Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break,
Under the burden,
Under the tension,
Slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision,
Will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T.S. Eliot
TEACHING TO LEARN: A SELF-REFLECTIVE EXAMINATION USING NARRATIVE WRITING AS A TOOL FOR EXPLORATION AND INQUIRY

A Thesis

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the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination and exploration of the multiple roles played on route to becoming a teacher using self-reflective autoethnography and narrative writing as a tool for inquiry. In this thesis I look reflectively at my white, conservative and economically privileged constructions and consider how to craft a socially responsible art education pedagogy given the values and belief systems in place at the start of my Master’s studies. Using narrative story-telling I examine the ways in which my past informs and troubles my educational journey, consider the changes my academic studies have inspired and speak honestly about the places I still struggle. I conclude with the belief that self-reflective narrative writing processes can enable and enlighten the learner about the quality and breadth of their philosophical inquiry.
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Thanks to my 367.01 students who inspire me everyday to do better and be better.

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VITA

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FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: Art Education and Visual Culture
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Overview:

Methods and Design of the Study

I am using qualitative methods of research to conduct this study. I am employing self-reflective autoethnographic writing as a method for inquiry as I explore my research question. Richardson (2000) describes five factors that she finds useful for the consideration of personal narratives. Her criteria are: (1.) Substantive contribution. Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (2.) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? (3.) Reflexivity. How did the writer approach this research? How is the author connected to subject in both the producer role and the product of text? (4.) Impact. Has the writer affected me intellectually and emotionally? Are new questions created and considered? (5.) Expression of reality. Does the reader feel a real sense of lived experience? (p.937) Autoethnographic writers may employ several creative writing tools to hold the interest of the reader including recall, phrasing, metaphor or dialogue to create and “relive” experiences. (Holt, 2003, p.16)

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) in The Qualitative Inquiry Reader address some “cutting-edge” methodologies, including Reflexive ethnography and Autoethnography, and specifically look at four different writers using these methods. Autoethnography is defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as a form of “writing one’s own biography from a specific
ethnographic perspective” and that the writing should “display multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal and the cultural” (p.739).

In my study, I also employ an additional method to further reflection and promote deeper self-discovery: Richardson’s (2000) “CAP ethnography” or Creative Analytic Practices which allows for the writing process itself to become part of the product. It is through these two lenses that I began to make progress in my research. A third lens comes in the form of my thesis advisor’s contributions which appear in the margins of my drafts as notations, and through e-mail correspondence about themes and issues he has found in my writing. This process led to the natural breaks in my thesis writing and it became important to allow each section to remain a bridge to the next.

Framework for Inquiry

I re-entered the world of academia after a fourteen year gap and found I was far removed from the discourse of art education and that new issues entered into the conversations, and I wasn’t familiar with any of them. Visual Culture, social power and privilege, critical theory, pedagogy, and queer theory are a few of the issues now in place and Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE) and multi-culturalism have been left behind. Because of my years away from the discourse, I had an outsider’s view, a simplistic take on some very complex ideas. These questions perplex me:

- Why are theory and practice so unrelated?
• When did “teaching” become “pedagogy?”
• Why could I not decipher the new “language” being used?
• How could I teach “Visual Culture” if I could not define it?
• Has teaching always been a form of social activism?
• How do you research a question you don’t know how to ask?

Overriding these questions is the biggest one of all. How do I fit into this place?

Can I fit in? I wonder this because in this new discourse there seems to be a new villainous term, different from the old buzz words such as “exclusionary” or “western-European exemplars.” The new villain is “privileged” and I am just that. I am white, upper-class, well-educated, well-traveled and conservatively positioned. I am an art educator, but also an art collector with the money to collect the things I covet. The family that surrounds me is even more privileged and has been for generations. My beliefs and values reflect the world I was raised in and still live in.

As I stood on the outside looking in I decided to observe, listen and ask questions about this new academic world. I also decided to pass for something I was not in order to figure out what it was I needed to become. It was in this “passing” that my research question took form. What interests me now is the ebb and flow of navigation and compromise, the moments of confusion and clarity, and the acknowledgement that temporary, transitory thoughts have become transformative and revelatory.
This self-reflective examination focuses on the past year of my academic journey and the multiple roles I perform as I travel. I investigate and excavate the dark thoughts, the enlightening moments, the frustrating truths and nagging doubts that linger still. In order to accomplish this I rebuilt my life from the bottom up, including the historical framework of my four families; the one I was born into, the one I married into, the one created with my husband, and my academic family. They have all influenced the person I am today and to deny one over another would be tantamount to severing a limb. I am a daughter, sister, wife, mother, educator, artist, student and writer and other things I am not sure how to name. Each of these identities plays a part in creating the lens through which I view the world.

I expose my own struggle to craft a pedagogical philosophy born out of instinct, necessity and my on-going graduate coursework. In the end I better understand why I think and believe the way I do, how it informs my teaching and most importantly that, is it possible to pass from one identity to another without losing myself. I do this without using academically distancing vocabulary that in my opinion has no place in a narrative such as this. Rather, I try to relate the understanding, the instructive moments, the uncomfortable engagements with those who see differently, and my responses to them, in a clear but emotionally relevant manner.
Research Question:

“Words are an instrument for thinking” Siegel (1979, as cited in Barrett, 2003). I agree. Writing is how I work through questions. I begin with an idea or thought and as several float across my conscious mind I quickly move to set them down on paper, or in this case into my laptop computer. I find at my age (45) and in my present location (student/educator/wife/mother/volunteer/writer/etc.) I remember better once I commit them to paper or hard drive.

My thesis question comes from many questions and many internal dialogues with myself. When colleagues ask what I am researching, I often stumble to answer in a clear or understandable way. This isn’t good, to have a thesis based around a question I can intuitively see and respond to, but have trouble articulating. I suspect the reason lies in my fear of discovering that the question keeps changing, shifting -- much like my perceptions of it have changed and shifted over the course of my research. I always knew what I was looking for. Stating it simply was the problem. I have used my methodology to help me write my question, instead of the other way around.

I write down what it is I seek to consider, wrestle with or discover. Here I am writing specifically to pin down my thesis question. My question is not an easy one to phrase or identify and therefore the ways in which I seek to research my question are complex in
construction. The only way that makes sense to me is self-reflective autoethnography, a methodology that celebrates writing and narrative as a process of inquiry.

I have already written over 160 pages of research narrative. Each time those pages are read and edited for grammar and content my thesis advisor jump-starts another group of questions I need to think over. I re-read. I reconsider. I try to see what he is seeing. Each time I revise, I come closer to understanding how to frame my thesis question. At this juncture I believe I can articulate my thesis question.

My question: Can I, a “self” socially-constructed through being white, conservative, and economically privileged, craft a socially responsible art education pedagogy outside/ despite myself and teach it with integrity? Is my education as a graduate student changing me? Is teaching changing me? How will I know? Each question begs another. I can see how my research question explores and re-positions my original inquiry. In seeking answers it seems inevitable that new questions surface, disrupt and ripple forth to lap and pull at the edges. The edges are far from neat and uniform and resist my efforts to tidy them up.

By locating myself in the question I acknowledge the inherent problems of truth, validity and perception. I define truth as “describing an event as I believe it happened.” I define validity in the sense that how I feel or react to an event is relative to what I believed to be true. Perception is simply how I see or feel at the time or in retrospect. My truth is not the same as what actually occurred, it can’t be, in that the event is perceived through my own
interpretive lens. Validity relates not to what can be proven, but instead to the reality of the experience. What I experienced and how it informs me is valid. Interpretations of my narrative bring additional questions, different meanings and complicated relationships between what is “real” and what I feel or imagine. The reader shares responsibility, or as Althusser stated (cited in Richardson, 1997), “There is no such thing as an innocent reading; we must ask what reading we are guilty of” (pg.37).

I attempt to smooth down those edges, or ignore them entirely; however, my thesis advisor does not. He points them out, focuses my attention on them, and asks for a more thoughtful acknowledgement of their existence. Some edges are sharp, hurtful and I’d prefer to leave them be. Some are bothersome, like slow-healing paper-cuts I should attend to. Others will remain edges, rough and unruly, as they continue to irritate. I may not be able to smooth those just yet. This is a process and will take as long as it takes. My thesis will need to come to fruition as its deadline looms, but the inquiry will continue beyond.
Literature Review and Rationale

A funny thing happened on the way to this thesis paper; it became something else and my intent and purpose shifted accordingly. What I had originally set out to investigate and the question I planned to research remained intact but the ways in which I found my answers changed. Writing became the catalyst to that change and my wide-angle lens approach needed a microscopic focus instead. I wrote one hundred plus pages of narrative that served to highlight, elude and protect who and what I am. The next hundred are different in that they have been questioned and re-edited using what Richardson (2000) calls “microprocess writing-stories” (p.932). She quotes Bochner (1998) who asks us to consider how re-reading our text “opens new questions and issues that feed back and emanate from the earlier passages” (p.932). Richardson (2000) makes this concept her own by adding to and modifying the process of revision and the scope of writing as a method of inquiry (p. 942-943).

Richardson (1997) states “Writing is a process of discovery” (p. 93) and explains that she writes because “I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something I did not know before I wrote it” (Richardson, 2000, p.924). She calls this process “CAP ethnography” or Creative Analytic Practices and believes the writing process and the writing product are “deeply intertwined, and both are privileged” (p.930). It is in this acknowledgement that the reader comes to ask how the author (self) knows and tells and
the telling itself becomes multi-purposeful. Richardson (2000) states “the deepened understanding of a Self deepens the text” and then allows researchers/writers to “view their work as a process rather than a definitive representation” (p.936).

Richardson (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) tells us she was taught to figure out what she wanted to say and not to write until she had an outline of organized points from which to work. She believes, however, that this “ignores the role of writing as a dynamic, creative process”(p.924). Silverman & Rader (2003) agree with Richardson and state:

We learn about others and ourselves through writing because writing is simultaneously self-exploration and self-explanation. We see ourselves in a larger context. Of course, we may not always like what we discover (perhaps traces of sexism or racism or classism), but uncovering those elements of our personality and understanding them is an extremely rewarding experience. Writing that is honest, candid, and reflective attracts us because those are traits we value (p.9).

The writing process did do many of these things for me but it was the careful reading and questioning by my thesis advisor that allowed new questions to emerge. His notes in the margins of my pages pointed out shifting voice, passive constructions and glossed-over revelations that needed my attention and further emotional honesty. The words he circled and the text he wrote revealed my map of cleverly disguised anger and resentment towards me and others. My pretty words covered my disturbing secrets
and he poked at my long-held beliefs and I re-considered them. I took a break from writing to read about different ways to excavate truth. These books included Martin Moran’s self-reflective memoir *The Tricky Part* (2005), Byron Katie’s *Loving What Is* (2002), and then a second pass at Laurel Richardson’s *Fields of Play* (1997). The previous writing becomes what I call “Part One” and stands alone, edited for grammar, but not altered from the original narrative.

In her book *Fields of Play*, Richardson (1997) argues that the poststructuralist should understand that the “self” and social science are “known through each other” (p.89). Furthermore, she suggests that writing qualitative research helps us acknowledge two important things, “First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said to everyone” (p.89). Richardson also reminds the writer that the self is always embedded within our research, even through our attempts to suppress the self remains “partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves, too” (p.91).

In the research methodology called “self-reflective auto-ethnography” I seek truth through the way I place myself within the narrative, and like Richardson, find that I have at times unconsciously repressed parts of myself. In Part Two I re-read and re-consider my stories, looking out from the hiding places, and seek ways to understand my emotions and to clarify my values. It is in this kind of work that my real learning
takes place. I am learning why I react the way I do, why I think the way I do, and how the things I carry inform my teaching and my life.

Memories seem to be nothing more than revisions of what is believed to be true, and time, distance and emotion all serve to alter or illuminate truths and sometimes to deny them. Denial is a helpful function, allowing for healing or progress to occur, but then eventually whatever is being denied needs to be dragged back to the surface. How it re-surfaces becomes an interesting part of my writing process. I was not aware of my repeating circles of language games until I looked at what my advisor had found in my writing. Much like A.M. Holmes (in Barrett, 2003) looks for the things “implied, but not illustrated” in Eric Fischl’s paintings, I am being asked to “fill in the blanks,” to answer the unanswered questions I was not aware are unanswered (p.67). If I write with casual honestly, what, if anything am I hoping to say? Curious, I begin to re-visit why I write, how I write and who I am trying to reach with my writing.

The second hundred pages have been written from a decidedly different place, a place of deep reflection and more honest consideration for myself and others. I hope the reader will see changes in my writing and note for themselves a voice less constrained by carefully worded language. In my new writings some resistance is still occurring and I am working to press farther into the reasons I still find comfort in resistance and
reluctance. Not all things that inform who I am are open for public considerations, and in those instances I reveal what I can and then only if it has direct bearing on an area of importance for my research.

Telling stories on paper offers the reader and the writer the ability to engage in a unique exchange of thoughts and feelings. Unlike the spoken word a written narrative allows us to re-visit, re-interpret and re-consider the author’s efforts over time. The outcome of that interpretation will be singular and exclusive, a personal response, until shared with others when it can become something else all over again. I like this idea. It helps me come to terms with telling the truth (as I experience my truth) for my own purposes without attaching much worry to how it may be perceived. DeZengotitia (2005) writes “one may lease, as it were, a reading, but one never buys, for multiple interpretations are bound to multiply, and definitive documentation, no historical condition or authorial intent will ever secure a settled meaning and resolve the play of language” (p.32). In other words, I will write and others will use my words as they see fit. Fair enough, but in order to engage readers I must write in a fashion that keeps them reading, and tell stories that are relatable and real. Narrative works in a binary fashion: it serves to tell others and according to Richardson (1997) it “is the primary way through which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (p.27). I hope that by telling my story, others will find useful connections to their own work, their own lives and the lives of others.
Part One:

Academic Self-Reflections

The early years were marked by one immutable fact. We moved a lot. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and after that lived in Morton, Illinois, Irvine, California, Dallas, Houston, and finally, Peoria, Illinois. This trend would continue in my marriage and added Memphis, Tennessee, Raleigh, North Carolina, Los Angeles, California, Columbus, Ohio, Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Columbus (a second time) to the list of places I’ve called home. The commonality here is that both my father and my husband work for Fortune 500 Corporations that rely heavily on the transfer of employees. As a result I have become adaptable, chameleon-like in my abilities to transform myself and fit in. It has also left me with some serious gaps in my educational journey: one I can attribute to my self-diagnosed math dyslexia, and conversely, my love of books. My surroundings and friends might change but my book friends went with me.

My interests are varied and reflect my nomadic childhood. Beatrix Potter was my first great love in both literature and illustration. My earliest attempts at drawing involved recreating her calming, muted watercolors. They still move me today and I have traveled to see her work in museums. My children, of course, were force fed a steady diet of her small green books. I had a brief Native American phase which eventually led to all things
“western.” Later, it was Nancy Drew that kept me up at night. By high school I’d moved on to biographies and history, mostly Russian and English ruling class, with an occasional foray into Austria.

I am reading one such book now called *Born to Rule* by Julia P. Gelardi (2005) which brings all of these classes together through the granddaughters of Queen Victoria. The women married into dynasties all over Europe, including Alexandra, the murdered Russian Tsarina. I mention this book only because my mother used to tell me when I was particularly obstinate (often) that I was “born to rule,” just not her principality. My superiority dissipated during the onset of puberty and the discovery of boys. Girl becoming woman also coincides with my sudden shyness, passive academic involvement and emerging desire to become an artist. It was also during this period that I began to write. A group of my middle school friends started a secret writing group and we published our own journal. We also wrote fictional tales of romantic longing that would put Emily Bronte to shame. What I would give to re-read one of those now that I have actual knowledge of sex. We passed around our novellas for other members to read. The writing group ended when one of these lengthy tear-jerkers found its way into a male classmate’s hand. Humiliation ensued and we disbanded, ashamed of being found out and of the sensual content.

I had not thought about those novellas for years until three years ago when on a whim I decided to try my hand at writing an intelligent, character driven romance novel. I cranked the first one out in less than six weeks. The second one in four weeks. I’ve since
written three others, each placed in different times and settings. I didn’t read any how-to guides or any of the other helpful hints books. I started with two names on a page, followed by a place and time. I pictured two people, a man and a woman, and then imagined sitting in their room watching and listening. I wrote down in great detail what I saw and heard. I imagined the internal thoughts between the silences and wrote those as well. These characters began to tell their own tale, sometimes clogging my thoughts as I drove or did laundry. Some nights I barely slept as a new obstacle presented itself to these people. The story didn’t always go where I expected or wanted. These people took on a life of their own and I merely recorded it. At least at the time I believed I was merely recording. Later, as this thesis process continued I located the truth.

My writing fascinated me and angered my family who found my distraction intolerable. I seemed driven by the process and ignored my usual duties of motherhood and marriage. When I finally let someone read one they were stunned to know I had it in me, claimed they weren’t sure they ever really knew me and then begged to read another one. Allowing someone to read one was an act of bravery because they are at times sexually graphic and troubling, possibly revealing something about myself I wasn’t aware of or might be ashamed of. A new thought occurred, what if my writing reveals less about me and more about the reader as they interpret and digest. My writing is not so much about my thoughts and feelings as it is about the reader’s thoughts and feelings. I am merely a facilitator. My latest book has moved me to the point of letting go of all my imagined restraints, like that my father needs to be dead before anyone sees them in print, or that
others will judge me. I simply no longer care because I don’t think I’m writing for others at this stage. I’m testing my writing legs and seeing if I can stand on them alone. What I don’t possess at this point is the time to do something with them, because now I am writing this thesis. Someday. Or maybe never. It doesn’t matter; I like writing them for fun.

Artistically, high school became my proving grounds. I won several Scholastic Art Awards, a city-wide advertising design contest, and a scholarship to attend summer art school at the University of Kansas. The rest of my school work was less promising. A brief academic turnabout came thanks to one of those transformational moments when a teacher says something that redirects what you believe of yourself. I think of two teachers often, and of how a few minutes and words can do so much good or in some instances, destroy. As a teacher myself, I keep these former educators in mind when I work with my own students. On any given day I can make or break their still fluctuating self-esteem and I remain on alert that I err on the supportive side.

My English teacher encouraged me to take Honors English. She said she saw something there that could be developed and was sure I was up to the challenge. I was, and suddenly late in my high school years, I again began to believe I was smart. My Latin teacher, Mr. Lonteen, asked me what colleges I was considering and after I told him, he shook his head and said “Too easy…why not Illinois Wesleyan? They have a great Art department
and you could minor in English.” My senior year I had my best grade point, but too little too late: IWU accepted me but on probationary admittance. I was back to feeling dumb again.

Art Major Meets Sorority Sisters

I had to send a portfolio to IWU to get accepted into the School of Fine Arts. I did and they deemed it good enough to let me in. I also expressed an interest in the soon to be created Graphic Design focus. Printmaking was my area, and pen and ink drawing, so I signed up for classes in both. General Psychology was my third class. (Probation means only taking three classes.)

I arrived as a sheltered small town girl. My public high school was rural and small, my graduating class consisted of 89 kids. Our valedictorian used her scholarship money to go to beauty school. It was not college prep and I often wonder why my affluent parents let me be educated there. I was one of a few wealthy kids, and we stuck out like corn in a soybean field (Future Farmers of America was by far our largest club). The college I was headed to was private, expensive and although also in the middle of an agricultural area, it was populated by students from the big city, Chicago. This was a place I was sure I would fit into eventually, just not in the Art department as it turns out. College became two separate things. Social and then the rest of it.

I feel now I must set the stage in order for you to get the full experience of the social politics on campus. It was the late seventies; “hippie” was on its way out and “preppy”
and Reagan were just warming up. I was monogrammed from head to toe. Kilts, Bass Wejun Penny loafers and Bermuda bags ruled the quad. So did Greek life and I pledged into a sorority. I looked like most of my fellow students, but not at all like my art major contemporaries. I was the only sorority girl in the School of Fine Arts and I looked the part. It never occurred to me at the time that I was expected to change who I was or how I dressed to study art. Naïve to social politics, I wore my wealth without considering the message it conveyed. My printmaking instructor pulled me aside one day and suggested I might want to dress down for class, correctly pointing out how permanently dirty acid and ink could be. I responded by wearing one Dad’s button-down shirts over my clothes. I had not been directed to change clothes in my high school art class; we simply put on a smock for class. I now realize he was trying to help me fit in but I felt it as something judgmental and declined to change. How I dressed at the time reflected who I thought I was and I could not fathom suddenly looking like “them” in order to be taken seriously. It was a stubborn mistake on my part which only further served to set me “outside” the group.

My conservative, sheltered upbringing also hindered my ability to assimilate. Second semester freshman year I enrolled in the required course “Life and Figure Drawing” and was not at all prepared for what it entailed. I grew up in a house full of girls. My father was a modest person who grew up in a house full of boys and now with daughters, kept “under wraps.” Without brothers, the internet or other opportunities for full disclosure, I had a rather disturbing image in my mind for the male genitalia...the fig leaf. The reproductions I had seen in high school were limited to those deemed acceptable to the
school and that meant only if adorned with some kind of covering. No one actually said
"This is a fig leaf covering the penis." So, naturally, I believed the penis was a stingray-
like appendage, and the idea that it sometimes expanded (as I'd heard) was scary. I
learned I was mistaken before I left for college. The correct knowledge did not help me
much, however, with the experience of seeing one in a fluorescent-lighted classroom
along with 18 strangers as the model posed nude. I was further dismayed, as was the
instructor, when this penis kept changing and we were erasing, drawing and then erasing
again. Apparently, the model enjoyed the experience of modeling. I must have looked
completely shocked because the instructor approached me during the break and addressed
the issue. He was a nice man, a personable guy that I enjoyed as an instructor, but my
own father had never uttered the word "penis" in front of me and now this man was. I
was unclear how to respond. I felt flustered and stammered away about not having
brothers or something. I could tell he felt concern for me but also found it funny. He
talked about this particular male body part with a casualness I had not imagined possible.
This was my first glimpse into a world where frank conversations about what I normally
would not find in conversation were commonplace and giggling was frowned upon.
Talking to a grown man about it was disturbing and I excused myself quickly to rejoin
the class. Later, when carefully telling the story to my parents, my father took issue with
my continuing in this major and wanted to call the Dean. My mother and I talked him
down and I finished the year.
More Uncomfortable Sex Talk

I was surprised to find, some twenty-six years later, that I still find that casual frankness about sex and sexual images unnerving. I was attending my first academic conference as a graduate student in the fall of 2004 when I revisited that warm flush of embarrassment. The Ohio State University hosted an inter-disciplinary event centering on Visual Culture. Many of the “rock stars” of the academic world were in attendance. I was assigned to work the registration table and attended many of the talks and presentations given that weekend. Some of our own faculty were presenting, including Dr. James Sanders, who spoke on queer theory and used graphic sexual imagery in his PowerPoint. I am not a prude by nature; I’ve watched porn, read sexually explicit materials and consider myself fairly open about such matters. My issues take form around the idea of doing so in a public forum, with strangers if you will, and how uncomfortable it feels. I wondered if the same message could be presented without the huge, black erection on the overhead. I confess, I was in the hall, often distracted by my duties at the table, so the context may have made some difference…but still, a huge, black penis? I thought back on my own innocence, how that discovery was taken from me, and how it feels to have an image forced upon you without warning. (note: On the advisor edited page of my early draft the words “frankness, unnerving, a prude by nature, I am not, fairly open,” and “how that discovery was taken from me” were all circled to point out a pattern of word choice.)

In today’s multi-media, million bytes a second world, images are forced upon us with such regularity I am convinced we barely feel them at all. Sex, violence and horrific images of suffering that pass by without allowing for reflection or engagement, or most
importantly, dialogue. This is when visual culture as a discourse begins to make sense to me. Teaching others how to actively see, interpret and respond to the images they engage with and what, if anything, to do with them. I worry over this when dealing with my own children. My thirteen-year old daughter will never be fooled by the “fig leaf” thanks to the penis-filled porn pop-ups that have at times plagued our computer. She may, unfortunately for whoever the guy is, think they should all be that large and hairless. She has seen her dad naked enough times to know it’s not always the case. My eighteen year old son poses another vexing problem, one I have actually addressed with my class; that being the unnatural appearance of women in the porn he downloads, not to mention the graphic acts the subjects are often engaging in. I’m not referring to regular old sex, but strange stuff: vegetables used for penetration, or girls in small, plaid skirts urinating for the camera. I asked my husband (I figured talking to Mom would freak my son out) to explain to our son that not all women are into this sort of thing, especially not the girls he dates, and that he should not expect all women to have artfully sculpted pubic hair. It was important to us that he understands the difference between “real” women and the constructed images he was viewing.

One morning I took my class to Hopkins Hall Gallery to see an exhibit by MFA students at the university. One set of photographs were explicit and sheltered from view by a divider. I mentioned that no one had to view them, explained that they were female nudes, and some of them involved images of violence. My own experience had made me conscious of the idea of forced engagement, and while it is highly unlikely that most of
these internet-savvy college students would be offended by them, I do occasionally have a Muslim or other religious student who might be. (note: editing notations show I am repeatedly using the word force.)

Everyone went in to view them. We discussed the imagery, the use of color-tint on the otherwise black and white photos, and the implied violence within the subject matter. One girl kept saying they bugged her; she couldn’t stand looking at them. I pressed her as to what was bothering her, hoping she’d land upon an interpretation we could talk about as a group. What she said took me by surprise. “She needs a bikini-wax…I can’t stand the way her hair isn’t taken care of.”

The nude was indeed in possession of what I would describe as natural pubic hair. It was not shaved into a “landing strip” or otherwise artificially dealt with. Normal. But not to my students, who have grown up with images of highly airbrushed, highly “landscaped” women designed for sexual viewing pleasure, and this bothered me. So when we got back to the classroom I broached the subject of female sexual representation and body image. I learned something from them. Apparently the trend is moving from barely there hair to no hair. The Brazilian Bikini wax was described to me by a female student. I had actually heard of it, just not the details of the process, which involves removal of all hair. One can imagine the position and painful process a woman endures to receive one. I felt sad, realizing that the girls in my class thought this was okay, and that many of the males in the class preferred this representation. I mentioned how one-sided
this grooming seemed and one student explained that men were now “man-scaping” as well because the removal of pubic hair makes the penis appear larger. I had nothing further to say…and felt incredibly old.

Back to Art School

An event that stands out in my memory is the moment art school died for me. The event took place the fall of my sophomore year. My sculpture class was meeting outside the building on a sunny afternoon. I remember vividly how the quad looked, the trees dressed in autumnal colors, the grass was the faded gold that welcomes winter, and all I wanted to do was sit and enjoy it. Instead, we were gathered around a sheet covered object for a student critique of a sculpture. The student pulled off the covering and I could hardly believe my eyes. My description follows:

A dead Ficus tree, stripped of all its leaves, had been set into a large bucket of plaster of Paris to hold it upright. Hanging from the branches were small plastic sandwich bags tied in a scattered arrangement about the tree. Inside the bags were parts of a dismembered squirrel. A real squirrel. Tail, legs, a head and a few other not so recognizable parts. Each bag had a bit of condensation as if still humid, or warm, implying a recent death or maybe just decay.
“Did you kill it?” I croaked out, “Please tell me you found it...like road kill.”

“It’s irrelevant,” the artist answered smugly. I glanced over at the instructor; surely he’d have an opinion about this blatant disrespect for an animal. He did, but not as I had hoped. “How it was created is beside the point, we are here to address the work on its merits.” But I couldn’t get past the squirrel, how it had perished, how he took it apart and most importantly, why. “Why?” was my first question. “It’s a metaphor...” the student replied as his hand swept out toward the quad, playground of both the college students and the squirrel. “The squirrel uses the tree, taking from it, removing its leaves, nuts, hiding out in its limbs.” Someone else spoke. “So, it’s like the tree takes revenge...”

Everyone nods as if it is all clear now. But to me it wasn’t clear. It was sick, a mean-spirited attempt to be clever and shocking. I felt strangely removed then, as if I was watching a play in a language I couldn’t accept. I looked around wanting to find a face that seemed as troubled as mine, to acknowledge that this was not art, but instead watched my classmates move closer and circle the tree to examine it. I had a huge lump in my throat, but refused to cry. I wasn’t exactly sure what I was feeling but it was somewhat like grief. My place was not to be found here. I simply didn’t belong with these people. I didn’t think like these people. The person I am today would have said something, voicing my opinion and asking him to defend his position. The girl who stood there that warm afternoon needed much more life ahead of her to gain the confidence to speak up. I still don’t know if he killed the squirrel, but I do know he dismembered it, and later included photographs of the act in his senior exhibition. Where is PETA when you need them?
This episode was the beginning of the end, but I knew better than to tell my parents. A story like this was all my Dad would need to convince him I was in the wrong place. I was floundering as an art student, the graphic design department had grown to include one class and didn’t even have the proper equipment to work with, my studio was empty because I preferred to work in the study space at my sorority house and my days seemed numbered as I lost any connection to the School of Fine Arts. I attended class but remained disengaged in the community I was supposed to belong to.

*Letters Home and Elsewhere*

During research for this thesis I came across a box of items my Mom had gathered from the closet of my former bedroom. She said she didn’t have the heart to throw any of them out. Inside I found many of my art awards from High School, artwork from both High School and College, photos from events at both places and most surprising, letters I’d written home to my family. I read them with interest and found myself amazed at how my sense of humor was already developed and similar to the way I respond today. I don’t recall writing home much, but here was proof that I had. In them I often glossed over the issues I was dealing with academically, but later refer to my mom helping me with my relationship with my boyfriend. I also talk a lot about money, a perennial college problem as I often wrote checks without asking if there were funds to cover them, and poke fun at myself. Even the envelopes had funny messages written on them.
Revisiting these letters brought on several reflections about who I am and how I chose to present myself. It also pointed out how memory functions or doesn’t. One Christmas about five years ago my Mom gave me a scrapbook filled with letters I had written to my Grandparents (on my Father’s side). They started when I first was able to write a simple thank-you note and stopped just before I gave birth to my first child in 1987. My Grandmother passed away when I was seven months pregnant with my son and she had kept all of my correspondence, which were not found until my Grandfather passed ten years later. What stunned me as I read them was the fictional quality they had. I had somehow created a safe space in which I allowed them into my life, an un-naturally perfect representation of my activities and interests. Perhaps these were edited by my parents, as in “put more stuff in there...tell them about that thing you made in ceramics class.” The letters have an alien quality. I don’t know that person. My voice seems oddly removed and the events and activities aren’t ones I recall with much clarity. The last years before her death were more recognizable, more me, but respectful. Humor had little to do with my writings to them.

What these letters point out to me is the way we construct our voice in writing, how we employ language in specific ways to produce the voice we wish to be heard, and how each of us reads voice in ways that may not be intended. For example, e-mail is becoming the preferred method of communication, a form of communication that is hard for me to warm up to. It has all sorts of rules for expression which I have not taken the time to learn and probably should. I prefer communicating face-to-face. I need visual cues, tone and the ability to look confused so that clarification can be offered. I need
body language, eye contact and other helpful expressive gestures. I enjoy the give and take of minds working together in a meeting, in the classroom or even over coffee. E-mail will never do that for me. Like a letter, it allows for one voice in the conversation, but often times they are short and take on an abrupt quality that leads me to wonder the real tone intended. It is a symptom of our over scheduled, too busy to talk or connect lives and reflects our society in general. These quick bullets of text that give information and little else don’t hold a candle to the art of the well-crafted letter.

The written word is meant to be savored, returned to and relished. No one seems to write letters anymore. Seeing my life chronicled in letters, real or imagined, gave me pause to reflect on what they had meant to the people who received them. Had I made them laugh or smile? Did they feel worried about how I was feeling or doing? Did they look past the words and feel the unsaid? Can they sense I’m writing out of duty or love? Letters, diaries and journals are the tools that assist the historian in re-building a person, place or time. Lovers re-read letters full of longing, hope and promise written by the hand of the person they love. I saved all the letters my husband wrote to me, each one a window into that time in our relationship. Some are angry, sad. Others are hopeful and loving. Some talk of the future, some talk of our past. Some are just sweet. I cherish that I have them, written in his hand with the crossed out words and misspellings included. They are real and mine. They show where we were and how we got to this place, now. I doubt an e-mail will ever hold that much wonder and resonance. (note: My advisor shares his differing views on e-mail and relationships in the margins. After many months of back and forth e-mails with him I begin to see his point.)
Costly Decisions

Although I was not feeling valued in the art department, on campus I was well known for my art skills. I designed a poster with a birds-eye view of campus and the surrounding hang-outs which was produced and printed by area businesses. I designed t-shirt logos for various Greek events across campus, was asked to design a brochure for an upcoming conference and painted small boxes as gifts that sororities ordered for rush week parties. I began to excel at the social aspects of college life and slowly pulled away from the academic. I didn’t feel valued in the academic part of college and wasn’t at all surprised when no one came looking for me. The faculty felt it was better if I faded away as well. Very simply, I flunked out.

I went home at the end of junior year and told my parents I was not going to return to school, despite my strong social ties, I could not stand the art department and was pretty sure they felt a similar dislike for me. I had another compelling reason for leaving; an important catalyst at play the last two years at IWU, my boyfriend (now husband of 24 years) was graduating and moving to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We aren’t good at being apart (still) and he asked me to move to Lancaster to live with him. My conservative parents, clearly reeling over my three years of college without completion said “no” or more specifically “over our dead bodies.” Not wishing to see me orphaned, my boyfriend asked me to marry him. Since this proposal took place over the phone I did not take it as a real proposal. A week later a small package arrived from his Grandmother and inside
was a diamond engagement ring, one of several his family would later allow me to choose from, however this one did not carry the stigma of divorce. (note: the largest diamond ring came from the worst marriage, so we passed on it.)

We married in December of 1981 and the tuition that would have been spent on my senior year at IWU was instead spent on my wedding. My husband-to-be promised my father I would return to school at some point and complete my degree. That would not occur until 1989, between child one and child two, and then only because a major university was in our backyard.

Memphis was our first home as newlyweds. I had lived in the south before, even learning to ditch my Texas twang in favor of a slightly toned down mid-western accent, but much to my husband’s dismay the “Y’all” returned to me, easily. I was able to “pass” while he remained an identifiable “Yankee.” The southern way mystified him, especially in light of the fact that racial divisions were so prevalent and in many ways untouched by civil rights progress. It felt different than my years in Texas where most racial divides centered on the migrant population. Texas always felt like its own country; one that hadn’t quite come to terms with being attached to the rest of the United States. In Memphis things felt old; the trees, the history, the values and the traditions. We often found ourselves lured into the slow sweetness of life, a pace that begged us to wait a little longer and look for the simple gifts of time. The old south was present in overt ways, troubling me and at the
same time comforting me. It's hard to put into words, the exact feelings, but I had the sense I walked with ghosts. I recall that the air was often heavy (humid, in reality) and took on a presence of its own. History, ugly as it was, permeated the place.

Privilege was a way of life for most of the Memphis friends we had. My husband's job connected us socially to one of the most prominent businessmen in Memphis. He asked to meet me early on and we sat in his big office in a converted cotton building downtown. He asked if I wanted to work. I said "Yes, I expected to, we needed the money to help qualify for a house loan." He must have filed that away for later because we got our house loan without the usual steps, he simply drove by the house we planned to buy and called my husband to say he approved of the location (mid-town, an up and coming area of renovated 1920's homes near Overton Park) and magically, we had loan approval. For my job, he suggested retail management at Goldsmiths department store. He then picked up the phone and called the President of Goldsmiths. The following week at my work orientation one of the retail Buyers said to me "I'm just curious... who do you know?" I knew what they were asking and answered, "Don Drinkard." He nodded and smiled knowingly. "Well, good for you, honey." I may have been from up North, but I had managed to find myself well-connected and many doors remained open to me in that regard.

One thing that stuck with me all these years was that although this was the most racially mixed city I have ever lived in, it was also the most segregated. I worked with several African-American women in my job but our worlds never intersected outside those walls.
It was made clear to me on both sides that to do so would not be welcome. The single most unsettling thing I encountered on a regular basis was the fact that older Black gentlemen would not look me in the eye when we spoke. They had been taught not to. The more they tried to avoid my gaze the more I wanted to force that connection, for the simple reason that it felt important to me that they know I see them. It turns out it was a selfish move on my part and actually put them at risk with any white southern man who happened to see the interchange. Some had been fired for neglecting this unwritten code. There were lots of codes like that, many I never did figure out, but they had a purpose in the Memphis culture.

Late one summer evening my husband and I went to the venerable Peabody Hotel in downtown Memphis for a drink atop the sky deck. It turned out the observation deck was closed for a private event, but somehow another elevator deposited us anyway. We stepped out and the years rushed back as we found ourselves in the midst of one of the secret societies that surrounded the cotton trade. It was a masked ball, everyone was dressed in antebellum clothing and the ballroom and terrace were ablaze with candles and lanterns. It was truly magical, despite the ominous undertones of an event that pre-dated the Civil War, and we tried to blend into the edges to watch the festivities unfold. One strange sight was a man with a large mascot head fashioned to look like a bizarre rodent or bug. We learned later it was a boll weevil, an insect known to wreak havoc with cotton crops, and the man sporting the headpiece was the newly crowned King of the secret club. Eventually we left and a few weeks later mentioned the event to friends from a well-known Memphis family. They were shocked we had witnessed it, that the society
we happened upon was deeply secreted and would be horrified to know an outsider had seen it, a couple of Yankee outsiders at that. We noted that they seemed upset about it and we decided not to ask further questions.

While we remember Memphis fondly for many reasons; the food, friends and the elegant southern manners, we also left there knowing a palatable sadness concerning the past that many wanted to uphold and protect. We have not been back since and I often wonder if the twenty-two years have made any appreciable difference. I would begin to think a lot about that time in my life when I started to teach and introduced my class to the work of African-American artists Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles. I felt the connectedness of time and place resonate as each artist described their own emotions and the wounds of racism they bore. Memphis began to decay a bit in my memories as the story-book pretty horrors in Walker’s silhouettes shadowed my perceptions and held a torch to history by illuminating truth in awful clarity. Black on white, white on black. The line between cut so precisely... separate and finely wrought. “Genteel” is one of the words Walker uses in her interview in the Art:21 (2003) series and Webster’s (1998) has several definitions listed, the most compelling being #5, “marked by false delicacy.” Her work makes that same claim. The viewer is pulled into this “genteel” southern silhouette for a closer look and then flinches as the images register. My memories of Memphis are like that now, too.

Having lived in Memphis, and several other southern locales, gives me an understanding that I believe enlightens the experience of interpreting Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles. I can’t experience it in the same way an African-American might, but I can
perhaps make connections that someone raised in the North may not have access to. I use my memories of the south and my time living there to bridge that divide with my students. I find storytelling useful for making certain moments come alive, to help them see and feel some of what I knew to be true. Many students have told me later that it is the stories I use to illustrate a point that they connect to and then in turn make their own memory connections. This way of teaching comes to me naturally, an instinct born from my personal love of writing and telling stories. I did not consciously know this until I was introduced to the constructivist theory in a Museum Education class and found the tenets of this theory to be useful and supported by my classroom experience. In “The Constructivist Museum” George Hein states “It is not only difficult but almost impossible to learn something without making an association with familiar categories” (Hein, 1998, p.156). He then goes on to say that by leading the learner down a comfortable, familiar path of the known, one can then make the leap to venture further, perhaps step off the path or look down another one...a different way of knowing and connecting.

I tell my students early in each quarter that I am not going to “teach” them anything. It’s up to me to try to make each lesson relevant, interesting and engaging. If I accomplish this then my hope is they will construct learning and meaning making for themselves. I like this theory for a lot of reasons, but the best one is that it puts the work on their shoulders, not mine. I’m not being flip here, I am truly concerned with the number of students today who want everything spelled out for them, detailed accounts of exactly what I want in a paper or presentation, seemingly unable to strike out on their own. Why they do this is a whole different thesis, but my goal is to encourage them to take risks.
with their writing and to see each assignment as an opportunity, not a checklist. It is what I believe, but in all honesty I tend to look for guidelines as well in my own coursework, even for this thesis I spent a good deal of time researching who does narrative inquiry, how they do it and in what format. My students and I are alike in this way and I try to remember that I might be their instructor, but I am also a student with the same struggles and deadlines to meet. I remind them that inquiry is not a set of defined steps, rather it a process that is uniquely driven by the person they are. In other words, I cannot offer them a map for that journey. By writing that very thought down it reminded me to chart my own course for this thesis, move down each path to its natural conclusion and then step bravely off into the tangled underbrush.

**Lessons from Los Angeles**

Los Angeles was the last city we wanted to get transferred to and of course it’s exactly where we had to go. Housing was hideously expensive and we ended up in a new condo despite our love of old architecture and historic neighborhoods. Our time in L.A. ran the full spectrum of life experience. We still mourn our loss of eternal sunshine, the strange gold light that seemed to gild the entire topography, and the laid-back lifestyle. We don’t miss the smog or the earthquakes, and especially the traffic. Our son was born there in 1987, a quick two hour labor (lucky) that resulted in a ten pound baby (not so lucky). He was five months old when we experienced out first real serious earthquake, a 6.7 magnitude quake that killed three people and profoundly changed us. There is no stranger feeling than having the earth beneath your feet, house or car move in such a violent manner. It defies everything you believe you can count on and then it continues to haunt
you for days with aftershocks. But then nothing about L.A. is on solid footing, not the
values, the people or the constant obsession with celebrity. The valuable lessons I try to
pass on to my students is the “unreal” quality of fame.

I worked for Nordstrom department stores before I had our son, in Cosmetics and also as
a part-time personal shopper. Celebrities were not uncommon, not at work or in my
normal day-to-day life. My interactions with them taught me several things I like to share
with my students. First, they are just like you and me. They have the same insecurities
and problems we do; the only difference is they have access to the best make-up artists,
lighting, wardrobe stylists and trainers. Second, the resulting photo is retouched, or
digitized and manipulated until it hardly resembles reality at all. One of my students was
inspired by this and did her final presentation on the HDTV technology and the uproar
from celebrities on how it captures every imperfection and amplifies them. We all got a
hoot out of seeing Cameron Diaz with zits and Michael Douglas looking like Dorian
Gray. The bad news is Catherine Zeta-Jones actually looked more perfect, and a few
others probably will, too. High Definition may drive an even more unattainable
perfection.

Body image issues seem to be a major topic with the women in my classes, a troubling
number of my female students already battle eating disorders and self-esteem problems.
One of the best impromptu discussions my class had took place during a presentation on
“The Incredible Shrinking Starlet” (Shroyer, 2005) in which the student presented us with
image after image of female celebrities who had gone from normal to emaciated, and
then the resulting increase of starring roles after breast implant surgery. One male student said, "I don’t get why girls think they have to starve or get fake boobs to get guys." A female asked him if he had posters of women in his dorm room. He said he did and then she wanted to know if his girlfriend felt threatened by those images. He said no, and the female student countered with “How do you know? What kind of message are you giving her by having those women on your wall?” I thought this was some good stuff and let the class debate both sides for awhile. What was clear after we concluded was that the males didn’t think women were affected by the unrealistic standards set by the media and the females disagreed strongly. I highly doubt what happened in class will circumvent an eating disorder or body image problem, but it did spark a lot of strong emotions on both sides and hopefully some lingering thoughts about representation and identity formation as it relates to media influence.

**Familial Foundations**

Family is a funny construct. You are born into one (or adopted) and no one really has a say in what it consists of. The good news is at some point your involvement is optional if need be. I’m lucky in that respect as all of my four families have offered me shelter, acceptance and support. Some better than others, but still, I’ll claim them all. When I think about identity construction and family influence several people come to mind, the first being my sister and I. We are three years apart in age (I’m older) and yet worlds apart in the way we live our lives. How can this be? We were both raised in the same house with the same married parents parenting. We don’t look at all alike, she’s brown eyed and blonde, taller by several inches and our body types are complete opposites.
Many times in my heinous sisterly way I insisted she was adopted, but truth is I look like our Dad and she takes after our Mom. This is odd to me now because my own children are a perfect blend of my husband and me, a hybrid; in that they look so much like each other it’s weird. There is no single genetic thread that appears to connect me to my sister, except that we are in fact biological sisters. Now that we are grown my mother often jokes about the social differences, “How did I raise a blue collar daughter in a white collar house?” She’s referring to my sister, who loves NASCAR racing, Jimmy Buffet concerts and Wal-Mart. So how did this happen? Its simple…we left home and life changed us, molded us and directed us in ways that are notably different. The foundation was the same but little is left to be seen as new layers are added, renovated or dismantled entirely. I wish to examine, excavate and consider how my four families intersect and diverge as time progresses and try to figure out when and how I became someone other than who I used to be.

*Mom and Dad*

My parents are from Minneapolis, Minnesota, both are of Scandinavian stock, one Swedish and the other Norwegian. I will spare you the litany of dumb Norwegian jokes my Swedish father would regale us with while my mother pretended not to care, besides Garrison Keillor already makes a nice living doing just that. My father is one of two boys raised by Milton and Inez Andersen. The boys spent summers up in Blackduck, Minnesota at the original family homestead just as their father had. They remember running from bears, walking with rifles for protection and shooting moose. The also remember mosquitoes as big as moose. My grandfather was one of the first employees at
Northwest Airlines and did everything from taking tickets to loading luggage. We have an old black and white photograph of him with Eleanor Roosevelt as he carried her bags.

My grandmother cooked as if her life depended on it. She was a stern woman who expressed love through food. My father and Grandfather saw her as sainted, my mother, sister and I are still wondering why. Perhaps she was not comfortable with girls. My father left for Germany at seventeen to earn college tuition on the G.I. bill during the Allied occupation. When he returned he enrolled at the University of Minnesota and majored in Political Science. He met my mom in a college bar. While my father’s upbringing was traditional from its gender roles to its devoutly Lutheran beliefs, my mother’s was not.

My mom was born a Ringer, a well-respected wealthy family that owned Ringer Sewing Machine Company. Unfortunately for her, her father was the disowned black sheep of the family who fancied himself part-Native American (he was not). My mom says this story may come from his time as a rodeo rough rider in a traveling Wild West show where he worked with many Indians and adopted some of their ways. The family was not well-off and both parents worked to make ends meet. My grandmother had already been divorced twice so my mom had two older half-siblings from different fathers. She says they hated her because she was the product of this new marriage and felt they liked my mom better.

My grandmother was a fairly strong woman and during a period of my grandfather’s unemployment she got a civil service job and bought a house without his knowledge or assistance. When she told him about the purchase he inquired as to whether he was allowed to live there. He was. They were Christian Scientists and when my grandfather
caught the Asian flu from my then eighteen year old mom, he died from his illness. My mom remembers the Church Practioners coming over and telling them his belief had not been strong enough. Organized religion died on that day for my mom and later in my life that would prove important. My grandmother took in boarders to stay in their house and did not re-marry. She remained a devout Christian Scientist and became a “reader” in the last decades of her life. Soon after her father’s death my mom met my dad and got married. I was born a year later on January 17th, 1960.

My dad still attended the University of Minnesota and drove a Caterpillar tractor on the weekends or after classes. My mom worked nights as a waitress while my dad studied and took care of me. When he graduated, Caterpillar hired him into their management program. He would spend his entire career with them and move us all over the country as he moved up the corporate ladder. He retired in 2000 at the age of 63. Glen Barton, the just retired CEO of Caterpillar, is his closest friend and constant golf partner. I mention this because later a graduate school classmate and I have a heated confrontation over this strange coincidence.

My mom stayed home to raise her two girls until we were in high school, and then she decided to find a job. Without a college degree she was limited as to her employment choices and settled for a position as an activity director in a nursing home. She moved up quickly to become Director of several nursing homes. I was often forced to work at her nursing home during summer breaks and busied myself by reading the confidential patient charts before I re-filed them. I loved the stories I’d read about their lives and came
to see the residents through a more empathetic lens. I also concocted versions of what their lives were like when they were young, and wrote them down to fill the time.

Eventually my mom was hired by the State of Illinois to inspect nursing homes and this in turn led to her final occupation, Director of Elder Abuse for Women’s Strength, a non-profit agency that shelters abused women and their children. Her work was rewarding, but at times dangerous and disturbing. My dad asked her to step down and she did.

Now she freelances as a consultant hired to put on sensitivity training in police stations and courtrooms to illustrate the disabilities seniors often face when dealing with the justice system. During these seminars she and her staff “disable” the participants with vision problems, hearing loss and mobility challenges and then enact a mock trial to enlighten the courts as to the needs of the elderly. She achieved all of this without a college degree and is one of the most naturally intuitive people I know. She can talk to anyone and make them feel important and valued. She is also where my art talent comes from. Her mother and sister are both painters and have been for as long as I can recall.

My mom paints and draws more now that she’s retired and has been after me to get back to painting or something creative, including writing.

My parents modeled a happy, balanced marriage for me and my sister. They’re affectionate towards each other and they spoke of love often. While my dad seemed the dominate party, we girls learned that women often wield a more subtle but equally effective power base, a lesson I use in my own marriage today. I had a conservative youth, politically speaking, but one devoid of religion. It was offered to us as a choice
and my sister and I both explored it. For me it was a quick inquiry, for my sister it stuck
and later she would be the only family member with church ties. One of us (me) has a
balanced, happy marriage the other does not. Our value systems are very different as are
the lives we lead and how we choose to live them. We have little in common now, other
than our parents, and every June when we get together at our family home the divide
seems deeper. My sister speaks disparagingly about the materialistic life I lead and I
shrug it off as jealousy. I am at times embarrassed by her dress and demeanor. So is my
mother. I once told my mother that I would not pick my sister as a friend. It is safe to say
she might feel the same about me. I wonder if that can or will ever change.

As my parents get older they seem even more conservative, but in reality it may be that I
am getting more liberal in my views and values. My father is Republican and believes in
a strong military. He, like many men his age, has problems talking about homosexuality,
and still thinks it is okay to poke fun at. Over the years I would have expected this to
become more pronounced as many of his other conservative positions have, but this isn’t
the case. My parents live on a beautiful private lane up on the Peoria River bluff. The
street called “Stony Broke,” is well-known for the seven American Gothic-styled homes
that grace it. They were built around the same time when a wealthy antiques-dealer
named Pauline cut a gravel road through an apple orchard and built her house and shop
on the lane. Family followed and added a few more gingerbread trimmed houses to the
street. The houses tend to stay in family or get sold behind the scenes to waiting families
of a certain caliber, an unwritten co-op board, if you will. One house in particular has
always had a gay couple living in it. In the past they were, as my dad would say, “quietly
gay.” You knew about it but no one spoke of it. Now a new couple has moved in, and they are not quietly gay. Mark wears a little blush and a touch of mascara, his partner, also named Mark, does not. They are very social with all the neighbors and, like it or not, my dad has had to deal with coming to terms with his uncomfortable feelings. My parents, oddly, also share the same first name, Lee, and Mark and Mark commented on how alike they all were. My dad laughed it off, but probably didn’t agree. In spite of the differences, my father has now become fairly accepting of Mark and Mark. They find common ground in the upkeep and beautification of “Stony Broke” and work together to plan shared garden spaces and the building of cute mailboxes for the street. I often share this story with my students, in an effort to show how people re-evaluate and adjust well-established beliefs through the very act of becoming friends. It is much harder to judge someone through the lens of friendship.

**Letting Go**

My parents did not like my choice of a future husband. They saw him as somewhat controlling (he was) and acknowledged that he would be the catalyst that takes their daughter away. But they never attempted to persuade me to reconsider. My mom often tells the following story to illustrate that the “jig was up.” My boyfriend lived in Chicago and my parents kept us at bay as much as they could, but occasionally even they had to relent. My mom and I took the train up to Chicago and then headed to Marshall Fields department store where he was going to meet us. From there I was going to spend the weekend at his house, with his family, and then take the train back to Peoria. We agreed to meet in the ladies shoe department and my mom watched as we young lovers spied
each other. She claims we locked onto one another and seemingly floated toward each other. People stopped and watched, somehow knowing this was a reunion of some kind, and my mother says we looked oblivious to all that existed around us. She says “love was undeniable.” I think lust had as much to do with our reaction as love, but both were clearly in play. She says she knew it was over, that I was his and no longer theirs. She’s told this story many times for different reasons, the most compelling being as a way of telling my about-to-married sister that she was not marrying someone who loved her. My mom was correct in a cruel way and now many years later it still rings true. Every June when we get together as a family, my spouse calls daily, sometimes twice a day, hers won’t call all week. My mom was right about the other thing too: her son-in-law was controlling and felt the need to keep me under his influence, not theirs.

I had never thought much about feminism as a girl, teen or woman. It would take me a long time to realize I needed to attend to issues surrounding my gender. I learned early on that I was valued for my looks, not so much by my parents, but by others, and much of my self-worth remains tied to that label. It’s sad that so many of us, men and women, find validation outside of our family, rather than the one place you should be able to expect it but often don’t find it or trust it if you do get it. I was not expected to be smart, just pretty and quiet. My in-laws relate that the first time they met me they thought I was a “pretty ball of fluff.” I was and nothing I showed them said otherwise. I had been conditioned to see myself that way and remained passive about changing that construction. I kept my wit under wraps and played the part of the lovely but complacent girlfriend. Later, after a few years of marriage, I began to believe I had little value to add to business or social
conversations. I felt free to be myself at home, express my humor or opinions, but outside those walls I felt constricted. This was a learned behavior. I recall many times my husband would tap my leg or softly kick my foot to stop me mid-sentence for some imagined faux pas I was sure to make. In retaliation I would shut down, not utter another word the entire evening, unless spoken to.

This remains a painful memory, a condition that thankfully no longer exists, but for a long time I felt my opinion was not worth hearing. In his defense, if I should allow him one, he was very socially aware of corporate politics and worried that I was about to derail his carefully attended to reputation. A “loose cannon” of a wife was not valued at his conservatively aligned corporation. The last time he attempted to edit me was a few years ago at a casual dinner gathering at our house. I was re-telling a story about some mutual friends when he helpfully corrected an unimportant fact, I continued with a side-long glance, and then felt his hand tap on my thigh. I turned to him and smiled, “Do that again and you’ll pull back a bloody stump.” The rest of my story went on without interruption. Later, I reminded him how awful that used to make me feel and that I was fully capable of taking blame if I slighted or offended someone, and that I knew better than to do either. He apologized. Profusely. Just writing this is hurtful.

I found my appearance to be both useful and problematic. In many ways it got me noticed and attended to, other times it interfered with whatever I was trying to accomplish. I never did figure out how to balance it effectively, perhaps it can’t be, and in the end realized it would be an issue no matter what I wished for. In knowing I have used it for
my own purposes, it makes the times it has hurt me difficult to reflect on. I am the type of person who needs to be liked, and when I feel someone doesn’t, I react by trying harder. I think insecurity is a factor here, but I also think most people desire to be liked and accepted for who they are. It is my culpability in these matters that troubles me most. Then at other times, when I had nothing to do with the reaction a man had to me, I was unable to blame him. Surely I had done something to make him believe it was fine with me if he took liberties.

Someone began leaving disturbing, graphic letters in our mailbox when I was a sophomore in high school. I never saw the letters, but the police told my parents they related events and items in such detail they were sure whoever wrote them had been watching me for some time and at close range. The police waited one night until the writer showed up to leave a new letter. It was my school bus driver (his daughter was an acquaintance) and I felt completely at odds with how to respond. I didn’t want her hurt, I didn’t want people to know what he wrote, and most troubling I wondered what I had done to provoke this response. Someone needed to tell me it was not my fault, but instead the message I received was this: close your blinds before changing. Did you smile at him on the bus? Why do you think he chose you?

In my undergrad years at IWU I found myself at that familiar crossroads. I was doing poorly in a Philosophy of Art class and made an appointment with the professor. We spoke for awhile about my inept response to the question I’d been asked to expound on. I asked if I could re-do it and try for a better grade. “No.” “Is there anything I can do to
increase my grade?” When he smiled I knew instantly I had stumbled into trouble. I left quickly and then shakily related the story to a sorority sister. She laughed at my naïveté and told me he was a well known letch, and that I should have known better than to seek him out and ask for help. I dropped the class and should have reported him but didn’t. I didn’t report him because I must have been party to his indiscretion, why else would he suggest such a thing? Was there some vulnerability men can sense about me? This is what I told myself. It’s your fault these things keep happening to you. (note: Margin notations point out unresolved language and vague threads I fail to complete.)

Again at work with a store manager who liked me to sit next to him so he could “show” me how to read inventory print-out sheets, a business associate of my husband’s in Memphis who gave me a goodbye kiss in front of his wife and my husband, and then discreetly slipped his tongue into my mouth, a co-worker who unexpectedly declared his love for me one day in my office, and several other similar events. I was sure each time I had somehow relayed some sort of message of acceptance. I thought once I had children and stayed at home this would go away. I want to relate an incident that occurred while I was volunteering for a Children’s Hospital fundraising project. I spent a good deal of time reflecting on this as it disturbs me still.

I was sent to meet a business owner who had agreed to donate printing services for our play program, not a small thing either, and I was to discuss the particulars of the donation and thank him. I would be the contact for the project and handle any issues. I entered into his office and he politely hung my coat behind the door. He was an attractive man, quite
charming and we had a mutual friend in common. We talked for close to an hour, an easy, friendly conversation about kids, travel and Columbus. I got up to leave and he pulled the door back to retrieve my coat and assist me into it. When I turned around to thank him he shut the door and suddenly pressed me to the wall and kissed me. I was stunned and my mind went blank with shock. I pushed away and reached for the door, but he stilled my arm and said, “Don’t leave…I think I just fell in love with you.” I didn’t respond and grabbed my purse to leave. I raced to my car and once inside began to shake. Immediately…what had I done to make him think he could kiss me? I drove home going over the details, my clothes? Nothing sexy about my turtle-neck and brushed cotton skirt, no heels…nothing. My manner? No. Above board, all of it. Too friendly? I didn’t think so.

I got home and sent the sitter away. I should tell my husband, I thought, but he’d likely go down and confront him, which would surely get back to our mutual friend. So I sat quietly and fumed. The phone rang and it was the guy. I couldn’t believe he’d actually had the nerve to call. He pleaded with me to understand his reaction; his marriage was crumbling. I had listened to him. He thought we had a connection. Could I forgive him? I asked him to leave me alone and hung up. He didn’t leave me alone, he kept calling, so I went back to his business the next week, held his office door ajar and told him in front of his employees that I would not be able to work with him and we would be looking for a new donor. I left feeling slightly more empowered and wishing I’d been more forceful, but for me it was a start. As much as I know this was his problem, a small part of me wonders…did I do something…anything?
These events have led in part to my husband’s recent conflicts over my returning to work. I am out in the world again, with men, working alongside, teaching and attending class. He finds himself unnerved by my new wings and is sure any man I encounter will have motives for something other than friendship. I have pointed out that I am now old enough to have given birth to all of my students and most of my fellow grad students. I understand part of his reaction is tied to past events in other work situations. He knows about the boss that wanted to give me “private” tutoring on inventory sheets. He knows about the co-worker who expressed his feelings for me. He doesn’t believe men can be friends with me. I’ve reminded him that he has a few good friends who are female. He once explained it to me in the following way, “You have a thing about you that’s innocent, but at the same time sexual. It’s like a visual scent.” I personally don’t see what he’s referring to, but I am not a male and far too close to the subject to have an objective view. It is what he sees and so in that respect it’s a valid evaluation. So far he’s working on letting go, but it’s still an issue for him to see me venture out into the world and find my way.

*The Family I Married Into*

My husband’s parents come from a background of extreme privilege. My father-in-law, Bert Savage, was the only child of Norbert Pistolesi and Muriel Smith. Muriel attended Stanford before marriage. Norbert’s family owned land in and around San Francisco, specifically Sausalito. They were participants in the highest levels of society in the Bay area. When Norbert Sr. was 36 years old he dove off the mast of his sailing yacht and into
the bay. Later that night, after complaining of a terrible headache, he died in his sleep.

Muriel was 28 years old and widowed with a six year-old son, Bert, and a significant fortune.

The story gets unclear at this point, filtered through my father-in-law’s less than sympathetic lens, and his mother’s version of events. Bert says she sent him to live with his grandparents while Muriel went on a long honeymoon cruise with her new husband, Robert Savage. The story has some validity as we have seen a sadly hopeful letter from young Bert to his new step-father that speaks of getting to meet him soon. The new family settled in Winnetka, Illinois, a wealthy suburb of Chicago. Muriel and Bob Savage had a son together, and at this time Bob adopted Bert and the surname “Savage” entered the family. Bob and Muriel were, according to Bert, a volatile match and soon the marriage was in trouble. They sent Bert to Hebron Academy, a boarding school in Maine. He claims they left him there for Thanksgiving and Christmas as they were often traveling. He spent summers at camp where Bert excelled at swimming and rifle marksmanship. This is also likely to be true. After Muriel’s death we found boxes of letters she’d kept of Bert’s correspondence from Hebron and camp. They were heartbreaking and at times terribly funny. Bert liked to misspell the simplest words to piss her off. He would often beg or negotiate for information in exchange of grade reports if she would promise to let him travel home on the train in “compartment,” not “sit up.”

What we do not have are her replies. Bert claims he paid his own way through Northwestern; she claims otherwise.
The Muriel I knew was elegant, proper and well-educated. She eventually got her doctorate at Northwestern, in Theatre. She sat on the Joseph Jeff Awards for Chicago performing arts and on the board of Ravinia, an outdoor venue on Lake Michigan. The first time I met her I was nineteen and she took her grandson and me to Salvatore’s for dinner (my first encounter with multiple waiters for one table) and then to Second City Comedy Club. She was concerned the off-color humor might offend me. What I remember the most was how many of the foul-mouthed comedians knew her and conversed easily with the elegantly clad society matron. Muriel traveled extensively, taking her three grandsons to Russia, Africa and China. As a grandmother she was very involved, but as a mother it depends on who you believe.

Muriel lived in an expansive brick mansion on Apple Tree road in Winnetka. Bert was not fond of her third husband; therefore boarding school remained his main residence. When he was home he had an interest in breeding and showing the Welsh terrier dog breed. He became a Junior handler and owned a dog for which he cared deeply. Many of his letters home were barters of sorts, “Please tell me what “Cindy” weighs or I won’t try on my mid-terms.”(Bert told us “Cindy’s” weight let him know if she was being fed or not.)

On one trip home for Easter break during his junior year at Hebron, Bert claims he lost his virginity to the Estonian housekeeper. This is notable only because many years later one of his son’s would marry an Estonian girl, a young woman the boys met while in Russia with Muriel. Bert often alluded to the coincidence. Even Bert would admit he was
not the most agreeable teen, and much of his adult life would be haunted (in my opinion) by his past. He never did fully reconcile with his mother. He did occasionally see her; she came to visit one summer when we brought our new son to meet her. She asked if she could hold her great-grandson and Bert quipped, “Someone sit next to her. I don’t think she’s ever held a baby before.” Muriel, always socially present, simply responded “Oh, Bert. Don’t be silly.”

When Muriel died there was no funeral. All of the belongings in her smaller home on Indian Hill Road (the best address in Winnetka) were offered up for the grandchildren to pick through. We found, along with the letters, a fabric covered index box. Inside were note cards detailing every event, party or social gathering she had ever attended along with what she wore, who she spoke with, and what type of hostess gift she gave. Another story that illustrates her extreme need for social perfection was her last residence on Indian Hill Country Club. The white painted brick cape faced the golf course, but its driveway was actually in Kenilworth, a slightly less affluent address than Winnetka proper. She petitioned to have her address changed legally to Indian Hill Road. Thanks to her socially connected power base, it was granted. This proved to be a prudent move on her part; years later when the house was sold for the estate the difference in zip codes resulted in several hundred thousand dollars extra.

Muriel was also a devout Christian Scientist (facelift notwithstanding) who eschewed medical help. Bert had long since been removed from the church after his repeated questions on the many worst case scenario injuries he could come up with, and how
exactly God would heal them. Some family members believe the Church may have
counseled Muriel into sending Bert away to school. Bert, like my own mother, would not
need or want religion in his life.

While at Northwestern Bert met a young woman named Gail Overby. Gail was an
outspoken, intelligent young lady with her own baggage-laden and privileged
background. Her parents, Otto and Geri, met at Macy’s department store were Otto was a
top executive and Geri one of the first female buyers on staff. She was a headstrong party
girl, independent and feisty, traits Otto felt he needed to temper. She would often
disappear for days on drinking binges and motherhood seemed to fuel her need to get
away. They lived on Central Park and had a summer home on the sound in Huntington,
Long Island. Otto eventually felt he needed to leave Geri, and although he sued for
custody, he lost, as was often the case in those days. Gail was left to parent her own
mother and younger brother, Steve. When Geri was sober she was a wonderful and caring
mother, according to Gail. Steve has slightly different memories and has never forgiven
his father for allowing them to stay with Geri. (note: my advisor writes that he is lost and
confused in this section and fails to see how all this relates to my thesis.)

Bert and Gail married before graduation and soon had a son, Norbert, my future husband.
Twin boys followed six years later. Bert made a name for himself in the retail world as
the buyer for Marshall Field’s art and antiques department. He traveled extensively and
later he and Gail would begin to buy and sell antiques on the side. They became experts
in early American antiques and watercolor itinerant folk artists, specifically J. Evans and
J.H. Davis. Eventually this expertise allowed Bert to leave Marshall Fields and Chicago and the family relocated to Strafford, New Hampshire, an area they frequented on their collecting trips. They purchased a defunct summer camp with fifty acres of land and two ponds. The main lodge served as their house and business space, and after extensive renovations made the perfect base of operations for their joint venture in the antiques world.

Bert and Gail Savage are featured in a book by Thatcher Freund called *Object of Desire* (1993) which details the rise of high priced antiques, the business surrounding antiques and the characters that inhabit that world. The book follows the "lives" of several world renowned objects and how they become coveted and collected. My in-laws were involved in the brokering of one of these objects; a blanket chest with original blue milk paint that had once been featured in a book by Dean Fales called *American Painted Furniture* (1972). The Freund (1993) book portrays my in-laws as well-respected and knowledgeable dealers and shows how they moved within those circles to broker art and antiques. Deals like this allowed them to exit the retail market which had become too pricey to maintain an inventory and begin brokering deals for a diverse client base, including Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Steven Tyler of Aerosmith, the B-52's, and museums across the country.

One such deal led to a multi-layered lawsuit and the strain, financial and emotional, had much to do with the end of my in-laws marriage. They had been contacted by a dealer in Ohio that had come across a John Brewster folk art painting owned by an Ohio family.
The family knew it was a companion to another painting and wanted to sell this one for $175,000.00 and hoped Bert and Gail could locate the right buyer. The Savage’s shopped it at several museums, to a few wealthy collectors, and several top dealers. All passed on it but one, David Schorsch, a dealer from Manhattan, who paid the price asked. The Savage’s took the broker’s cut of 10% and all was good...for awhile.

Mr. Schorsch held onto the painting for a few months, waiting for an important sale that was scheduled at Sotheby’s New York auction house before offering it to the public. For reasons unique to high-end art and antiques and the uncertainty of auction psychology it went way above estimates. The painting sold for $852,500.00. The family in Ohio was not happy and sued everyone involved, including the Savage’s. The Savage’s were able to prove that the painting had been offered to many prospective buyers, including museums, and all had chosen to pass on the price originally set by the owners. My in-laws were victorious, but the toll was high, and the business and marriage partnership began to crumble. The accumulated art and antiques the Savage’s owned as a couple were sold and the assets divided equally.

Soon after Gail struck out on her own she learned she was about to inherit a substantial fortune from an aunt. Bert also inherited a large sum when his mother died. Both found themselves at a crossroads, with enough money to do anything they wanted and neither was sure how to proceed. Bert struck out in a new, burgeoning area, Adirondack furniture and accessories, and taught himself everything he could about Adirondack items. He became one of two experts in this new collectable trend and was featured in magazines
and books as a collector and dealer. Under his guidance the Blue Lake Adirondack Show became a major force on the show circuit. The book *The Angler’s Life: Collecting and Traditions* by Laurence Sheehan (2000) features “Larch Lodge.” Bert’s converted summer camp filled with Adirondack treasures. Bert’s signature Charles Sumner built desk graces the cover of the large scale coffee table book. It was not unusual for me to open an issue of the magazine *Country Living* or *Martha Stewart Living* and see my father-in-law. Stewart did a feature segment on her television show with Bert and his collections.

Gail wanted to step away from the cut-throat world of art and antiques while she concentrated on her new life, investing in real estate and travel instead. She spent a few years working behind the scenes with Northeast Auctions in Portsmouth, New Hampshire until she retired to attend to the “grandma thing” and her real estate holdings. Bert and Gail remained good friends, even after he remarried, and he visited her often at her summer home, Turtle Point, in mid-coast Maine. Bert died in 2001, unexpectedly at age 66, at Larch Lodge in Center Strafford. His Adirondack collection was auctioned in the spring of 2002 and many in the world of antiques turned out to honor his memory and purchase from his inventory.

**Ruminations on Family Foundations**

My two families are as different as can be and yet I move more easily in one, and not the other. One would imagine it would be my original family, but it’s the family I married into. The reasons are varied and troubling at times, but deserve to be examined for the
ways in which each contributes to the person I was becoming and am. At first I would point to the amount of time with each, 18 years with mine, 27 years with my husband’s family. That’s certainly part of it but something deeper is ingrained in this adoption of values and beliefs, something my own mother likes to toss around to upset me; “money is seductive.” The lives my husband’s family lived and live are full of experiences, objects, travel and ownership which have fascinated me from day one. Seduced? Absolutely.

When I first saw my future mate I had an immediate reaction to his appearance, his pressed Khaki pants, Bass Weejun loafers and button-down shirt. He looked like money, with that old money confidence one associates with the casual grace of the Kennedy clan. He even flashed a toothy Kennedy-esque smile that made me want to know him better. I judged a book by its cover and this time was right. What was surprising to learn was the idea that this kind of wealth isn’t showy, not by a long shot. His father drove a Pinto to work, his mother a ghastly Econo-van for collecting antiques, but his house was filled with art, antiques of museum quality, and an eclectic group of friends. Gay couples, drug-addicted children of the super-rich, celebrities and scholars were often over for dinner, lured by Gail’s cooking and Bert’s charisma.

I also learned that old money tends to be more Democratic than Republican; secure in their own wealth they are less likely to worry about the Government taking it away and more likely to be liberal about social issues. Many of their friends had the luxury of doing for a living what interested them, not what paid the bills. They spent money on things that increased in value, or offered life experiences that educated or empowered, not pampered
or wasted time. They spoke openly of sex and drugs, trusted their children to be honest about their own dealings with either topic, and honored the opinions of views unlike their own. I found his family to be intriguing and listened carefully, soaking up what I could of they way they operated, and the things that seemed important to them. While they were free-spirited and liberal, their eldest son, my husband, was not, and was at times embarrassed by the way they lived and the friends they associated with. My husband will always be grateful for the open and trusting way they raised their children, but would grow up to be more conservative and Republican. Honesty would be the most enduring value he took from them.

I mentioned earlier that my in-laws took me to be “a pretty ball of fluff” at first glance, but later found their daughter-in-law inquisitive and truly interested in the objects they collected and sold. My husband and I began to develop our own taste, one that was not as hard edged as their early-American collection, but a hybrid of selected objects mixed with more traditional English antiques, slightly more comfortable and affordable. With their help we began to collect Audubon Quadrupeds, Gould bird prints, Bessler botanical prints and antique rugs. Buying art with your spouse is an interesting negotiation; an agreement must be struck over an arbitrary taste boundary that usually results in one party getting its way over another. Luckily, we have only disagreed vehemently once, and chose to pass because of our inability to find common ground. I do have one area I collect alone, and although he does like them, he relegates them to the private spaces of our home. I collect original children’s book illustrations and have a couple of Harrison
Cady’s and paintings by two other artists that are lesser known, and all depict rabbits, one of my favorite subjects. Some of them are as valuable as the Audubon’s but they remain upstairs nonetheless. They might seem a tad out of place downstairs, I suppose. Our home is much more formal than the ones my in-laws have owned and would be described by Bert as being too much like Muriel’s Winnetka home. We take this for what it is; an insult.

I learned to watch how my in-laws worked together at shows when they were considering an acquisition, how Gail had honed an instinctive eye for what was right or correct when judging antiques. She knew just by looking, in an instant. Bert would go over the piece methodically, detailing joint-corners and finish, nail heads and patina as he made his call. If their assessment was at odds Bert would always defer to Gail. Something akin to Gail’s ability has inspired a book I recently read in preparation for the class I teach. *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell (2005) speaks of the Getty Museum’s acquisition of a Greek kouros marble statue dated 530 B.C. and the expert who took one look at it and declared it “wrong.” Gladwell’s book is about that instant, the moment that speaks truth, if only we’d listen. Many Getty-hired experts had declared it real, a great find and could not fathom how they could be so wrong. They had been looking too hard, too long and missed the obvious. Gail had that innate ability, one that comes from years of looking and feeling, even when others are telling you otherwise. She taught me to stand back and feel, look but don’t covet, see but don’t dissect and above all trust. If it’s right you will sense it, know it, and respond to it. This is a lesson I try to use in many facets of my life and it has usually been right. Gladwell (2005) calls it “The power of thinking without thinking”
(p.13). How my mother-in-law developed this ability is unknown, but perhaps having to parent an alcoholic and young brother helped hone her instincts before actual understanding and knowledge had been sorted through. Being on your own so young must allow for an awareness, a natural development of survival instincts that you learn to trust or else.

Bert taught me a different way of inquiry, one based in detailed research and observation, building layers of information that support or deny an assumptions. He was rigid in most areas of his life, building walls that divided and in other instances encompassed those he cared for. Those in the inner circle passed many tests to gain entrance, my own admittance coming late, after giving him grandchildren and learning to give back as bad as he gave. (In some ways I credit him for my ability to respond to Dr. Kenneth Marantz later in my life.) I didn’t always like my father-in-law, but I always admired him. Bert was a larger than life character, never apologizing for his idiosyncrasies, and there were many. He hated bridges and often drove hours extra to avoid them; he traveled with his own coffee and Vodka, used refrigerator bulbs in lamps to save money, and may have loved his dogs more than his sons. Gail remembers the biggest argument they ever had was over his intention to put braces on one of his show dogs when he had neglected to offer orthodontics to his own kids. He stated that none of his children were competing for “Best in Show.”
The greatest lesson he taught me was to live life on your own terms. I came to that lesson late, at age 37, during a difficult time. I would at times believe it was a realization I came to on my own, but in retrospect it was Bert who helped me see the power in living that way. It can be selfish, indeed, often it is, but for some people, necessary.

My in-laws were but one part of my being seduced. The rest of the extended family had things to offer. Steve, Gail’s younger brother, owns homes in East Hampton, Amagansett, and Palm Beach. Otto, Gail’s father, also kept a home on Ocean Boulevard in Palm Beach. Family friend Bill Carr owned homes in Telluride, Colorado, New Orleans, a penthouse on Central Park, an island off Florida’s gulf coast and in Maine. We had access to all of these, and used many of them for vacations or trips to New York City. We also traveled all over the Caribbean, renting private homes for spring break. We spent parts of each summer at the lakeside resort Migis Lodge renting a six bedroom house that came with a nanny and child-free dining. It was after one of these weeks that my mother-in-law decided the eleven thousand dollar a week price tag could be better spent. She bought a summer house on Snow Pond in Belgrade Lakes, Maine and embarked on a year-long renovation. My children have spent ten summers there. In a move that no doubt angered my parents Gail sold us the summer house to get it out of the estate for the tiny sum of fifty thousand dollars.

It is for some of these reasons my parents resent my new family and its ability to “buy” the grandchildren into spending time in Maine or on Anguilla during spring break. I could defend my decisions; no, not convincingly, but my parents live in Peoria, Illinois.
My children have been afforded wonderful opportunities of travel and experiences that I won’t apologize for, and I doubt my parents would begrudge them those opportunities, but I can see how it might bother them. My two families rarely cross paths, both believing the other is judging it unfairly. I stand in the middle, unable to balance easily between these two worlds, pulled in directions of obligation and then conversely, preference. It has at times made me sick, literally, and I find myself resenting being in this position. The ultimate betrayal came in 1989 when my mother-in-law offered to pay for me to return to school and finish my undergraduate degree, something my parents had not suggested or offered to do, having once done so without success. It was this third family, my academic family, that truly changed me and the way I see myself today.

*My Academic Family*

In 1988 we got transferred to Columbus, Ohio, with our 17 month-old son in tow. We bought a house in the upscale community of Upper Arlington, known for its great schools and 1920’s era homes. The Ohio State University loomed off to the east and the opportunity seemed too good to pass up. My mother-in-law sensed intuitively that I needed this challenge in my life. She also seemed to know that her own son needed to see his wife in a different light, and offered to send me back to school. I inquired at the Department of Art Education and determined continuing my degree in this area would be the quickest route to a degree. I had no intention of actually using my degree; I just wanted to be able to say I had one. I wanted to be able to say I was a college graduate because the social class I belonged to appeared to require it. I was less without one.
As fate would have it, my assigned advisor was Dr. Kenneth Marantz, a grizzled older Jewish man. He had another purpose in mind: he intended to make me work, think and embrace learning for learning’s sake. He intimidated me much like my father-in-law did, but I eventually began to believe what I had to contribute was worthwhile, and pushed back. I was older than my fellow students, but only by ten years, so the divide was most evident in the acknowledgement that I understood what it meant to squander the opportunity college affords. My fellow students had many other things pulling for attention, including drinking, football games and more drinking. I had a house to run, a family to care for and several volunteer commitments, but managed to balance these fairly well, considering. I found my time in class to be liberating and transformational. I ventured into the academic world with much trepidation, but began to feel success quickly and relished my new accomplishments.

My work began to be recognized, sometimes preceding me to a new class with a new professor. I felt compelled to work hard to maintain that recognition, and was happy when I was tapped for the Honor’s Program. This meant an additional graduation obligation, an honors thesis, and I was stunned to find articles and helpful notes come my way from the faculty to assist in my research. It contrasted greatly with my first college experience, given the size of Ohio State, I would have never predicted such hands-on involvement, and it had a profound affect on me. Dr. Marantz learned that my mother-in-law had funded my return to school and was impressed. He asked for her address and wrote her a letter about her gift to me. When she showed me the letter I was dumbfounded by his prose, it seemed like such an unusual gesture, from a man I knew as
demanding and gruff. The letter was so complimentary my husband began to suspect the usual: obviously this man thought of me as more than a student. I decided to have Ken and his wife Sylvia over for dinner to meet my mother-in-law when she visited. They arrived in a “LeCar”, and the words “LeCar” were actually painted in huge lettering on the side. I could imagine my neighbors wondering who we knew that drove such a ridiculous car. It was also one of the things that endeared him to me; he actually lived in Upper Arlington as well, but chose not to prescribe to any of the usual constraints of taste or style, the barometers of acceptance in these parts. We had dinner and spoke of many things, including my success at Ohio State. My husband realized I was, in fact, just a student, a good student and that this man saw beyond whatever my husband believed most men were not immune to. (note: my advisor senses an undercurrent I need to reflect on.)

Several months later, during an office hour’s appointment, Dr. Marantz spoke to me about the importance of travel, specifically referring to the material aspects of my life, and choosing life experiences over things to own. I would begin to travel abroad a few years later and wrote to him about what it had meant to me. We still correspond every year and he wrote a reference letter for my admittance to graduate school, adding the quip, “Fourteen years late, but better than not at all.”

My Honor’s thesis began to take form after learning about multi-culturalism versus high art, the idea of craft and untrained artists, and the exclusion of both in art history curriculum. I wanted to look at why the objects my in-laws bought and sold to collectors
were so undervalued by the fine arts world. I could use the vast library they had to bolster my research (little was available on campus) and try to argue for the inclusion of such objects in pre-service art education curriculum. I was surprised to find many images from self-taught artists and crafts mirrored in contemporary art forms, and began to build my case. My topic became known around the faculty and soon all kinds of information came my way, many taking me off into other directions or pointing me back to my original assumptions. My research became a collaborative effort that served to inform and promote inquiry and when I finally sat down with my undergraduate thesis committee we all felt I had made a good start, but should consider taking this further, perhaps in graduate school.

I had not planned to attend graduate school. I had promised my family (and young son) that I would only be in school for one year, but my professors encouraged me to keep going. I really felt I couldn’t. We wanted another child and my husband was up for a promotion and most likely another transfer. My honors advisor asked if funding was an issue, wondering if it might be possible to get a fellowship or associateship to help with costs. No, it was timing, not money. It took fourteen years before the timing would be right. I applied to graduate school this time (2003) with the intent to continue my original thesis, but it didn’t take long to be intrigued by other questions.

Thanks to instructors like Dr. Marantz and others in the art education department I began to see myself as intelligent, capable and cared for by my instructors. I became unafraid to state my opinions, to inquire and challenge what didn’t make sense.
Education became a gift, an amazing gift of self-esteem that changed me forever, and I will remain grateful to Ken Marantz and my mother-in-law for setting me on this path to self-discovery. In subtle ways I began to assert myself at home, expressing my opinions, and wanting to be heard. My grades alone spoke of success, but the recognition by the School of Art at graduation left no doubt that I was valued for my academic endeavors. I received the “Excellence in the Arts” during a ceremony at the Faculty club. Next to my giving birth, I think it was a moment that made my husband take notice. I was smart in his eyes now.

Shortly after graduation (1990) I was firmly entrenched in my old social structures again. We had another child, upgraded houses and embarked on a costly renovation, my mother-in-law bought Turtle Point in Maine, and I applied myself to motherhood and volunteer work. We traveled the Caribbean and acquired more stuff; I spent time worrying about shallow things, like what dress to wear to the Gala, or who was at our table at the Country Club New Year’s Eve party. Social endeavors became consuming and predictable: same people, same tired topics. When a transfer presented itself I was ready for the change and ready to run away from all the trappings of this stifling world, and on to a more authentic life. At least that’s what I believed.

Strange New World

Lancaster, Pennsylvania, corporate headquarters of my husband’s company, appeared to be a conservative stronghold including impossibly rigid social constraints. I had envisioned this historic, Amish populated, beautifully landscaped haven for family and
home. It was, too. But, peel off that layer and all the other stuff I'd wanted to escape were right there underneath. I couldn't see that at first, I had been seduced again, by a stunning topography, an impressive house and the sounds of horse hooves and wagon wheels on the road out front.

We bought a home we had actually photographed a year earlier, thinking we could build a replica of the sprawling white-clapboard with Essex green shutters. It was not for sale then, and now it was. We couldn't imagine being able to own it, this stretch of road with other historic estates and horse-adorned lawns that rolled down to the river and covered bridge. It looked like a postcard. It was, and on the cover of the Pennsylvania state map, as well as in many magazines and in books on gardens and architecture. The houses sat back from the road behind white horse-fencing and had long driveways and stately trees. I was so in taken by the beautiful area I could not believe we got to live here. Our property came with a two bedroom guest cottage, a heated greenhouse conservatory, a white barn with green trim and two acres of lawn and gardens. My favorite part of the main house was the 20' by 20' screened porch that overlooked the river and a pasture with our neighbor's two horses. When our kids, then ages 4 and 9, first saw their new home they took off running across the back meadow, yelling "we live in a vacation."

We met our neighbors, surprisingly young, as most of these estates had recently turned on the market and been renovated. They all had what seemed to be regular jobs, except for the couple who were both doctors. We liked everyone from the beginning. It didn't take long before we realized we weren't really in their league at all, not without access to most
of my mother’s-in-law money. Our next door neighbors were so unassuming and quiet that we were shocked to hear they were heirs to the Quaker Oats money. The couple across the street had just sold their bottled water company to Disney for forty million dollars. Suddenly the two doctors looked like working stiffs. This was old money of the highest order, the kind that never talked about money; they just spent it, and assumed you could to.

We went to Polo matches and watched our neighbors play on the horses that roamed their property. We watched as they took off in private planes to shop in New York. We watched as they left to vacation at their 10 bedroom home on Lake Michigan, or beachfront home in Naples, Florida. We watched as they left their driveways in Porsches and Range Rovers. Lancaster, it turned out, was full of people who could do these kinds of things, and did them without really flaunting that they could. They didn’t brag, or talk about it, they just lived their lives as they always had. We had always felt wealthy in Columbus, but here we weren’t even on the same playing field, polo or otherwise.

I could have let this eat me up, maybe it was a little, but I had bigger issues ahead. Cancer. After I wrote that word I shut down for the day, not ready to write about this part of my life just yet. I slept on it and then avoided it most of the next day. I am here, now, trying to put down on paper something that I wish had never become a part of me in spite of the recognition that it has seriously transformed many parts of my identity. I hate it for changing me, but still must acknowledge the good that has come of it. I will admit this
before I try to excavate this painful episode in my life. If I could have battled cancer without telling anyone I would have. That’s my nature. But it is impossible to do this alone. I know this now. (note: This paragraph was surrounded by circled words and notations to further explain my vague and elusive language.)

No one knows why people get Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, especially young people in seemingly good health, but they do. I have spent a good deal of unhealthy time dwelling on the “why’s” and “how’s” of my cancer. Stress would be a likely culprit. I have a flighty immune system, I don’t catch many colds, but if there is a virus around I’ll end up with it. There is some anecdotal evidence that Non-Hodgkin’s may begin as an ordinary virus, but then in the presence of a lowered immune system (recent illness, stress, lack of sleep) it can take hold and mutate into something far more sinister. I can list a string of stressors which preceded my diagnosis: in one six week period my father-in-law had a massive heart attack, my own father was diagnosed with prostate cancer and while he was at Mayo clinic my grandfather died (my dad’s dad), and while at my grandfather’s funeral my husband called to tell me we had been transferred to Lancaster, Pennsylvania and we needed to sell our house and buy a new one. And on top of all this my son fell on the playground at school and suffered a terrible concussion. I believe on the stress meter those six weeks would qualify as a major stress event. Six months later I had a lymphoma growing inside me. My oncologist thought it had been growing about that long. I recall that on the house hunting trip to Lancaster I caught a nasty upper respiratory virus. So is that why? Maybe. This is how it happened.
We were on vacation in St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, in a stunning rental home overlooking Cinnamon Bay. I was happy for the simple reason that all my tennis playing had finally wheedled off that ten pounds of post-baby fat and I looked good in a bikini again. Only it wasn’t the tennis, I simply couldn’t eat much, I got full very quickly. I didn’t question this at the time. One night after the kids were asleep my husband dragged our mattress off the bed and out onto the veranda under the star-filled skies. We made love and at some point I lost consciousness. I saw stars like pinpricks behind my eyes, similar to when I am having an orgasm, but then everything went black. I kept this episode to myself, even lying to my doctor later about how I blacked out. (I blamed it on tennis.) I did realize something was wrong and when we returned to the states it got worse, I couldn’t lean down to tie my four year-old’s shoes without getting light-headed, so I went to the doctor. A few tests later he told us the news. I had a large mass or lymphoma in my chest, somewhere between my heart and lungs. They couldn’t remove it, “too dangerous”, so we opted for a biopsy and waited to find out exactly which of the eleven identified lymphomas it was. The answer would determine my course of treatment. Early indicators pointed to Hodgkin’s disease, a less deadly form with typically less devastating treatments to endure. Those indicators were wrong. I had, instead, an aggressive B-cell type that needed full chemotherapy and radiation.

We had a few important decisions to make, fast. Did we want more children? A more aggressive treatment would offer better results but make me sterile. No more kids we answered. Did I want a second opinion? God, yes. All the other oncologists agreed with the original protocol so we went forward with the course of treatment prescribed. Four
rounds of chemo, a nasty combo of three drugs and a course of prednisone (steroids), followed by six weeks of radiation directed to the tumor. We got some good news, too. It had not moved to any other lymph gland and was encapsulated in the one lymph. The tumor had grown quickly and was pressing on the vena cava and that was what caused me to black out. I was very sick at this point, barely able to walk or swallow. But, damn I looked good. Dying rapidly, but tan and thin at last, it was a set of circumstances that I found very ironic. Humor ended up being the lifeline that got us through. Now we needed to tell the kids. Not so funny. (note: My advisor notes a theme I am not addressing with regards to my self-worth.)

We sugar coated it as best we could, but kids are very intuitive creatures, and they understood the seriousness of what I needed to do. Guilt over the pain and worry I caused those who loved me was the most difficult part of having cancer, worse than chemo or being bald, and worse than an unknown future. I felt compelled to make everyone around me feel better, never complaining or letting them see my fear or despair. I held it all in check, tamping down the frustration and self-pity until it rose like the bile in my throat after each round of chemo. I didn’t occur to me at the time that this was probably exactly how I ended up with a depressed immune system in the first place. Too much emphasis on what others think, say or do, coupled with anger and guilt. I think I found my “how and why.”

During the strange two weeks between having the biopsy and waiting for the results I got to experience the idea of dying. At first you marvel at how the world goes on normally,
as if they weren’t aware of how your lives had just been up-ended. You pass through that quickly, somehow finding comfort in the way that it does go on, and grateful that you have each day. Then things begin to seem brighter, sharper and you see them with amazing clarity. The simplest things became too beautiful to pass by. The clouds against the clear blue sky, the velvety deep pink of a hollyhock bloom, the flushed cheeks of your sleeping child, or the elaborate spider web glistening with morning dew. Emotions became heightened. Each moment resonated with the possibility of being the last, the last sunset, the last gin and tonic, or the last kiss. I would not give back those two weeks for anything, and wish everyone on earth could understand how it feels to be that present. Even now I take note of similar moments and try to remember to be present in that way. It is perhaps the single best gift a person facing cancer receives. (note: This section is filled with passive voice. My advisor suggests I ask why.)

I responded well to the protocol, the tumor shrank quickly, and the radiation took care of what remained. I was told to go out and live my life, and if at the end of one year nothing had returned, my odds would be placed at 98% that I was cured. Easy for them to say. Go live your life. I was completely floored as to how you do that. For one thing, I looked like death. Anemic, bald and bloated from all the steroids they had pumped into me; I could not face what reflected back in the mirror. That person was not someone I knew at all. I fell quietly into a deep and soul-sucking depression. I had fought valiantly and cheerfully, hiding all the darkest thoughts and moments from those I cared about, and in some ways from myself. Everyone was ebullient, grateful and proud of what I had endured. Not me, I was simply too tired to care about living like this. I would rise each morning and face
the mirror, a stranger stared back, eyebrow-less and pale, with spiky black stubble on my head. I cried for a few minutes and then plopped on my wig, drew on the things that allowed for expression, and walked my kids to the bus stop. All the other mothers would smile and talk around my situation, acting as if everything was normal. I would return to my house, the house that once offered me shelter and comfort, and then sit alone in my closet staring at the clothes that didn’t fit and the woman who didn’t feel like me.

I sought help. I wanted drugs, but my psychiatrist wouldn’t give them to me. She said I was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and would eventually find my way out of it. I did, too, eventually. I find it strange that I had cancer and have no visible reminders that anyone else can see, my biopsy was tiny, only a thin line remains, and the three small black tattoo dots that mark my radiation site look like freckles to everyone else. And yet I am scarred inside with huge ugly puckers of twisted flesh that remain unseen or felt until they reveal themselves in strange moments and unsuspecting times. Inside I feel betrayed by my body. It failed me. As much as I wanted to go forward and leave this all behind, as if it happened to a friend or acquaintance, not me, it turns out it is inescapable. So what can I do with this realization, how can I move forward and allow peace to return?

I began to revisit the past year. The good and the bad. I spoke for the first time to my husband about the dark parts he had not known. The things I chose to keep secreted. The alternate life I carried out in the singular battle I believed was mine to own. I told him when the insomnia would occur during the prednisone cycles I would go out across the
backyard and sit on the rise to let the mist from the river cover me. I revealed how I drove
to radiation each morning down a certain street were the sun filtered through the
overhead branches in streaks of “God Rays” (my daughter’s description) in a secret ritual
of hope. I spoke of how my arms fell asleep during a radioactive scan that took 45
minutes to complete, and how when I tried to relax my arms the technician yelled and
told me if I moved the test would have to be started over. I wept but did not move. My
anger was terrifying in its power. I hated that man. I hated that this was happening and
nothing I could do or say would change this moment. It was so pure it was white hot.

I spoke of the night I walked down to the covered bridge and watched the horses at
Bridge Acres run through the mist along the river, white horses that then walked with me
along the fence. I recall thinking I must remember this night, I must remember how
beautiful they were in the silvery moonlight, these white horses that I wanted to draw
strength from. I had a secret life of healing, of places and things I hoped would help me
find health. I never had religion or faith in my life, so I needed other touchstones and
rituals to look for emotional peace. I told him about what Joe Glick, our Amish gardener,
had told me when we talked early in my illness.

I had just had a large rectangle rototilled down by the barn when I got sick. I intended to
start a vegetable garden and cutting garden that spring and suddenly seeing that happen
became important to me. An affirmation of life, if you will. My entire family was there,
including my parents who were way too old to be down on their hands and knees planting
in the hot sun. I was still having problems with light-headedness so I sat nearby under
one of the large Chestnut trees and watched. They, including my children, worked
feverishly, as if driven by some need I could relate to but chose not to dwell on. When it
was done it was perfect and neat, gravel covered paths bisecting flowers and vegetables,
and a white bird house on a pole in the middle. A few days later my family left and a few
weeks later my garden was showing serious neglect. This bothered me, the overabundant
weeds that represented the unwelcome invader in my body, but I was too ill to do much
about it.

My husband hired Joe Glick, an Amish neighbor of 72 years who liked to stay useful now
that he’d turned over his farm to his son. Joe rode his foot-powered scooter over the
bridge and up the hill to our house to weed my garden and I spent the hour talking and
watching him work. It was a hot July afternoon and I sat in the shade, sweating in my
wig, while he removed his blue jacket and rolled up his sleeves. I asked him if he’d seen
a lot of changes through the years in our little area along the river. No, he said, every
house was already here when he was born, and as I thought about it I realized he was
right, ours was built in 1907, and was one of the newest on the bend. Our side of the
Conestoga River was the “English” side (the Amish call us English), and once you
crossed the Hunsicker Mill covered bridge 150 years drop away. None of the Amish
farms over there have electricity or phone lines, although you can reach Joe by cell phone
when you want to hire him, one of many strange exceptions to Amish rules.

Joe told me the houses all stay the same it’s the people who change. He’d known
everyone who had lived in my house, a small group, as we were only the third owners,
and told me some of the history of my house and all the times he had worked the property. He asked me if I was scared, he knew of my illness, and I took a few moments to respond, finally saying, “For my children, I’m scared for them.” He straightened and mopped his brow with a bandana and replied, “Do they know you love them?” I answered quickly and a little put off. “Of course they know!” He smiled and checked his pocket watch. “I wouldn’t worry then, in this life that’s all they need.” In this life... I kept repeating it in my head. In this life... as in there are many more lives ahead. I liked this idea despite its religious undertones and found comfort in it.

I walked with him down the driveway as we set up another appointment. Just before he left on his scooter he looked back at my house “Rabbit Hill” and said, “Mrs. Savage, you’ll be fine, this is a long-life house. Everyone whose lived in it has had a long, full life. The oak tree behind your porch was planted by Dr. Fulton when he was 73 years old, he got to be 103 years before God called him home, and he saw that tree grow big and shady. It’s a long-life house.” I watched him go down the hill and disappear around the bend. I decided to believe him. My husband planted three willow trees along the back of the meadow. I don’t live there anymore but the willows are tall now, their branches sweeping the grass and moving gracefully in the breeze. Good friends of ours bought our house when we left and they carefully watch over my willows for now.

Early in my illness, before the chemo started, my husband’s stepmother called and asked if my father-in-law could come for a visit. Bert had never done that before, we always saw him at his place at his convenience, and now he wanted to visit. She stated that he
needed to see me. He drove from New Hampshire and even crossed our covered bridge to get there. We never spoke of my illness, we just spent time together. I have always had a thing for rabbits, the influence of Beatrix Potter, I imagine, and Bert had always had fun with this fact. He had given me several large wooden signs that he had found in his antiques travels, usually with a sweet rabbit image under which it says something horrible like “dressed meat, freezer packed.” Another says “Elm Rabbitry. Home of that delicious, domestic rabbit meat.” He loved that we had purchased a home named “Rabbit Hill” and on his way to visit he found another sign. We were at a friend’s baby christening when he arrived and when we returned home later we found a rather large wooden cut-out of a rabbit propped up on the entrance to our driveway. It said “Rabbit Show” and a few people had stopped in looking for one. Typical Bert, despite the serious reason for his visit he couldn’t resist himself.

What Bert did try to tell me was that I needed to remove useless people and relationships from my life, to live for myself first and then others, and not to suffer fools. I didn’t get it at first, but as time went on it began to seep into my thoughts, in unexpected ways, and I tried to honor whatever I was feeling. Things began to crystallize, I found myself becoming dissatisfied and critical of certain aspects of my new life. One event sticks out as a light-bulb moment. There were several, but this one is special.

My daughter (9 years old at this point) and I had been invited to a baby shower at Bridge Acres, the riverfront horse estate and stables next to the covered bridge. The owner’s only daughter was having her first child and the parents planned a lovely garden party in her
honor. The secret sunken gardens were bordered by cedars on the right, with hedges and stone walls surrounding the rest. Inside the garden tables and tents were arranged around the circular fountain and a large fabric covered table awaited the gifts. We walked down the hill with our gift, a collection of favorite children’s picture books, and entered the sun-dappled garden. We sat on a low retaining wall and watched as the other women arrived, climbing out of Land Rovers and BMW station wagons, wearing Lily Pulitzer sundresses and Helen Kaminski straw hats. Most carried large gifts they placed on the table for later. The group was lithe, young and tanned and balanced wine glasses and Kate Spade bags as they mingled. They wore the uniform of the class they represented. We settled in as the sun began to move the shadows and the gifts were opened. It was an embarrassment of riches: a pricey stroller, high-end baby monitors with night vision and the like.

I noticed a lone figure coming across the bridge carrying a small box. It was Rebecca, the Amish maid who had cleaned Bridge Acres for years, joining the group to offer her gift. What a contrast she made with her stark white cap and heavy blue dress, stocky shape and severely pulled back hair with no make-up. Rebecca looked to be fifty, but is the same age as most of the women at the party. She’d been “passed over” in Amish terms, unmarried still and considered somewhat of a burden to her parents for not procuring a marriage offer. Not useful for fieldwork, Rebecca earned her keep by cleaning the elegant homes of the wealthy Lancastrians.
Rebecca shyly approached the family and waited until the new mom opened her gift. It was a simple brown cardboard box, held closed by string tied in a utilitarian bow. Inside laid two bottle brushes tied with a yellow satin ribbon. It was a simple gift. Most likely a useless one as most bottles are sanitized in the dishwasher now. But in that moment it occurred to me that this gift had probably been given with more thought and consideration than the entire table of overpriced must-haves. After she left a few people snickered over the gift and I felt sick that these women were my kind, my friends, and the garden suddenly felt less sunny.

This was a difficult thing for me to wrestle with. Many of these same women had fed my family when I was sick, keeping the food coming for months in an organized manner that amazes me even today. Flowers would appear in glass vases on the back door step, a maid would show up to clean my house, on loan from one of these same snickering women. They formed prayer groups to pray for my recovery and had candles placed on church altars all over Lancaster. These were good people, but for each other, for people like them, not others. Although they would argue that they did tons of community service and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for worthy Lancaster causes, which they did, just not in a manner that could be construed as hands-on.

Another issue was taking form. I found myself the unlikely role model, being asked to talk about my ordeal to women’s groups and other gatherings as an inspirational speaker. The truth was there was nothing inspirational about what I had done. Like thousands of other people who are diagnosed with cancer I had simply done what was required to live,
and hoped that it was enough. At first I just wrote a speech about what I learned. I nervously stood before the Junior League of Lancaster and told them what I knew now having survived...and did so in such a way that they laughed, sighed, and in the end cried. It was finely crafted to promote that response; after all if I was going to do this I should be inspirational. (note: My advisor finds this passage oddly sarcastic.)

Afterwards word spread of my talk. People called wanting copies of my speech. Other groups called. Could I tailor my speech to highlight my faith in God? (No.) Could I talk about breast cancer and being a young mother? No and yes. Could I tell someone's elderly Aunt what to expect with her own recent Non-Hodgkin's diagnoses? Maybe, but do I have to? I called it the "Cancer Dog and Pony Show." I was tired of being that person and not who I used to be...normal. I stopped doing them because I needed to move on, begin to see myself as healthy and carve out a new identity, but I never forgot the strange high of moving people with my words. I began to write for myself in journals and in the form of non-fiction accounts of the ways my Amish neighbors taught me to see my world differently. I became reflective on how to respond to this new, damaged person and how to heal her. (note: More sarcasm is pointed out to me.)

We began to shun the usual events, populated by the same groups and stayed closer to home. We had a few select friends and directed our social efforts within those families. My husband began to get hemmed in by working in the corporate headquarters with the obligatory long hours and he too became restless. When the opportunity to return to the field presented itself we took it, returning to Columbus after a five year absence. We
were running away, from the toxic work environment and the bad things that had
occurred while there. I thought that this was possible, to leave all the reminders and
recollections, but these things follow. Although I would no longer be Shari Savage, the
girl who had cancer, as I was in Lancaster, I would come to understand that I will always
be that girl. No matter how far I run.

Reconnecting and Reminiscing

We returned to Columbus without much time to say goodbye to Lancaster and our
friends. School was starting soon and we needed to get the kids enrolled quickly. We
returned to Upper Arlington, knowing the schools were excellent and that the kids still
had friends there. Our house in Lancaster sold behind the scenes to a young couple who
were close to us and had always loved our house. The husband is grandson to the Pfizer
family and his only “real” job is administering grants from the Pfizer family foundation.
What they did to “Rabbit Hill” was hard to believe: a friend called to say the entire back
of the house was ripped off. This was a pretty big house to begin with, and now it is huge.
After getting over the shock of it we can now admit it’s beautiful, more than we would
ever imagined should or could be done to it, but nonetheless beautiful. So now I mourn
the old “Rabbit Hill” and marvel at the new one. Somehow we are still friends. As long
as the willows stay.

Back in Columbus we were trying to find a house that was as special, but knew the land
and surroundings would not easily be replicated. We found a stately stone Cotswold
home built in 1910 and did some major renovations before moving in. This kept me
occupied for awhile, blissfully happy getting settled and busy reconnecting with old friends. By winter I was miserable. I missed Lancaster. Not so much the people, but the land, the Amish, the comforting sound of horse hooves and the lush, rolling green and gold hills. I needed a distraction, a new focus away from house and family. I needed to attend to me. The Ohio State University seemed a likely start. My experiences there had been among my best memories. I just hoped someone there remembered me. Someone did.

Graduate School

I wandered Hopkins Hall, home of the Department of Art Education, but the names on the doors were new to me, only one or two I recalled having taught me. Dr. Stuhr, it turned out, was now the Chair. I made an appointment to meet with her. I intended to go back to school mostly as something to do, perhaps move toward the possibility of finding a future career as my children were now well on their way out the door. As it happened Dr. Stuhr did not recognize me, it had been 14 years, but once I told her my name I got an instant hug. She looked exactly the same, as if the years had by-passed her somehow. We caught up on where the years had taken us. She had always made me feel safe, something about her Wisconsin accent reminds me of my family in Minnesota, and for some reason I blurted out that I had battled cancer. The girl who didn’t want to be identified as that defected body just outed herself for some unknown reason.

She understood and shared her own battle with cancer. She told me about two other Professor’s who had also faced cancer. We wondered if there was any connection or just
the sad fact they we were all getting older. Together we discussed a few areas to consider and since I was already involved with the Women’s Board at the Columbus Museum of Art we decided on Museum studies, a new strand within the department. I needed to take the GRE in order to be admitted, submit a proposal of what I might focus on in my research and find three references that support my admittance. That was October of 2003. It took awhile to track down one of my old professor’s but Dr. Stuhr wrote one, Dr. Marantz as well, and then I needed to study for the GRE and take it.

Just before Christmas, Dr. Stuhr called and said she needed a Graduate Assistant for Winter Quarter and would I be interested. I hadn’t taken the GRE yet but she thought we could get things in place in order for me to start. I ran over to Hopkins to pick up the course packet and fill out some paperwork. That night I couldn’t sleep, I was so excited and scared, awed that they would just let me walk in and teach. I devoured the material, wondering how on earth I could pull this off. A few days before Winter Quarter started I got an e-mail from the Graduate Secretary. She was sorry, but they could not offer me the appointment after all. I was devastated. I’m certain no one there knew how excited I was and therefore could not know how upset I became. I found myself revisiting all the old insecurities, perhaps the other professor’s wrote poorly about me and my abilities. Perhaps they recalled something about my time at Ohio State before; maybe I wasn’t as good as I had once believed. I drove to campus the first day of Winter Quarter and returned the notebook of materials I had organized for someone else to use. Dr. Stuhr walked past me as I stood returning it to her secretary. She didn’t recognize me. I left feeling depressed and wanting to forget I ever considered Grad school.
As spring came I realized I needed to pursue this and took the GRE’s, a scary thing, too, as I had not had a math course since 1974 high school pre-algebra. I still can feel the disgust of not even understanding the questions for the math portion, but had been assured no one actually cared about my score, only that I had taken it. I got everything submitted and waited, sending an e-mail expressing an interest in another chance at a grad appointment. I received another e-mail from the graduate secretary, although my OSU grade point had been very high, once blended with my original grades from IWU, I was not meeting the minimum. They would have to petition the Graduate School to consider an exception. I felt stupid all over again…and embarrassed. I could enroll as a continuing education student and wait for approval, but no appointment could be offered. I swallowed my pride and registered for two classes.

44 and Back in Class

My first day was truly scary. I had no idea were to park or how the busses worked. I arrived way too early for class and then suffered the horror of watching incredibly young people stream into class. I was old enough to be their mother and felt just about as out of place as one could. I knew the instructor, I’d had Dr. Barrett before but he didn’t recognize me either. We went around the room introducing ourselves. I said what I felt; I’m old enough to have given birth to every one of you. They laughed, and I felt slightly better. Academically I got up to speed fairly quickly, but the generational divide was quite disconcerting. This class involved responding to art and I felt differently about a lot of things we looked at and responded to. I was coming from a very different awareness, a
completely separate way of feeling about many of the images. I think I bugged a lot of them with my "out there" interpretations, but if I was responding honestly, it was what I saw or felt was conveyed...to me.

One day Dr. Barrett showed us a large photograph of an installation called *Revenge of the Goldfish* by Sandy Skogland and the subject matter was intriguing. The installation featured a woman asleep on a single bed. A young boy sat beside her in his underwear. The entire room was bright blue, including the furniture, walls and everything but the goldfish. Oversized goldfish floated all over the installation, almost as if the people were in an aquarium of some kind.

My younger counterparts saw or felt something sinister. Some mentioned child molestation, or neglect by the woman as she slept and ignored the boy. Wow...that's not at all what I felt or saw. I saw a tired Mom who had gone into comfort her child and later feel asleep in his bed, exhausted from being up with him in the wee hours, like I had often found myself asleep with my own young children. I saw nothing sinister or sad at all. The goldfish seemed like a dream, a nod to the snack "goldfish" mothers carry with them to keep toddlers happy. I was met with confused stares. Clearly my frame of reference was involved with my motherhood and theirs was not.

There were other disconnects as well. I was beginning to see how things had changed drastically in the time I was away from college life. Before class started I got to hear about the drinking, the fighting (yes, a girl punched another girl at a party for breaking a
dried rose from a boyfriend), the sex, the drugs, the next tattoo, and the latest piercing. I am being completely judgmental now, but...these are our future educators. Others were friendly and included me in conversations, at least conversations I could enter in on. Some of them could not make a statement or observation in class discussions without the word “like” inserted between each word. Again...an educator? (note: My advisor is now sick of my repeated use of ellipses and circles them every time I employ them.)

My other class was strictly graduate students and offered a much more diverse group of people of many ages. I felt better here. But then the thought occurred to me...if I do get an appointment I will be teaching students like those in my other class. How will I relate to them, engage them and teach them? Not long after, I did get an appointment for the next year and began working on figuring out a plan to address my concerns. I spent the summer break trying to self-educate and develop a pedagogical framework from which to work in. Just one problem...I didn’t actually get a copy of the course packet and syllabus until a week before fall quarter began. Panic time. (A note about the word “pedagogy.” I had never heard this word before. It was bandied about by many of the professors in the department. I had to look it up. I had to look up many words that year.)

The Learning Curve

What I lacked in actual knowledge I compensated for with enthusiasm. I was beyond excited to try my hand at this teaching assignment but also understood that it would be unlikely that I would be able to get all my lesson plans in order before classes began. I decided to do one week at a time. This was more difficult and time consuming than I had
imagined, but I kept reminding myself the next two quarters would be better. What occurred instead was the constant revision of ideas and theories as I learned additional information in my own studies. Each class served to inform and challenge my assumptions and soon I was changing everything I had originally planned to do with my students. Teaching became a process of discovery and in turn informed my graduate studies. Later, I would begin to acknowledge changes in my own personal beliefs and values or in some cases an uncomfortable realization that I teach one thing and think another. I’ll attend to those revelations later in this thesis.

One day I was a 44 year-old tennis playing, volunteering, stay-at-home mom…the next day I was a college instructor. How does one make that leap? I started with a basic question…what kind of teacher would I build for my own children? I wrote down a wish list of attributes and this is what I created for my perfect world, perfect teacher. I will use “she” only because I am a she.

- She would know their name and major
- She would remember things they had said and make connections to class work and life
- She would want them to find success and devise ways for them to reach that goal
- She would listen without judging, acknowledge without degrading, and praise when independent connections are made
- She would care about what obstacles they have and work to promote a safe space
- She would consider learning styles and offer several ways to facilitate learning
• She would be friendly, but firm, offering trust when earned and concern when needed
• She would make lessons relevant and interesting, encourage opinions and discussions, and redirect when this is not occurring
• She would facilitate, promote inquiry, and value ideas different from her own
• She would use humor to bridge difference
• She would be available for help in-person and through e-mail in a timely manner

The list could have gone on and on, but this seemed enough to start working with. I still wish this teacher existed for my own children; occasionally they come across one, but too often these types of teachers burn out for a multitude of reasons. For my purposes these goals seem plausible only because I have the luxury of teaching one class of 25 students each quarter. This allows me the time and motivation to connect with my students. This act of connecting is perhaps the most important part of my philosophy and my students report it is my best quality. They want to succeed because they believe they can and that their teacher cares about them personally.

I believe this is the motherhood part of my identity and it makes me “mother” my students. It sometimes makes me guilty of enabling as well, and I walk a fine line to make sure I don’t do it often. I have a tendency to think the best of people, give them the benefit of doubt, and when I realize I’ve been had it makes me wonder about my instincts. Thankfully, this has not occurred often, but when it has it bothers me for longer than it should. I have yet to develop the thick skin needed to do this job, and honestly
wonder if I will ever develop that ability. I offer this example which happened my second quarter as an instructor. (note: My advisor has underlined the following words: mother, enabling, been had, for longer than it should, and thick skin. He sees five “rich” topics I could expound on.)

Most students arrive in Ethnic Arts without any concept of exactly what the course will be about. We further confuse them by launching into the visual culture theory that is embedded in the course work, but not part of the title of the class. Usually we can bridge that divide by using artists and artworks with ethnicity evident in their construction. My first quarter reviews were wonderful, acknowledging that they had felt my enthusiasm for teaching, found the work interesting and fun, and that I had truly cared about them as people. I was pleased I had met some of my original goals. When I received my second quarter evaluations I was pleased to find similar comments, all overwhelmingly positive, until I came to the last one. My class advisor, Dr. Ballengee-Morris, had purposefully put it last, after all the positive reviews. I was shocked by a rather mean-spirited attack about my personality and appearance, along with the statement that they had not learned a thing about Ethnic Arts. All the other positive comments fled to the corners of my office. I read it again. I knew who wrote it, I recognized her handwriting and her tone. I just couldn’t believe she had attacked me as a person in such a hurtful way. I have to paraphrase, as I eventually destroyed it so I would stop reading it, but I recall it well: “I still don’t know what ethnic art is. I learned nothing in this class. The teacher dressed like a college
student and seemed interested in people liking her instead of being a respected authority on her topic area. If all I had to do was show up to get an A then I’ll do it. This class was a huge waste of time.”

Actually, I think I nailed it verbatim. It still hurts to read it. What horrible thing had I done to make her dislike me so vehemently? I had always listened to her, tried to help her make connections to the art we studied, she even claimed she really liked Kara Walker’s work. I had always sensed she thought a lot of the topics we covered were silly; she often made side comments to those around her while I lectured. The students around her seemed to not want to respond to her comments and looked uncomfortable when I glanced over at the noise. But she did the work, and she was a bright girl and a capable writer.

She was an Engineering major and perhaps this kind of artistic exploration was difficult for her. She was often upset by the volume level of multi-media presentations and during one class she asked to leave during a writing exercise involving music because the “racket was driving her nuts.” Near the end of the quarter I engage the class in a constructive dialogue concerning reading materials and assignments we did over the weeks. I asked if anyone had any other comments to pass along to improve the class. Her hand shot up. “When you lecture you rub your knuckles together and it makes me crazy…I can’t even look at you.” The class made an audible sound of shock that she had voiced this criticism and I was unsure how to respond. I stumbled over it, finally saying, “I hadn’t realized…I’ll work on it.”
After class a few students came up and said they had never noticed that I did this, and thought she was out of line. I do know the last few classes I lectured with my hands wrapped around a notebook. Later, I recalled meeting a young man during a T.A. training seminar that had been brought in to the School of Engineering to teach “Social Politics” to the undergraduates. He related that employers were dismayed by the lack of manners and social skills of engineering graduates. I imagine this young lady had not yet taken his class. I hope she does.

This episode did make me think about what she had said and try to find something constructive from it and examine if it held any truth. I started with not “knowing what ethnic art was.” We had done nothing but look and respond to ethnic art, including her stated favorite, Kara Walker. I let that one go. I dress like a college student…well, she had me there. I am a college student. I carry a backpack and walk great distances from class to class. If she meant dress my age, 44, then again she had me. I don’t dress like most of my contemporaries, but they aren’t students at Ohio State. I dress for comfort, as most art education instructors do, and I am not going to suddenly wear heels and a dress suit. Then there’s that “respected authority” bit…I am far from an authority and never claimed to be. I make that quite clear the first day…we are learning together, finding commonalities and differences and working through those as a class. I stand as an authority only in that I have to grade their work and keep the class on track. The last part, her assertion that “the class was a huge waste of time,” that I feel bad about. I wish she
didn’t feel that way and I wonder how I failed her in this manner. Perhaps she had no
intention of learning from this class. Our paths crossed one day on the bus, I decided to
gaze out the window, afraid she could somehow see that she’d made her mark.

What truly disturbs me is how I let this negativity override all the incredibly positive
evaluations I have received. This says something about the kind of person I am, how
easily I can be wounded…and I don’t like it at all. I’m not at all sure how to fix that.

_Revelations and Confusions_

Not too far into my first quarter as an instructor I signed up to work at and attend the
Visual Culture Conference hosted by Department of Art Education. My first duties were
to work the registration table and welcome each participant, and give them a name badge
and folder of materials. Doing this meant I got to meet many of the top scholars of my
discipline. My own professors are among the top educators in the field, but we do read
many of the other articles and research by other well known educators. The names of
many of the people I had quoted in my work came to this conference. Freedman,
Duncum, and Mirzoeff, to name a few. A couple of the newer scholars from Art
Education at Ohio State were set to present as well.

This was a gathering of academes finest, across several disciplines, and for the first time
graduate and pre-service students were allowed to sit in. This served two purposes; to
expose us to the latest theories surrounding the still transforming Visual Culture
movement, and to bridge the divide between theory and practice. In my opinion, the
second purpose failed. Most of us students felt the divide grow larger, pushed apart by intellectually distancing language and far-left ideologies that left us feeling confused as to what role we held. During the second day, a group of us started a list of word we’d never heard before or didn’t understand. I kept that list and looked up every one of them. Some of them are not actual words, but new twists on language that seem to defy grammatical constructs. A few examples: “lack of fixity,” “undecidability,” “self outside the rhizome,” “perspectivinal,” and “hierarchically” are some of my favorites. The favorites of the speakers include:” tropes,” “subjectivity,” “binary,” “hegemony” and “criticality.” Also, Bush-bashing seemed a major commonality, and given that the election had just taken place a few days before the conference made this an easy topic to expound on.

This raised a few eyebrows with us students, not so much because we were Republicans, (most weren’t), but because of the exclusionary assumption that all educators are clearly Democrats, so therefore we can make fun of those idiotic Republicans and their idiotic policies. I wondered if I had made the same speeches and changed “Republican” to “Gay” or “women,” how well received my ideas would have been. And yet this was exactly what was taking place, we who honor difference and fight for inclusion, were bad-mouthing those who didn’t think like we did. At one point a faculty member did speak up and comment that “he had never heard so much truth being sanctified.” A smattering of clapping followed. This entire event made me feel outside, for one because my husband is Republican, as is my father, and for the record neither are idiots, and also because I wondered why many of the theories we heard about were so far removed from what we do as teachers.
There was some really good stuff, too. My favorite was the geography professor and his
take on the way we interact with all the things we encounter passively as we go through
our day. His thoughts work well in conjunction with the lesson I teach on site response
and how places feel to the visitor and why. Later on in my Museum Practicum class I
would revisit this theory in relation to museum space and visitor response, which turns
out is an important new facet of museum studies and education. Other speakers simply
frightened me with their huge vocabularies and dense research interests. These speakers
included two young women, clearly brilliant scholars, but I could not understand what
either one of them talked about, and I felt unsure I could actually compete in this arena if
I was expected to write and speak as they did.

One of them, Dr. Jennifer Eisenhauer, who teaches in Art Education at Ohio State, does
research using critical theory methodologies in subjectivity involving feminist theory and
art education. I have been assigned her materials to read in two of my classes. Her work
remains some of the most difficult reading our classes have ever dealt with. In one
graduate class we read a book chapter in which she somehow interconnects the word
“girl,” the third wave of feminists, and the mythological “cyborg.” As a class we had so
many questions about it the professor asked Dr. Eisenhauer to come talk with us about it.
We came ready with questions on definitions of words we’d looked up but weren’t sure
about, and the methodology and philosophical influences embedded in her text. I can’t
say that it clarified much for any of us that day, but later when I read another piece by her
I had some kind of a blueprint of how she works through a question, but chooses not to
answer it. Knowing this made the second piece easier to deconstruct and digest. The ironic thing was that her argument was in direct conflict with an article I had submitted for a publication edited by Paul Duncum on case studies for the Visual Culture classroom. Again, theory and practice at odds.

Dr. Eisenhauer’s (2006) article “Bombardment: Subjectivity, Visual Culture and Art Education” and the previous one we’d read, used several connections to explain her argument; metaphors of bombardment, humanist and posthumanist theories of the subject, and the performative photographs of Cindy Sherman in relation to a re-thinking of subjectivity (p.1). While the rest of the 705 methodology class was struggling to understand her work, I was having an altogether different reaction to her argument, or in this case, arguments. She refers to bombardment metaphors as a language of urgency and states:

Within the context of art education this informed individual is most often understood to be the teacher resulting in an ironic construction in which on the one hand the student is understood as having had much more exposure to popular visual media, yet on the other hand is presumed to lack the sophistication, knowledge and/or experience to critically engage these texts. (p.7)

Later she challenges the assumption of vulnerability quoting the Blackman and Walkerdine (2001) assertion that the media is “often constructed as potentially dangerous, particularly for those who were seen to be more vulnerable to its effects,
usually women and children” (p.8). Eisenhauer (2006) wants us to consider that our students are able to decode and understand the images and texts they are exposed to, and I might agree that they can, but feel instead they have seen so much for so long it is a passive interaction and critical interpretations are not often attended to. This is what I argued in my paper when I expressed my own observations as a parent of teens, and as a teacher, believing that this stuff does indeed “bombard” and our children no longer flinch, they simply let it slide through them, seemingly unnoticed, but in my opinion, felt.

I see young women in my class who are affected by the constant imagery that says they should look this way and dress this way. My own daughter is not immune to this message, she too tries to meet these impossible standards, no matter how much a parent tries to re-enforce her self-esteem. My paper focused on using advertising as a way to actively see what is being promoted and decode the implied messages using denotation and connotation as a tool (Barrett, 2003). My class responded well to the exercise, truly shocked by how much sex and sexual imagery was used to sell or grab attention, how little color was employed, and how few “normal” sized bodies are ever used in advertising, accept in a negative way. Throughout the quarter they brought in additional ads to talk about, questioning intent and focus, and I could tell they were thinking critically about the imagery they came in contact with. But when I read Dr. Eisenhauer’s article I questioned myself, wondered if I had gone down the wrong path, or was pedagogically speaking, off-base somehow. One of my fellow classmates who also
teaches asked her how she would like her theories to relate to practice, how that jump is made? She responded that it wasn’t her problem; her job is to “trouble” the assumptions and let others figure out what to do with it.

After she left I told the class that I had submitted a paper for publication that argued the opposite point. Most agreed that they too worry that today’s youth is bombarded by the media and do need the tools to interpret what they are being forced to engage with everyday. Those of us who practice worry about this kind of stuff. We don’t always have the time to “trouble” other theories before we act. I do find the methodology she works in to be interesting, and briefly considered researching through that lens, but honestly don’t think I have the brain capacity to think like that. I admire her ability to find so many bizarre connections and somehow work them into one piece. In person she is soft-spoken and easier to understand, and although many of the concepts still elude me, I do have a better understanding of the purpose of her research.

The Process of Academic Writing

Laurel Richardson (1997) states “Writing is a process of discovery” (p.93). E. M. Forster once wrote “How can I tell what I think till I see what I’ve said?” (in Silverman & Rader, 2003, p.7) and both of these quotes relate to how I approach the process of writing. Normally it happens something like this; a fresh notebook filled with untouched lined paper, a black fine-point Sharpie pen and my hand starts to move, bringing thoughts from my head onto the paper. I rarely cross out or misspell (not horribly, anyway) and I keep going until I have to stop to think. I have a stream of consciousness kind of thought
process and it usually stays on course, or when it doesn’t it has a purpose even I wasn’t aware of at first. It works pretty well. For most things… but not academic writing. This I learned the hard way. (note: My advisor circles the sentence beginning with “I have a stream of consciousness…”, and asks me to think more on this statement.)

I prefer to hand write, as described above. All five novels I’ve written were done this way. That’s also why none of them are in the hands of an editor; I haven’t bothered to type them yet. I find the “act” of writing to be central to my thought process and have at times wondered if having the word processor as a middleman shortchanges the quality somehow. It interrupts the flow in a way, finding the correct key, the nasty green or red lines that let me know I forgot a possessive apostrophe or some other bothersome grammatical convention. It’s not natural. It is, however, expedient and neat. It is also necessary to the way things are done today and this has been perhaps my greatest challenge in returning to school. I am not computer savvy. I can’t type well and I only recently learned how to attach a document. I don’t trust computers, they lose stuff, or I can’t find a file in the great void of imagined chaos inside a hard drive. Quite simply, they make me nervous with their power and secret codes

My first quarter back, I wrote all my papers by hand and then began the laborious two fingered work of typing them on the computer. It was slow, but I did notice that I had to do little revising: what comes out on paper is what I intended to say. Now I write exclusively on laptop, punching away, still two, sometimes three fingers at a time. What I have come to understand is this may actually be better, only in that when I re-read my
words new thoughts and ideas surface, and can easily be inserted wherever I need them. I still think in a linear fashion, but now have the option to spend more time reconsidering and rethinking the words I put down. It can also be dangerous. It allows for the freedom to keep going, no longer concerned with the economy of language, I often abuse (or ignore) the idea of keeping things simple.

I met Paul Duncum, an Art Education professor from the University of Illinois, at the Visual Culture conference and we talked about an upcoming project he was working on concerning a book of case studies of Visual Culture classroom activities for K-12 teachers. He gave me a hand-out about the requirements and on a lark I decided to try to submit one. I asked my advisor, Dr. Barrett, if he would act as my editor. I generally do well writing for him and figured he would be helpful as he had served as an Editor for many academic journals and other publications. He is also an accomplished author of books related to art education, contemporary art, photography and art interpretation and criticism.

Over the Christmas break I worked on the article, or book chapter for the Duncum book. I approached it as I do most writing assignments and wrote in a linear direction. I dropped it off when school started back, with four weeks to go before the deadline to submit. I thought this was more than enough time. I was wrong. The first draft showed up in my box four days later with more than a few pencil marks, suggestions, and corrections. A little irritated I fixed whatever he had suggested and gave it back. Another couple of days and again, more slashes and marks, stronger suggestions and more critical feedback. I
was getting tired of the process, this was an additional workload I had not intended and besides it was tough work. I was getting tired of my paper too, as was Dr. Barrett, I imagine. Academic writing for publication was harder than I realized, and involved pedagogical politics, language and less wordy text. It also meant losing some of my passion, my voice and my strong opinions. It was straight-forward stuff, not at all how I naturally respond to a question. Finally, a week before the deadline he deemed it ready to submit and wished me luck. (note: My advisor asks if I had ever been taught that writing is a process of re-writing.)

The submission process is a whole other set of hoops to jump through. Copies without names, disc copies and cover letters...all in triplicate. I received a letter several weeks later saying my submission had been received and that the review process would take several months. I heard from many of my instructors how difficult it is to get work published, even for them, and I should not be expecting much, other than learning something from the process. Best case scenario was I might get it back with major revisions advised, and I certainly wasn't looking forward to that. I forgot about it as time went on, the deadline for hearing back from the editor had come and gone. An Associate Professor shared that he had submitted as well and hadn't heard back either. Besides, after reading Dr. Eisenhauer's take on media bombardment I wasn't so sure I wanted mine out there for someone to pick apart.

During the summer break I received an e-mail from Paul Duncum. My book chapter had been accepted and could I please send an electronic version of my paper along with a bio
for the book. I read it a few times; not quite believing this was real. I had one big problem. I didn't have a copy of the book chapter on my laptop. It was somewhere on our family PC that had since crashed and burned thanks to my teenaged son downloading music and porn. I had the last edited copy from Dr. Barrett and sat down to completely re-type the entire paper, attach it to an e-mail, and hope for the best. I was so unsure of my abilities to actually send this paper electronically that I burned a version onto a disc and had the graduate secretary send one as well. The bio, needless to say was short, as I haven't done much to speak of yet.

A week or two later I received an edited version of my submission to approve. I was more than a little shocked to see what was left. Any voice Dr. Barrett had left in was now notably absent. The gist of my article was there but it was so far removed from my original work that it hardly seemed like I wrote it. By this point I hardly had, between Dr. Barrett and Paul Duncum I had somehow managed to find success in getting published but the satisfaction is somewhat dimmed in the process. I am grateful to both of them for helping me through the process; I learned a tremendous amount about the ways and means of academic writing, and am looking forward to the day it is actually in print. Seeing my name attached as the author will seem disingenuous, however, but part of the game I suppose. The most important thing is this; like most people with a "Cinderella" complex I am always sure I don't deserve my successes, but now someone other than my beloved instructors at Ohio State found my work to be acceptable. My submission had been blind reviewed by three others besides the editor and still managed to make the cut. I find comfort in that, and fully admit it's sad that I do.
**Fish out of Water**

I decided to take a course outside of my major, a move my husband thought was risky, after all they won’t know your work, and you’ll have to prove yourself all over again. I thought the class sounded interesting, especially in light of the class I teach, I felt this course could serve to enlighten my understandings of some of the more difficult topics I deal with. The class was in Comparative Studies and was called “Intersections: Approaches to Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality.” In the syllabus the professor, Dr. Maurice Stevens, explains “In moving through this course, weaving our ways around various kinds of experience and ways of knowing it, we will be vexed by this tension again and again. It will be in turns enthralling, informing and frustrating…but we will never let this tension be paralyzing” (Stevens, 2005). Dramatic stuff…and it turns out he wasn’t kidding. This would become the single most exasperating class I have ever taken, yes, even worse than algebra.

I should have known this “studies” area was different just from the first day of class. Once most of us had wandered in the instructor came in and put down his backpack. He introduced himself and said “I’m going to step out now and I’d like you to arrange the classroom so that there is no one focus of authority and you must accomplish this without speaking to one another.” He left and we all looked at each other. Finally one girl got up and started pointing at chairs. We followed her lead and suddenly we had one large circle of twenty odd chairs and eleven students to occupy them. I tried to convey making a smaller more intimate circle by dragging a chair closer to the middle. Alas, no one
budded. He re-entered, dismayed that the chairs still faced the chalkboard and media center, and sat himself along the side of the room. Someone explained that we needed to see the blackboard. He smiled and shrugged.

The class was the most diverse I have been in at Ohio State, racially, sexually, emotionally and any other variable you wish to insert. We had it covered. A young African-American gay male, a recently separated young mother who now realizes she is bi-sexual, a female dominatrix who works in bondage retail store, a lesbian, a female Hispanic, a female Jewish biology major, two older female self-proclaimed radical feminists, a recovering anorexic with major issues involving the Catholic church, a young single mother who identified herself as an anarchist, one straight white male, a single white female English major, and me... I am not telling tales I shouldn’t, these are not assumptions on my part, but this is how each person identified themselves as we went around the room. In the world of Women’s Studies and Comparative Studies...this is called “naming.” The idea behind “naming” has to do with self-identification, stating who you are through your own words. Another person joined us the next time we met and although we may have assumed it when she interacted with our class, we did not have it confirmed until later in the quarter...she was mentally ill.

This was a rollercoaster of a class. Nothing seemed to be off-limits as a topic, and the only time anyone got reined in was when the mentally ill woman went off on a rage about Latinas being too sensual, the decline of the middle class, or the pandemic something or other I never quite understood. The poor professor would carefully direct her to write
down her thoughts first, so that she could see where she was trying to go with them. At first we were all open mouthed and shocked at her declarations, eventually we began to understand she was truly ill. We learned in her final presentation that she had been hospitalized twenty seven times.

I could not find a place in this class. I was not accustomed to the language; “othering”, naming, more binaries, or the democratic process of the grade construction. I had no idea how I was doing in the class because nothing got graded. I was also missing some of the basic background in feminist theory, critical race theory and queer theory. Additionally, I was introduced to white, disability and sovereignty studies. All of this was new to me, and when reading the assigned readings I often times became unnerved, felt strangely unsettled and unsure of my feelings. I wrote things down in the margins, things I didn’t get or experienced in a different sense than the authors. Dr. Stevens was correct when he used the word “tension.” I felt tension whenever we met as a class. In the process of trying to educate myself I asked questions about the parts I was having trouble with, and although Dr. Stevens never made me feel ignorant, my classmates did.

During a group discussion following the reading of “Challenging Imperial Feminism” by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (2001) the practice of female circumcision came up. Like many western women I am appalled that this practice survives in India and parts of Africa, and this article asks feminists to refrain from judging these practices and instead allow the women in those cultures work to change the way things are done, not to impose western ideology on their cultures and value systems. I argued I couldn’t do that. I was
angry that any mother would allow her daughter to be mutilated in this manner simply because it was done that way, and felt in many of these male dominated societies change would be slow, if not impossible. Dr. Stevens wanted me to look harder at the issue, to understand that not all cultures worked the same. I got that, but I can’t remain passive about genital mutilation, or purdah, or killing female babies in China, or any other real human rights abuses. He agreed, if any of these things happened in America it would be criminal, but we were considering other places with different values.

One classmate, who was far more indoctrinated in the “Studies” arena, asked if I had my son circumcised. I had. Well, then, wasn’t that the same thing. Yes and no. If male circumcision mutilated the penis to the point it could not perform, feel pleasure, or ejaculate, then I was certain male circumcision would have ended a long time ago. I thought that was a decent argument, sort of like the old “if men could get pregnant there’d be a free abortion clinic on every corner.” But, she was ready for that. How do we know? It might actually diminish pleasure; perhaps men could be feeling much more pleasure. Perhaps. I still argue someone would have figured that out by now if men were actually missing out on increased pleasure. Besides, my real point was about intent. Female circumcision is not about cleanliness, it’s done for far more despicable reasons, because it will stop the woman from wanting pleasure, from becoming a whore, or owning her sexuality. Not to mention it is not usually performed in a sterile, medical procedure and in many cases girls are unable to urinate properly or later horribly injured while trying to give birth. I wasn’t going to change my mind. I will judge these practices and the people who continue to use them. No apology.
My next battle came in an unlikely form. Tourism. We spent a good deal of time discussing the book *From a Native Daughter* by Haunani-Kay Trask (1993) and her impassioned plea that we refrain from visiting her island, or any other Hawaiian island, as tourism has obliterated her culture and turned what remains of it into a joke. She wants you to tell all your friends to stay out too. I asked the question, “If she got her wish, and no other plane landed, all the hotels and tourist attraction went away, all the non-native people were relocated…what would happen to those that remained?” In other words how exactly does one take back ownership, how does one prove they are pure enough to be real Hawaiians, and can this utopia exist…ever? Some classmates felt the natives would figure it out, that it was theirs to determine how to proceed from that point. We then moved on to how any form of tourism “others” people.

I was stumped by this tourism thing. So are we saying we should not travel, not expand our understanding of the ways other cultures and peoples live? I decided I had to say something in support of travel, the idea of being exposed to a world larger than our own. “I teach a class filled with students from Ohio and the only ones who have been outside of our county are the international students and a handful of kids who went to Cancun, Mexico for spring break. I can lecture until I’m blue in the face about culture, food, customs…but traveling to a place and seeing, tasting…that can’t be taught.” You would have thought I had uttered the “N” word. “That’s privileged! What about the guy working in the fields in Peru? He can’t travel to Europe!” Now I’m completely floored. “Wait, are we talking about class issues now or tourism as a form of “othering,” which one is it?”
The English major speaks up; she too is having trouble with the travel issue. She loves going to Europe and can’t imagine being without that experience. It has been important to her growth as a person. “Can you travel as a tourist and not “other” the people of that country?” she wonders. We all wonder. Is the very act of being an outsider automatically “other” the other? My head hurts. Could this get any more convoluted?

Oh, yes. The dominatrix speaks. “We have people who come into the shop that are “tourists,” giggling and pointing at the things we sell.” How do you know they are “tourists?” I ask. “Well...they look like you. No offense.” Oh, but I am offended. Actually, I’m angry. I smile and cross my arms. “Really? I’ve been married 24 years...You don’t think I’ve ever been tied to the bed? Maybe I’m not a “tourist,” maybe I’m nervous about being in your store for the first time and don’t know how to act.” She smiles back. “Maybe.” I made my point, but now I feel the flush of embarrassment. Why did I say that?

I struggled all quarter with the “othering” concept. There were times when people actually said “you are othering the other” and then “othering to the other to another other.” This was like a math equation of the square root of the act of “othering.” The whole “othering” issue was in constant flux, each “group” asking another “group” not to speak for them. It got really interesting when we got to “Queer Theory.” This was the only time the Professor started a discussion with a stated set of guidelines on what was acceptable and what was not to be tolerated. I’m not certain, but it was probably directed at the mentally ill woman, as she had often spouted off with anti-homosexual rhetoric.
We began our discussions centered on Ruth Goldman’s article “Who is that *Queer* Queer? Exploring Norms around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory” (1996) and the idea of who belongs in “Queer” as a category. The idea that one group cannot speak for another had already been established. A black feminist in the Third World does not want the white, western feminist to speak for her. The lesbian does not want the gay male to speak for her...got it. But now we are getting in deeper. What about the bi-sexual that neither camp wants speaking...pick a side, please.

While the class is debating the issues I am silently writing in the margins. I no longer speak up too often in this class, especially after the Rikki Salinger incident, which I will speak about later. A classmate notices I am not participating and says “What do you think, Shari?” Although I never actually “named” myself, I am fairly certain I have been pegged in this category-white, conservative, traditionally (meaning hetero) married, and worse yet, privileged...with a possible interest in being dominated sexually. Why is it we need to categorize everything? Is it human nature...do we need to put things and people in identified places to understand them? What I had been doing was making lists of every possible category that might not want one to speak for the other. I said “I was just sitting here writing down every kind of sub-set of identifications that could splinter off and demand their own theory, their own voice...and honestly I think this kind of division only serves to dilute the message.” “In what way?” Dr. Stevens asks. I looked down at my list of categories and sub-sets and put one together. “A black, Jewish, trans-gendered male/ bi-sexual vegan wants his/her own needs voiced. It seems to me the divisions could be endless. What if I almost fit that category except I’m Hispanic, so he/she can’t speak
for me? It doesn’t seem productive to separate this way.” A few people think I might have a point, but most think “self-identification” and ownership of the experience is crucial to bridging difference. I admit I’m still not sure. In my own mind I decide to leave the in-fighting up to the “Studies” areas and move on.

The event that caused me to shut down as the class continued happened when Rikki Salinger came in for a visit. She was on campus talking about a photographic show she had brought together called “Motherhood is a Class Privilege.” The series of images of working mothers from around the world were installed in three different buildings on campus. I viewed the ones in Hopkins Hall several times. But she didn’t want to talk about that, instead she wanted to talk about one of her areas of interest, access to abortion. She began with a history lesson of reproductive rights including the alarming statistic that go along with the darker periods when abortion was illegal. She kept using the term “unwillingly pregnant” over and over again to describe women seeking abortions. I wrote the term down and as she continued the term began to bother me. Finally I felt compelled to ask, “Are you referring to women who have been raped or sexually abused, or whose birth control had failed?”

Confused, she asked me to clarify. “If a woman has consensual sex with a man and they do not use birth control then she is willingly accepting the possibility that conception could result. To me, if this woman conceives she is not “unwillingly pregnant.” I was met with stony silence. I could feel my classmates were appalled I had voiced such an opinion. That’s how it felt, the silence, but maybe they were all waiting for her to address
my excellent point. Instead someone asked if I was “a pro-lifer”, in a decidedly negative tone. “No...I support a woman’s right to choose...just not as a form of birth control.”

Rikki then pointed out when modern birth control became available. I asked if the number of abortions declined after that, if less women were “unwillingly pregnant” once other options were available. She didn’t really answer the question I asked, but instead stated that “Women should be able to decide if they want to be pregnant or not.” I agree I said, I’m just wondering if “unwillingly” was the best word to describe these women, that to me it implied force. The professor redirected the question and I felt the uncomfortable glances of my more liberal classmates. I shut up and took notes for the rest of her lecture.

I was one of three mothers in the class and a few days later one asked to speak to me about what I said. She wanted to know if my point was related to responsibility; did I want women to be more responsible? No, I responded, I really was interested in the choice of words. I felt the words made women seem helpless and stupid, as if they didn’t realize intercourse could result in a pregnancy. She confided to me that becoming a mother had changed her views, that she could not imagine aborting now that she’d given birth. I think I surprised her when I said I could, but only if I was actually “unwillingly” pregnant.

Another problem I wrestled with in this class was the way we were evaluated. We had two graded projects, both group efforts, one a presentation, the other a position paper and presentation. I hate group things; I prefer to be graded on my efforts, not other’s. For the first project I was grouped with two people to present on the book The Possessive
Investment in Whiteness by George Lipsitz (1998). The book was dry and tiresome. We wanted to do a more interactive presentation, especially since two of us were from the visual arts field. We agreed to meet at my office at Hopkins so we could use the Mac for our project. The one student didn’t show up. I showed the classmate who did come the Art:21 DVD featuring a great interview with African-American artist Kara Walker. She loved it and we worked on another interactive idea involving her photographing the things in her kitchen, blowing them up and letting the class deconstruct the imagery through the lens of class and race. Then we started talking about personal stuff, we both had daughters and discussed all the stressful imagery available on the news each night. Somehow we got onto the Tsunami images and she shared her political views as an anarchist, and the evil corporations that make money off of disasters. The most evil corporation on earth was Caterpillar Tractor Company. Wow. Why? She listed many reasons, but the most important being that they send equipment over to disaster sites and then ask the country to pay them back for the equipment. I was compelled to tell her my dad spent his entire career at Caterpillar and was best friends with the current Chairman. Instead of being embarrassed she shook her head and said “I don’t care…it’s an evil company.” “I admire your conviction,” I replied, “but those are multi-million dollar tractors, they can’t just give them away every time a disaster occurs.” She wasn’t buying it. We agreed to disagree and I figured that was that. I hate confrontation, and as confrontations go this one was heated but respectful. I couldn’t help but feel she was not going to think the same about me anymore. Evil is a strong word. (note: My advisor circles “I hate confrontation” with three big rings.)
With that behind us we presented the next Monday, assigning the absent classmate the task of facilitating the hanging of the large prints. All went well. After class the professor asked us to type up a brief description of how we each contributed to the project. I got the task and typed one up. I gave it to my anarchist classmate for approval, and she did not approve. She wanted to re-do it because in the report the other girl seemed to have contributed nothing. "She didn’t." I stated. "I will re-write it and give her a bigger role" she said, filing it in her backpack. Whatever. I was tired of it. I was slowly pulling away from this experience. I felt outside and wasn’t altogether sure I wanted to be inside. Luckily, I found common ground in my next group project.

My final project focused on the process involving placing nuclear waste storage sites on Native American reservations. On first glance, a no-brainer, how dare the Government try to mess with the Indians again! My project partner was the female Jewish biology major, a smart cookie with a dry wit. We got on well because she too had been subject to some serious disagreements in class. One involved carbon-dating versus the oral tradition claim that Native Hawaiians were the true original occupants of the islands. The scientist in her refused to accept "stories" over factual data. We did our research and then decided to posit that the Native Americans should be allowed to decide whether or not they wanted to assume stewardship of these facilities. We chose not to judge their culture or the sovereignty that allowed for tribal councils to decide for groups in a less than democratic sense. We came upon a position statement written by two Native Americans that advocated that the Native populations had the right to consider whether or not these
facilities were correct for their specific tribe, and no other tribe or government should intervene. We decided based on the earlier work we had done on Third World black feminist theory that we would not judge. Surely this was the correct position in this class, right?

We presented our position paper, after carefully outlining the massive amounts of money being offered to these tribes, the safety concerns and issues involved, the legal rights afforded to sovereign nations, and the opposing arguments, we advocated allowing the tribes to decide. Apparently people took issue with this and started arguing right away. “Its blood money...these are the poorest areas in America, how could they possibly say no to those kinds of dollars.” “What about the greater good? What about the States that would have to house these radioactive sites just because of sovereignty loopholes?” We argued we gave them those rights, and now when they want to exercise them you claim they aren’t capable of making the correct decision? The angriest classmate was the anarchist and Dr. Stevens pushed her to explain why. “It’s the money...its impossible to walk away from those amounts of money. The Government is buying them off.”

I pointed out that of the original four hundred tribes offered the chance to participate only fourteen entered the process and as of today only seven are still exploring the option. Many have said no to the money, the majority have said no...She was still upset and the professor tried again. “Are you saying they can’t make an informed decision?” She addressed me, “Didn’t you say some councils can vote without a consensus of the tribe?” Yes, some of the tribes still considering the program have structures like that. “So it’s not
a democratic process?” No, it’s their cultural governing body. Even for the anarchist this was difficult stuff to swallow. The funny thing was I agreed with her. The Indians were getting the shaft again, but that’s not the right answer in this class. We got an “A”.

(note: Here my advisor locates sarcasm again.)

I tried to describe to my advisor, Dr. Barrett, what was bugging me so much in this class. I had a very difficult time doing so. I specifically mentioned one idea we had been exposed to in White Studies involving the process of performing “Whiteness” and how to resist that performance. I couldn’t articulate how one does this…I am white, I can’t not be white. I am a woman. I am a mother. Those roles exist in ways I cannot deny. Is this to mean resist performing white privilege? Again…how exactly do I do that? Why was this not an issue to me? Why was a lot of this stuff not an issue for me? Because it doesn’t apply to me…it doesn’t matter to me…it doesn’t affect me. Those are the real bare bones truths. We rarely get stirred up enough to act until we are incensed about some grievous wrongdoing. In other words by being white and privileged I haven’t had too many grievous wrongdoings imposed upon me. But do I have to carry this guilt too?

Guilt. Uneasy thoughts that flicker on the edges, darting out into the light for a moment and then scurrying back. Sometimes I am willing to look closer, stop…examine. Other times I am full up with my own set of problems and perceived obstacles. I didn’t really care about the election, neither candidate appealed to me, until one day I realized my son was about to turn eighteen and Bush’s War became my son’s war. Something sinister entered my white privileged world, and neither attribute would help stop the Selective
Service from insisting he register. Now the election had my attention. That’s what it
takes, a personal connection, a moment of clarity that takes your breath, a feeling deep
down inside you that resonates despite your efforts to shake it. Did this class actually
bring about any real changes in my beliefs, values and attitudes?

I recall during my conversations with my anarchist classmate that she shared that this
class had changed her, truly captured her and emotionally up-ended her world. She was
beyond agitated about some of the topics and went to see Dr. Stevens about her
revelations and some of her questions. She tried to relate some of her feelings to me and
it was clear she felt things very deeply. She rattled off a few things she was genuinely
upset about and troubled by, her brow furrowed by worry and her hands flailing through
the air. My immediate thought was about how stressed out she seemed. I told her she
should pick one thing and devote her energies toward that. (Isn’t anarchy enough?) “Pick
one! How do you choose which is more worthy than the other?” “I don’t know,” I said,
“but you’ll make yourself sick if you try to fix all of them. I speak from
experience...even the smallest problems can overwhelm you if you let them. Care about
many...but work on one. Hey...if you fix it, great... move on to the next.” I don’t think
she took my advice.

So she got more out of the class than I did. I can live with that. Maybe becoming
enlightened is enough for now. Maybe later I’ll have more time and emotional space
available for consideration; simply reflecting on this has been a good step in re-
connecting with my educational progress.
Found Out

All this time I had managed to keep my privilege secreted from my fellow graduate students and most of my professors. I carefully maintained that façade for two quarters and then found myself in the strange position of sitting right in the middle of both worlds, the academic and the privileged. I took Museum Practicum, a required course for my museum studies major, and could no longer deny my other life. The course was taught by two staff members at the Columbus Museum of Art, the Director of Museum Education and the Head of Docent Training. One had her doctorate; the other was working toward hers. I think there were six or seven of us in the class.

Art museums are, although they work diligently not to be, places of privilege. Their funding is often bolstered by private donors, the art is often given or loaned by private donors, the collections are often built on the value of the art already housed within; art that has a decidedly high end provenance. The majority of museum members are people of wealth. This is the strange bedfellows’ truth of art and art education. We talk out of both sides of our mouths on this one. We argue against studying the prevalence of western European Art in museums, in curriculum, and the world of privilege that surrounds this art. Then we cozy up with those same privileged groups looking for monetary support, grants, underwriting, estate planning and whatever else we can garner from the association. We roll our eyes at the cookie-cutter utopia of Georgian homes and
neighborhoods retail billionaire Les Wexner has carved out in the rural countryside of New Albany, Ohio, and then gratefully accept his patronage in the form of the Wexner Center. We don’t bite the hand that feeds us, but we do judge it.

Now I sit with my classmates around a small table with two instructors I know from this other realm. We talk about the upcoming decorator show house I am involved in which benefits the CMA. One gives me praise on convincing Dareth Gerlach, wealthy art benefactor and widow of Lancaster Colony founder John B. Gerlach, into letting the Women’s Board members tour her impressive collection of art. My classmates stare at me. Nannette Maciejunes, the Director of the CMA, stops in to say hi and joins in the conversation and we speak about our upcoming meeting at Dareth’s home with Jim Keny, Dareth’s art broker. I note the date and time. Nannette tells the group that Dareth has just given the CMA one of her paintings, a Childe Hassam, worth one million dollars. Again my classmates look at me strangely. My other life has collided with this one. I wonder how long they can stay separate now.

Despite the evidence just shown, the instructors begin teaching us about the new mission of museums, the goal of reaching broad groups of people, and making them feel welcome and comfortable in these walls, getting the message out that these places are not temples or shrines, but places they can find themselves represented. A worthy mission…but in my opinion one that will take a good deal of re-examination on the part of the museum world. We read several articles a week covering issues and challenges facing museums today. In class we discuss them and then do something in the museum, learning about all
the different parts that make up the CMA. I am the only one who talks. I wait, no one answers the question asked, all staring at their notes as if the answer will suddenly pulsate before them on the page. I can’t stand the weight of the silence. I speak. The instructors seem relieved and a three-way discussion begins. One girl files her nails while we talk.

The team teacher configuration is an interesting and confusing way to be evaluated. They tell us each will read our papers and each give their own comments and numbered score which will be averaged. One is an English major, she doesn’t seem to like the way I write. The other one loves the way I approach each assignment. One hands me a photocopied page out of Dr. Barrett’s book “Criticizing Art” (2000) which she thinks will help me “fix” my problems. I smile and thank her, but really want to say, “He likes the way I write…and I already have his book.” I don’t say anything and tuck it into my notebook. The other instructor tells me she wants to give a copy of my critical response on an installation to the curator who designed it. She thinks he will love my take on his work.

I am in a quandary. One thinks I am a bored housewife back in school on a lark. The other sees me as an engaged thinker with a flair for description. I am both. I don’t know how to write to please both instructors. I can give them each what they want, just not in one paper. I have to choose so I err on the side of the more critical teacher, working harder on my shortcomings, the ones underlined in the Barrett photocopy. This helps for awhile and then I venture into territory that turns them both off.
While in my 700 level class on issues in Art Education, we were supposed to be developing an idea for our possible thesis question. Our final paper was based on that topic. I had come upon a passage in “Learning from Museums” by Falk & Dierking (2000) which had intrigued me for some time. Research showed that “children suggested that they (1) enjoyed seeing and learning about new things and perceived museums as places to do so; (2) preferred to share what they were learning with others, particularly peers, rather than listen to adult docents” (p.103). I married this with a personal conversation I had with an art educator in the Columbus schools in which she told me she never used the docents at the CMA because they were “too old and didn’t have the patience for the way kids act today” (Vereb, 2003, personal communication).

With these two thoughts banging around in my head I started researching teen docent programs. It was not a new concept at all. Many museums, including art museums depend on these kinds of programs. My thesis idea was to propose the creation of such a program at the CMA utilizing the fortunate placement of the Columbus Center for Art and Design and Columbus State. The Ohio State University is fairly close by as well. Between these three schools I envisioned a service-learning inspired docent program that could benefit the college students and the museum education program.

We had to research a similar question or look at a particular problem challenging the CMA for our final project paper in the Museum Practicum class so I chose to re-investigate this idea. I discussed my proposed topic with the two instructors and got a chilly reception. No way. That won’t work here. College students are too squirrely to
depend on, our docents go through months of training, just when we got these kids trained they’d be off to the real world. I redirected. Okay, what if they only got trained for special events, like the Georgia O’Keeffe show? No. Shot down.

I found another topic and tossed all my peer docent research in the trash. I settled on exploring the constructivist theory and its implication for educational programming in museums. This is a buzz word topic in museum education, but my take on it was not exactly what my instructors believed to be true. I worked hard to find information to support my premise and in the end thought I had my facts down pretty well but was still nervous about how they might interpret what I was trying to say. I had a feeling that while they had given us several articles about constructivist ideology, the museum educators at the CMA hadn’t necessarily bought into the program.

Two themes emerged from our coursework. The first involved a major report by the American Association of Museums published in 1991 which served to identify excellence and equity in museums, and these two key concepts became the title of the document. Next, three key ideas are considered and the second one asks a lot from its associates. It states “Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society’s pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs” (p.3). The document is twenty-five pages in total and one word that is repeated time and again is “broad.” For example, the museum must place education “in the broadest sense of the word” at the center of its role. It should also “reflect the diversity of our society by establishing and maintaining the broadest possible public dimension for
the museum" (p.7). For the CMA to meet either of these goals would take a complete overhaul of the staff, which in my opinion is far from diverse, and follow that with a reflective look at educational programming and the definition of "broadest possible dimension."

The second theme is "do people learn in museums?" A landmark study by the Smithsonian Institution titled "Strangers, Guests or Clients: Visitor Experiences in Museums" by Zahava D. Doering (1999) found a stunning piece of information concerning learning in museums; people don't.

Our studies also showed that people tend to attend the exhibitions that they think will be congruent with their own attitudes, with whose point of view about a subject they expect to agree, and that they respond best to exhibitions and themes that are personally relevant and with which they can easily connect. We found, consequently, that most museum visitors acquire little new factual knowledge (p.7).

This is a major blow to museum education in general and a kick in the stomach for curators. This makes me wonder if the next blockbuster event at the CMA should be a photographic journey of the Ohio State Buckeyes road to the 2002 National Football Championship. It would seem to hit on all Doering's (1999) points. At least in Columbus. Her next finding was equally surprising. (note: Sarcasm is pointed out again.)

For some of the same reasons that mitigate against acquisition of facts, visitors are unlikely to fundamentally alter their view about
a subject as a result of visiting a museum...we recognize they are powerful tools for *confirming, reinforcing* and *extending* existing beliefs. (p.8)

Doering (1999) cites Hein (1998), one of the leading advocates for the “constructivist museum,” a museum that “organizes itself around the principle that visitors construct their own knowledge in the museum” (p.9). Doering (1999) feels her findings support what Hein has proposed and then furthers the argument by quoting Prentice (1996) who argues that value should be placed not on the goals of the museum staff, but rather on the visitor experience. Prentice accepts “that much of the museum experience is provided by visitors as a result of prior (or subsequent) ideas” (p.9). This statement makes me wonder, how is a museum to divine what its visitor is looking for? My take on this issue was simple, why worry about that? Plan programming according to the museums stated mission and let the “meaning making” take care of itself.


Weil (2002) wrote a fictional account of a group of internal memos regarding a letter the museum director had received from a visitor who wished to relate his very personal and deeply moving reaction to a 5th
century Greek ceramics exhibit. The curator, head of security and chief financial officer all responded to the letter through the lens of their own agenda regarding the exhibit. This exercise shines a light on the disparity of what each thought the exhibit should be, none willing to accept the validity of what it had become for this particular visitor. Had the constructivist educator responded he or she would have likely deemed the exhibit a success, noting that the visitor had indeed been transformed in some manner, even moved to the point of penning a letter about his experience. Whether or not the visitor gained knowledge about 5th century Greek ceramics is not the point, he did make meaningful connections and clearly related what he experienced to his own life and current struggles...a simple and worthy outcome by anyone’s standards. (Savage, 2005)

My final argument comes in the form of the CMA staff itself. Each week a different part of the museum would come to class and detail what they did, how the job worked within the museum as a whole and the challenges they face. These challenges include staffing problems, budget constraints, curator wish-lists, archival costs, event planning, benefactors, publicity and visitor services as some of the issues we learned about. Add to this the AAM call to reach the broadest audience possible with relevant exhibitions and I worry how all this can be dealt with in one mid-sized art museum. How exactly do you define “broad” or what might be “relevant” to this undefined group? How do you identify this visitor? I proposed that constructivist ideology lets the museum off the “hook.”

By adopting the constructivist view the museum rids itself of the daunting task of discovering what is relevant to the public it serves, and therefore allows itself the freedom to set its own mission. A mission that utilizes its own collections, the collections of others,
the finances available, the staffing it has in place and the building it has inherited. Each museum is unique. No two collections will be the same; no two curators will have the same purpose, no two buildings will operate in the same fashion, no two educational programs will be alike...just as the visitors experience will be as individual as their fingerprint. While we may be able to identify visitors, we will never capture the ways in which they construct meaning or understand the relevance it brings. (Savage, 2005)

My two teachers’ comments are in the margins on either side of my conclusion. One teacher agrees that it is unlikely to know the visitors experience and knowledge, but she hopes I will consider the importance of the museum acknowledging the community it serves and respond through educational programming. The other teacher tells me she enjoyed having me in class and reminds me to continue looking at how “learning” is defined. I do enjoy how academia likes to take a simple word, which for most people implies one thing, and give it greater importance through multiple interpretations. Now it can serve purposes larger than its original meaning. Could facilitating an experience induce learning? Could simple interaction with an object constitute learning? This is question I don’t have time to answer, yet. I’m working on it.

In 2004 the CMA brought in an ambitious exhibition called “The Circle of Bliss” which the curator and museum board did not think would appeal to the Columbus market because it dealt primarily with Buddhist iconography and art. Despite those beliefs it was the most heavily attended exhibition that year and surprised everyone in its appeal to the visitor. The gift shop also reported sales that far exceeded plan. (The pop-up version of
the Kamas Sutra sold out.) This exhibit was important to the curatorial staff and they moved forward with their plans even though they believed the market appeal would be lacking (Arthur, CMA Board member, March 2005, personal communication).

I wondered if they would have bothered with this exhibition if they had been trying to “be relevant” to the Columbus community, considering we are unlikely to have a large Buddhist population. As a museum director I would hope to put faith in my curatorial staff to find intriguing exhibitions that offer a multitude of experiences, not those necessarily tailored to our community. “The Circle of Bliss” is just such an example. I asked Board member William Arthur how much say the Board has in curatorial decisions and was surprised to hear they have had disagreements over objects being purchased and funding. He did not imply who has final say, but it did occur to me that the Board members, many of whom I recognize as people of privilege, do wield a certain amount of power in the community, but hardly in a “broad” sense, economically, socially or otherwise (Class roundtable, March, 2005).

The Museum Practicum class is intended to be taken toward the end of museum studies, however, I believe it should be taken early in the coursework as it helps clarify which area of the museum you may have an interest in. I now have a clear understanding of the way the structures are arranged and the interactions between those structures. The class is invaluable in this way, a hands-on, behind the scenes look at how the CMA runs and operates.
Part Two:

Writing the Truth

At one hundred pages, or thereabouts, I took some time off from this thesis to read a book which garnered high praise for its honesty and ability to capture, dissect and examine truth. The book titled *The Tricky Part* by Martin Moran (2005) is an auto-biography, a self-reflective examination of the author's life and the events that transformed him, and his battle to find closure with his past. I read it straight through, unable to stop turning the pages and finally finished it close to mid-night. Then I lay in bed unable to sleep. My mind could not shut off, his words pulling forth images and emotions I had no place for. Troubled by the book's effect I began to search for some common thread to pull at. The unraveling revealed more than I wished for. The truth, it seemed, had two voices, two stories and suddenly connections to my past and present fought for prominence.

Perhaps it was not a coincidence that my thesis advisor was also reading through my first one hundred pages of work, and had pulled out a few threads himself. He noted these in an e-mail which was so long I had to print it in order to consider all he'd found. In my writing he detected elusive passages, emotions pointed to but not addressed and
narratives that needed clarification. I wasn’t telling the whole of it. There are reasons embedded in what I wish to hide and the real heart of it. I need to attend to the things unsaid. I don’t want to, but I understand now, thanks to Martin Moran, that I should.

I wrote in an e-mail to Dr. Barrett about this book, stating that although I had nothing in common with the author’s tale I was haunted by his prose, and could not set it aside. I mentioned that the authenticity of Moran’s voice made my own writing feel like half-truths and pretty words. I wanted to know how this writer could remember so vividly all the details and emotions attached to a moment in time. I thought about this for almost two days before the answer came. He could because he chose to. It is that simple. A sudden shift in my work seems the correct direction, attending to the themes I alluded to and drawing upon them to illuminate truth.

*Revisions and New Revelations*

My thesis advisor asked a question, a seemingly innocuous question at first glance, but one that gave me pause when I attempted to answer it. He asked how my “escapist” novels connect to my academic writing and what do I get out of writing them. The answer came quickly, surprising me in that I had an answer, and the answer was connected to much more than I had expected. I am re-writing my past, an event that lies buried and separate. Separate in ways so absolute that I have not considered the connection until now and now only because I read a book that helped me find the connection. I am scared to do this and cling to the hope that it will allow me to understand why it sits there silently waiting for me to come back.
Two First Times

When I think back about the first time I had sex I have two truths. The time I wanted to take someone else into my body and the time I didn’t. For a great deal of time I have told myself it doesn’t matter, it’s a small thing in the course of a lifetime, nothing that should stop me from moving forward. I do quite well emotionally without acknowledging this event. Re-reading my thesis and considering my advisor’s comments has convinced me otherwise. Because I have chosen not to attend to this truth I am destined to speak around it, over it and continue to hold to the other truth. The reasons are too upsetting to admit, but I want to consider the possibility that I am not alone in this experience.

This is the truth as I recall it. I was sixteen and liked a boy, a lot. We dated a few times and then one night he said we were going to a party at his friend’s house. He and his friend went to another high school so I imagined I wouldn’t know many people there. It turns out I knew everyone there because it was just us in an empty house. His friend and the girl he was with took off to another part of the house to be alone. There are a lot of things I should have done, things I will tell my daughter to do, but I did none of them. I ask myself why and the answers shame me, but maybe they are not unusual. I was attracted to him and wanted to kiss him, let him kiss and touch me, but I did not want to have intercourse with him. This is what he intended to do and did do, sort of. I’m not clear even today exactly how one defines losing your virginity. What are the rules of engagement? Full penetration? Half way? If my legs are closed and my jeans are only pushed down to my thighs does that count? If my hands are pinned above my head and I
don't scream is this still against my will? I don’t know. I don’t know. He only said one thing to me the entire time. Are you going to help? Help? Help how? By holding still? Did I say no? I can’t remember. My body said no, my closed thighs said no, my struggling against his grip said no. My voice failed to express my emotions, although my mind was screaming, still screaming even now. I don’t want you inside me.

It was dark, I couldn’t see his face at all; maybe my eyes were closed like my thighs. His clothes were on too, only undone were they needed to be for our bodies to do what he intended them to do. It didn’t hurt in a physical way. It was killing me inside my head. I wanted him to like me. I didn’t want him to think I was a bitch, or worse, a tease. He smelled good. The sounds he made gave me a strange sense of power, that I somehow caused his loss of control. These thoughts seem stupid and shameful now, especially considering what he was doing to me, but they are real and sad at the same time. It takes longer to describe what took place than the event in real time. Suddenly my stomach was wet and slimy. The first thing I did when he let go of my hands was to touch the wetness in curiosity. What had he left on me, marking me? The smell of clean instead of something dirty.

I never saw his penis, but could feel it now soft, weighty and harmless on my skin as he lifted from my body. We didn’t speak, dressing in the dark, and I could not find something to wipe off the mess. He drove me home and I even let him kiss me goodnight. I let him because then it was something else, this meant something else now.
My dad's bald spot was the first thing I saw, his back sitting in the chair waiting for me to come home. Could he smell sex on me? I moved by quickly and went upstairs. Luckily my sister was at a sleepover so my late night bath did not get noticed, as if that would lead to questions, or answers. My stomach was covered in dried gluey semen that I tried to brush away with my hands first. The bath took care of the rest. I climbed into bed and instead of crying or thinking over what had happened; my first thought was "god, I hope he calls." Not because I liked him any more, I didn’t, but because if he called and asked me out again then it wasn’t what it was.

What was “it” exactly? They didn’t have a name for it in 1976, or at least not a name I had heard of before. There is a name for it now: date rape. He did call. We went out again and this time he wanted me on my knees. Before he had his Levi’s unbuttoned I was headed for the car. I had my answer now, this was what it was. I fell into a depression in the weeks that followed, although at the time I couldn’t have named that either. My world was grey, rooms seemed broken into parts that I couldn’t make whole, and I wept all the time. Even now I am bothered by recalling the feeling of emptiness. I felt cold and colorless. This was not how it was supposed to be the first time. Not the way I had envisioned. Not the way our writing club had written about it. It wasn’t soft and surrounded by lovely words and gentle hands. So I decided it didn’t count. Locked away and separate, I waited until I wanted someone else inside my body, and that time counted. That became the other first time. The time I said yes. (note: Passive constructions, the repeated “it” and still vague language is noted by my advisor.)
Re-writing the Past

By looking back and acknowledging the past I found the reason I write “Romance” novels and why I claim I don’t care if they are ever published; I write them for me. I am re-writing the past, how it should have been, and in some cases admitting to how it was. I want to reclaim the innocence lost and write my ideal first time. The first time is rarely perfection for anyone, and for this reason it is a major consideration in most novels in this genre. Before I attempted to write one of these novels I read many of the best selling authors in the genre to see what it is that appeals to women, including myself. Some are just plain stupid, thanks to weak plot lines and unrelatable characters. Others are compelling stories on their own, with a welcome smattering of sensual imagery to keep the reader devoted to the romance aspects. I began to see themes and key terms, important literary devices as transparent as Penthouse Forum with its obligatory “eight inch penises,” and I also noted who wrote them well.

The loss of female virginity is the single most attended to theme. The reasons include the obvious, many of these stories take place in the distant past, when virginity was expected by men and highly valued. Without a maidenhead a woman was ruined. All sorts of good story lines and highly charged drama with these rules in place. Yet, despite those societal constraints, the women in these books give away their virgin status more than one would expect. I could devote an entire thesis to the language and plot devices; perhaps I will someday, even approach it from a feminist slant. Books like these outsell more respected authors with ease. (note: My advisor wishes I would devote more time to what I’ve dismissed.)
Personally I enjoy the ones that make my chest hurt, a palatable ache for a character's plight, and then a well-crafted emotional connection that makes the sexual act of joining with another person sacred, and still erotic. That's a lot to ask for in a romance novel so I started to write what I wanted to read. I often don't know where my novels are going or what will happen. That's true; however, now I can see that I am clearly working through my own issues and purposes as I write them. And in that truth I realize that I may never want anyone else to read them. These are my emotions stripped down and flung out onto the bed, only to be acted out by the people I create, speaking the words I wish I would have spoken years ago.

I went back to the first one I wrote and read the first sexual encounter between my characters. I wrote a confusing scene in which she reacts to his advances the way I had, and the uncertainty of what actually happened between them that night is a major theme throughout the entire book. The story is that he raped her, in a drunken state, and because she later finds herself pregnant, they marry, and figure out a way to forgiveness and redemption. In the end neither can say for certain what transpired that first time. The similarities to what happened to me are undeniable. The truth was right there in front of me all along, from my hand, and still I managed to keep it separate in my mind.

She was pressed to the bed under his crushing weight. Breathe, her mind pleaded, her brain operating slowly as if swimming through reeds. She was about to be brought to her senses. She gasped for air, finally, and felt her chemise being pulled down to her hips. She fought
under him, but that only seemed to make him more determined.

(Savage, 2003, p.11)

In this version, however, there is no question he was fully inside her; the questions that she struggles with afterward involve complicity on her part. Again, the woman wrestles with her part in allowing this to happen. She doesn’t speak, because words fail her as well. I can see now how I was letting her live this for me, allowing for me to work through it without actually having to acknowledge that it happened to me.

She was having difficulty putting his words together in her head. She was too involved with placing emotions, the different textures of his body, his scent. The areas of her brain that housed reason and intellect had been enveloped by touch, breath and skin. She was aware of air hitting her skin, but not that her dress was pooled at her feet.

(Savage, 2003, p.11)

I am sure there are many other passages in this book that come from that secreted place. Further examination might reveal other layers, other truths that I need to attend to, and will at some point, but for now I need to look at how these realizations inform my responses to other parts of my identity.

My thesis advisor had circled words in my text, drawing arrows from one to another, something akin to content analysis methods. The pattern that began to take form appeared to be related to my continued statements that I am sexually open and able to deal freely with sexual information, imagery and language. I just don’t care to deal with it in public
or what I perceive to be “forced” interactions. I am an art educator, not a psychologist, but I can guess these reactions have something to do with my past, intertwined with my need to replace innocence or protect it. While I can explore these emotions in my fictional writing in private, assuming I choose to keep these novels private, in my academic life I encounter sexually charged imagery and related topics as a matter of course.

Merely acknowledging that I am a sexual being is difficult and not a normal part of my privileged life. Except at Book Club, after a few glasses of wine, and even then we speak in third person. This is puzzling to me in light of the fact that many husbands in our social group have cheated and left marriages, a few women as well (someone has to be sleeping with these men.), and yet sex remains off limits. Sex is rarely a part of our conversations, unless it involves someone else who’s having it with someone they shouldn’t.

At one meeting we were discussing Running with Scissors, a memoir by Augustus Burroughs, a gay man who writes graphically about his introduction to gay sex and the phony psychiatrist hired to “cure” him. Other themes abound too, handled with humor and biting wit. Someone asked “Who recommended this book?” as in which one of you wanted to read this crap. It wasn’t me, but I launched into a defense of sorts based on my limited new understanding of queer theory. A few raised eyebrows later I was met with, “You artistic types.” as if this excused me for making sexual commentary. We are
discussing Tom Wolfe’s *I am Charlotte Simmons* next month and I can only imagine what will be said about the portrayal of college life today and all eyes will likely turn my way.

I will be asked to address this, which is interesting since three-quarters of these women have college-age children. I do have enough of a grasp to report his book is accurate, scary in its ability to capture the sexual frankness that permeates some of the collegiate experience, but I remain an outsider as an instructor. I see and hear quite a lot; however, it is not the same as engaging in the collegiate world.

I work at becoming more comfortable with the “no topic off-limits” academic world. The idea that an entire class (Comparative Studies) uses sexual orientation as the start of their “naming” process is foreign to me. When did this become any one’s business? I wonder how strange it would be to introduce myself like this: My name is Shari and I have been sleeping with the same man for 27 years. Having sex with the same guy for longer than most of you have been alive. I can imagine the looks of disgust, recoiling at the idea of one partner, for so long. Then again, even my husband and I marvel over the fact that it has been that long. (note: My advisor chides me for this assumption.)

Where is the line drawn? Is it ever drawn? For some things, the word “nigger,” or derogatory references toward gays or lesbians, and all those other categories not mentioned, it is quickly drawn. With sex, however, the line gets crossed all the time, despite the work place law that states otherwise. Should I have raised my hand at the
visual culture conference and said, “I’d prefer not to be inflicted with your penis imagery in the same room with my peers and colleagues, Dr. Sanders?” I understand his point that Queer theory needs to be dealt with and wonder if he can understand my need to not view penises with strangers and peers. It should have been my decision, not his. My reactions to his presentation are not about “gayness” they are about any such imagery that I don’t wish to view in a public forum. I can see now that my reaction is tied to my past. I want to decide when and where, and with whom.

I watched Dr. Steven’s, my Comparative Studies teacher, squirm whenever the mentally ill woman made her politically incorrect commentary, but he seemed unmoved by our resident Dominatrix and her enlightening commentary on the number of disabled people who dabble in or practice sadomasochism as a way to redirect pain, feel pain, or simply watch others have pain inflicted on them. Interesting, but later as she detailed how equipment is modified for different kinds of disabilities I began to feel like a voyeur and wondered what any of this had to do with anything, other than making some people (me) in the room very uncomfortable. This may be an age thing, but it may also relate to “force.” I didn’t want this imagery in my head. And now I can’t remove it. Perhaps I can find that place in my head where I store the stuff I don’t want to deal with and file it there.

I feel this way about violent imagery as well, not just sex. I don’t recover easily from visually disturbing images. When the news says the following footage may be disturbing I heed the warning and look away. I do know where this comes from. I was watching a
documentary as a teen, on photography and famous images, which then considered the next frame taken just after. The idea was to show how the perfect image, the perfect moment is captured, and how the previous one or one directly after was less for some reason. No warning accompanied the famous image of the Vietnamese man with the gun pressed to his temple, his face twisted as he waited for the bullet that would take his life. The picture-after is as imagined, brains spraying out from the other side of his skull. The image is seared in my brain. Some would argue this is a good thing, that these images are important and will make me more empathetic to the human condition. No. It just made me angry that I am in possession of something I did not want.

“Protection” is the word that comes to mind. I am in many ways looking to protect myself from some imagined or real pain that will be forced upon me. I want to maintain the innocence until I say I want to know more, feel more and take it inside me. When I feel I’m ready.

There is another issue I work out in my novels, another right of passage I can’t undo and go back to relive the way it should have been. Giving birth, a decidedly female experience that is unfortunately a medically male-directed event, and I carry deep wounds that I did not fight harder to determine how I wanted mine to play out. I re-write them also, in each of my five novels, the woman is in control of her birth. I noticed that most romance novels end with an impending birth, after all, it was the main purpose of marriage in that period, to produce an heir, but the event of birth itself is not detailed. The man is usually pacing the hall or drinking heavily in the library as he listens to the
screams from upstairs. It wasn’t done this way at all during the time periods prevalent in these books. The man in the hall or waiting room is a recent construct.

I researched obstetric practices from early midwifery to the present and was appalled to see how convoluted the process of childbirth has become. There is a growing number of homebirth advocates, including the risky unassisted birth trend among fundamentalist Christians, but for the most part birth remains a hospital event. It turns out this is an area of interest for Laurel Richardson as well, and she details some of the authority and control issues that have been wrestled from women over the years. In her book *Dynamics of Sex and Gender* (1988), she writes of the de-sexualizing process women go through in the hospital before giving birth, important to socially constructing birth as a medical procedure rather than a naturally occurring process which is sexual in nature. Richardson (1988) examines the language used in text books to further her argument, citing the way biological processes are written as male dominated events. My favorite section is two tables showing the patriarchal biology aspect of orgasm as compared to the matriarchal version. It is slightly sarcastic in nature although I could be reading that into it (p.130).

Male version: Many women say that they do not experience either pleasure or orgasm…And from the point of view of function, it may be said that orgasm for women is a luxury, whereas for the satisfactory discharge of the male function of orgasm is indispensable for conception.

Female version: If a woman obtains her orgasm before the man obtains his, it is absolutely essential that she sees that he receives
one. This is especially true if fertilization is desired...but, also, for the humanitarian reason of reducing the congestion of the penis. (Herschberger, 1948, cited in Richardson, 1988)

Richardson (1988) continues to explore the language employed to socially construct male dominance in both reproduction and sexual interactions which often times stems from the belief that the way a man and a woman connect to have intercourse is a male dominant act. She changes the language to re-position the dominant role. Childbirth has also suffered the fate of this re-positioning, only in the opposite sense. While the woman giving birth should be the dominant party, she has somehow found herself the conduit between the father at one end and the male handling the delivery at the other. Both men are directing her as the labor and birth progress, negating the fact that she is capable of this birth on her own. Richardson states that while both men have an important role to play, one supportive, the other necessary in the rare case of complications, the assumption that she cannot accomplish the goal of birth on her own is disturbing. Most disturbing to her is the obliteration of the sexual nature of birth and the cultural preference for birth to take place in a medically directed male dominated show. She offers this scenario to highlight the absurdity of how unnatural the process has become.

Coitus, parturition, and breastfeeding all are sexual experiences that are based on neuro-hormonal reflexes; they are affected by the environment in which they take place. If intercourse were on a schedule, limited to so many minutes, and occurred in a semi public place with the participants partially clothed, it is unlikely that many people in our culture would find it sexually satisfying.
Yet, what I’ve described is the culturally prescribed way for engaging in nursing. Similarly, if intercourse were to take place in a brightly lit room with both parties drugged, their feet in stirrups, their hands strapped to the table, supervised by a sterile helper who manually or with forceps joined the members, few people would consider the experience as a “joy of ecstasy”; and yet this is our culturally preferred way of childbirth (p.130).

How I wish I had read Laurel Richardson’s thoughts before I got pregnant. Seeing childbirth written this way makes the entire process of giving birth under medically established guidelines barbaric. While she doesn’t address how we find ourselves here, I have read several books on the history of how this transformation occurred, and much of it has to do with social power and the male dominated medical system. Why is this important to me? I had what most women would call “easy births.” No drugs, no endless hours of contractions, very little medical intervention and two healthy babies. What do I have to complain about?

I didn’t complain. I didn’t think I had any right to or real reason to complain. It wasn’t until later, when the high had worn off that I began to question what I’d been through. For one, I didn’t need to be in the hospital. In both cases the doctor was a hindrance, not a necessity. During the birth of my daughter I was actually asked to stop pushing because the doctor wasn’t ready yet. We were: she was moving out on her own, ready or not. He came in just in time to replace the nurse’s hands with his own. And still he stopped to cut me, a needless procedure considering she was already half out. I guess he needed to prove his worth.
Soon she was in my arms and I forgot about the procedure until he started to stitch my unneeded episiotomy. I asked him, “Why did you do one?” He replied, “She was face-up, which can cause bruising, so I made more room for her.” An inch long cut with a pair of scissors versus some bruising. I’d like to have been given a choice. I said, “I would have preferred bruising.” as he continued to stitch. “My call,” he answered. My husband was right behind me making calls to our families. The doctor stood up and started to dismantle the stirrups and reconvert the delivery bed back to a regular bed. The fold down panel wouldn’t budge. He continued to struggle with it as I remained spread out in the stirrups. He buzzed for a maintenance man to assist him. Now two men were crouched between my legs wrestling with the uncooperative bed. “Can I please put my legs down?” He replied. “Hold on, I think we’ve almost got it.”

A nurse walked in and immediately rushed to my side, yanking a sheet down to cover me. She scolded both of them, using comfort and safety as her reasons, and assisted me with getting my legs down. My husband, off the phone now, had not intervened. This stuck me as odd as he is usually aware when I feel threatened or uncomfortable. Later, I asked him why he hadn’t come to my aid and he replied, “He’s your doctor so I assumed he knew what to do.”

The maternity ward at The Ohio State University was overflowing with new mothers. Although our insurance covers a private room, one was not available. It was well past one a.m. now and I wanted to sleep. Our daughter was four weeks early and was sent to the
 neo-natal intensive care unit for evaluation, so I told my husband to go home and get some sleep himself. For some reason I was still having contractions and could not sleep. I rang the nurse who politely explained to me that my doctor had ordered a Pitocin drip to help shrink my uterus. Unnecessary, as breastfeeding does this quite well, so I asked to have it removed. After contacting my doctor he allowed the nurse to remove the I.V. At three a.m. a roommate arrived. I never saw her due to the wall that separates most of the space but I heard her all night. She called seven or eight men to tell them she’d just had their baby. By morning I was in tears, dead tired and no one had brought me my baby.

The NICU has its own set of rules and having access to my daughter was only allowed during certain periods. I contacted the lactation specialist at the hospital and asked her to do battle with the rule-makers. A compromise was struck; they would feed her my breast milk out of bottles. They stated it was imperative they monitor the amount of milk she was getting. I agreed, but insisted I be allowed to try breastfeeding her as well. I was given a half hour period to do so. Whether or not she would be hungry was not considered. The NICU was brightly lit, sterile and noisy. We did not fare well with breastfeeding. I was soon discharged from the hospital and my daughter remained behind due to jaundice. I traveled back and forth from home to the NICU to continue trying to nurse her.

On her first night home she woke for her three o’clock feeding. I prepared a bottle of my expressed breast milk and sat down in her nursery to feed her. I decided to try putting her to the breast one last time, hoping. She latched on right away. The room was dark, warm
and soothing. I remember an incredible wave of bliss feeling her tugging gently on my breast knowing this was how it was supposed to be. When her sleepy head rolled back and I looked down at her milky parted lips I was overcome by anger over what had been taken from us.

I could have had this baby without any of the interventions that were inflicted on us. Even her jaundice could have been treated at home. Because she was premature I would have had her in a hospital but I would have chosen a midwife instead. My husband would have played a larger role instead of being relegated to stand near my head. I do have anger over the way control was taken from me and my daughter and I cannot go back and fix it. So I write it instead. How it should have been.

My intention in writing about childbirth in my novels is one directed at describing to women another way, a better way. The way it was done before the medical establishment deemed it dangerous and unclean to give birth at home. I remember reading an excerpt from a 1940s obstetric textbook in which a passage stated that the laboring mother be told not to make any noise during birth so as not to disturb the doctor. I laughed out loud when I read it. I imagine many women failed to comply.

Writing about my anger has helped me realize that I might want to publish these novels after all. Women who like to read fictional accounts of perfect first times might enjoy reading about perfect births as well. Or maybe someone will read such an account and have the courage to take control of her childbirth story. That would make me very happy.
I wrote earlier about picking one thing you feel strongly about and working to bring attention or help to that cause. This is one of those things I would want to work on. While this may seem a feminist issue it is also a human issue. We need to do better for women, babies and women’s partners.

*Back in the Classroom*

A new academic year (2005) has begun. I find myself working from a new text book, *The World is a Text* by Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader (2006), and with a new syllabus for my Ethnic Arts class. I took several weeks off from this thesis writing to do two things; prepare lessons and write a new proposal for this thesis. Both things had to be attended to before proceeding, and both things seemed to be informed by the other work. The new course focus is, in my opinion, more relevant to our students and therefore more relevant to me. Writing is now a large part of what I am teaching, instead of a mere offshoot of our course work last year. I have noticed profound changes in the first weeks of teaching this revised course involving my attitude toward teaching the material and my student’s reactions to my teaching and the subject being taught.

First, the thesis writing process and the research about writing processes is helping me be a better writing teacher. I am able to explain the value of writing, reviewing texts, and the important work of revising to my students from a place of emotion, not just knowledge. I find I am passionate about the process and the possibilities the writing process brings to the writer. As I talk to my students about my own writing I speak with authority on the positive changes it has made to my work and my life. I feel a sense of purpose about what
narrative and story-sharing can do to bridge connections between my students’ life experiences and my own, and then to our coursework. Last year I did not have the tools to do this.

Second, my passion for writing is making an impression on my students. They listen with an intensity I have not experienced before, eyes rapt and ears tuned, as I talks with enthusiasm about the topic at hand. They respond to my questions with an equal amount of passion, mirroring my excitement. I am invigorated by this give and take. I think to myself “Why is this happening?” Is this different kind of student? No. They are the same mix of general education students I get every quarter. I have changed. Not only from the writing process, but also because I have furthered my education and this increased knowledge base is now readily available to pull from. I am changed in innumerable ways, ways I can’t acknowledge ahead of time until they happen. A question asked brings forth an answer from some place inside me of stored knowledge and then some thread of a connecting thought pulls me into another file of data. My head has become like the computer hard drive I am nervous about relying on, and from inside the scattered memories I present a coherent thought for consideration. I wonder how this thesis would look after another year of graduate school, how many other places could I go with my continued education. I wonder how I got along without directed learning for the years in-between.

A precursor to my new pedagogical space is certainly due to this being my second year of teaching. I am more comfortable in believing I can teach. I am more comfortable standing
in front of students and facilitating discussions and recognizing when to re-direct. I am more comfortable with me. I am beginning to trust in my abilities and this translates into a confidence I lacked before. I find myself “naming” (like the Comparative Studies group) when I address who I am and what I do. I no longer identify myself as an “instructor;” I call myself a “teacher.”

I would not have dared to claim I was a teacher last year because I didn’t feel I was qualified to do so. I might not technically be qualified to this year either, but I feel as though I am a teacher. Instead of saying I am a grad associate instructor I no longer qualify my response with the underlying disclaimer that I am only a T.A. I have a new identity now and I am not afraid to claim it.

The uncertainty I felt last fall was important to my growth. Those feelings of inadequacy spurred me to educate myself beyond my course work. I read outside of my assigned areas and looked for pedagogical ideas that felt right to adopt and adapt. I took theories and deconstructed them to suit my needs, re-inventing ways to approach the unapproachable and made them my own. Again, my naiveté gave me the impetus to be so bold, but I lacked the time and understanding to fully embrace all the theory available. Sometimes I had to trust my instincts. Other times I fell on my face or realized I had stumbled into political arenas where I didn’t intellectually belong. All the while I kept making notations about the things I couldn’t understand, or words that seemed slippery, and worked to grasp what I was missing. I still need to do this, but now I see it not as a sign of ignorance, but rather as a predisposition to acquire tools and knowledge.
In second week of this new teaching year I was high as a kite. My energy level felt unstoppable and transferable, my students seemed to be feeding off that same energy, and when class ended I was fully enraptured by a good feeling. I was floating. If this is what it feels like to make the connection with those I am guiding then I want to feel this everyday. It is powerful and life altering to find purpose in work and life at a time when my other life purpose (child rearing) is waning. I am grateful to be here, now, doing this kind of work. “Work” does not even feel like the right word. I admit this to my class. “I am learning more from being with you, am better because of what we do together, and hope to return the favor.”

Value Changes

One of the more interesting revelations in my academic journey is taking form in the way my internal thoughts and beliefs have begun to show up in my thinking and teaching, and the ways they have been affected by what I have been asked to consider in my on-going course work. Some things have slipped in seemingly unbidden; others are quite visible and then again still others are flexible. I would like to relate one such interaction between a student, a politically loaded issue, and my perception of his proposed take on that issue.

A male student e-mailed me that he wanted to argue against Affirmative Action in his final writing assignment and presentation. My negative reaction to his chosen topic was immediate and surprising considering my conservative background and belief systems. I wanted him to reconsider, given the possibility that several of his classmates might be at
Ohio State because of such policies, and the degree with which the class might react negatively concerned me. I had a decidedly liberal reaction against his position despite my own beliefs which might be described as closer to his than many of my academic counterparts. I asked him if I could review his paper first as a cautionary measure. In the meantime I discussed this paper topic and my concerns with my advisor and he persuaded me to let the student defend his argument to his classmates, instead of me muting his words. I agreed, seeing the learning that could take place with the student and his classmates.

I admitted to my advisor that I had reacted in a liberal mindset without pause, coming from the work I did in my Comparative Studies class, a class I had believed did nothing more than confuse and anger me most of the time. I had actually allowed change in, allowed for the possibility that enlightenment can lead to new beliefs, and acted accordingly. If this could happen to me then it was possible this student might find enlightenment through the comments of his classmates. I decided to let him present without my intervention.

He began by dividing the class into two groups; white males and everyone else. A surprising thing occurred. The white males were the minority group. He'd made his first point without actually speaking. He continued supporting his argument against Affirmative Action with well-documented court cases and statistics, and spoke not so much from a conservative or racist platform, but rather as a capitalist wanting only the most qualified individuals working alongside him. He did a good job of maintaining a
respectful tone and encouraged discussion afterwards. I was sure a few of my students would disagree or at least offer disputing evidence. The class remained quiet, not quite sure how or what to do in response. I wanted to step in but somehow knew my bias would likely be apparent. Finally someone spoke up.

One of his good friends, the son of a Greek immigrant, asked him if he could see the value in working in an environment of people with diverse views and life experiences. He responded he could but hoped they would be the most qualified candidates for the jobs. Then the room began to join in, questioning how “most qualified” would be defined and wondering if he had considered diversity as a quality that might be needed in many workplaces. He agreed that it could indeed be a desired quality and qualification. An interesting off-shoot of this presentation came from a young lady who had attended an Ohio State minority student orientation. She noted her Hispanic heritage as a part of her application process and then felt like an outsider at the orientation because she was not ethnic-looking and the other women asked her why she was there. She wondered how ethnic she needed to look to be considered a minority. Her admission sparked a lively debate on whether or not her minority status was “bogus” because she was perceived as “white” and therefore, privileged.

I was able to speak to this only because of my time in Comparative Studies and recalled information I had been introduced to in my course readings, specifically the writings of Peggy McIntosh (1997) and her “unpacking the invisible knapsack of white privilege” (p.295). I explained the inherent privileges garnered from simply being white,
listing some of the notable but often unseen ways being white changes perception. After class I remember closing up the room and thinking about how easily those words had come to me. I had denied learning and yet I had indisputable proof I had learned and applied what I learned to other areas of my work. The question remained, what about my life, my “at home” values, had these been affected? I began to wonder if you can have two sets of values, one for academia and another for the rest of your life.

I recalled reading about an Ohio State professor who struggled with some similar questions in her own academic life during the “disability studies” portion of my Comparative Studies class. Brenda Jo Brueggemann teaches English and is deaf, or as she likes to say “hard of hearing.” In her article “Enabling Pedagogy” (2002) Brueggemann relates the story of what happened when she inserted “disability” into her freshman composition class. She also teaches a class called “Disability 101” and found a marked difference between these two student groups. Brueggemann reports that she met with more resistance in the non-disability focused class and instead of “converting” some students to her way of thinking about disabilities she alienated some of them with her opinions.

One student in particular was angry about handicapped parking spaces at Ohio State and spoke of this issue often in class. Brueggemann spoke with him privately and encouraged him to write a research paper on the topic. She hoped he would relent once he knew of the realities of disability parking. While he did learn how easy it was to obtain a handicap permit he also went much further, actually counting all the unused spaces available on
campus as contrasted with the shortage of student parking, and argued that despite
Brueggemann's claims that non-disabled people took up spaces, there were still large
numbers of unused spaces being reserved. She admits she did not “convert” him, but
takes solace in the passionate way he approached proving her wrong (Brueggemann,
2002).

For Brueggeman the biggest struggle has been with her own switch in identification. She
only recently began to consider herself disabled, and admits it was not a space she
believed she should occupy. She has employed many accommodations to help her teach
without much emphasis on her disability, and has focused more on her abilities. She
limits the numbers of students per class; she can hear some things and lip-reads when that
fails. She uses teaching methods that compensate for her shortcomings and most students
perceive her disability as slight. She admits to working hard to make her disability not an
issue, as opposed to allowing her students to accommodate her disability. She also admits
that through viewing various representations of disabled people (often profoundly
disabled) her own disability seemed slight (Brueggemann, 2002).

I liked her honesty about her opposing struggles with place and identity. I also liked the
way she writes in a free-flowing stream of consciousness that feels real and shot full of
emotion as she experiences it. I can easily see her classroom and hear the tenor of the
uncomfortable discussions. I also identified with her worries over “losing” a student by
coming on too strong with her own bias, a bias that has only recently become a bias for
her. I too err on the side of caution, not yet comfortable with the social activism
sometimes tied to teaching in higher education. Instead, I work toward making
connections through story-telling, relating personal accounts (mine and others) to our
course work and hope somewhere down the road, in-class or out, my students find a way
to relate them to their own life.

*The Invisibility Factor*

I employ several thought provoking writing prompts during the ten week quarter, each
intended to tie somewhat to the issue or topic we are working with. One of my favorites
is a question I ask after viewing interviews and work by African-American artists Kara
Walker and Michael Ray Charles. Both artists speak eloquently on what it is like to feel
invisible. I ask my students to write about a time or place they also felt invisible. I offer
two personal examples from my own life; my early fine art school “squirrel sculpture”
incident and then when I was battling cancer. I tell them about being bald, not having
eyebrows or eyelashes and how I felt invisible when I looked in the mirror, not
recognizing the expressionless face that stared back. I explain these are confidential and
we will not share them as a group. I will note categories that emerge but I won’t share
specific events.

I expected to find myself reading a lot of angst filled paragraphs about the middle school
lunch room and not knowing which table to sit at or the group of friends in high school
who no longer talk to you. I was surprised by the depth and variety of the stories they told
and their ability to tap into the pain they felt at the time, or still feel. Some revealed
haunting tales of murder and sexual abuse, coming-out stories and struggles with
anorexia or self-cutting. I was shocked and found myself in tears several times. My assumptions regarding the eventless lives of educated Midwestern teens were shattered. Yes, there were some lunch room tales, but few in the total of three quarters. I sometimes think my doctoral research could be embedded in these writings. This year I plan to retain all of the student writings just in case. One stands out in emotional hurt and because of how I responded to it.

A young woman writes of feeling invisible after telling her mother about the long time sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of an uncle. Her mother chose not to believe her and the abuse continued until she went away to college. The writer is angry, feels enormous betrayal and low self-esteem because of the abuse and her mother’s reaction to the news. She writes her emotions with knife-edged clarity and it becomes clear to me she has not tried to deal with any of this professionally. I write back, honoring her experience and asking her to seek counseling to help her find peace. I give her the name of an on-campus counseling center. Not once does it occur to me that I have neglected to do the same about my own feelings of betrayal. Not once do I make the personal connection to my own troubling story. Only when I sit down and write of my experiences in this thesis do I make the discovery that her pain is my pain. I also think of writer Martin Moran and his book The Tricky Part (2005) and wonder if his story would help her. I wonder if I have any right to e-mail my former student and recommend his book to her. Now I wish so desperately to write to her, acknowledge her emotions and respond from a place of knowing and one of human connection. I think about how this job of
teaching is so much more than subject matter. I will think about her and worry over her for years to come. I can’t recall anyone telling me that this would occur or how to be a responsible guide when it does. I work solely from motherhood on this one.

Because I am at the beginning of a new school year (2005) the kids I face now are mostly strangers at this early stage, fresh faced sophomores and juniors with little life having been lived from my vantage point. Next week I will ask the question “Have you ever felt invisible?” and will never see any of them the same way again. I will be in possession of the very things that scar and shape, and hold the power to direct and help. Or perhaps just listen and empathize. I am somewhat more comfortable with responding to them because of the past year of teaching and learning. The work of this thesis is also responsible for the confidence I feel in responding to their writing. Now I will have new, important tools at my disposal as I read for content and for the things unsaid, denied or brushed over. I see now how words can cover. I see now how language can be slippery. I plan, this time, to look deeper and with an open heart to shared experience.

*Place and Space*

As a class we are discussing space, specifically space constructed for the public, and our relations to those places. I’ve asked my students to write about a classroom space that they loved learning in and conversely, one that precluded learning. The resulting work
was well-stated and descriptive both emotionally and literally. Many themes emerged and I categorized these on the blackboard as we worked through them. Comfort, people and subject matter are some of the most prevalent categories we noted.

We began an informative discussion on how classroom space can become uncomfortable when we don’t understand the subject and then also how emotional comfort plays into our learning space. I related my Comparative Studies experience, specifically referring to the Ricki Salinger discussion involving abortion and my perceived emotions over sharing my opinion. I talked about the mythical safety zone I believed should have been in place when talking about opinions and not having to worry about feeling attacked or judged. My point was to let them know that I know how that feels and will remain cognizant of the notion that we all come from differing value systems and beliefs. I wish for them to feel safe in my classroom and that it’s okay to agree to disagree.

The next day I received an e-mail from a male student. He wanted me to know how refreshing it is that an instructor at a liberal university actually had the guts to admit she was pro-life and that he also is very pro-life. I was stunned. I had never said I was pro-life. I had simply related the story of my debate with Ricki Salinger and he heard only what he wanted to. I had to be pro-life if I questioned Salinger’s use of the words “unwillingly pregnant.” Now I am left wondering if my Comparative Studies class heard it the same way. They must have. They too asked if I was pro-life based on my questioning of her word choice.
I remember saying to my class several times that I was not questioning Salinger’s stance on abortion rights, but the definition of how a woman is “unwillingly” pregnant. I did not tell them my personal views other than as they related to word choice. I did speak, however, to the idea of being responsible for our own bodies and for our own opinions. Somewhere out of all that this student decided I was pro-life. Did he hear an undercurrent, a position I wasn’t aware I was championing? Did my Studies class hear a position as well? I stopped to examine what I really feel and considered how best to state my position before I responded to his e-mail.

I have always been pro-choice, at least since college in the late seventies, but now I do have a slightly different set of parameters for that position. Life experience has changed a few central issues for me. One, I am now a mother. I’ve carried life, life I wanted and planned for, and know the great gift of birth and motherhood. When I did not wish to be a mother yet, we took appropriate measures and understood our pro-choice position should a precaution fail. The possibility of becoming pregnant was not an end of the world issue due to a committed marriage and the means to support a child. When we decided to stop our family from expanding we used precautions again and then eventually, a vasectomy. We were responsible about the realities of conception.

I am still pro-choice, but not without some reservations, the kind of reservations that arose when Ricki Salinger used the words “unwillingly pregnant.” If you knowingly have unprotected sex and become pregnant than it is not in my mind “unwilling,” it is likely.
My notion of pro-choice falls under the guidelines of how and why you find yourself pregnant. If a woman is sexually molested, raped or uses a birth control method that fails then she is “unwillingly” pregnant. Another category asserts itself here as well, one that is an issue for us if my husband’s vasectomy should fail at some point. We were advised not to have any more children if I used the aggressive cancer protocol we chose. Since a vasectomy was already in place we felt this was a good choice. However, if I did somehow get pregnant it is likely the fetus would have some form of genetic problems because of my chemotherapy and radiation. In this event I would choose to end the pregnancy.

Perhaps it’s not possible to have a pro-choice stance with stipulations, but I find the idea of women using abortion as a form of birth control problematic. I find the idea of women who seek abortions being labeled “unwillingly pregnant” to be troublesome. If you welcome a man into your body and allow ejaculation to take place without precautionary measures, the word “unwillingly” should not apply. In the rare event precautionary measures fail (usually condoms) another less invasive measure can be used, the morning after pill, which disrupts implantation.

None of my arguments come from a place of religious values, rather a place of responsibility and the added acknowledgement of once holding life inside my body. I feel abortion cannot be a black and white issue. It is a gray area with many deep personal intentions that need be considered. I wish for my own daughter to have the option of choice open to her in the future and feel it is my duty to make sure she understands the
importance of being responsible for her own body. In the end it is a personal choice, but hopefully one made with wisdom and accountability. If the young man of my first time had succeeded in impregnating me I would have had an abortion. I would have been “unwillingly pregnant.” Today, however, my guess is I would think about that choice often and wonder who that child might have been, how my life would have changed and where I would be today. I would wonder those things now only because I know other things since then. What might have been is gray. Back then it was black and white.

Writing to learn something

I wrote the above in order to understand my position and find the right words to explain my feelings. By carefully considering my point of view and setting it down on paper I have been able to step back and see what it is I believe about abortion. I can see what lies in the gray areas as I try to relate my emotions with particular word choices. I hear in my head where ambiguity flickers and can understand how others may feel the parts unspoken. Some of my experiences are not for my students’ public consumption, and perhaps the things I left out give away my bias, or my uncertainty. I re-read my text as I search for the sections that can remain part of my response to my student and think about how I will link the personal with the political concerning abortion.

Most important to me in my response to this student’s e-mail is the way in which I want to place myself without threatening his values or beliefs. I wish to restate my words and at the same time honor his impassioned disagreements to my stance, allowing for dialogue to take place in a safe zone of understanding. I want to keep the lines of
communication open not as a means of "conversion," but as a bridge to the gray areas of human experience. I am oddly nervous that he will feel threatened by my need to clarify my position but craft a reply regardless.

The next time I see him in class and he smiles lightly. I try to make eye contact several times while I am speaking to the class. He looks away. At the end of the class period he approaches me with his assignment to turn in and I ask “Did you get my e-mail?” He says he did. “Are we cool?” I ask. He smiles easily. “We’re cool.” I feel an immediate sense of relief. I would hate to lose this kid over something that has nothing to do with our in-class relationship. Then again is that even possible? Will we always have this thing between us? Most of all I wonder why it means so much to me. What would be the worst thing that could happen if he couldn’t let go of our differences?

I try to analyze why I worry so much over perceptions of my opinions or beliefs, and how I will position myself in the future. Will I talk around the issue? Will I look for vague language to hide behind? Probably not, because I always preface my lectures with a short statement of bias if I have one. I often do have a bias. I let them know about it beforehand so they can sift through and determine for themselves where my bias might be. I work hard to present both sides and fortunately this year’s textbook is full of essays and articles that offer opposing takes on important issues. Hearing both sides is a powerful tool for facilitating discussions and allows the student the comfort of seeing his or her stance represented.
Oddly Arousing

I used this same "writing to learn something" technique this past summer in an effort to understand some strange reactions I had during an art history class I took the previous spring. It was a High Renaissance art class and dealt heavily with Christian imagery involving biblical stories I had no frame of reference for. I had no spiritual connection to the stories, their meanings or the reverence they held. I responded from a place of ignorance and wonder, and yet found myself drawn to these sadly beautiful depictions of Christ. I decided to sit down and try to relate my feelings on paper and after sharing an early draft with Dr. Barrett, he asked me to dig deeper and speak honestly about what was shaping up to be a decidedly blasphemous take on Jesus.

I thought he was hot. Specifically, Rosso Fiorentino's *Dead Christ* (1524), a depiction so sexually male and alive it had me wondering if anyone else was seeing and feeling what I was feeling. I looked harder and thought reflectively. The resulting essay explored my interpretations and examined some of the societal underpinnings that evoked my strange and oddly arousing reaction to many of the images of Christ this class exposed me to. In the end it veered back to place of reverence for form and beauty, and in doing so seemed to take a bit of the edge off my earlier declarations concerning my "hot Jesus." Parts of this essay will be included in Dr. Barrett's upcoming article *Students Finding God in Artworks*.

My success in writing this piece is directly tied to the interactions between author and editor, especially in relation to the gentle prodding to reflect honestly and the
encouragement to step outside the boundaries with a risky topic. I admit it was scary to
write so honestly about a very personal interpretation, an interpretation that could be
upsetting to those with faith-based convictions, but at the same time it was freeing to let
loose with my emotions and attempt to situate them in a particular context. It was in the
writing and re-writing of this essay that I began to understand the importance of the
relationship of working with an editor. Later, when my thesis was well under way, I
would make the connection to the value of this collaborative give and take and the
multiple lens approach to finding deeper meaning.

The Therapist is in
I asked the “invisibility” question yesterday (Fall, 2005) and have spent the bulk of today
working with my student’s responses. This time instead of making notes back to them in
the margins I decide to reply in the form of letters. It is time consuming but necessary
because the things revealed are not easy to respond to in tiny pencil marks on the sides or
bottom of the page. Writing of such emotional tenor deserves a thoughtful and well-stated
interaction and the opportunity to offer empathy and hope. I take it seriously.

Once again I am stunned by the breadth of experience, the ability to describe the pain and
anger associated with their invisibility, and the ease with which they choose to share with
me. This time I encounter more males than females with body image struggles. My
students write of emotional abuse, death, murder, identity struggles, and hopelessness.
One girl writes of being sexually assaulted by a date and the “haze” she existed in for
months after. I spend a great deal of time responding to her, with truthful
acknowledgement of her pain, and in order to atone for the former student I did not offer
truth. A young man writes of his strong conviction to remain a virgin until he can give
that gift to his wife. He speaks of the numerous dates he’s been on that seem to
degenerate after the girl knows he’s not willing to be in a sexual relationship with her.
He wonders if he will ever find a girl that doesn’t think he’s weird. Once he reveals his
virginity he says it feels like the girls look right through him. I offer him encouragement
to stay the course and cite my own issues with the loss of what I, too, think is an
important gift.

Another young man reveals he is bi-racial, something I had not noticed because he looks
more white than anything else. His father is black but he’s never met him. He was raised
by his white mother in a fairly affluent household. He feels stuck in the middle. He’s a
“nigger” when people know about his father’s race and “too white” around his black
friends. He writes poetry to deflect his anger. He includes a few lines for me to read.

I am a nigger to whites, yellow to blacks, rich to the poor
I am the combination of opposite sides of a silent war

He writes eloquently about his struggle with place, not belonging to either side and
knowing what it is to be judged for being either or, and feeling directed anger from both
his races. He was the last one to finish writing that day. He told me he had a lot to say.
He did.
I am reminded of what I said earlier, one day they are all fresh-faced kids, the next day I see them as more real, more developed and human. I use our humanness to connect and write back as someone who sees them as the individual fragile souls they have revealed to me. I want to touch them carefully. They seem as though they might break. I am sad for the things they have seen and had done to them. I am grateful they trust me enough to share and am honored to respond in kind.

Too Close?
I am many things to many people. Mostly I am what I want them to see. In my classroom, however, I find I tend to be an open book, sharing personal events and emotions whenever I believe it could help promote understanding. Experience in this class setting has shown me that my students find comfort in the open atmosphere, are more willing to share or venture out onto a branch of uncertainty. I also know there are some who are not at all comfortable with sharing in a group and I let them know I understand. I tell them about my son, a painfully shy kid who is often pegged as aloof because of his good looks and “Abercrombie” clothes. His quiet nature has cost him academically in several classes. I acknowledge my “mothering” tendencies and try to resist judging these silent students who don’t verbally participate in class. They share in their writings and I reward their efforts whenever possible. This is hardly a scientific statement but the quiet ones are often my best writers. I mention this to my high school senior son who agrees and says “when you spend a lot of time in your own head you have a lot of things that need saying, and if saying them out loud isn’t easy then writing them might be the only answer.”
My husband at times questions how close I allow my students to be to me and my personal life. He thinks it's odd and wonders if it is a good idea. We discuss this at length often and I remain steadfast in the belief that it is good. I believe I would have ended up teaching with this mindset anyway but there was an early catalyst. After I was asked to teach and accepted, I was offered the opportunity to attend a three day T.A. orientation. Long lists of seminars were available to attend and they were helpful. The most interesting thing I gathered from the orientation came from the handbook put out by the Faculty and T.A. development department on teaching at The Ohio State University (2001). One of the most important things a T.A. is asked to do is to help students make a personal connection to a rather large and at times impersonal college experience. (note: my advisor asks me to consider spousal fear of workplace relationships and write more about this subject area.)

Under the section titled "Motivation and Classroom Environment" the number two tip encourages the instructor to make students feel invited and states "the presence of or absence of a close relationship with an instructor is cited as a factor which influences retention" (p.9). Additionally, getting to know students personally, learning to empathize, and fostering enthusiasm are also listed. The section concludes with "personalizing" the classroom and stresses the following:

Similarly, direct attempts of instructors to talk about such things as their own life experiences related to the subject
and their personal difficulties in mastering certain concepts
create a warmer classroom climate (p.9).

The handbook is full of useful information regarding learning styles, teaching
philosophies and models, syllabus creation, writing concepts, intervention strategies and
university resources. The handbook was compiled from information gathered from
winners of the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award and the identified qualities shared
by those who are chosen (p.22). I wonder how many professors could use this handbook.
I can think of a few I’ve encountered over the years.

I took to heart the idea of promoting personal connections between instructor and student.
It is the number one quality my students mention in my evaluations. Sadly, some have
said I am the only teacher who knew their name or anything else about them. While that
has rarely been my experience as a student at this University, the discourse I study in is
exceptional in this respect due to the relatively small size of the department, I do
understand other discourses are quite large. Many of my fellow graduate teaching
assistants do not follow my way of thinking and are often appalled by the familiarity I
have with my students. It seems to follow a cultural divide, the American teaching
assistants are more comfortable with the concept, and my Asian counterparts find it
unprofessional. A friend, Eleonora Redaelli, a grad assistant from Italy, marvels at how I
approach my classroom, and recently expressed shock over the idea that I allowed my
students to do a semiotic reading of the contents of my purse. Culturally, she finds it
extremely difficult to be that available to her students. It is simply not done that way in
her country.

I believe my willingness to share and work for personal connections has touched my
students in a positive way. This is not a one way street by any means. I am the recipient
of many wonderful exchanges that serve to enlighten me and foster a better
understanding of who my students are in the process. The one thing that bothers me the
most is that once they leave my class at the end of the quarter I will rarely get the chance
to see them again. Many do stay in e-mail contact, some still drop by the classroom to
chat, a few have sought recommendation for jobs or grad school, and others have given
me gifts. But the majority will likely never cross paths with me again. Despite that truth I
still think about many of them, worry over some of them, and hope all of them will
remember the teacher who knew their name.

This quarter (autumn 2005) I am thinking about the question of being too close,
specifically because of the recent “pro-life” interaction with one of my male students and
the “invisibility” papers I have just given back. Before I hand them back with my written
responses I thank them for their honesty and tell them I am humbled by the things they
chose to share with me. The students take a few minutes to read what I have written to
them. Several make eye contact and acknowledge the effort with a smile or slight nod of
thanks. We proceed with the lessons and activities of the day. After class six students
remain wishing to talk with me. The first two missed class on the “invisibility” day and
want to write on the subject if I will allow it. Usually these are in-class only assignments and if you aren’t there you don’t get credit. One girl missed because of a concussion suffered at the new Ohio State climbing wall, the other had a brother returning from Iraq with the Lima Corp. I decide to let them respond because I sense they want to be in on the personal aspects of the exchange. The next couple of kids want to thank me for my response and another simply says “I can’t believe you get me.” The last one hangs back waiting. It’s my “pro-life” student. He wants to talk.

Surprisingly, he doesn’t want to talk about the “invisibility” writing or the previously dealt with abortion exchange. He wants to talk about a class he took last year in which he felt similar tensions to what I had described in my Comparative Studies class. Because of his conservative views on abortion I am surprised to hear him talk about how hard it is for him to listen to “ignorant” people try to discuss issues of race. I am surprised because he speaks passionately about the hope that these discussions will no longer be needed in the future. He states that he wonders how long it will take before race is not a major topic, and when race will become invisible. I mention that because race can’t be “invisible” to the eye it will always be a factor for some people. He sighs and says “yeah, but usually the people who need a class in diversity issues aren’t going to go to college.”

I hear the word “privilege” jump into my head in the form of a classmate’s voice in Comparative Studies, “that’s privileged…going to college is privileged.” I try to filter the voice in my head. “That may be” I begin, “and perhaps this is where positive change will start to make a real difference. When you learn to speak knowingly about an important
issue you are then able to explain your views to others who don’t share it and spark internal dialogue.” He nods thoughtfully and then smiles, “Like we did on abortion.” I smile back; thrilled we made this connection, and say, “Exactly.” I leave the classroom this day resolute that familiarity is not only okay, it’s transformative.

**Missed the Boat**

On the same day I have a wonderful “teaching” moment I find myself facing the possibility of not teaching next quarter. My reactions to this turn of events are telling in several ways. An e-mail went out to all the grad assistants who teach 367.01 listing the available slots for next quarter. I unfortunately was out of town and did not retrieve the e-mail until all but one night time slot were spoken for. Additionally, the slot and time I teach currently was not listed at all as an offered option. Another e-mail announces that she (the professor who oversees 367.01) has heard from everyone and these are the assignments. I am not listed anywhere.

I am swamped with anger and resentment. I see subsequent responsive e-mails from other grad assistants squabbling over classroom assignments and grad class commitments. I fire off my own e-mail, careful to inquire respectfully about the slot I now occupy and wonder where it has gone. I mention that I was out of town and not able to respond. I also point out that I cannot take the evening spot and will be unable to teach winter quarter. I remain so agitated I can barely figure out what to do. I feel as though the air has been sucked out of my lungs. Not teach? I do the internal dialogue of doubt and insecurity, despite the knowledge that it is unlikely the department doesn’t want me anymore. I feel
unwanted regardless. By late afternoon I have not received an e-mail response and begin
to panic. I could take the quarter off, I decide, but then what, will I have to pay tuition
and forfeit my stipend? I try to visit the professor but she is not in her office. I try the
graduate secretary hoping she will know something. This turns out to be a bad move as
her information sounds ominous, “well…you may have missed the boat.”

With my teaching position now in serious danger, the passive girl falls to the side as a
voice I am not used to speaks up; I question the fairness of a free-for-all e-mail, I ask if
seniority should be a factor considering four of us have taught this class for over a year
and the remaining six have recently received appointments. The secretary seems
unmoved by my worries but does check the master schedule on-line and confirms my slot
is gone. I ask if my contract is void if a spot is not available. “Yes, it’s void.” I am feeling
desperate and out of control now. My face is hot. I realize those in the office might not
see that I’m upset; rarely does anyone see my emotions in a moment like this. I know I
learned this subterfuge from my mother. The voice of reason tries to quiet me. You don’t
need the money or the tuition. A quarter off could be spent on your thesis. But that’s not
it, that’s not it. I need to teach.

Dr. Stuhr’s secretary is listening to my rant (a respectful rant) and steps in. The professor
I need to find is in with Pat and will be out soon. We go up to her office and I plead my
case, shamelessly playing the “mommy” card in explanation for my being unable to take
the only open slot. I know only one other T.A. is a mom so my odds increase or so I
hope. Luckily, my female professor feels motherhood is an obligation that needs to be

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filled like any other job and offers me a daytime slot. I feel the tension unclench in my
neck and shoulders where I have apparently been holding my anger. We move on to talk
of other things, primarily teaching philosophies and crafting pedagogy that fits the person
you are. We spend some time discussing my thesis and she is intrigued by my
methodology. I somehow manage to explain my thesis without my revealing the
economic “privilege” piece. I feel at this juncture it would not look good to have pushed
for a teaching slot when I am not desperately in need of the stipend or tuition credit. She
tells me I am a natural born teacher and that my evaluations (which she previewed before I
get them) bear this out. I am no longer resentful that I had been forgotten. I tell her what I
felt when I realized I might not have a position winter quarter. I need to teach.

Now as I reflect on my range of emotions on that day I can see the many parts of me that
were involved. Insecurity, guilt, passive aggressive actions, masking truth and entitlement
all played a part in this day. These negative associations managed to drown out the good
that had transpired earlier in class, leaving me weak and powerless. It is the entitlement
piece that I wrestle with now. I think I am good at what I do, so why do I worry so much
that I don’t deserve my place at this institution? Why do I continue to believe my
privilege will somehow diminish my intentions? Was a small voice in the farthest part of
my brain telling me I’d been found out and therefore some other more deserving graduate
or doctoral student had been gifted my place? As I write this and consider these words I
realize how irrational my thought process had been. I can see clearly now how I let me
emotions direct and destroy. It is hard, though, in the middle of that spiral to get any
distance on what is true and what is imagined. What it felt like was real, in every way real, from the tension in my shoulders to the heated flush of internalized anger that warmed my face. Real.

I already knew I loved teaching students. What I hadn’t realized until it was threatened was the idea that I need to do it. What teaching has become for me is unexpected, exciting and welcome. These same attributes can be applied to how I feel about learning and about writing. Teaching, learning and writing have all become intertwined for me, each working in behind the scenes ways to inform and strengthen each other. When I teach I learn, when I learn I become a better teacher and writer, when I write I learn from what I write, and when others read what I write they learn something as well. Or so I hope. I cannot excel at one without the others. So I fought, in my own passive aggressive way, to get what I need. (note: my advisor points out that “need” is much stronger than “want” and I might want to explore this distinction.)

**Outsider Tensions**

Besides teaching I am also a student in a required course for my museum education concentration. Museum History is the class I am taking this fall (2005), my other class is an independent study for thesis work, and I find this combination to be good for the amount of things I have on my plate this quarter. I am most grateful for the previous work I did in the Museum Practicum class because it gave me a strong background of issues and current theoretical thought which is bolstering my coursework this fall. I enjoy the feeling of being equipped with additional knowledge and for the ability to make
connections between the two classes. While some classmates struggle with the readings a few of us are able to approach the articles with an understanding that comes from being familiar with the authors and their theoretical biases. I find writing for the class is heightened by the ability to express opinions and offer differing examples from previously read articles and books. I also enjoy the professor who is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about museum history. Dr. Sanders has an infectious spirit that keeps the class moving at a well planned pace. I feel comfortable with the assignments and the class as a whole.

One afternoon the classroom felt uncomfortable and I had a feeling something I have said or discussed in a couple of planning meetings had actually made its way into the class. The professor said that the Department Chair wanted each syllabus to include a disclaimer of sorts that acknowledges content that might be offensive or uncomfortable, and that he had forgotten so he was going to read it to us. He did, but in the end said if you do have an issue with such imagery this was not the class for you. I was fairly sure the actual wording was something along the lines of “come see me and we’ll work out some alternatives.” And what if “this class is not for you” but it is a requirement of your major? Too bad?

He read the statement with a good deal of sarcasm, and was met with laughs and general agreement that it was ridiculous. One student quipped “you shouldn’t be in grad school if that stuff bothers you.” Two people weren’t smiling or rolling their eyes; me and an Asian doctoral student. I remember thinking I can handle it, I just don’t want to handle it
with the rest of you or watch my Asian classmate stare blankly at her notebook in an effort to not engage. I saw this previously in Dr. Short’s methodology class, when Dr. Sanders gave a presentation to our class on critical theory. Four Asian women looking uncomfortable as two pretended to take copious notes during a presentation filled with pictures of nude men and penises. Dr. Short sat in the back of the room looking as though she was trying hard to come up with an appropriate question for our visiting instructor. I do have to admit I did have an inkling of what was coming because I’d seen a similar PowerPoint presentation of his at the visual culture conference and therefore was not as unnerved by the imagery. I did still feel bad for the classmates who were uncomfortable. (note: my advisor notes my continued issues with “forced” interactions in public settings.)

This episode involving the “content” disclaimer stuck with me for a couple of days. I wondered if I should have said something or perhaps mention the cultural differences often prevalent in grad school, indeed our most diverse student population at Ohio State, in an effort to remind my classmates and instructor that we come from many varied value systems and religions. I didn’t, simply because the overwhelming response made it clear I was in the minority. I have made a great many strides this past year but like most people don’t like to feel an outsider, and in this case remained passive. It is this same passivity that is bugging me now. I’m mad at myself for not having the backbone to say something. I am especially disappointed because the policy may be in place because of things I have related about honoring student difference in the class I teach.
Now I am left with the question “are they right?” Should grad school only belong to those who can handle frank sexual imagery and liberal policies? Can someone earn a degree in art education, museum education or cultural policy if they are of a conservative or otherwise restrictive ideology? If a Muslim woman wanted a degree in art education and her cultural and religious beliefs stated she cannot look at images of unclothed males, how would she progress in our discipline? The laughter that followed the reading of the “content” disclaimer did not feel like the group was honoring difference, it felt decidedly like exclusion. If you won’t play by our rules then you really shouldn’t be here at all.

The roundtable discussion that may have prompted the inclusion of the “content” disclaimer took place last spring (2005) with the 367.01 instructors. We discussed some of the problems we have encountered in regards to the general education population we teach. Religious difference was a prominent and persistent issue. Violent imagery in the movies some of us use was another. We discussed some of the ways to teach what we need to teach and still acknowledge personal beliefs and capabilities. One solution involved placing the decision in the hands of the student. For example, when Robert Mapplethorpe photographs were discussed the images were placed on a table at the back of the room. If you chose to you could, one by one, go back and look at them, privately, or not at all. No one was forced to view them.

We had a lengthy discussion about the possible use of the movie “Passion of the Christ” as our new textbook contains four differing essays written about the movie and it’s content. The movie is by all accounts disturbingly bloody and violent. Apart from that
issue there are several others involving religion and anti-Semitism. I stated I won’t be using it, mostly because I could not watch it (will not) and I can’t ask my students to do what I won’t do. I imagine we can learn a lot about the controversial movie from the essays and if someone is intrigued and wishes to know for themselves they can rent the DVD, or find it at the library, and watch it at home.

Process notice

A quick note here on how the creative analytic process is working in this body of work: First, when I sit down to write I try to devote several hours at one sitting. Usually I produce about ten pages of text. Later, sometimes even the next day, I go back and re-read and re-consider my words. I look for the ambiguity and vague language and try to insert the missing thoughts or unsaid emotions. I may have been trying to hide things and then again other times I recall or remember an additional bit of information that serves to clarify. I re-write and add as I see fit. Ten pages then become twenty. Once I drop off my new sections for my advisor to reflect on, I wait to see what he has uncovered or where he may have felt I was talking around something. The process starts again. I look harder, using his notations as a guide. I don’t always agree with him and later he will invariably note my indiscretions again and so on.

As much as I’d like to claim this is tiresome it is not. I am always excited to see what he sees or to think over a previously stated truth with an eye towards a clearer lens. The process is fascinating to me and my biggest fear is that this thesis will not end, but I am also fearful that it will end. Writing it has become a part of my day to day life and I miss
interacting with the process on the days I can’t write. On those days I think, I recall and I look for new ways of discovery. I have learned to keep a small, spiral notebook with me at all times so I can jot down whatever ideas I happen upon.

Four Quarters Down

I have just completed teaching fall (2005) quarter using the new text book and coursework and feel as though this is the most successful class I’ve taught to date. The work we did together seemed relevant to my students’ lives and my own. They taught me as much as I taught them, both academically and personally. The human aspects of the direction of our subject matter left me open and vulnerable, and I allowed my students see me in that light. We had some very honest interactions on socially loaded issues, including race, religion and even sex. We laughed a lot at the ways our respective generations see things differently, expressed the ways some things have reverted back to past views, or simply disappeared completely. Both male and female students expressed concern over some of the constants in their world, including media depictions of females, the socially “unreal” aspects of technology and loss of connecting on a human level, and the inability to find news sources they can trust in.

I believe the course itself is not social activism in any overtly biased way; instead it offers many conflicting views and ideologies and asks the students to sift through the rhetoric and find what rings true for them. I feel my students were successful at doing this and many told me at the end of the class that they had begun to see the world through a more critical lens. I am grateful if this proves to be true and I have somehow inspired twenty-
six young kids to engage more fully with the world they live in. Some of the final paper topics they decided to research reflect their willingness to criticize ideas and values prevalent in our society.

Several females chose topics involving depictions of women and girls in print ads, television, movies and Disney animated films. One student reported on the *Dove* brand ad campaign “Real Beauty” which featured normal sized un-altered women in their underwear. She included several quotes by men reacting to these images with negativity, perpetuating the idea that women need to aspire to the unattainable digitized model or celebrity. This student asked the other women in the class to send a message to advertisers and included addresses and websites so they could express their feelings regarding the topic.

Another student introduced us to the tie-in between pornography and human trafficking. She pieced together mainstream advertising imagery glorifying childish-looking women and the increase in pornography geared toward the descriptor “barely legal.” She made connections to some of the photographs by Sally Mann we had viewed earlier in the quarter and this caused several students to wonder if Mann’s photographs were more complicit than we had believed. Her presentation was disturbing without being gratuitous, despite several male students hopes that it would be, and she also left us with names and addresses of people to write to in reference to human rights issues.
A male student and self-professed basketball fan did an examination of the hip-hop culture, the professional African-American basketball player, and the recent dress-code decree set down by the NBA. He addressed several tough questions concerning role models, money and the prevalent “me” attitude some famous players have. This student made connections to the NBA-related images painted by artist Michael Ray Charles we saw earlier in the quarter and used these to support his argument. He also questioned what racial undertones are embedded in the new dress code and how the business side of the organization is reacting to outside pressures to take the “street” out of the NBA. This presentation sparked a heated debate on the demise of the “team” concept and the idea of role models in sports and the impact on young kids.

The most thought provoking presentation was the final one of the day and the quarter. It left the class silent and shuffling quietly out the door, but inspired many questions before the students left. This presentation focused on a pro-suicide website, ASH, which is devoted to helping people find the correct way to “catch the bus,” a euphemism for killing oneself. Besides the detailed methods and formulas for committing suicide, it also boasts a count-down to death blog, where you (the person dying) can be encouraged along by others. A successful “caught the bus” banner is sent out when the person can no longer type into the blog chat room. The student then read the transcript from one such blog count-down. Several people were moved to tears. We had a long discussion on
freedom of speech rights and the legalities of sites such as this and others, including pro-
anorexia websites. The student related that she chose this topic because a close friend had tried to commit suicide and is now in therapy and doing well. She worried that the outcome would have been suicide if her friend had found this website first.

When I contrast the Fall 2005 class presentations with those done within the former coursework assignments I am heartened by the depth and breadth of the topics and issues my students researched. I am also pleased with how many of these students were inspired by the essays we read, the artists we learned about, and the in-class discussions that took place over the quarter. I could also tell from the kinds of questions the students asked after each presentation that the inquiry was reflective of the internal questions they wrestled with as they considered the presenter’s argument.

For these reasons I believe Fall quarter was successful and useful for my students. I have not yet read the evaluations from this class to see if they agree, but the last day of class I found a card left on my desk after the students had gone. At first I believed it to be a Christmas card, but then opened it and soon I was in tears. Someone had passed the card around for each student to sign. It was covered in small notes about how much they loved the class and how much they learned. Several thanked me for sharing myself with them. If I were to apply content analysis to this card to gauge effectiveness in reaching my
goals as an instructor, the following words would help define my success:

"Enlightening," "opened my eyes and mind," "intriguing," "teaching," "refreshing,

"learned," "enjoyed," "concern," "dedication," "sharing," "commitment," "home,

"comfortable," and "awesome."

I placed the card on my office bulletin board as inspiration to keep working at finding new ways to connect, inspire and instruct. When I look at this card it makes me feel as though I have accomplished something good and purposeful. This is reason enough to keep going with my own studies and my own academic goals, especially on the days when I say to myself, "You are 45 years old and doing homework. Why?"
Part Three:

Reflecting on the Margins

Before I began the work of reflecting on the issues, themes and questions my advisor noted needed further attention, I needed to get into the proper frame of mind to do so. This was difficult then, with one quarter ending and the Holidays looming, I was stretched too thin. I chose to first re-engage with the process of inquiry as defined by author Byron Katie (2003) as a starting point. Katie’s book, Loving What Is, is part self-help, part meta-cognitive philosophy, and yet deals with inquiry in a remarkably simple way. She states, “A thought is harmless unless we believe it” (p.50). I think I might have chosen the word “powerless” in place of “harmless,” but I do see what she’s saying. She asks us to become aware of the stories we tell to ourselves and others, about events, emotions and beliefs. She wants us to consider the internal dialogue running through our heads, the soft whisper that speaks of doubt, and those automatic critical thoughts which nag and hurt. I hear these thoughts often. I believe them resolutely. Why?

Inquiry, Katie believes, is more than a technique for investigation. Inquiry takes practice and with practice she hopes the process will become a balancing force when we think. Her process is almost too straightforward to be taken seriously: For each thought you struggle with you simply ask, “Is it true?” If the answer is yes, then you move on to
another question, “Can you absolutely know that it is true?” By now most people have admitted they can’t prove it’s true, but for the tough questions she asks you to keep working. The third question asks, “How do you react when you think that thought?” Write it down. Look at the words you chose to describe your reactions. The last question is the most telling, “Who would you be without the thought?” (p.24-25). In other words, what would my life be like if I didn’t see myself through those beliefs. How would it change the way I think, react and connect? With Byron Katie’s questions in mind I will look closely at the things I tell myself, the “stories” I write and the beliefs and values that support them. Richardson (2000) and Bochner (1998, in Richardson, 2000) both ask us to consider looking deeper in the text for “new questions and issues” as a way to use the process of revision for clarity and as a method of inquiry. In reconsidering my words and their meanings I begin to see how Richardson believes researchers/writers need to “view their work as a process rather than a definitive representation” (p.936).

Four Things

After re-reading Part One and Part Two several times, I have chosen four issues to focus on. Although they are separate, in many ways they are also inter-related, each serving to support (or undermine) the other. I will look at passivity, self-worth, sarcasm and force. I placed them in this order for the simple reason that I feel they work in that order, in relation to building layers of thought and response, and in connecting to aspects of my self.
I recall a few years ago there was an uproar about a hazing incident that took place in a suburb of Chicago involving high school girls. The incident made the national news because someone present at the event recorded video as it was happening. In the video upper class girls were hazing the younger class girls (freshmen and sophomores) in a ritual that had taken place for years at this particular high school. Overtime it had become more violent and humiliating than it had been in the past. The younger girls are corralled into a bunch and then pelted with things, usually shaving cream, food or other harmless messy things. On this year, however, the upperclassman brought paint cans, big coolers and metal garbage cans. The interaction got violent and the video footage depicted the victims being pummeled with swinging paint cans, being hit with the large coolers and metal garbage cans, sometimes about the head and face. As I watched the video roll I marveled at what a sociological goldmine it was. Some girls fought back, some girls screamed and cried out for their safety and the safety of the others, and then again other girls rolled into balls and waited until it was over. I wondered what my daughter would do. It occurred to me that I would be one of the girls curled up on her side waiting until it was over.

When the phone rings I answer it. When the doorbell rings I answer it. When an acquaintance calls and asks me to do something, volunteer or chair a committee, I say yes. When someone asks me a question I answer it even if I realize it’s none of their business. I have bought countless things I didn’t need or want because I couldn’t say no. When I watch people on T.V. having a heated confrontation I change the channel because it makes me feel agitated. “Is it true?” Am I truly this passive? Somewhat. I have changed
since I had cancer. I don’t answer the door anymore, unless I’m expecting someone. I have caller ID now on my phone. I can easily avoid the dreaded volunteer coordinator. I still avoid confrontation, real or on T.V., because I worry about stress and my immune system.

I fight for my children. I have taken on teachers, school administrators, and coaches. I fought back when I had cancer, but honestly for my family more than for myself. If I had died I would have failed them, not me. That’s how I felt at the time anyway. It seemed selfish to say I was fighting for my life, as if my being here on earth was important to anyone other than my husband, children and parents. I realize now, sadly, that I had little value for myself. Instead, I have used other things to build my self-worth. Monetary wealth, associations with those I thought were “important” people, houses, luxury branded cars, pricey antiques and art, well-dressed attractive children who excel at sports, understated but expensive jewelry, impressive travel destinations and the ability to stay home with my children. All of these things tell the world who I am. None of these things are who I am.

This is a shallow list; however, it has also been consistently upheld as a driving force in my life. Being measured in these ways feed upon themselves. When we were selling our house to leave Columbus, Ohio, to move to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a young couple made a cash offer on the first day it was on the market. The only stipulation was the young man’s father needed to see the house first to approve the purchase. The next morning the realtor, the couple and the father came back to see the house. I went out on
the screened porch with my four-year old daughter. The realtor came out and asked me to make coffee for them, which I thought was a strange request. I must have made a telling expression because she said, "Do you know who he is?" No, I had no idea who he was. The father was Robert Walters, Chairman and CEO of Cardinal Health, a billion dollar company larger than Proctor & Gamble. He was buying the house as a wedding gift for his son and his fiancé. I went in and made coffee. Mr. Walters paid me little mind, until he noticed a painting we had, and then he deemed me worth speaking to. He collected the same artist and was stunned to see one of Judi Rotenberg’s pieces hanging on my wall. We talked about her gallery in Boston and somehow ended up discussing our summer home in Maine.

The normal transactions involved in the sale of a home were set aside. He trusted us based on who we collected and the fact that we summered in Maine. Odd criteria for most people, but not for rich people, we had proved our trustworthiness through the things we owned, not who we were.

It happened again recently with a woman I volunteer with at my daughter’s school. She lives in one of the largest and finest homes in my neighborhood. She has barely bothered to have conversation with me, often times looking past me as we talk, in hopes someone better will happen upon her. I mentioned I’d read that one of the horses she and her husband owned had done well in a race at Keeneland Racetrack in Lexington, Kentucky. "You follow horses?" she asked in surprise. I do, we have friends who own and we keep track of how their horses fare. I had her attention now. "Who are your friends?" I knew
before I told her that she would be impressed and I admit it gave me a thrill. My husband once worked with Bob Lewis when we lived in Los Angeles. Bob and his wife Beverly owned two Triple Crown contenders, Charismatic and Silver Charm, and are considered one of the most likable couples in the racehorse circuit. They are incredibly humble people who made their wealth through beer distribution. He started out driving a beer delivery truck and Beverly did the books. “You know the Lewis’s?” She looks at me when she talks to me now.

In my socially constructed world who you know and what you own is its own form of currency. It can also leave you feeling morally bankrupt. What I understand now that I could not see before is how false this construction is. It took the great equalizer, Cancer, to give me the perspective to see the truth. A major hiccup in the path to happiness, but cancer served several life affirming purposes. All the pretty things and well-connected friends can’t fix what is happening to you. It might get you better health care, but still your body does the deciding if its going to work or not. I can list the good that came in the form of cancer and I can also list the bad. I’d rather not list them: the bad might be longer than the other and I’d prefer to believe they balance somehow.

Cancer did more than challenge my body. It seriously messed with my self-image and gave me the clarity to see that too much of my self-worth is tied up in what I look like. Without my Cartier watch, Land Rover and Kate Spade purse to announce who I am all I’m left with is my person. My face. My hair. My body. The “me” I knew in the mirror
disappeared and with it went the one thing I had always been able to count on. Pretty. My advisor picked up the many times I tried to act as if that wasn’t the case, or the other times when I blamed those who made assumptions based on my looks.

From a young age I can recall the many times I was referred to as “pretty,” “beautiful” and later, “sexy.” I can’t recall other words, such as smart or talented. My parents probably said those things, but they have to say those things. “Is it true?” I don’t think my letter-writing voyeur bus driver wrote those letters because I was smart. I’m fairly certain the boy who wanted to have sex with me wasn’t driven by my obvious artistic talents. Would my boss have felt the need to “explain” how to read inventory sheets if he perceived me to be intelligent? It was not my skill at negotiating free printing services that caused that business owner to want to kiss me. My own in-laws called me a “pretty ball of fluff.” My husband kicks me under the table to stop me from saying something stupid. It wasn’t just the voice in my head, the doubts whispering away. I was taught in every conceivable way to believe “pretty” was my one important quality. But, it’s my fault that I chose to believe it.

So when the quality I felt valued for went away, at the very time I was most vulnerable, I lost my footing as to who I was. When my four-year old daughter saw my bald head for the first time she cried and said, “Don’t ever let me see you like that again.” She feels horrible about saying that now, and I tell her she was just having an honest reaction to the same thing I was. Where is my mom? Where am I? “Shari” was gone and I needed to
find someone to replace her and fast. Someone who could do what needed to be done. Someone who didn’t care what others thought of her. I don’t think I found that person, not then anyway, but a seed was planted, and eventually took root.

My advisor asked me why I had to tell my husband about all the things I had kept separate from him and my children, only after the fact, rather than at the time they were occurring. Guilt. Plain and simple, I hated what my illness was doing to those who cared about me. My dad called one day, shortly after my diagnoses. He was drunk and crying, two things I’d never known him to do. My son acted as if nothing was wrong at all, ignoring what was taking place in our life, until one day he got angry at me about something and told me he didn’t have to listen to me anymore. I was already gone. My daughter asked me every night at bedtime, “Are you going to die, Mommy?” Eventually it became, “I’m glad you aren’t going to die,” and then, “It’s good you lived or I was going to kill myself to be in heaven with you.” This one used to make me crazy, especially since we’ve never been to church. Someone else had told her she could be with her mommy in heaven. I never did find out who it was.

It was hard enough seeing what my illness was doing to them; I felt I couldn’t add to that in any way. So I had my own secret ways of coping. I used whatever resources I could to get through and if I cheated someone out of feeling like they’d done their part to help, well, too bad. It was what I thought I needed to do at the time, right or wrong. At the same time that I have been working on this section my daughter (now 14 years-old) came home from school and asked me to tell her about my battle with cancer. She had attended
a school assembly where six of her middle school teachers related their battles with breast cancer. Nine teachers at her school have been diagnosed with breast cancer in the last six years. The school has been tested several times and has proven to be unrelated to the cluster.

My daughter said listening to the teachers speak about what they went through made her want to understand more about what I had been through. She said she doesn’t remember much. I told her I was grateful she couldn’t recall much about that time. She said she was grateful too, because if it was happening now she didn’t think she could handle it. The very thought of going through that now at my children’s current ages is scary. I would not be able to hide the bad stuff from them as I did last time. The idea of not being able to shield them was sobering. Although my daughter doesn’t remember many details she was not left unscarred. She has several issues that trouble her and are directly tied to control. Her therapist says it stems from thinking her mom was going away and there wasn’t anything she could do to stop it. So she tries to control everything else around her. We have battled with her over compulsive timetables, over-exercising, and her demand that we can never be late to pick her up. She spent several months insisting we all be upstairs in bed at the same time each night. She is much better now and knows when she is beginning to obsess over something, and then uses coping skills her therapist taught her. I carry tremendous guilt over being a part of her problems.

I cannot pinpoint when exactly I began to let go of some of my past constructions, but a lot of it started after my battle with cancer. I recall one conversation that angered me
greatly, still does, with a Lancaster, Pennsylvania neighbor. When my cancer was first diagnosed we received a good deal of help from two friends who were both doctors. They checked out oncologists for us, contacted people who could assist us, and handled any other medically related questions we had. We will always be grateful to them for their help. A year after I had finished treatment I was in the “why” phase of recovery—why did this happens, what can I be doing to make sure I stay healthy, and other investigations into healthy choices. I had mentioned a type of natural supplement for liver health to my doctor friends at dinner one night. The husband laughed and said, “Are you trying to figure out why you got cancer?” I replied, “Yes…but more than that how to make sure I stay healthy.” He smiled and shook his head in amusement. “God gave you cancer.”

His wife was shocked and apologized right away. I knew he was religious but thought as a doctor he might have a more scientific approach. “Why did God give me cancer, Bill?” “To teach you to be a better person,” he responded. “Bill, if being a better person is putting others before you, caring deeply about how you treat those you love and trying to be all things to all people, then I have to tell you that’s exactly how I ended up sick.” “Maybe so, but God meant for you to live through this and learn from it,” he explained. I brushed it off and we finished dinner, but it remained a barrier to him from that point on. A few friends I related the story to were stunned by his audacity. I never forgave him for saying that to me; however I will admit I have thought about what changes I could make in response to my illness.
Two years ago we heard he had been diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. I wrote him a long letter about what I had learned from my own battle. I refrained from asking him why God gave him cancer. A “better person” would not find anything amusing in what has occurred, so perhaps I am still learning to forgive. If I look at his proclamation through Katie’s lens “Is it true? God gave me cancer.” I guess I would have to be able to see God as an all-knowing, all-powerful entity to say yes. Since I don’t hold that belief I’ll say “No, it isn’t true.” Being a better person is a worthy goal, and if I frame it as being a better person to myself first and then others, I find it useful for contemplating. In order to be better to myself I need to stop tearing myself down with thoughts that serve no life-affirming purpose. After years of internal negative whispering this one will be difficult to work on, but with Katie’s inquiry maybe I can begin to focus on ferreting out what is really true and what I choose to tell myself.

Teaching at Ohio State has given me more than an education with a helpful stipend. It has helped me see myself as something altogether different than what my friends and family have seen thus far. I am evolving, becoming, and at times embracing what it is to be not like “them.” I am still partially in both worlds, not quite ready to be one person over the other, but I have changed nonetheless. I have a few things that remain hold-outs to my privileged life, things I feel bad about, but yet continue to do. I purchase my own media for the class I teach, mostly because the communal sharing of such items between the nine of us grad associates is less than productive. I hate being set to teach a lesson only to discover the materials I’d requested haven’t been returned yet. I print a lot of my handouts at Staples because the quality is nicer. I pay for many of the art supplies I
incorporate into my activities so that I can be sure I have everything I need. Each time I take a class on a field trip I pay half of their admission costs. I am sure most of my fellow teaching associates don’t do these things and I don’t tell them that I do.

I do these things for several reasons. Control is the most important: I hate the feeling of being unprepared in front of a class, so I make sure that doesn’t happen. I feel guilty using resources available in my classroom because they probably aren’t for 367.01 to use, so I purchase my own. I feel guilty asking students with limited funds to pay to attend a field trip so I offer to pay half to make it less costly. I am fortunate that I can easily do these things and feel guilty that my teaching counterparts can’t. I don’t know why I feel I need to apologize for being privileged, but it seems like something I should be sorry for. It’s as if I feel guilty for holding my position when there are others who could use the stipend and tuition credit, so by paying for all the incidentals I am somehow atoning for taking someone else’s spot. By believing this I am once again reinforcing a low self-worth. I am unable to say “I deserve this appointment” as long as I believe being privileged undermines my credibility. Is it true, am I taking a spot from someone more worthy? I can’t prove that’s true. No one at Ohio State has ever said anything that might support this belief, so it is my own “story.” I can see now as I write these words how silly my “story” appears. As Byron Katie states, “A thought is “harmless” unless you believe it” (p.50), so perhaps now I need to consider the “harm” in believing it.

The harm in believing the negative stories I tell myself is evident in my issues with self-worth and related to my other identified categories, passivity, sarcasm and force. My self-
worth is tied to things (appearance, money, status) that cannot sustain my soul. I am passive because I don’t want others to think poorly of me if I was assertive. I would rather curl into a ball than fight for myself, and hold anger inside me because I am afraid to express my real feelings. I am angry at myself for being passive. And this is where the sarcasm comes into play.

My entire family (mom, dad, sister) has sarcastic dry wits. We can effectively deal with our issues and problems by skirting the real issues and problems through this method of communication. We can illuminate someone’s issue by making light-hearted fun of the person or tendency. I furthered this use of sarcasm as a way to let people know I may not have a college degree but I am witty and clever, therefore “intelligent.” Now that I have a college degree and am about to complete another, why do I think sarcasm is still an easy way to get my point across? Because it’s a passive way to say what I feel without saying it directly. I use it often. My friends look to me to offer up the pithy retort. I resorted to sarcasm several times in this thesis. My thesis advisor pointed to it and asked me to look more closely at why I choose to employ sarcasm in my writing. I’d never considered the pain behind the words and now it seems clear that I have anger about many things in my life. Sarcasm may cover for them, but it can’t make them disappear.

Sarcasm is natural to me; my responses are quickly formulated, and rarely thought through. I can’t recall having said something sarcastic that people took the wrong way or didn’t laugh at, and I imagine if I had it would have tempered my quick responses. Is it true that my sarcastic remarks remain merely funny or do they hurt? I suppose I should
ask someone, not that they’d admit it to me. If I turn it around and ask myself if other people’s sarcastic remarks hurt me I’d have to say I seem well-conditioned to it after years of living in families that employ it regularly. Even when we have serious conversations about events or issues, someone always feels compelled to lighten the tenor with a sarcastic remark. It is how we waspy-types diffuse uncomfortable interactions.

I remember the first time I traveled to my college sorority sister’s house in suburban Chicago for a weekend visit to meet her family. They were Greek, second generation, and culturally immersed in their heritage. They seemed much closer as a family than mine did, laughing and teasing lightly, welcoming me with the same friendly banter. The big difference came when the brothers and sisters fought. They yelled and screamed at one another and flung horrible wishes for injury and death. Then it was over and they were close again, as if nothing had happened. I was shocked and highly agitated when they flew into one of these sibling and parental disagreements. No one in my family ever spoke this boldly to one another, or with such vehement anger. In my family we fume and let things simmer away under the surface, instead of allowing for the person who wronged to figure out they had. In her family they let it out and then got over it quickly. I often wonder what would happen if my family began speaking that honestly with one another. I don’t think it would work for us. I don’t think even if I was incredibly angry I could tell my sister I wish she’d been born in another family or that I hoped she’d “get the big C, cobalt treatments and all,” as my roommate’s family had yelled at one another.
I do know her family all live within a few miles of each other and remain close as the expanded family grows. Mine live all over the country and begrudgingly attend expected holiday get-togethers. Then again, perhaps they live by the motto, “keep your loved ones close and your enemy’s closer.” Look, sarcasm once again. What does sarcasm do for me? Actually sarcasm might not be the right word. Sarcastic remarks are said to be “cutting” or “contemptuous” and I don’t think I am trying to be either. Sardonic might be closer, a slightly less hurtful brand of humor or irony. Why do I continue to employ such humor in my personal relationships and writing? My first response is because it has become a part of me, how I react, and how I respond to uncomfortable moments of real or imagined conflict. I am afraid people won’t like me. They will see a quiet, pretty, aloof woman without an opinion. I’d rather they see me as approachable, clever and funny. I continue to use it also because it has gotten me attention. A friend calls and tells me someone I worked with on a Women’s Board event loved being with me, I was “so funny and she had laughed and laughed all day.” She wants me to work with her on another committee. My parents say, “Let Shari tell the story, she’s so funny.” My best friend Mary calls after a bad day at work and says, “I just needed some “Shari” to make me laugh.”

I know I used sarcasm and humor in general to diffuse the seriousness of having cancer. My oncologist didn’t have any sense of humor, it seemed, so I felt compelled to find things that were funny about what I was going through. Parts of it were funny. It was good to laugh, and it felt good to help the people who didn’t know how to act around me
see I was okay. It made my kids see it was still okay to laugh about what was happening to us. At the time I preferred to laugh than dwell on the seriousness of the realities I faced. As I write these thoughts, however, I begin to wonder if my ability to push the serious issues away somehow negates the healing process. By covering over the sad and scary I effectively keep anger and pity at bay. By not dealing with these emotions in the proper way I simply defer them to the future, where eventually they will need to be dealt with.

In writing about self-worth, passivity and sarcasm it is clear to me how interrelated they can be and have been for much of my life. I’d like to consider how the word “force” comes into play, as it seems to be a constant undercurrent in much of my thesis, despite my early efforts to gloss over it. The first thing that occurs to me is how the word force and the word passive are defined: Force; active power, compel, coerce (Webster’s 1998, p. 204), and then Passive; not active, acted upon, submissive (Webster’s 1998, p.381). Each definition carries parts of the other and seems to need one another to exist. Am I passive because I’ve felt forced or do I feel forced because I am passive? What came first and why?

I, like many young girls, was taught to be polite, to listen respectfully and obey authority figures. I learned to express myself through art and writing. I used my imagination to explore thoughts, questions and ideas, but kept inside myself with those explorations. I remain somewhat secretive about my real emotions and feelings. This thesis is among the most honest revelations I’ve been willing to share and discuss. I feel relatively safe allowing my academic advisor and thesis reader to read what I have revealed. I would
feel embarrassed and ashamed to have some close family members and friends read what I have confided. I have no issues with anyone else, including strangers, reading this body of work, especially if what I’ve written helps them look harder at their own beliefs and values, and the “stories” they tell themselves. If I believe this to be true, why am I not offering the same chance to those closest to me? Why am I ashamed to have them read what I have written?

I harbor worry over allowing those closest to me to see what lies beneath. They know me as one thing, and here on paper and in my academic life I am or have become something else. I remain fearful because I have seen, heard and felt the questioning of who I am now. As I learn and grow as an academic, instructor and researcher, I resist where I came from. I flush out the people and places that supported my past and in a sense deny who I was to become who I need and wish to be now. I think it frightens my parents, my mother-in-law and even my husband, to see how two scant years of graduate study can disrupt the values and beliefs I once held. When my daughter told my father I had voted Democrat in the last election he blamed it on my newly found academic liberalism. My friends arch their eyebrows at some of the statements I make about social issues or problems I encounter with my students. In a conversation with my husband I explained some of my feminist reactions to the male-centered domain of birth, using some of Laurel Richardson’s (1988) arguments to describe my feelings. He responded, “What’s got you so stirred up… I’ve never heard you man-bash.” Later he asked if school was
“brainwashing” me. If I let my friends and family read what I have written they will not likely see me the same again. I need to let go of that fear and instead embrace how it might explain or enlighten them as to what has become important to my development as a person.

Through narrative writing, the re-telling of long-held beliefs, and the re-consideration of those “stories,” I have begun to see how easily events of the past can direct and disrupt the future. Even those events long-buried have a way of re-surfacing in the most unlikely places. It is when I venture outside myself that these inconsistencies begin to become unstable, and in turn, unavoidable. I must look, without flinching, at who it is I have become and the structures in place that helped create that person. If I have been compelled or coerced it is because I remained submissive and acted upon. In not dealing with my emotions related to the date-rape of my sixteen-year old “self,” I found my “forty-something” self re-writing my “story” in the form of fictional novels. This act of writing is secretive and cathartic, and as long as I keep my books to myself they can’t help anyone beyond me. I believe I will be able to let go of them, and the past, when someone (an editor, perhaps) finds them worthy of publishing. This form of validation has nothing to do with pride, I believe, and everything to do with reflective healing.

I still hold anger over the loss of my sexual innocence. I understand the value placed on virginity is socially constructed and perhaps should not hold the power it does, but it remains a “thing” or “time” I can never have back. Letting go of my anger around this event would seem to be an easy thing to do, but since I spent years telling myself a
different “story,” (It doesn’t count…it’s not the real first time) it manifested itself in my novels, still deeply secreted as fiction. When I realized, and it truly was a revelation, that I had simply been re-writing my own loss of innocence, I was stunned. How could I not have seen it? If I had not been writing this thesis how long would it have been before I saw myself in my female characters?

What I can take pride in is the ways in which my fictional “girls” determine their paths, how they deal with anger and resentment. Although some suffer the same loss I did, they become strong women, active in their lives and healing. I should learn something from them, and now that I recognize myself in these women, I can continue to write a way to healing my own loss.

In my academic life I write about this same issue of force, specifically in relation to any sexual imagery I am compelled to observe with others. When I was sixteen I was not ready to understand or know all of what my date was forcing me to understand and know. Neither my mind nor my body wanted to accept that he was forcing himself into me or that he was taking my virginity away from me. It was not that I was morally or religiously opposed to having sex, it was that I wanted to have sex with the person I chose, the person I wanted to give myself to the first time, and now I would not have that chance. All the wonder and mystery of gradually discovering sex together, with a person I cared for, had been taken from me. Nothing about date-rape has wonder or discovery in
any good sense. It hurts and it's scary. I am grateful it has not affected me in any negative way in my marital sexual life. Most of the resentment I foster has little to do with intercourse and more to do with choice.

I often wonder if I had fully understood how the forced loss of innocence would affect me long term- would I have fought harder or failing that, at least told someone what had happened? I can't change what transpired, but I do have some amount of control over how much and for how long I will allow it to bother me. The first thing I have to do is forgive myself. I harbor guilt over allowing myself to be in a vulnerable situation, for not realizing what might happen or for not recognizing where we were headed; for trusting someone without having proof he was trustworthy. I believe my conservative reactions to sexually charged imagery at school are related to this same trust issue: are you showing me this to teach me something, or simply hoping to shock or push the envelope.

As the second year of my Master's study begins to wind down I am recognizing that I am softening in my reactions to explicit sexual imagery that I feel is forced on me. In a recent museum education history class Professor Sanders said he wanted to show us a short film called "The Attendant." He admitted he had not seen it yet, and related the name of the filmmaker (who I cannot recall) several times as if that should be fair warning. It didn't seem as if the filmmaker's name meant anything to any one in the class. We watched as a young man has his backpack searched by a museum guard, and although we don't see what is in the backpack, the guard raises his eyebrows in judgment. Later, all the paintings on the walls begin to change into homoerotic bondage scenes. After the
museum closes for the day we hear the echo of a whip snapping on flesh. The next scene is of the guard, leather-clad and wielding a bullwhip, whipping the young man, who had apparently brought his own leather paraphernalia in the backpack, as he lies partially clothed on the floor of the gallery. I watched with amusement, not so much appalled by the film, but more or less wondering what this had to do with anything, especially museum education. We did not discuss the film and never have since we viewed it. I have thought of it often and still wonder what it was all about. Personally, as an instructor, I would never show my students a film or video of something I had not previewed.

Had I somehow become jaded over the past months? Perhaps come to expect sexual imagery as a part and parcel of my museum education studies? A few weeks later, this same class went to visit the Wexner Center’s opening exhibition, “Part Object, Part Sculpture,” and we were guided through the gallery by the curator, Helen Molesworth. She explained her vision of the exhibit and the rationale behind how she grouped artworks in each of the gallery spaces. I had been looking at the paintings and sculptures in the first gallery before she joined us. I had made my own interpretations about the things I saw. Molesworth explained that the room was filled with sexual references, using descriptors such as “pussies, assholes and ejaculatory sprays,” as she guided us through the space. I was shocked for two reasons; one, I’d never heard those words in an art gallery before, and two, because I had not seen any of the things she said the artworks represented. The sparkly Pegasus I had observed galloping across a blue star-filled sky was now an “ejaculatory” emission on canvas. I was angered by the idea that she had
changed my vision so profoundly that I could not see my mythical creature anymore.
This felt like a forced sexual interaction and I did not care for her insertion. I liked my
own thoughts better.

I found out I was not alone in my discomfort as a fellow female student leaned toward me
and said, “Ten to one she talks about masturbation next.” We smiled at each other five
minutes later when she did. Given Molesworth’s sexual frame of reference, everything
did indeed begin to look sexual, and later we learned that many of the artists had slept
together. An incestuous exhibition, of mostly gay artists, and now I was looking for more
references. A couple of us discussed whether or not knowing the sexual preference of the
artist was important in any way. I tend prefer coming to an artwork without much
information, and in this case did not think it helped my understanding or meaning
making. The next day I found myself wondering if and how Molesworth changes her
gallery tour for children or teens. I’m hoping she does.

Two weeks after the Wexner visit I brought my fourteen-year old daughter to Hopkins
Hall for a parent-child job shadowing day. We were walking down the hall and I stopped
to introduce her to a graduate teaching assistant I work with. As I was talking I suddenly
noticed an 8 by 10 inch flyer stapled on the bulletin board behind my daughter and
quickly moved her down the hall to my office. The flyer advertised some kind of
discussion or meeting on politics and consisted of a color-photograph of two naked
women and a naked man engaged in a sexual act (or simulating a three-some) with masks
of well-known political faces on their heads. I was embarrassed as a parent and teacher
that this imagery was hanging in a public area where children could see it. I understand we are a University and primarily work with college-age students, but several times I’ve encountered elementary school children in the building. It seemed wrong. The next day I went back to the bulletin board and took the flyer down. For me that’s fairly aggressive. Perhaps it would have been better if I had tracked down the producer of the flyer and explained my feelings about what it depicted and its public placement.

The image itself was not at issue. Actually, they were attractive bodies and in another place I would not mind looking at the photograph. Just not in the hall with my daughter. I find myself wanting to protect her from a world that insists she see things before I have a chance to explain or shield her from such imagery. Things that used to be reserved for private interactions are becoming increasingly commonplace and before long accepted as normal. If she sees three people engaging in sex on the walls of a public University is it too much of a stretch to believe she might determine such actions normal?

Will she too begin to believe in the idea that female pubic hair is not only unneeded but unwanted by her male counterparts? Or should I consider the fact that the more knowledge she has about sex, the better? Is this the information I would choose to educate her with? Threesomes and Brazilian bikini-waxed nudes? I feel like I should apologize for my conservative reactions to such imagery and yet as her mother I feel I should be appalled and worried about how media depicts women. Is it okay that her generation thinks oral sex isn’t sexual or intimate? And if I feel so strongly about these questions what can I do as an educator to change the societal direction visual culture
seems to be headed? Do I have a right to express my concerns and produce pedagogy which is critical of a media that continues to press and blur the lines, directing new norms of how a woman should look? Is this my role? I admit I struggle with how I would do this and if I should.

I write graphically about sexual interactions in my novels and I like reading books similarly written. Women or men who read these kinds of books engage with them in a private manner. If someone begins reading one and is offended, they can close the book and remember not to buy that author again. Engaging with erotic words seems less intrusive to me than having an image forced upon me. Words have the ability to become whatever the reader decides they will be, filtered through their own imagination and memory, their own understanding of what those words represent. A good writer can make you feel, see and hear an event or interaction, but it is still constructed by the reader’s mind and remains uniquely personal; a private, internal connection of words and thoughts bridged by lived experiences and imagined places. A place a writer can take someone, but never actually know it as they do. I rarely attend movies made about my favorite books. I am reluctant to let go of my own special knowing of that place or time. The first movie version of *Harry Potter* is the only movie that has surpassed my own imagination, and even then my imagined world and the movie version were strangely similar.

I recently read an interview with one of my favorite fiction writers, Diana Gabaldon, whose *Outlander* series (1991-2006) has been talked about for years as a possible mini-series or movie. She hates the idea and remains convinced her characters and their lives
should never be traumatized in this manner. What parts of her main characters, Jamie and Claire Fraser, would be left out? What deeply shadowed pain or beautifully rendered joy would be alluded to but not shown or felt? I would hate to see a screen version of the couple I know so intimately I can conjure the subtle quirk of Jamie’s smile or the silver-shot waves of Claire’s unruly hair as clearly as my own hand. Let them forever live as I know them in my head.

My purpose in writing about narrative story telling, fictional or otherwise, relates to the question of belief, an integral part of this thesis project. I use the word “belief” in place of “truth” because I feel it is a better indicator or at least closer to how I wish to frame validity in this thesis writing process. Whether or not something is “true” seems unrelated to what is felt, known or taken in. It is what we believe that truly marks us. Before I begin the work of structuring my thesis conclusions I need to write about “belief,” the authority of language, and clarify my position on the importance of reflexive ethnography.

Writing Poststructural Self-reflective Autoethnography

Britzman (2000) looks at the genre of poststructural ethnography and identifies three qualities she feels are important in good educational ethnography:

First, ethnography is both a process and a product; there are methods for how to go about narrating a culture, and these social strategies promise a text. Second, good ethnographic texts tell stories that invariably embody qualities of a novel. Implicitly, ethnographies promise pleasure or at least new information to the reader. Third, an ethnography takes the reader into an actual world to reveal cultural know-
ledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants...these textual qualities appear seamless because they blur traditional distinctions among the writer, the reader, the stories, and how the stories are told (p. 27).

Further troubling the ethnography genre, particularly my methodology, is the additional piece of the researcher researching the “self” and finding stability within that process. Britzman reminds us, “Subjects may well be tellers of experience; but every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation” (p.32). She wonders what constitutes belief if the relationship between real and what is represented is always in doubt. How do we grant authority to “second-hand knowledge” and read “across the ethnographic grain”? (p.29) I wonder this too, knowing that I am telling stories I believe to be true, and at the same time understand the inherent fictional qualities they hold. I offer the following example when constructing validity in a pivotal story in my life.

When I wrote about my date rape episode my thesis advisor wrote back about what I had revealed. He read my “story” and deconstructed what I was passively avoiding, mostly in the form of word choice. I was initially writing it as if it happened to someone I was watching, not as the person it happened to, similarly to how I write my fictional novels. I re-wrote my first “telling” using active voice and found this new version troubling to read. It had taken on a more “real” quality. My emotions no longer hid behind the words. My second draft prompted my advisor to e-mail me a list of reasons I should let myself “off the hook,” specifically related to whether or not this event actually was a loss of
virginity. I had, after all, stated I wasn’t clear what constituted the breeching of my virginity, full penetration or partial, as it remained a fractured understanding given my initial struggles. I don’t have the proof my hymen was broken, no blood marked my body, but rarely do today’s young women have intact hymens. Sports, tampons and other non-sexual activities usually tear the hymen long before intercourse. I realized, then and now, that it doesn’t matter. At the time and for many years after I believed the boy had sexually violated my body, and certainly my mind. It is the “belief” that held the power, not the truth, whatever that may be. I perceived what occurred between us as a loss of my virginity, and in the very least, innocence, and perhaps more importantly, trust.

The truth is not the placeholder in my past. My belief is. What I believe, how I react to what I believe, and how I am changed because of it is where the validity comes into play. My perceptions and values are shaped by the “beliefs” I adhere to and my actions and reactions are, in my mind, valid. In other words, this is what I think happened and this is how it made me feel at the time, followed later by, and this is how I feel about it now. Britzman (2000) finds this narrative tension, “between what is taken as lived experience and the afterthought of interpretive efforts, between the real subjects and their textual identities” to be difficult to uncouple (p.32). I, too, struggle with the idea of producing my “self” within the text, through the stories I choose to tell, the language I employ to tell my stories, and the things I have left unsaid. The major difference between ethnography and self-reflective research is found within that tension and is significant in that the researcher producing is changed through the process. I hope others will read my work and learn something about themselves, but the real beneficiary is me. I have gained
insights which profoundly affect the person I am and inform the teacher I am learning to be. The question remains...have I answered what my research set out to explore and consider?

I believe I have answered my initial question, “Can I, a “self” who is socially-constructed through being white, conservative, and economically privileged, craft a socially responsible art education pedagogy outside/ despite myself and teach it with integrity?”

More important than answering this question is the process I used in finding my answer. The ways in which my self-reflective narrative writing served to illuminate my teaching journey is clear, but the surprise was in how it informs my life. I had not asked my methodology to do this for me, but it has and I am grateful.
Conclusions

I imagined that after nine months of research and writing I would be ready to wrap this project up and move on. Instead I find myself sad as this thesis comes to a close because writing every week has become a welcome process. I have found how valuable it is to put my thoughts on paper (laptop) and figure out what it is I am trying to say and then what it is I need to say. My thesis writing mirrors this process in that the first part seems to be made of what I was trying to say, and the second part is what I needed to say. This last part, the conclusion, will act as the connecting bridge between intention and realization.

Academic writing, whether it is for thesis, dissertation or article publication, is often done with the help and guidance of an editor, mentor or advisor. I am fortunate to have worked with all three, but in the form of one person. This relationship must be acknowledged in a direct manner rather than a couple of sentences in the front pages, as that does not account for how important the collaboration is to the writing. My thesis advisor is crucial to the process and the product, in guiding, questioning, expanding and narrowing, and listening. The give and take of this collaboration serves multiple purposes and can lift and enlighten the research in significant ways. Although this was my story to tell, it could not have been told as effectively without the generous thought and time given by my advisor. This is not a thank you. This is the truth.
With his uncanny perception for the unsaid he was able to challenge me to look deeper, think harder and often times reconsider how I see myself. Our exchanges involved more than grammar and punctuation, although there was plenty of that; they involved trust and understanding. I was often questioned and asked to explain my contradictions, but never felt judged for my answers. The places this thesis was able to go only happened because I was unafraid to speak openly about my beliefs and values. Freed of feeling guilty about my human frailties I was able to transcend justification and explore the why’s and how’s of my social constructions. Still, this was not an easy adjustment, and my writing often mirrors my struggle to speak actively, thereby “owning” my emotions and subsequent beliefs.

The process of self-reflective narrative writing seems to be tied to things as transitory as my mood, available quiet time and current stress level. My writing tone often reflects more than the subject matter being considered and when re-visiting words I had previously written I had to recall exactly what was going on that day that left me unable to separate from entanglements under the surface. It is not unlike the strange feeling I get when reading one of the novels I have written, wondering how I accessed certain places and devised a particular description to speak with unusual clarity. Who wrote that? I find it hard to connect the “writer” to the “self” in those moments. In this respect, my thesis serves not only to explore and inquire, but also to situate, in a time or place which
connects patterns, values, emotions and finally, beliefs. The process cannot be consigned to the product as they work in tandem, neither able to declare or establish an authoritative position.

In the spring of 2004 I arrived at the Ohio State University to begin work on my Master’s and to prepare to teach as a graduate assistant. While I was unsure of my abilities to teach, I felt relatively sure of who I was as a person. It didn’t take long for that to change as I began my studies and tried to find a comfortable “place” for who I was. Things became complicated in both my academic learning and my personal life. I tried to hide these changes, dressing one way at school, speaking from a more liberal platform as a student and teacher, and resisting some of the given in my non-academic life. Socially I found myself questioning many of the values and beliefs often prescribed in my white, economically privileged world. Those close to me found these ideological shifts troubling and wondered if “school” was changing me. How could it not change me? Existing in a middle-ground of social and political beliefs allows me to understand conflicting theories and look for commonalities that bridge difference between me and my students. It also helps me to speak intelligently to those close to me that don’t share my views.

In my first year of study I wrestled with my internal conflicts, often feeling uncertain about how to express my concerns or ask an appropriate question to further my understanding. Now I enjoy the duality, seeing my previous conservative social and political values battling with more recent constructions and noting how they challenge one another. I believe this serves me well with my students as I am able to hear difference
and reflect critically on why those differences exist. I teach students who are “works in progress” and I let them know that their instructor is also a “work in progress.” I tell them what they believe today may not necessarily be what they believe next year or ten years from now. I can tell stories from my own educational journey to highlight and support how values can shift and alter over time and lived experience. I am not fixed and stable, and neither are they.

In Britzman’s (2000) study of student teachers she noted that, “Most, if not all, of my participants were deeply invested in the humanistic notion of an essential self that had somehow been repressed by some condition, person, idea or social structure” (p.35). Despite that belief many felt that teaching “demanded they hold themselves in abeyance.” I believed the same thing when I began teaching. Now I see how restrictive and dishonest that was to both me and my students. By openly admitting my biases or struggles with particular issues I expose my humanness, but at the same time allow my students to loosen their own bonds. I hope within that space is the opportunity to construct meaning and meaningful connections to our coursework and our lives. If I hold myself separate, deny who I am, I offer little to the idea of how identities reflect belief systems, and more importantly that those same systems can shift or fluctuate. Through story-telling I explain where I was before and which kinds of inquiry led me to consider alternative ideas of knowing. I think it is crucial for students to understand how education can empower and enlighten.
Education, especially with regard to my Master’s work, is both liberating and frustrating. I find myself embracing one theory or ideology only to discover that another more intriguing theory exists. I then have to work though what I find useful and consider how new revelations inform past frameworks previously adopted. DeZengotitia (2005) calls this “intellectual shopping” and refers to “deconstruction” as the academic version of shopping as we are “perpetually entertaining options among undecidables, exercising them provisionally, in accordance with a context and the needs of the moment” (p.32). I feel like art education often works in this mode. As I encounter each professor in my studies I begin to see how they each operate from different points of view, or in many cases, several points of view. No one way is correct or necessarily preferred. Despite the added complexities of figuring out where my current professor is theorizing from I like knowing it can be this way. In the same way my teaching assists in my learning and my learning assists my teaching. I also learn which teaching styles don’t work for me and have spent time considering how to resist allowing some methods from creeping into my own pedagogy. I try to speak to my students in a clear and understandable manner. If I need to use a big academic word I explain it right away, instead of assuming they know what it means or the context of its use. I have complained of this “academic-speak” to my advisor and he nicely pointed out that I should understand some of what is being said at this point in my studies. I do, usually, understand, but if the explanations given are equally dense then I tend to disregard. I am fortunate in that most professors’ I work with are not wrapped up in convincing me they are academically worthy to teach. The teachers
I learn the most from are able to reach their students without being verbose and distancing, allowing me to become familiar first with the concepts and then later bridge to the more difficult language. I try to model this in my teaching.

Another significant change in how I view myself as a teacher came from an unexpected place, my closet. I spent the first year denying privilege, dressing down and comfortably, never revealing that I had arrived on campus in a Landrover or that my life at home was radically different from many of my peers. This year I am comfortable dressing from my usual clothes, albeit still comfortably, instead of a more casual version. Passing back and forth from my on-campus life to my regular life is much easier now and has given me freedom to present a truer version to my peers. I no longer hide who I am or where I come from. Some may judge me for my economic privilege but I have decided to let that go for the sake of finding peace within myself. I should not have to apologize for my wealth or feel guilty, but at times I still feel uncomfortable about it.

At a recent 367.01 meeting we decided to do a lunch time potluck. Every T.A. was supposed to bring something to share with the group for lunch. One woman brought a bunch of grapes and said, “Sorry, it’s the end of the month, it’s all I can do.” Two others brought nothing. One T.A. unwrapped a sandwich and cut it into six slices (8 of us were at the table). I brought a huge salad in a gigantic ceramic bowl. I felt awkward in both the amount of money I had spent and the amount of food I had brought. I found myself unusually quiet as we met and discussed teaching and evaluations. Dr. Ballengee-Morris took note and asked, “Why are you so quiet?” laughing, because she knows I am not
quiet in these meetings. But I was this day. I felt bad about my economic place within this group, and in addition, the topic revolved around bad student evaluations of teaching, which I did not have. In fall (2005) quarter my evaluations were my strongest to date. I felt different and out of sorts. I didn’t like it, but I also don’t know how to feel not different. Maybe I will always feel different and maybe that’s okay.

I can see as I reflect upon the last section of my thesis, part three, how I have changed as a student, teacher and person. I can look back and see how the “self” I was, has been altered, bettered and empowered. I am making inroads at home as well, relating ideas and concepts I am learning to my children, my book club and my husband. Not everyone agrees with me; however they listen and understand that I am passionate about what I have learned. I have tried to relate through narrative writing the ways I believe I have become an instructor who is able to teach with a socially responsible mindset, despite the constructions that I had before I began teaching. I look to my most recent teaching evaluations (Fall 2005) as a validation that my students feel the same.

This thesis project comes to a close just as I am accepted into the Ph.D program for fall of 2006. Again I find myself questioning whether or not I am capable of competing with my peers and hear a negative voice responding in my head. I promise myself that I will refer back to this document as a reminder of how critical education, teaching and writing have become to me and why it is important for me to continue on the path I have chosen.
I am the only one I need to prove my worth to and that alone should serve as a catalyst. I have chosen to conclude with something I wrote before I started this thesis project. I saved it wondering where it might fit in or if I would feel differently about what I wrote now that my exploration is finished. Originally I had planned to begin with it. Now it seems right to end with it instead.

While life is lived in a linear fashion, it is felt in circles of connecting thought...touching memory, pain, joy and contentment. The teleological direction is determined by the human need to revisit the past in order to illuminate what lies ahead. All I am today, what I believe to be true, how I experience and organize thought, feel and express, is at all times born out of my past. In recognizing this it allows for reflection, acknowledges the possibilities for growth and the value of inquiry.
REFERENCE:


