts of turn-of-the-century miners walked the path and on that day I was hoping they would give me guidance.

As I walked I thought about the process of writing my life into stories and poems. It had been a long and creative journey. Like the path I walked on, it had often been a windy road, fraught with bumps, dips and many hidden roots. It hadn't always been an easy walk but now as I reached my destination I realized it had been worthwhile.

I could not imagine a quantitative project that would have enriched my teaching, and my life, as much as my writing had. When I began to plan out this narrative inquiry project, I was not sure what the product would look like, nor what the purpose was. Writing about my life was of interest to me but I failed to see how it would benefit anyone else. At last I do understand. The stories I write are more than the simple stories of my childhood. The poems contain more than my penchant for flowery language. Van Manen discusses that while memory "is very personal, it transcends the biographic dimension of the personal. It is personal in that it could be any person's experience, any

person's memory" (van Manen, 2002, p.167). When someone else picks up my writing and reads it, it will become part of their experience and will remind them of memories of their own that connect with my themes and thoughts.

I wanted to share my stories with other teachers to encourage them to tell their own stories. My writings are "exercises in phenomenological reflection. They read like simple texts but the ease of [their] simplicity is deceptive" (van Manen, 2002, p. 2). Readers will identify with my experiences, on some level, and be drawn into a self-examination of their own life experiences. Reading my stories will stimulate reflection. "For a phenomenological text to 'lead' the way to human understanding it must lead the reader to wonder" (van Manen, 2002, p. 5). In provoking wonder and reflection, my text has met its main purpose.

Recalling my past and bringing it forward into the present allowed me to bring those memories into my classroom. It reminded me that my purpose is not simply to teach content but to impact students and replicate, within my classroom, the sense of community that I knew as a child. I had been lucky to grow up in a very close family, surrounded by love and support, privy to great opportunities and exposed to tremendous learning possibilities. Not all students are as lucky as I was. As a teacher however, I could attempt to give my students some of that support. It was important that I remember strong community so that I would continue to provide that

Suddenly my thoughts were broken by the bark of my dog. She stood about five metres ahead of me at the foot of a long set of wooden stairs. At this point of the Miner's Path the trail split. Straight ahead of me, the path continued up to the waterfall at the head

of the trail. The stairs led up to an area that once was the Prospect mining property and was now a vast area of trails and abandoned roads. Once a thriving mine, the Prospect was now a mecca for hikers, mountain bikers and dogs who loved to run. My dog did not want to commune with the ghosts of miners any longer. She simply wanted to run freely along the roads they once walked. I placed my hand on the rail of the stairway and looked up. Thirty steps led to the top. I stopped, rubbed my forehead and considered whether or not I really wanted to continue this walk. When my hand returned to my side I noticed it had something on its palm. As I turned it over I saw that coal dust was smudged across my fingers and presumably my forehead now too. There was no escaping it. The mine was in me. I placed my foot on the first stair and stepped up to walk with the miners.

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