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Blue-Collar Scholars: Bridging Academic and Working-Class Worlds

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Blue-Collar Scholars: Bridging Academic and Working-Class Worlds

by

Nathan Hodges

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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family research, autoethnography

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Thank you reader for being brave enough to pick up a book this large. Hopefully you're using it for reading, though I suppose it could double as a weapon. This dissertation would have never been finished without my family. Not only were they an important biological step, they continue to show love and encouragement for me, and to share our story honestly. This dissertation also would have been a miserable shell of what it is without my committee, especially Art Bochner, whose 356-pages of handwritten edit, Track Changes, and novel-length emails created panic, self-loathing, and ultimately a much better dissertation. Love you all! Kisses and belly rubs for Winston, Buddy, Buddha, and Zen.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores one white working-class family's hopes, fears, illusions, and tensions related to social mobility. I tell stories from my experiences as a first-generation college student, including: ethnographic fieldwork; interviews with my family, community members, and former teachers; and narratives from other working-class academics to provide an in-depth, evocative, and relational look at mobility. I explore the roots of vulnerability in my family and how I was socialized into understanding belonging and worthiness in particular ways, and how this socialization influences my feelings of belonging and worthiness in the academy. The goal of this research is bridging – past and present selves, working-class and academic cultures, work and family – for me and my family and other first-generation students and their families.

CHAPTER ONE:
PROPOSING A DISSERTATION

Proposal Defense

I reread the email and send it to my dissertation committee:

Hey folks! Just a reminder about the proposal defense tomorrow at 3:30 in CIS3057.

Art suggests we start a half-hour earlier, in order to prolong the interrogation :)

Art replies: **Quite a framing. I'll keep that in mind. I had thought of it as a party, a kind of celebration with you taking center stage. But since torture is in the news, I suppose I can go with that.**

Keith: **Thanks Nate! Looking forward to the discussion. See you then :)**

Carolyn: **What defense? Just kiddin. Looking forward.**

Shawn: **What proposal defense? Ha...just kidding.**

Me: **I'm wearing body armor!**

Carolyn: **It's your head we're after not your body**

Me: **Well the academy has historically only been interested in what's above the neck.**

The next day I wake up early and go to a coffee shop in the USF Business building. What better place to prepare for a dissertation about classism and working-class culture than inside a building that promotes an anti-labor, anti-working-class ideology (Pelz, 1995). I handwrite notes in the margins of my 40-page proposal, elaborating on ideas and getting ready for critical responses I foresee from my committee.

An hour later, I put my pen down and stretch out my right hand, cracking my knuckles at each little joint. I swallow the last bit of coffee, put my notes in my backpack and head toward the CIS Building. Anne, the office assistant, is sitting at her desk when I walk into the department main office.

“Just when I thought my day couldn’t get any worse, I find out you’re here,” I tease.

She laughs, “I only came to work today because I knew that it would make you miserable. Anything to subject you to more suffering.”

“Not as miserable as my committee’s ears are going to feel listening to my defense today,” I say. “The only thing I’m *passing* today is gas.”

“And your committee *passes* out,” Anne says laughing.

“That’s probably for the best,” I say. “After hearing me talk, they’re gonna want to put this defense in the *past*.”

We continue bantering back and forth, dropping puns and self-deprecating humor.

I spend a lot of time chatting with Anne. Our relationship is one of the most meaningful ones I’ve developed in the department. Anne comes from a similar class background. We share a dark sense of humor, laughing at things most people would find repulsive, offensive, or heartbreaking. She reminds me of my family.

“Well, this is the last time you’re going to see me,” I say to Anne, before walking into the conference room.

“Finally some good news today,” she teases. I walk into the conference room and sit at the head of the table. My committee follows.

“Can we make this quick? I got somewhere I need to be,” I tease. Dr. Carolyn Ellis laughs and sits to my left in a multi-colored patchwork wolf shirt, purple earrings dangling by her face. Dr. Keith Berry sits beside her in cargo shorts and a t-shirt, his sweet cologne pleasing my nose. My advisor, Dr. Art Bochner sits to my right in a tie-dye t-shirt, perhaps the same one I saw him wear at his NCA Distinguished Scholar lecture. Dr. Shawn Bingham sits beside him in a suit jacket and bowtie. I’m in my usual shorts, t-shirt, and Converse High Tops. Conversation quiets down and all eyes look at me.

“We want to start by allowing you ten to fifteen minutes to give us an overview of your dissertation,” Art says. “What called you to this project? And what do you see as the narrative arc of your dissertation?”

I pull out my notes and begin. “This is not a topic I chose at random. Social class and class ambivalence are topics I’ve been thinking about for a long time. I have felt out of place in both the college classroom and in my own family’s living room. I’ve listened to academics criticize, make fun of, and entirely ignore white working-class lives. I also know how it feels to return from college and be uncomfortable talking to my own friends and family. I’ve been straddling a fence between two different worlds and not feeling at home in either.

“As an undergrad I completed a research project on first-generation, working-class students at Manchester College, trying to understand how these students communicated on campus and at home. Later that year in my role as a public relations assistant on campus, I interviewed several Manchester first-generation college students, alumni, and faculty for a magazine story about the emotional and financial barriers these students face and the various support systems Manchester offers. When I moved to Central Michigan University for my Master’s Degree, I continued researching social class. I interviewed other first-generation college

students concerning the memorable messages they received from their family about work and education. In my final semester at CMU, I discovered *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004) and was blown away by the combination of evocative storytelling, reflection, and analysis. Finally, *engaging* academic writing that even my family can read and understand. Stories are my family's forte. Narrative is a way of helping me bring the language of the working-class into academia. That semester, I wrote my first autoethnography, a poorly written victim tale about my experiences as a first-generation college student.

“Fast forward to USF. Here, I've continued my research on class and working-class culture including interviewing my family for several class projects and publications. I interviewed my mom for a paper about social class and teeth; my dad for a paper about factory work; my grandpa for a paper about masculinity; and my brother for a paper about violence and play fighting. I've also had them read and respond to several of my writings. I plan to use some of these in the dissertation.

“I want to produce an in-depth, evocative, personal, and relational story of social mobility. I will offer my own experiences as a first-generation college student from a white, working-class family to show the potential emotional costs and rewards of growing up in a white, working-class rural community and becoming an academic. Mobility is often studied sociologically but I want to look at it through the detailed experiences of those who live through it. Also, mobility is often framed only as a success. Think about popular phrases like, ‘I worked my way up from nothing’ and ‘I started at the bottom and now I'm at the top.’ I want to complicate the idea of mobility as always and only offering a ‘better’ life,” I say using air quotes.

“The canonical narrative of social class and mobility is hierarchical, represented by the metaphor of the ladder. We're told we can have a *better* life than the one we start out with if

we're willing to work hard enough. Most of us who start our lives in the so-called lower or working class, internalize this storyline. I question the utility and ethics of understanding social class as a hierarchy in which some are lower and some higher. At the very least, I want to question the taken-for-granted assumption that certain kinds of work and the people who do these kinds of work, deserve better treatment and respect than others (Jones and Vagle, 2013).

I continue, "Mobility is typically examined as an individual achievement. We rarely look at how relationships influence and are influenced by mobility. This is one of the reasons I am involving my family as participants in the dissertation. I want to examine the influence of my primary and secondary socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) on my becoming an academic, both the good and bad. I will travel back home this summer to conduct interviews with my mom, dad, grandma, brother, former high school teachers and college professors, and also will do fieldwork in my small rural community. I will bring readers into scenes of my family life and upbringing, as well as in the classroom as a student and teacher.

"The goal of this dissertation is bridging – past and present selves, working-class and academic cultures, work and family –not only for my family and me, but also for other first-generation college students and their families." I pause, "That's probably good enough for right now."

"Thank you for that helpful overview of your project," Art says. I feel the care and protectiveness for me in his voice. "Next, each member will provide comments on your proposal. Who wants to start?"

"I will," Carolyn says. One by one, each committee member provides feedback on my proposal. Carolyn says she loves the stories but thinks I need more literature on social class, working-class academics, and working-class masculinity. She also suggests that I research

Darlington's town history and look at other small-town studies, in addition to reading others who've done research with their families.

Keith says he appreciates my ability to trouble taken-for-granted ideas. He sees my conversational tone in the proposal as a way of carrying on a working-class tradition but found moments where it felt too chatty and I was attacking not only the reader but academics in general. He also thinks I need to avoid overgeneralizations about social class and about academics. He encourages me to interrogate my anger in my stories.

Shawn encourages me to bring in more social class and whiteness literature. "And you still seem to be romanticizing the working-class," he adds.

Art goes last. "The case you have been making here is the burden that is placed on a person who is rooted in working class culture but aspires to an academic life. I like the goal of bridging these two worlds, but the study has to reflect both sides – the working-class side *and* the academic side. To me, being between means seeing the good in each side, the university side and the family/blue collar side, but also the bad or unsatisfactory in each side. At the risk of oversimplifying these ideas, I want to draw a little diagram." Art stands and walks to the white board, grabs a marker and draws this diagram on the board:

	Positives	Negatives
White, working class		
University		

Figure 1: Art's Proposal Chart

“Let’s start at the top left corner,” he says, putting a check in the box. “Your proposal clearly shows your love and appreciation for your family and community. But as Shawn said, you come off at times as romanticizing them and other white, working-class people.”

He moves his marker to the right. “In your written proposal, you are clear about what you resist in an academic life but not nearly so clear or confident about what you resist in a working class life, and here I am talking about values. Don’t many of those working class kids who become academics discover that there are beliefs endemic to many working class communities that they simply can no longer accept or endorse, though once they thought them natural? If there are ways that you would like to reshape academia, aren’t there also ways you would like to reshape white, working class people? Otherwise, how can one claim ambivalence and the feeling of between-ness? For example, in my book, I try to say that my father behaved badly toward me, that he did some things that a good parent shouldn’t do, but that isn’t the whole sum of who he was and even that part of him is explainable, though it may not be entirely forgivable. Do you plan to beat your kids like your father did you? Would you refuse to pay for your childrens’ dental care if you could afford it?” He leaves the box without a check.

Art moves his marker down to the bottom right and puts a check. “You’ve also shown how academics who have no lived experience of white, working class culture can be condescending toward this culture. But you can’t just exercise your anger, justifiable as it is, without showing where and how it is rooted and manifested. You don’t want to lecture the reader and make it seem that you’ve already made up your mind about everything before you’ve even started. You want to let the stories do much of this work. Given your storytelling ability, I think they will. A little modesty and uncertainty enhances your credibility. You don’t want to alienate the people you’re trying to persuade.”

He moves his marker to the bottom left corner. “But not everyone in the academy joins in on this, do they? And one comes away wondering why you would want to be in the academy since there isn’t much good that you seem to see in it, at least not in this proposal. What is it that draws you to the university?” He leaves the box blank and puts the cap back on the marker. “How can you and other blue-collar students from families like yours live a good life in the academy while maintaining appreciation and acceptance of the good values they were socialized to in the white working class while questioning and transforming the bad ones?”

After an hour or so of dialogue with my committee, Art says, “Okay, you can go ahead and step out into the office while the committee discusses your defense. We’ll come get you when we’re ready.”

“It shouldn’t take that long to pass me,” I tease.

“We need time to discuss all the revisions you’re going to need to make,” Art fires back.

I step out of the room laughing and close the door. *I think that went okay.*

Anne isn’t at her desk. There’s a sign placed in the middle of the room: **Will return in a few minutes. Please take a seat.** I sit beside the display case housing memorabilia of my committee: several books by Art and Carolyn, and an award for Keith. Art’s newest book, *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (Bochner, 2014) is displayed near the front.

I connect with many of the complicated family relationships Art shares in his book. His father worked long, back-breaking hours as a self-employed sign painter. He told Art over and over that one “should expect to suffer, to fall, to face setbacks and make sacrifices. Work is what gives meaning to life. After you fall, you can rise again through hard, honest work and self-

sacrifice” (Bochner, 2014, p. 29). Art admired his father’s work ethic and self-discipline but also knew that was not the life he wanted. He wanted to do work that is enjoyable, that feels like play.

I think about what Art said during the defense. To write a story about my white working-class family and community that rings true, I have to include the controversial stuff: the close-mindedness, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, rage, violence, drugs, and bad decisions. How do I do this without hurting relationships and reinforcing stereotypes? I am a son, brother, nephew, and grandson of a working-class family who I still love deeply. Being an academic confronted by stereotypical, often negative portrayals of the white working-class, my tendency has been to romanticize the white working-class. It’s a defense mechanism. We know the working-class isn’t all small-town charm, family values, and strong work ethic, as many critical/cultural academics routinely point out (see Richardson, 2005). As a working-class academic, I cope with the split between my love for small-town community and working-class values like work ethic, resilience, loyalty, and candor, and my distaste for the fundamentalism and injustices I sometimes find there (Ellis, 2009). The challenge in this dissertation is to show my family as I know them – loving, hard-working, complicated, and flawed people, just like me.

Blaming and shaming my family and the academy while I stand out as innocent, or as a hero who managed to turn out great *despite* them, limits opportunities for learning from my experiences. Good stories involve complex, multifaceted characters. If I out to set out to blame and vilify, my writing quickly turns into self-righteous narcissism. I try to write my characters – including myself – as flawed human beings who did what they could given the circumstances in which they lived. But I don’t want to let anyone off the hook. Instead, I push towards empathy. My mind wanders back to May 23, 2010.

Manchester College Graduation

I'm walking across campus with my mom, stepdad, dad, and grandma when I spot Dr. Dave Switzer, my professor ahead of us.

"Let's walk through the Science Center," I say. "It's air-conditioned."

Damnit! Too late. Eye contact was made. Dave has a huge smile on his face. I walk slowly, feeling an internal tug of war with my academic self on one side and my working-class self on the other. How do I act when they are together? I can't speak like an academic when I'm with them. And what would Dave think if I talked with him the way I do with my family? My parents have never seen 'academic Nate' and only recently have my professors begun seeing 'working-class Nate.'

I censor myself when I'm around my family, finding it easier to sink back into our more familiar, blue-collar culture. I don't intervene when my stepdad makes comments about Muslims or gun control. In a classroom, I'd jump all over it. In my family, there's no qualifying ideas or being politically correct. In the classroom, things are "problematic." In my family, they're "bullshit." In a family that can't afford to keep the dirty parts of life at bay, we see no reason to do so with our words (Black, 1995). Around academic folks, I'm discussing ideas, being critical, challenging opinions, even debating. I act confident, yet contemplative, treading more carefully with my jokes and word choices. How would my parents react were I to fully embrace my academic identity at home? Would they put me on a pedestal I didn't want to be on? Would they think I'm trying to act better than them? But academia is an important part of who I am. I feel most alive in the classroom, creating and debating ideas, and challenging myself to think about things in new ways. This is not something encouraged at home. Many of my family and community members resist these intellectual activities. Ideas threaten the way things are. I've

begun disassociating from my working-class roots, becoming a divided self – the Nate Hodges on campus and the Nate Hodges at home.

Dave approaches. “This is one of my professors, Dave Switzer,” I say, being vague. But he is more than a professor. He is a father-figure, someone who appreciates aspects of me my family hasn’t even seen. C’mon dad and Jeff, please stay quiet. And Dave, please don’t say anything that makes my family feel stupid or out of place.

“I’m his mom, Becky. It’s nice to meet you.” Mom’s never one to be shy. Just please, please, please don’t say anything embarrassing.

“I just want you to know that I’ve had a lot of great students over my forty years of teaching, but Nate is one of the best. I am very, very proud of him.” I’m shocked.

The pride I feel in my academic achievements is always tempered by the guilt I feel at having chosen this life (Law, 1995). Despite my academic successes, I can’t shake the feeling that I don’t quite fit in here, and that I haven’t done any real work, at least work that deserves any more recognition than what my family gets for their factory labor, which is pretty much no recognition at all.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, embarrassed but unable to hide the grin spreading across my face. I glance at mom, who is smiling with tears of pride in her eyes. My grandma, tears in her eyes as well, says, “He is just an awesome young man.” My dad’s stoic expression turns into a grin. Please just stay quiet. Don’t say anything stupid, Dad. Let’s just go.

I hurry the conversation along to move on to the ceremony though we still have plenty of time. As I walk away, I feel overwhelmed by guilt. My family are good, hard-working people. How can I be ashamed of how my family talks or the values they represent? These values were

formed over the course of their lifetime in a culture that supports them. This culture isn't inferior to academic culture. It's just different. Besides they didn't have the same choices I do.

Despite this guilt, I continue hurrying conversations along after the ceremony, even more so than earlier. Even though it's been more than forty years since Dave was painting cars for a living, he can more easily talk across our cultural gap. Introducing my family to these other professors though, the gap feels wider. I walk quickly through the crowds, actually trying to lose my family long enough for me to say hello to my professors without them by my side.

Sitting here now six years later, I fight back tears thinking about this. If I could go back, I would have my family stand right beside me the whole time, my arms wrapped around them, beaming with pride as I introduce them to my academic mentors. But I didn't. And I have to live with this. I'm not the only one though. For many first-generation college students, graduation is an important day because they are able to witness how much their college accomplishments mean to their family (Orbe, 2004). They can be complicated, anxious days.

Lubrano (2004) shares a story about Dennis who invited his blue-collar parents to college to watch him give a speech. Instead of allowing them to stand next to him while faculty surrounded and congratulated him, Dennis asked his parents to go sit down, that he'd be right with them. Their faces fell and then they scurried off. Dennis says, "If there's one thing in life I regret, it's that moment. If I could have done it again, they would have been in the front row. My parents were more intelligent than most of those professors, anyway. It should have been one of the proudest moments in their lives and instead, I shunned them" (p. 55).¹

¹ When Christopher (1995) told her graduate student peers about the years she spent as a secretary prior to attending school they replied, "But you always knew you were smart right?" as if one couldn't be a secretary (or working-class) and smart...the equating of social class position

I now understand myself as a blue-collar scholar. I work hard to nurture my working-class roots and not let education diminish or even destroy what is good about them. I also love and embrace my academic side, the critical, questioning part of me. But I didn't always feel this way. Like Rennels (2014), "I wish I had the gumption to [embrace] my working-class roots...much earlier, [but] I am thankful I can be open about them now."

Anne walks in the office. "Oh brother, I thought we'd got rid of you," she says moving the sign.

I hop out of my chair, pick it up, and pretend to carry it out of the office. "You said to *take* a seat," I say nodding at the sign. Anne laughs as the conference room door opens.

Art pops his head out. He's smiling. I have a dissertation project!

Working-Class Academic Narratives

This dissertation joins a growing collection of working-class academic autobiographies which understand "working-class experience [as] a source of cultural critique" (Mazurek, 2009, p. 162). These texts are important for reasserting the significance of class in America; critiquing academic institutions, particularly hierarchies of status within academia and the contradictions between most universities stated values and actual practices; and helping to build class solidarity (Mazurek, 2009).

Striving for upward mobility can be a nightmare, not just a dream. The American Dream narrative glosses over the tensions, leaving out the complicated family plotline. Law (1995) writes there is a "cruel duality of the working-class student in higher education" (p. 1)...they learn to "become a double agent, learning to lie with conviction in two contexts at once and fearing expulsion from both" (p. 4). Social mobility can leave a person feeling alienated, with

with intelligence [is] one of the most common, egregious, and offensive examples of classism in America" (p. 146).

“survivor guilt” (Jensen, 2004, p. 172), “in a state of perpetual liminality... rife with tension and fear” (Dykins Callahan, 2008, p. 354), and like a straddler with each foot in a different world (Lubrano, 2004). Many feel “torn between two different notions of what it means to succeed in life,” (Jensen, 2004, p. 174). Some of us who grew up in rural working-class communities feel like we’re living a double life (Banks-Santilli, 2015).

Many first-generation college (FGC) students and working-class academics feel so ashamed of their working-class identity when they do reveal their roots, they describe it as a “coming out” (Dykins Callahan, 2008) process which is a “constant negotiation” (p. 354). Working-class students “must negotiate issues of marginality on both ends as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes and college life” (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004, p. 42).

On campus, FGC students might try to assimilate into the academic community by censoring aspects of themselves that mark them as FGC. They also might overcompensate to feel like they belong. Many FGC students form a social support network with counselors, mentors, friends, faculty, and administrators. Some FGC students separate from academic culture, not going to class or dropping out.

At home, FGC students might censor themselves around their families, not talking about college or what they’re learning there. Some FGC students completely separate from their families, avoiding calling or going home (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Peckham (1995) writes, “In time, I more or less forgot who my parents and siblings were. Although I hesitate to admit it, I must tell you that the only time my parents and I and my brother and sister have been together since I left home was for my parent’s silver wedding anniversary. I suspect the next occasion will be a funeral. That’s called erasure” (p. 274).

Rennels (2014) observes that “class can be performed apart from one’s economic resources...someone may have little to no income but still perform as though they are middle class by learning from, relating to, and imitating middle-class people around them.” She went to great lengths to hide her poverty. She lies to her friend about living in a trailer and instead tells him to drop her off at her friend’s brick house in an edition (claiming it’s hers), and jumps into a snow bank behind the house until he leaves, then walks a mile home to her trailer (Rennels, 2014).

Dykins Callahan (2008) admits “I have hidden behind branded clothing, semi-fine wine, scholarly books, and big words...I have been a coward, doing what I told myself I had to do to make it in the academy” (p. 354). Appel (2014) describes the “feeling of being always already behind,” and Black (1995) felt, “alternately afraid and ashamed and bold and angry” about her upbringing” (p. 17). Law (1995) “learned through myriad covert (and some not so covert) pressures and practices, to feel increasingly ashamed of [her] home, [her] family” (p. 2). Lubrano (2004) captures the challenge working-class academics face when writing about their lives: “Much about working-class life is admirable and fine. The trick is to avoid glorifying it without painting life in it too darkly” (p. 17).

Many of us working-class academics continue to understand our past as a deficit we individually had to “move up” out of, and ourselves as heroes struggling against the odds. We rarely see the beauty in the blue-collar, and when we do, we risk romanticizing our past, a childhood that is saturated with both pleasure and pain.

At the end of *This Fine Place so far From Home* (1995), an edited collection of working-class academic narratives, editor C.L. Barney Dews writes, “A few of our contributors expressed great concern over the reactions their families might have if they ever saw the essays in this

book. They were afraid of shaming their families by telling family secrets, especially secrets from within the class closet” (p. 355). This lack of communication contributes to the gulf one feels between their academic and working-class lives. The ambivalence, shame, anger, and sadness are experienced in isolation. It’s important to have these difficult conversations. Lubrano (2004) says, “Maybe it’s up to us [first-gen students] to bridge [our worlds]...After all, our parents and still-blue-collar siblings didn’t cross the class divide with us. We are the bilingual ones, able to speak the language of both classes” (p. 218).

Empowering FGC Students

Of the 7.3 million undergrads attending four-year colleges and universities, about 20% are first-generation (Banks-Santilli, 2015). If you type “first-generation college students” into Google Scholar, you will see that FGC student research has focused on how these students struggle with access to, and success in college, and the various ways we can prevent them from failing. In other words, college is seen as a problem for FGC students. Stuber (2011) writes, “the combined portrait [of first-generation college students] is one of students at academic risk...where a disproportionately low number succeed in college...they are more likely to leave at the end of the first year and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor’s degree after five years” (p. 117).

As a group, “first-generation students typically rank below traditional students when comparing grade point averages...completion of academically rigorous courses...and scores on standardized examinations” (Atherton, 2014, p. 824), and “those whose parents had college experience were significantly more likely to have higher levels of academic preparedness” (p. 827). We’re told they experience professional, financial, psychological, and academic difficulties (Banks-Santilli, 2015) and these challenges are compounded when FGC students pursue graduate

school (Lunceford, 2011). Yet, not all FGC students feel less academic or socially prepared than their non-FGC peers (Stuber, 2011), or view their background as a deficit (Banks-Santilli, 2015).

The trouble, as Macias (2013) points out is that most FGC student research has focused on what's wrong with them, even in programs meant to help them. "A perpetual focus on deficits and gaps has caused us to *expect* deficiency. It is the norm, so much so that words like 'poor' and 'uneducated' come to mind before 'family-oriented' and 'determined' when we think about these students... Instead of cultivating a fear of failure through deficit-oriented perspectives, we must choose to emphasize a capacity for and expression of success" (Macias, 2013, p. 18-19). He suggests an approach to empowering FGC students by focusing on what positive values they bring to school and thinking about ways their upbringing can help them to succeed in academia.

One area focused on in FGC student literature is the challenging relationship with family after one goes to college. FGC student research has mostly ignored the family's perspective despite that, "almost without exception, first-generation college students identify their families as key sources of support for their college success" (Orbe, 2008). Rather than framing the first-generation college student experience as a deficit and working to eliminate the tension with one's family by separating from them or choosing to have distinct academic and family identities, as many FGC students and working-class academics choose to do, one could focus on bridging these worlds together. That is exactly what I try to do in this dissertation.

Methods

Though I'm hesitant to call what I do autoethnography, because the word is unnecessarily long, abstract, and only used by academics - this dissertation would certainly be classified as autoethnography by academics. I've tried in my work to describe rather than rely on loaded academic words. Autoethnographers *create* stories from experience. They don't just *transmit*

experience. Vickers (2010) says “all forms of textual representation, traditional empirical reporting, or otherwise involve some degree of fictional work, even those that conform to more familiar modes of representation...Even nonfiction texts are partially and inevitably fictional because they have been ‘fashioned’ and ‘molded’ by their writers” (p. 561-562).

Autoethnographers are less concerned with “what *actually* happened” and more concerned with resonance. Does the experience evoke in the reader a feeling that it is lifelike, believable, and possible, that it actually happened (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011)? Does the story bring readers into the scene to help them “experience an experience” without actually being that person (Ellis, 1993)? Good autoethnographies offer us a different sort of knowledge than knowing *how* or knowing *what*; they can help us know *what it is like* (Goodall, 2008).

As I read narratives of other working-class academics and first-generation college students, I was inspired to reflect on my own life. The use of literature and footnotes through the dissertation is meant to join a community of working-class academics, to show how my experiences resonate and sometimes differ, illustrating that the personal is political and social.

Stories are uniquely positioned to reveal the processes through which meanings are constructed, challenged, made familiar and made strange. Rather than limiting and categorizing, stories seek to *show the unfolding*. I believe social class can best be understood by exploring and representing lived experiences in stories, not abstract economic, occupational, or political categories. Demographic data often ignores lived experience, “tell[ing] us how to tell our stories, obscuring details, reducing our lives to myth and archetype, making us forget how to tell our stories ourselves” (Hicks, 1995, p. 152).

In this dissertation, I use literary methods – scenes with characters, dialogue, descriptions – to help readers experience an experience, to see what I saw, feel what I felt, and struggle with

the ambiguities and emotional dilemmas I faced. Academic jargon is often far removed from the everyday realities of my family so it's important for me to make my writing accessible, understandable, and truthful to those I write about. I connect my experience to larger cultural and political stories, weaving together personal narrative, interviews, and academic literature.

In my research, I acknowledge the blurry boundaries between nonfiction and fiction, memory and imagination, and make the processes of writing and remembering part of the story. These stories do not aspire to a universal, static truth. The stories we live are different than the stories we tell because of the nature of language and memory. Thus I face “the difficult, never-ending process of fashioning language that is adequate, both to the past and the present [I] seek to understand” (Freeman, 2010, p. 183). The worth of this work will hopefully be judged by how it resonates with the experiences of those who've followed a similar path from working-class to academic class, and more generally by academics who've ever felt like a divided self.

In telling these stories, I seek to make sense of and thread together the divided self I have experienced since committing to an academic life. Narrative reflection can help one bridge together their past and present selves, and the gap between their home and school worlds (Jehangir, 2010, p. 541-542). By the end of this project, I should have a better understanding of my feelings and behaviors, and also the first-generation college student experience.

I draw from my lived experience being part of two communities (working-class and academic), to share stories of childhood experiences at home and in school, being in the college classroom, talking with professors, working in a manufacturing factory, and my college graduation day. I draw from a variety of artifacts (syllabi, course papers, notes, photos, newspapers, emails, letters, magazines, etc.) and present-day conversations with family and friends to help with the memory-work (Bochner, 2014) involved in representing these scenes.

I also present scenes from interviews I conducted during summer 2015 with my mom, brother, dad, grandma, former high school teachers, and a former professor. I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the Darlington Library and the town of Darlington during this summer. In addition, I present scenes from the 100th annual NCA Conference. I also draw from interviews conducted with my mom, brother, grandpa, and grandma for previous published papers and class projects throughout my time at the University of South Florida.

My fieldwork involves many improvisational conversations. I might remember a particular experience and call my mom at that moment to ask how she remembers it. Or I might be working on a paper and be interested in hearing my dad's perspective on the issue so I text him. Or I might Facebook message my brother about a particular memory. Although these aren't interviews in the traditional sense, these fieldwork snippets comprise a significant amount of "data" for this project.

Sometimes I write down notes without telling my family. For example, last summer I went fishing with my Papaw out on his boat and listening to him talk, I would leave my line in the water every few minutes and write down what he was saying on a scrap piece of paper I had in my pocket. He didn't see me do this although we were on the same small fishing boat. I didn't want to interrupt Papaw to ask him if I could write it down because he's fishing and I thought it might make him uncomfortable or confused. Do I need his consent to write notes? What is okay to tell about my family? I imagine Papaw might ask, 'why are you writing instead of fishing? You ain't ever gonna catch a fish with a pen in your hand.'

Relational Ethics

After finishing the first draft of my dissertation and receiving feedback from Art, I send a text message to my mom: **One of the biggest challenges I've had is writing the controversial**

stuff about our family and community. I've mostly avoided it. But my advisor keeps reminding me no one is all good or all bad. It's important to be truthful and include it all.

She replies: **The story will not be genuine if you don't tell it all. Where you come from and the challenges you've been through with your family and community is what made you who you are. Wow I sound like a college professor!**

I reply: **I know, I just get scared because I love my family. I just have to remember I can love my family and still be critical of some beliefs and decisions they've made.**

She replies: **You tell it the way it needs to be told. We love you. Just remember I want some of the royalties for bringing you up in a messed-up family that you can write about 😊**

The kind of ethics I practice in this dissertation can't be found in an IRB handbook. In fact, the IRB doesn't even consider my dissertation to be "human subject research."² Sorry mom and dad. And Uncle Jeff, you did always say I was "a fucking *badger*" on the wrestling mat. The ethical principles that guide my life don't come from some federally funded committee anyway. They were mostly instilled in me by my family – the same people I write about in this dissertation. Even when I write about myself, I'm writing about my family. Personal stories implicate others. We're relational creatures, us human subjects.

When playing by institutionally sanctioned academic rules, people aren't even considered human subjects unless I'm intentionally acquiring information from them, but I consider every aspect of my life to be potential data (Barton, 2011). By the IRB's rules, there is no difference

² According to the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board, research is a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Autoethnography does not fit under the scope of this definition, according to most IRB's around the nation, even if the research involves interviews about deeply intimate and controversial topics.

between a loved one and a stranger. Following IRB protocol, Bresnahan (2016, in press) requires her younger college-aged brother and sister to state their name, age, and position within the family into the recorder during her Master's thesis research, despite them living together for years and sitting around the table in their pajamas. Throughout the article she addresses the complex ethical issues that arise when one does research with intimate others (Ellis, 2007), issues IRB is not prepared to handle.

Relational ethics encourages me to “make ethical decisions the way [I] make them in [my] personal life” (Ellis, 2007, p. 213). My dissertation must provide a story I can live with, not just one that gets me a degree, although I'll take one of those too. Ideally, it brings me closer to my family, but at the very least, I don't want to damage these relationships. Family research, such as this dissertation, creates opportunities for bringing families closer together by creating conversations where there used to be isolation, secrecy, and shame (Castro, 2013).

According to Ellis (2007), relational ethics are concerned with “the question of how to honor and respect our relationships with intimate others while being faithful to what we perceive to be the truth of the story” (p. 210). There are no easy answers to resolving these ethical issues: “I seek questions as much as answers, and practice relational ethics as *lived* through caring, compassionate relationships, which emerge and change with my participants—my family” (Bresnahan, in press). I think the best I can do is be open about my ethical dilemmas and acknowledge my reasons for making the decisions I do. However, there is a limit to this. “Sometimes too much complexity can get in the way, even take the place, of what's important” (Ellis, 2001, p. 615), and at some point, you just gotta' tell the damn story.

Chapter Previews

In this dissertation, you will see how one white, working-class kid has moved through life, emotionally and physically, from his rural hometown into an academic life. I try to show through narrative scenes how I made sense of the world *then* and later describe why I'm called to make sense of these experiences *now*. I want to bring you along with me on this emotional journey – to feel the shame, embarrassment, anger, ambivalence, nostalgia, pride, and struggles for love, belonging, and self-worth. I'm concerned with how the experiences *feel*, what they *mean*, and how we can *use* them to live better lives (see Bochner, 1997; O' Brien, 1990).

Chapter two presents scenes from childhood at home and in school to illustrate the working-class values I was socialized into by my family, and how these values influenced my experiences at school. I was a troublemaker and class clown in school, expressing myself in ways I didn't feel I could at home. This chapter includes discussion on humor, class clowns, rage and family violence, drug abuse, and primary and secondary socialization.

Chapter three presents scenes from my transition into Manchester College, including the culture shock and integration into college life during the first year. I discuss how I transition from a mostly white, hetero-, conservative community into a more diverse community, and my challenges in taking on the identity of "student."

Chapter four presents scenes from my summer spent working in a manufacturing factory. I bring readers into a day in the life of a factory worker, and also show how I come to understand the roots of my father's rage through my own rage in the factory. I show how I learned the value of putting in a hard day's work, of bustin' ass, of just working – putting forth mental and physical effort simply because I am a human being capable of doing so. I learned to appreciate physical exhaustion, pain, and adversity instead of avoiding it, knowing sweat, sore muscles, and

calluses make me a stronger person. I learned the value in actually creating something tangible in a world of ideas. I learned you don't need a college education or certain job title to be intelligent, creative, and able. The working-class is full of wisdom, just not the abstract lifeless kind favored by most academics. I also learned – through its absence in the factory – the foundation of any good organizational culture is compassion, respect, and dialogue.

Chapter five presents scenes from my time at Manchester, focusing on how specific mentors and courses influenced my academic success and my decision to pursue a career in academia. The chapter includes an interview with my former professor, Dave Switzer, presented in the form of an office mentoring session.

Chapter six presents scenes and discussion related to my uncle Jim, the professional wrestler known as The Ultimate Warrior, and how his social mobility story influenced my understanding of mobility and family relationships. I interview my grandma for this chapter, and also include conversations with friends and family. I learn stories about uncle Jim I've never heard before, gaining a more complex understanding of him as a human being, rather than a heroic figure.

Chapter seven discusses “The American Dental Dream,” the cultural desire for straight, white teeth, and the difficulty poor and working-class folks, including my mom who I interview, have in achieving this dream. I also include a scene of sharing this story with my Writing Lives students and how their reactions affect me.

Chapter eight presents an ethnodrama of the 100th NCA National Convention that my grandma and mom attended to watch me present two papers, including a presentation about personal experiences with social mobility on a *Blue-Collar Scholar* panel. I include written

reflections from my mom, grandma, panelists, and audience members to show the multiple perspectives (from my family and academics) on the conference experience.

Chapter nine focuses on my relationship with my brother. The chapter includes free writes and an interview from a project we did together in an Emotions, Trauma, and Intimate Interviewing class, and also interviews during my trip home during summer 2015. I explore how our socialization taught us to relate in particular ways, especially how violence has played a role in our relationship. I also explore how our relationship has developed as I've left home and continued in academia.

Chapter ten includes scenes from ethnographic fieldwork in Darlington, including a conversation with the Darlington Library director, *The Darlington Herald* newspaper archives, interviews with my mom, and multiple conversations with my stepdad, Jeff, and my Papaw. I explore how the community insulates itself, closing itself to different ways of life, while also at the same time beckoning me with its hard work, loyalty, and fierce sense of love.

Chapter eleven includes scenes from in the classroom as a graduate student and instructor. I discuss how class is talked about in the academy and the ways I bridge my working-class and academic identities in the classroom, one of which includes playing the role of the trickster, a connection to my early experiences as a class clown.

Chapter twelve presents an interview conducted with my dad during summer 2015. Though my dad is a man of few words, we explore issues of social mobility, work, family relationships, and masculinity together, him teaching me important lessons for living a meaningful life and at the same time revealing close-minded and stereotypical views.

Chapter thirteen includes an interview with my grandma from summer 2015, discussing social mobility and our family relationships. In this conversation, we explore a range of

important topics related to my upbringing, our community and family, and how to live a good life.

Chapter fourteen concludes the dissertation by discussing how my childhood and working-class socialization taught me to understand belonging and worthiness in particular ways, and the various forms of armor my family, community, and myself put on to protect ourselves from feeling vulnerable, especially as a poor, white family in America. I draw from the interviews and stories presented in the dissertation for this analysis to consider how and why I strive for a more vulnerable life, one in which I feel like I belong in the academy *and* in the working-class. I can't bridge worlds without being vulnerable with my family. This means an honest coming to grips with my past, and mine and my family's vulnerabilities and weaknesses as well as the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of living an academic life.

CHAPTER TWO: CHILDHOOD

“The original meaning of the institutions is inaccessible to them [children] in terms of memory. It, therefore, becomes necessary to interpret this meaning to them in various legitimating formulas. These will have to be consistent and comprehensive in terms of the institutional order, if they are to carry conviction to the new generation...The children must be taught to behave and, once taught, must be kept inline. So, of course, must the adults” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 61-62)...Only later can the individual afford the luxury of at least a modicum of doubt” (p. 136).

“You snuck out of the trailer one morning when you were just three years old,” mom tells me. “I woke up early to make some coffee and noticed there was a kitchen chair next to the front door and the chain lock was unlatched. I called grandma who lived up the road ‘cuz you’d snuck to her house in the middle of the night before. She says she hasn’t seen you. So I start panicking. I run down the road screaming your name. About a quarter-mile from our house, I see this little blonde-haired boy in nothin’ but a diaper, standing in the middle of the Waynetown Bridge. I yelled at you, ‘Nathan Lee, you get your ass over here right now!’ You started crying and I snatched you up by your diaper and brought you home.”

Mom noticed early that I was trying to leave: home, my town, the world in which I grew up. Yet, not completely leave. I ended up on the bridge, symbolic of how I've felt since I left for college – on a bridge linking two separate worlds – wanting to leave but also wanting to stay.

School Days

Tell any teacher who had me as a student between Kindergarten and my freshman year of college that I am now a doctoral student and they'll cuss you out for even bringing up my name, perhaps throw chalk at you, and then call you crazy for telling such lies. Alright, I'm exaggerating. An eraser. They'd throw an eraser.

My first day of Kindergarten I lock myself inside grandma's car in front of the school. "Grammaw, if you love me you won't make me go," I tell her in between sobs. Once she convinces me to unlock the door, I cling to her pant leg, begging her to not leave me. Later that year at a parent-teacher conference, my teacher, Mrs. Starlin, tells my mom I have a learning disability because I don't talk. Two weeks after the conference, she calls mom again and tells her I won't stop talking and I need to work on my listening skills.

The next year Mrs. Richardson hands me a paper with Old English letters and ornate page borders telling me I am awarded *Funniest—Excellence in Reading at Anna Willson Elementary*, a boring way of saying class clown. I knew as early as Kindergarten that my greatest pleasure is making others laugh. I feel most alive pushing boundaries and getting laughter out of people. It is my attempt at fitting in, yet marking myself as special, someone not quite *in* the group but a part of it nonetheless. Willson Elementary allows a space for my comedy by rewarding it so it can be ordered into the school's everyday symbolic universe, thus no longer challenging it, but legitimating it. I need the school to know I'm challenging their rules, not following them.

The next year Mrs. Whicker writes on my report card, “Nathan has decided not to work hard and not turn things in. He should be on the Honor Roll. He needs to apply himself.” I’m not interested in memorizing historical facts, math problems, and fill-in-the-blank spelling worksheets. Instead, I spend my school days doing things I’m told not do in order to impress others or get a laugh: pranks, smartass comments, and fights.

Following a series of stunts including yelling “penis” in the lunchroom; kicking Jason Kelsey in the nuts; and throwing rocks at recess supervisor, Mrs. Harshbarger, a squat, hairy woman who is as mean and ugly as *Matilda’s* Aunt Trunchbull, I am banished to a room by myself for three days. I spend these days devouring books from the school’s library—R.L. Stine’s Goosebumps books, The Adventures of Captain Underpants, and of course, the detective stories of Nate the Great. These punishments are opportunities for me to escape the rigid structure of Mrs. Skodinski’s classroom, a place where I am labeled as a bad student. I leave behind my C grade in Reading and escape into new worlds in the pages.

I do everything I can to get a laugh in school. I don’t feel like I am going to get people to like me because of my looks. I am fat and insecure. At the age of four, my parents divorce. Mom wins custody and we move out of dad’s trailer to another trailer. Once I *learn* that poverty is something to be ashamed of, I know I’m not going to attract friends through my social status.

I learn my “white trash” family is something to be ashamed of when I stay the night with my best friend, Clay Buck, in fourth grade. His home life is much different from my own. It’s clean: the house, language, conflicts, etc. (Lubrano, 2004, p.173). They don’t call us poor, white *trash* for no reason. Being in his house, seeing his family interact makes me *feel* that my home life is something to be ashamed of.

I also receive free school lunches as a junior high student, a marker of my family's poverty. When getting my lunch, I get far ahead of the person behind me in line so they don't hear me tell the lunch lady mine is free. Usually I wait until everyone is out of line before getting my food. Despite the food being free, I know this is something I'm supposed to be ashamed of. I feel this shame as I see my peer's brown bag lunches with clean-cut sandwiches, yogurts, granola bars, and fruits, or when they hand cash over to the lunch lady each day. Ashamed of my poverty, I turn to humor as a way to get people to like me.

Justice For My Balls

Principal Stewart announces over the school's PA system that it's time to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I stand from my desk and begin the daily chorus along with the rest of my seventh-grade homeroom class.

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for my **balls**."

A few of my buddies hear me and snicker. Mrs. Burkett stares at the chorus of laughing bodies coming from the back of the room. We have been chanting this mindless rant every school day since Kindergarten. Does anyone in here even know what it means to pledge their allegiance to a nation? Who exactly, are we pledging to? And why is our country under god? Did God pick America over all the others? We end our allegiance and sit as Mrs. Burkett begins attendance.

"Hodges?" she says.

"Not here," I reply.

The class bursts out laughing. Mrs. Burkett looks annoyed. "Nate, I want to talk to you after class," she says.

While I fight for attention at school, I watch other kinds of fights at home. We had moved once again, but this time out of a trailer and into a house with mom's second husband, Mark.

Porch Fight

"You're not waking them up, Mike," I hear Mark shout as I wake from my living room nap. I peek through the white-laced curtains to see my dad and Mark squared off, nose to chin, on the front porch.

"I don't know who the fuck you think you are buddy, but it'd probably be a good idea for you to take your ass right back inside and get out of my way," dad says without missing a beat, inches from Mark's chin.

"Get out of my face Mike," Mark says hesitantly. Even though my dad weighs about the same Mark weighed when he hit puberty, he knows dad is a state runner-up in wrestling.

"I'm not moving an inch. Now go tell them their dad is here to see them or I'll go in there and get them myself."

"You're not stepping a foot in my house Mike. The boys are asleep and there's no sense in waking them up. I'll tell them you stopped by to see them when they wake up."

"Well I guess I'll have to get them myself," dad says. He steps toward the door and Mark shoves him back.

"You're not going in my house, Mike."

Dad lowers his level and delivers a double leg takedown the same way he taught Yub and me to hit one on the wrestling mat.

"Kick his ass, Mark!" mom screams from the front door. "Kick his ass!"

Once mom realizes the wrong ass is being kicked, she calls the cops.

Dad mounts on top of Mark, relentlessly swinging at his face as Mark tries to cover up. Blood sprays from his nose onto my dad's white work uniform.

I don't make it to dad's trailer that night. And mom and Mark's relationship doesn't make it much further either. We move a few more times with mom bouncing around to different babysitting, waitressing, and factory jobs, often working more than one. Then she meets David and they marry. He works several different labor jobs before getting hired at the steel mill where he works up to eighty hours a week.

Trailer Shame

In fourth grade, me, Yub, mom, and David move into a trailer in the woods. Luckily, no one on the school bus can see it. I don't have friends over to our trailer, partially because I don't have many, but mostly because I don't want the friends I do have to see where I live. In seventh grade, we move into a different trailer beside the highway so kids on the school bus can see where I live. Though I usually ride the school bus, occasionally for sports practices and school events, mom or David have to give me a ride.

Mom and David drive rusty, old beaters that typically have something malfunctioning, like the passenger door doesn't open so I have to crawl in through the driver's side door. One time, I am sitting in the passenger seat of mom's car when she turns a corner and the door falls off. I fall out on the road. I'm not hurt but we drive home without a door. Whenever I need my parents to pick me up from school, I try to arrange for them to get there late so no other kids are around. If there are kids waiting with me, I stay in the building pretending those aren't my parents until the kids leave, even if this means my parents wait twenty minutes or more.

I also feel ashamed for feeling ashamed because I don't want to hurt my parent's feelings. They're doing the best they can, aren't they? I never go without during my childhood. My

parents buy me video games, WWF action figures, and other toys I want for Christmas. I always have clothes to wear even if many come from Goodwill.

I sit on the couch in our trailer watching WWF RAW with Yub and David. I have about a dozen plastic WWF action figures next to me, and a notebook labeled “Private WWF Writings” in my hands. Pretending to be the WWF Matchmaker, I’ve filled the notebook with imagined wrestling events and matches.

Mom sits in the recliner reading a Danielle Steele book. When she isn’t at work, cleaning, cooking, or watching *Days of Our Lives*, she is usually reading a paperback romance she salvaged from a yard sale for a quarter.

“Ugghhh!” I squeeze my nose and look at my stepdad.

“Blame your mom,” he says smiling. “She’s the one who made the gravy.” Yub, never one to back down from a challenge, lets one rip, a roaring explosion of fear-inducing flatulence. As my stepdad’s smell grows weaker, my brother’s undigested intestinal breath infiltrates the air. I don’t back down. I dig deep and let out a roaring butthole battle cry.

Weighed Down³

“Alright, Nathan go ahead and step on.” I step onto the scale and the nurse moves the bottom slide to 150, then begins moving the top slide to the right. 160, 170, 180, 187...188...The beam starts moving toward the middle. 189...190. The beam levels out.

“190 pounds,” the nurse says. She measures my height and takes me to a private room.

“Okay, I need you to lift your shirt up. We’re going to do a body fat test.”

³ Portions of this section are taken from, Hodges, N. (2015). Weighing ourselves down: Scale stories. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 4, 51-69.

I can't remember the last time I received an A on a test, and I had a feeling my luck wasn't about to turn around on this one. I nervously lift my WWF Wrestling t-shirt. She stares at the flesh hanging over my 38-inch waist, then uses her metal calipers to pinch a handful of fat from my lower stomach. She continues the test, pinching flab on my tricep.

“Looks like you're thirty-two percent, Nathan.”

I fail.

After the sports physical, I spend the basketball season as the heaviest sixth grader on the team. Andrew Jones, one of the players who didn't score *only* two points the entire season is forced to run sprints after practice when the coach overhears him calling me a *fat ass*. Of all things to call fat? He's not the only one though. I've heard it all: *Fatty. Fatso. Chubby. Tubby. Put down the brownies. Put on a bra*. It's not just words either. My fat boobs make easy titty-twister targets. And when my friends squeeze my fat rolls, the anger that escapes from my gut finds another victim—someone poorer or richer, dumber or smarter, fatter or skinnier. Like my friend Tyler, that dumb four-eyed fatty.

After basketball, I start my second year of wrestling. We travel to tournaments around the state with dad on his weekends. The highest weight class in my age group—Novice—is 140 pounds with a + added for each 30 pounds after. I wrestle Novice 140++. Dad introduces Yub and me to wrestling at the local youth club. We grew up listening to wrestling stories from dad, a state runner-up in the 98 lb. weight class as a senior for Crawfordville High School.

“Didn't even wrestle varsity my freshman year. Too damn little,” Dad says, reflecting on his glory days. *Eighty-three pounds, that's what he's going to say he weighed*, I tell myself, having heard the story countless times.

“Only weighed about eighty-three pounds soakin’ wet. Lightest weight class was ninety-eight pounds.”

Now that I was a wrestler, I needed a wrestling dummy to practice on. My brother is 100 pounds lighter and better at everything we both do—sports, grades, video games—but don’t tell him that. He always has been, but who wants to be the second-best brother? Not me. If you can’t beat ‘em, beat ‘em up. That’s my philosophy, at least until I find a way to stand out?⁴

Working my way to this super-super heavyweight class doesn’t come easy. I earn it with a strict diet of bologna, oatmeal cream pies, macaroni and cheese, and pop. As a kid, I eat whatever my parents buy and tell me to eat. Mom says, “We bust ass just to put food on the table. You’ll eat what’s on your plate or go hungry.” I never go hungry. Fried bologna sandwiches are my favorite. Mom cuts an *x* in the middle of the round lunchmeat to keep the meat from bubbling up and looking like a meaty sombrero while it sizzles in the pan. Put on some cheese, put it in between two slices of white bread, grab a bag of tater chips, crack open a pop, and you get an idea of what most of my lunches look like. Breakfast is for cereals—the kind that tastes like candy and has games on the box. Mom says all that sugar is gonna’ rot my teeth out but she keeps buying them. *When you work long, exhausting hours and live paycheck-to-paycheck, healthy nutrition and exercise aren’t exactly your top priorities.*⁵

⁴ Read Becker’s (1973) discussion of “heroism.” Young sibling rivalry reflects the basic human condition, “the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation...to feel himself [sic] an object of primary value: first in the universe, representing in himself all of life” (p. 3).

⁵ There is an “assumption [in our society] that an individual’s weight is determined by their willingness to make healthy nutritional choices. However, the emphasis on personal choice deflects attention from factors (e.g., nutritional knowledge; affordability and availability of foods) enabling or inhibiting others from making “correct” decisions” (Gerbensky-Kerber, 2011, p. 358).

Trampoline Championship

I shut the trailer door and walk toward the trampoline in our neighbor's yard, the site of the most anticipated match in WWF history. Two brothers settling their feud in front of millions for the Heavyweight Championship of the World. Granted, I'm the only real heavyweight, registering at 180 pounds on my 11-year-old, 5'4 frame. Yub, an agile 80 pounds of 8-year-old fury, would only be a heavy weight to a baby. I strut down our driveway with a foam belt slung over my shoulder. Yub bounces in the distance awaiting me.

Now entering the arena, the WWF World Heavyweight Champion, Naaaateeee "The Grrrrreaaaaaaat" Hoooooodegeees!

This is a hardcore match. Anything goes. Remnants of our last match surround the trampoline: a three-step Little Tikes plastic ladder, a metal folding chair, and a plastic sled.

Yub and I square off on opposite ends of the trampoline. An unspoken challenge arises to see who can bounce higher. His small body quickly takes the lead. As he's flying at treetop heights, I jump next to where he is about to land. He sinks several feet into the canvas before launching off the trampoline.

"Ding, ding, ding," I say as he crashes onto the grass.

Yub mumbles an assortment of cusswords and complaints as he climbs onto the trampoline. I attack, grabbing him by his arm to stand him up and land some backhand chops across his chest. I bring down some vicious overhand fists to his neck, slowing down before impact to make it look real without the real damage. He stands groggily and I charge him, clotheslining him to the canvas.

He lays on the trampoline feigning injury like the well-trained pro wrestlers we watch on WWF Raw every Monday night. I look out at the crowd and throw both my arms in the air, inviting cheers. The neighbor's dog lays in the grass staring at me, his eyes half closed.

I climb the outer ring of the trampoline, the corner turnbuckle of our wrestling ring, and leap toward Yub. I'm "Macho Man" Randy Savage soaring through the air in his orange bandana and tights, body stretched out for his patented elbow drop.

But Yub rolls out of the way before my elbow crashes into his sternum. I bounce off the canvas and flip to my back. He grabs me by the hair, standing me up to deliver several wind-up blows to the face. He puts his other hand on top of my head, making sure to hit his hand and not my head, a trick we learned through slow-motion analysis of wrestling tapes. I hold my face to show the crowd I'm damaged.

"Irish whip," Yub whispers, grabbing my arm and whipping me toward the edge of the trampoline. I bounce off the ropes and run back toward him. He leaps into the air and dropkicks me in the chest, emulating our favorite lightweight wrestler, the masked Rey Mysterio Jr.

Yub climbs off the trampoline and grabs the Little Tikes ladder. He throws it on the trampoline and climbs back on. He hoists the ladder overhead and slams it on my torso, slowing down before impact. I lay on my back, breathing heavy. He sets the ladder up on the edge of the trampoline and carefully climbs to the second rung. It's not quite as tall as the ladder Bret "The Hitman" Hart climbed to beat Shawn Michaels for the WWF Intercontinental Title. Yub backflips off the ladder for a Moonsault Splash. I curl up, protecting my face as his legs come crashing down onto my midsection.

Assuming he's done enough for the victory, Yub goes for the pin. "One...Two...Thr...!", I shove him off just short of the required three-count. He stands up and looks around at the crowd in disbelief.

Rather than boos, we hear tires on gravel. David is home from his shift at the steel mill. He drives past us toward the trailer in his dusty, Ford pickup.

He waves from the truck as I sneak up behind Yub and whisper "backdrop." He turns around and charges me. I bend forward and launch all eighty pounds of him, head over heels into the air behind me. He bounces a foot in the air then lands on the canvas gasping for the air I knocked out of him. I run toward him and jump in the air for a leg drop. I lift up my thigh before impact.

"Dinner's ready!" mom shouts from the front door of the trailer.

"We're finishing our match first," I shout.

"No, you're eating now before it gets cold."

"But we're almost done, mom."

"I don't care. Get in here now!"

"Why can't we finish our match first?"

"Because I said so!" She shuts the trailer door. Yub jumps off the trampoline.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "We're finishing the match."

He takes off running across the gravel on his tiptoes. I chase him, picking up rocks and slinging them toward him.

"You fuckin' fatass," he shouts.

"Just wait 'til I get to the trailer."

Snake In The Grass⁶

Me and Yub go with dad every other weekend and on most Wednesdays. Dad's trailer looks like it'd only take a small puff from the Big Bad Wolf to blow it down. It used to be white but it hasn't been washed in twenty years. I learn to feel comfortable in dirty, cluttered places.

Dad has a metal barrel in the yard where we burn our trash, mostly pop bottles, fast food wrappers, and cigarette cartons. I love burning the trash – the only chore I ever liked. I watch the plastic drip, inhaling all the fumes.

Junk cars litter the driveway and yard but we have lots of room to play. There is a big hill in front to roll down, sled down, push Yub down, and woods out back to explore. Sometimes, we shoot guns with dad. The first time I shot his 12-gauge shotgun the recoil threw me on the ground and I had a bruised shoulder for a week. I missed the pop can target.

Dad saves our pop cans in plastic barrels outside and brings them to the recycling center for cash. He splits the money into separate savings accounts for Yub and me. We have other chances to earn money too. Dad pays us a dollar for every A we get on our report cards. Yub's revenue skyrockets; mine not so much.

The trailer is up a hill in the woods. No neighbors in sight. If someone is in the bathroom and we have to pee we just open the door and whip it out. We piss all over dad's property. We also rarely wear shoes so our feet are probably covered in piss and Peaches' dog shit.

I like to find toads out behind our trailer. When I find one, I'll pick it up and bring the little fella (let's assume his name is Teddy) over to Peaches' water bowl. I hold Teddy under water while he wriggles to get away, and wait until the wiggling is just a slow-motion twitch

⁶ “Harsh physical punishment by parents, particularly fathers, models assaultive behavior, which siblings may imitate... a child learns that behaviors such as hitting, slapping, and pushing are appropriate ways to solve problems” (Caffaro, 2013, p. 93).

then I pull him out of the water and watch him slowly regain life. He gasps for air and stretches out his limbs. Right when he believes he has a new shot at life I submerge him in the water again. I repeat this process over and over, each time Teddy slowly losing strength but never losing hope that he'll be free again. After about a half-hour, I set Teddy on the ground to hop away, but Peaches usually rips his limbs off and leaves him to die.

I know what you're thinking, what a sweet young boy. Toads aren't the only objects of my displaced anger. Yub gets the brunt of it. I often feel like a cobra backed into a corner (from bullying at school, violence at home, and the shame of living in poverty). What does a cobra do when backed in a corner? It strikes. It doesn't matter who it is.

Speaking of snakes, there's plenty out here. The trailer has no siding around the bottom so guess who likes to slither on in. One time, I opened the cabinet under the kitchen sink and saw freshly shed snakeskin. Try falling asleep with that knowledge. I frequently have nightmares of being chased by a snake. Yub doesn't have to fall asleep to be chased.

"Give me the controller," I say to Yub who sits on the floor playing *Final Fantasy*, inches from the small TV.

"No! I'm in the middle of a game," he says.

"Save it and let's play a two-player game."

"I don't wanna play another game."

"I don't care," I say, hovering over him and blocking his view of the TV screen.

"Get outta' the way!"

I snap. Yub curls into the fetal position and protects his face as I smash my fist into the side of his head and hand, then hammer his rib cage. He moves his hands down to protect his

midsection and I clobber the side of his head. I stand up and kick wildly, my shin colliding with his thighs, arms and midsection. He tries to grab my leg to stop the kicking so I bring my knee down into his side and slam my fist onto his back, but careful not to hit his spine. He scrambles to his feet, and rushes down the hallway to the living room. I chase but stop halfway down the hall when I see dad lift his head from the pillow on the couch.

“What the fuck is going on?” he says.

Yub runs past him, tears running down his face, fear in his eyes. Dad turns his eyes to me, guilt written onto every skin cell of my body. He grabs the flyswatter lying beside the couch, fly guts and wings dangling from the rubber mesh.

His eyes are hungry for prey. I back away.

“We’ll see if you hit your goddamn brother anymore!” he says stomping toward me.

I turn my back and cover my face, in a kind of standing fetal position. *Whack! Whack!* The flyswatter smacks my ass and back of my thighs. I turn around putting my hands out to create distance. He swings again. *Whack!* The flyswatter hits my hands. *Whack!* My arms. *Whack!* My side.

“Turn around now!” He swats my hands again. I move them to protect from the sting. He swats my legs.

“One of these days, you’ll learn your fucking lesson, son!”

Yub lays in his bed crying at the other end of the trailer, as I lay in my bed nursing my wounds. Dad sits on the living room couch smoking a Marlboro.⁷

⁷ “The suffering that studies say our children endure when they are beaten: feelings of sadness and worthlessness...bouts of anxiety...outbursts of aggression...intense dislike of authority, frayed relations with peers, and negative high-risk behavior” (Dyson, 2014).

After a series of detentions, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and verbal lashings, Mr. Hunt expels me from Southmont Jr. High for pulling a fire alarm and evacuating the entire school. Luckily, there are only three weeks of school left so I don't have to repeat eighth grade. I spend those three weeks in a cubicle at the alternative school, actually doing homework. If caught talking I must do pushups, then remain standing.

I move out of mom's house and in with dad a few weeks after alternative school, my first time living with him since I was four. By this time, mom has divorced David and moved once again. She dates a few different men, each moving in and then out within a matter of months. I often smell pot coming from their room, a smell I've known since I was young but not understood until recently. But I don't discover the depths of her addiction until much later after rarely seeing her throughout my high school years.

Montgomery County Meth Epidemic

Drug abuse, particularly methamphetamine, heroin, and prescription painkillers, have completely ravaged my hometown and surrounding Montgomery County. The mayor of Crawfordsville, Todd Barton, says "The average person does not realize they probably come in contact with people on drugs every day in this community. It is that prevalent in our community" (Franks, 2016). As income inequality continues growing, so does drug abuse by the white, working-class. According to a recent longitudinal study conducted by a Nobel Prize winning economist, the mortality rate for white Americans age 45 to 54 without a college degree soared by 22 percent between 1999 and 2014, and is largely due to substance abuse and other forms of self-harm (Holloway, 2015). I don't have to look any further than my family to realize the extent of the drug problem.

My mom was addicted to meth for several years throughout my junior high and high school years. Yub snorted, swallowed, and smoked about every substance Montgomery County had to offer, ending up in jail for a summer. Several aunts, uncles, and cousins on both mom and dad's side of the family have been addicted.

After a decade of addiction, which included a stint living in a small camper next to his sister's house, uncle Tim was caught by the state police in the woods making meth in the trunk of an abandoned car. He was gaunt, scabs on his face and arms, from picking at imaginary insects, and his teeth were basically nonexistent. Mom was caught and spent several months in jail for possession of meth.

Meth use is especially concentrated in the rural, white working-class because it is inexpensive and keeps you awake and alert for hours, perfect for those long hours in the factory. Goad (1997) says, "When someone inhales a thick line of crystal methamphetamine, they summon an invisible angel who holds a gun to their head, commanding them to keep working. It treats the bloodstream as an assembly line and pushes up the production quota...good crank lasts at least eight hours – a full work shift" (p. 127).

But meth isn't just used for work. It's used for the same reason most drugs are used: it's fun. Meth makes you feel on top of the world. It's a release, an escape from the overwhelming stress and shame of living in poverty. Just as heroin, alcohol, and other drugs are. White-trash fun is extreme, balls-to-the-walls, over-the-top, and right in your face. It's not subtle or soft. Goad (1997) writes:

"Working-class amusement is always too much...You don't make love, you fuck your brains out. You don't just laugh, you piss yourself laughing. You don't just drink, you drink yourself blind. You don't want to get high. You want to get FUCKED UP...You

don't punch someone, you beat the shit out of him...It's overstatement for the overworked...White-trash fun is desperate fun. Painful fun. Risky, bleeding, murderous, frightening fun. It's fun that in any other context wouldn't seem like fun...When you bust your ass all week, you just don't have patience for the soft stuff. If you've been laying hot tar on a roof all day, I don't think Mozart and goblet of cognac will take out all the kinks in your neck...Every work load has an equal and opposite play load. When you spend all day loading sixteen tons, you have to find a way to dump it. If you hammer nails all week, you want to get hammered on the weekend...It's purification time. Whether actual or figurative, something has to die tonight" (Goad, p. 130-133).

Jerrod

"Some of the crises that occur after primary socialization are indeed caused by the recognition that the world of one's parents is *not* the only world there is, but has a very specific social location, perhaps even one with a pejorative connotation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 141).

One day freshman year, as I'm getting off the bus and walking into school, I notice something moving out of the bottom of my eye. I look down and see a cockroach crawling across the front of my sweater. I swat it away and look around to make sure no one saw. I am trash. My clothes already reek of cigarette smoke from living with dad, something I try to mask with body spray but you can't just pour whipped cream on shit and call it a dessert. I smell poor, unlike my best friend, Jerrod. He smells rich because he is rich. Largey & Watson (1972) write, "the middle and upper classes attempt to support their status position by the appropriate use of expensive perfumes, perfumes that symbolize high status" (p. 1029).

Jerrod is one of the most popular kids in school and is liked by both students and teachers. He's attractive, a top-ranked student, star soccer player, and has "American Dream" teeth. I'm ashamed of my crooked, crowded mouthful, rarely smiling with an open mouth, especially for photos.

Jerrod's mom is a nursing professor and assistant dean at a university and his dad is an engineer at Rolls Royce. They have a happy marriage and four beautiful, successful children. One of Jerrod's sisters is earning her doctorate at a top-tier university. Another is a pharmacist. And the other works for Twitter.

I become friends with Jerrod when he joins the wrestling team. He's attracted to my playful, risk-taking fun, and "rough around the edges" personality, something he doesn't really get at home. I'm attracted to him because he offers me something I don't get at home either: access to a different way of life. Our houses are about fifteen minutes from each other but we live a world apart.

His family eats together every night at the dinner table. They talk about their day over nutritious meals with fresh ingredients they grow in their garden, or exotic dishes they know from years spent living and traveling abroad. They run 5K's together during holidays and work out in their home gym together. They talk about school and politics. They even argue, but not like my parents. Each person gets a turn, and they actually debate – making claims, providing evidence, and not shouting, insulting, or breaking stuff.

This is a different culture, a new way of living and thinking about the world. I am uncomfortable at his house, like I don't belong, not quite sure what to say or how to move through this space, although I'm also excited by this different way of life. The more time I spend with Jerrod, the more I believe this is a life I could also live. I become interested in going to

school and leaving home, in traveling the world and experiencing new things like his family. I want to be able to tell the kind of exotic stories he can tell, stories about living in Indonesia and traveling across Europe.

I start to understand his life as not only different than my family's life, but better. Seeing my family go to a job they hate, that destroys their body and mind, then struggle to pay bills, and turn to drugs just to cope with the shitty cycle they are caught up in, I resist the temptation to let myself get sucked into this life. Spending time at Jerrod's house makes me aware that I may need something different than my parent's life. I grow increasingly ashamed of my family. I come home from Jerrod's house angry with my family for being poor, for not being educated, for not eating dinner together, for not talking about school and politics, for not being a *real* family like his.

Weighing Myself Down⁸

I lose almost ninety pounds from middle to high school.

I wake up to the sun shining on my face. I feel light, empty. The pipes feel unclogged, pure. I get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. A little apple juice-colored pee dribbles out of my dehydrated body into the toilet. I strip off my clothes to check my weight. Depending which number the dial stops on determines how I plan the rest of the day.

118 pounds – *A great start! There's a potential to hit an all-time low today.*

I turn toward the mirror and tighten my stomach. My ribcage presents itself through the skin, but I'm unhappy about the excess skin in my lower stomach from losing so much weight. I squeeze the skin, frustrated. "Being obese for so many years had permanently stretched the skin of my torso. To me, the folds that pooled around my navel and hung from my pecs looked like

⁸ Portions of this section are taken from, Hodges, N. (2015). Weighing ourselves down: Scale stories. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 4, 51-69.

fat” (Penn, 2012). I’ve researched different plastic surgery options for removing the skin. I imagine slicing off the excess and stitching it back together so that it is tighter. I suck in my stomach allowing my ribs to jab sharply against the skin. My hand fits nicely under my ribcage.

I admire my jutting collarbones and dip my fingers into the hollow above them. Satisfied, I wrap my hand around the other wrist, touching my thumb and index finger together. No room for excess flesh. I want others to see what’s on the inside—not emotionally, but physically. I want my anatomy revealed through my skin—skin that’s a size too small, a thin fleshy cloth pulled tightly over my muscles, bones, and blood vessels. “Unfortunately... This excessive body is worn as an unwelcomed flesh costume” (Glenn, 2013, p. 351). I continue the “body-checking routines” (Penn, 2012), sucking in my neck and examining my jawline, making sure there is no turkey-like flesh hanging down. I slip on mesh shorts, held up by my hipbones. I touch the point of each hipbone, which stick out further than the flesh in between them. Before leaving I look into the mirror at my favorite part—my eyes. They look like they’re being sucked into my skull like black holes. I would be disappointed to look into the mirror and see vibrant eyes. What I like about my body is that it looks unhealthy, like my bones are eating my flesh. I don’t want a *normal* body.

I go to the kitchen and pour exactly eight ounces of Gatorade into a cup. I drink all of it except the last swallow, which I swish around in my mouth, then spit in the sink. I’m proud that I drank less than the amount I poured. I’ve added *not* half a pound, but less. I eat the top half of a whole-wheat bagel, saving the bottom half for after my run later. I go back to the bathroom and sit on the toilet, trying to make more weight come out of me. I spend a significant time on the toilet throughout the day because of frequent constipation.

After fifteen minutes of failure on the toilet I go to my bedroom and read the newest issues of *Men's Health*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Flex Magazine*. I write a detailed meal and exercise program for the next few weeks as well as daily weight goals for the month. This isn't about being healthy. Although I'm interested in changing my body—in removing the excess—I'm motivated and driven by the numbers: bodyweight, calories, running times, weightlifting reps. This is about making extreme sacrifices to achieve goals. The goal, of course, is perfection. My weight can always be lower. Keep the number moving down no matter what. It's a predictable process. I'm always waiting on weight loss (Glenn, 2013).

After I finish writing my goals, I walk to the kitchen and pull a black trash bag out from underneath the sink. I stretch the bottom, ripping a small hole that I put my head through. I rip two smaller holes to put my arms through. Standing in our trailer without air conditioning in the heat of a Midwestern August, I'm already dripping sweat. I'm careful not to rip the holes any larger since the purpose of wearing the trash bag is to keep as much of my body enclosed as possible. I layer on the rest of my running outfit: shorts, sweatpants, t-shirt, hooded sweatshirt, stocking cap. I put on my shoes and grab my stopwatch. Looking like I'm dressed for a blizzard, I step outside into the hundred-degree weather and begin the familiar three-mile run down a gravel road.

Arriving back at the trailer, I stop the timer at eighteen minutes and thirty seconds, nearly a minute slower than my personal record. Disappointed, I spend the next ten minutes sitting inside my dad's broken-down Dodge Dart with the doors closed and windows up, sweating like a sumo wrestler in a sauna. *What would mom do if she saw me like this?* I moved out of her house partially because it is easier to continue my weight loss away from her concerned, watchful eyes.

I stagger dizzy-headed back to the trailer bathroom. I strip off my clothes and meticulously wipe my sweat off with a towel, even though I continue sweating as I wipe. I step on the scale.

The red dial spins. A few centimeters shy of 114 pounds.

No way! This scale can't be right! I step off and step back on just to be sure.⁹ The dial points at my failure. A cold, calculated display of my worth (Glenn, 2013).

I put the sweatpants and sweatshirt back on and walk to my bedroom. I lie on my back, staring at the heat radiating from my hands, one of the few parts of my body not suffocating under fabric. Staring down at me from the ceiling is a poster I cut out from a wrestling magazine: **Obsessed is just a word the lazy use to describe the dedicated.** I crank out one hundred crunches then muster some spit from my dehydrated mouth into an empty Gatorade bottle on my dresser, even though it feels like someone vacuumed out all my saliva. Pushups are next. Sweat drips from my nose to the carpet, as my chest fills with lactic acid. I go to absolute failure, wait a few seconds and do more. Then I grab the loaded barbell off my floor and hoist it overhead for military presses until I'm unable to perform another rep. Dizzy and exhausted, I lean against the wall. *Stop being a little bitch! Where's your fucking dedication?* I don't have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Two angry drill sergeants killed both of them.

I walk out the front door of the trailer and line up in front of the Dodge Dart for sprints. *I don't give a shit how you feel. I'm more powerful than you'll ever be.* Mind and body are at it once again. Guess who wins.

⁹ Different scales produce different measurements. As a wrestler, I learned to question the reliability and generalizability of scales as I constantly weighed on different scales for practices and tournaments. In a sport where a tenth of a pound can keep you from competing, you question these "objective" measurements and put forth the "subjective" effort to ensure you are far enough underweight that regardless of what scale you weigh on, you will still "make weight."

I run twenty sprints across the grass, dodging molehills and Peaches' piles of dog shit, then jog back inside. Disoriented and emitting heat like a furnace, I strip off my clothes as the scale beckons me. "Step on, step on, I promise to tell you something true. You want to know the truth, don't you?" (Glenn, 2013, p. 354). Toweling off, just the thought of putting those sweats back on wears me out. Black numbers and tally marks stare up at me from the compact analog scale. The red dial is lined up on the scale's biggest number: **0**. I visualize the dial pointing at 114.

I step on...

Several months later, I step onto the scale backwards and wait a moment as the psychologist records my weight. I catch sight of the number as she writes it down.

"Thank you," she says. "You can step off."

Not seeing my weight is a coping mechanism. The scale controls how I see my body. The higher the number, the higher my disappointment, so it's best I don't know. Without a scale, I can't obsess over my weight. The number is what drove me to not eat or drink, work out three times a day, and feel disgusted about my body. The obsession for more than a year has been to make that number keep going down. It's taken as much willpower to start eating and gaining weight again as it took for me to not eat and lose weight. *Did I seriously just weigh almost 130 pounds? I'm going for another run when I get home.*

Being the only guy in an eating disorder therapy group brings mixed feelings. As my dad drives me to the clinic each week, I turn the music up so we don't have to talk. We live in a society where men struggle talking vulnerably about their bodies and body image, especially with other men (Brooks, 2006). We can talk about weight when it's in the context of making

weight for wrestling, because it's not about body image or emotions then. It's about competition and determination. It's about being tough. It's about being a man.

As a member of this group, I now have a label. I've become a *kind* of person (Hacking, 2000): a person with an eating disorder. I hate this label. My brain isn't infected with some 'disorder.' I've chosen this lifestyle. If people choose to pathologize my eating and exercise behaviors, that's their problem. *It's just because they don't have the willpower to do what I do. Lazy fat asses.* And there is nothing dis-ordered about my eating. It's the most ordered thing in my life. I have my eating completely under control and can tell you exactly what I've ingested the last week, even a breakdown of the micronutrients. It's under more control than the rest of this group. They gorge themselves and throw up. No discipline. I'm not some emotional girl throwing up her food. I'm in complete control.¹⁰ What I'm doing is the most masculine form of self-discipline. I've created an extreme, rigid lifestyle for myself. I don't want to talk about how fat I am or what I see when I look in the mirror. I want to talk about going on grueling runs, lifting weights, being strict and regimented with my diet in order to have a lean, disciplined body. *This is an impressive logical compulsion*, a self-mantra designed to retain *my* sense of masculinity.

As the only guy in the group I am even more aware of my body, one of the reasons why I am here in the first place: Body image. *Body image is relational*, even though most discussions about the topic make it seem like we're injected with body standards from celebrities and advertisements like they're hypodermic eating disorder needles. Images from the media matter, but more important are the people we interact and build relationships with in our everyday lives.

¹⁰ Tillman (2009) discusses bulimia as a purging of emotion (p. 98), and a "sense of lack of control over eating" (p. 100). My approach to my eating, exercise, and emotions was strict control. Both extremes are unhealthy in their own way.

Part of my drive to change my body stems from my desire to stand apart from my brother. By changing my body, I stand out and gain attention. As my brother tells me, “I get zero attention at home. Everybody is always worried about you and your stupid eating disorder. I hate it.”

Those early years of being teased by peers also made me see my body negatively and want to change it. *I'll build a body that will show them!*¹¹ It's not just past interactions that influence how we see our bodies though.¹² When I'm in the gym surrounded by bodies that work out, I compare and question how lean or muscular I look. When I'm around family or peers who don't work out, they often comment on how muscular or lean I look, making me feel different in my body. Even alone in front of the mirror, the imagined reactions from others influence how I see myself. Sometimes I become an other to myself. *Who is that in the mirror?* That may be my body, but that's not me.

Algebra Playground

I stroll into Mr. Steiner's class for pre-Algebra my freshman year. I managed a **B** the first trimester mostly by cheating on the exams. Mr. Steiner upped test security this semester and I have a **D-**. “Out in the hall,” is a phrase I hear almost daily. I am more interested in shocking my peers and making them laugh than earning grades. I push boundaries in stupid ways: Hiding chalk, throwing stuff, writing obscenities on the board, making vulgar jokes, chugging rotten milk, rubber band wars – the classroom is a battleground. Everyday I attack Mr. Steiner's

¹¹ Many bodybuilders tell stories of being made fun of for being small and/or fat when they were younger. These early bullying experiences inspire them to build a bigger, stronger body. The problem is many still feel insecure. Strong exterior, weak interior (Hensley, 2011).

¹² Female bodybuilders, with their massive muscles, compare their bodies with other female bodybuilders, not skinny supermodels. They build their social identity through their own tight-knit bodybuilding community (Fisher, 1997). FatClub.com, an online community of men who collectively pursue bigger bodies and weight gain, “offers a safehaven for those who enjoy being fat” (Adams & Berry, 2013, p. 315). Each social group illustrates how one constructs their body image through their relationships.

institutional authority. I refuse to be one of the school's sheep. This usually gets me herded into the hallway with the other troublemakers.

I don't do homework at home. I get to class early and copy answers from Mr. Steiner's Teacher Edition book on his desk while he stands in the hall chatting about farming with the math teacher next door. Southmont is a rural high school: Cornfields on one side and a cow pasture on the other, the perfect landscape for a "drive your tractor to school" day. Several teachers farm, grew up on farms, or married farmers.

On test days, I get to class early and copy answers from the answer key he usually leaves poorly hidden under some attendance sheets. I think he picked up on my method because the answer sheets are harder to find this trimester. One of the problems with cheating on his math exam, ethics aside, is I don't get credit just for getting the right answer. I also have to show my work. I could be a smartass and write, "look at your answer key," but then I'd have an **F** in the class, which would disqualify me from wrestling. Instead, I make up calculations. Multiply some numbers. Divide some. Throw in a few symbols: square roots, fractions. I half-erase some, making it illegible, and appear as if I worked through the problem by trial and error. There isn't enough time to write all the answers from the answer key. And if I got all the answers right, Mr. Steiner would know I cheated.

Days we don't have tests are when I get in the most trouble. "Get out your homework and pass it in," Mr. Steiner says. I turn mine in half complete. He collects the homework and goes to the chalkboard to write a problem on the board. While his back is turned, I stand up and flip him off, throwing my middle fingers at the back of his head. A few students laugh. He whips around but I'm sitting by the time he locks eyes on me. He knows I'm the culprit but he can't prove it. I smirk. He turns around flustered and continues talking through the problem on the board. I build

a small paper airplane behind the cover of my textbook and launch it across the room at my friend, Tyler. He's paying attention to Mr. Steiner as it hits him in the head. He smiles but pretends nothing happened. A minute later, I notice Tyler slowly inching his hand into his pocket and pulling out a quarter. He puts it in between his thumb and index finger and flicks it toward me. I move my head just in time and the quarter zips by and hits the wall, falling to the floor.

"HODGES, GET OUT!" Mr. Steiner yells, turning around.

"But I didn't do anything!" I say, only half telling the truth.

"TO THE HALLWAY!"

"This is bullshit!" I say, shoving my desk and walking toward the door.

I walk out and sit on the marble floor. I won't be defeated this easily. Once I hear Mr. Steiner teaching the new lesson, I peek my head slowly around the corner. A few students see me and smile. I take the eraser out of my mechanical pencil, wait until Mr. Steiner turns his back, and launch it toward him. It misses and hits the chalkboard beside his head. He doesn't see it. Several classmates laugh. He turns toward the door, assuming I'm up to no good, but he's not quick enough. I'm sitting against the wall out of sight. He walks to the door and slams it shut.

I wait a few minutes, then crawl toward the long window beside the door. My classmates are working through problems at the board. Tyler, another class clown, but one Mr. Steiner likes because he's a farmboy is at the board nearest me. He sees me and shakes his head. I grab the door handle and slowly crack the door open.

"Hodges, you idiot!" Tyler says. I look around for Mr. Steiner. He's at the back of the room helping a student with their problem. I crack the door wider, reach in and grab the trashcan. I pull it into the hallway and set it against the glass, then pull the door so it's slightly cracked. Later, when Mr. Steiner is at the board going through problems, I slowly crack the door open

where students can see me. I make faces, going cross-eyed, drooling, and moving my mouth around like its Silly Putty. I pretend to be Mr. Steiner giving a blowjob, first with one hand, then with two. When Mr. Steiner turns around and sees several students holding in laughs he turns toward the cracked-open door.

“HODGES, TO THE OFFICE NOW!”

This isn't the first time I've been sent to the office this year. A couple weeks ago I was falling asleep in the back of geology class during a lecture about volcanoes. I look up just in time to see Ryan Brock fling a #2 wood pencil right at my eye. I stand and walk over to his table. Mr. Martin continues lecturing about diverging tectonic plates as my fist converges with Ryan's nose. Principal's office: Three-day suspension, the ashy aftermath of a volcanic eruption in class. My dad is pissed at me, but doesn't do much about it. What's he going to do really? Tell me not to hit people?

To pass time in Mr. Hopkin's Geometry class, Nate, Ronnie and me play the rhyme game. The rules are simple: someone chooses a word and we each write down as many words as we can that rhyme with it. It turns out math teachers don't like students arguing about words when they're trying to teach about numbers. Mr. Hopkins let us put our word skills to use by kicking us out of class and making us write a paper addressing the question: “Why I act the way I act?” I relish the opportunity to tackle this philosophical “punishment.” Finally, an assignment where I am free to think critically about my life and am not inhibited by structural constraints. I write about my desire to make others laugh and push boundaries and how this is linked to the social environment I grew up in. My first social construction assignment is a punishment from my high school geometry teacher. The paper doesn't help my grade. Numbers and triangles can't keep my attention. I earn a **D**.

Class Clowning

I am a class clown: a rule-bending, comedic insider who pokes fun at rigid school rules, standards, and structures without seriously threatening the people who maintain them (see Frenztz, 2008). I clown to soften hierarchical relationships (Berger, 1997) because I am already experiencing problems with authority. I don't like being told what to do and comedy is a threat to authority. There's a reason why satire is punishable by death in dictatorships.

My parents were told what to do everyday at work and they brought this communication style of domination and control into our home. At the same time, they express hatred for their bosses, politicians, business executives, and other authority figures for telling them what to do. My parents tell countless stories about how their damn boss don't know their ass from a hole in the ground.¹³

My family often says one thing and does another, and my family does one thing and the people at school and in the media do another. Although my family is critical of authority, especially bosses and politicians, they often hold dogmatic beliefs in other authorities like the Bible, U.S. military, and family elders. I inherit my parent's cynicism toward authority, including them as authority figures, since they undermine their own bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005) through contradictory language and social interaction. Comedy is a way of undermining bullshit.

George Orwell (1945) wrote, "Every joke is a tiny revolution." My clowning is a rebellion against authority and against reason. It is a chance to play, to relive the childhood freedom that school tries to institutionalize out of me (Freud, 1960). There are other reasons I clown.

¹³ "No one who grows up working-class can possibly believe obedience to authority figures will keep us safe or advance us in the world, because we see every day that authority figures have no respect for us or our families and no interest in protecting us from harm" (Siegel, 2014).

Director and comedian, Judd Apatow (2015), says “I always felt the reason I was interested in comedy was that I was on some level hostile and looking for answers” (p. 289). His comment is similar to many of the comedians he interviewed for his book, *Sick in the Head: Conversations about Life and Comedy* – unexpressed anger, trying to fit in, feeling awkward and out of place, not feeling good enough, etc. My favorite comedian, Louis CK says, “My parents were divorced...I was awkward and couldn’t quite score the way everybody else did. I didn’t feel like I was succeeding as a kid. I was bad academically, always behind, always in trouble. I had friends and stuff but I didn’t feel like I was winning in school. And comedy was this amazing thing because comedy is like saying the wrong things – when you see a grownup do it and they succeed at it and get applause” (p. 289). Like Louis CK, using comedy was a way of overcoming my insecurities and self-perceived deficiencies.

I was bullied constantly because of my weight. I was embarrassed about living in a trailer and my family’s poverty. I was ashamed of my academic performance, of constantly being labeled a bad student. These clowning attacks were defense mechanisms – a way of expressing my anger (Freud, 1960). Through using humor, I try to regain my sense of self-worth, and even express my own superiority (Hobbes, 1840). Jokes are a way of building solidarity with my fellow students while at the same time dividing me from my teachers, as jokes create an “us” and “them” (Meyer, 2000).

Comedy can offer a kind of narrative truth, what I call *comedic truth*. Burke (1984) argues that comedy offers us “perspective by incongruity” (p. 173). Comedic truth is a truth that exaggerates, distorts, and draws attention to incongruity. Berger (1997) says the comic worldview, “is that of a world turned upside down, grossly distorted, and precisely for that

reason more revealing of some underlying truths than the conventional, right-side-up view” (p. 21). Comedy and religious faith share many of the same qualities.

Religion is an important sense-making tool for people, one which parents often go to great lengths to socialize their children into. I don’t have that in my family. Humor is my faith, transcending me beyond the reality of everyday, ordinary existence and suggesting there is something beyond this material world that is redeeming (Berger, 1997). My parents tell me all the time that “life isn’t fair, get used to it,” especially when I don’t get my way. Religion and humor are ways of getting used to it. Humor becomes my way of making sense of this unfair world, a way of thinking everything’s going to be okay, regardless of if I’m poor, fat, not “cool,” and a bad student. Humor offers a way to stand out and get attention despite my poor self-esteem and shame.

Family Violence

The summer before my junior year of high school, dad and Ralpa, the woman he’s dated for nearly a decade, buy a two-story brick house in a housing edition. The neighbor across the street is Mr. Hunt, the former junior high principal who expelled me. Dad and Ralpa fight almost every day. I listen from my bedroom as I try to fall asleep, or sit in the living room while they fight in front of me.

“Get your shit and get out!” dad shouts. He grabs Ralpa’s clothes from the closet and hurls them into the hallway. “Get the fuck out!” he shouts again.

“This is my house too, Mike!”

“Your house?” dad’s rhetorical question comes out eerily calm.

“You haven’t paid a goddamn dime on this house in six months. Don’t give me that bullshit, Ralpa!”

“My name is right there beside yours on the papers. Don’t tell me I haven’t paid anything in six months. I pay my half...”

CRASH! Dad slams the bedroom door.

“Bullshit!”

CRASH! Ralpa swings the door open and it crashes into the wall, the handle piercing the plaster. A picture of dad, Yub, and me falls to the carpet.

“What the fuck are you doing?” dad shouts inches from her face. She backs away “Quit being fucking stupid!” He says, stalking her down, spit spraying like venom.

“Get out of my face, Mike.” Her tone changes from anger to fear. “Mike, get out of my face or I’m calling the cops.”

“Call the fucking cops, Ralpa! Go right ahead. I’ll dial their damn number for you.”

Ralpa backs down the hallway. Dad follows.

“GET OUT OF MY FACE!” she screams.

She pushes over the six-foot tall glass display case at the end of the hallway. A Mother Mary figurine breaks into pieces on the floor.

The fight rages on. Cussing, hateful words, slammed doors, smashed objects, punched walls, shattered glass, dialed phones, then a knock on the front door.

“Hello I’m from the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Department. We received a complaint about a dispute going on at this residence.” They bullshit the sheriff like they always do and the fight resumes when he leaves.

Ralpa wasn’t the only one who fought with dad in the house...

“Dad, why can’t I borrow the van?” I ask, lying about going to Jerrod’s house tonight when I’m really going to a party.

“Because I fuckin’ said so, Nathan,” he says.

“That’s fuckin’ retarded.”

“Watch your damn mouth,” he says jabbing his finger into my chest and inching closer.

“Dad, get the fuck outta’ my face.” I push him back. He grabs me by my shirt. “Fucking let go!” I try to peel his hands off. BAM! His right fist bites my left cheekbone.

“IS THAT ALL YOU GOT?” I yell.

Tears roll down my cheek. Not from physical pain but from the shock. I love my dad. He loves me. *People who love each other don’t do this, do they?*

“Goddamn! I fucking hate you so much!” I say, crying even more.

I stomp out of the kitchen and down the stairs. I stop on the bottom step and unleash my rage into the house, leaving a fist-sized hole in the wall. I shake the white plaster crumbles from my knuckles, and slam the back door as I leave.

Two years later the pattern repeats with a different character...

“Goddamn, I fucking hate you so much,” Yub shouts at dad. I’m standing against the door in my bedroom listening to Yub and dad fight upstairs. Two years have passed since my last fight with my dad. By this time, my 200-pound National Champion wrestler brother is too much for my 130-pound dad to handle. Yub lays it on him.

“You’re a terrible father! I fucking hate you!”

My composure crumbles under the weight of his hateful words. I explode out of my bedroom, and walk upstairs. I grab Yub by the shirt and lift him onto his tiptoes.

“STOP FUCKING TALKING TO MY DAD LIKE THAT!”

My fist quivers inches from his cheekbone. He looks petrified.

“Get off me!” he mumbles, untangling my hand from his shirt.

He stomps downstairs, punches a hole in the wall inches from mine. White plaster crumbles from his knuckles as he slams the door.

Southmont Graduation And Manchester Application

I graduate high school on my eighteenth birthday. I am ranked 82nd out of 144 students, but I’m not really one for numbers anyhow. It doesn’t come as a surprise considering I spend almost as much time in the hallway and principal’s office as the classroom.

I live and breathe wrestling at Southmont. I finish my career with several school records, a seventh place finish in the state finals, and an award for area wrestler of the year. The wrestling mat is the only place I feel like I belong. It is the only place throughout my childhood where I feel validated, where I excel, where people cheer for me and consider my work significant.

After the State Finals, I receive letters from a few small colleges who are interested in me joining their wrestling program, including a letter from the wrestling coach at Manchester College, an NCAA Division III program in North Manchester, Indiana. I also apply to Indiana State University (ISU), only about an hour away and a popular college school choice of my peers. Dad doesn’t want me going to ISU because there’s no wrestling program. Jerrod gets accepted into Wabash College, a prestigious liberal arts college in town, and Indiana University School of Business, one of the top business schools in the country. He chooses IU.

I qualify as a 21st Century Scholar, an award program geared toward low-income students that pays a portion of tuition if I attend an Indiana college or university. I still have to borrow more than \$5,000 a semester for remaining costs. I naively borrow from a private loan company

with interest that accrues while I'm in college. Mom and dad don't have good enough credit to co-sign the loan. Dad is struggling to make payments for a house on the verge of foreclosure. Mom is working overtime as a waitress and cleaning houses, hovering around the poverty line. Grandma Donna cosigns the loan and even agrees to pay the interest while I'm in college.

The summer before I start college at Manchester, I work at a construction company, my second paid job. My first job lasted one day before I quit. I was a dishwasher at the restaurant my mom waitressed. The goal is to save money for college, but I save nothing. Zilch. I'm terrible with money. I don't like being in debt and pay all my debts off as soon as I can, even recklessly so, like using my whole paycheck to pay off bills the day I get paid and only having twenty bucks left for the next two weeks. I still don't trust myself with owning a credit card and any time I have extra money, I spend it.

As I prepare to leave for college, to start a new life in a new place, I'm excited but I don't really know what college has in store for me. What do I want? What will make my life feel worthwhile? Why am I so ashamed and angry?

CHAPTER THREE: MANCHESTER BEGINNINGS

In August 2006, I drive 2.5 hours to North Manchester in my '99 Pontiac Grand Am – paint scratches, smashed fender, and bungee cord holding the hood down. The car, the first one I'd owned, and purchased for me as a graduation gift a few months ago by my parents and grandma, is filled with dorm room stuff. My mom, dad, Jeff (mom's fourth husband), and grandma follow behind me.

I pull up to Schwalm Hall and feel embarrassed as student workers swarm my car to help me carry stuff to my room on the first floor. My family helps carry a few things, then hands cash, hugs me, and leaves. Mom cries, as she does every time we part ways. I walk into my new room feeling torn between excitement of a new life ahead of me and a tinge of sadness about the life it feels like I'm leaving behind.

Move-in day is often fraught with complicated feelings and tensions for first-generation college students. Part of this has to do with the fact that move-in day is a family affair (Rease-Miles & Lopez, 2015). This is the first time students get to see the worlds of their future and past together, and for first-generation, blue-collar students, this often creates an ambivalent, even awkward experience they aren't sure how to cope with yet.

When I moved into Manchester, a private liberal arts college, I moved from a conservative, white working-class community to something very different. In my hometown, many people drive gas-guzzling trucks with roaring engines and big tires. They have American

flag and “Support the Troops” stickers displayed on their rear-windows. At Manchester College people drive small cars that hum like sewing machines and run on cornstarch and free love. The rear windows of these vehicles display peace signs and “Pro-Choice” stickers.

I may not have realized it yet, but the minute I hop out of my vehicle on move-in day, I’m leaving the conservative, blue-collar, white, hetero-, Christian way of life I grew up in and entering a world unfamiliar to me: the cosmopolitan world of liberals and democrats, homosexuals, transgendered, Palestinians, Indians, Nigerians, Ethiopians, Muslims, Buddhists, Catholics, Jews, wealthy, big city, and every different color on life’s rainbow.

There was one black person in my high school and she was adopted by white parents. There were no openly gay students. I didn’t know any gay men until I arrived here. I grew up with two female cousins who were openly lesbian, and who introduced various girlfriends to the family. My family’s perspective, while supportive in some ways, still “othered” this lifestyle. Jeff’s dad, my papaw says, “If they wanna be gay, more power to ‘em. I don’t care. Just don’t push it off on me. It’s just like religion. I’m not real religious. I believe in God and all that but I don’t like for people to push it off on me.”

Ninety-two percent of the 16,000 people who live in Crawfordsville are white. Eight percent are Hispanic. “Comin’ over here and takin’ all our jobs and payin’ no taxes,” I often hear. Muslims – the supposed terrorists my community is afraid of – live in my hall and several become good friends. Manchester attracts many international students to its peace studies program, the first of its kind in the world. There is a United Sexualities club on campus and a Gay Prom. I go to my first drag show here. In Crawfordsville, there is man and woman and you act like a man or act like a woman. These distinctions are clear. There is no gray area.

Vulnerable Leadership

At Manchester, the College President, Jo Young Switzer, knows every student by name and eats lunch with students and working-class folks on campus – the maintenance workers, groundskeepers, cooks, and custodial staff. I've never seen such respect shown to people like my family by people who make such high salaries and have so much decision-making power.

Manchester feels like a community where people, not profits, are put first. I feel the truth of their mission statement everyday: "Manchester College respects the infinite worth of every individual and graduates persons of ability and conviction who draw upon their education and faith to lead principled, productive, and compassionate lives that improve the human condition."

Many of Manchester's employees are former graduates – librarians, accountants, administrators, fundraisers, alumni relations, maintenance and grounds workers, coaches, human resources, academic support, career services, public relations, counselors, admissions, professors. The President and Vice President are Manchester grads. People grow deeply attached to this place. The alumni donation rate is almost three times the national average. Graduates even leave their entire estates to the school when they die.

Class Struggles

I go to college intending to major in Sports Management with the idea of being a high school athletic director and wrestling coach, though the only sports I care for are wrestling and long-distance running, and high school wasn't exactly an enjoyable place for me. At the end of my first semester I have a 2.8 GPA and am nearly kicked out of school. I cheat on my Intro to Psychology final exam.

I study several days, typing a study guide, and rewriting it several times to help memorize for the exam. I bring the study guide with me to the final exam, hide it under my desk and look at

it a few times to confirm answers. I receive an email from my professor a few days later. She informs me she knows I cheated, that I will receive a zero on the exam and she is reporting the incident to the Academic Affairs office where they will decide if I am expelled from the college. I never hear from the Academic Affairs office and I wonder if she actually reported it or said that to scare me. It works. Although I know cheating is wrong, I didn't trust myself to perform well without help. I didn't in high school and hadn't thus far in college.

I take a College Algebra class during January and finish with a **D-** despite doing the homework and never missing class. I retake the class in Spring and receive a **C**. I struggle through my Intro to Communication and Public Speaking class. I rarely read the textbook, but invest a lot of time preparing for presentations. I try to say too much and go over the required time, which is punished harshly. I receive a **C-** in the class.

I finish the year with disappointing grades, I'm burnt out with wrestling and unsure about my major choice and why I'm in college, though I'm having fun. One positive thing about this year is I reinvent myself. I become more confident. I make friends. I also became more aware of my multiple selves. There is the Nate Hodges at home and the Nate Hodges on campus. There is also the Nate Hodges in the classroom and the Nate Hodges with his friends. Another not-so-great change is that I'm becoming a heavy drinker. Given my propensity for doing things to the extreme, this is scary. I also discover Adderall, a drug that is like steroids for the brain. I sign up to live with a new roommate next year: Austin; he's quiet, a good student, a better option for focusing on school.

On the last day of school, I load up my stuff and drive back to Crawfordsville to work in a factory for the summer. Driving back alone in the silence, life's big questions drift into my consciousness: What am I doing here? What do I want out of college? Can I succeed as a

student? Am I destined to end up back in Crawfordsville working in a factory? Why have I been drinking so much? I've seen the destruction that drugs and alcohol has caused my family. Am I following in their footsteps?

CHAPTER FOUR: MANUFACTURING STORIES

“The working class doesn’t write a lot of history books. The working class doesn’t produce many movies or radio shows. The working class doesn’t tend to hire media consultants or theatrical agents. The working class has played an itty-bitty role in fashioning its popular image. That’s because the working class [is] too busy working” (Goad, 1997, p. 101).

When I was a kid, my dad would come home to our trailer in his sweaty, oil-stained work uniform and say, “Son, you better get yer’self an ed-ju-cation. Getch’ya a *good* job. Ya’ don’t want to end up like yer dad, breakin’ yer back just to put a damn penny in yer pocket.” My dad, mom, stepdad, brother and the rest of my family have worked in factories for most of their adult lives. Some make brake pads, some build car axles, some package cheese, and some bottle medication, but they all are told more or less what to do and how to do it. The working-class is made up of people who go to jobs in which they have comparatively little power or authority, aren’t the boss of anyone, and have little to no control over the pace and content of their work (Zweig, 2004). Working-class bodies stand up, move, sweat, get dirty, and ache on the job.

Our experiences at work influence our attitudes, behaviors, and values, and how, why, where, when, and to whom we communicate. They shape our ideas about what it means to live “a good life” and the actions we take toward achieving it. Work has been understood at different

points throughout American history as natural, a necessary evil, punishment for sin, a path to salvation, the source of economic value, creation, and the essence of what it means to be human (see Mills, 1951). Richard Nixon claimed “labor is good in itself...a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working” (Terkel, 1972). Studs Terkel claimed that “work, is by it’s very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body” (Terkel, 1972, p. xiii), and is also “a search...for daily meaning as well as daily bread” (p. xiii).

Mills (1951) proposed that *ideal* work would have no ulterior motive other than the process of creating the product being made. *Work should be meaningful*. You should be free to control your work and learn from it. There should be no split between work and play. This is not to say work can’t be challenging or even dull at times, because workers “gain positive satisfaction from encountering a resistance and conquering it...without this resistance he [sic] would gain less satisfaction in being finally victorious over that which at first obstinately resists his will” (p. 222).

If there is no inherent meaning for work I wonder, “why some workers are privileged and others excluded and how some types of work are constructed as desirable and others are not” (Jones & Vagle, 2013, p. 132). Why is working with your hands treated as less valuable or respectable than working with ideas? How do we even make these distinctions? Why is the CEO paid ten, twenty, one hundred, even one thousand *or more* times as much as the worker on their assembly line?

We inherit narratives from educators, workplaces, media, family, children’s books (Wieland & Bauer, 2015) and even mythology in which we learn what kinds of work are valued by society, and thus what value should be attached to the people who do these kinds of work. The American Dream narrative treats factory work as undesirable and insignificant. How many

parents tell their young children they should aspire to work in a factory? When was the last time a warehouse worker was invited to speak at career day?

My family and the schools I've attended tried to reinforce the idea I could make a *better* life for myself than the one I was born into and raised in. This *better* life includes a college education and work that isn't physical labor. My job this summer at the lighting factory is supposed to help reinforce this narrative. I don't want to work in this shithole. I'm just doing it to buy a computer for school and pay for some of my tuition.

According to Ancient Greek mythology, Sisyphus was hauled down to the Underworld by Hades and condemned to an eternity of hard, meaningless labor for crimes committed against the Gods. His eternal assignment was to roll a giant boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back to the bottom before he reached the summit. In the eyes of the Greek Gods, there was no punishment more torturous than hopeless, repetitive physical labor (Camus, 1955).

Rolling Uphill

My steel-toe boots clomp on the hot pavement as I run in the factory's side entrance door. The electronic time clock shows 3:00 p.m., and I breathe a sigh of relief as I swipe the barcode on my company-issued, plastic card. Printed on the card are my name, a number, and a picture of me with a closed-mouth smile, ironic considering how rarely I smile in this place. If I swiped this card one minute later, I would be late. If this happens three times, I will be fired. The factory doesn't deal in excuses. It deals in numbers.

I walk towards the group of second-shift workers gathered by the manager's office. Most of them have a fountain drink—a Styrofoam cup filled with 32 ounces of ice and pop—to cool them down in this 100-plus degree factory. As I stand at the back of the group, sweat pours down my forehead and seeps through my Indiana High School State Championships wrestling t-shirt.

The gray-haired second-shift supervisor stands in front of the fountain drink crew, wearing a red t-shirt displaying the local liberal arts college from which he graduated. He dresses like he doesn't plan on getting dirty which says "something obvious about the distinction between management and employee."¹⁴ Other than these quick meetings at the beginning of the shift, I rarely see him. Most of the time, he's holed up like a groundhog in his air-conditioned office.

Before the meeting starts, a first-shift female supervisor – the only black person I've seen in the factory – walks by and tells us, "Y'all be careful in this heat now. Stay hydrated." I'm reminded of my friend Steve's story about his job last summer in which he spent each day in a 100-plus degree factory running back and forth to four different conveyor belts, unloading and stacking fifty-pound boxes of kitty litter. Eight hours of sweating in a dirty factory every day caused acne all over his back that became infected—blistering, oozing puss, and scabbing.

The meeting lasts about two minutes. The supervisor tells us we didn't meet our numbers yesterday and reminds us we need to pick up the pace, but to be cautious about the heat. As we disperse, Debbie,¹⁵ a veteran packaging line worker, pulls a head-cooling bandana out of her small lunchbox and wraps it around her forehead. She lets out an "ahhhh" as the cold, gel-filled red cloth chills her head. She has one of the dullest tasks in the factory: Unfold cardboard and shape it into a box. Tape cardboard to keep shape of box. Remove light fixture from rack and place in box. Tape box shut. Place label on box. Repeat. She is standing, reaching up to racks, and bending over the assembly line eight hours a day for longer than I've been alive. She could keep a chiropractor busy 'til the cows come home.

Two decades of bending over an assembly line, lifting and welding heavy machinery left my dad's spine in need of surgical repair. The spinal surgeon stuck a nightmare-sized needle into

¹⁴ Payne, 1996, p. 52.

¹⁵ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter except for the factory my dad works.

dad before slicing open his lower abdominals and moving his stomach out of the way to access the backbone. He cut out the grinded-down spinal disc and inserted two stainless steel plates and an elastic pad.

My dad tells me, “I reckon one of these days my job’ll be replaced by a couple robots. I’ve been loading the same car parts onto the same locating pins for so long I think I could probably build one blindfolded. Your body and eyes has to be there but your mind don’t.” With the metal disc wedged in between his vertebrae, my dad is one step closer to being a robot, which is great news for his employer. But looking like a robot takes skill. These aren’t *unskilled* jobs and not just anyone can do them (see Lucas, 2011). Debbie and my dad may make their work look automatic, but that’s because they’re damn good at their job. I wonder if any of my professors could last a day in the factory. Could their bodies handle it? Better yet, could their minds handle it?

Dad works in a factory that looks like mine. At least the area in which I work. I’ve never seen the entire plant. This isn’t college; there are no campus tours. My work area makes me picture what the Skynet machine factory would look like in *The Terminator* if the cyborgs won the war against the humans. “We got robots dancing everywhere son,” dad says. Concrete floor, steel-crossbar ceiling, and walls covered in metallic pipes of all shapes and sizes. Bright, industrial lights are spaced out across the ceiling like miniature suns in a manufacturing galaxy. As I walk to my work-station, I dodge Jim, one of many workers zipping down concrete aisles on forklifts. I nod my head at him and put my earplugs in to block out the repetitive noises of the factory floor, which sound like a boring boxing match between robots. The tape machines on the packaging line provide a constant drone that changes pitch when a cardboard box is put through. Sounds of various machines scattered throughout the plant can be heard: the deafening industrial

fans, the hydraulic noises of rack pulley systems, the high-pressure spray of a nozzle in the paint area, and metal slamming against metal in the scrap area dumpsters.

Walking by the shipment supervisor's small office window, I make eye contact with the twenty-something, dark-haired female sitting in the air-conditioned room on a cushioned computer chair. She glances at me with a blank expression before returning her attention to the computer screen. *Fuck you! Just keep sitting on your lazy ass*, I mutter, pushing my safety glasses back up towards my eyes, sweat dripping down my nose. *Calm down, Nate. She's just doing her job*. Most of the time she chats with Eric, a bald-headed, low-level manager. He told me yesterday, "I got a Master's in Journalism, but you see where it got me. Psssh. Worthless degree." *That degree keeps you from getting any calluses on your hands, doesn't it?*

I put my rubber-coated work gloves on my clammy hands and pull my iPod Shuffle out of my pocket. Listening to music is one of the ways I try to pass time on the job. Fifteen minutes can feel like an hour in this place. Bustin' ass sometimes makes the clock hand move faster. Sometimes it doesn't. Regardless of what I do to pass the time, the minutes stretch out like pieces of Laffy Taffy. Too bad I'm not being paid for how much time I *feel* like I'm working. I pull my earplugs out, put the earbuds in and press play, drowning out the factory noise.

You can take this job and shove it

I ain't workin here no more.

My job requires pushing and pulling lighting fixtures clipped to half-ton steel racks to various parts of the factory. The racks are carried by a hoist and submerged into a series of tubs with chemical treatments before being dried and lowered. The shift supervisor tells me to "be careful" because the racks—1,000 pounds of steel—sometimes fall from the ceiling, when the hoist malfunctions. I guess every job has its downfalls.

My brother works at a brake pad factory down the road and I cringe when he tells me about all the fingers lost in their machines. Last week a lady had her entire left arm fileted. It was snagged in a machine she was cleaning and her skin just hung off the bone, giving her coworkers a gross anatomy lesson. A guy working with my friend Steve had his entire foot ripped off by a machine. After a prosthetic replacement he went back to the same place to drive a forklift.

I stand on both my *real* feet, waiting for the rack to lower to the floor. After the rack is safely lowered, I use all my strength to pull it away from the wall. I shift my weight to stop the momentum and rotate the back end around, like turning a steering wheel with no power steering fluid. I dig my boots into the concrete floor and drive into the rack. Then the next one. And the next one. And the...

The foreman, he's a regular dog

The line boss, he's a fool.

A hand tapping on my shoulder from behind interrupts Johnny Paycheck's country classic and I press the pause button. I whip around to a graphic t-shirt from Wal-Mart that has "I'm with stupid" written on it and an arrow pointing at me. It's the supervisor who controls the chemical tanks and inspection.

"Can't play music," he says as I take the ear buds out.

"Oh shit! Yeah. Sorry about that. I forgot," I say, playing stupid. Maybe I wasn't playing.

"And you hafta keep up with the racks. You need someone else to take over?" he says, without any interest in my response. I shake my head, but he's already walking away.

"Fuckin' piece of shit," I mumble under my breath. *Keep up? By all means, take my fucking job. You couldn't keep up with me.* My job is the one assigned to temporary workers, because no one wants to do it full-time. They give it to the "college boy," which is what the

workers usually call me. *Someone to take over? Who? Who the fuck could possibly keep up with my pace?* For all the hate I have for this place, I realize from my reaction that I've taken pride in being the best rack pusher in the plant, a pride I'd yet to even take in my school work.

Like father, like son. When a Subaru would drive by us on the Interstate, he'd say "Dad made that car buddy." He may have only been one assembler in a long line of assemblers, but here he was connecting to the final product. There is dignity in doing your job well, regardless of what that job is (see Lucas, 2011). However, who else acknowledges his efforts, or even his pride? In a place like this dignity can be hard to maintain (see Crowley, 2014).

I make a thousand pound rack feel like an empty wheelbarrow as I push it down to the inspection area and park it in front of the supervisor who just scolded me. He looks up from his computer and I strangle his eyes with mine. I wish he could feel me jumping over his desk, grabbing him by the hair and repeatedly slamming his face into the desk until he stops moving. In my mind, blood splatters all over the spreadsheets in front of him. He quickly looks back to his computer screen, hopefully seeing the violent scenario play out in my eyes. I leave the rack to be inspected and walk back to my work area.

The supervisor sits at a desk while the workers he supervises check the reflectors. They make sure the chemical tanks did their job and the chemical coating and color are okay. Sometimes the reflectors spend too much time hanging out in the acid tank. After the inspection the rack is left in the middle of the aisle for me to pull back down to my area where it's retrieved by other workers for the packaging line. From there, the reflectors are boxed, labeled, and shipped off. There's not much communication between us cogs. I *kind of* know what happens to the reflectors right before I get them and *kind of* know what happens to them where I drop them off, but that's about it. I repeat this physically exhausting, mind-numbing task hour after hour,

day after day. It's like changing the same light bulb for eight hours every day and never getting any closer to having it screwed on correctly. But unlike most the workers here, I have an end date. Others do this their entire lives.

A bell rings signaling break time.

Walking out the side door into the sunshine, I take off my safety glasses and clip them to the front of my wet t-shirt. Workers sit on picnic tables in the grass smoking cigarettes. It seems I'm the only one on the entire shift not lighting up. Murph is sitting by himself reading an old paperback novel and already lighting his second cigarette. On break he attacks the books and cigarettes with equal intensity.

I walk over and sit at a table across from Jim, the forklift driver. I forget how exhausting it is having a job that requires standing the entire shift until I sit down. My legs feel like anvils in these heavy, steel-toe boots. Jim sits across from me quietly smoking an unfiltered Camel cigarette. My back is stiff as a board so I stretch it out by hunching my shoulders and arching my lower back like a pissed-off cat.

"Shooo. Cold in there ain't it," I say.

Jim ashes his cigarette, takes off his hat and wipes his sweaty brow with his sleeve.

"C'mon 'leven o' clock. Got a fishin' pole and a six-pack sittin' right by my front door."

"Oh yeah. Whatchya fishin' for?"

"Doin' a little catfishin. This ol' boy I know said he's been catchin' some big uns down there south end of the crick. Figger'd I throw a line in and crack open a few cold ones."

"Hey. Even a bad night fishin' is better than any day in this shithole."

Dale, a packaging line worker, sits down at the table with us and lights up a cigarette.

"Damn, you see that," he says.

Jim and I turn to see where Dale's eyes are directed. A mid-20's new female hire is standing under the shade of a tree, fanning her sweat-glistened belly with the bottom of her shirt, and exposing a purple rose tattoo on her hipbone.

"That looks like a two person job," Jim says pretending to get up.

We laugh.

Before the bell rings to signal the end of our ten-minute break we walk back into the warehouse sauna. On the way to my work-station I see Kenny, a "spider" at the factory. A spider gathers cardboard and other materials workers need from ceiling-high shelves and delivers them to the assembly line. Like a spider he traverses the web connecting various areas of the factory. His name is shouted the entire shift. "Kenny, I need an FJ1!" or "Kenny, get me a 32 SSB!"

I overhear him teasing a newbie on the packaging line who asked for a few cardboard boxes. "I 'on't see anything wrong with yer legs, boy," he says with a grin.

Most of his teeth are missing and what's left is corroded and brownish-black. His red-scabbed face, gaunt frame, and teeth that look like they've been dipped in acid, are telltale signs of a serious sweet tooth for methamphetamine. Kenny is a spider *and* a meth addict. I know because I live in a town ravaged by the drug like a trailer park in a tornado.

"Y'all young'uns are tryin' to work this ol' man into the ground," he says, playfully punching me on the shoulder as I walk by.

I wonder why there has been no intervention from the company when the addiction is written all over Kenny's body. Maybe because he shows up to work regularly, works hard and gets along with others on the floor. He's also one of the most upbeat workers on the shift, smiling and joking. But damn, shouldn't the company do something?

When I get back to my work station, I discover there's a problem with the chemical tanks and they can't send any new racks through until it's fixed so I stand against a table watching the packaging line workers do the robot with cardboard boxes. I know if my boss lady comes out of her office and sees me standing over here like a dirty, sweaty mannequin, she'll send me over to the line until the racks are runnin' again. Before she has a chance to look past all the hard-workers at me, I sneak through the cardboard box aisle and down the stairs to the break room. I grab a pencil and *The Sugar Creek Scoop*—the town's daily newspaper—and walk to the men's room. I spend the next twenty minutes on the toilet with my jeans at my ankles filling out a crossword puzzle. While I fill in boxes with letters, assembly line workers fill boxes with lighting reflectors.

An hour later when the chemical tanks are fixed, I'm parking another rack of shiny aluminum when a group of four executives walk by wearing suits and ties. The leader of the group points out different machines, showing the process used to create the lighting fixtures. As they walk by the workers, pointing and discussing, I notice the executives are not talking with the workers or even *about* the workers, but seem to be more interested in the machines.

Mary hurries out of the supervisor's office where the blinds were closed and the door was shut. She must have heard there were executives walking through our area today because this is the first time I've seen her on the line. Mary, an older packaging line worker with a fake tan covering her wrinkled skin, spends most of her time in that office. She quickly starts putting boxes together making the rest of the workers—who've been working since the start of the shift—look like they're operating at half-speed.

I look back at these suits and ties. They aren't even acknowledging the people building the products that keep their wallets full. *Do they think they're more valuable than us? Is this how*

my dad has been treated for the last two decades? Those goddamn...Calm down, Nate. They're just doing their jobs. Once the suits and ties are out of sight, Mary takes off her work gloves and heads back to the supervisor's office.

Another bell rings for the beginning of the thirty-minute lunch period. A few decide to go to a fast food joint for dinner or the gas station up the road for a refill on cigarettes and fountain pops. I join the small group of workers rushing down the aisle to the break room. As I walk, I point my toes out and try not to let my thighs touch. A boil has formed and rubbed raw on the inside of my left thigh from hours of them rubbing together, making me walk like I forgot to wipe in the bathroom earlier. One of the Mexican workers in the paint area sees me walking funny and we exchange smiles and a wave. As I walk in the break room door, a member of the maintenance crew tells me, "If they're gonna come over here and take all our jobs, ya figure the least they could do is speak some goddamn English." I think of all the things I want to say back to him: *Why are you mad at this worker? He's bustin' ass for the same shitty wages you are, or even less. Be mad at the people hiring him who get paid outrageous salaries.* But I nod my head and don't say anything. *I suppose if I was fired from the factory during a "downsizing" after decades of hard work, and the company brought in more workers to replace me for cheaper wages (as routinely happens in places like this), I might be a bit pissed too. Even if the anger is pointed in the wrong direction, that doesn't make it inauthentic, only misplaced.*

I didn't pack a lunch, so I decide on a chicken cordon bleu sandwich from the vending machine. The \$2.75 plastic-packaged sandwich doesn't seem fancy enough to have the 'e' and the 'u' switched. What the company *should* do is switch the 'e' and 'u' back and add 'collar' at the end: A chicken cordon blue-collar sandwich.

As I wait for my sandwich to warm up in the microwave, I watch Barney, Tony and the maintenance guys chatting and eating lunchmeat sandwiches at their table. Everyone calls him Barney because he looks like Barney Fife, the overly confident, easily duped deputy from *The Andy Griffith Show*. Barney started working here a few months ago. He hitches a ride to work from Tony every day because he doesn't have a license. Unlike Barney Fife, who spent his life placing people behind bars, Barney, a factory worker now in his 50's, spent his life at bars and sometimes behind bars. After way too many DUI's, Barney lost his driver's license for life. Even though he's a hard worker, without a license he's had trouble keeping a steady job. He shifts around from factory job to factory job after being let go for too many missed days. The guys at the table laugh and shake their heads as Barney tells his story about the previous night at the strip club, a story they've heard a time or two.

“My head hurts so bad ya woulda' swore I spent the mornin' listenin' to my ex-wife.”

I shake my head and laugh. After the microwave dings, I take a bite of my sandwich and burn my tongue, which is probably good considering the chicken looks and tastes like the cardboard stacked on the wooden shelves outside the break room. Easing the kinks out of my locked-up back and knees, I sit down slowly at a circular table with Brian, a mid-30's assembly line worker whose sister also works on the line. He wears a dirty Ford hat, and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off to show the tribal tattoo around his right bicep. He likes to speed his '89 Ford Mustang through the parking lot every day, revving the engine. On the job, he's nothing like those displays of manhood. Instead, he works slowly, complaining about his back, the machine, management, the company, anything really.

“Hey college boy, ju-hear that sumbitch CEO of ours made damn near seven million dollars this year,” Brian says, referring to Vince Newman's salary.

“And they wanna tell us money’s tight round here,” I say. “Where’s our fuckin’ bonus?”

“None of ‘em gives a rat’s ass about us. Hell, my back’s been fucked up for a year and they aint payin’ a goddamn dime. Bleeve that shit?” he says, standing up to leave and pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his front shirt pocket.

“And I’ll tell ya sumpin else too,” he continues. “I’ve had it ‘bout up to here with this mandatory overtime bullshit. What good’s the money if ya’ ain’t got any time to spend it?”

As Brian walks away I think about how hard I work to earn my nine bucks an hour. Vince probably made nine bucks in the time it took Brian to get from his chair to the door. I can’t help but think about my dad. As a reward for a profitable year at Subaru, my dad, an assembly line worker, received a stock paper certificate. Vince gets an extra couple million dollars; Dad gets a piece of paper. Reminds me of the time dad came home pissed saying, “they give fifty thousand dollars to the goddamn Campbell City owl exhibit. Who you think made them that money?”

A piece of cheese clings to my chin as I eat my sandwich. I put the piece in my mouth, wondering if the cheese was stacked by my stepdad, who works at a cheese factory in town. He spends his shift stacking blocks of packaged cheese on wood pallets. He was let go from his previous job at a book-publishing factory after 25 years of work. They downsized and machine operators, like him, became dispensable. I throw the wrapper in the trash and leave the break room with Vince and my family weighing heavy on my mind.

I rush back to my station before the second bell rings so I’m not branded with a write-up. For the next two hours it feels like the hands of the clock saw something scary in the future and are trying to back away. Leaning against a steel beam waiting for the next rack to be lowered, I can’t shake that number—seven million—from my head. My mind keeps moving back and forth

from seven million to \$2.13, my mom's hourly wage—without tips—waitressing at a family-owned restaurant a few years ago. I disregard company policy and put in my earphones.

I think about my mom arriving home late at night from work after a ten-hour shift, exhausted and carrying a stack of bills. I remember her taking off her shoes, Band-Aids falling off her heels and revealing ripped-open pink blisters. “It was a slow night,” she'd say, tears welling up. Slow nights mean few tips. Her \$2.13 hourly wage was going to have to be enough to help her pay rent, electric bills, car insurance, gas, and groceries for her and two boys with voracious appetites. “Had a six-top that bitched the whole time. First they wanted the Ranch in a cup, not on the salad; then they thought the food was taking too long; then the steak was too done and the fries were too cold; then they wanted me to give all of ‘em a discount ‘cuz of how long the food took. I ran back and forth for an hour with a smile on my face and they only left three bucks between all of ‘em.”

I wonder what Vince's parents were like. *Did they read to him when he was younger? Did they go on vacations? Did they ask him about his homework and help him with college?* I fill in the answers to these questions. Blame doesn't work well with empathy and I don't have the energy to take Vince's perspective. *Do his children go to private schools?* I yank the steel carts around at a rapid pace. *Has he ever worked in a factory? Does he think his job is more important than Debbie's?* I jerk and shove the racks to their next destination.

One of these days I'm gonna blow my top

And that sucker, he's gonna pay

My fast pace catches the attention of the assembly line workers. They don't look happy because the faster I work, the faster the racks get to them and the faster they're supposed to

package them. A hand taps me on the shoulder and I whip around to see the same supervisor who scolded me earlier.

“Hey, I thought I already told you?” he says as I take my ear buds out. My jaw is clenched so tight I’m afraid my teeth might crack under the pressure.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

“Don’t let me see ‘em in again or you’re gettin’ a write up,” he says, turning away. I don’t explode. I don’t argue. I just keep my mouth shut.

I put the iPod in my pocket and feel myself taking on my dad’s rage. He wakes up at 4:30 a.m. and goes to a job he hates every day. From the moment he punches the time clock until the moment he punches the time clock again, he is told where to be, what to do and how to do it. His managers, often college graduates who don’t have a lick of factory experience, tell him to work faster and bring home bigger paychecks. There is rarely dialogue or catharsis, just the slow buildup of words unsaid and emotions unexpressed. His anger, which he can’t afford to express at work, used to combust at home (see Petry, 1946). In a job ruled by commands, conformity, and discipline (Zweig, 2004), it’s no wonder he parented the way he did, turning to “because I said so” and spankings to teach my brother and me.

I wonder if my dad would have told my boss to take the write up and shove it up his ass, like my uncle Jerry told his boss before he walked out. My parents taught me not to take any shit off anyone. If you’d been wronged or mistreated, you stand up for yourself. Yet, here I am obeying authority, not getting loud or angry.

I hurry over to the time clock right as the bell rings with a big smile stretched across my sweaty face. I swipe my ID and understand why there is a smile on the card: this is what I look

like leaving work. I continue through the parking lot toward my car as Brian speeds by revving his Mustang's engine.

Rolling Downhill

I consider the characters I write about to be complicated and contradictory people. I try not to split the world into dichotomies – black and white, bosses and workers, but in the sticky heat of the summer night shift, rage sometimes blinds me from seeing the gray area. I'm not always empathetic or reflexive. I'm sure as hell not perfect. When writing I push toward empathy, toward understanding the webs of meanings these characters are spinning and suspended in. How do I present a story that does not stereotype, that does not in some way flatten and simplify lived experience? I admit that anger seems to hover over my story like a nasty storm cloud, but I want you to feel how the “slow burn of relational conflict”¹⁶ and systemic oppression can set your blood on fire and sometimes it feels like the only way to put it out is ignite rage like a fuse until it explodes.

“I push that rock up the hill and just when it gets to the top the boss kicks it back down,” my dad tells me. My parents, Debbie, Jim, Kenny, Brian and others continue to perform the same task every working hour. The Gods – Greek, Roman, American Capitalist – view “Labor...as an unfortunate by-product of the serious business of making money and collecting status rewards...only losers are the materially productive” (Dews & Law, pg. 305). Henry Ford's name is on cars, trucks and SUV's around the world. He gets recognition for work he didn't do. Where's the recognition for the assembly line workers who build these vehicles?

This insane system known as the assembly line is designed to deny individuality and eliminate self-worth. Do you ever wonder who built the car you drive? Do you think

¹⁶ Keith Berry, personal communication, 2013.

about the personal toll it extracts from those individuals who spend the best years of their lives in a hot, dirty, boring, dehumanizing factory? (Hamper, 1992, p. xiv).

But Camus tells us “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Sisyphus is defiantly happy because he is *aware* that to live is to suffer, and there is no kind of work or way of living that escapes this suffering. Pushing a boulder up a hill is no less absurd or meaningful than standing in front of a classroom, sitting at the head of a corporate board meeting, or writing a novel. The work itself – pushing a boulder up a hill, welding front axles, mopping floors, grading papers – can be its own joy and reward, and deserves equal respect for the pride and dignity each worker gives to the job and the impact of their work in our lives.

Still this is not the life I want. I can’t do factory work for the rest of my life. Sorry Sisyphus, but I’d let that rock roll right on top of me. I can’t handle the repetition, authority, and devaluing of workers. After working here for a summer, I don’t know how anyone who works in a place like this isn’t consumed by rage. I’d need a release: drugs, violence, somebody else to hate...anything to soothe the pain and self-hatred.

CHAPTER FIVE:
MANCHESTER MENTORS

I start my second year of Manchester with a new laptop I purchase from the money I earned at the factory. I live in the same dorm with my new roommate, Austin. He is quiet and clean. I am obnoxiously loud and keep a once-a-semester laundry schedule.

Austin and me have lots of conversations about our futures. He is having doubts about becoming a science teacher. His heart is just not in it. His passion is art. He eventually changes his major from science education to art. What I didn't know prior to my convincing him to change his major was that being the roommate of an art major means you spend a lot of time modeling. My face earns him a lot of A's in his Drawing classes. And I earn them too. Do you know how difficult it is to be completely still for twenty minutes?

My favorite times with Austin are the early morning trips to the cafeteria: eating breakfast, drinking coffee, and reading the newspaper. We become best friends, which means the banter never stops. He keeps me from going to sleep every night by turning the TV volume full blast, leg pressing my bed from his bottom bunk, and reaching up to the top bunk and pulling my blankets off my bed. Then I climb down for a 2 a.m. wrestling match where I take my blankets, his blankets, the remote, and sometimes his whole mattress and throw it in the hallway. We eventually make amends by agreeing to drive to Hardee's and buy each other 99-cent chicken sandwiches. We also enjoy teasing our neighbor and best friend, Carl.

Despite having several alarm clocks, one of which is hooked up to his bed and shakes it like an earthquake, Carl has trouble waking up in the mornings, so he hires Austin and me to wake him up every morning in exchange for Adderall. Being the mature adults we are, Austin and me find great joy in waking this bear out of hibernation. We charge into his room, rip off his blankets, attack him with pillows, and throw books and hangers at him. He wakes up furious, jumping out of bed to attack us, but we sprint back to our room and lock the door, laughing ourselves to tears. This is our morning ritual. One time we even manage to set up a camera and tripod in Carl's room to record the ritual. We have several good laughs showing it to Carl later.

I change my major to English and enroll in Intro to Literary Studies, Creative Writing, and Journalism. Really I don't think too much about what job I'll get although this seems to be the question my family asks: *What are you going to do with that major? What do you want to be?* Maybe I'll be a journalist? I don't know or care. I just love writing, getting the chance to be clever, to scream, "Hey! Look at me!" on the page (Orwell, 1946).

I'm not as drawn to the writing I get in my Creative Writing or Literary Studies classes. It feels too neat, too distant, and often too pretentious. I want to see a human being struggling to figure things out on the page. I don't want abstract art for the sake of abstract art. I may not have been able to express it this way then but I had "reality hunger" (Shields, 2010). I am craving something raw and real, something that touches me where I live, and doesn't really care about what genre it falls into.

In some ways, I feel journalism fulfills my reality hunger more than my other writing classes. We are writing about real people with real problems and real feelings. Creative writing often feels like it is too much about craft and not enough about truth. But I play the academic game, writing how I think I'm supposed to write, trying hard to be someone I'm not. I also

hadn't yet internalized the idea of writing as labor. Everything I turn in is a shitty first draft (Lamott, 1994). The idea of working at a piece of writing over time, continually refining it, hadn't occurred to me. I fail time and time again in wrestling and my workouts, yet I remain determined and disciplined and keep at it to become better, a philosophy I hadn't applied to my writing. Not yet.

Judd Case And The Learning Bug

In our Journalism class, we write stories for the school newspaper, *The Oak Leaves*. Each week our professor assigns us a story. If written well, the story is edited and appears in the newspaper distributed to student mailboxes on Friday.

One of my assignments is to interview a new professor in the Communication department, Judd Case. Judd is a tall, lanky guy with a quiet voice. He's proudly a geek, into chess, comics, Buffy, and anything new media. During our interview, he tells me he is teaching a class called "Video Games and Virtual Identity" in January, where we will get the chance to play video games as homework. Sign me up!

I naively assume we would just play video games. We did play games but we also read stuff like this:

"It is against the background of the discussion about ontological status and the flexibilization of human identity that Ricoeur presents his theory of narrative identity.

Ricoeur takes Heidegger's notion of the existential self as his starting point, but he implicitly criticizes Heidegger for sticking to Descartes' immediate positing of the 'I.'

Unlike Descartes and Heidegger, Ricoeur does not believe that we have immediate access to the self in introspection or phenomenological intuition" (de Mul, 2005, p. 253).

Names are dropped. Long words are used, and sentences are in a seemingly different language. These authors sound smart and I feel dumb. It's almost like the people here speak a different language than my family. Throughout high school and now here at Manchester, I became familiar with the feeling of being "corrected," of being told my language, my family's language, is wrong, or in poor taste. In school, I am told to speak a certain way – "proper" English – but that's not how my family talks.¹⁷ Teachers take my *ideas* and put them in their *words*, words my family and me never say. These words aren't *better*. They are less descriptive and more abstract. These words confuse me and don't make me *feel* like the words my family uses and the stories they tell.

I miss blue-collar language, its roughness and lack of pretense.¹⁸ The blue-collar voice can be a profane voice. Obscenities are said not just out of a total lack of sophistication, but to make a point, or because we're pissed off, or sometimes just 'cause it's dirty fun" (Saldana, 2014, p. 977).¹⁹ The *academic pose* I sometimes read here involves an onslaught of unintelligible sentences and big words that seem to have more to do with status than communicating ideas (Badley, 2015). I feel bullied by the author.

During one class period, Judd sets up a chessboard at the front of the room. The class splits into two groups and lines up on either side of the board to play each other. I don't

¹⁷ "Working-class language conflicts with the language students are expected to use in school. Working-class students quickly learn that their and their parents' language is incorrect. This labeling [implies] they and their parents are incorrect" (Peckham, 1995, 271).

¹⁸ Barney Dews (1995) writes, "I long to write and read scholarly essays that sound like my sister when she's talking – my sister who lives in a trailer house a few miles from my parent's house and continues to talk the way I use to talk, the way I often wish I still did, the way that feels honest... If I take a few deep breaths, then type as fast as I can, I outrun the academic censor and write something my sister *and* a colleague might understand. But if I go too slowly, I end up thinking too much and my sister gets lost" (p. 335).

¹⁹ Kovacovic (1995) writes, "At Ace Metal Refinishers, I would have simply exorcised my anger about unfair treatment with a cathartic 'Fuck 'em' but I have forgotten how to speak so clearly since learning the polite, prudent, articulate, obfuscating language of the university" (p. 244).

remember what the particular lesson is about, but it does reinvigorate my passion for chess. I help Judd start the Chess Club and play a simul game against female Grandmaster Susan Polgar who visits campus to talk about gender and chess.

At least once a week he brings the boards to the Oaks dining area and we wage war over the checkered battlefield. I am never quite able to overcome his French Defense though. He also brings along his five-year-old son, Gabriel, who I play, and nearly lose to. His wife, Joanne, occasionally joins to watch.

Judd often grades by the fireplace in the Oaks. I spend several hours a week chatting with him about a wide range here. One time we talk for hours about our families. He talks about his dad's job as an airport director and I talk my dad's assembly line job. He listens to me discuss my emotions about being the first in my family to go to college.

When I needed a subject for my art class photography project, I ask him and he is happy to help. I drag him all over campus to snap some great photos and he never complains and makes sure I am completely satisfied with the photos before moving on.

Throughout my first class with him, I struggle to understand the ideas but work hard, studying and restudying for the exams, memorizing study guide answers, even if I don't completely understand what they mean. On my last assignment, Judd writes, "Superb, Nate. It has been such a pleasure to have you in class. I hope we can do this again!" one of the first times I recall receiving a compliment for my academic work. I commit to being a lifelong learner. I change my major to Communication and take every class Judd offers.

He opens my eyes to new ways of observing the world. Until I took a class with Judd I understood communication as people speaking to each other verbally, nonverbally or through different forms of media. My understanding of communication is radically changed in Judd's

Telecommunication class. He is once again drilling the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver model into our heads, four letters that would come to haunt my dreams. He is trying to help us understand how the world could be understood in terms of messages sent through channels to receivers. It's a simple model but a great introduction to understanding the world through a communication lens. Judd tells us a story about how we could understand war as communication, how the Atomic Bomb could be understood as the channel through which the United States sent a message of their military power to Japan. This anecdote was like an epiphany for me. Any phenomena can be understood as messages sent between senders and receivers, meaning I could study anything in communication.

School starts feeling meaningful and even fun, not like a chore. I still feel inadequate in class, like the other students know something I don't. But I have a new mentor who believes in me. I begin staying after classes, chatting with professors and building relationships, and finish the semester on the Dean's List. As I finish the semester I start noticing other differences between Manchester and my hometown – hands.

Class As Embodied

Class writes itself in and on our bodies.

My dad's hands offer a fleshy slice of working-class life. His palms are callused from a lifetime of "fixing things." A big, juicy vein runs down his forearm toward his knuckles where it weaves through a network of veins. His hands need all this blood to lift large block engines and squeeze a welding gun eight hours a day. His fingernails have oil caked so deep no amount of washing can get rid of it. One fingernail is bruised a dark purple, smashed at work, and the sides of his fingers are stained dark yellow, from three decades of holding Marlboros.

Here at Manchester, I see different hands. My professors' hands are smooth, fingernails trimmed, and other than the occasional smear of chalk or ink, these hands look clean. No matter how messy or tough the ideas they work with, when their job is finished there's no calluses or dirt to show for it. Neither my parents' nor my professor's hands fully satisfy me. My parent's hands are missing the chalky intellectual labor and my professor's hands are missing the tough physical labor. I want a combination of both those hands: blue-collar and scholar.

Working With Jeri

The following summer I work at a steel scrapyard in my hometown. I spend the day at a conveyor belt sifting through pieces of dirty steel for copper. I save money to pay for a portion of tuition and fees. My friend, Jerrod spends the summer working at a medical supply company in Norway, a place his mom partnered with to write a book about simulation in nursing education. The previous summer he worked at Rolls Royce, his dad's workplace.

Before the fall semester begins, I am hired as Manchester's public relations assistant, one of the most coveted student jobs. I get to write news releases for Manchester's website, and feature stories for the alumni magazine. I also photograph events, network with alumni, help with news conferences, and communicate with college administrators on a daily basis.

My first week back on campus I am already hard at work in the PR office. My boss, Jeri Kornegay, a 60-year old with 30-plus years in the newspaper business, assigns me to write a news release about a war journalist visiting campus. I finish the news release Friday afternoon and leave it on Jeri's desk for her to see when she comes to work early Monday morning.

That night, I chug a fifth of vodka in about ten minutes and go with friends to a campus dance. The only dance move I do is the face plant. I wake up the next day in a hospital to a nurse saying, "You're lucky. You could have died last night." I don't feel lucky, especially when a

police officer walks into the room and takes me to jail, tears streaming down my cheeks. I find out from the officer that I was arrested on campus last night with a .35 BAC, enough to put me in a coma. My first week on the job and I've managed to almost drink myself to death and like any good PR guy, give the school free press...in the police blotter.

My biggest lesson is yet to come. Monday afternoon I walk into Jeri's office for a meeting with the door shut. Shame seeps out of every pore on my body during the half-hour tongue-lashing. "And a damn fine job on the Kevin Sites news release," she says right when I think she is going to tell me to pack my stuff and get out of there. She doesn't fire me.

I made a mistake. A stupid, Stupid, STUPID mistake. But she forgave me. She helps me realize I'm not an idiot (even if that mistake was idiotic) and that I have the potential to do something good with my life. Forgiveness can be one of the hardest things to give, but thank you Jeri for giving it, because your generosity changed my life. Of course this isn't the only mistake I make over our next two years working together, but it is certainly the most significant. Forgetting to turn the coffee pot off overnight could have turned into a more significant mistake, but luckily the only thing burned was the coffee. Wearing a highly unfashionable hat while speaking at a televised news conference turns out to be a good mistake for Jeri, because it gives her ammo for humorous insults. This is one of my favorite parts about working with Jeri, the banter between us. Lord knows how many times she wants to staple my mouth shut (my mouth is too strong for tape), but we are open and forthright with each other, the staple – pardon me – of any good working relationship. She is a walking, breathing lesson in communication.

By my second semester on the job, Jeri is giving me tasks a seasoned PR professional typically does. I write several fundraising stories for the campus magazine and learn more about

writing from Jeri than I do from any class I've ever taken. She teaches me that writing is like any other kind of labor. It's hard work and failure is just a part of the process.

Just when I'm sitting up on my high horse feeling like I'm Stephen King, she drops off the draft of fluffy crap I just gave her, and lets me know about half of that oh so good writing can leave the page. Remove ~~all of the~~ unnecessary words. Pull every ~~single damn~~ weed and leave the pretty flowers. That's what three-plus decades in the newspaper business will do to you.

I also become a mentor for first-generation, first year students at Manchester as part of a grant-funded program. This is one of the first times I hear the term 'first-generation college student' and realize I am part of a larger community of students who share similar struggles.

That summer I write an op-ed for the second largest newspaper in Indiana about recent cutbacks in funding for Indiana colleges, drawing on my own lived experiences:

The stated mission of the State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana is to make college affordable for all Indiana students. Yet recently, the commission announced a 31 percent reduction in state financial aid for Indiana students. Something doesn't match up here.

I'm a senior communication studies major at Manchester College, a private liberal arts college in northern Indiana. The financial aid I receive from the state is crucial to my ability to attend college.

I am the first person in my family to attend college. Because both of my parents have low-income jobs and poor credit histories, I'm left with paying the remainder of the tuition, housing and fees that my financial aid doesn't cover. While I receive wonderful support from my family, they simply can't afford to pay my college expenses.

For three consecutive summers, I have labored in construction, a factory, and a steel mill to pay for my college expenses. Because I must pay my own way, I am making every dollar

count: I am consistently on the dean's list; I've already completed three internships; and I've been a member of the wrestling team and several organizations and clubs. And during the school year, I hold a campus job.

I am already borrowing the maximum amount allowed in government loans, which still doesn't come close to covering all my expenses. This means I have to seek out alternative loans. Because both my parents earn a low income and have poor credit histories, they are unable to co-sign a private education loan for me.

Fortunately, I convinced a dear relative to co-sign the loan, putting tremendous pressure on that person, who is retired and on a fixed income. What about students who can't find someone to co-sign a loan?

Other students I know face a similar dilemma. I don't have any statistics, but I'm guessing a lot of people reading this can relate. Many students who qualify for SSACI funding have parents or guardians unable to co-sign a loan because of their own financial troubles.

And what happens when students do find someone to co-sign a private education loan (which has a sky-high variable interest rate)? The students will graduate from college buried knee-deep in debt and often must begin payments within six months of graduating. It's difficult to begin payments while looking for a job at a time when almost 15 million people have lost their jobs.

As a 21st Century Scholar and recipient of need-based Frank O'Bannon Grants, I have been dealt a serious blow by the decision to reduce the caps on financial aid. The SSACI Commission has decided to reduce individual state aid because of a dramatic increase in applicants for state aid this year. This means less money per student coupled with higher tuition

rates. In essence, the SSACI is making college less affordable to all Indiana students, contradicting its very mission.

I just received my fall tuition bill, and not surprisingly, the amount I owe after financial aid is more than last year – much more. I lost more than \$3,400 in state aid this year as did thousands of other Indiana students. So now what do I do?

Hopefully, the money I earn from my summer job will pay my Fall school bill, but what about my Spring bill? It's either drop out of school or take out another loan, thus tacking on more debt.

I often hear students talk about packing on the “Freshman Fifteen” extra pounds, but I think students should be more worried about packing on the “Four-Year Financial” pounds, which are far more depressing.

Language And Thought

My senior year I enroll in a class called “Language and Thought.” I experience a paradigm shift in my way of thinking about the world this semester. The ideas in the class “drove me sane” (Kodish & Kodish, 1993). My professor, Mary Lahman, is a graduate of Manchester College. She took the class in 1982 when it was taught by Paul Keller, who studied General Semantics with Irving Lee at Northwestern University. Professor Lahman said this class changed her life. Manchester College President, Jo Young Switzer, also a graduate of Manchester and Communication professor, took this class as a student and later taught it, saying it was one of the most influential courses she ever took.

The class is rooted in General Semantics²⁰, which explores how we transform our life experiences into language and thought. We learn about the subtle, yet critical distinctions between what happens in our lives and how we talk about what happens. We also explore the interpersonal and organizational problems created by unexamined attitudes toward language. The goal of the class is to recognize our patterns of miscommunication in everyday life, understanding the contributing factors, and develop effective language strategies for correcting these problems and delaying our evaluations in our interactions with others.

The field of General Semantics was introduced by Polish-American independent scholar, Alfred Korzybski with his books *Manhood of Humanity* (1921) and *Science and Sanity* (1933). Korzybski studied engineering and mathematics and was fluent in four languages. Wounded in World War One while serving in the Russian Calvary, he understood the devastating effects of human cruelty despite increased scientific knowledge and technological advancement.

Korzybski argued that human knowledge is limited by the human nervous system and the languages humans develop. He argues that no one can have direct access to reality, because what we know is filtered through the brain's response to reality, what he calls abstractions. Our senses are not suited to see the world at the process-level, the constant changing microscopic and submicroscopic levels of existence. Instead we perceive the world as "things" like static objects. His goal, and the goal of general semantics, is to make people aware of their abstractions. He introduced the now famous phrase, "the map is not the territory," meaning the word is not the

²⁰ General Semantics has fallen out of favor and been superseded by social construction in the Communication discipline although the National Communication Association hosts a lecture from the Institute of General Semantics each year at the national conference. Korzybski's work is "a forerunner of contemporary theory and scholarship in language studies, neuroscience, cognitive science, applied psychology, sociology, cybernetics and systems theory, communication studies, media literacy, and media ecology" (Anton & Strate, 2012, p. 9).

same as the thing that it names. The language we use to describe something is not the same as the thing being described (Korzybski, 1933).

Korzybski argued that what separates humans from other forms of life is our capacity to bind time. We are able to capture and store knowledge and pass it on from one generation to the next, to build on previous generations. He believed that scientists were the most effective time-binders and “put forth a utopian vision of society governed and administered by scientists, one where the scientific method applied to all aspects of human life, for the greater good of all” (Anton & Strate, 2012, p. 10-11).

Korzybski was famous for his engaging lectures. During one particular lecture he was giving to a group of students, he muttered something about being hungry and stopped to retrieve a packet of biscuits wrapped in white paper from his briefcase. He asked a few students in the front row if they want one. Several obliged, chewing vigorously. "Nice biscuit, don't you think," said Korzybski, tearing the white paper to reveal the original packaging: a big picture of a dog's head and the words, "Dog Cookies." Two students ran out of the lecture hall to the toilet. He said, "You see, I have demonstrated that people don't just eat food, but also words, and that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter." (Alfred Korzybski, n.d.).

In another lecture, Korzybski told a story to a group of highly regarded scientists about an I.Q. test that was being played among people at the gathering as a kind of party game. He said those who he regarded as most gifted did the worst on the test because they considered the ambiguities of the questions and tended to not respond as quickly with the “correct answer. He says that the emphasis on the “right” answer, on verbal definitions and labels that often gets rewarded in life and school may actually work against learning from experience (Kodish & Kodish, 1993, p. 161).

Korzybski believed that paying greater attention to the nonverbal world helps us notice the differences between our maps and our territories, our words and our worlds. He advocates sensory awareness and semantic relaxation similar to mindfulness and meditation techniques. He believed by paying greater “attention to our own nonverbal functioning we achieve a greater sense of our own roles as map-makers” (Kodish & Kodish, 1993, p. 104).

“For your final projects, you will create a website addressing the patterns of miscommunication occurring within a specific context, the contributing factors that leads to these problems, and correctives for addressing the problems,” Professor Lahman says. “But before I give you time to brainstorm the topic for your website, let’s review the patterns of miscommunication.” She passes around a handout to each student:

Miscommunication Patterns (adapted from Haney, 1992)

1. **Bypassing** occurs when we talk past one another, missing each other’s meanings by assuming the same words have the same meanings for others, or when we use different words to represent the same things. Sometimes bypassing is deliberate.
 - a. Double bypassing: language constructed to disguise or distort meaning.
 - i. Gobbledygook (jargon, technical terms, nonsense)
 1. “a kind of smoke-screen communication...more calculated to obscure than to inform” (Haney, 1992, p. 288). When people are unsure what they’re saying or afraid of how their ideas will be received they may cloud their writing in jargon.
 - b. Correctives
 - i. Be person-minded, not word-minded.
 - ii. Be sensitive to contexts.
 - iii. Ask questions and put speakers statements into your own words.
 - iv. Delay a day.
2. **Allness** is dogmatic, unqualified, categorical, close-minded thinking and communication in which you assume it is possible to know everything about something and what you’re saying includes all that is important about the subject. Part of our craving for certainty.
 - a. Contributing factors
 - i. Unaware of our abstractions, assuming we have covered it all.
 - ii. Unaware that we are abstracting different details.
 1. “It’s impossible to reason a man out of something he has not been reasoned into” (Haney, 1992, p. 326).
 - iii. Evaluate a group on the unconscious assumption that our experience with one or a few members holds for all.

- iv. Being closed off to the new or different, losing or suppressing our ability to learn and grow psychologically.
- b. Correctives
 - i. Deep conviction you can never know or say everything about anything.
 - ii. Recognize you inescapably abstract.
 - iii. Make a habit of adding etceteras.
 - iv. Ask yourself if you have an “all-wall?” (Am I closing myself off?)
- 3. **Stereotyping** is the failure to recognize differences, variations, nuances, and overemphasizing similarities.
 - a. Contributing factors
 - i. Hardening of the categories (our categorizations become unyielding). “Some persons are terribly uneasy until they tack on a label” (p. 363).
 - ii. Self-serving emotions (tendency to displace one’s unwanted emotions (ex. fear/anger) on a group easily identifiable by race, religion, political party, or lifestyle deviating from society’s norm.
 - iii. Language structure (abundance of generic nouns and verbs).
 - b. Correctives
 - i. Be sensitive to differences (the more we discriminate among, the less we discriminate against).
 - ii. Internalize premise of uniqueness.
- 4. **Polarization** involves going to extremes, creating false dichotomies, and dealing with situations in either-or contradictory terms.
 - a. Plight of the moderate: “The more divided a society becomes, the more difficult it is to remain temperate...you can’t criticize anything without having it supposed that you favor the opposite extreme” (p. 390).
 - b. America’s polarization: “Our nation’s vitality has historically been its inability and unwillingness to self-examine, to adjust, to evolve...It compels the fearful to turn to authority, however oppressive, for security...Fear is the fundamental means of control” (p. 391).
 - c. Vicious pendulum effect: When two groups address a given issue, get heated and become even more polarized and rigid. Both think they know reality and thus are threatened by others who make similar assumptions.
 - i. “Underlying this threat is fear. Anger, profanity, physical threats, and violence notwithstanding, the primary emotion is fear of loss of contact with reality. One’s usual response to fear, real or unfounded, is defense – often an overreaction” (p. 391-392).
 - d. Contributing factors
 - i. Neglecting the middle ground (not seeing shades of grey)
 - ii. Easier and quicker to think in terms of dichotomies.
 - iii. Conditioning (we’ve been taught to believe there are only two sides to every story). Complete these dichotomies. After you’re finished try filling in the gradational terms between them.
 - 1. Good--- _____
 - 2. True--- _____
 - 3. Guilty--- _____
 - iv. Two-sided either/or questions.

- e. Correctives
 - i. Specify the degree.
 - ii. Test if the contrary is actually either/or.
 - iii. Remember controversial issues are usually complex. Our perceptions of such issues are programmed by prior experiences.
 - iv. Get rid of “I know reality” fallacy
 - 1. Try role reversal (express other’s points of view).
 - 2. Label your opinions, feelings, and value judgments.
 - 3. Instead of “is” use “appears to me to be.”
 - 4. Resist absolutes.
- 5. **Frozen evaluation** involves failing to differentiate the way a person, place, situation, and thing changes over time.
 - a. “Laws, rules, and regulations are an area rife with the premise of permanence” (p. 427). Even our Constitution has been amended 27 times.
 - b. Contributing factors
 - i. Subtle changes are so gradual we fail to notice them.
 - ii. Tolerance for change is uncomfortable.
 - iii. Language fails to specify time.
 - c. Correctives
 - i. Internalize change as inevitable and keep evaluations up to date.
 - ii. Administer change (involve other people in planning; use feedback so people can express resistance; make sure people understand reasons/goals for change).

After internalizing Korzybski’s ideas, I fall into analysis paralysis, deconstructing everything to the point where I can barely write and annoying any friends I have left to the point that they want to paralyze my vocal chords. I am assigned a paper to write in intercultural communication about an aspect of my identity and I can’t do it because I have trouble believing that identities (static sets of characteristics) actually exist, and even if they did I could never possibly describe mine because words are inadequate.

I go to Professor Lahman’s office hours. She is excited that I’m taking to the ideas, as almost any teacher would be. But she doesn’t understand why I feel so paralyzed and I can’t complete the assignment. I tell her it doesn’t even make sense to me anymore. The only way I’m able to complete the assignment is by writing an addendum that I attach to the original assignment:

How can you know me when I don't know myself?

I can't know everything I am and I'm not everything I think I am. What does this mean?

Let's look at the first premise: I can't know everything I am.

When you look at an apple, what do you see? Duh! An apple, right? Well, have you ever looked at an apple and thought, "That's not just an apple. That's also a seed which produced a tree, which produced a fruit that turned yellow, then red, then was picked and sold in a market where it was bought by me, cut up in small pieces, covered in caramel, chewed, swallowed, digested in my stomach, turned into feces, flushed down the toilet through sewer pipes until it reached a designated wetland where it fell out onto the land and was decomposed by microorganisms for food. Those microorganisms were eaten by larger microorganisms, which died, decomposed and so on. The point is: An apple is not an apple. It is a process.

The apple never stops changing. If you look at an apple one second and then look at it a second later, it is no longer the same apple. On the submicroscopic level (electrons, protons, neutrons), it has decomposed, grown or altered in some way. What this means is we live in a world of processes, not a world of things. And this doesn't just apply to apples; it applies to the entire universe and all that is in it, including humans. This means no human is the same as another human and no human ever remains the same. We can never experience exactly what someone else experiences and we never experience the exact same thing more than once.

By labeling something as a thing, we are saying the thing itself exists, when in fact, it doesn't. What we call a "thing" should be understood as a process of constantly moving subatomic particles. We can't experience them with our senses but they're always there. This means we can never actually experience reality (or the process world) and this also means we can't rely on our senses. Therefore, whatever we experience is not reality. If we can't experience

reality and can't possibly know everything about reality, we can't possibly know what we actually are. By identifying ourselves, we are limiting ourselves to a certain set of criteria and leaving everything else that we are out.

As human beings, we search for structure and order by creating meaning out of our experiences. Our language allows us to do that. In fact, it's all we have to describe our experiences and make sense of them. Our language is a necessary, yet inaccurate tool for making meaning out of our experiences. Language creates a sense of similarity and connection where there is none. But language is all we have and we have to find a way to use it efficiently.

Identities require a static set of characteristics. The world is dynamic, not static. We are identifying ourselves as some thing that doesn't actually exist, at least as we describe it. Therefore, we are not everything we think we are.

I am transformed by this class, which gives me a new vocabulary for expressing how I've been socialized.

Grad School And The Switzers

In my senior year, I decide to apply to six graduate schools: Illinois, Purdue, Iowa, Northwestern, Nebraska, UMass-Amherst. I apply to the Ph.D. programs of several of these schools, an idiotic and expensive move given the application, transcript, and GRE fees for each school. I pay the GRE fees twice because I perform poorly the first time and retake it.

President Switzer and Dave, her husband and my professor/advisor, treat me graciously. At the beginning of the school year, they gave me a thousand dollars to help pay for my study abroad trip to Italy and Greece, my first time flying on an airplane and leaving the country. By the time Jerrod graduates he's already logged more than a half-million miles in an airplane, traveled to more than twenty countries, and backpacked across Europe.

When I tell my dad I'm traveling to Italy and Greece, his response is, "there's a lot of bad stuff going on over there. You can get yourself killed." I tell him there's bad stuff going on everywhere and ask him if he ever wants to travel. He says, "I got everything I need right here, son. There's no place like home." He's never left the country and has spent most of his life in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Just before I leave, I receive an email from the Dean of Students letting me know Jo And Dave Switzer had deposited \$1,000 into my travel account. They also leave a small travel bag with toiletries and cash in my campus mailbox.

I have people who believe in me and invest their time and money in my success. The only place I had that in high school was Coach Welliever and I poured everything into wrestling. I receive the Paul Keller scholarship award for top Communication major. I start feeling like a real scholar.

I enroll in a Senior Research Project class with Dave Switzer, President Switzer's husband and a Professor for more than 30 years. In the class, I must design, write, and present my own research project. I decide to research the experiences of FGC students from working-class backgrounds at Manchester College, especially focusing on how they communicate on campus and at home. While looking for literature on first-generation college students, I stumble across a book at the Funderburg Library, *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*. I read dozens of FGC students and working-class academics telling my story.

Later this week I will present my senior research project to the Communication faculty and my classmates. I meet with Dave to discuss my project and grad school applications.

Chatting With Dave

Shit, I'm late! Well, on time but being on time feels late when meeting Dave.

I run up the three flights of stairs in Calvin-Ulrey Hall, my body numb after the trek across campus in below-freezing weather. I open the door to the hallway where Communication and Economics faculty offices are. At a school of Manchester's size that means six offices. As I walk down the hall, the building creaks in a way that lets me know it's been here a while.

I wave to my professors as I walk by their office.

"Hi Judd!"

"Hi Professor Lahman!"

I know everyone at Manchester and they know me. Dave's office door is cracked open, a desk lamp flooding the room with warm light. I knock.

"Hi Dave!"

"Well hi there!," he says. "Come on in and sit down." He turns from his desktop computer and points to a cushioned chair beside his desk. "It's good to see ya."

"Thank you," I say putting my book bag down beside the chair. I look around his office. So clean and organized. Hope he never sees my dorm room. His Ph.D. diploma from the University of Illinois hangs on the wall next to his National Umpiring Hall of Fame plaque.

"So how are ya?" he asks.

"Well, I've certainly been less stressed," I say. "Senior research project, classes, grad school applications, working with Jeri, studying *again* for the GRE...but I shouldn't be complaining. I'd prefer this over getting up at four-thirty every morning and going to a factory like my dad does."

"I understand that," Dave says. "I painted cars and straightened fenders all through college. You just keep doin' what you're doin' Keep workin' hard and using the talents and skills that I, and many others, see in you."

“I will, and I appreciate it.”

“Well tell me how I can help ya,” Dave says.

“I suppose we could start with grad school stuff. I’ve already sent my applications to Northwestern, Purdue, Iowa, Illinois, and UMass Amherst. I was thinking about applying to one more school, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It looks like a good school, and their graduates get jobs at good places. I connected with several of the faculty’s research interests. I was wondering if you’d be willing to write a letter to Nebraska, too?”

“Give me the information and I’ll have the letter in the mail by the end of the day.”

“Wow! Thank you!” I’m not surprised. He doesn’t wait. He does. I connected with Dave our first class together. He reminds me of my grandpa. He’s a storyteller, a jokester, a hard worker, and old-school. He doesn’t use technology in his classes. He’s a lecturer and paper handouts kinda guy. I’m drawn to that. I can’t stand the campus zombies that walk around with headphones in their ears and stare down at their phones, which is why I’ve never purchased a smartphone.

“You’re welcome,” Dave says. “I believe in you and you deserve the opportunity to succeed.”

“Well, thank you.” It’s still strange to have someone believe in my academic abilities.

“The next thing I wanted to talk about was my presentation later this week. I was wondering if I could run through my ideas for the presentation and see what you think.”

“Sure, I’d be happy to.”

I pull my paper out of my bag. “I’ll start with an overview of the project – a survey of one-hundred thirty four students at Manchester College to examine how first-generation students from working class backgrounds communicate on campus and at home and how these students

negotiate multiple identities. Working from these survey responses, I offer ways we can diminish the dissension between academic and blue-collar cultures.”

“Good. Very concise and organized. What’s next?”

“Next I was going to briefly discuss prior research on the topic. I had a few narrative excerpts I was going to read that discuss the unique intellectual and social challenges first-gen students face on campus and at home.”

“Good,” Dave says. “But limit these because you wanna make sure you leave time to discuss your own study. Make sure these excerpts help set up the problem and how your study plans to address it.”

“I know. I’m struggling with finding stuff to cut. It all seems important.”

“Of course it all is,” he says. “But part of the challenge is condensing your ideas.”

“Yeah, I’ll figure out what to cut. Next I was going to talk about methodology. One-hundred and thirty-four Manchester College students completed surveys that involved a combination of closed- and open-ended questions.”

“Good,” Dave says. “You’ll want to discuss how you operationalize your variables.”

“Yeah, operationalizing social class is difficult. For my survey, I felt it more important for students to define themselves rather than imposing a definition on them that would limit or hinder their ability to make sense of their experiences. But I’ll discuss some of the ways the literature has defined class and some of the problems with class definitions.

“Then, I’ll describe my theoretical framework.” *Why am I using this fancy way of saying theory?* “I use co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) to explain how members of marginalized groups communicate with members of dominant groups. I’ll discuss a few previous applications of co-cultural theory on the study of first-gen students.

“For example, at home many first-gen students censor themselves around their family to avoid controversy, and several describe conscious attempts to separate and distance themselves from their family. On campus many first-gen students try to emphasize commonalities between themselves and other students whose parents went to college. Some censor themselves, hiding their class differences with peers. Many overcompensate in their social and academic life because they feel like they start behind. For example, one student said, *I still have to study three times longer than them [non FGC students] for my tests* (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004, p. 44). Some first-gen students network with other first-gen students on campus, and many seek support and mentorship from faculty, administrators, and people like you,” I say pointing at Dave, “to help them succeed.”

“Well, *you’re* doin' what is necessary to succeed,” Dave says. “You’re payin' attention and askin' good questions. Everything I’m puttin' out there, you are digesting, integrating, and making sense of. That’s what teachin’ and learnin’ is about. I get really tired of folks who are just collectin' credits. That's not why I went to school and that's not why I work on lesson plans. So it is really good to have students who meet the goal I have for students.”

“So how many credits am I gettin’ for being here?” I tease. “Next, I’ll discuss survey responses to a few important questions. For example, whether students saw their class background as an advantage or disadvantage and in what ways. Eighty-nine percent of first-gen students wrote that it has some advantages, like teaching them work ethic and appreciating what they have. Last, I’ll discuss recommendations for helping eliminate classism on campus and diminishing the cultural gap between academia and working-class culture. One of the recommendations is diversifying the socioeconomic origins of the faculty and administrators.

Just as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other diversity categories are considered in hiring decisions, so too should social class.

“Another recommendation is creating opportunities for student’s families to get involved in their academic lives. Negative, stereotypical views of working-class and academic cultures are in large part due to a lack of communication between the two cultures. One way to help parents understand the academic world is to invite parents to academic events. For example, when students give a presentation, the professor could allow them to be an audience member. Parents are able to be audience members for their child’s participation in college athletic events, concerts, plays, graduation ceremonies and other award ceremonies but parents aren’t able to witness any of the child’s academic endeavors.”

As I finish describing my presentation I realize I’m all over this project. I am a first-generation college student from a working-class family. I’ve experienced the same tensions and ambivalence. But how could I do a research project on myself?

“Nate, I’m very impressed by your efforts,” Dave says. “This is graduate level research you have produced.”

“Thank you. This is obviously something I really care about and is personally meaningful to me. Didn’t you also say you were a first-generation college student?”

“Absolutely. My parents were high school grads. My dad was a blue-collar worker at International Harvester. He was the head of maintenance, chief custodian repairperson. He’s a real skilled craftperson, but he learned that by bein’ around other people. He went to high school, went to the Navy, and went to work. My mom left the family when I was in sixth grade and I never saw her again. I know she graduated high school but she didn’t go to college.”

“So did you grow up in a family with just your dad? Or did you have a stepmom or...”

“Nope. My dad and I lived with his mom and her husband. My paternal grandfather had died when my dad was young and so from about the fifth grade until about the ninth grade I lived with my grandparents and they were very influential in my growin' up. Then my dad remarried a terrific woman who was a terrific stepmom. So I learned pride and good work from my grandpa, my grandma, and my dad. They were really hard workin' folks.”

“What made you decide to go to college?”

“It was just sorta like the natural next step. I never even thought about bein' the first person in my family who went to college, let alone graduated from there. I didn't see it as any great big source of pride or anything. I wanted things other than what my parents did. It was just like what ya do, and I could keep the same job I had all the way through high school. I went to college in the same town I went to high school so I just kept workin'. My dad understood it was important to go to college. He never did but he understood it. What he didn't understand was goin' to graduate school. He thought college was kinda it. When I told him I was goin' to the University of Illinois, he said, 'well whataya do?' Cuz he got up every morning, went to work carryin' a lunch bucket, and came home.”

“You already went to school. You're goin' to school again?” I say, mimicking his dad based on similar comments from people in my own community.

“That's right. He thought it was meant to get a job,” he laughs. *I hope I get a job after all the schools I'm about to go through.* “Fortunately, I was makin' enough money that he wasn't payin' for any of the school. The only time he and I ever talked about college was a good friend of mine went to Butler in Indianapolis and I wanted to go there but I didn't have enough money for private school and he didn't have enough money for private school, so that was out. That's probably the only real serious conversation we had about college. He didn't know much about it.

He didn't want me to make any stupid mistakes but there wasn't any bust out, first-generation get away from manual labor stuff. I didn't know what I wanted to do but I needed to do somethin'. First I thought I wanted to be an attorney. Then I thought I wanted to teach secondary school speech and drama. Then when I did my student-teaching, I knew that wasn't it. My undergraduate debate coach said I need to go to graduate school. He found a way to get me to Illinois and then when I got over there I just got intellectually seduced by the subject matter.”

“Well it worked out for ya.”

“I wasn't a very good student in high school. I didn't take it very seriously. I had an okay, not distinguished, not focused, undergraduate degree. It took me five years to do. I was livin' downtown with a buncha guys and havin' fun. I was paintin' cars and always had money in my pocket. And when you work at a body shop you always had great cars for a date. On Friday I'd say, 'Oh Mrs. Johnson, we wanna get this Thunderbird just the way you want it. I'll have it for ya Monday, noon,' and I'd drive it all weekend.” His grin has me laughing.

“I did my Master's and Ph.D. faster than I did my undergraduate degree. I did my Master's in one year and a Ph.D. in three years. When I went to graduate school I had no confidence that I was gonna do well. I rented my apartment by the month cuz I thought any time they were gonna throw me outta there. I remember my first semester as a Master's student, it was my first course on modern rhetorical theory and I had this very distinguished, major footnote named Marie Hochmuth Nichols and we were writing a paper on the meaning of art and science in 18th century Europe.”

“Oh my goodness,” I say.

“I. Had. No. Clue,” he says punctuating each word. “I read all this stuff I was supposed to read and I thought, okay, I read it all but what am I gonna say about it? I woke up in the middle

of the night standing in in my little apartment kitchen and looked through my cabinets thinking, I gotta find these damn words somewhere.” We both chuckle and he continues, “In that one moment, alone, doubting myself I really wondered if I could find the words for one paper, let alone a couple grad degrees. I was about ready to just go back to painting cars and straightening fenders like I did all though undergraduate school. I found the words later that day and it was the first of many accomplishments. If I can do it, you surely can with your enviable skills. But I worked really hard. I lived in the basement of Lincoln Hall and the Library. That's where I spent three years. Friday nights I played poker and Saturday morning I ate at the Union and went back to work. That's what I did and I was glad to do it. It was fun. Well, exams aren't fun. But positive feedback was fun. Also I got some really good help from some very smart people.”

“It’s good to hear that doubt is normal. I’m excited but also really nervous about grad school.”

“I had absolutely no confidence when I first went to grad school. There was this bar on Green Street called Murphy’s Bar²¹. I was there one afternoon with my officemate, a guy named Bob Bicker. It was probably about, oh, six weeks into graduate school and we just could not figure out what we were doin’ there. We'd been there long enough to know we didn't belong. So Bicker and I are sittin' there at Murphy’s and Joe Wenzel comes in. Wenzel was teachin’ in Communication and Bicker knew him from the debate circuit. Wenzel sits down for a beer with us. Bicker started talking about how hard and confusing our lives were and I said yeah, I don't know what I'm doin'. I'm just sorta lost. Wenzel looked across the table at us, stood up, took a great big slug of beer, and said, *welcome to graduate school boys*, then set his beer down and walked out.” Dave bursts into laughter and repeats Wenzel’s line. “I thought, I'll be on the bus by

²¹ This is the same bar I go to each semester when I attend the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois.

Monday. Welcome to graduate school, boys. So what I learned from that was keep your mouth shut and stay here 'til they tell you ya gotta go somewhere else." We both laugh.

"I knew from the first couple classes I took with ya, you were always stressing work ethic," I say. "I resonated with that. Not that other professors didn't stress work ethic but here's a professor telling me it's okay if I'm not as smart as someone else, I can outwork them and perform just as well. I lack a lot of confidence and that's encouraging for me."

"Oh yeah. Some stuff you can't change. And I think being how smart you are, you can change it a little bit by new habits and stuff but how hard you work is completely in your control. That's always worked for me. Plan to work. Work to plan. You just keep your head up and your mouth shut and you're okay. I'm pretty good at keepin' my head up. I'm not very good at keepin' my mouth shut," he grins.

"That's alright. You have good things to say. I was gonna ask, I still kinda see myself as a blue-collar kid. Maybe it has to do with being in a place where there aren't a lot of those people around me but I take pride in that-"

"Yep, I do too because to tell ya the truth it represents accomplishing goals. I knew I didn't wanna paint cars for all my life, and I was able to get myself into a position so I didn't have to do that. That's a success. If you think ya got where ya wanted to be that, by definition, is a success, and we all like to have successes.

I don't think it's overall better to be a professor than a car painter but I think it was better for me to be a professor than a car painter. I don't generalize that beyond me. I don't think there's anything wrong with rememberin' your roots. I'm not ashamed of 'em. I don't deny 'em or anything. I'm proud of my parents, and my grandparents especially. And I'm also proud that I succeeded professionally."

“I still see you as kind of a blue-collar guy, too,” I say.

“I think you're right and I'm really glad that you're right. That's a source of pride for me. There are people who have much more professional success than me but this is just what I wanted to do and I'm very lucky. I'm proud of my roots. Everybody has things they wish had been different but you get up and you go to work every morning, when ya come home you feel like you've justified your existence.”

“I would say you've done just that.”

“I hope so. That's the way I see it.”

“I also wanted to thank you for the study abroad money and gifts. I really appreciate it!”

“You're very welcome. The gifts are equally from Jo, but it's our pleasure. You just keep doin' what you're doin'. You're worth the investment.”

“Well I have you fooled,” I tease.

“I'm pretty easy to fool so don't think too much of that.” I laugh.

“Well thank you, and thank you Jo. You married a pretty incredible woman.”

“My gosh, you're tellin' me. I'm just lucky she lets me carry the bags.”

I laugh, “well I better get outta here and stop taking up all your time.”

“You're fine. When you're workin' on stuff if there's anything you want me to read, or ya wanna talk if something stimulates more conversation, don't be shy. You know how to get a hold of me.”

“Alright, thank you!”

“Take care of yourself. Do good and do well.”

My senior research paper wins an award at the Manchester Research Symposium and I am asked by two committees on campus to present my research to them. I am also rejected from each graduate program. I recoup and apply to three Master's programs, deciding on Central Michigan University. I receive an envelope in my campus mailbox with \$400 and a note:

Nate,

The Board of Trustees set up a special fund for me to use for needs beyond our regular operations. Here is \$400 for you to use for your graduate school applications, job search, and end-of-school expenses. Your call. I believe in you. I'm glad you chose Manchester. This gift does not need to be repaid but when you are able, please pass it on through gifts to MC or support for others in need.

Jo Switzer

As I prepare to move on to graduate school, I am motivated by the confidence of my mentors – Jo, Dave, Jeri, Mary, and Judd – even though I'm not quite sure why they believe in me. Have I fooled them? Am I fooling myself? Can I really make it in the academic world? If I become an academic how will I relate to my family anymore? Will I have to choose between my love for family and my love for school?

CHAPTER SIX:
UNCLE JIM'S SHADOW

I complete my Master's degree at Central Michigan University. In my last semester, I discover autoethnography in a book titled *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004) and immediately realize this is the kind of research and writing I want to do. I apply to the University of South Florida and move to Tampa that Fall. During my first two years at USF, I write narratively about social class in many of my classes. I also involve my family in my projects, interviewing them and co-writing. Two years into my doctoral work, the narrative fabric of my life rips open.

April 5, 2014

I log on to Facebook to see the selective fun my peers are having at the Southern States Communication Association in New Orleans, a conference I would be presenting at if I had more than \$13 in my credit union account. As I scroll through the News Feed, I see a post from a friend about the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Hall of Fame Ceremony. I Google "WWE Hall of Fame" and the first result shows an image of the headline inductee for the night: A muscular, tanned man with Mount Everest traps sloping up to his war-ready face paint and 80's metal hair; tassels with multicolored streamers ready to snap around his bulging biceps; and abs that look chiseled by Michelangelo. I'm staring at a real-life action figure, my uncle, *The Ultimate Warrior*.

I click on the link next to the image. The Hall of Fame is located in New Orleans, just a sprint from the Conference location. I click on the video of his acceptance speech. His entrance

music bangs out of the speakers as he walks onto the stage with his two young daughters, Indiana (Indy) and Mattigan (Mattie), latched onto each arm. He has traded his *Ultimate Warrior* attire for a suit, and his high-energy sprint for a walk with a slight limp. He makes it to the podium and kisses Indy and Mattie on the cheek before they leave the stage to sit with their mom, Dana, in the audience.

He begins his hour-long speech with a deep, guttural growl.

“The most anticipated speech in the history of sports entertainment,” he says spraying testosterone. “There’s a lot of squiggling go on in these seats out here.” Eighteen years after a falling out with the organization that included years of legal battles here he is being honored by the WWE. He thanks his wife and the camera moves to her, a blonde-haired beauty with sparkling eyes and teeth. A gray-haired woman in glasses leans in and hugs her from the side. My grandma looks beautiful in her black dress.

“Mom, I’m glad you’re here tonight,” he says to my grandma. “I remember when I was eleven or twelve and dad decided that he was gonna go on and do different things in his life and he never looked back to provide any kind of support, financial or otherwise. You didn’t skip a beat. You got to work and you provided for me and my other two brothers and two sisters so that we never went without. The hard work ethic that I have and the self-discipline that I have, I got from you and I love you.” Tears stream down grandma’s face.

He continues, turning to Indy and Mattie. “Although I’ve done some pretty incredible things in my wrestling career when you weren’t around, the most *awesome* thing I will *ever* do is be your father.”

He ends by recognizing the working-class folks behind the scenes:

“I want to thank the superstars that you never see. I’m talking about all the people behind the scenes that work for WWE. Some of them for years. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty years. They are the superstars that make this happen. They really are. The ring guys, who back in the day, would get to the building, set up the ring, tear it down, drive all night, get to the next town, get a couple hours sleep, grab a cheeseburger, a couple Coca-Colas, go back to another arena, set the ring up again. Right before the matches take a shower and then come and ask me or the other guys, *Can I get you anything? Is there anything I can get you man?* I’ll never forget those guys. In fact, when I think about the Hall of Fame and I think about honoring people that make this company work I think it would be appropriate to have a category in the Hall of Fame where you honor these people.”

April 6, 2014

Wrestlemania XXX from NOLA on pay per view. Hogan’s entrance just now took me back many many years to going to the Rosemont Horizon in Chicago each month for live events. Never have I heard a louder roar than when he’s entered arenas.

I read Keith Berry’s Facebook post the day after the Hall of Fame banquet.

I reply: *Except when the Warrior ran in and shook the ropes!*

Keith: *Nathan—similar, indeed, but the Hogan entrances were nuts—second only to Austin’s and Rock’s!*

Me: *I had to stick up for my uncle (Warrior) who beat Hulkster at Wrestlemania 6!*

Keith: *Ha, your uncle?*

Me: *Ultimate Warrior is my uncle. Mom’s brother.*

Keith: *What!?!?! Nathan—ur uncle is a legend!*

April 8, 2014

I'm peeing at the urinal around the corner from my office.

"Is it true that The Ultimate Warrior is your uncle?" I shake the dribbles off and turn around to see a full-grown man looking like a kid who just met his hero.

"Yep! Mom's brother" I tell Professor Jay Zalinger.

"I loved the Warrior growing up," he says. "He was my favorite! So you're like The Ultimate Scholar then? We have to get you some spandex briefs and paint your face."

About an hour later, I leave the CIS Building to walk toward my class. My cellphone vibrates in my pocket. I grab it and see *Mom* on the screen.

"Hey mom."

"Hey bubby." Her voice cracks.

"Are you okay mom?"

"I just wanted to let you know before you heard it all over the news; Uncle Jimmy's dead."

"What? He was just...But yesterday...He was just on TV less than 24 hours ago! How did he die?"

"He's been sick for a long time." I hear the tears pour out. "Only his wife and grammaw knew. He told 'em not to tell anyone. Grammaw told me when she left the Hall of Fame, she looked into his eyes and they both knew it was the last time they would ever see each other. It's just sad 'cuz I know he died with a lot of guilt."

After the conversation, I go to my computer and watch his WWE promo from last night. Known for his prophetic, sometimes incomprehensible, and always hyper-intense promos, he launches into the last speech he will ever give:

"No WWE talent becomes a legend on their own. Every man's heart one day beats its final beat. His lungs breathe their final breath. And if what that man did in his life makes the blood pulse through the body of others and makes them believe deeper in something that's larger than life, then his essence, his spirit, will be immortalized by the storytellers, by the loyalty, by the memory of those who honor him, and make the running the man did live forever."

It's like he's giving his own eulogy. He knew death was breathing down his neck. He had to have known. It was said in typical Warrior fashion. Super intense, almost growling at the crowd but it's obvious now he's struggling for breath throughout the speech and sweating profusely and yeah, he does look skinnier. The limp looks even more pronounced now too. He's setting the story straight about his character, thanking the fans, and thanking his mom. With death looming so close, and what my mom tells me was "a lot of guilt" about leaving the family, he seems to be tying up loose ends and trying to let his mom know how much she meant to him before he didn't have a chance to anymore.

I stay up all night in a kind of daze, my mind trying to process what my body heard. I sprint around the Internet reading and collecting news stories of his death.

Fox News reports:

"Like so many others, as a child, I loved the Warrior. He was a superhero incarnate x 10. Chiseled out of granite, his face masked in war paint and tassels hanging from his biceps, he was an unforgettable sight. Excitement was guaranteed whenever Warrior charged the ring and shook the ropes on WWF Wrestling Challenge and WWF Superstars of Wrestling every Saturday morning. No one understood his manic promos, but it didn't matter. Warrior was just awesome – it was as plain and simple as that."

The New York Times reports:

“...Mr. Hellwig joined Mr. McMahon’s organization, then known as the World Wrestling Federation, in 1987 and quickly rose in fans’ esteem with his feats of strength, his dervish energy, his orange tan and his quasi-mystical interview style. Answering a ringside interviewer’s question about tactics, he gestured toward a fan in the crowd wearing face paint like his and said, “I know that warrior is ready to make the sacrifice so that I shall live.”...In the mid-1990s, Mr. Hellwig and Mr. McMahon became embroiled in a contract dispute, and as a result his appearances were intermittent through the rest of the decade. Like many of the marquee names in the business, Mr. Hellwig also admitted to having taken anabolic steroids throughout the ’70s and ’80s, before they became illegal.”

The online blog, Deadspin, reports:

“In his last public appearance, not 24 hours before his death, James Hellwig made clear that there is a distinction between the Ultimate Warrior and the man beneath the facepaint. So it in no way detracts from the respect earned by one of the biggest and most unique characters in wrestling history to point out that Hellwig himself was basically a crazy jerk. Fans got a taste of Hellwig's thought processes from his incomprehensible promos in his first WWF run. They appeared inspirational enough—until you stopped to actually listen to the words....Warrior's most controversial comments came in the mid-2000s, when he made another career change, this time rebranding himself as a conservative commentator. At a Young Republicans-hosted event at UConn in 2005, he said (to gasps from the crowd) that "queering don't make the world work."

I also scroll through the comments section of news stories about his death along with comments on his Youtube videos:

...“As a working professional with children that fully admits that I was this guy multiple times for Halloween growing up, this is truly sad. I feel like a part of my childhood is gone forever. This should be a giant lesson to everyone about the dangers of Steroids!!!”

...“Some crazy mofo in face paint and arm bands just crashed through the Pearly Gates and power-slammed St. Peter.”

...“Getting a Warrior tribute tattoo next month, his death will not be in vain. He has and will continue to inspire my life.”

...“You have to give him credit for speaking his mind and not really caring who agreed with him. Warrior didn’t need a bunch of ‘yes men’. Warrior was an individual...a thinker...a loner who didn’t need to go with the crowd.”

...“Good. I'm sick of people kissing his back side. He was a piece of feces and if people actually read up about him, they'd see the real man. He spoke out against the LGBT community making him a waste of O2.

...“Who cares? Warrior was a steroid freak. He is burning in hell now.”

I remember trying to contact him on Facebook a few years ago., though I received no response. I scroll through my archived messages and find this message sent July 26, 2012:

Name is Nathan Hodges and if this is familiar to you it is because I am your nephew. My mom is Becky. I see myself in you a lot. 100% intensity in everything I do. Exercise the mind, body and soul daily with conviction and unabandoned, raw fucking intensity. Just wanted to say hello and let you know that your blood runs through my veins. Almost was moving at least semi-close to you. Had a decision between the University of New Mexico and University of South Florida for a doctoral program but chose South Florida. You

don't have to respond. Just thought you might be interested in knowing that I am carrying passion and intensity on in the Hellwig family tree. All best, Nathan.

“He may have been The Ultimate Warrior but he was my big brother,” mom says through tears into the phone. “I’m just sad for losing what could have been. He never got the chance to meet my kids and I’m so proud of them. You know he talked in his Hall of Fame speech about doing the Make-a-Wish and seeing the reflection of his face in the kid’s eyes. He never looked into my kid’s eyes.”

“I know mom,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“And poor grammaw; no mom should have to bury their kid,” mom says. “She told me she would have rather died so that he could be there for his kids and wife.”

“I’m sorry mom.” I just keep repeating the same phrase. What am I supposed to say? No social script feels right for moments like this. “It makes you realize how stupid some of the fighting with your siblings is. Hopefully you all get closer.”

“Yeah but I’m at the age now where I’m not going to be disrespected. When grammaw called and told Uncle Jeff his brother had died, he told her Jim has been dead to him for years.”

Later that day autopsy results reveal uncle Jim died from a heart attack that stemmed from Atherosclerotic/Arteriosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease, the same disease that killed his dad. The results quieted a few of the rumors surrounding his death, although some were unrelenting in their insinuations that his death was caused by steroids and drug abuse, even if they knew nothing about either. Television news personality Nancy Grace performed a segment on Warrior’s death with allegations that his and many other professional wrestlers’ deaths were caused by steroids. She even insinuated that professional wrestler Owen Hart’s death was caused

by steroids even though his death was caused by a fall during a stunt gone wrong at a live performance. There was outrage against Grace from the professional wrestling community and from my mom who posted “Bite Me Nancy Grace” to Facebook when the toxicology results were released. Uncle Jim’s dad, John Thomas Hellwig, walked away when Jim was just ten years old. He left Jim two things: his last name and a broken heart. Jim was able to change his name.

On April 8, 2014, my uncle James Brian Hellwig died. I only know him as *The Ultimate Warrior*, the larger-than-life professional wrestler from the 80’s and 90’s. I don’t know uncle Jim as a *real* part of the family. He is someone “related by blood, separated by class” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 7). He left our small Indiana hometown right after he graduated high school. The canonical narrative we hear about him and others like him are that he is an exemplar of The American Dream. He rose from humble beginnings and achieved unprecedented fame and financial success. But what does the relational and familial plotline of The American Dream look like in his story? Before he died he told my grandma, “If I could go back, I would do things differently.” When he died, his brother told grandma, “He’s been dead to me for years, mom,” before hanging up the phone. What about the tears my mom cried while saying, “He never got to meet my boys and I’m so proud of them. I’m sad for what could have been.” What about the Uncle I never hugged, wrestled with on the living room floor, or ate “Hellwig portions” of food with at Christmas dinners?

His death ignites a fire in me mostly because I see myself in him. I realize how our narratives converge. I also “left” and am doing something different than my family. I embody many of the same values – toughness, self-discipline, a whatever-it-takes work ethic, and lack of pretense and political correctness – working-class values instilled in us from the family and

community in which we grew up. However, I wonder if unconsciously his social mobility story, his detachment from our family, is what led me to have such strong, even romanticized, views of my family as I left to become an academic. I now have no desire to escape my past or leave my family behind and work hard to embrace my working-class identity in academe.

I never met Uncle Jim and my family rarely talked about him. I think I internalized his looming absence to mean that I don't want social mobility in the way it has been canonically portrayed, the way it played out in my uncle's life. I want to be successful, but I don't want to leave my family behind. However, this is the only narrative of social mobility I've been exposed to since going to college.

Even before my uncle's death, I began crafting a counter-narrative in which I understand social mobility relationally, looking for connections and similarities between my academic life and my family and past instead of looking for distinctions. One way I do this is by including my family in my academic research and sharing my stories with them. When I look at social mobility relationally, I begin to see and feel coherence between my past, present, and projected future. Bochner (1997) says "Coherence is an achievement, not a given. This is the work of self-narration" (p. 429). The mixed messages I received from my parents about education, work, and mobility, prepared me to be a scholar. This creates a storyline where I am now no longer a victim and my working-class family and community are no longer inhibitors.

I decide to interview my family about Uncle Jim as part of my dissertation research.

June 6, 2014

"You look like a Hellwig" grandma says as I walk into Neighborhood Drycleaners to drop off clothes. I squeeze her tight, her head leaning against my chest in our embrace.

The conversation quickly turns to Uncle Jim.

“I cried the entire weekend because I knew when I saw him that he only had a couple days,” she says tears forming in her eyes. “You don’t want to put a time limit on it, but I could tell right when I saw him.”

“It was heart disease, wasn’t it? That’s what the newspapers said.”

“Well, I’m not supposed to say anything. Dana doesn’t want me telling anyone, but he had a disease. It’s hereditary.”

“Oh.”

“He told me one of the most important things he learned is that genetics matter just as much as lifestyle. You know ‘cuz he lived such a healthy lifestyle.”

We talk about school for a while and I tell her I’m about ready to start my dissertation.

“I don’t know how you can write a paper that long,” she says. “The facts are just so cut and dry.”

“Well I’m not just writing the facts grammaw.”

“You know what you’re going to write it about?”

“Well I was thinking of writing it about our family and Uncle Jim.”

She laughs. “Oh. Our family? But we’re so dysfunctional... And I’m the monarch.”

“All families are dysfunctional. And the ones that appear perfect are probably the most dysfunctional.”

“Yeah, because they hide and cover up all their problems.”

“Yep. So, uh, are you okay with me writing about that?”

“Yeah sweetie. You can write about whatever you want. You’re an adult. I appreciate you asking me though.”

“Well I wouldn’t want to write about it if you didn’t want me too.”

“How do you plan on writing about him?”

“Well I thought I would interview everyone in the family. It’s just I don’t know anything about my own uncle.”

“Well they don’t really either. And that’s the way he probably wanted it. Your two uncles probably won’t have very many nice things to say about him. They looked up to him and then he left them. He could have at least given them a sliver of his life. He just left and never came back.”

“I know.”

“You know he was a real troubled teenager. He got into lots of trouble. He was into the drugs and all that. If he didn’t leave this town he wouldn’t have been anybody. He’d still probably be in trouble. I’m just so proud of you for getting out of this town and going on and doing something with your life.”

“You know the only other person in our family to do that is Uncle Jim,” I say.

“I know. I get that a lot of people like him but I don’t think anyone should put him up on a pedestal. He’s a human and he’s not perfect. I don’t really consider him to be a role model.”

“What I want to do in the dissertation is show him as a human being, not some famous character. I want to reveal how he was viewed by the family.”

A few seconds of silence pass.

“If I hadn’t seen him at the Hall of Fame, I may not have been able to grieve so easily,” she says. “I just need some time off work to go to the camper and cry,” she says laughing.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I say. “Crying’s good. The real problem is people who don’t cry and hold it all in.”

“Well I definitely don’t have that problem,” she says. “I cry during Hallmark commercials.”

My uncle inspired me from afar as he did many people across the world. He inspired me to work hard and be disciplined, to always challenge myself, to suffer and grow, and to not let fear stop me from going after my goals. But my uncle Jim is no superhero. He is not Ultimate or a Warrior. He is a human being, and like every other human being he’s flawed.

June 13, 2014

“You know what he told me one time?” Grandma says. “He told me he was in a bathroom stall at the airport-” she lowers her voice, “-pooping. And there was a fan waiting outside the stall for an autograph.” She laughs. “Can you believe that?”

We’re at the Applebee’s in Crawfordsville, meeting for the first time since I told her I wanted to write about uncle Jim and our family in my dissertation. Who is Jim Hellwig – the human being, the man, the son, the brother, the uncle?

“I said where have you been for the last ten years,” Grandma says referring to a phone call she received from uncle Jim after nearly ten years of no contact. “I didn’t know he’d married this other girl Dana. But I had a choice and I chose to let him be part of my life again. To me he was just a human being. He wudn’t perfect in any way.”

“That’s why I want everyone’s perspective in the family because I want to show how everyone has good and bad parts about them,” I say. We eat our fried green bean appetizer for a few moments without talking.

“One of the good ones out there,” she says. “He told me, *mom, if I could go back-*” her voice cracks. “*maybe I’d make things different.*”

I sit silently unsure of how to comfort my grandma. “You can tell that I’m like uncle Jimmy in a lot of ways,” I say, trying to shift the topic.

“I know that. And that’s why I’ve always been there for you. Nate, you gotta get out there and you gotta make what you want your life to be. You can’t just do what other people want you to do.”

“That’s uncle Jim’s whole philosophy about life, going out and doing what you want, but when he died it made me think about how I don’t want to be like him in that I leave and forget about my family. “

“Mmhhh, right,” she says. “He said to me once that once you’re gone for so long there is no coming back. How do you come back then?”

“Even though I never met him, he still inspired me. Just his lifestyle. At thirteen, I started working out and I never stopped since.”

“That’s why he was proud and fought for the Warrior name. He’d invested all those years and he had no other way to make a living. The Ultimate Warrior stuff continued to sell.”

“It still is. They’re probably making millions off the stuff right now.”

She pauses for a moment. “I don’t know how much as a grown man you keep confidence. Because you’re doing this paper on him. You can, right?” She said this in the sort of way that told me the lines of communication stop here.

“He lost almost all his money in his fight against Vince McMahon.”

“Grandma, is it okay if I turn the recorder on?” I say. I turn my phone recorder on.

“Go ahead. He did tell me-” she hesitates before continuing. “Well I might as well go ahead and say it. You'll be discretionary with things, on what you put in okay?”

“Yeah.”

“They hadn't made a house payment in three years. There was just no money.”

“How'd they live?”

“He worked all the time. He was constantly on the computer doin' the deals. But they spent more money than they had comin' in. And Dana, well she didn't clean her own house. All she had to do was be a mother. And those things all add up. Dana wanted to get a newer vehicle and he told me, *mom she never stops and thinks about where the money comes from*. But, they had vehicles when I was out there, Nate, that they kept for a long, long time. It wudn't like they went out and got new vehicles. He was thrilled to death 'cuz he bought a Tahoe off somebody for five thousand dollars. She had a PT Cruiser.”

The waitress brings our meals to the table. We sit in silence eating our meal.

“We are not what you'd call a pretty family,” grandma says. “When you get a little older you realize that the family you have is not the dream that you picture. We're all at the dinner, but usually somebody's not talking, or mad at each other, somebody's doin' the drugs, somebody's drinkin' too much, somebody's beatin' their wife.”

“Just another Hellwig family dinner,” I say. We both laugh.

“I talked to a friend today and I don't usually talk about my private life but she asked how things was going and I said, *oh fine. Well no, not really. Sometimes your adult children just keep you so stressed. I lost one. He died. It's like I don't even get a period where I can just grieve because the other problems kick in ya know!* So she told me some of her issues with her kids. She said, *when you get overwhelmed just call we'll just exchange stories and feel better.*”

“I think that does make people feel better.”

“Ya know after a while you have to let go. People are a certain age. They make choices.”

“Yeah. That reminds me I haven't talked to uncle Jeff in like six years.”

“He's not doin' real good. He still thinks we all lied to him about the student loan but the truth was it was none of his business. I didn't have to ask permission to sign for you. That is BS.”²²

“I feel bad. I feel like I caused-“

“You didn't cause nothing. Just because I had faith in you. I don't regret one second of signing for you to go to college. I would've died if you'd gotten stuck here with no future. My god no! If anybody should feel bad it should, I'm gonna say this okay with nobody around, your mom and dad should've been there for you more. And I knew they wasn't and I knew I was gonna have to be. Now if there's anything wrong with that then god can strike me dead right here. Okay? I've not been sorry one minute I signed for you.”

“I know.”

“Quit bitin' your nails sweetie,” she says. “It's a nervous habit.”

“You always say that grandma.”

“I know. You've turned into a good man. Comin' back here is good to see family and stuff but whatever you do don't make it a long, long visit because it's too easy to get sucked into everybody's life. Ya know what i'm sayin'?”

²² Uncle Jeff is actually the first college graduate in our family, earning a Master's Degree in Aerospace Technology. He is estranged from our family, living alone in an apartment in Crawfordsville, and receiving monthly checks from the government for his severe anxiety and depression. I used to be really close with him. He was a competitive bodybuilder and was one of the first persons to teach me how to lift weights and eat healthy. When he discovered my grandma cosigned my private school loans, he was enraged and vowed to never talk to his family again. I think he felt like our family was keeping a secret from him. We haven't talked in years.

“Everyone has their problems,” I say. “I don’t know anything about his wife or his ex-wife. I never knew that he came back home after he left. Mom was telling me he went to Aunt Brenda’s wedding and he came back for some Christmases and stuff.”

“Well he come back one Christmas. He did come back for Aunt Brenda’s wedding to give her away, and this is a sad story. The three boys was dressed up and they had come back in town for something. It was Jim and Jeff and Jay. The wedding was held out in the country.”

“They come into Crawfordsville?”

“They come to Crawfordsville. Well, they didn’t come back. Of course that was before cell phones and there was no phone out there. I just took for granted they probably didn’t wanna come back and the sad thing was the car had broke and nobody come in town to check on ‘em. Isn’t it sad we didn’t make the effort to come back in town and check on ‘em?”

“Did they miss the wedding?”

“No, he gave her away but afterwards they should have been there for the dinner and stuff.”

“Mom told me about Jeremy [my cousin] at the wedding. He was just a toddler and he was so scared of uncle Jim because of how big he was and how deep his voice was that every time uncle Jim came near he’d pee his pants.”

Grandma laughs. “Yes. The pee spot just kept getting bigger and bigger throughout the day. You oughta see the pictures.” We both laugh.

“So when did uncle Jimmy leave when he was younger?”

“Right after high school. Thing was we was livin’ in Hillsboro. He graduated and there was issues between my second husband and I so I came to Crawfordsville and bought another

house and he didn't wanna live in Crawfordsville. But he didn't have a vehicle. He didn't really have a choice but to go down with his dad."

"Hmm. He didn't wanna live with you or-"

"No that wudn't it. I think he just knew Crawfordsville is a dead end. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"That's how I felt when I graduated. I just wanted to go out and do something different."

"Right. So Jim went to Florida and stayed with his dad for a while. There was more opportunities with bodybuilding. I don't think Jeff and Jay ever lived with him but they lived in Atlanta, too. He hadn't been a dad, hadn't paid a penny of support, and they said the only advice he ever gave 'em when they went down to Florida was, save your quarters for the laundry mat." Grandma laughs, "Talk about a screwed up family."

"Mom told me one of the reasons Uncle Jim changed his last name is 'cuz his dad never gave him anything growing up. The only thing he gave him is his last name and he didn't want that."

"Really?" she says.

"That's what mom told me."

"Well that's probably true. And his name wasn't no longer Jim Hellwig. It was just Warrior. Now the boys [Jeff and Jay] just thought that was terrible. I didn't take it to heart. I didn't see anything wrong with it."

I pause. "So mom said uncle Jay lived with uncle Jim for a while."

"That didn't go too good."

"Why didn't that work out?"

“It would depend on whether you were asking Jim’s side of the story or Jay’s side of the story. For one, he bought the tools for Jay to make log furniture but then Jim and Sheri decided they wudn’t gonna live in New Mexico no more and they just up and left Jay there. He had no place to live, no money for food. Nothing. That’s Jay’s opinion. That’s why Jay got so hurt. And then Jay went to one of the wrestling meets. It was down in Florida, I think. Jim sent word out there he dudn’t have a brother named Jay. Wouldn’t that break your heart? And I know Jay was probably doin’ drugs but back then I guess everybody did pot. I don’t know if he was doin’ the other drugs.”

“How old were they when their dad left?”

“Jim was ten and then you go on down the line. Your mom was a year old. It's like she never knew him. Never knew him.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Well because him and I got to where we hated each other. I didn't blame him for leaving me and finding somebody that liked him. Know what I'm sayin'? The relationship just deteriorated. It was horrible. Why he would leave his kids, I don't know. He had no guarantee I'd be a good mother to 'em. He never stopped to ask how hard it'd be for me to work and take care of the kids and work.”

“I just don't understand how after uncle Jim saw him leaving he would leave his family. But I was also thinking, was it just his responsibility to stay in touch?”

“He didn't call it leaving. The thing is everybody seemed to have an attitude about it. Was it his place to fix their attitude? Really what does a brother owe the rest of the family? He had a right to go out and live his life. And I'll tell ya a little secret. Now this is between you and I. You

know how when people win the lottery and how many friends they have all of a sudden? She may not remember this but even your mom when she was younger and with Jack Burns-

“Jack Burns?”

“Yeah. You might of been livin' with your dad then. That's the one she went to Florida with and your dad ended up gettin' custody. They said that she abandon 'em... You're gonna unbury bones. They actually asked Jim for money. That's between us okay? You don't wanna hurt your mom's feelings. I'm just sayin' I never thought Jim owed me. I had people who actually had the nerve to say to me, *why do you work? You got a son that's rich*. When is it that your children owe you a free life? They don't owe you. If they go out and make their own life then that is the job you're supposed to do. You don't owe any one of your parents anything. They should be grateful for the fact that they raised you but not to the point they lay guilt trips on ya or anything. How crippling would that be if ya constantly think you owe somebody?”

“That would be not a great way to live.”

“It wouldn't. I just hope he was happy. He told me many times their relationship wasn't great. There's nothing perfect. Ya understand that? He was a Hellwig so I'm sure he wudn't-”

“Wasn't great?” I say.

“Yeah. Big voice, strong opinions and you voice 'em. I love him. He's my son. But I didn't live with him as a wife. To me he wouldn't have been a perfect mate. She wudn't a perfect mate either. But they loved each other. And he said you couldn't pick anybody to be a better mother than what she was.”

“He died of the same thing that his dad died of didn't he? Heart disease?”

“Well you knew he did have a disease though? Besides the heart?”

“Oh, I didn't know that. I just knew he had heart disease. Everybody online keeps talking about how he was doing steroids and that's what caused it. I think it's bullcrap.”

“I don't think he did 'em for that many years. After he was all out of wrestling, he told me he quit. Now he did go exercise every day but he told me the last year or so he couldn't do it.”

“That must have drove him crazy. I only knew he had heart disease.”

“Well that's because Dana told me to keep my mouth shut. I'm not supposed to say nothing. When I was out there six years ago I went out and housesat for 'em for seven weeks. The whole family went to Spain. I didn't know what they were going for. I didn't know if it was just a promotional thing but I think he wrestled.” Tears start forming in her eyes. “Nate when he come back he was black and blue from head to toe. I couldn't even look at him. I was absolutely devastated. He could not hardly walk. Brenda says she still remembers me calling and just sobbing on the phone.”

“He did wrestle. The match is online.”

“Did he? I didn't see. Dana had a horrible time. She was miserable and angry at him.”

“Why was she so angry? Because he chose to do that?”

“No they'd just been married long enough that I think she'd just-“

“Just angry for being married?”

“Yeah. I mean if I'm being as honest as I can be without being hurtful. I went out there four or five times and she never hesitated to let me know how miserable she was. So that just kind of put a strain on having a relationship with your son. You know what I mean?”

“Well he'd be hard to be with...I remember you telling me he got in trouble all the time in school.”

“Well he was a troubled kid. His dad left when he was ten. He was so angry and hurt to the core. All the kids was and each one showed it in a different way. It shows up as adults. I mean your mom and aunt Brenda, they've had a lot of men in their lives and a lot of it is from the fact that their dad abandoned 'em. They're looking for that approval. I say kids grow up in spite of their parents, not because they raised them. When one of the parents walks out some kids are driven to succeed to show their parents they can and some of 'em is just the opposite. Every person reacts in different ways.”

We start talking about me staying at grandma's house when I was younger and the memorabilia she kept of uncle Jim.

“Now do you remember seeing that one National Enquirer article?”

“I saw it at your house. That and the bodybuilding book he was in. Did you ever talk to him about that that article?”

“No. I never ask him. I didn't believe one word of it myself. Well truthfully he was my son and I loved him and if it had been true I wouldn't have loved him any less. Well honestly I think Jeff and Jay bought into that homosexual thing.”²³

“Thought he was?”

“I never ask 'em point blank but that's the impression I got. Jim stayed with one of his teachers after graduation. He didn't wanna come to Crawfordsville so he stayed with a Mr. Pate.”

“He was in the newspaper.”

“Yeah. The Journal article. Well I called Mr. Pate after Jim had passed because Jim talked to me about what his friendship had meant to him over the years. I called and left a message and about two hours later I get this phone call from Mr. Pate. That man sobbed. He said

²³ There are accusations in *National Enquirer* magazine that he was having sex with men for money.

Jim was a nice young man. He said Jim had told him over the years what my friendship had meant to him but hearing it from his mom means a lot. Then he sent me a card, apologizing for crying and that he's reached the age where he cries over everything." We both start laughing because no one cries easier than grandma. "Yeah, I was gonna send a card and tell him I cry during Hallmark commercials."

"He was probably like a father figure to him.

"He was a father figure to him. And Jim even saw Vince McMahon as a father figure. He called Mrs. McMahon mom a few times and there's nothing wrong with that."

"I'm just so glad I got to see him for the weekend. Actually I only probably spent ten minutes total with him cuz him and Dana got a house. He knew what the hotel would be like with all the wrestlers comin' in and the fans. I stayed at the hotel downtown. Jim said *everything's paid for, don't you pay for anything mom*. Of course the flight was paid for. The hotel was paid for. Well I get there and they ask for a charge card number. I said, *well I got one but I didn't know I was gonna have to do this*. She says, *honey your room's covered but your meals aren't*. And I wudn't about to whine to Jim as busy as he was. He would've been devastated to think I had to pay for a meal. And of course the Roosevelt Hotel meals are expensive. Guess where I ate most of my meals?"

"Bourbon Street?"

"IHOP," she says laughing.

"Don't be too adventurous grammaw," I tease.

"Well I did go down to the French Quarter though."

"Grammaw! You get any beads?"

"No. Becky told me to buy beads and I didn't," she says laughing.

“Did you ever talk about me to him grammaw?”

“I talked about the grandkids. He just wudn't part of this life. I remember one time Dana got mad. She said I was always talking about Brianna [my cousin] and never their girls. How am I supposed to make it about the girls? They live thousands of miles away. Dana told me she's never found a more self-centered person. And she didn't say it in a loving manner either. But I told him the last time I was there, *Jim you've turned into a really good man. You can't ask for more than that.*” Grandma cries. “He was a good dad. And I think he was a good husband. I think he was. You know nothing stays the same. Nothing.

“Before I left [the Hall of Fame], the limo was waitin' on me and I said I'm not leavin' 'til I go back and tell my son goodbye. Of course everybody's down there talkin' to him so I had to wait and to hug him. I cried 'cuz I knew how sick he was. He asked me what was wrong and I said 'oh I just love ya so much!' And Mattie, when I hugged her and kissed her, I told her now you take care of your father.”

I put my arm around grandma as she cries. “I wished they had some kind of service for him but I just had to tell Dana whatever works for her, whatever was best for her girls. The thing is all you can do in life regardless of what gets handed to ya', put one foot in front of the other and just deal with it because you don't have a choice unless you wanna' waller in self-pity.”

“Gotta' find a way to have a good attitude,” I say.

Our conversation winds to end and we walk to our vehicles.

“Thanks for the lunch and the great conversation grammaw. I love you.”

“Oh I just love you so much. The conversation was just incredible. I mean you made me cry my eyes out.”

“Well that doesn't sound like a great conversation.”

“No, it was good tears,” she says.

On the drive home, I reflect on our interview. Can you ever really leave your family? Uncle Jim moved over a thousand miles from home in the middle of the fucking desert and didn't talk to anyone in the family for more than a decade. Were we in his head and heart all those years, bitchin' at him, and reminding him who he is and where he comes from?

And how does grandma do it: How does she hold herself together and continue to show love and empathy despite all the tragedy and pain she's endured? How can I become as wise and compassionate as her? Grandma squashes most the fears I have about my social mobility. She wants me to get out of Crawfordsville and do what makes me happy. She doesn't want me to “get sucked into this life.” Does she trust that I won't forget our family like uncle Jim?

CHAPTER SEVEN:
THE AMERICAN DENTAL DREAM

Two years later in Tampa, I sift through boxes in my closet and grab a copy of the Fall 2010 Manchester Magazine. On the cover is a picture of a Manchester student standing with her parents in front of a manufacturing factory, her father's workplace. The bottom corner reads, "Starting from scratch: First in family to attend college, students find a second home at Manchester." Inside the Magazine are three different stories I wrote as a PR assistant, about the experiences of first-generation college students at Manchester College and the resources the College provides to help these students succeed. I interviewed dozens of students, alumni, faculty members, and a counselor at Manchester for the project. I flip to the first story and begin reading:

"I feel like I'm living two different lives," says math major Natalie Collar '11, a regular on the Dean's List. "One includes attending courses, studying all the time, sharing enjoyable experiences with friends and growing as an individual. The other picks up when I visit home on the weekends or during holidays."

May graduate Amber Richey '10 was the first to break the chain of factory careers in her family. "I frequently feel cognitive dissonance with my background values and the values I have acquired while in college," says Richey, who majored in psychology with minors in gerontology and peace studies. "I grew up in a very small town and coming to college was difficult because of that narrow viewpoint I had. Now that I am back home from school, I find it difficult to uphold

my new values and understanding of the world because I am back in my community. As much as I struggle with it, I know my family struggles as well because I am not the same person they sent off to college four years ago and I refuse to conform back.”

Management and marketing double major John Sharp '12 moved with his family to a south Indianapolis mobile home community during middle school. “The whole situation of living in a trailer park was difficult because people knew and made judgments without really knowing me,” says Sharp. He strives to make his tight-knit family a part of his college life. My most difficult challenge I struggle with on a daily basis is trying to share with them what I am learning in the classroom.”

I skip ahead:

“Some first-generation and low-income students face serious hurdles. We look for evidence of the skills that allow them to overcome those barriers,” says Dave McFadden '82, executive vice president and enrollment expert. While the College considers all the usual criteria – high school grades, test scores, class rank and recommendation letters – no single variable predominates, McFadden explains.

The Manchester difference: When students are marginal – with scores, grades, and class rank near the College’s red lines – Manchester considers responses by those students to six questions based on the research of William Sedlacek, a scholar of non-cognitive assessment in higher education. For example, successful applicants asked to write about a passion will reveal creativity and curiosity. The admissions committee looks for personal growth, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, empathy and other traits that will serve students well in college.

I flip a few pages and discover a picture of me in my cap and gown, mom and grandma on each side. I remember the anxiety I felt when Jeri asked for permission to publish the photo. I

told her “I’m embarrassed by my teeth, especially my snaggletooth that is prominent in the picture.” She assured me she will “fix” it. My snaggletooth doesn’t appear in the Magazine. It is digitally altered, smeared together with other teeth.

At USF, I find support for writing about my lived experience and telling stories. For my final paper in Health Communication, I interview my mom about the connection between our teeth and social class.

Teeth Tales²⁴

Movies, TV commercials, billboards, magazines, professors, doctors, lawyers, my friends, my friend’s families, my students, my colleagues, professional athletes, President Obama. . . it seems everywhere I look I see straight, white teeth. Well, not everywhere. All I have to do is go home and chat with my family or almost any poor or working-class family in America to find teeth that our culture says are not worth smiling about. The American Dental Dream, the desire for teeth whiter than the bald eagle’s head and stronger and straighter than the white picket fence surrounding the dream home, is a national ethos as difficult to achieve for the working poor as the other American Dream. And just like the other American Dream, it is a story of social mobility built on appearances. As George Carlin (2005) said, “It’s called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.”

My mom and I grew up in working-poor families, unable to afford the dental care needed for straight, white teeth. Every one of her crooked, decayed teeth was replaced with dentures at the age of 42. Only her family and close friends know her teeth are made of acrylic resins, not calcium. To others, she has achieved the American Dental Dream. Her teeth might be fake, but her smile is real. I also know what it feels like to be embarrassed by my teeth: a crowded,

²⁴ Selections represented from Hodges, N. (2015). The American dental dream. *Health Communication*, 30, 943-950.

crooked mouthful with a rebellious snaggletooth. No matter how often I brush, I can't scrub away my working-class roots. Through conversations with my mom a different story emerged than the dentist–patient compliance story that condemns us for poor personal choices. The stories we shared are about our culture's emphasis on straight, white teeth as a marker of social status and the high cost of paying for teeth like these.

We live in a culture telling us daily that our teeth should be straight and white. In a 1966 study, researchers provided 1,862 Americans the following scenario:

The Green family had been saving money for a long time to buy their house. They have finally found one they like and can afford. But their thirteen year-old son has begun to be self-conscious because his teeth are so crooked. When they go to see the dentist, he says that the teeth can and should be straightened. This would use most of their savings and they could not meet the down payment on their house. (Linn, p. 290)

What would you do?

Eighty percent of participants chose to straighten the kid's teeth. The American Dental Dream over the American dream home. Participants who had the lowest amount of education were most likely to say they would straighten the child's teeth because of appearance (Linn, 1966, p. 292), perhaps to have the child pass as not poor by “communicating in ways that hide or deny [their] identity” (Orbe, 2013, p. 203), since teeth have become another socially constructed category for demarcating the poor from the rich (Toner, 1998). This is a 1966 study, too. Only a few generations ago, people expected to lose their teeth, and dentures were the norm, especially for the working class. Now more Americans are keeping their natural teeth into old age (Douglass & Sheets, 2000).

Economic structures created by our capitalist culture make it difficult for the working poor to achieve the American Dental Dream. More than 4 in 10 Americans pay their dental bills themselves (Florida, 2011), compared to only about 1 in 10 paying physician costs out-of-pocket (Thomas, 2009). Most dental insurance requires costly co-payments and usually is not really insurance at all, but more like a membership that allows people to have a discounted fee at the dentist (Thomas, 2009). Medicare does not cover any dental costs, except under unusual circumstances, and only about 20% of practicing dentists accept Medicaid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration, 2013). Even fewer devote a substantial part of their practices to working with poor and low-income patients. Braces can cost anywhere from \$3,500 to \$10,000 (Oral-B, 2013) and are not typically covered by insurance since they are generally associated with cosmetic procedures. Dental health and dental aesthetics are different ideas, but aesthetically pleasing teeth have material consequences. Being hired for a job where you make enough money to achieve the American Dental Dream can be tied to whether you already have straight, white teeth. As the American Association of Orthodontists website reads, “We live in a competitive world and a great smile can give you an edge.” The same subtle advantages providing access to schools with well-paid teachers and superior physical facilities also result in mouths with dazzling white, perfectly straight teeth (Oldfield, 2007).

By sharing these teeth tales, I am an agent for renewed understanding and change. My mom tells me how she struggles to cope with economic structures that inhibited us from achieving the American straight and white ideal:

Growing up,

Grammaw just didn't have the money

to fix my teeth.

She had five kids to support

and utilities

and food

came first.

She done what she could.

The dentist told me

you and your brother both needed braces

but I didn't have the money.

Me and your dad were both struggling

to make ends meet.

The way we understand, describe, and treat teeth is symbolic of our identity and society. Ben Myers (2008) writes about being socialized into and performing straight and white identity using the metaphor of straight, white teeth. But white privilege does not necessarily mean the privilege of having a straight, white smile. Beautiful, jaw-dropping smiles inhabit the mouths of all races and sexual orientations. How many poor or working class people do you see with straight, white smiles?

My parents made sure I grew up straight by spending thousands of dollars to provide me orthodontic care and the proper medical equipment to pull teeth and attach braces and rubber bands and retainers to make sure that my teeth came out straight. (Myers, 2008, p. 163)

When you smile, you are letting us know who you are and where you come from—what sort of advantages you do and do not have. Social class is about more than money. Social class

writes itself on our bodies, influencing how we talk and walk, and what we look and feel like. “In a country in denial about class divisions, a mangled mouth is the clearest indication of second-class citizenship” (Thomas, 2009). My body reveals clues about social structures and cultural ideals. My teeth are a “cultural billboard” (Spry, 2001, p. 719) composed of calcium, money, family, education, my past and projected future (see Myers, 2008, p. 168). Despite being a doctoral student, working-poor is still written on my body. My teeth tell the story of being unable to afford orthodontic care.

“Damn! Wished I didn’t hafta work tomorrow,” my stepbrother Caleb sighs, thinking about his night shift loading paper into a printing press. “Shouldn’t we at least get a day off after Christmas?”

“At least yer bringin’ in holiday pay,” Jeff replies. My stepdad spends his nights stacking blocks of packaged cheese on wood pallets. “Bein’ an adult sucks dudn’t it?”

“What sucks is this TV show,” says Yub. “Turn it to the football game.”

As my family sits around the living room opening presents, the show *Lost* plays in the background, detailing how survivors of a plane crash slowly uncover secrets about the island they’re stuck on. Sawyer, one of the main characters, is on screen smiling, revealing his movie-star teeth despite the fact he’s been on a deserted island for months.

“Sis, open that damn present already, I’m starvin’ to death!” Aunt Brenda complains. She had all her teeth removed and replaced with dentures only a few days ago so eating solid food is out of the question.

“Sorry, we don’t have any baby food,” Yub teases.

“You little smartass!” she laughs, turning her attention back to the last present under the tree. “C’mon, I wanna’ see what Dad gotcha,” Brenda tells my mom.

Meanwhile, Jeff and Uncle Steve’s eyes are glued to the TV where a gorgeous sideline reporter with teeth brighter than the white stripes of the referee’s uniform is holding a microphone to the face of Green Bay Packers’ quarterback Aaron Rodgers. She asks him a question about his game plan but when he talks I can’t take my eyes off his immaculate teeth.

Like nested dolls, Mom opens box after box before she gets to one about the size of her mouth.

“Dad, what the heck is this?” she asks as she struggles with the tape.

“Hell yer’ crazy if ya didn’t think I’s gonna make ya’ work for it!” Papaw says grinning. There is a gap in the bottom half of his mouth where his teeth used to be, leaving no place for his top row of dentures to rest.

“Help her get that tape off,” I say to Yub.

“How ’bout you tape your mouth shut?” he says.

“You’re about to get the snaggle in the skull,” I say, snarling my upper right canine at him. The jagged, vampire- like tooth rests high in my gums and juts out in front of another tooth, ready to attack.

“The snaggle’s ’bout to be on the floor,” he says making a fist.

It wouldn’t be the first time one of us had teeth, or pieces of teeth, knocked out. Our mouths are more chipped than the pavement street my mom lives on, and Yub is missing half of his front left tooth.

I help her with the tape and she opens the box to find a useless five-stick pack of Winterfresh gum. Because she received a full mouth of dentures at 42, she is unable to chew it.

“I thought it’d give ya’ somethin’ to do with your mouth besides talk,” Papaw teases.

“Dad, don’t make me take my teeth out and come over there. I won’t have nothin’ to lose then.”

My younger cousin Hayden sprints down the hallway wearing yellow, rubber Billy Bob teeth, a present from Santa this morning. He bumps into an end table and knocks off a picture of Uncle Tim.

Uncle Tim didn’t make it to family Christmas this year. I pick up the picture and stare at his red-scabbed face, gaunt frame, and scraggly hair. He stares back at me with a rare grin on his face, revealing a mouth that looks like it’s been smashed with a hammer and tarred. The few teeth that are left are corroded markers of the addiction that kept him awake during his night shift factory job. I place the 5 × 7 back on the end table, reminiscing about the *old* Tim. *Things would’ve been different if he had money.*

“Alright, I want a picture of everyone,” mom says. The groaning starts.

“You may have to take two to get all of me in the frame,” Jeff says, rubbing his belly after a Santa-sized portion of turkey and noodles. We make our way to the front of the tree.

“Smile on three,” mom says, holding the camera in front of her face.

“Mom, the camera’s not zoomed in to the right place,” Yub says pointing at his face.

She laughs and focuses the camera on the family.

“One.”

I push my cheeks out a little, letting the ends of my lips curl up without opening my mouth. Without baring my teeth the forced smile makes it look like I’m plotting something devilish.

“Two.”

On the TV, a Wal-Mart commercial plays showing several Wal-Mart clerks turning their checkout lights on and off to the tune of Christmas music, all smiling with straight, snowy white teeth.

“Three.”

Click. I’m not smiling.

Wal-Mart considered her [Caroline] for customer service manager and then promoted someone else . . . The people who got promotions tended to have something that Caroline did not. They had teeth. Her teeth had succumbed to poverty, to the years when she could not afford a dentist. Most of them decayed and abscessed, and when she lived on welfare in Florida, she had them all pulled in a grueling two-hour session that left her looking bruised and beaten . . . No employer would ever admit to passing her over because she was missing that radiant, tooth-filled smile that Americans have been taught to prize as highly as their right to vote. Caroline had learned to smile with her whole face, a sweet look that didn’t show her gums, yet it came across as wistful, something less than the thousand-watt beam of friendly delight that the culture requires. (Shipler, 2004, pp. 52–54)

Growing up, I went to The Kids’ Dentist twice a year. The dentist office was a mixture of pleasure and pain. Usually a dentist appointment meant I was missing school (pleasure), but missing school to have sharp metal objects shoved in my mouth (pain).

Stretching my mouth like silly putty, Dr. Winn and her assistants stick their hands of knowledge and power into my working-poor mouth and poke at my teeth with sharp metal toothpicks, spoons, and Captain Hook tools.

“Open wide,” she says, wedging a sharp metal drill in my mouth.

The spinning steel screeches against my teeth, attacking cavities embedded in my molars.

Floss is then wedged in between my crowded teeth, cutting the waxed filaments into my gums until I taste blood. Not being a vampire, I am happy when the taste of my own blood is sucked up through plastic hoses. Next, flavored toothpaste is rubbed on a chewy retainer and put on my teeth for cleaning. I choose French vanilla from a menu of delicious flavors: bubble gum, cherry cheesecake, chocolate, banana split, and other flavors that taste like the same sugary stuff supposedly giving me cavities.

The pain is short-lived and intense, the metal tickling sensitive nerves in my mouth. The pain experience taps into several of my senses: the burning *smell* of teeth being grinded; the *taste* of tooth dust being sprayed in my mouth; the *sound* of a buzzsaw screeching through sheet metal. Every time I visit the dentist I vow to never have a cavity or filling again. I brush fanatically, up to five or six times a day. But every time I go to the dentist I have new cavities. As Kenneth Oldfield (2007), who grew up in a working class family, says, “If you had weak teeth, no matter how often you brushed, they still decayed and had to be extracted” (pp. 5–6).

I pick up my pink-and-white toothbrush from the smiley-faced toothbrush holder my mom bought me before I moved away for graduate school. The bristles on my \$2 Colgate toothbrush are fraying in all directions. I hold the brush in my mouth and grab my scrunched up tube of Colgate Total whitening toothpaste. I unscrew the lid, revealing little dried chunks

crusted onto the grooved end, and squeeze the tube from the bottom up with my thumb and index finger. I take the toothbrush out and squeeze a big goop onto the frayed bristles. I brush softly over my bottom back right molars since they have been sensitive lately. Most of them have amalgam fillings, a mixture of different types of metal and liquid mercury that fill in the hole where the dentist dug out a cavity. The working-poor are often left choosing between amalgam or no fillings at all because alternative fillings are not covered by Medicaid. Despite being used for more than 150 years, the fillings continue to be criticized about their potential for adverse health effects because of the mercury (see McGrath, 2013).

I keep scrubbing my front teeth, trying to scratch away the plaque I know is there but can't see, like an ugly by-product of social class, invisible and destructive. As I continue brushing I think about the lengths I've gone to brighten my smile. During my high school years, my hometown Wal-Mart Supercenter oral health care aisle took quite a hit. I made sure to take all the whitening strips out of the box and shove them in my pocket so I did not set off an alarm as I walked out the automatic doors.

I snarl my upper lip to continue the last part of my brushing ritual: cleaning the snaggletooth. Resting high in my gums, this tooth bullies its way in front of my upper right incisor. The incisor tries to hide behind the canine like a toddler in hide and seek, leaving half its body exposed. I spit into the sink and glance at my teeth in the mirror. My bottom teeth cannot stand in a straight line for the life of them—just a misbehaving, zig-zaggity mess. Some of my teeth form a broad U-shape, where the middle has been ground down from other teeth. My left front tooth contains a partial veneer, with a slightly longer left corner than the rest of the tooth creating a downward slope. There are gaps in the back of my mouth where teeth used to be. The

last time I went to the dentist, several years ago, I had my wisdom teeth removed without general anesthetic in order to save money.

As I watch my friend Jerrod talking, my attention is not focused on the words he is saying but instead the beautiful white barriers those words are escaping through. I envy his teeth. He radiates confidence and warmth, the inspiration for clichés like “his smile lights up a room.”

Henson et al. (2011) showed 221 teenagers pictures of 10 volunteers’ smiles. Each volunteer is shown two photos: an arrangement of teeth considered “ideal” and another considered “not ideal.” “Ideal” arrangement referred to the American cultural desire: straight, not chipped, crowded, or crooked. The researchers then asked the teenagers to answer questions based on these photos. Those with culturally ideal smiles were perceived by teenagers as more athletic, social, and better leaders.

Uncle Jim realigned and whitened his teeth as he became famous. During many of the earlier photos before his realignment, he kept his mouth closed. It seems uncle Jim went to great lengths to escape his past: legally changing his name, claiming to hail from “parts unknown,” cutting off contact with his family, and straightening his teeth.

Those who have the money to straighten their teeth and choose not to do so disrupt cultural expectations. Consider actor Steve Buscemi. His crowded, protruding teeth distinguish him from most celebrities. Although he has also publicly acknowledged that his teeth have helped land him certain roles, mostly as the oddball or bad guy, could you imagine Steve Buscemi as the lead actor in a romantic-comedy? Could you imagine him in a Crest commercial?

“I think people look at you differently when you have bad teeth or at least *you* feel like they do,” my mom tells me on the phone. She continues:

I hated my teeth growing up

I had absolutely no confidence

because of my teeth.

I was embarrassed to talk to people

because you know how they look at you

when you have a cold sore—

they’re lookin’ at your cold sore,

not you.

That’s how I felt.

My mom felt stigmatized because of her teeth. Ellis (1998) says *minor bodily stigmas* are “involuntary characteristics perceived by self and/or others as undesirable. Sometimes people are born with minor bodily stigmas, other times these attributes are acquired later in life” (p. 524).

My mom thought others viewed her teeth undesirably (whether they did or not), which has an impact on how she lives her life. Sparkes (2012) discusses the shame and anxiety his father felt about his dentures, and about the stigma of having teeth that marks himself as working-class:

His teeth were a source of deep anxiety and ongoing degradation. It was not long before he was wearing a full set of dentures that became a constant reminder to him of his poor background and a source of deep vulnerability and shame in terms of what was already a fragile sense of masculinity (p. 176).

My snaggletooth has been my biggest source of shame and embarrassment. I try to keep the snaggletooth hidden beneath my lip but occasionally in a fit of laughter or a forced smile, it will emerge, a photo bomb for any picture it is in. My snaggletooth haunts my smile.

Occasionally, I will bare my teeth for a straight-on camera shot, so as not to get a good angle on the snaggler. I have an overbite so bad it seems like every time I close my mouth the top half is going to eat the bottom half. When I am forced to open my mouth for the person insistent on a serious smile, I make sure to extend the bottom half of my jaw forward so I can stack my teeth. Organized photos, often a source of fun and pleasure for others, are an anxious time for me. One photo in particular sticks out:

Lacey has my high school libido

dancing fast during slow songs.

Bright, pink Prom dress

snug against her bronze Venezuelan curves.

“Smile,” says the photographer.

Her moonlight smile

casts a shadow on my closed mouth.

Weeks later in the lunchroom,

she’s walking toward me frowning,

photos in hand.

She unloads:

“Why do you look upset? Are you angry? Are you not

happy with me?”

She’s upset I look upset,

insecurely assuming
something must be wrong with her.
I'm too embarrassed to explain
why the ends of my lips look too heavy to lift.
We break up a few days later.

My mom had photo anxiety, too. She tells me:

“Any picture you see me in before my senior pictures,
I did not smile with my mouth open.
Not one picture.
You see my pictures *now*.
I'm always smiling
Everybody says how beautiful my teeth are *now*.
I smile without hesitation.
Nobody at work knows I got fake teeth.
Everybody thinks these are my real teeth.
It lets me be the person I wanted to be.”

I rinse my toothbrush, put it back in the holder, and dry my hands on the towel hanging over my shower curtain. I grab my bottom left incisor and wiggle it, noticing it felt a bit tender when I was brushing. As a child I would try my hardest to pry my teeth out so I could collect money from the Tooth Fairy. I would wait excitedly in bed with my tooth under the pillow and my parents would say, “He won't come if you're still awake.” In typical American fashion, the Tooth Fairy came for a business deal: a few bucks for a piece of my docile body. It is a cultural

myth based on the idea of capitalistic exchange. I wonder though, what did the Tooth Fairy do with all of those teeth? Did he deposit them in a tooth bank where they collected interest and made him rich, like the orthodontists who removed my mom's teeth, averaging more than \$300,000 annually (Berenson, 2007)?

According to the latest Delta Dental Tooth Fairy Poll, 90% of American homes are visited by the Tooth Fairy and the average payment per tooth is \$2.42, a 15% gain since last year (Delta Dental, 2013). Adjusting for inflation, that nighttime tooth-napper still owes me at least \$10, and if broken pieces of teeth are accepted for half-price, then a lot more. This may sound like a fairy tale, but the ideology has materialized in America: We pay a price for our teeth. And if you are a member of the working-poor, the price is too high.

"If I won the first thing I'd do is fix my teeth," my brother says as he scratches off a lottery ticket.

"Me too," I reply, scratching off my \$5 Hoosier Millionaire with a penny.

We both lose.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I run my tongue along the back of my crowded bottom teeth, and prepare to present "The American Dental Dream." My hands tremble as I get ready to talk to a group of "serious" academics about the Tooth Fairy and my snaggletooth, but I hope my vulnerability will invite others to share their teeth tales. Stories have a funny way of leading to more stories.

The article from which this chapter was drawn has been through months of revisions following feedback from journal reviewers, colleagues, my girlfriend, and my mom. Most of the people I have talked to about the article acknowledge they have never noticed anything "wrong"

with my teeth and a few mentioned how they love my smile. Hearing these comments about my teeth has at times, left me “feeling ashamed for feeling ashamed about a seemingly trivial blemish” (Ellis, 1998, p. 526). I also wonder if in my writing I have made the issue “bigger than life,” about a “blemish so small that [I] shouldn’t care; at the same time, it is so big that it prevents [me] from measuring up to the images of perfection [I am] encouraged to seek” (pp. 526–527).

As much as I would like to see immediate structural and cultural changes, I am not getting my hopes up. Dental care is not high on the health care policymakers’ list of concerns, as it represents less than 5% of all health care spending (Thomas, 2009). This is partially because those in Washington who make decisions that impact working-poor teeth “tend to come from the segment of the population that has not experienced [these] type[s] of problem[s]. And if you’ve never had a toothache, you’ve never had a toothache” (Thomas, 2009). It is hard to understand how teeth can strongly impact a person’s life, when you are in a position to take your teeth for granted. And even though most public health dentists say that dialing back the obsession with aesthetics would allow them to better serve a broader population, about 50% of a dentist’s annual income is from elective aesthetic procedures, so dentists profit from the vanity and anxiety most Americans have about their teeth (Thomas, 2009). So, how do my mom and I cope with crooked, crowded teeth, paradoxically turning them into something to be valued (Ellis, 1998)? What agency do we have when we are unable or unwilling to buy into the American Dental Dream?

Bud Goodall (2005) says, “A comic perspective helps. Or at least it has helped me. It’s not so much a cure for the past as it is an *attitude toward it*. And attitude can help get you through the night by not taking yourself and your own misery so seriously” (p. 509). Even before this writing, I was comfortable discussing my teeth, through reframing the narrative (Kiesinger,

2002) I tell about them by using humor. During my high school years, I began treating my snaggletooth as a separate entity, naming it “The Boston Snaggler” (named after the infamous Boston Strangler). I would tease friends, and sometimes strangers, that The Snaggler had a mind of his own, as I snarled the tooth at them. I externalized the embarrassing tooth, “objectifying and personifying the problem in [my] life that [I] experience[d] as painful and oppressive” (Kiesinger, 2002, p. 108). This shift from a tragic teeth tale that constructs me as a victim, to an empowered teeth tale, makes people laugh and projects me as unique and confident. I inherited this comic perspective from my mother, who has also been able to reframe the stories she tells about her teeth as seen in the family Christmas narrative. Some mornings she walks around our house singing without her dentures in.

When externalizing the story I tell about my teeth, I view it with some emotional distance. Bergson (1911) tells us comedy requires “a momentary anesthesia of the heart” and encourages us to “look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into comedy” (p. 5). However, this reframing is an emotionally dynamic process and at times, especially when I am supposed to give a “serious” smile for the camera, these feelings of embarrassment return. A tragic frame is one in which we forget that we are looking at the world through a frame. We associate our frame of the experience as *the* experience. We feel stuck, hopeless. Agency means being able to reframe the cultural narratives we are given about teeth. A comic corrective (Burke, 1984) allows us to take charge of our own story again (Parry, 1991) and “presents a world without pain . . . an abstraction from the tragic dimension of human existence” (Berger, 1997, p. 210).

Sharing Teeth Tales

²⁵“Before we begin our discussion, please get out your copy of the article and your body part story.” The students in my *Writing Lives* class get out their paper copies of my article, “The American Dental Dream” (Hodges, 2015), and their writing assignment – a personal story about a body part. I scan my first page while waiting:

The cultural desire for straight, white teeth – is difficult, if not impossible, for poor and working-class people to achieve. In this autoethnography, I brush away the taken-for-granted assumptions about teeth, exploring the personal, relational, and structural consequences of this cultural desire, and showing how social class writes itself on our bodies. I write these teeth tales to show how one might cope with their teeth (p. 943).

“I share my autoethnography with you, not only as a model for your own paper, but to show you I am also a human being with personal struggles and insecurities. I’d be interested in hearing your connections, stories, questions, criticisms, grade-boosting praise.” Several students laugh. “What’d you all think?”

“I really like it,” Jessica says. “Thanks. What’d you like about it?”

“I related to it. I grew up with messed up teeth, and I was always so embarrassed by them. I wouldn’t smile in photos or talk in class. It seemed all my friends had perfect teeth. But my parents couldn’t afford braces. Once I finally had the money I fixed my teeth.” I wince at her use of ‘perfect’ and ‘fixed’ teeth, implying her teeth were a problem, instead of the problem being the idea of perfect teeth, but I stay quiet and let her story be.

²⁵ This section adapted from: Berry, K., & Hodges, N. (2015). Naked Teaching: Uncovering Selves in the Reflexive Classroom. *Journal of Education*, 62, 59-83.

“I saw myself in the story, too,” Heather adds. “I hadn’t realized how little I thought about teeth until I read the article, but you’re right – our teeth are connected to our social class and we make class judgments about people based on their teeth. Even I do.”

“I worked at a dentist’s office for seven years and this American Dental Dream is real,” Anna adds. “We’re so obsessed with these perfect movie star teeth. I remember how patients would tear up with joy when they saw their dental transformation for the first time.”

“Thank you all for sharing your connections,” I say. “I believe this idea of ‘perfect teeth’ several of you alluded to is an illusion. The American Dental Dream is a cultural desire for perfect teeth that can never be achieved.²⁶ You’re led to believe your teeth can always look better. The idea of which teeth are desirable, perfect, or normal, is a cultural ideal and tends to be circularly defined. It’s not inevitable and could be otherwise (Hacking, 1999). But this cultural desire is powerful. How many people in here have had braces?”

All but two students raise their hands. “And how many of you are completely happy with your teeth?” No one raises their hands. “So braces didn’t solve the insecurities with your teeth. You are led to believe your teeth need fixed, and can look better. This deficit discourse (Gergen, 1997) is what keeps the capitalist engine running. We create problems needing ‘fixed’ by introducing new products and services. Just think about how the introduction of whitening strips and braces changed how we understand teeth.”

“After reading your article I went and immediately whitened my teeth,” says Melissa. “I know this is the opposite of what you hoped but the pressure never seems to end.”

²⁶ As human beings we “face the pragmatic challenge of figuring out how to dwell securely in the space between the rottenness of perfection and the rottenness of imperfection” (Bochner, 2012, p. 4).

“I hate to be the outlier here but I have straight, white teeth and I’ve never had any orthodontics,” one of my favorite students, Dustin, responds. “This seems to be a sweeping generalization. I don’t really see the connection between social class and teeth.”

“Well I do say in the article that straight, white teeth that meet the cultural ideal requires good genetics or a lot of money. However, many people have some sort of dental intervention. Look at how many people have had braces in here.”

“That’s why I think your story is relatable,” says Josh. “I had braces but I still have insecurities about my teeth even after my parents spent thousands of dollars on them.”

“Many of us have these minor bodily insecurities (Ellis, 1998) we rarely talk about and we each find our own ways of coping with them,” I say. “When we share our stories with others we can feel a little less alone in these insecurities.”

“I felt that connection reading your article,” says Tara. “I had horrible acne in high school and we weren’t allowed to wear makeup in my school. I was so embarrassed. I felt like all anyone could see was my acne. It’s like how your mom described her teeth in the article.”

“I felt the same way about my ears,” Derron adds. “They’re so big and kids used to make fun of me, calling me ‘Dumbo’, like the elephant. But then when I found out how to wiggle them, everyone wanted to see my tricks.”

“No way,” Ian says. “Show us!” We laugh as he wiggles his ears up and down.

“That’s great you found a way to reframe something you were embarrassed by into something you embrace and makes you unique,” I say.

“I related too,” Natalie says. The bridge of my nose is pronounced and every time I’m around my grandma she makes comments about it. She even offers to pay for plastic surgery to

get it fixed.” Several students gasp. “But I’ve grown to love it. It holds my glasses up nicely,” she says grabbing her frames. Several students laugh.

“People make judgments about my nose,” Lance adds. “People say I have a Jewish nose. I identify as Christian but my dad is Jewish, and I felt in some ways this was an attack on him.”

“I really connected,” says Lacey. “I have a slight eye misalignment called pseudostrabismus.” Basically my left eye is about two degrees off from my right, making me appear cross-eyed. After reading your story, I realized my eye affects my life in ways I wasn’t aware of, like realizing I don’t have any selfies online because it’s most noticeable in pictures. Now I want to write my autoethnography about my pseudostrabismus, though a part of me feels it’s a minor problem and writing a 20-page paper about it is blowing it out of proportion.” As she talks, I realize I’m staring at her eyes and look down at my article instead.

“Wow, thank you so much for sharing,” I say. “Your comment reminds me about the double binds of discussing minor bodily stigmas. For example, many of you may have never even noticed my teeth before reading this essay, but I’m guessing many of you tried to get a peek at them today.” The class laughs, my humor resonating. “Other responses?”

“I admire how you used humor to cope with your teeth. Like how you named your snaggletooth and snarled it at people,” Erick says. The class laughs. “I also admire your honesty, like how you write about stealing whitening strips from Wal-Mart.”

“Yes, your teacher has broken the law,” I joke nervously. “Most stores now have them locked behind glass cases because so many people were stealing them.”

“This discussion has made me realize we all have something we’re insecure about and afraid to talk about it, making that insecurity even more powerful in our minds,” Erick says.

“Yes, and I hope my openness inspired you to be open with your own stories.”

Hands shoot up in the air. “Your story made me think about...

“... the moles on my arms.”

“... the stretch marks on my boobs.”

“... the gap between my front teeth.”

“... the scar on my lip.”

“... my obesity and how I use humor to cope with my insecurity.”

The stories pour out.

The vulnerability I show in sharing insecurities about my teeth invites others to share their own insecurities. I also share my stories with students as a way of bringing up the difficult conversation of social class. I am able to establish my working-class identity in the classroom by sharing my stories. I am able to get students to think critically about classism and class inequality. Through storytelling, I am able to bring the language of the working-class into academia in a way that honors and respects it. This kind of language wasn't allowed in my early education. It was considered “incorrect” or “inappropriate.” Now I get the chance to bring my family's stories into the classroom and show students they aren't incorrect or inappropriate.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
A MULTI-VOICED ACADEMIC CONFERENCE TALE

As I gained confidence in my storytelling ability, I began submitting articles for publication and presenting stories at conferences. In my third year at USF, I invite my mom and mother and grandma to the 100th annual National Communication Conference to watch me present two papers. This is their first time at an academic conference. I feel ambivalent about my family coming into this academic context where they will see me talk about social mobility on a *Blue-Collar Scholar* panel. My hope is the conference experience will bring us closer together by introducing them to what it is I do as an academic.

In this chapter, I present a multi-voiced narrative of the *Blue Collar Scholar* panel that includes in-scene descriptions from me and written reflections from others who I describe below. One of the central struggles for me is how to negotiate my working-class and academic identities without hurting my family's feelings and without damaging my academic relationships. I also show the tensions that arise when those we write about are right there in front of us. Should I as Ellis (2007) says, "Write as if my participants will be in the audience" (p. 215)?

Characters: Nathan Hodges (doctoral student at University of South Florida); Krystal Bresnahan (Nathan's ex-girlfriend and USF doctoral student); Dustin Briggs (Nathan's best friend and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale doctoral student); Tasha Rennels (USF doctoral student and *Blue-Collar Scholar* panelist); Nathan's mom; Nathan's Grandma (he refers

to her as ‘Grammaw’); Linda Scholz, Daniel Strasser, Richard Jones (*Blue-Collar Scholar* panelists); Ken Hillis (*Blue-Collar Scholar* Chair); Audience members.

Narrative style: This is a multi-voiced reflective text involving actual written responses from me, my mom, grandma, Krystal, Dustin, and Tasha. After the Convention, I collect responses from these people through email, asking each to write a short reflection on their conference experience, particularly focusing on the *Blue-Collar Scholar* panel. The story is presented using these post-NCA reflections woven into my in-scene descriptions. I include each individual’s own words (with slight editing for clarity). I arrange their responses in sequence to create a coherent, linear narrative.

Blue-Collar Scholar Panel

Dustin: When we [Dustin, Krystal, Mom, Grandma] were waiting in the hallway for your first panel to start, they [Mom, Grandma] didn’t understand the competitive paper process, and asked Krystal and I about how it worked. Once it was explained to them, it increased their appreciation for your accomplishment. They may not have understood the utility of paper panels (and sometimes I don’t either) but they definitely appreciated that their boy had something to say, that they were involved in what you had to say, and that what you had to say mattered to this group of academics enough that they wanted others to hear it. I imagined them sitting in the bleachers during one of your late season wrestling matches. They knew now that you only made it this far because of your effort, and in some ways that effort reflects them.

Krystal: You were practicing before the first presentation and your grandma asked me, “Is he always this nervous? I’ve never seen him get like this.” I said, “No, I think it probably has something to do with you being here. He wants to impress you.” She said, “Oh, he doesn’t have to do that. He impresses us every day. We’re just so happy to be here.”

Nathan: I sit on the toilet editing my paper, only about ten minutes from presentation time. I cross out this sentence to lessen the feeling of ambivalence in the presentation: “~~Striving for social mobility can leave a person feeling alienated, like a traitor, in a state of limbo, like a double agent, learning to lie with conviction in two contexts at once and fearing expulsion from both.~~”²⁷ I read through the rest of the paper imagining myself saying these words out loud to my family, hearing the story through their ears. I delete the original ending, which focuses on the tensions I feel in the presence of my family.

I flush, walk to the presentation room, and set my stuff down at the far end of the table. Mom, grandma, Krystal, and Dustin are sitting in front of me a few rows away. Mom and grandma are beaming with pride. The small room is a little less than half full. If these four left, it would look quite empty. As I say hello to the other panelists I notice how they are dressed. I spent about a half-hour this morning trying not to look like an academic. I wear my blue jeans and high top Converse shoes, but I cave in and opted for a long-sleeve shirt with a V-neck sweater over it. I contemplated for a long time wearing my black short-sleeve t-shirt. I purposefully try not to “dress up.”²⁷ During other conferences, I’ve worn shorts and a t-shirt, and I usually dress this way to teach.

Had I shown up at my presentation wearing blue jeans and my “This guy needs a beer” t-shirt, I bet many of the audience members would’ve been saying, “Who the hell is this guy? He’s not one of us!” Hey! I did need a beer! It was stuffy in there. Too many ties, V-necks, black-rimmed glasses, and brown pointy shoes. Look around at NCA and you’ll see there is an implicit dress code, and it’s not how my family dresses.

²⁷ Notice how “up” implies a higher value.

Tasha introduces the first presenter, Linda Scholz, and the title of her presentation, *Back and forth, forth and back: Rooting my Guatemalan and United States working class, political, and transnational presence(s)*.” I already want to distance myself from this group. I’m not like her mom and grandma. I don’t use those highfalutin words. I keep it real. Linda continues her presentation: “Using performative ethnography, I bring this visual instantiation to life by sharing how transnationalism has informed my working class and academic presences in Guatemala and the United States.”

My family is probably thinking, *What the hell did she just say?* Actually, so am I. Too much *unnecessary* abstract theory and too many long, jargon-y words that seem more concerned with sounding academic than clarifying meaning. Writing like a scholar “seems to consist mostly of obscuring ideas rather than communicating them” (Lawler, 1995, p. 58). I look over at mom and grandma. Mom is scrunching her whole face, like she’s trying to vacuum in some meaning from Linda’s words. I don’t think it’s working. Grandma has a glazed-over look on her face. She sees me looking at her, smiles, and winks.

A moment later, Linda’s voice cracks as she tells a story about guerilla fighters destroying her family’s village. I look back at mom and grandma who are on the verge of tears. Here is something they can connect with – stories and raw emotions.

Dustin: Your grammaw understood the stories, and comprehended them in a way that seemed deeper and maybe more impactful than the way some other folks in the audience received them. She absorbed the stories, reflected on her own life, and gained an appreciation for the panelists as people who deal with struggles too. For her, the story had direct application to her life without being mediated by theory. In fact, later when your grammaw said, "they left out some of the heart wrenching parts," I feel like at least part of her was saying, "the narrative left

some of its impact on the table by substituting theoretical argument where the raw story alone could have expressed the message more effectively to me.”

Nathan: Tasha presents next. Her paper is titled, *From Insider to Insider/Outsider: An Autoethnographic Account of Returning to My Working-Class Roots*. As the only two students in my department who study white, working-class culture, we often get grouped together. She often describes her working-class past as something that keeps her from measuring up to this “elite academic culture.” I still don’t like the hierarchy of understanding working-class culture and people as something lower than our current circumstances, as something that needs to be moved *up* out of. However, as a white, working-class *woman* her experiences aren’t the same as mine. Tasha continues with her presentation, “I lived in a rundown trailer park surrounded by white, non-college-educated, wage-earning people.”

Rundown. This way of painting the working-class as something to be ashamed of happens in the way she describes (evaluates) her interviewee’s homes, what they eat, how they dress, in comparison to her. On the flip side, I tend to romanticize the working-class, ignoring their prejudices and faults, for example, by not mentioning my stepdad’s racism or homophobia when describing my home life. Perhaps I’m making our differences appear more significant than they are. We feel a connection; we’re both working-class academics and friends. She continues, “to illuminate the liminal space in which working-class academics exist—one that prevents us from being fully accepted among the middle to upper class educated elite, and poses challenges when we return to our working-class roots with no open arms to embrace us.”

Notice this hierarchy of educated *elite* and also that the past is seen as inhibiting – “no open arms to embrace us.” I know this isn’t my story but I look out at my mom and grandma and

I want to scream, *This isn't me! I don't think I'm better and I feel your embrace!* Mom sees me looking at her, smiles, and mouths the words, *I love you.*

I present next. Tasha introduces me and I stand from my chair and read:

“My lived experiences of growing up in a family of factory workers and working as an academic inspire me to understand social classes as ambiguous, fluid, and ideally nonhierarchical categories. I am a working-class academic, a blue-collar scholar. I feel most comfortable on the hyphen, standing in the space between labels, beating my chest and scaring them off. I refuse to leave family and friends behind and scale the ladder out of the working-class. I appreciate the culture and community that helped shape me and continues to. I share these words to honor my family and the working-class.”

Dustin: The biggest impression I had about your family being there was a sense of intermingled pride and confusion. The event itself didn't seem to make a lot of sense to them. At times they seemed uncomfortable and they later admitted they felt out of place. They got past the dissonance by fully immersing themselves in pride for their (grand)son... You were their ambassador to a strange and forbidden world and it seemed to mean a lot to them that you haven't forget where you came from, and you still claim them as a big part of who you are now.

Mom: Nate has seen what happens to a family torn apart by one member succeeding and walking away from where he came from and I think that is why Nate is so determined to never forget where he comes from and the ones at home who have nothing but love for him. His grandmother and I have been at every milestone in Nate's career as a scholar and I couldn't imagine missing anything he does. I will be there in August of 2016 to see him receive his final diploma as well.

Nathan: I end my presentation by saying, “Find ways to bring your family into your academic life and bring your academic life into your family. One way of doing so is to invite your mom and grandma to your NCA presentation.” I point toward my family, smiling through tears in the audience. The audience and panelists look at them and applaud. Krystal described this as a “drop the mic and walk away” moment. She’s overdramatizing but I like thinking of it that way. I felt like I was defending my family from a culturally constructed hierarchy that places them below me and that has been implicitly reinforced over and over again by academics. Krystal said some of the other panelists looked shocked. All of a sudden the people that panelists were discussing abstractly are only a few feet away. One of the presenters, Richard, started crossing out lines in his paper. I’m probably attributing too much meaning to this act, but there was a part of me that wonders if there were things he was going to say but isn’t now that he knows my family is in the audience. I don’t know. He didn’t respond to my email.

Tasha: I loved that you brought your mother and grandmother to the panel. I think it made the fine line we walk between the academy and working-class even more clear. I was definitely much more aware of my words and when you told me at the USF party that they had trouble understanding some of the stories in our panel, I felt awful. I don’t think many of us realize how socialized to elite academic culture we have become. What you did by bringing your mother and grandmother to NCA provided an opportunity for some serious reflection.

Nathan: Tasha and I speak at the USF party later that night. She tells me she liked what I said about academics not doing something better than what our families do, that they’re just different. I feel bad about what I thought about her earlier in the day.

Nathan: The last presentation is from Richard Jones, who shares interview responses and personal examples about the struggles of first-generation college students not getting the support they want from their families in order to succeed in college.

Krystal: After being dismissed from the first panel, I asked your grandma, “So what’d you think?” She said, “They were all really good but it’s kind of sad to hear how all these kids think their families feel about them going to school. They all go so far from home and it’s hard for us to know what they’re going through without ever doing it ourselves. We’ve always tried to support Nate the best we can.”

Grandma: The panel presented issues of being the first college graduate in the family and each faced different family feelings and expressed that it can become difficult to strive to move forward and also to stay comfortable with family. Some expressed it was perhaps due to their own perceptions of how other members of their family felt, not necessarily feelings expressed by the family.

Mom: When I heard the other presenters speak it actually saddened me to hear how some of the families had made the students feel as if they were doing something wrong by wanting to better themselves with an education. I have always told my kids there is a lot more to this world than just Crawfordsville, IN. To see where Nate is today in comparison to where he started his journey is amazing. To be honest, I am in awe of him and all he has accomplished and continues to accomplish. I have no doubt Nate is going to go very far in this life and achieve great things. I also know with all his accomplishments that when he comes home he will be no different. He will still wrestle with his brother, sing to his mom, and give me a hug and kiss before I go to bed.

Nathan: After the panel is over, I walk over to mom and grandma. They hug and kiss me. “You did so good,” mom says.

“What’d you think of the other presentations?” I ask.

“Oh, I think I’m just not educated enough,” grandma says. “Everyday people can’t understand ‘em. It’s just too technical.”

“Yeah, they made me feel so stupid,” mom adds.

“You’re not stupid at all,” I say.

“But yours wasn’t like that,” grandma says.

“Neither of you are stupid. They’re just using big words to make themselves sound smarter than they are. I hate it as much as you do.”

CHAPTER NINE:
WHISKEY NIGHTS WITH YUB

During my third year at USF, I ask Yub to work on a project with me for my Emotions, Trauma, and Intimate Interviewing Class with Carolyn Ellis. The following chapter includes interviews, scenes, and free-writes with my brother, exploring our relationship and how we understand our upbringing, during this project and during another interview Summer 2015.

For the class project, we each free-write about our childhood, then exchange writings and interview each other through Skype. Here is Yub's free write.

Dear Yub's class,

"Hardcore match!" Those were the last two words I heard before being knocked unconscious the only time in my life. The thud that followed those two words was probably very sickening for anyone watching what transpired. Apparently the thick plastic they make Lil' Tyke ladders out of is pretty hard. And very sufficient for knocking an 8 year old child out cold. In honor of the WWF's new "a hardcore match can transpire anywhere at anytime rule," Nate "The Great" Hodges, a name my brother used to (very annoyingly) call himself all the time, decided to show his enthusiasm for this new form of reckless abandon on Little Nicky by trying to bludgeon me to death. To be honest that wasn't actually my wrestling alter ego from years ago, I don't even think my brother would allow me to create my own; I had to be whomever just got their ass kicked the most the last time we watched any matches.

You see, the charismatic, easy-going Nate Hodges you've all known to grow and love didn't use to be so nice. Or easy-going. Or any other adjectives that resembled anything good on the scale of morality. He was a monster. A demon child. Not born of man, but sprung straight from Lucifer's sperm. He hated me and had no qualms about showing it. The guy with too much hair product standing before you stole so much of my youthful innocence that they should give me my own special on Lifetime Network: A Child Called Yub.

It's odd to me now, reflecting on my past that he used to be so mean. It's actually hard for me to pinpoint a large collection of the horrible things he's done to me. Except the steak knife stabbing over a PlayStation 2 game, the cracks over the head with a Nintendo 64 controller EVERY time I would score against him in ANY game, the time I got in trouble when HE broke his hand over MY head. OK so it's not that hard. I'll admit I had a handful of it coming to me, but, but, but... HE STARTED IT!

I know I should've just let him win, but we were so damn competitive at everything we did. No matter whether we were playing video games, checkers, or some stupid game we made up. We always had to win. Always. Unfortunately the few times a year I see him now, we still end up arguing over video games, board games, stupid games we made up, and pretty much anything and everything else we fought about as kids. Except Little Nicky is now Big Nicky, so violence rarely erupts.

As much of a dick as he was when we were younger, he was the only one allowed to be, for a few reasons. One of them was due to the fact that I was a kid bullied constantly at home so I had a lot of pent up anger. Another reason was because I was (and am) a total badass. But my favorite reason was because my brother wouldn't allow anyone else to pick on me. I think it was a "what's mine is mine, and the little punching bag with blonde hair is mine" kind of thing.

Luckily for me, or maybe for him, I got much bigger, and Nate's total hatred toward everything that breathed, slowly started dissipating as he entered high school. He actually became the kind of big brother you would want to have. Other than the occasional violent outbursts, he was very helpful to me in my awkward teen years. Even though he was an outright dick and tried to bludgeon me to death with any objects he could get his hands on, he always did display a very heartfelt passion toward his family. He still does. I vividly remember a time when Nate and Dad picked me up unexpectedly from my ex-girlfriend's house and forced me to come home after I had stayed there a couple days. After a short car ride filled with shouting and anger we finally reached home. Nate headed to his room to avoid the inevitable backlash that usually follows when a teenager does not get his way. After one too many "I hate you" and "Fuck off Dad" comments from me and an annoying silence from my father, Nate stormed up the stairs, picked me up by the front of my shirt, and half screamed, half spit "STOP FUCKING TALKING TO MY DAD LIKE THAT!" I know right? Yub had at least a half hour of us arguing to come up with something with a little more jazz, but it was all it took. The intense look in his eye and the large glob of Yub spittle on my chin was enough to scare me off. I wandered off with my tail between my legs, afraid of the big crazy guy with too much hair product in.

He was also the guy to comfort me after I, on the VERY RARE occasion, lost a wrestling match. I was fortunate (or unfortunate) enough, to have my brother on my wrestling team as a senior during my freshman year of high school. The other older guys respected me as a wrestler, partially due to the credentials of my brother, but also respected me because of the respect my brother showed towards me. When I lost a match for our team at the Team Regional tournament to a weaker, slower, less handsome wrestler, I was devastated as I sauntered off the mat. The coach had no sympathy for me because I was clearly better than the ogre that beat me; the team

had very little to say because I had cost them team points, but my brother, although he was trying to prepare for a match he knew was going to be a close contest to a rather good wrestler embraced me and told me he loved me. At which point I sobbed uncontrollably and embarrassed myself, but that's not the point. That was a very selfless act from someone who truly cared about the pain I was feeling at the time, and I will never forget it. Or the day after his last wrestling match ever he wrote down every single thing he ever knew about wrestling and made me go through it with him on the carpeted basement of our house, in our underwear of course.

I have a knife wound on my right elbow, a scar on the back of my head—ask Nate about Mr. Snaggle, a legitimate fear of plastic ladders, a somewhat over-the-top competitive attitude, and way too many grey hairs for any 23 year old. And due, in no small part, to such a fucked up upbringing and childhood you are blessed with an excellent teacher, a wonderful student, and an all-around awesome human being. With way too much hair product in. LOVE YOU YUB!

I send him mine:

Dear Yub,

Pretty much everyone in the family tells me how mean I was to you when I was younger. The reason I wanted to do this project is because it's hard for me to imagine now how different I was then. What changed? I'm trying to put myself back into my younger mind and think about what was going on.

There wasn't really a day that went by when I was around you and didn't hit you. I used to get enraged for even the most ridiculous things. I stabbed you in the arm with a knife when you beat me at NBA Live on Playstation. Or if you told me to "watch out" if I got in front of the TV or something really mundane like that, I would just go off. I would hold you down and beat

the shit of you. I hit you so often that anytime I am around you and move my arm you flinch. You still do today, I think..

We had all sorts of tortuous games I forced you to play. Like the submission game where I put you in a hold and you can't move or make a sound for ten seconds or I hit you. Or when you wanted me to play video games with you, I'd only play if you participated in one of my "torture games." We also had boxing matches. Well, you ran and I boxed.

I bet you really hated being home during the summer; when everyone left the house and it was just us. I don't really recall you fighting back, mainly because you were about 100 pounds smaller. I'm guessing you wanted to beat the shit out of me but you weren't big enough. You resorted to cussing, name-calling, and running, until you got bigger. Lots of younger siblings fight, but why was I so angry and violent?

Because I was picked on at school for being fat? Maybe I was jealous of you? You beat me in nearly everything we did growing up. You always made good grades and were great at wrestling. You won nearly every tournament you entered after a few years of wrestling. I rarely won in my first few years. Eventually, I developed a strong work ethic, training year-round, running, lifting weights and wrestling nearly every day. Even with all the hard work, the victories came slowly. Eventually, a rift between you and dad emerged because he would say things like "if you had your brother's work ethic, you'd be unbeatable son," or "if you worked half as hard as your brother, there isn't a kid in this state that could beat you." Dad's negative comments led you to believe, "Nate's your favorite son."

We also grew up in houses where fighting was happening all the time. Mom was usually in a shouting match with one of her husbands. We'd lay awake in bed listening to them shout, slam doors, break stuff. Dad used to fight with Ralpa. It was normal. We didn't hate each other.

I think we just grew up in an environment where people were violent and fought and this is how we learned to resolve conflicts and deal with each other.

*Now we joke about how mean I was back then. How come you're not mad at me? **The weird part about it is, even though I was so mean to you, I still loved you and would kill anyone else who fucked with you.***

I look forward to seeing your free-write. I love you yub!

After the free-writes we prepare questions to ask each other during a Skype conversation. Even though it wasn't a prompt for the writing, we discover that violence is the main idea we focus on. Yub says, "If I had to describe my childhood in one word it'd be violent – just fuckin' violent." We also realize that although violence is typically thought of as destructive and abnormal, it wasn't that simple in our family.

"To speak only of helplessness and intimidation is to oversimplify a complex bond...It is as easy to over-dramatize as it is to underestimate...[Sibling Violence] is so common that it is almost invisible. Parents often ignore it as long as nobody gets killed; researchers rarely study it; and many psychotherapists consider its softer forms a normal part of growing up...parents often escalate conflicts by playing favorites, ignoring obvious victimization, intervening only to shut kids up or blaming older children without understanding how younger children provoke them" (Butler, 2006).

It is challenging to talk about our relationship growing up in ways that show the complexity – the love, anger, violence, and play all smashed together into, well, a pretty normal childhood to us. Below is a portion of our Skype conversation:

"Why don't you hate me now?" I ask.

"I never did," Yub says.

“But why aren’t you mad at me now?”

“I never was. I got mad at small things but I never disliked you. I had a lot of fun with you. I don’t know why. There’s no simple answer because that’s goddamn batshit crazy. You were fucking mean to me. I know you were mean but I don't remember hating you for it. I'd tell you I did but I never took our lives back then as anything but normal. I was young and that's all I knew life to be. Where did our anger come from? It had to be mom and dad ‘cuz they were always fighting.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Maybe I was just taking violence out from other people on to you. It wasn’t until I stayed the night at Clay Buck’s house in elementary school that I realized not all families fight like this.”

“Yeah. And what about dad? We were scared to wake our own father up. That’s terrible.”

“I know. You remember how he treated Peaches? Dad woke up one time and saw her climbing onto the counter to get some food, and he kicked her in the side.”

“He probably kicked her in the ass when she runnin’ out the door too.”

“Yeah he did. Then he probably said something like, *you gotta’ fuckin’ teach ‘em son or they’ll never learn!*”

“Dad has such a grand idea of what a family is and he's in a sense the most family-oriented person I've ever met but growing up he never showed us any resemblance of a normal family,” Yub says. “For example, every time he sends an envelope out, even for bills and stuff, he has a sticker that says "The Hodges Family" instead of "Mike Hodges." And you know how grammaw’s moving in with him?”²⁸

²⁸ My dad became my grandma’s legal guardian in the last year of her life when she had Parkinson’s Disease and other medical problems. He and my Aunt Kristi, who lives with my dad, were her primary caregivers until her death.

“Yeah.”

“He moved all his stuff out of the living room and gave me his furniture because he’s trying to make it look exactly like grammaw’s living room for her. He actually cried today. Like happy tears. Because he said that’s the best grammaw’s looked in months. He’s like, *Hell son. It could almost bring a tear to your dad’s eye*, and he started tearin’ up. It was sad.”²⁹

“I don’t know if any one of us was more angry or meaner than the other,” I say.

“Maybe I was and maybe I did initiate a lot of stuff but I think I was so much bigger that I could just beat you up.”

“No,” Yub replies. “I always wanted to play. Every time I’d score on you, you’d just CRACK, one time. Or if I’m winning with forty seconds left, you’d turn it off. You’d win. You had this uncanny ability to actually convince me I lost a game even though there was only ten seconds left and I was winning. I feel like every now and then I would lose a game on purpose, not because I was scared you were gonna beat me up. Just because I felt bad ‘cuz I always beat you at everything. I was pretty smart when I was younger and just like I was naturally good at things and I feel like you were just bitter about that for some reason.”

“I think that might have had something to do with it,” I reply.

“I made a joke in what I wrote about having a Lifetime Network special, but seriously there are movies about kids being bullied severely by their older siblings,” Yub says. “I feel like a knife wound and taking a log over the back of the head is a good premise to a movie.”

“There’s some that’s not even as bad as the violence you got,” I reply.

“You broke your hand over my head. Remember that?”

²⁹ Seeing my father cry or show any emotion other than anger throughout much of my childhood is rare. It still is, but his masculinity has become more complex since I’ve left for school. He’s more expressive, more vulnerable, but he “always will be silent, strong, hard-working, and stuck in his ways of being a man: a man with a monolithic, quiet strength” (Strasser, 2016, p. 68).

“Oh yeah.”

“You were just beating the shit out of me for something stupid. I eventually went out there to dad who was mowing the yard and told him and he was just like, *Son, have you ever heard the story about the fuckin' sheep who cried wolf?* and just saying don't fucking tell on your brother when nothing's really happened. And then when I came back you fuckin' tore into me. Just holding me down and punching me in the back of the head as hard as you could. And you broke your hand. I didn't know it at the time. But I went down there ballin'. I mean there were knots all over. All he did was have to stop his tractor to hear me. Dad was so pissed at me. The next day we had to take you to the after-hours clinic to get your hand checked out. And I remember the receptionist making a comment about, *Oh, we're not gonna see that guy coming in with a black eye are we?* And I didn't say anything but dad made a joke about it. I remember being just so upset at that time that I tried to tell dad you were beating the fuck out of me and he just tried to turn it into a life lesson about not being a pussy.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“I remember what upset me more than anything in the world is when you would really hurt me and be mean to me, everyone just thought, *eh, they're just brothers*. Like, it's not normal to get hit over the head with a fucking log.”

May 30, 2015

“Dick,” I say testing the Macbook Photo Booth recorder.

“Are you recording?” Yub asks. We're sitting on his living room floor around a ten-dollar table I just purchased for him from Goodwill. His ex-girlfriend took most of the furniture with her after they broke off their engagement. There are clothes and trash everywhere. He's behind on his payments and expects to move in with dad soon.

“Yeah, it just started when I said dick,” I say.

“Dick,” he says. “...And we’re live.”

“Alright, what kind of work do you do and how do you feel about your job?”

“I work at a company called ExpressScripts,” he says. “I do factory-type work. I move medicine from one space to another so a vehicle can move it to some location in the country. It's a pharmacy but I spell it with an 'F' because I have no respect for my job. I think a lot about our culture and civilization and I work for a company that sells pussy creams and placebo effects to cancer patients. So I feel pretty good about it,” he jokes. “At first I liked the security. It's a forty-hour-a-week job plus overtime if you want that extra money. For factory work, it's pretty clean and pretty easy physically. It's not emotionally draining. Same as everyone. You clock in, you clock out.”

“Are there carpets?” I ask, trying to get a visual for the place.

“No, but it is temperature-controlled. There's actually a lot of federal regulations on what we do so it's gotta be clean. And we do live tours to gain customers.”

“Do you have fun at work?”

“I love the people I'm with, but you see this desperation in people like ‘I need this job. Actually it's not even *I* need this job. They'll look someone dead in the eye and say *you need this*. Uh, no I don't. There's plenty of places in the world paying fourteen dollars an hour to hate yourself for eight hours. That's part of factory work – learning to be okay with hating what you do. Part of the reason I like going to work is telling my coworkers, *I don't need this job and neither do you*. I'm not startin' a revolution by any means, but there's still a definite backlash. I don't believe in the same things they believe in. But I love the people I work with. I make them giggle. They like me.”

“But you don't like the job? What would you do if you got fired then? Which might become a reality soon.”

“Yeah, it's a really plausible reality. I don't care. I quit, go back to school, sell my car and do what I want to do. I'm not saying I'm flirting with that line of danger. Every time I miss a day mom says, 'Is that 12 points? Are you fired?' I say 'No, I got a point back yesterday.' Fuck it. It's Saturday. I'm gonna sleep until 2 pm.”

“So are you thinking about going back to school then?”

“Yeah. Thinking about it. Not acting on it very well.”

“Why do you wanna go back to school?”

“Just because I like school. I don't know. That's as far as I've gotten really. I like people challenging me mentally. People respect me at school. I don't get respected at work. To the people at work, to the working-class, I'm not intelligent. I'm an idiot. I live too free.”

“You're an idiot to the people you work with?”

“Yeah, my coworkers, the ones at my level of pay. They affectionately call me an idiot. It's not that they think I'm dumb. It's just that my drive does not lie in making a paycheck or how many hours I achieve in a week. The people I work with seem to give a certain amount of respect to the corporation of Express Scripts rather than the people who run it. If I'm ever in a deep, meaningful conversation with one of my coworkers which is hard to do at a place like that because you're constantly having to do little chores, someone can walk up to me at any time and say, *stop this conversation and fix this machine*. That's the thing I like least about my job. It's a slavery to structure. I could be trying to cheer someone up who's having a bad day, but in the job description it says to keep employees working so someone can come up and stop me. I don't

argue but I'm adamant about I'm gonna do what I want, and it's within the confines of the rules, so they can't fire me.”

“Seems to be something we've both had in common our whole lives – we really, really don't like being told what to do.”

“Ever. I made a joke the other day that I do the opposite.” Yub scrunches his face in disgust while chugging the rest of his cheap whiskey.

“There ya’ go, Yub.”

“It's my inspiration juice.”

“I think we got that dislike of authority from growing up in the family that we did,” I say.

“Yeah? Well how many military members do we have in our family?”³⁰ The ultimate test of authority.”

“Yeah that's true, but at the same time, they're critical of authority. Mom and dad always told stories about their bosses being shitty and how they hated 'em. My boss is a fucking idiot. My boss screwed me over. My boss doesn't do anything. And they hate the government.”

“And dad insults every cop that pulls him over. We were lacking authority growing up too. We didn't have much structure.”

“That's true. I mean as kids we mostly played on our own around the neighborhood until dinner time when we came home. We didn't have much structure. Mom sometimes didn't even know where the fuck we were all day.”

“Didn't we used to get locked out? Weren't their days where if we were inside playing too much Nintendo or goofing off, they'd kick us out?”

“They probably wanted to kick us out so they could smoke pot.”

³⁰ Several of my uncles and cousins were in the military on both my mom and dad's sides of the family. Also, my stepdad and Papaw were in the military.

“I think we just annoyed them at times. They're like, ‘you're too loud and obnoxious and I'm cooking dinner,’ and they'd just lock us out until dinner was done.”

“I remember when we went to Nicholson in second and third grade and I walked home from school. Most my day was spent playing outside. I'd just say, see ya mom. That has to shape how you think and approach life. As little kids, when we were still learning and having our values shaped we had very little structure.”³¹

“Well I remember I peed the bed forever. Like first or second grade is when I finally stopped.”

“I did too. I went way longer than that, I think. I went until like sixth grade.”

“Pissing to bed? No you didn't. Did you really?”

“Actually when did I stop?”

“It was before me,” Yub says.

“Maybe it was. I don't know why I'm so eager to say I pissed to bed longer than you.”

“I just remember it was around the same time mom babysitted my best friend Jared Earle. We lived on Traction Road. Mom tried to make me wear those diaper things to bed. Goodnights I think they were called. Mom would wake me up for school and I'd be covered in piss. I was in charge of cleaning myself, picking outfits, and then making it to the bus on time. Well our driveway was a fucking quarter mile long, so I'd wake up, wipe the piss off, and put on a red sweatshirt and sweatpants, then sprint through the woods to make it to the bus on time. That's not structure. Why wasn't mom helping? Even if she smoked weed, roll a joint real early, smoke it, and drive us to the fucking bus.”

³¹ Engen (2012) argues “At the core of these different [parenting] approaches stands a different definition of self, with poor and working-class parents seeing self as something that emerges naturally and professional middle class parents seeing self as something to be cultivated and transformed through communication and structured activities” (p. 235).

“Tell your son to take a shower,” I say.

“Yeah, I just pissed myself. And your idea is to just scream at me until I'm awake.”

“PICKLE!” I say mimicking mom.

“Yeah, and how many times did we get in fights waiting for the bus?”

“Never,” I reply sarcastically.

“I got kicked off the bus because-”

“Whose fault is that?” I tease.

“I was instigating I'm sure. It's six in the morning and I'm covered in piss in an all red sweat suit that mom approved of by saying, ‘bye pickle.’ I wasn't happy. But we didn't even make it to the next stop. You just turned, hit me with your book bag, and started beating the shit out of me.”

“That's because you hit me first,” I tease.

“I imagine I tried to trip you when you went by and you beat the shit out of me. I was a little shitbag. It doesn't matter. The bus driver blamed me. She was just tired of it. She said I had to sit in the back with the high schoolers and they started a prison chant like, ‘fresh meat!’ I said no. Mom had to come pick me up twenty yards down the road and her initial reaction was to ground me because she had to pick me up and drive me to school, even though she knew you beat the shit outta me.”

“Mommy loves you bubby,” I say mimicking mom. “Alright, let's go to a different question. What would your ideal life be?”³²

³² Capello (1995), a working-class academic, discusses her relationship with her brother who was accepted into the Berklee School of Music but didn't go. He works as a roofer and hates his job. He sometimes does gigs to reawaken his musical interest but mostly deals with bouts of unemployment, work, and taking care of his kids. She wonders if her brother would be more financially stable and have a better self-esteem if he went to school, but she says, “I can't really

“A fucking utopia that doesn't exist. I don't know.”

“Like do you wanna keep working in a factory?”

“Absolutely not. I hate the rigid structure. That's gonna happen anywhere. I'm never gonna be in charge but-”

“Even where I am. I'm teaching public speaking next semester and they keep making it more standardized. They're telling me speeches I have to do, criteria I have to use for speeches. I mean, I'm not gonna do it. Some of the same sort of things happening in your factory are happening in this factory.”³³

“The professor factory,” Yub replies. “I feel like money needs to be mentioned but I don't want to.”

“Well, you just did,” I say.

“I don't care about money. I could make a hundred thousand a year and still spend a hundred and twenty thousand a year. I could make thirty thousand a year and I'm spendin' forty.”

“However much you have is however much you're spending,”

“Yeah, my ideal life? It doesn't even revolve around me. I hate how this factory creates such a hierarchy. I hate inequality and that boils down to you cannot be better than anyone. You can punch my dog. I don't care. She's a dog. I get it there's a hypocrisy already but you're not better than the dog. For some reason you were just born into a body that was more evolved.”

fill that gaping space with a what-life-would-have-been for my brother. In fact, to do so would be to evade my trouble: a perceived gulf between my life and the lives of those I love and have left behind” (p. 133).

³³ Di Leo (2014) writes, “The neoliberal university not only transforms its faculty into workers but it also regards its students, that is, its consumers, as workers-in-training. Thus, if faculty and staff of the neoliberal university are workers, and its students are workers-in-training, then why should we not regard the university itself as a working-class institution?”

“But you gotta catch her and she’s faster. Alright, a few questions about your perception of me. In what ways do you think I’ve changed or stayed the same since going to school?”

“You have a drive now that you didn't have. You were dedicated to wrestling for a fraction of your life but you have this passion that never existed before. You wanna help people now. That's a one-hundred eighty degree difference. You were an angry little shit. You were mean but you were also bullied. I don't wanna say you came from humble beginnings. You came from a weird beginning. You came from a trailer where there was no parents and a stench of pot smoke in the air. But someone who's close to you could've saw that drive.”

“I'm sure Mr. Welliever might have seen that drive in wrestling.”

“That's where your passion was apparent then. I don't wanna say if you have a passion you can apply it to anything else. That's not true. But you found a zone you're comfortable in. That's good. How have you stayed the same? You're still a cunt. I don't know. You're still you. You're still you bubbly,” he says mimicking mom. “You're goofy.”

“So it's not like I went to school and became a different person?” I say.

“No. You didn't leave in a trench coat and come back in a blazer. You're still the same person or you wouldn't be talking to me about social class. You wouldn't be trying to understand where you came from if you were different than you were before. The same things are still important. You just gave yourself a leg up on what this hierarchy means. I wish you thought less about social class to be honest. I know you have this anxiety that you're exhibiting a 'holier than thou' attitude but you're really not. I don't think we think of you differently.”

“I'm glad that I think about class because there are people that don't. I think Uncle Jim is a classic example of someone who felt he had somehow risen above something.”

“Yeah, well he did,” Yub says.

“That's one way of looking at it. Another way of looking at it is to say there is no way of life any better than any other way of life. It's not inherent that any job is better than any other.”

“You're gonna fall into a group no matter where you are in life and the working-class has this mob mentality that hard work pays off. The hypocrisy is that they don't realize once they climb that ladder and take that step into the desk job they've always wanted, they're turning around and disagreeing with everything they've said for years to achieve that status. They're giving up on the same beliefs, same values, same kickassness that made them an awesome human, all because someone throws twelve thousand dollars more a year at them. Mom would make jokes about her supervisors and immediately when she became a supervisor, there was like a probationary feeling-out period where she didn't say anything about those that were above or below her but then she got comfortable and now its 'her workers don't work hard enough, they don't care enough, there's not enough passion.' All her values and beliefs prior to this job have just been turned over and buttfucked.”

“Yeah but does someone have to do that? Do you think that I can still be the same person that mom and dad raised me and you as, like the values they tried to instill, and still be an academic? You think I can be both?”

“They didn't instill much good values,” Yub says. “You can elaborate and make it seem more in depth but they didn't.”

“Well they did,” I say. “We are who we are because of how they raised us.”

“Take more credit for yourself. Seriously. Maybe this is just me personally. They were pretty much divorced by the time I was born and were close to being divorced right before they were divorced. Everything was a struggle for them. It's like an eternal challenge they couldn't

overcome. There wudn't enough time to sit down and have family game night. There wudn't enough time for-

“Family dinners.”

“Yeah. There wasn't any, ‘this is who we as a family think you should grow and evolve to be.’ Anything you are, you've created. I think that's your uniqueness.”

“But if we had that organized family, we wouldn't be the same people we are today,” I say. “We probably wouldn't have the same sense of humor. We probably wouldn't have the cynicism we have now. We'd be different people. I think it's easy to look at our childhood negatively but as an academic, my job is to be critical and be comfortable with ambiguity. I can see how growing up in an environment where we moved all the time and where there was constant bullshit would make me a person who's critical and comfortable with ambiguity.”

“Okay, would you say you're almost destined to be in academia then?”

“I don't know if I'm destined to but...”

“You've laid out the two things that make you a good academic are your drive and your willingness for change.”

“Well that, but also the way me and you can see through bullshit. Our jokes are based on this cynicism. And we call out our own bullshit. I think we're like that because we grew up in a family where it was constant moving, mom getting divorced, and where the things we experienced at home were very different than what we experienced at school.”

“I think we were fed our own fair share of bullshit growing up,” Yub says. “A specific example I remember: Mom was dating Dale Lamb. I was in third grade in Crab Orchard, Kentucky. You were in sixth. And this was before we understood drugs. I remember mom just bawling one day. I finally asked her what's wrong, why do you keep crying? She screams out

through tears, 'I have a migraine.' I'm empathetic enough to know you're not crying like that because of a migraine. Hours later, I told you she had a migraine, just regurgitating the bullshit response she gave me. You're like, 'No, Dale's mom just died.' I remember my little third-grade self feeling shattered that mom would lie to me about why she was crying."

"I think that's important for why we are the way we are," I say. "Because you learned at a young age the contradictions in what mom was saying and not every family experiences that. Like we knew mom wasn't just in her room reading. We smelled the pot."

"When I was in sixth grade at New Market, mom used to have a bookcase right next to her bedroom door. One day, I had a cold and I was over there looking for a book. Mom had been in her room for a day or two. I didn't know she was doing fucking meth at this point. I'm just looking for a book so I could lay down and recuperate. I was sniffing, and mom came out of her room abruptly, asking me what I was smellin' for. She thought I was sniffing to smell if she was doing drugs. I learned cynicism from our parents."

"They also said one thing and did another," I reply. "Mom said stay out of trouble, don't do drugs, and then there were cops showing up at our door. When you grow up in a family like that where you hear one thing and see another, you're bound to grow up cynical. How important do you think education was to us growing up? Do you think it was emphasized by our parents?"

"No, there was never a 'go do your homework.' They didn't like it when we got in trouble at school. Well, mom didn't. I made good grades though. I know you kinda had piss poor grades when you were younger. I was smart. But shouldn't there have been some reinforcement there? I don't know, you're the fucking academic. How was education for you growing up?"

“I don't remember it being emphasized by our parents at all. Not the same it is for Brianna now.”³⁴ Mom told me this summer she learned from mistakes she made with us and is able to be a better parent for Brianna.

“No, I got a 4.2 my junior year of high school one semester and no mention of it.”

“How'd you get that?”

“I'm fucking smart, you little cunt,” he says, grabbing the sheet of questions. “What do you think mom and dad wanted for us growing up and what do you think they want for us now?” he reads then answers. “I used to always say I wanted to be a lawyer when I was younger. I remember dad telling me I need to grow up and be a CEO. He still tells me that. That's him reaffirming his faith in me and letting me know he supports me. I was good at math. Dad thought math, business – do it. Well I'm good at communicating with people too. I'm good at understanding people. They never mentioned you could make a living connecting with people. That's how you've changed since college. Our parents learn from you more now than you learn from them. That's something they didn't experience or accept growing up.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You love what you do. Your job is to communicate with, learn from, and understand people. That was never emphasized growing up. It was, ‘you could be a CEO, you could run a company.’ It was never you could make a honest, good-hearted living interacting with people.”

³⁴ My cousin, Brianna, lives with mom and Jeff. Mom is her legal guardian. Brianna's mom, Kim, fed up with her marriage, divorced Jay, Brianna's dad, and left to Florida, leaving Brianna with her dad, who was unemployed and addicted to painkillers. He receives monthly disability checks for a back injury he sustained falling off a ladder at work years ago. Child Protective Services was called and they asked mom to take Brianna in. Mom has a court-ordered protection against Jay, after various threats.

“When I was talking to dad the first week I got back here from Tampa I was telling him that you had applied to Manchester and he was like, 'why would he wanna leave that job? He's making good money. 'I would trade him for that job.' Mom even supports you going to school though she wants you to go to work, mostly 'cuz she cosigned the loan for your car.”

“She does. More so than dad. In a way I understand our parents tried to raise both of us individually. It's an old hacky comedian joke but by the second kid, they're done. I was the kid right before they got divorced and part of me takes it personally and I don't want to but there's probably some truth to that. They got lucky. I was smart. I got good grades. I was an athlete. They didn't have to worry. I'm okay, but I think I'm just ready for the second act of my life. I kinda want to abandon everything and do something I love. Of course they're skeptical. They've seen how hard you had to work and financially the struggles you've been through. They're like no. I'm like say no again and I'll punch ya in the fuckin' mouth,” he teases. “I learned that from my dad.”

“Classic dad. So do you think that me going to college has changed you at all?”

“Oh yeah. It's inspired me. You interact with people and write for a living. I love those same things and I never realized you could have a job doing those things until you. You're a huge inspiration in my life. I'm gonna teach at the same school and teach all your students. I wanna be on record saying that.”

“Alright, I think that's good for now,” I say turning the recorder off. “Wanna play another game of Magic?”

July 31, 2015

“I’m tappin’ five mana and bringin’ out a Garruk, Primal Hunter.” I slap the Magic® card down on dad’s living room floor. Yub moved in a week ago with his dog, Bella. “And four more mana for an Ajani Steadfast.”

“Goddamnit! I fucking hate that thing,” Yub says shaking his head.

“I’ll add one loyalty counter to Garruk for a three-three green beast token and take two off-”

“Fuck this, I forfeit.” He grabs the bottle of 99-proof liquor, unscrews the lid and takes a big pull. He scrunches his face in disgust. We’re playing loser chugs and nearing the tenth round. Let’s just say Yub’s not sober. He puts the bottle down and exhales. “Who doesn’t move into their dad’s house at twenty-five and drink a fifth at 3 a.m.?” he says.

I take a puff off my cigar. “Put another one in the win column for this deck,” I say tallying my record on a scrap of paper I keep with the cards. “*Suck my big fat deck* is now thirty-five and four.”

“Put another one in the win column for self-respect,” he says. “Being two months behind on car payments and spending my paycheck on Magic cards, pot, and alcohol.” I laugh. “I have to shit,” he says walking to the bathroom. He leaves the door open and plops down on the toilet, visible from my spot on the floor.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! An alarm sounds from Yub’s phone. “Fuck you, I ain’t goin’ to work,” he jokes. He forgot to turn off his alarm for the weekend. But three-thirty wakeup time? No wonder he misses so much work.

“You ever finish that essay?” I ask. “No, it’s not due until later this week.”

“This is the Rogerian³⁵ one, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, we’re supposed to basically look at the issue from multiple angles and find a middle ground.”

“I have a few articles I could send you,” I say. “Me and Krystal created a teaching activity called the perspective-taking presentation (Hodges & Bresnahan, 2013) that also might be helpful.” I grab my laptop and email him the teaching activity along with a short article from my advisor about criteria (Bochner, 2000).

Yub is enrolled in an online English class at a local community college. For his first assignment he had to critically analyze an advertisement. He chose a cellphone commercial and sent it to me after he turned it in. I thought it was well-written and hilarious. His teacher assigned him a C on the paper with the comment, "Don't use first-person in academic writing. You did it okay here but only use 'I' sparingly. Never use second-person though."

Next, students were to submit a topic proposal to the teacher, using that same topic to write three different argument papers. Guess what topic Yub chose? "Encouraging first-person voice in academic writing." His thesis was something along the lines of “we should encourage writers to be more subjective and move closer to their subject, not further away."

To help him with his paper, we engage in several discussions about objectivity and subjectivity, discussing the same ideas we discuss in my Writing Lives classes and the same issues I debate in my graduate classes. I let him borrow my advisor, Art Bochner’s (2014)

³⁵ Referring to Carl Rogers, a renowned humanistic psychologist. Piper (1995), a psychology professor and first in her family to go to college writes how even Rogers, one of the most popular psychologists, is class-biased without realizing it. She shares a passage from his book *The Therapeutic Relationship* to illustrate the subtle ways in which his classism emerges: ‘The unmotivated, defensive, and reluctant patient from a different (lower) socioeconomic background may not provide the therapist sufficient opportunity to deepen the relationship, and may thus severely limit the therapist’s ability to communicate and function effectively’ (p. 292).

autoethnographic book in which he discusses several of these issues. Yub also borrows one of my favorite books, *Reality Hunger* (Shields, 2010), and I email him several articles that discuss the importance of first-person, subjective writing and critique the tradition of third-person, impersonal academic prose, including autoethnographic exemplars (Bochner, 1997; Bochner, 2012; Carter, 2002; Hodges, 2015a; Hodges, 2015b; Pelias, 2000). I am thrilled to be sharing with Yub the same readings I read in school, and having conversations with him I have in the classroom. He also cites one of my articles in his paper.

The toilet flushes. “I think I might write the whole thing in second person just to piss her off,” he says.

Since I’ve been in college I’ve went back and forth about encouraging Yub to attend college. Sometimes I feel I’m pushing too hard and I should let him do with his life whatever he wants. On the other hand, I feel like he lacks the confidence and information to apply to and attend college. He’s scared. He’s been in Crawfordsville for too long, stuck in jobs he hates, jobs that don’t stimulate him or give meaning to his life. This summer we’ve connected more than ever. He’s interested in what I do in school. He is fascinated by the idea that I get paid to do something I love. I want to help him get out, to do something he loves and allows him to use his intelligence and creativity.

CHAPTER TEN:
DISCOVERING DARLINGTON

After passing my qualifying exams and defending my dissertation proposal, I travel home during the summer to conduct interviews and fieldwork in Montgomery County.

I roll over and look at my phone. Quarter after noon. I push the blankets off and move my feet from the mattress to the wooden floor, yawning and stretching my arms above my head. I've been staying at mom's house most nights since I've been home for the summer.

I open the door and am greeted by mom's two little white Shih-Tzu puppies, Buddy and Winston. They wag their whole bodies and jump at my legs. Winston licks my foot and I reach down to pick him up. He goes limp when I nestle him in my arms like a sleeping baby and give him kisses. I set him down and walk toward the kitchen. A folded stack of my clean laundry sits on the dining room table.

"Hey, are those yours?" Jeff says walking into the dining room.

"Hey Jeff. Yeah, these are mine."

"They were downstairs so I went ahead and washed them."

"Thank you. You been outside?" Sweat is glistening on his forehead and soaking through his, *This guy needs a beer* shirt, the same one he bought me.

"Yeah, I mowed the rest of the yard. Hotter 'en shit out there."

"Looks like it."

“Oh, and I had to move your van forward to mow over there. I put some power steering fluid in it for ya. Damn thing needed some. That musta’ been like going to the gym every time you drove.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty good workout! Thanks Jeff.” I’ve been driving my dad’s old Chevy Lumina van since I’ve been home for the summer. I grab the stack of laundry, bring it to my room, and walk to the kitchen.

“Left you some blueberry pancakes,” Jeff says.

“Alright, thanks,” I say, eyeing the stack of pancakes on the counter.

“And I bought a dozen eggs from the neighbor this morning, if ya want some of those.” Our neighbor owns chickens, which make their presence known every morning.

“What makes ya think I’d want some eggs?” He laughs. I eat about a dozen eggs or egg whites a day. I haven’t eaten meat since my senior year of undergrad, more than five years ago. This shocked my family, especially the men, most of whom are hunters and fisherman. Real men eat meat. They certainly see no reason to not eat it. My reasons for stopping aren’t moral or health related. I just wanted to see if I had the discipline to do it. My dad still asks every time I see him, “You’re not eatin’ meat are ya’ son?” like he still can’t believe it. Yesterday, when I woke up Jeff had already made dinner for me and mom that night so we wouldn’t have to worry about cooking anything. Once he had the green bean, potatoes, and ham in the crockpot, he remembered I don’t eat meat, and made me rice and beans, too.

“And there’s a fresh pot of coffee for ya,” he says.

“Awesome! Thanks.” He retreats downstairs to take a shower before work – second shift at a cheese processing and packaging factory in Crawfordsville. Two years ago, the book publishing factory Jeff worked at forced the workers with the most years of experience to retire

or be fired and then replaced them with inexperienced workers – one of whom was Jeff’s son, Nathan – at about half the wages. I wrote Jeff’s resume when he applied for a new job.

I pour my first of many cups of coffee for the day and grab a pancake from the plate on the counter. I roll it up and eat it in a few bites, then get the carton of fresh eggs out of the fridge. Looks like Jeff has already cleaned them, probably anticipating that I’d want some this morning. I grab a pan from the dish rack in the sink, noticing Jeff cleaned my dirty dishes I left in the sink from a late night snack. I put the pan on the gas stove and crack three eggs.

While the eggs are cooking, I grab my computer and a printed draft of this dissertation chapter, and bring them to the dining room table. I finish making an egg and cheese sandwich and sit at the table with my coffee and food. Before writing, I enjoy a quick game of online chess with my breakfast. I lose.

Jeff comes upstairs, “Looks like ya found ya somethin’ to eat.”

“Yep. Had one of those pancakes too. They were good.”

“You can have some more. Just make sure you leave a couple for your mom.”

Brianna walks through the dining room. “You finish your chores?” Jeff asks.

“Yeah, I did all of them,” she says.

“Are you sure? You clean the toilet?” Jeff asks.

“Yeah, I did that last.” She grabs a glass of Kool-Aid and heads back to her room.

Mom writes a note most mornings before she leaves for work at 5. Typically the note includes a list of chores she’d like Jeff and Brianna to complete. She has not asked me to do any chores this summer because she knows I am writing my dissertation. Yet, when I look at the tasks she’d like the only other two people in the house to complete, I feel lazy and privileged. Then I struggle through six hours of writing and wish I could do chores instead.

Writing for six hours doesn't actually mean physically writing for six hours. I take breaks to eat, refill my coffee, poop, pee, play with the puppies, check my email, handwrite notes, and other things to avoid the page. I sit in a chair drinking coffee and writing about Jeff while he is outside in the sun, mowing the yard, chopping wood, fixing something, and pouring sweat, before he goes to the job he is paid for.

Growing up in an environment where work is something that wears you out and makes you swear, I often feel ambivalent about my "work" in the academy. I downplay my academic achievements, saying things like, *I'm getting recognized just for sitting in a chair and typing while my dad busts his ass everyday and doesn't get any recognition*, when I receive an award, or *We actually get paid just to read and talk to people*, when I feel exhausted after a long day of teaching. "My old self doesn't respect my new self. My old self says I'm living a lazy, privileged life. My new self says, what more could I do? My old self says, you're not doing anything productive" (Christopher, 1995, p. 140). The feeling that I'm never working hard enough keeps me overcompensating in school – spending more hours writing, more hours preparing for teaching, and trying to cover everything in papers and presentations. I try to make my work feel like my dad's assembly line work. It needs to feel stressful and strenuous. This summer, I wrote most of my dissertation outside in the muggy Indiana heat, sweat literally dripping onto my drafts.

"Let's see...what am I going to have for lunch?" Jeff says, looking through the fridge. "I guess I'll have leftover pizza. Pizza and Kool-Aid. Havin' a nigger lunch tonight." I shake my head as Jeff laughs. "Now if only the Kool-Aid was grape and I was a few shades darker." He laughs again. "And I walked into work with my drawers hanging halfway down my ass." I laugh. "This generation is gonna have hip problems when they're older cuz they walk around like this

all the time,” he waddles hips pretending to keep his pants from falling down. I laugh again and shake my head.

His cell phone rings.

“Hi honeypie!” he says.

“Hi my Jeffy!” I hear mom through the phone. She’s not known for being quiet. “You need to call that lady today about our insurance,” she says.

“Don’t tell me how to live my life,” Jeff teases.

“You’ll do what I tell you to, Jeffy! Cuz I own this bitch!” Jeff laughs. Anytime someone in our house gets told to do something, the response is, ‘Don’t tell me how to live my life.’ Mom even made a song for Jeff, ‘Don’t tell me how to live my life, cuz I’m your wife, and I’ll cut ya with a knife.’ Mom asks, really tells Jeff what to do everyday – picking up something here, dropping off something there, doing this, doing that – and Jeff does it. He does everything she tells him to do, even when she’s rude, because he adores her.

“What’s Nate doin’?” mom asks.

“He’s out lookin’ for them damn Kamikaze sparrows,” Jeff says. I laugh from the dining room table. Last weekend, when Jeff was mowing, a rock flung from the blade and cracked a window on the house. I went outside to tell him and when he went over to check it out, he laughed and said, ‘Your mom ain’t gonna be happy about this. Better tell her it was those damn kamikaze sparrows.’

“Jeff, quit being a penis,” I hear mom tease.

There is rarely a conversation between mom and Jeff not filled with banter. Just yesterday, mom had Jeff in a headlock saying, “Now tell me you’re sorry!” When he tried to weasel out of it, she yelled, “Jeff quit touching my privates.” She especially likes to yell this in

public to embarrass him. It backfired last time though. They were at Wal-Mart waiting in line to check out and Jeff kept annoying her by sneaking items like super-sized bras in the cart. She yelled, “Jeff quit touching my penis!” a slip of the tongue.

“Alright, love ya, see ya later, bye,” Jeff says quickly before hanging up, the same goodbye they always say.

“Well shit,” Jeff says looking at the clock. “Why can’t I just hit the lottery?” He grabs his lunch cooler.

“Bout that time?” I ask.

“Yep, time to go to my happy place. You ready Brianna?” he yells toward her bedroom. He is dropping her off at her boyfriend’s house and picking her up after he gets off at work at 10. Brianna walks out of her room, dolled up for her boyfriend.

“Bye bubby,” she says.

“See ya.”

They both leave. I stay at the dining room table writing, the puppies at my feet.

A few hours later I hear mom’s Jeep pull in the driveway.

Arff! Arff! Arff! “Buddy!” *Arff! Arff!* “Buddy! Shutup!” He’s on the swing in our screened-in front porch, his head peeking up just high enough to see out the window.

As soon as she walks in the door the puppies jump at her legs. “Awww. Hi boys! Mommy’s home.”

“Hi bubby!”

“Hi mom!”

“Want me to make us something for dinner?” she asks.

“That’d be awesome!” Don’t get mom’s home cookin’ in Tampa.

“Whataya want?”

“Mmm. How about mushroom and avocado omelettes with asparagus?”

“You just had that a couple nights ago.”

“I know but it was good. Or we could make a little Buddy stir-fry. Give me a reason to eat meat again.”

“Aww, take it back. He don’t mean it, Buddy,” mom says leaning down to kiss him.

“Need any help with dinner, mom?”

“No, I got it bubby. I’m going to relax for a few minutes first. I’ve been on my feet all day.”

“Okay. We’re still having our interview tonight, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, we can do it after dinner.”

I grab my computer and walk downstairs into Jeff’s basement getaway to write. There’s a **Man Cave** sign hanging above the doorframe. I open the fridge to grab a bottled water but all I find is Miller High Life. On top of the fridge, a sign stares back at me: **Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be shot again.** Jeff ain’t kiddin’. There is a loaded gun cabinet about twenty feet from me. Mostly he uses the guns to hunt, as evidenced by the deer antlers sitting on the floor next to his coonhound hunting trophy. I shut the fridge door and sit down in the recliner.

Sitting on a table beside the gun cabinet is a pile of Jeff’s long sleeve blue work shirts. He’s fifty years old and had a job since 7th grade. In the 25 years he spent at Donnelley’s before he was forced to retire, he only missed six days, and according to him, he only missed those days because they pushed him out the door. Even when he’s not at work, he’s working. I rarely see him sitting still. The day he had his gallbladder removed, he came home and mowed the yard.

On the wall hangs a Confederate flag with country singer Hank Williams Jr. in the center and the phrase, “If the South would’ve won, we would have had it made” stitched across the top. Yeah, we’d have it made! Ain’t nothing like kickin’ back on your porch watching your field slaves fill your bank account while your house slave serves you sweet tea. If the south would’ve won Darlington would be experiencing a slave labor shortage. According to the 2013 Census, 99% of Darlington’s 840 people (which includes surrounding area) are white. There is one black person. He’s married to a white woman. They live right around the corner. Of course everywhere is right around the corner in Darlington.

Leaning against the TV stand is a framed photo of the main characters from Duck Dynasty, one of Jeff’s favorite reality TV shows before it was cancelled when the main character, Phil Robertson, compared homosexuality to bestiality and said blacks were not mistreated during the Jim Crow era. Jeff was pissed when the show was taken off the air. He doesn’t like the government or anyone telling him what he can say or do. Next to the Duck Dynasty picture is a picture of “Jesus” – white, bearded, and with a glow around him.

The shelves beside the TV stand are filled with memorabilia of his three greatest passions: family, fishing, and football. Several pictures of his son, Nathan, in his high school football uniform, sit on the shelves. Going to a football game with Jeff means you’re sitting with the loudest coach in the stands. He is too fired up to sit, insulting ref’s calls and shouting advice to whatever team his sons or stepsons are on. His sons, Nathan and Caleb, with his previous wife, wrestled at Northmont, me and Yub’s high school rival. I had graduated by the time Nathan and Caleb wrestled for North but they were in school at the same time as Yub. At county and conference wrestling meets, Jeff cheered for Northmont, but also for Yub. Jeff did not let his lack of wrestling knowledge stop him from yelling bad calls at referees and bad advice to

wrestlers. But there is never any doubt who he cares about out there on that mat. Plus, it wouldn't have mattered if he cheered against Yub. He never came close to losing to a Northmont wrestler.

"Food's done," mom yells from the kitchen just as I get into a writing flow. I walk upstairs to the dining room where she made me a plate of food.

"Thanks mom. Looks delicious!"

We eat and chat about the new shipping supervisor job she interviewed for. She is the lowest paid supervisor at her workplace, and the only female supervisor. She feels as if she has no other opportunities for advancement and is ready for something new. After dinner, mom goes to the living room to watch TV. I go to the bathroom with a pen and legal pad, and plop down on the toilet. I write some questions for our interview.

I flush and walk downstairs to grab a Miller High Life from Jeff's fridge. Hopefully he doesn't shoot me. I walk upstairs to the living room.

"Hey bubby." Mom is laid back in the recliner, a wool football-design blanket covering her legs and Buddy and Winston on her lap. She points a remote toward the 52-inch TV, fast-forwarding through the commercials to get back to Amish Mafia, one of the many reality TV shows she loves watching. Better this than one of the god-awful Housewives spinoffs she likes.

"Hey mom. Here's the questions I thought I might ask you. You can look them over while I charge my computer." I rip off the sheet and hand it to her.

Arrooff! Rooff! Rooff! Mom puts the recliner down and Buddy and Winston jump to the floor. *Roooff! Rooff! Rooff!* She walks over to the window.

"SHUTUP!" mom screams. There are several dogs in small separate cages in the backyard. Jeff trades and sells them for raccoon and squirrel hunting. I feel bad for them. I wish

Jeff would just get rid of the dogs. Papaw, who lives in the house right behind us, also owns several hunting dogs.

Mom returns to her comfy position in the recliner. Buddy jumps up on her lap and Winston sits on the floor looking up at her.

“Aww, Winston! Are you *slow*? It’s okay, mommy still loves him!” She reaches down and picks him up.

I sit down on the brown suede couch adjacent to mom and move my bare feet back and forth across the fibers of the beige carpet. I look around the maroon-painted room, anything to avoid this trash TV. To my left is a table of pictures. My favorite one is of me squeezing my sweet grandma on high school graduation day. I’m wearing a tie and baring my teeth, two things I do about as often as I eat meat. On the same table is a picture of mom and Aunt Brenda on vacation in Gulf Shores. Mom, grandma, Aunt Brenda, and my cousin, Jolyn, drove down to Tampa to help move me in when I started at USF. They spent a week at Gulf Shores on the way back. Mom moved me into each of the schools I’ve attended, driving 2.5 hours to Manchester College, 6 hours to Central Michigan University, and more than 20 hours to the University of South Florida. Despite living several hours apart, mom and Aunt Brenda are best friends. They have matching tattoos. They go to concerts together. They drink together. They used to do drugs together. They even married and divorced brothers, my dad and uncle.

On the same table is a picture of Yub (who mom calls Pickle) at the county wrestling meet. When he qualified for his first high school state finals, mom had shirts printed with a picture of a pickle in a wrestling singlet and the words “Pickle Posse,” on the back. I was a proud member of that posse.

In another corner of the room are side-by-side pictures of Jeff's mom, Mary, and dad, Donnie, before they had kids. Mary looks beautiful with her curly hair and glasses. Donnie, known to me, and the rest of his grandkids as Papaw, is in his Army uniform and already sporting the big ears we tease him about. Even though he is not my biological grandpa, he's my Papaw. Family ain't all about blood. He's lived in Darlington his whole life, except his three years in the service. He got out of the service in April and was married by June. Mamaw and Papaw built their life together on West Street. He worked for forty-five years at the book factory in town (the same one at which Jeff worked) and she stayed home taking care of their two boys, Jeff and Jerry, who also lives in Darlington. Mamaw occasionally bartended at the American Legion in town where Papaw is a regular. About a month shy of their 50th wedding anniversary, Mamaw died at the kitchen table while her and Papaw sat at the kitchen table eating supper.

I look around mom's living room. A painting above the window reads, **Life isn't about waiting for the storms to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain.** The word **Simplify** is on a shelf, a decorative jug, a heart-shaped pillow, and a Kleenex box. The word **Family** is on every wall of the room.

A bookshelf on the wall across from me is stocked with family pictures. A frame with the word **Brothers** encases a photo of Yub, Nathan, Caleb, and me at the Porter County Fairgrounds. My hands are wrapped with tape because moments before Jeff took that picture, I was hammerfisting a 38-year-old mixed martial artist in the face until his eyes rolled to the back of his head while Jeff and my brothers cheered from the stands.

Near the couch is a wooden crate with books and magazines. A Bass Pro Shops catalog and magazine called "Full Cry," for coon and tree dog enthusiasts, sit on top. Underneath the

magazines are stacks of books – Nora Roberts, Danielle Steele, Jodi Picoult, Dean Koontz, and other romance and mystery novels.

Interviewing Mom

“You ready mom?” I ask, unplugging my laptop and setting it beside her.

“I usually charge for interviews but I guess I’ll let ya have this one for free. Only ‘cuz you’re so cute,” she says muting the volume on the TV.

“Mom!” I press record on the laptop and walk back to the couch.

“Alright first question I had was, what do you think about what I do in school? You’ve heard my presentations in Chicago, you’ve read some of the stories I’ve written, and I’ve interviewed you for papers.”

“I’ve already told you a million times, I think you’re amazing,” she says.

“Mom!” We both laugh.

“Well I do. I think when you write, you put your whole heart into it. It’s something people enjoy reading. I’ve watched you do presentations. People are totally into what you’re saying. You’re an amazing student and I just never thought I would see that out of you because that’s not who you were in high school at all.”

“How do you feel about me sharing personal stories from our family? Do you feel like I do an accurate or truthful job of portraying us?”

“Well you talked about me smoking a Camel Light cigarette and drinking a Mountain Dew. I guess that’s pretty much as accurate as you can get,” she jokes. She’s referring to a story I wrote for Carolyn Ellis’s autoethnography class.

“That wasn’t something I ended up sharing with anyone though.” I may have shared it with one classmate.

“Oh well scratch that cuz I'm really not *that* person,” she jokes. “I think by sharing what you do, you're showing where you come from. As screwed up as our family is, it's who you are, and who we are.”

“Why do you say our family's screwed up? You and grammaw always say that.”

“Most of 'em have been into drugs. I had a dad that walked out. I have three brothers I have no relationship with. And all they used to talk about was how papaw walked away and they did the same thing,” her voice cracks, tears forming in her eyes. “Uncle Jim walked away, uncle Jeff's more or less walked away. He don't have anything to do with us. Uncle Jay I've chose to walk away from because of the person he is. They've all done what they've hated dad for.”

“Do you see any similarities in what I'm doing and what uncle Jim did? Like leaving and doing my own thing?” I ask.

“Oh not at all.”

“Well when he first left didn't he come back for a while and stay in touch?”

“For a little while but you gotta remember Uncle Jim was ten years older than me. I never really knew my brother. But you will never walk away from your family. For one, we'll stalk you,” she laughs, “and your grandmother is probably one of the main reasons you're where you're at today. I couldn't cosign a loan for ya. Dad couldn't cosign for ya. She believed in you and like she'll tell ya, you've not let her down. You've far exceeded anything she ever thought you'd do. You love your family. You love your brother to death. And you adore your grandmother. You adore me even though you don't say it. You won't ever walk away from your family.”

“There's so many people who come from families like ours who do walk away and become ashamed and embarrassed of their family once they achieve success. You think Uncle Jim was like that?”

“Oh he was embarrassed. He said the reason he changed his last name was because that's the only thing his dad ever gave him. And it wudn't a name he wanted to carry on.”

“I'm ashamed I even felt this way now but I remember when I first got to Manchester, I was embarrassed by my family.” I take a big swig of my Miller High Life. Really, I was ashamed. I wanted desperately to fit in with my peers, to be one of the “cool kids” but living in a trailer with a white trash family made that difficult.

“Oh I'm sure,” mom says. I am relieved by her understanding reaction.

“Because I felt so different than most the people I was around. But I've learned to appreciate and embrace where I've come from.”

“Well I 'member the day we took you to Manchester,” mom says. “You were still really mad at me,” her voice cracks and tears form in her eyes, “for my past.” She still lives with a lot of regret about her years of drug addiction when I moved in with dad.

She continues, “And I 'member pullin' up and your car had a bungee cord holding the hood down,” she laughs.

“That was my fault,” I say, remembering the day I rear-ended a car at a stoplight when I dropped a lit cigar between my legs.

“I think I had fifty dollars to my name to give ya,” her voice cracks, “and you were still hurt and angry at me. That was hard for me to leave you. I could tell you were scared but you done what you always do. You make jokes. But I felt bad. I left you with no money.” Tears stream down her face. “But the night I got the phone call you were going to the hospital and to

jail. I think something happened that night. Ever since then, you've just excelled," she says sniffing. "I think you were scared because you could've been kicked out."

"Yeah," I pause, "and that was also around the same time I had a teacher who mentored me and believed in me," I say trying to change the subject because I still struggle with overdrinking.

"Yeah. I think one of the reasons I became a supervisor is that I had a supervisor that believed in me like your professor. You know I hated high school, so I didn't instill in you the education. And I was screwed up. I always thought I had to have a man in my life to be somebody."

"And they were usually pretty screwed up too," I say.

Mom has been married four times and dated several men in between. My grandma divorced four times, and even my great-grandma divorced. Mom may have thought she needed a man in her life, but she didn't take any shit off them. If a man didn't treat her right, she ended it, or at least she would now. Same with grandma. To me, my mom and grandma are feminists, though not the kind of feminism we talk about in my classes. They're *doing* feminism, not talking about it, by being tough independent women. This story I've heard countless times from my mom exemplifies this feminism.

My dad, who was trying to be a police officer at the time, jokingly handcuffed my mom to a stool in the kitchen. My mom asked him to uncuff her but he refused, beside himself with laughter. The more he laughed, the angrier she became. She swung the stool at him with it still attached to her arm, narrowly missing him. He took off down the hallway and she chased him swinging the stool before cornering him, and forcing him to apologize and uncuff her.

“Yeah and I didn't put you kids first like I should've. I guess that's why I still baby ya now. Cuz I missed all that time,” her voice cracks.

“Mom, we love you and forgive you. We were too young to know what was going on anyway.” *Why have I so easily forgiven her? I was just a child when I was exposed to this violence and chaos. This had a strong negative influence on my psyche and relationships. Shouldn't I be angry?*

“I'm startin' to forgive myself. But I missed a lotta years with you guys.”

“I didn't realize you were missing them. I was with you.”

She laughs, “I was missin' em.” She snuffles, tears falling, “I just love ya' more than life itself.”

“Mom, this is just turning into you crying telling me how much you love me.” Even as I say it, I know it's not what I should say. I don't know how to handle my mom's vulnerability. Why can't I just agree with her and acknowledge that she made mistakes.

“I know,” she laughs through the tears.

“How did you feel when you saw me present in Chicago? How'd you feel about what I said about our family?”

“Well for one I felt such pride. I was so proud that I was your mom. And I'm okay with what you say because everything you say is the truth. I've never hid my past so anything you say, it don't really embarrass me cuz its made me who I am which in turn's made you who you are. Do I wish things may've been different? Maybe but then I wouldn't be who I am. I've always been proud of you and what you've said. And when you looked out and seen me and grammaw sittin' there, I could tell you were proud we were there.”

“I didn't see any other parents there,” she says laughing.

“No that was awesome. I've never seen or heard of that before.”

“I missed a lot while you were in high school and I swore I wouldn't miss anything since. I've been to Manchester, Michigan, Chicago, Florida. I won't miss anything. I'm proud of ya. You've always had it in ya. You've just finally chose to do somethin' with it.”

“Do you think I've changed since I went to school?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” mom replies.

“In what ways? And in what ways do you think I'm still the same?”

“You're still silly Nate. You're still lovable Nate. I see you and your brother together and it's hard to believe you're gettin' ready to have a Ph.D. the way you two act.”

“Don't talk about my Yub like that,” I tease.

“But you've changed in the fact that I think you like yourself. You didn't like yourself in high school. And you didn't have very many friends.”

“You're makin' me sound like a real winner, mom.”

“No, I mean you didn't really though. You were a class clown. But now you've got friends that you'll have for life. You found yourself in college. When I dropped you off that day, I could tell you were petrified but you made jokes. That's how you always done it.”

“I've been trying to think if there was something about my upbringing that made me excel in college. For example, our family didn't really like being told what to do. I'd hear stories from you, dad, and stepdads, about how bosses are idiots and don't ever do anything, and so I grew up hearing how we should be critical of authority figures. And that's actually really helpful for what I do now, is being critical of authority. Also we moved a lot as a kid and you were divorced several times, so it made me really comfortable with change and ambiguity.”

“Mhmm,” she says nodding her head.

“I had to because things changed a lot. In a lot of ways, I feel like my upbringing is an advantage for where I am now.”

She laughs, “I’ll take that.”

“I do. Also as me and Yub grew up we’d hear things from you and dad that we knew were otherwise. We started seeing through your bullshit. Growing up in a family like ours, we learned to detect bullshit.”

“And that's sad,” she says.

“That's not sad. I'm glad.”

“You know, growing up I didn't have a good role model. I had grammaw but she worked a lot. She was raising five kids on her own. Aunt Brenda did a lot of the raisin' of me. My first day of high school I got called into the principal's office and he told me I've had your sister and your brothers and I don't want anything outta you the way I got from them.”

“Aunt Brenda got in trouble?” I take a drink of beer.

“Aunt Brenda skipped so much she had to go to night school. And then she skipped night school. So when she walked across the stage at graduation, they handed her an empty diploma. She had to go and make it up. Two weeks before graduation I got called to the office and said I had six weeks worth of work to make up or I wudn't graduatin' cuz I had skipped so much. I hated school. My brothers never went to school.

I ‘member when I was sixteen, me and my friend Lisa went down to Florida to visit Uncle Jay. He was wantin’ to find some crack one night so we went out cruisin’. His friend was drivin’, uncle Jay was in the passenger seat and me and Lisa were in the back seat. We turn down this street where all the lights are busted out. Uncle Jay tells us to stay down. They slow the car down and all of a sudden we’re swarmed on all sides by these black guys tryin’ to sell us

dimebags. Jay punches one of the guys, takes his bag, and we take off. That's what I knew. I had a dad that walked away. Grammaw was busy. But she done the best she could. So...and I forgot the whole question," she laughs.

"Wow. That was good. Did you think when I was younger I would be where I am now?"

"No."

"What'd you think my future was gonna be like?"

"I didn't think you would go to college. You hated school. And then with your eating disorder, there for a while, I thought you would be sick your whole life. I know that sounds bad...Because you had to work so hard for everything and when you were younger you didn't have the dedication to work for it. I seen that turn around in high school with wrestling. You proved if you want something, you work for it. I was shocked when you wanted to go to school. I didn't think you'd be where you're at. I definitely didn't think you'd still be in school nine years later."

"With you paying my car insurance?" I joke. Mom and dad help me out a lot financially. She pays my car insurance and my cellphone bill. Anytime I run out of money and need help, they put money in my account. Several times I've asked mom if she has ten dollars she can put in my account so I can make it to payday. Sometimes dad will just surprise me, sending me a message saying, 'Dad put 100 bucks in your account. Love you champ!' This summer he gave me 400 dollars to pay my rent while I was without a source of income. He has no expectation it needs to be paid back, though I look forward to the day I can return the favor.

"Yeah but I told you from day one, do what you're supposed to do and I'll help you. But yeah," she laughs, "I didn't think it'd be nine years later. But I don't regret it."

“Was there anything in my childhood that gave you the inkling that I'd be interested in school or learning. One thing I remember I used to do that probably explains why I had zero friends except Clay Buck, is 'member I used to write out wrestling matches?”

“Oh you had 'em everywhere. You'd do the whole Summerslams.”

“I used to create these fantasy worlds,” I say.

“Yeah and I think you and your brother both got your reading from me cuz I've read my whole life. I love to read.”

“I remember you use to write poems, too,” I say.

“I don't know where all my poetry went. It actually helped me when I was at my lowest. I would write poems and that's how I would express myself,” she pauses, “But no, I didn't see you here. You were a mean bully,” she laughs.

“That's exactly what Yub said.”

“You were. It was like whatever mood Nate was in, the rest of the household was in. There was only one person that you were really sweet with and that was your grandmother. Except for one summer.”

“Yeah, I remember. I feel bad about it.” That summer was when I was at the depth of my weight loss. I was depressed, angry, and especially mean to those who worried most about me.

“You always had a connection with your grammaw. You still do. She's close with Brianna too, but she adores you. We're really blessed to have grammaw.”

“I remember I used to go to the library with her.”

“Yeah, she took you to the library and wherever you wanted to go. You spent a lot of time with grammaw. And your brother was glad to see ya go,” she laughs, “cuz you were mean to him.”

“Give him time to let the bruises heal up,” I take a swig of beer.

“You were mean.”

“Thanks a lot! What do you think about Yub going to school and what was it like being in classes with him?” Mom enrolled in her first college class at Ivy Tech last year. Yub went back to college and they were in the same intro English class.

“I don't think your brother will be happy until he goes to school and gets a degree. He's lost right now. I think everything come easy to your brother - wrestling, grades – and I let him become an adult long before he should have so he has no self-discipline. I found out a lot of things they let him get away in school because he was a wrestler. But he wants what you've got.”

“He likes reading and writing,” I say.

“Yeah and he's so smart. He's also gotta realize it's not just the degree that's gonna make him happy. He has to be happy within himself and do something he loves doing but he also has to have the discipline. Even if you got a degree, you still gotta work. It's just a different type of work.”

She continues, “But I had a lot of fun havin' class with him. He'll tell ya the first day of class, I looked over at him and said, ‘Pickle, what the fuck am I doin' in here?’ and he said he's never seen such pure terror on someone's face.”

“Yeah he told me that. Didn't you get a better grade than him in the class?” I take a drink.

“I kicked butt in that class. I like to write. At first I was nervous because I don't know the technical forms. I can write and pour my heart out as long as I'm not being graded on the form and all that.”

“That's why you should take my class.”

“Yeah, I've read your syllabus. You sound like a tough teacher.”

“You’d love my class ‘cuz I don’t care as much about the technical stuff.”

“This year wasn't as much fun for me. I don't know if it was cuz I wudn't with your brother or I just didn't enjoy the classes as well.”

“Reminds me of my first year at Manchester. I worked harder than I did in high school but I didn't like school. I mean I took public speaking my first semester and got a C- and now I teach public speaking. I tell all my students that.”

“Well I tell everybody that because you were actually very shy.”

“I still am kind of,” I reply.

“You was a class clown to hide the fact that you were shy. The fact that you teach public speaking now is crazy to me. Grammaw says I was never shy. Through my years of doin' the bad stuff, I don't think I was shy but I hid, ya know. And then when I started waitressing at A-Country-Affair, I had to actually start reading the menus to people. That's when I come back out of my awkwardness. Now, it don't bother me a bit. I've done presentations in front of fifty senior management. I was probably more nervous doing my presentation last year with your brother in there cuz I wanted to prove to him that his mom could do this. I started school mainly cuz I realized how good I was at this job and people were listening to my ideas and I thought the only way I would be promoted was to go to school. I'd already signed up for class and I got promoted before I started. But I went ahead and went cuz they pay for it. I tell all these young kids I work with, use it. I don't see myself being at Express Scripts all my life but this schooling's gonna help me get where I wanna go.”

“Do you wanna graduate with a degree?”

“Yes, just mainly to prove to myself that I can do it. I can probably move up the ranks now without a degree, but I wanna be able to walk across that stage and have you in the audience,” her voice cracks.

“I’ll be there...throwing banana peels at you.” I once again am aware that I’m joking because I’m uncomfortable with her vulnerability.

“Whatever. I just wanna prove that I can do it. I’ve done a lot of bad stuff in my life and I wanna do something really good, just for me,” she says through tears. *Why did you do this bad stuff? Did you think about how it would impact me and Yub, not only then, but also later in life?*

“You gonna cry through the whole interview?”

“Probably,” she laughs.

“Do you think that you’ve changed since I went to school?”

“Yes. Um, I think I’ve become a better role model for you,” she says sniffing, tears falling from her cheeks.

“Mom, stop crying,” I tease. “I love you.” *Actually, please cry. Let it out.*

“I know. But I think I have proven to you that I’m somebody you can count on no matter what since you’ve been to school,” she sniffles, “I think you know without a doubt all you gotta do is call me and I’m there. I also think you’ve seen me grow as a person in my work ethic since you’ve went to school. And I couldn’t be more proud of you for anything,” she says still crying.

“Mom!”

“I know,” she laughs through the tears. “I can’t help it.”

“I’ve noticed that you’ve changed since I went to school. I mean you’re in college and in a supervisor role. I was wondering how the different experiences you’ve had shape how you are as a supervisor?”

“I think I have empathy for people. I tease you that I'm so tough. In some instances I am when I know that I'm bein' played. Some people just know how to play the system but I also know that life just happens and I'm willin' to work with people cuz I've been there. I've had sick kids. I've worked. I waited tables my whole life. So to be where I'm at now, I've worked my butt off to get here. I have a lot of pride in what I do. I have a lot of pride in the fact that people respect me enough to come to me. I get along with people. Me and the site leader are buddies. He's the one who you sent that paper to.”³⁶

“He didn't seem to like it,” I say. “I don't know what he was expecting. Not really anyone enjoys working at a factory like that.”

“No. And there's a lot of people at work that feel the same way. Some of the associates feel that he doesn't talk to them. You know, he'll walk right by and not even see 'em. And you know I talk to everybody. So there's a big difference there. The associates don't feel like I'm up here,” she raises her hand above her head, “I'm still down here with 'em,” she says lowering her hand. “For example, the janitor there at work, he's a Mexican guy. Love him to death. I joke and talk with him all day. And the guy that works in the kitchen, I mean, I talk to everybody. Cuz we're just in there for one thing. We're tryin' to support our families and make a livin'. I just do their payroll and approve their time but like the last couple days I've been on the floor working right beside em. They feel like I'm still just Beck. Some people get in management and they feel entitled.”

“I don't think it's fair the hierarchy we create in the workplace,” I say. “The argument people make is this person is up here because they worked so hard to get here but that's not true.

³⁶ Mom discovered that her boss used to be a manager at the same factory I wrote about in “Manufacturing Stories.” He wanted to read my paper so I emailed it to him.

There are people like dad who does his job every day, works hard, and doesn't move up." *But can we escape hierarchy? And would I really want that?*

Mom nods, "And places need people like that just as much as they need people that wanna move up. Because the ones that come in everyday and just do what they gotta do and come home is the ones that keep the places runnin'."

"They're the ones that usually get paid the least," I say.

"Yeah."

"And get the least amount of respect."

"Yep."

"Which doesn't make any sense to me."

"It doesn't. This is my first year as a supervisor and when I done reviews, I fought to get people higher raises ya know cuz I've been there and I've made twelve dollars an hour and you can't live on twelve dollars an hour."

"And there's days honestly, a part of me regrets movin' up to supervisor because I'm more of a doer. I wanna be on the floor instead of at a desk doin' the payroll and things like that. So, it's been a struggle for me. But I'm really good at bossin' people," she jokes.

"Mom!" I shake my head.

She laughs. "I've got practice!"

"Alright, thanks for the interview, mom."

"Was that it?"

"Yeah."

"Aww! I love you bubby. Did I do okay?"

High School Emails

I reread the email before sending to Mr. Hopkins, my high school geometry teacher.

Hello. My name is Nathan Hodges. I graduated from Southmont High School in 2006. I was a student in a few of your math classes. If you remember me, it probably isn't because I was a math genius or model student. I made a habit out of performing poorly in your classroom (when I wasn't getting kicked out of it). I still remember the time Nate Cravens, Ronnie Whitacre, and me got in trouble for being rude to a poor, little substitute teacher when you were gone. When you came back, you made each of us write a paper for you about 'Why I act the way I act?' In all honesty, I really enjoyed that writing assignment, as I realized perhaps then, that personal, reflective writing is where my passion is. However, it would have been nice for me, you, and the substitute if I wasn't doing that because I was such a jerk!

The reason I am writing you is because I am entering my fourth year as a Ph.D. student in Communication at the University of South Florida and starting my dissertation. I am writing about the experiences of first-generation college students and working-class academics (those in academia who come from working-class families), including narratives of my own experiences. In the dissertation, I want to share evocative accounts of early educational experiences. In some ways, I'm also trying to understand how I went from that kind of student, one who didn't even graduate in the top half of his class, spent most of his class time kicked out in the hallway, and who hated school, to now being nine years deep in higher education.

Anyhow, if you're still reading and haven't deleted this by now because the worst damn Geometry student you ever had is back to haunt you, I'd like to ask a favor. Would you be willing to write a little bit about your perception of me as a high school student? What you thought about me then? Memories you have? Please be honest, even brutally honest if necessary.

Thank you very much. Although math still hasn't drawn me in in the same way it did you, I will always remember you as a funny, energetic teacher.

Mr. Hopkins replies:

Of course I remember you! You also should know, you do not have to tell me to be brutally honest, I just tell my true feelings. You were and are actually not that different from many students during my teaching tenure. I could tell you were bright, energetic, and had passion. The problem was, you were immature in your thought process of worrying what your peers were thinking of you today. You were not concerned about the future and where those same peers and "friends" would be 5-10 years from now or beyond! For some, as their junior and senior years roll around and they become more interested in a subject matter they want to pursue, they turn it on and there is literally no stopping them. For others, it comes during their college days!

I use the analogy, everyone's brain is like a five gallon bucket and it is full...Mine is full of math and farming, my passion. I never know what a kid's brain is full of, but my hope is someday they can fill it full of their passion. Believe it or not, it will happen like my teaching style...It will happen without really trying or knowing it is happening. I hope this helps and I wish you the best.

I send a similar email to my sophomore English teacher. She replies:

If you were to ask me years ago if I thought you would still be in school, I would have definitely said no. Hey, you told me to be honest, so that's what I am doing! I was at first somewhat surprised that you were in Honors English. You seemed to dislike being challenged, you didn't want to work to your potential, and you were too concerned with other things such as your social life and appearance. You kept me on my toes on a regular basis and yes, I did get

angry with you from time to time. However, I always noticed that your writing ability was exceptional. I knew that if you took school a little more seriously, that you would excel in some way. You always seemed to produce good work when I least expected it. In other words, you were one of those kids who made me really frustrated because I knew you had potential, but you just didn't work very hard!

My junior English teacher, Mrs. Dove, writes:

*Before I start heading down memory lane, I want to let you know that this is something that I encounter nearly every year. You must have been a late bloomer because I often see changes around the rebellious student's junior year. Just this year I had a student who was baffled by his own self emergence. What is it? Does maturity kick in? Does reality of life after high start to appear? So many of my students say they wished someone had told them to do better in their earlier GPA-driven high school days. When they say that, I know that they have been told; they just weren't listening. It's the "you can take a horse to water" cliché. The student has to figure it out for himself. My opinion of you was formed early in my classroom when I made a comment about *The Scarlet Letter*. You piped up from the back corner of the classroom (interesting place for the disinterested/hiding student) "Didn't Nathaniel Hawthorne write that?" I was very surprised. I knew then that you were smart. In fact, I met your mother at a baby shower a couple of months ago. When she said who she was, I said I knew her boys. I don't think I said "Smart boys," but it was what I was thinking. Were you the bored genius? I'd like to think so. You were never rebellious in my class; I never kicked you out. School didn't give you the challenge that it should have, and you acted out. I honestly don't ever remember your acting out in my class, but it is clear to me that you weren't being challenged. This is not always the case for my students who finally figure it out. Many never aspire to go to college. You must find*

college challenging or you would not be making a career out of it. I would be curious to know what type of classes you got kicked out of. Female or male led? Required or elective? Boring or challenging? Freshman or senior?

Good luck with your dissertation, future Dr. Hodges.

I also send an email to my high school wrestling coach, Jamie Welliever, who continues to be a father figure. He replies:

As a JH student you were like a lot of young people I have seen over the years. I wish I would have had you more in class, but regardless, from wrestling and around school I could tell you were really searching for a direction. A lot of young kids need structure, direction, a little attention to give them a positive direction. For various reasons sometimes Moms & Dads can't totally fulfill this. Sometimes they are not around enough, sometimes they are too close, etc. It doesn't really matter. Raising 3 totally different kids I can tell you it is the most challenging thing in the world. Anyhow, you needed attention & a direction to go. I'm so glad wrestling helped give that to you. It really didn't take much with you to 'turn the corner,' and that is sometimes the case, but often it takes something much bigger. I'm not sure how to say this, but you are not like 'everybody else.' You have a built in resilience that most people do not even come close to having. Your motivation to work and be good at something is beyond most people. Let's face it, you didn't have the greatest success in wrestling in JH or even early in HS. You somehow overcame that and persevered. I wish I knew where that comes from – I would be a rich person. I could give lessons to teachers, coaches, businesses, an endless number of people. Somehow you knew that you were the one that had to make it happen to be successful. I certainly think God had to be working with you.

Darlington Stories

“Want to go to the Darlington Library with me?” mom asks. “I need to bring a few books back and I’m gonna get a few more to bring to the lake when we’re on vacation next week.”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll see if they have any stuff on Darlington history there.”

I slide on my sandals. She grabs her purse and we head out the door.

“Aww, we’ll be right back,” she says to Buddy sitting at the door looking up.

It’s a beautiful sunny day. Perhaps a bit too hot and humid for mom, but I like the heat. Big, strong oak trees stand their ground in the recently mowed yard. The tulips and sunflowers mom planted are in full bloom in her literal flowerbed. She stuck an old metal bed frame into the yard, filled it with mulch, lined the side with rocks, and planted flowers. The seeds of my knack for wordplay were planted right here. Mom and Jeff’s newly purchased pontoon is next to the driveway. This is the first summer they can bring it down to the trailer they bought near Raccoon Lake.

We hop in mom’s Jeep Wrangler and back out of the driveway.

“Be careful, mom! The neighbor girl is right behind you on her bike.” Darlington kids ride their bikes around town anytime the sun is out. Residents feel safe in this community. People sleep with their windows open and doors unlocked. Walk down any street in Darlington on a sunny day and you’ll find parked cars with their windows down.

Mom drives by the neighbor’s garage. He waves as we pass. He’s tinkering with an old car he restored. I have no clue what kind. Despite my blue-collar roots, I don’t know a damn thing about vehicles and have no desire to. I’m worthless when it comes to the stuff men are supposed to know around here: cars, guns, hunting, machinery, fixing stuff.

Mom drives down West Street, then turns right on Adams, and left on Washington. Most of Darlington's streets are named after famous historical figures – Madison, Franklin, Douglas, Harrison, etc. Patriotism is landmarked around town. In Darlington, life is slowed down. No speed limits over 30. People sit on front porches chatting with neighbors. They wave as I pass by. They make me feel welcome, like part of a community. Maybe I'm romanticizing a bit but it's how I feel when I'm home. I doubt everyone would feel this way. You won't find any gay pride flags, burkas, or 'Black Lives Matter' signs in this town. More than 99% of the residents are white. Most are Christian, vote Republican, and work in a factory or on a farm. People in Darlington check the same Census boxes and they hate the Census because it comes from the government. But I don't mean to pigeonhole and ignore working-class diversity.

In my "Communication and Identity" class, I interviewed my seventy-five year old Papaw, who's lived in Darlington all his life except for this three years in the military, about what it means to be a man. He told me a man stands up for what he believes in, then told me this story to illustrate:

When I was in the service, I was on the CQ one night. That's company guard at the barrack. I was with a group of guys that was mostly from the South. We had a colored guy just come in the outfit. He was just a young buck sergeant. I never will forget 'im. His name was Curtis Anderson and he was from St. Louis.

Them guys threw what they call a blanket party on him. About the time a guy gets in bed, they just throw a blanket over him so they couldn't see who was doin' it, and they just beat the hell out of 'im. I mean just kickin' and punchin' and anything they could pick up and crack 'im with, they didn't care. I could hear the commotion and I went to the room to see what was goin' on and they had just beat the hell outta' that guy. I broke it up and sent Anderson down to the

orderly room. I called the medics and they come in and took care of 'im. They coulda' killed that guy that night and those buncha guys wouldn't of even cared. For breakin' that up, later they had a little party with me and just pretty well beat the shit outta' me.

They tried to get me to rat on who had done it. There was two guys that was in on that, that was gettin' the highest decorations you could get in peace-time service. But I said if they won't admit doin' it, I'll never tell ya' who it was. But I took an asskickin' for just tryin' to help a guy out. He was only gettin' his ass kicked because he was the wrong color. That was the only reason. He was as good a guy as you'd ever meet.

Later on we were out on field duty and it was pourin' down rain. I was drivin' a five-ton truck haulin' the ammunition for the whole company. This jeep driver come back in the middle of the convoy and wanted me to drive it up there 'cuz I was one of the older guys. I told him I didn't think I could pass everybody. It was just an old dirt road. I started around the convoy and didn't see the road come down. The truck turned over and caught fire. My ribs was broken. There was a guy ridin' with me but he bailed out of the truck and took off. Just left me in it. Well Anderson cut the top off that truck with a bayonet and drug me out of it. We didn't get thirty yards and that truck blowed up just sky high."

Papaw's story offers a slice of American race relations during the '60's. Some white, working class men and black men were friends during this time. This seems obvious, but I don't hear too many stories like these.

I stare out the window of mom's jeep trying to count the houses with American flags flying out front. It's easier to count the rare house that doesn't. Patriotism feels unquestionable

here. I see several Confederate flags, too. One staffed in the bed of a pickup truck has the words, “I ain’t coming down.”³⁷ I remember a conversation I had with Jeff about the flag last weekend.

I’m writing at the dining room table. Jeff walks inside sweating after mowing the yard. He makes both of us a green apple Crown Royal and Countrytime lemonade mixed drink, and joins me at the table. He scrolls through his phone. “Al Sharpton demands Kid Rock to ditch his Confederate flag,” he says reading a Facebook post. “Yeah, right. We’ll see if that happens.” Mom and Jeff love Kid Rock. Mom is going to his concert in two weeks.

“They took the flag down in South Carolina,” I say, trying to remain neutral. I disagree with his views but I don’t want to fight with him. I typically smile and shake my head, hoping to shift topics. Culturally, this is a significant issue, but here at home between us, it has little significance. Maybe I’ve just become good at compartmentalizing the personal and political. However, a part of me feels the need to change his views, to be an activist about what I believe in, to open his eyes to different ways of living without fear and anger. But is it possible to change his views after fifty years of believing what he believes? And should I try to change his views? What if these political differences hurt our relationship if I continue arguing with him about my views? Is it worth it, or was the foundation of the relationship not strong enough to begin with if we can’t love each other and still express our differences?

“I know. That shit pisses me off. A buncha whinin’ pussies. That flag’s been up there how many years? There’s plenty of sand all over the world. If you’re offended by the flag, then leave. Get out of our country.” Alright then.

“What exactly is the Confederate flag supposed to stand for?” I want to know what the flag means to him, to lovingly pry.

³⁷ To quote Yub, “You do remember Indiana was part of the Union, right?”

“It was originally the battle flag of the South during the Civil War and they were for slavery and plantations. That’s all anybody wants to point out is the slavery thing.”

“So is it supposed to be about Southern tradition?” I pry some more.

“Yeah, it’s the rebel flag. I got one hanging in my basement. Now that one’s more the slavery thing.” I haven’t used Q-tips in a while. Maybe I’m not hearing this correctly.³⁸ Granted, Jeff is a rebel (even if he does what my mom says).

“I helped teach a class this last year and there were black guys in the class who were scared of the Confederate flag. They were from the south and they said if they saw a Confederate flag they didn’t go in that area.”

“There are some but there are more and more black people they’re showing in the media that raise the flag and don’t want it to come down.” I assume he is referring to Fox News where they find a rare conservative black guy who is supposed to stand for the majority black opinion. However, if you don’t interact with any black people and only watch Fox News you’d think this represents popular black opinion.

“Well this guy was a big offensive lineman from Mississippi. He said if he sees a Confederate flag he knows he’s supposed to stay away.”

“Yeah, they’re still pretty rough down there. But taking the flag down ain’t gonna end that.”

Mom turns past the Congregational Christian Church, one of three Christian churches in town. She takes a left on Main Street and drives past the bank, hardware store, general store, pizza shop, town marshal, and post office. There used to be more businesses in Darlington before

³⁸ “Regarding racism, everyone is guilty. Minority straddlers will say the working-class is overt in its prejudices, while the middle class is surreptitious, devious and hypocritical” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 22).

the High School shut down and the small county schools consolidated. The town took another hit when the highway that used to run through Main Street was rerouted around the town. This combined with the opening of chain stores in Crawfordsville like Wal-Mart and Kroger hurt local businesses. On the other side of town by the highway is the Darlington Mini-Mart and Country Corner Café, where old men, including Papaw, gather each morning to drink coffee and shoot the shit. At night, a few gather at the American Legion Post, to drink beer and shoot pool.

We pull up to the Library, a brick building on the corner of Franklin and Main, and walk in. Mom returns her books to the front counter then looks around for others. On the counter is a stack of blank-covered red books entitled **Darlington High School 1896-1971**. The author's name, **Dale**, is on the spine. Dale must be John "Butch" Dale, the librarian and also Papaw's cousin. He is the editor of *The Darlington Herald*, a seasonal newsletter which includes old clippings from the town's now defunct daily newspaper (of the same name), stories about Darlington from former and current residents, old photos of businesses and residents, and other stories about the history of the town. I see a copy of the most recent newsletter, Summer 2015, on the counter.

On the front is a poem, Trade in Darlington, first published in the newspaper in 1933, and details about a summer reading program. I open to the second page. A Few Crazy Moments at Darlington High School. I scan the stories from DHS alumni and see Papaw's name in a story from Dale Cohee, his other cousin:

One night at a basketball game, Kendall Wells, and Donnie Dale, and I slipped up to our 7th grade homeroom and put a dead baby mole in Mrs. Martin's history book. Then we mashed it down, and the book closed pretty good. The next day we heard plenty of screaming and saw lots of tears when

history class rolled around. All the 7th and 8th grade boys ended up in the office. When the three of us finally admitted to the dastardly deed, we had to apologize to the teacher, and we were ordered to buy her a new book. We didn't buy the book though. Donnie just traded his to her!

I recognize this story. Papaw told me it when I interviewed him for a paper in my "Communication and Identity" class. Papaw's version of this story was a little different:

"Me and a group of these boys found a derved mouse and we took it in one of the teacher's rooms and put it in her history book. Another boy smashed that damn book and mashed that mouse all over it.

The next day the principal took all the boys in and talked to 'em, startin' with the sixth grade class. You got one boy admitted he was with 'em. Then he took my class in and I admitted it. They musta been at least eight or ten boys and there was only two of us that ever admitted it.

He asked that first boy, 'if you done something like this at home, what would happen for punishment?'

He said, 'Well I'd probably get a paddlin'.'

So he gave 'im a paddlin'. Well I wudn't gonna get no damn paddlin'.

I said, 'well ya know I'd probably have to buy a new book. I'd prolly have to work it off, buy her a new book, and apologize to 'er.' So that's what he had me do. I had to go up and apologize in front of the class and she stood me up at the blackboard with my nose in a circle for about all day. Then I had to work around home and make enough money to buy her a new book.'"³⁹

³⁹ On the way to Golden Corral, I asked Papaw if he had seen this story and he said, "yeah, I don't know where he's getting' his facts from," then recited this version.

Papaw is a prankster. Many of the people in my family are. Him and mom are constantly playing practical jokes on each other. A few years back, when people was gone for the weekend camping, mom bought a pair of underwear and smeared chocolate all over the back of them to make it look like someone didn't get to the toilet in time, then she hung them from Papaw's flagpole for everyone driving by to see.

I turn to the woman at the counter staring at her laptop, "Do you have any extra copies of this that I could have?"

"Um hold on," she says. "Let me ask Butch." She walks over and asks Butch who's at the stairwell tinkering with a handicap lift.

"Well let me look," he says. "We might have some back issues."

"Thanks," I say.

"It's for his dissertation," mom adds.

"Okay, let me look here." He digs through a few boxes underneath a table. "Here's a few of 'em." He hands me a couple copies. "Follow me back here and we'll see if we can find some more."

I hand my mom the stack and follow him downstairs into a room with wood floors, rows of old student desks, and Darlington High School memorabilia hanging on the walls.

"I've been refurbishing some of these old desks," Butch says. "I'm trying to make this like a museum that replicates an old schoolroom."

"Wow, that's cool!"

He walks behind the teacher's desk to a little wooden landing and looks through several stacks on another desk. "Where are they? I just saw them the other day," he says. He walks around the desk to another small room.

“Lots of history in here,” I say.

“Yeah, I’ve been collecting for years and people donate stuff. Been trying to sort through all of it. Oh! I know where they are.” He walks up two wooden steps to a small hallway and I follow him.

“This is where all the history is,” he says, walking into a small room on the left. I follow him in and the smell of old books overwhelms and excites me. I take a look at some of the titles, “Montgomery County History” and “Indiana Authors” and old copies of *The Darlington Herald* as far back as the early 1900’s.

“So what’s your dissertation about?” he asks, thumbing through stacks of paper on top of a shelf.

“It’s about the experiences of first-generation college students, those who are the first in their family to go to college, and-”

“That’s me,” he says. “I am. Ah, here they are,” he says pulling down a stack of folded black and white newsletters.

“Wow, thank you so much! I’m wanting to write about my own experiences and include a bit about Darlington in there.” I pause, “You know Jeff Dale? He’s my stepdad.”

“Well I’m Butch Dale. His dad, Donnie, is my cousin,” he says as we walk out of the room.

“Yeah, he’s talked a bit about you.”

“You know I went to school for six and a half years but I could never decide on any one thing.”

“Oh yeah? So did you end up finishing?”

“Yeah, I got a Masters plus another year and a half of classes. I was a teacher for years. Mostly high school. Then I was the county sheriff. And I’ve been here for twenty-five years.”

“You’ve done it all.”

I walk over to my mom who is holding two books in her hands – a Jodi Picoult and a Danielle Steele. “Check out all these newsletters, mom. It’s so cool back there. He’s redoing one of those rooms to make it look like an old schoolroom. And there’s a small room back there full of books about Montgomery County and Darlington.”

“Now when you write this and become famous, you remember me,” Butch says. Mom and me laugh as we walk to the counter to check out.

“I was reading through this last newsletter and there’s actually a story about my grandpa in there, about him smashing a mole in his teacher’s book,” I say. “Well he told me it was a mouse.”

He smirks and shakes his head, “Oh you gotta take everything that guy says with a grain of salt. It’s hard to tell what’s truth and what’s fiction.”

Papaw is a storyteller. All he needs is a spark, a word, a gesture, and he’s off. He’s had seventy-five years of rich life experiences he’s lived, told, reflected upon and re-told thousands of times. He reminds me of Edward Bloom, the main character from one of my all-time favorite movies, *Big Fish*. Edward’s tales are filled with adventure and heroism. In his stories, he gets the winning touchdowns, gets the girl of his dreams, saves a town from a giant, and rescues conjoined twins from a warzone. His son, Will, describes his father’s stories at the beginning of the film as “impossible to separate the fact from the fiction, the man from the myth. The best I can do is to tell it the way he told me.” Edward tells the truth as he *feels* it, trying to convey the emotion and meaning of his life experiences, not letting facts get in the way of the truth (see O’

Brien, 1990). Perhaps my grandpa's tall tales are a tad bit shorter than Edward's, but he's a storyteller. It's how he entertains, teaches, relates to others, reveals who he is (i.e. constructs his identities), and leaves his mark on the world. Like Will says at the end of the film, "The man tells his stories so many times that he becomes the stories. They live on after him. And in that way, he becomes immortal" (Burton, 2003).

"I know," mom says. "Some of the stuff that guy's done, it's a wonder he ain't been shot."

Butch laughs. "It's hard to believe either one of us didn't end up in jail for some of the stuff we done. And I ended up becoming sheriff."

"He's a handful," mom says.

"So what are you majoring in?" Butch asks me.

"Communication," I reply.

"Oh yeah, you could be a TV personality or something."

"I want to be a professor and teach at a college or university."

"Yeah," he pauses "when I went back to Purdue for Political Science, I walked in the room and all the students sat down at their desks. They'd seen my gray hair and thought I was the professor. When I walked past them and sat in the back, they were surprised." We laugh.

"We have a few fifty year olds in our program," I say. "And I'm just a few years older than my students. I've taught public speaking for the last few years and I taught a personal narrative writing class this year."

"Yeah, I hated school at first. I wasn't a real good student. I started when I was five. I think my dad was just trying to get me out of his hair. Anyway, one day my first grade teacher asked us if we knew any nursery rhymes. I raised my hand and said 'yeah, my dad taught me

one.’ So I went up there to the front and told ‘em what my dad had taught me, *Mary, Mary quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and one damn petunia.*” Mom and me laugh. “She’s lucky I didn’t say some of the other things I heard my dad saying.”

“In second grade...,” he continues with another story. “In third grade,” another story. “In fourth grade I had Mrs. Audrey Cox. Now she was a strict one. Of course they all were back then. She had started teaching there in 1916 so she was, I don’t know, about fifty or so. “Now she didn’t have paddles in the room. She had what she called the baby pen. She drew a big square on the chalkboard and wrote **Baby Pen** and if you got in trouble, your name went in that square. You didn’t want your name up there because she had a baby bonnet and if you got in trouble you had to wear it. You better believe I stayed out of trouble in that class. She was one of those teachers that just changed me. From that point on I got straight A’s through school and was the Valedictorian. I went and visited her in the nursing home before she died. I actually wrote a story for her in one of those newsletters.”

“Wow!” mom says.

“Some kids it just takes ‘em a while to turn things around,” he says.

“I wasn’t a real good student,” mom says, “and he didn’t turn things around until college,” she says looking at me.

“Yeah, I wasn’t a great student,” I say. “I spent about as much time in the principal’s office as I did in the classroom. I was always trying to be the class clown.” Right at the end of that sentence I look down and there is a picture of Mrs. Norman, my former high school English teacher, staring back at me.

“Actually there’s one of my teachers right there!”

“That’s his daughter,” mom says.

“Mrs. Norman?”

“Yep.”

“Well I was a terrible student in her class,” I say. Butch laughs. “I doubt she liked me very much,” I add. He laughs again and sits at his desk.

“When I was a teacher I had this student who didn’t ever do his work and made poor grades,” he says. “The problem was everything was dumbed down for him and he was bored. He dropped out of high school. Well, he ended up going to college, getting his Ph.D., and now he’s an engineering professor. When I first went to college I was going to go into electrical engineering but I did an internship for a month and hated it.”

“You gotta find something ya love,” mom says. “Like him,” she says pointing at me, “he was so shy growing up and now he’s teaching public speaking.”

“I used to be shy too but if you know what you’re talking about, you’re alright. I remember when I was the valedictorian and I had to do a reading in front of the school. I fumbled through that reading and I could hear a few snickers in the crowd. Well after the reading I had to light this scholarship candle-”

RING! RING! A phone call interrupts our conversation. He walks over to the old spiral-cord phone on his desk. “Hello, this is the Darlington Library.”

“He’s a good storyteller,” I say to mom while he’s on the phone. “Just like Jeff and his dad.” He hangs up and walks back over to us.

“So I have to light this scholarship candle in front of everyone. I finally get the match lit and my hand is going,” he pretends to be holding a match, his arm shaking because of nerves,

“and I finally had to hold my arm still with my other arm to light the match. I’ve done lots of presentations since. Was valedictorian of the police academy, taught, spoke to other groups.”

“You get used to it,” I say. He walks back to his desk and sits down.

“I had this really shy kid when I was a teacher at Northmont,” he says. “Never talked. I was a sheriff at the time, too. I’d teach during the day and was a sheriff at night. Well one night I got a call that there was a car stopped out there on 231 in the middle of the road with its flashers on. I drive out there, pull up beside the car and shine my spotlight. I don’t see anyone in there. I figured they must of went and got help. Then I see the top of a head in the window. And it’s that student. He has a girl laid down across the console and they’re both nude. He looks petrified. He says, ‘He-...he-...hello, Mr. Dale.’ I said, ‘What are you doing in there?’ He says, ‘I was just che-...checkin’ these fuses.’ I said, ‘Looks like she’s checkin’ your fuses. Can’t you find a better place to do that?’ He says, ‘Yes sir, Mr. Dale. Where at?’ ‘Well, there’s a cemetery just down the road.’ Me and mom are cracking up.

“Well, you ready to go bub?” mom says.

“Yeah.”

“Good luck,” Butch says. “Both of ya go ahead and take one of them books I wrote over there.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, thank you so much. This is awesome!”

“You know Donnelley’s made those,” he says. Donnelley’s is the book-publishing factory in Crawfordsville in which my stepdad, stepbrother, Papaw, and several other friends and family worked.

“Thank you so much,” mom says.

“Yes, thank you,” I say. “I’ll be back in here.”

We hop in mom’s Jeep and head home. I open a newsletter from last year.

“These are so cool, mom. They’re like a living history project.”

“That was nice of him to let you have those and to give us those books.”

On the front is an editorial entitled, Darlington’s Open Door, from the April 13, 1917 issue of *The Darlington Herald*. It reads:

To the man or woman who is seeking a home, we say come to Darlington. You will find no better place on earth to live than here, be you seeking a home where only modern conditions and conveniences prevail. Here you will be among people who are happy, contented, hopeful, congenial, and progressive; here Christianity prevails, good schools for the education of your children, all these things Darlington offers to you, and we are ready to meet the stranger at the gate. We balk at no legitimate enterprise, and welcome every man, rich or poor, who comes to add his efforts to the upbringing of the town. Here where the Hoosier hospitality abounds, you will be made to feel at home, and you will have a home among the salt of the earth.

The above editorial appeared in the local newspaper in 1917...96 years ago, and it still applies today. Our town does welcome people, rich or poor, and particularly those who will add his efforts to the upbringing of the town.

We need people who can make it what it once was...a vibrant community with many small businesses and people who volunteer to help with all of the activities, sports, clubs, church meetings, etc.

It's been a while since I've read something using the general masculine pronoun (i.e. man, he, his) without [sic] beside it. You'll find this kind of writing in the Bible or Darlington newsletter but not in an academic journal from this decade. At least not any I read. In academia, we call this gender-exclusive language, a subtle, everyday way of reinforcing male authority and silencing females. We take for granted the idea that our personal pronouns should be gender-based. Imagine, if you can, a writing system that doesn't use gender-based personal pronouns, but instead uses class-, race-, sexual orientation-, or some other identity marker-based pronouns. Or we eliminate these divisive pronouns and use collective and relational pronouns like 'you' and 'we,' acknowledging that identity is relational (Gergen, 2009).

I scan the page:

About a month ago, I dropped my wife off at a Wal-Mart in Lafayette so she could run in and pick up a couple of things. I waited in the car and just watched people walking by. I saw a woman who probably weighed 450 lbs., a teenage girl with bright red hair, a young man with large round turquoise earrings stuck through large holes in his earlobes, an older man with tattoos covering almost every part of his body, a girl with at least 30-40 body piercings, and a young lady with a top so sheer that you could see everything underneath. What an entertaining 15 minutes! I told my wife, when she returned, that in the "olden

days” I would have had to go to the circus and pay to see those people.

We pull in the driveway and mom lets me out of the jeep before she parks in the garage.

Arff! Arff! Arff! Will you ever learn, Buddy?

I walk inside and the puppies scurry over to me, wagging their bodies and pawing at my legs. I pick up Winston and kiss him, letting him lick the dried sweat from my face, then put him down and pet Buddy. I walk to my room and set the newsletters and book on the bed, lay face down, and open a blank Microsoft Word document on my Macbook. While the memories are fresh, I recreate the Library experience, including dialogue of the conversation with Butch. After a good start, I take a Facebook break. I’ve had it deactivated for a few days to focus on my dissertation. I scroll through the News Feed and realize once again why I feel better without it. On Facebook, I scroll through a finely crafted storyline of a person’s identity. Though I try not to, I compare my own life to this idealized version I see online.

I scroll through the News Feed. Several family members have “liked” a meme showing a puppy with the phrase, “Bruce Jenner’s cat.” I scroll down. Jeff has posted a t-shirt with the phrase, *My wife is sweeter than heaven and hotter than hell*. I click on his profile.

At the top is a picture of an adorable puppy staring at the camera: our chocolate lab, Abby. Those big innocent eyes, floppy ears, and tiny little paws make me smile until I remember she is now in a cage in the backyard. On the left is Jeff’s profile picture – him standing next to a statue at the Jim Beam distillery, a record of him and mom’s weekend trip on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. Below is his profile information:

Level 5 cooker at **Pace Dairy of Indiana**

Studied at **School of Hard Knocks, University of Life**

I scroll down. There's a picture he's shared of answers from a grade-school science exam: **Name a solid:** *poop*. **Name a liquid:** *pee*. **Name a gas:** *fart*. Another meme reads **Ban the Burka**. Underneath is a meme with the Statue of Liberty and Marines rattlesnake emblem: **America is calling. We either band together and fight or we lose our country to illegals, terrorists, and Liberals.**

I have never been a part of any military force or any group requiring me to make my bed and fold my clothes. I've never bled overseas, except for the time I cut my finger trying to open a wine bottle in Italy by smashing the end against a concrete step. I've never had protective feelings about an idea as abstract and diverse as 'America.' The military is Jeff's religion.

The other day I went into the dining room and there was a camouflage rifle on the table. I don't know what kind. I don't know a damn thing about guns. I ask Jeff if he bought a new rifle.

"It's my new Muslim huntin' rifle. That thing will hit a coyote from a thousand yards and only make a hole about the size of a quarter, but it'll come out the other side with a hole the size of a paper plate."

I smile and shake my head.

He continues, "This country's about to end their shit, especially after what happened in Tennessee."

"What happened in Tennessee?"

"A Muslim killed four Marines at a recruiting center."

"Wow."

"He was a student at University of Tennessee. I was probably payin' his damn tuition. All of 'em better get the fuck out of this country while they still can. You don't fuck with Marines."

“I’ve taught several Muslim students,” I say. “One of them was about the sweetest student I’ve ever had.”

I’m talking about my student, Areeb, from Writing Lives. She gave me a translated version of her favorite Arabic book as a gift at the end of the semester. In that same class I had a Marine veteran who fought in Iraq twice. We met in my office to discuss the autoethnography he wrote about his second deployment. He says he killed several Muslim soldiers and saw several kill his closest friends. He says he still struggles be comfortable interacting with Muslims and that his grandpa, a World War II veteran, hated ‘Japs’ until he died.

“Them’s the ones you gotta watch out for,” Jeff says. I remain silent. “Your brother pissed me off the other day when he posted that Praise be to Allah thing on his Facebook.” On his birthday Yub wrote a silly post thanking everyone for the birthday wishes and ended it by writing, ‘Praise be to Allah.’ Jeff commented, ‘I’m not laughing.’ I’m proud of my brother for being open-minded and challenging the close-mindedness we often find in our family. Really, he is as a model for me. He actually challenges family members and pushes their buttons.

Jeff has several convictions I disagree with but I don’t define him by these. In our relationship, they rarely create serious tension. Given a different context they might. Mostly, I just know him as a hard-working, humorous guy. There are not many opportunities I would have to see him act out his prejudice toward someone. He mostly interacts with the same white, conservative people everyday. I click into the Privacy settings on Facebook and deactivate my account.

The truth is, I feel like a fraud. I smile to Jeff’s face, then go and write about him behind his back in the house he works hard to pay for. I sit quietly listening to his stories and jokes, nodding my head, chuckling, then quietly retreat to my computer to write what he says, knowing

many academics would find them offensive. He doesn't know I'm planning to write these things down or maybe he wouldn't have said them. My guess is he still would, but I don't know. My family knows I'm writing about them, but it's different to hear about it in the abstract and then to see your name right there on the page.

Would I be comfortable showing this story to my stepdad? Probably not, although most of this is posted to his Facebook profile for his friends to see, and my guess is he wouldn't even mind me sharing this with others. In fact, he might encourage it. But, I feel uncomfortable sharing this with you because I am the one introducing you to him. How I portray him here on the page is the only Jeff you will know. I'm trying to portray him in a complex, nuanced way, but your perception of him is ultimately outside of my control. What if you leave this writing not liking my stepdad, a person you didn't even know until I wrote about him?

I close my laptop and pick up the top copy of *The Darlington Herald* from the stack. There are pictures of Darlington business from the 1940's – one of four grocery stores, a theater, cigar shop, pool hall, pharmacy, and soda shop. Underneath is an editorial from Butch talking about the “good ol' days” in Darlington. I scan the page:

I was 8 years old in 1956. Although I lived on a small farm 2 ½ miles southeast of Darlington, I was in Darlington just about every day...It seemed like Main Street was always packed with cars and trucks. Many times dad had to park on North Franklin as there were no parking spaces on Main Street. And there were always people sitting on the numerous benches located in front of the businesses. In the evening, the town was often more crowded than the daytime, as the townfolk and farm families

would come to town for some ice cream, a soft drink, an evening snack, or to shop.

I always enjoyed going to Darlington as a youngster. I often think about those days, and what the kids of today are missing. While today's kids are at home in a technology dominated world of phones, Playstations, iPads, computers, etc., I was with PEOPLE of all ages...gaining social skills, developing lifelong friendships, and having fun!

Reading this, I'm able to more easily reflect on how I've been romanticizing the working-class and my family, because Butch brings nostalgia to the max. He seems to be living in an idealized version of the past. He holds strongly to tradition and is reluctant to change. This seems to be a characteristic of many people in this town and my family.

I grab a newsletter. Underneath an old photo of Main Street is a reflection about the summer of 1966 written by Butch:

Honestly, at the age of 17, I really did not know what I wanted to do the rest of my life. My friend expressed the opinion that he wanted to try several jobs. He absolutely did not want to work at a factory job his entire life no matter how great the security or the pay was. Yes, that sounded like a good idea to me. We both agreed that we would try several different occupations during the next 45-50 years until we retired.

I kept my promise. During the last 48 years, I have worked as a teacher and coach, sporting goods manager, deputy sheriff, County sheriff, librarian, along with assorted part-time second

jobs in between and at the same time, including artist, writer, antique firearms trader, farmer, antique truck restorer...well, you get the idea. I have never regretted trying so many jobs, although I have had a few people criticize me for not staying with one job. Some people thought I should have just worked at R.R. Donnelleys for 50 years.

What happened to my friend? Did he keep his part of the agreement? My good friend, Joe Mahoy, died in a tragic accident two days later, when he and another young man fell to their death while working on the new Cherry Grove elevator.

I resonate with Butch's promise. Living in the same town I grew up and working in a factory like others in my family doesn't appeal to me. I needed to leave Crawfordsville and go down a different path, although I wasn't quite sure what that path was at the time I graduated high school.

But my family's life also appeals to me. They live in the here-and-now. They can enjoy something without deconstructing it and pointing out everything that's wrong. There are of course downfalls to this. Being uncritical of one's values and beliefs is what leads to stereotyping and close-mindedness. That is not to say they aren't critical. They are, especially when it comes to authority.

Trust me, I get being critical; I'm in the academy. But they also know how to shut off their critical faculties and play. And when they leave work, they completely leave. I don't really leave work in the academy. Something related to my teaching and research is swirling around in my head almost every waking minute, and usually when I'm dreaming. New technologies – email, Canvas, etc. – has made teaching feel like a 24-hour job. When I worked in a factory, I

punched the time clock and didn't think about work until I punched the time clock again. I also miss work that makes me sweat and physically exhausts me. Like my dad says, it helps you sleep at night. Perhaps that's why I exercise almost every day. But I don't know if I could personally live "the good life" without work that challenges me intellectually. I feel a tension between living the critical life of an academic, and the less critical life of conviction my family lives. I find both of these ways of living appealing. I believe most of my family has no desire to find meaning in their lives through their work. They believe meaning in one's life is created through the relationships you develop, especially with friends and family.

I admire those who are able to work in a job they hate just to support their family and pay the bills. People like my dad, Jeff, and Papaw. But they also didn't necessarily have the same "choices" I did, or at least didn't see factory work as a choice, but perhaps the only option. As Papaw told me during our interview:

"I worked at Donnelley's forty-five years. I tell people I went there lookin' for a job and forty-five years later, I left lookin' for a job. I never did like the place but I went to work everyday. I didn't have to depend on other people, and I don't remember my kids ever havin' to go without a meal. I think the reason I stuck at that job was I had so many friends there and we's all in about the same boat. Back then we didn't make a whole lotta money. Ya just kinda made enough to get by. Well, it's about the same way today I guess.

"Jeff's the same way. He was one them boys, everything he done he went at like he was fightin' bumblebees. He's just a good, hard workin' guy. He got it honest. I worked all the time and I guess that's what he thought he oughta do. Even before he was sixteen, he had a job working in a filling station. He made his own money and bought his own car. He had to wait 'til he was sixteen just to get it out there on the road, and first thing he done was run into a fence.

Now Jerry, he's, well, they're different. Jerry just don't take no shit off nobody. He was out there at the cheese factory where Jeff was. Jerry was havin' trouble with the way they were treatin' 'im on overtime. There was one woman in that bunch that had seniority over him, and if he volunteered, that'd be the only time she'd work overtime and she'd bump 'im off of it. He made a statement to her and she went to the boss. The boss come out there and told 'im what he was gonna do and what he wudn't gonna do and Jerry said, 'I'll tell ya what I'm gonna do, I'm just gonna tell ya to stick this place up yer ass.' But he's the kinda guy that can do anything. He can weld. He's a helluva good mechanic. He just never would settle down. He's just like his dad. Always into somethin'."

I put down the newsletter and open up another one. It is filled with clippings about military veterans from Darlington. Both my stepdad and papaw are veterans. Papaw never went into combat, but he helped work on building the Berlin Wall and saw Germans kill each other. He was stationed in Nuremberg but traveled around Europe. These experiences in the military, traveling around and meeting people from different cultures may have made him a more open-minded guy. Listening to him tell me stories about the military, I get the impression he enjoyed his time overseas. Jeff feels the same way about the military. He told me “There were some guys in there who hated it. It’s like anything else. You can make yourself miserable if you want to.”

When I’m done, I Google “Darlington, Indiana” and click on the first link, [Darlington, IN – Small town life with big possibilities](#), the town’s website. On the front page is a slideshow of landmarks from Darlington – the covered bridge, tollhouse, community center, and park. I click on the “About Me” tab.

The town was platted by Enoch Cox on February 3, 1836. The original plat contained twelve lots on each side of Main Street. There are several different stories about the origins of

the town's name. The most popular one is Quaker Preacher Job Moffitt believed the town should be named after Darlington, England. Another story is the town was named after Dr. Darling who lived here during the early days of the town's formation. Some believe the town was named by a group of friendly Native Americans as they sat around a campfire with the 1st white settlers to the area. Imagine that – the town's name being the outcome of intercultural dialogue.

Interviewing Mom Again

I give mom a first draft of this chapter to read about two months after our first interview. We arrive back at the house from a walk around Darlington. Mom has a voicemail with a job offer from Genco for a warehouse supervisor position at \$53,500, a ten thousand dollar salary increase from her current job, of which is almost double what she made throughout my childhood. I grab an ale from the fridge and we meet in the living room for our second interview.

“I'm ready,” mom says, looking down at her phone texting.

“What'd you think of the chapter?” I ask.

“I really liked it. I thought it portrayed us and Darlington really well. Jeff talks just like that. I talk just like that. Darlington's a little town. Everybody waves. I sleep with the windows open. And I just love how you write.”

“Not everything I wrote in there about Darlington and our family is good, though.”

“No, but it's truthful. The good, bad, and ugly, that's who we are.”

“Is there anything that you would change or take out?”

“Uh-uh.” She is still occupied with her phone, sending messages to friends about her new job offer. “Hold on. Sorry.” Just like my students.

“You thought that I did a good job portraying us?”

“Yeah. There’s some things, like when you were talking about how you was embarrassed of us. Did it hurt my feelins’? A little bit. But I knew it at the time.”

“I grew up embarrassed.”

“That breaks my heart because as a parent, as sad as this sounds, I didn't think about it. I just knew that we loved ya and we gave ya what we could.”

“I feel bad about it now.”

“Don't feel bad. You don't ever have to apologize for what you feel, bubby. Sometimes people ain't gonna like it. You think people always like what I say? No, I'm very outspoken.”

“I know. It just took me a long time to embrace where I come from. I always felt ashamed because we were poor.” Having a friend like Jerrod only added to my shame because of the comparisons I made with his life.

“I knew that cuz 'member we used to go places and you wouldn't ever give me a hug out in public?”

“Yeah.”

“Now you do,” she says in a cutesie voice. “It don't bother ya.”

“High school was all about class. It was like a big popularity contest.” *And I was losing.*

“It still is. When I grew up, I had to work detassling⁴⁰ every summer to buy my school clothes. You had to be thirteen to detassle. My first summer, I was only twelve but I lied and told ‘em I was thirteen. I even detassled my first year outta high school cuz I couldn't find a job. My best friend, Lisa, used to detassle too, but she got her money to spend on stuff. She got a moped one year. I had to spend all mine on school clothes. I was always a year behind on what was in

⁴⁰ Pulling the top part – the tassel – off the corn plant.

style cuz I couldn't afford it the year it was in. But grammaw couldn't afford to buy all our clothes.”

“So how did you feel about the Manchester scene where I discuss being embarrassed by our family? That was the part I was most nervous about givin' to you. I've been workin' on it for the last month.” Why am I so nervous? She has already come to grips with her past. Why can't I do the same?

“You don't ever have to be scared to tell me sumpin, bubby. No, don't ever apologize. I knew, bubby. Growin' up, I was embarrassed of my family, and like you said, you were confused cuz you were tryin' to be one thing, but you had come from somethin' totally different than that. You didn't know how to bring the two together. I can understand. Trust me, I get bein' embarrassed of your family. Growin' up I didn't have very many friends. I had a birthmark and funky teeth. Then to have people's parents tell 'em I can't be their friends cuz my brothers are in trouble all the time. One of em was a judge Jay had been in front of a hundred times.

Mom continues, “And Jeff, he's a redneck. That's just how Jeff grew up. I did, too. I grew up in a very small town. When I went to high school there was one black family in Crawfordsville and they had nineteen kids. I didn't grow up around black people. Now where I work, the majority's black cuz we're over by Indianapolis. There's a ton of gay people, too. Jeff's not used to it and it makes me mad cuz I have a lot of gay friends. You hear me yell at him. Don't judge people cuz one of these days you may need somebody. You've heard me talk about Stacy. I love Stacy to death. He's very flamboyant. You can tell he's gay. I guess that's somethin' I like about him.”

“That's how I grew up, too. I had one black person at my high school. One of the reasons I changed so much when I went to college is-“

“You seen that there's so many different ways to live,” mom says finishing my sentence.

“Yeah. But it took me a while to appreciate where I come from. Cuz I miss being home, too. There's aspects about this life that I like.”

“I love ya to pieces and you're always gonna be my baby, but I feel like this summer, you and I have connected as friends. It's been a really, I'm gonna cry,” she says tearing up, “really good summer. I tell everybody at work that you're my buddy.”

I look at Buddy. Mom chuckles.

“You are. You've been my buddy. We've had some really, really good talks this summer on our walks. I know you're gettin ready to graduate. It's not like you're stayin' at home anymore. Them times are comin' to an end,” she says tearing up. “You're gettin' ready to graduate and start your life.”

“No, I'm gonna get another Ph.D.” I say.

“While you're working,” she says laughing. “But I'm very proud of your writing. I think you portray us exactly the way we are. The good, the bad, the ugly. The part about your brother, I totally agree. Your brother's not gonna be happy [working in a factory]. I think he wants to be you. And it's funny cuz when you were younger, I think you wanted to be more like bubby when it come to wrestling and stuff. Now he's wishin' he woulda took the path you took. But he'll find his way. He's a good kid. He's just a little lost right now. I love him to death and changin' jobs, I'm gonna miss 'im. That's one of the highlights of my day. I'm out there ten times a day just to see your brother. And I don't care if he's mad at me or not when I walk up there, he'll be like, 'hi mom.' It just makes my day. I just hope he gets it together.”

“I'm sure he will. So what do you like about living in Darlington?”

“I like the small town feel. A lotta people I work with live in Indianapolis. You can't turn on the news without hearin' about murders there and I guess there's been a couple around here, but I feel safe here. I can leave my windows open. Brianna can walk to her friend's house. It's a little town but I feel like I'm in the country. It's quiet. Dad's right behind me. That's just what I've always lived in. I like the things that the big cities offer, but I wouldn't wanna live in one.”

“Even the name Darlington has like a small town charm to it.”

“Yeah, it's a cute little town. It's sad that it's died out.”

“What things don't you like about it? Or do you wish were different?”

“I wish there was more things here. I wish I didn't have to run to Crawfordsville to go to the store. But other than that, there's really not anything I don't like.”

“At one point in the dissertation I called you and grammaw feminists, as examples of strong, independent women. Brianna even said that in your birthday card. What'd you think about that?”

“I don't think I've always been that way. I think I've only been that way the last eleven years when I've been totally clean off of everything. Before I always felt like I had to have somebody. I've always been vocal but a lot of 'em treated me like crap because I didn't think I deserved any better. I would say you aren't gonna do that to me anymore but I'd still put up with it. But I'm at the point now that I like myself so much, I would *never* let anybody disrespect me. That shows now in my work. I've been promoted because I do speak my mind and I know what I'm talkin' about. But I do remember chasin' your dad down the hallway with that freakin' bar stool chained up to me. I was gonna beat 'im with it.”

“Divorce isn't even a big issue to me because there's a history of divorce in our family. Grammaw was divorced four times and even great grammaw was divorced. There's a history of

divorce in our family. I feel like some women stay in marriages even if they're terrible because they think that's what they're supposed to do.”

“I think all them times grammaw got married she was lookin' for a father figure for us. But unfortunately, her father was an alcoholic and was mean,” *My grammaw has told me horrific stories about the physical and sexual abuse he inflicted upon her, her sister, and mom. She was placed in foster care when it was found out her father had molested another child.* “That's the men she went for cuz that's all she knew. Then she wouldn't put up with it, so she got divorced. I remember our stepdad, Glenn, he was an alcoholic. He done somethin' really bad and the next day we were gone. There was no question whatsoever. We just up and moved to Crawfordsville. I 'member we pulled up to this little white house. We're like oh that house is cute. How we all gonna fit? And she's like, no it's this house over here and she pointed to the one on the left and it was gray and ugly. The boys started cryin'. Uncle Jeff actually ended up stayin' with our stepdad for a while. But she made it a really nice house.”

“Okay, another question. Why do you think there's so much drug use in our family?”

“It was the thing to do growin' up. You smoked pot. I hate to say it's not a big deal, but back then that's all we did.

“Not just pot. It'll be legal soon, anyway.”

“I know, but that's what we did growin' up. We didn't do heroin. Don't get me wrong, me and your dad used to hang out with Dana, and we done coke once in a while. But it wudn't like it is now. Kids nowadays, they don't smoke pot. They go straight to heroin or meth.”

“When I came back from Manchester for the first time is when I realized there is a meth epidemic in this town,” I say.

“Yeah, you can tell. Look at your uncle Tim. Look at the changes in him.”

“I don't know how he's still alive.”

“I don't either. When I got outta jail the first time and I seen 'im at the wrestling meet, he actually asked if I wanted to go get high and I'm like, “don't you know where I've been?” And he's like, ‘yeah, but it's outta your system in three days.’ I'm like, ‘no, I'm done.’ To him it was like, why you quittin'? Once it gets ya it gets ya.”

“Why did you start using drugs?”

“My family's the one that got me on the drugs. For my fifteenth birthday, uncle Jay gave me a bag of weed and my first hit of acid,” she chuckles. “Then Aunt Brenda's the one that got me on meth. I'd never heard of it. So that's all I've ever known.”

“That's a good big sister right there. Here little sis, try this.”

“It just screwed my whole life up. But there's nothing here for kids to do so they turn to drugs cuz they're bored. Look at your brother. He's done almost every drug. I don't know, you just have to decide sooner or later that your life's worth more than that. And it took me goin' to jail. But in jail, there was women that come back over and over. When I left I told 'em, you'll never see me again. I made a promise to myself that I would never go back.”

“I still don't know much about what was goin' on during high school cuz I didn't see you very much. There were points I don't even think I knew where you lived.”

“Probably not,” her voice changes drastically. “I was lost.”

“Well, so was I,” I say. “We were both bein' selfish in our own ways.” At the same time mom was struggling with addiction and unhealthy relationships with controlling men, I had isolated myself from her and many other friends and family with my obsessive weight loss.

“Yeah, we both were. I was clean your senior year but I was so busy tryin' to get myself outta the rut that I was workin' two jobs so I missed that part, too.”

“Since our last interview you've gotten a new job. How do you feel about that?”

“I'm so excited! I just wish when I was younger I would've had the work ethic I got now. When I was younger I was busy smokin' pot. Pot makes ya lazy. I was with your dad. I wudn't happy. I had a really good job at Random House but I was doin' the meth so I lost that job. It wasn't 'til I got completely clean that I realized I'm a worker. And I'm smart. And I'm good at my job. It feels good at work to know people come to you. The whole pharmacy comes to me cuz I know what I'm talkin' about.”

“That's a major difference between teaching and working in a factory. People I teach ask me questions, respect me, and wanna know what I think. When I worked at a factory they did not care at all what I thought. I just pushed this rack from here to there and at any point they could tell me to go to a different place. People who worked in the office would walk by and not even look at you. They don't treat people like humans.”

“Our site leader does that now. I think that's why the people like me so much cuz every mornin' I make my rounds through the whole pharmacy and I talk to everybody. I'll walk up and say, 'hey shithead!' to somebody, but then I go up to another supervisor and I know how to speak to them different. But the site leader will walk through and not even acknowledge anybody and not to toot my own horn but they're gonna miss me when I go. Cuz I go in there everyday with a smile. I love to have fun. It's gonna be a huge loss.”

“Yeah. I'm the same way at school. I like to have fun. I joke with everyone.”

“The last couple months I've found myself pullin' into the parking lot, not wantin' to go in like I did before. I'm getting' grouchy and I'm not enjoyin' it like I did before. That's what made my final decision to move to sumpin else. It's gonna be a longer drive and it's scary to start somethin' new but I just think it's time.”

“It's exciting, too.”

“It is exciting. I never knew I had it in me.”

“That’s what life's about. Tryin' new things.”

“Yeah, and look at Papaw. He's seventy-five. He goes to Golden Corral once a week. He goes to KFC once a weeeek. I don't wanna be that person. I tell Jeff, when I retire, I'm happy livin' in a trailer down in Florida, but I don't wanna live here my whole life.”

“He seems like he'd be okay with moving south.”

“I don't know. He likes to hunt and all that.”

“You can hunt in Florida. There's more rednecks in Florida than there is here.”

“I'd move today if I had a job. It wouldn't bother me a bit. But I'd take Buddy and Winston,” mom says in a baby voice to the puppies.

“Alright mom, how do you wanna end this chapter? You get the last words here.”

“Let's just go out in this world and make it our bitch bubbly!” I laugh.

“Alright, thanks mom.”

“Aww. I love you so much. I didn't even cry.”

“Yeah you did. I love you, too.”

We hug, “Maybe a little.”

Difference And Love

I scroll through my News Feed and see a meme from Jeff claiming that Obama is a Muslim. Underneath, one of Jeff’s hunting buddies, Dan, writes: **I 2nd that now let is [sic] hang that son of a bitch MUSLIM**

Hey, at least he makes his racism obvious. I reply: **Obama is absolutely not a Muslim. Even if our President was a Muslim, big fuckin’ deal. I can’t believe I have to say this but**

not all Muslims are bad people. I teach college classes in which the majority are Muslim students.⁴¹ They are more like me (a white kid from a working-class family in Crawfordsville, Indiana) than someone like Donald Trump.

Dan: well I can see right now Jeff this kid is a OBAMA loving person lets just hope he wakes up before the MUSLIMS in his class cuts off his stupid head why would Indiana let someone like him teach college my kids or grandkids sure as hell will never be in his classes lets just see what side Nathan is on when the killing starts

Me: Dan, I am Jeff's stepson. In response to your hateful, attacking comments toward me, I just want to say that I'm sorry you are harboring so much anger. I think your children and grandchildren would have a lot of fun in my classes! None of my students are going to cut off my head. Have a good day. I feel like a pretentious, smartass college kid. After I reply, I notice Jeff replied: **Dan that is my son you are bashing**

I feel guilty because Jeff defended me as his "son" and I'm calling myself his "stepson." While I don't see him as my dad, I do appreciate his fierce loyalty for family and love for me, and especially his love for my mom. I've not spent as much time explaining to Jeff what it is I do in school in the same way I've talked with others in my family, likely out of fear of offending him and also because my "school stuff" isn't exactly a manly topic in his neck of the woods. When Jeff introduced me to Roger, the guy who runs the campground, he said, "He's livin' down in Florida getting' his doctor in what is it, journalism?"

⁴¹ I taught public speaking to international students for four semesters. Many of the students in the class were Muslim. The majority were from the Middle East. One of my favorite students, Abdullh, is a Muslim from Oman, who switched his major to Communication after taking my class, and enrolled in my Senior Capstone class. We have met outside of class for coffee on several occasions.

Dan: **Well I can't help who's kid he is I'd say they [sic] same if my kid was thinking that way about OBAMA the truth is the truth about that trash son of a bitch OBAMA he is nothing but a fucking MUSLIM AND A LYING SON OF A BITCH**

Me: **Dan, I'm sorry you feel that way.**

Dan: **And I wouldn't be paying for my kids of [sic] grandkids to be going to College to have fun. It's fine u have ur right to think as u wish about Obama but i have mine and o [sic] only see that MUSLIM as nothing but a trash son of a bitch who needs to swing at the end of a rope for the world to see**

I'm done. I'm obviously not changing his mind, and he sure as hell isn't changing mine.

A few minutes later Dan posts again: **Son i wouldn't trust a MUSLIM 3 feet from me like i said ur right to think as u wish and so do i lets leave it at that**

I finish reading and notice I have a private message from Jeff. He writes: **I hunt with this dan and he is a Obama and Muslim hater and you will never get the last word on this. Lol and I think of you more as a son than stepson that's why I said son sorry**

Me: **I love that you said son! I said stepson cuz i didn't know if it would confuse him**

Jeff: **He is already confused**

Me: **hahahahaha! you watching some football today? Raiders have really turned their team around**

Jeff: **Although I can't stand Obama and don't know any Muslims. But I will protect my country til they bury me. Yes raiders will be back solid in a year or 2**

Me: **yeah, i get what you're saying. I personally don't trust any politicians. And I've been around enough Muslims to know that most are just like me. Shoot, a student I had**

last semester loved Jason Aldean and football. Just can't understand how some people (like Dan) can have so much hate inside them. It's like poison. Sad really.

A few days later, Jeff posts a meme of Donald Trump saying, *You're anti Trump? Good for you! I bet you're either a Muslim, illegal, or living off the gov't.* My mom Likes the post.

Me: I'm anti-Trump!

Jeff: That's good I don't think he can run things but I like some things he wants to do

Me: He's an insanely rich asshole who's been coddled his entire life by his rich family. He has no idea what it's like to work, what people like you, mom, your dad, etc., deal with. And he has no respect for working people. In his ideal world, he'd pay you as little as humanly possible, make you pay even more taxes, make you pay for health insurance, and then pay the CEO and top owners of Pace Dairy even more money, and make them pay less taxes. He says some stuff about immigration, Muslims, and guns that he knows some folks will like, and diverts their attention away from the absurd income inequality in this country.

Jeff: This is true but we need no more mouths to feed from other countries. Specially the won [sic] that will cut your head off after they eat your free meal

I post an article from *The Guardian* about Muslims who helped shape America. In the photo to click on the article is Donald Trump sitting next to Muhammad Ali.

Jeff: i never like [sic] Muhammad either he was a draft dodger

Me: In the article, you'll notice that there's a lot more Muslims than just him who have been crucial in building our country. Creating important medical advancements, building businesses and creating jobs, actually designing the Trump Tower, even fighting

for our country as far back as the Revolutionary War. Thousands of Muslims have fought (and died) for our country, even fighting for us in the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan. Also, I know you like Mike Tyson, and he recently converted to Islam, too.

Jeff: Sorry for Mike sorry nate I am not converting to muslim

Me: haha!

Jeff: Lol I have a silent love for God and a loud love for my country I served for and may die for

As I log off Facebook, I think about all the things I want to say to Jeff but don't say for fear of offending him or making him angry: Why do you hate Muslims? Why are you so scared of different ways of life? You do realize these memes you post and jokes you make stand in contrast to what I believe, what I teach, and what I write about in school, right? How does that make you feel? Why are you afraid to let your guard down and be vulnerable?

I understand why he and many white, working-class folks are drawn to Donald Trump. Here's a politician who is actually validating them. For so long, politicians have shamed the white, working-class – those lazy, backward white trash, misogynist, racist, homophobic bigots, the most prejudiced of all the Earth's creatures—the hateful, ignorant rednecks—the only cultural group left in our society that anybody anywhere is allowed to stereotype, make fun of, and hate. Just turn to any liberal news station or go to any college “diversity” class and you'll see what I mean. The more liberal, intellectual and/or inclusive someone claims to be, the more likely you'll hear discrimination against rednecks (see Richardson, 2005).

I also realize the things Jeff says are incredibly offensive to the people he attacks and makes fun of. It's hard for me to imagine Jeff ever saying these things to the actual people he is attacking or making jokes about though. He makes these comments partially because he's never

met people like this. His anger toward different ways of life is only heard by those who already support his views other than Yub and me. Perhaps that's why his statements don't seem to shock me as much as if they were said in my classroom for example, where there is much more racial, ethnic, and religious diversity.

Perhaps I am desensitized to crude humor and aggression because of my upbringing. Perhaps, I too, am complicit in his stereotyping and "hate speech" by smiling, laughing, or remaining silent when he jokes. Perhaps I am complicit by not aggressively challenging every comment he makes. Perhaps I'm even complicit by maintaining a relationship with him. How can I smile and joke with someone who thinks my Muslim students are trying to cut his head off, who thinks my students should be deported out of this country? How can I care for someone with such hateful views? How can I love a racist?

I empathize with Jeff's fear and anger but am also appalled that he actually believes the racist and homophobic things he says. I don't think it is surprising Jeff and many members of this community have the prejudices they do. There is practically no racial, ethnic, sexual, and political diversity in this town. Darlington is insulated. Jeff has never met a single Muslim. He does not interact with black or gay people on a daily basis. Those he interacts with everyday share the same beliefs as him. The information Jeff receives about people different from him comes from Fox News or click-bait online articles that present untrue or misleading information meant to incite fear and anger. He's also resistant to any really dialogue or exchange of ideas about these issues, at least on Facebook.

I can imagine how what I've just said might be interpreted by the readers of this dissertation, especially critical/cultural academics, and even more specifically people of color, Muslims, and others whom Jeff and my community attacks. I offer my complicated

understanding of our relationship with the hope that you might empathize with how one comes to have such views. That doesn't mean letting him off the hook.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:
THE ACADEMIC LIFE

The following chapter contains scenes and reflections from my time as a graduate student and instructor. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an in-depth, ethnographic view of academia, and also to discuss the tensions first-generation college students feel being a part of this culture. I show how I embody the role of the trickster – a rule-bending, comedic insider who pokes fun at rigid organizational rules, standards, and structures without seriously threatening the people who maintain them (Frenztz, 2008) – as a graduate student and instructor. This role is one of the ways in which I am my working-class self in the classroom, and am able to make connections between my past and present.

Scooby Snacks

“Today, you’ll get the chance to embody another character and present,” I say to my Public Speaking class. We’re doing an impromptu speech activity in which each student presents the same paragraph from the public speaking textbook as an assigned character. The characters range from a drill sergeant, Lil Wayne, and a news reporter in a hurricane, to Pikachu, and me. Students laugh and a few groan as I assign them their character.

“Alright, I’ll start,” I say. “You all can choose my character.”

They choose Scooby Doo from a long list of characters. I get on all fours and crawl around reading the paragraph in a Scooby voice. Students laugh hysterically as I ad-lib to a long-

haired student, “Scooooooby snacks?” The performance is subpar at best but honestly that doesn’t matter.

After seeing their teacher crawling around on the ground presenting as a fictional dog, we’re on a fairly equal playing field. I diminish my own power by being vulnerable and performing the impromptu activity right along with them. The student presentations are engaging, the most confident I’ve seen them. Near the end, one of my quieter students stands up,

“Hi!” says quickly. “Hello! Hey! How are you? How is everyone?”

She scribbles something indecipherable on the board, then becomes distracted, stops and sits on the corner of a table at the front of the room.

“Alright! Let’s take attendance. Let’s see here! What’s a good attendance question?”

She bubbles over with energy and we scream with laughter. She’s spot on with her character. It’s me.

Play and humor are not things. They are frames for experience. Organizations frequently think of play this way, scheduling play-dates, allowing for children to have recess, creating extracurricular activities as a form of “structured-play,” trying to create play as an escape from the seriousness of ordinary life. Just because you structure a particular activity or speech that you think is fun doesn’t mean it’s play for you or your students. A play context could be established during a test or mundane activity like taking attendance. For example, having students crumple their quizzes and throwing them that at me after they’re finished, is a playful symbolic act. It’s not *what* you do, but *how* you do it. The play frame is established relationally, through meta-communication and nonverbals.

Often instructors are afraid to play and clown around in the classroom, or to allow their students to play and clown around, because this is not the way to control a classroom. Clowning

around is a threat to power and control. Clowning also requires vulnerability, which is, quite frankly scary. For me to crawl around on the ground like a dog in front of my students, I have to really let my guard down and not take myself too seriously.

I use self-deprecating humor to diminish my own power in the classroom, which ironically often results in students giving me more authority. I'm also not afraid to be wrong (which is convenient considering how often I am), or afraid to humorously point out my mistakes (also convenient).

Spivak's Jargon

We are assigned to read Spivak's (1988) "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" for my graduate Communication and Resistance course. I'm immediately turned off by her dense, theoretical prose. I read the article twice, but still barely feel I understand what she is saying. I log onto Blackboard to post my required blog response to the article. I'm the last one to post and I notice that everyone else has posted how much they enjoyed the reading, several even noting their "academic crush" on Spivak, despite writing, "I'm not entirely sure what she was saying." At the expense of looking like one of the few students who doesn't "get it," I write this title on the blog, which I later read to the class:

How to write and speak post-post-structural-modernistic-colonialismized jargon:

Can the Subaltern Speak? Not in this language, Spivak.

My classmates laugh through my reading of the blog post. Spivak is at the frontlines of pretentious academic writing, dropping -isms like they're hot, namedropping like a tabloid magazine, and writing sentences even she probably can't explain. It's not just her, though. Most

academic writing needs a translator.⁴² My blog post used humor to poke fun at the conventions of academic writing and get the class to consider their own writing practices.

Perspective-Taking Presentation

I glance at the time in the top corner of my Macbook⁴³. *Shit!* Three minutes to make it across campus. I save the paper I'm working on. It still needs an ending. I grab my backpack and coffee and run out the door to the Public Speaking class I'm about to teach. *I just scolded them on Tuesday for showing up late.*

Today will be an exciting class. It's the first day of perspective-taking speeches, a group project in which students embody the role of others and inform, persuade, and create through their frame of mind (see Hodges & Bresnahan, 2013). Some days I still can't believe I get paid to do this: to write, read, and talk. "Because of my background, I have a hard time defining the[se] activities...as work...sometimes it seems like work, and sometimes it seems like a privilege...But still it doesn't *feel* like work because it isn't hard, it isn't unpleasant, it isn't boring or frustrating. It's rewarding: it's an amazing privilege to be given the opportunity to influence so many people" (Christopher, 1995, p. 140).

I show up two minutes late. Nobody scolds me or counts me absent. I take attendance, make a few pitiful jokes, which my students laugh at nonetheless, and announce today's topic: "The American Dream." There are four group perspectives: immigrants, low-wage workers, homeless persons, and senior citizens. Based on interviews with individuals in their assigned perspective, the students embody their characters and address The American Dream. Every

⁴² The National Communication Association online magazine, *Communication Currents*, actually has a section in each issue, called "Translation Essays" which are devoted to making articles accessible to those outside academia.

⁴³ Even though we hear plenty of stories about the CEO of Apple, how often do we hear about the people who build these products?

presentation uses the phrases “work hard” and “work your way up.” I ask about these phrases during the question-and-answer session.

“Isn’t walking outside in the hot Florida sun all day holding a sign work?” I say to the homeless persons group. “Probably worked harder than I did today. Our society just doesn’t recognize their labor as legitimate or valuable.”

A few students nod. It feels like one of those light bulb moments teachers rave about.

Who built those light bulbs?

“That’s not really work though,” a student from the senior citizens group says. “I mean it’s not a job. If they really wanted to work they’d be out applying for jobs.”

“Well then what’s a job?” I say.

“Not standing outside begging for money,” she replies. “They should be actually working to earn that money.”

“I think what they do is work,” a student from the low-wage workers group says. “I mean I’ve seen people earn money doing a lot less. I had a job at a gym making ten bucks an hour where all I did every day was sit at a desk and greet members as they walked in.”

“I’ve also seen people work harder and earn less,” a member of the immigrant group adds. “The janitor from my dorm who we talked with only makes a few dollars over minimum wage and she’s cleaning up after disgusting college kids all day.”

“I think we’re raising some interesting points about the different meanings attached to work and how these different experiences of work influence how we place values on people, and the sense of self-worth people feel as a result,” I say. “So how is this connected to today’s topic?”

“Well The American Dream says that if people work hard enough they can be prosperous and successful, but it seems today ‘working hard’ has come to mean getting a college education, earning more money and getting a prestigious job title,” one of my favorite students replies.

“Nice. The American Dream reinforces this idea that some people have earned better treatment than others, and therefore those people should be paid more and given more decision-making power (see Jones and Vagle, 2013). But not everyone who works hard moves up and/or becomes rich. What about the working-class? Do they not work hard? Do they deserve less?”

Before leaving I tell them what my favorite comedian, George Carlin, had to say about today’s topic: “It’s called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.” I leave class carrying a stack of speech outlines and the euphoria of a good teaching day. Teaching can feel so meaningful sometimes. I take a look at the outline on top of the stack. Right smack dab in the top-center of the page in bold letters: **Presepective taking speach.**

“Thank you,” I say as the janitor stops mopping the floor to hold the door open for me. I walk toward the communication building with the class discussion playing out again in my head. It reminds me of something my dad used to tell me, “Find a job that doesn’t feel like a job.” What he was telling me was to find work that is meaningful and work will never be meaningful if it’s treated like a job—a place I go just to pay the bills, where every day I’m counting down the minutes until I leave.

When you’re in the academy, work comes home with you. Most of my conversations outside of school are about school. The line between personal and work life is blurry. Even if my pay as a graduate student can’t buy me a pot to piss in as dad would say, teaching often brings me great joy and the feeling I’m making a positive impact on others. But many universities are becoming eerily similar to the factory. Students filing through classrooms like assembly line

workers in a degree factory. Academics filing through department meetings, heads down and mouths shut, manufacturing jargon in obscure journals to fill their quota, just doing their part on the tenure assembly line.

No amount of money can buy me meaningful work even in a capitalist society where how much someone gets paid is a cultural marker of their value. Work will be meaningful when it's something I care about (Bochner, 2009), when I don't hate getting up every day to go, when it feels like play. A significant part of the meaningfulness attached to work is the ability to have a positive influence on others and to be able to feel and see this influence. Factory workers have a positive influence on the lives of others through the products they help to build, but when the tasks for building the product are so segmented, it's hard to feel connected to the final product.

Communication And Diversity

Once back in my office, I drop the outlines on the other stack of outlines I've yet to grade, grab some trail mix from the vending machine, and head to the large lecture Diversity course for which I am a teaching assistant. I upload a PowerPoint about communication and social class and sit in a chair behind the computer as Professor James begins class by saying "Of the big three diversity categories – race, gender, and class – class gets the least attention."

Working-class lives are rarely represented in university syllabi or classroom discussions. When social class is mentioned it's usually inserted at the end of a list that includes race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. The topic of class often quickly shifts to race or gender. When we "talk about equality it's phrased strictly in racial and gender terms, as if even white males ever had true equality among themselves" (Goad, 1997, p. 40), but "white privilege does not always or inherently bestow class privilege; rather embodied whiteness [sometimes] obscures class disadvantage" (Lawless, 2012, p. 251).

Goad (1997) argues “America will never know the true meaning of tolerance until it learns to embrace the redneck.” For all the hate toward rednecks, they have practically no economic, political, or cultural power. The white working-class (rednecks, white trash, and hillbillies) are the class of whites who lack the power to define or shape cultural norms (Beech, 2004, p. 175).

“Raise your hand if you are upper-class,” Professor James says. Only two of the one hundred and fifty students raise their hands.

“Middle-class?” Nearly every remaining student raises their hands.

“Lower-class?” A few hands go up.

Mark Orbe (2013) couldn’t have predicted this scenario any better. He says, “Because of the desire to identify with the American Dream – which includes social mobility –most individuals regardless of their financial circumstances, identify as middle class” (p. 196).

“And we don’t want to leave our TA’s out,” she says. All eyes turn toward me. *I hate this activity. It’s reinforcing stereotypical, limiting ideas about social class.*

“It’s complicated.” I say. A few students laugh, surprised by my response.

“I’m a doctoral student but I’m the first in my immediate family to go to college. And I don’t think what I’m doing is better or higher than what my family does. It’s just different.” A few students nod. *At the same time, I wouldn’t want to trade places with them, I think.*

“Thank you for sharing,” Professor James says. “Nathan’s response reminds us that social class is more complicated than just how much money someone makes or even just the job they have.”

Before leaving class, students drop off their reading response to *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (Ehrenrich, 2001). I give half the heavy stack to the other TA and

stay after class for ten minutes answering students' questions, mostly about grades and absences. I pack my bag and trudge up the three flights of stairs, thinking about the classroom activity.

Classifying Class

The terms we use to discuss class are important. Lawless (2012) identifies as a lower-class academic despite how the term 'lower-class' is used to stigmatize people. Even though the terms working class and lower class are often used interchangeably, she writes, "I grew up in a single-parent home in which my mother was not *working*. I am not embarrassed to admit that I cannot claim the identity of *working class*. Instead, I find the term *lower class* empowering because it represents certain experiences that have carved my unique identity" (p. 247). Her mother feels insulted by the label, insisting instead on the term working class, because of the work ethic associated with the label. I also believe researchers have been too concerned with defining class instead of looking at how people use class to define themselves (Lawless, 2012).

Social class defies simple categorization. Lubrano (2004) says, "Class is a script, map, and guide. It tells us how to talk, how to dress, how to hold ourselves, how to eat, and how to socialize...It's invisible and inexact but it has resonance and deep meaning...the dark matter of the universe—hard to see but nevertheless omnipresent, a basic part of everything" (p. 5).

Ultimately, I believe "class must be studied [reflexively], where both the individual and society are seen as constantly influencing one another" (Lawless, 2012, p. 248).

The basic properties of social class are division and power. To say *class division* is to be redundant. If something is classed it already includes and excludes (Busk & Goehring, 2014). Zweig (2004) describes class "as mainly a question of economic and political power" (p. 4) and "the power some people have over the lives of others and the powerlessness most people experience as a result" (Zweig, 2000, p. 11).

How much money did you make this year? C'mon tell me. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You *earned* it, right? Class is about more than just how much money you have; it's how you get money (hourly, salary, inherited), how you spend it, your beliefs and knowledge about it, and the level of financial security. My mom says, "I work paycheck to paycheck. I will work until I'm old too, probably. If Jeff or I was to get sick, we have no reserves." Feelings toward money don't necessarily change with economic changes. It's more useful to think about income as an effect of class rather than a cause (Mazurek, 2009, p. 149).

Consider my current position as a doctoral candidate. I barely live above the federal poverty line, but I know few people who consider someone in the final stages of a doctoral program to be *solely* lower- or working-class, even if I identify with working-class values. Academics seem to be a class of their own.

What do you do? This is usually one of the first questions we ask someone when we meet them. Our job, or work, or career, or occupation depending on whom you're talking to, is an important aspect of one's social class. People of different classes not only do different kinds of work, but also have different ideas about what work has to do with a good life.

In recent decades, college has been seen as a ticket to social mobility. One goes to college not just to get a formal education or a different job, but to have a "better" life. Many first-generation college (FGC) students see college as a possible escape (Lapaglia, 1995) from repeating their parents' lives. Di Leo (2014) writes:

"For my parents' generation, a high school education was a ticket to a better life than their parents... If the educational attainment of their parents for their children was high school, then theirs was and would be college. But the key difference between my parent's

parents and my parents was that the expectation of educational attainment of my parents was not entry into the working-class for their son, but rather entry into the middle class”

College is a classed institution. Oldfield (2007) says, “Students who are the first in their family to enter higher education join a rarified and often mystifying culture of rules, rites, and rituals...No matter what distance they have physically traveled to their campus, college requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one they knew as youngsters” (p. 2-3). College can change one’s beliefs and values and encourage questioning of the things they take for granted. Working-class families realize the very existence of a college degree undermines and threatens their own working-class identity (Law, 1995). But “crossing from one world to another is never fully achieved for the working-class academic” (Law, 1995, p. 6). As class straddler, Amy Reed says “My mother said education would raise me up, but I’m still blue-collar. It doesn’t go away” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 200).

Social classes can be understood as shared meanings inherited from one’s family and larger community, especially their experiences of work and education, and continually molded through one’s own lived experiences. Each class is its own culture with different, sometimes contradictory ideas about how to live a good life. Your class influences how, where, when, and to whom you communicate, and the problems of classism and class inequality are communication problems, not just material problems.

“If we stop thinking of the poor as people who have too little money and start thinking of them instead as people who have too little respect, then it’s our attitude toward the poor, not their poverty, that becomes the problem to be solved...When class becomes a cultural marker like race and gender, then the solution to the problem of class resembles the

solution to the problem of racism and sexism, a matter of eliminating prejudice” (O’ Dair, 2014).

Class Inequality

One aspect of social class that most of us, even politicians, are willing to talk about is the middle-class. That’s because the term glosses over differences, encompassing as many people as possible to the point where the term really loses any distinguishing meaning (Mantsios, 2012).

It’s time we start talking about class inequality. Approximately 1 % of America’s adult population earns more than \$1 million annually and there are over 1,000 billionaires in America. At the same, more than 15 percent of America’s population (1 in every 7 people) live below the federal poverty line, and an estimated 3.5 million are homeless (Mantsios, 2014). The richest 20% of families of U.S. families own 89% of this country’s wealth, and the wealthiest 1% own nearly 37% of the country’s wealth (Desilver, 2015). This level of inequality is not inevitable.

Woman In Regalia

During my comprehensive exams, I sit on the 2nd floor lobby of the CIS building writing. The 1st floor sliding glass doors open and a woman in high heels and academic regalia walks in, followed by two male campus security guards. The woman looks flustered. She is shaking her head, as if to say, ‘I can’t believe it.’ The guards try talking to the woman, seemingly asking if she needs help, though I can’t hear any of their words except ‘Ma’am.’ She walks toward the hallway completely ignoring them and putting a phone to her ear.

“This is unbelievable,” she says into the phone. “I *finally* got in but I had to wait outside for security.”

It seems the professor forgot her card to enter the building and called security for help.

A moment later another woman in regalia, a student in a graduation gown, and an older woman in a dress, are standing outside the sliding glass doors. The security guards walk toward the doors and they slide open. The three women walk in without looking at or talking to the guards, and join the other professor in bickering about the locked doors as they walk up the stairs. The first professor walks up the stairs and sees me sitting at a table in my baggy sweatpants, sweatshirt, and flip-flops. She gives me a once-over.

“Excuse me, sir,” she says. “What are you doing here? You know the semester is over.”

“I’m writing.”

“How did you get in here? The doors are locked.”

“I’m a graduate student. I used my card.”

“Oh, so they let graduate students in but not faculty?” she turns away from me toward the MIS offices.

She tries to open the door, but it’s locked.

“Unbelievable. I need your key to get in here,” she says to the other professor. “They lock faculty out of their own offices.”

She is let in the office. The second professor and the two women with her walk into the office behind me. Meanwhile, the security guards are waiting in the lobby looking up as if awaiting instructions from the professors. The women chat and take pictures with their cell phone, one professor even pushing into me as she takes a picture with her cell phone. We’re in a massive, empty building and this woman is bumping into me.

The security guards says, “Ma’am, I’m sorry but do you need anything else? We’re really busy and we hafta go if you’re okay.”

“Yeah, go ahead,” the professor says, acknowledging him for the first time. The guards leave without the women thanking them. I want to scream at her, “You self-centered bitch! This world doesn’t revolve around you. Treat people with respect. You messed up not having your key. Don’t just expect that people will take care of your mistakes.”

For me, this interaction was saturated by classism and inequality. I could have interpreted the scene much differently. I could have sympathized with the woman who had to wait in the cold. The doors should be open, especially for faculty. They are the life and blood of this institution. It’s not their job to make sure the building is unlocked. They’ve got more important things to think about. It’s the security guard’s job to make sure these things are taken care of. Just as I shouldn’t have to worry about my department being clean when I walk in everyday – not my job. That’s for the working-class folks down there. I earned my right to not have to do that.

I sincerely hope you’ve picked up on my sarcasm. Perhaps some academics would have viewed this scene differently? They may not have even noticed that the woman didn’t say “thank you,” and may have thought the security guard was rude. But I identified with the workin’ man, not the academic. My working-class socialization taught me there is no job beneath you, that you respect and appreciate all hard workers.

I’m also ashamed to admit that I didn’t stick up for the security guard except in my head. I also wonder if I would have felt the same way if the professors were men? Have I been socialized into automatically seeing an angry woman as a “bitch” and not acknowledging her anger? I really don’t think so in this situation as there have been numerous mundane experiences here on campus where I’ve sided with the workin’ woman. I grew up in a different family and was present during these experiences, I wonder if I would have sensed any tension? I’ve also

witnessed the way professors in our department tell our front office assistant, Anne, to complete a task for them. For some, their voice inflection and the way they phrase the sentence sound as if she has no choice but to do this. *Your job is beneath me. I have more important stuff to do.*

Writing Lives⁴⁴

The following semester I am asked to teach, “Writing Lives,” a popular undergraduate autoethnography and personal narrative class.

“You’re all here for advanced statistics, right?” I say. Students look back puzzled and shake their heads. “No? Okay, well welcome to Writing Lives. I’m Nathan Hodges and I’m your instructor this semester. You can call me Nathan, Nate, Instructor, or whatever you want as long as it doesn’t offend others.” Several students laugh. I watch one student scan me from my Chuck Taylor high top shoes to my fedora. I sense his surprise at my casual dress and youth. I look around at the circle of students cramped together in our small classroom. We were originally assigned to a stadium-style seating room, but vulnerable discussion can be difficult when you’re looking at the back of someone’s head.

“It’s important in a class like this that we build an intimate community, so let’s get to know each other.” We spend the next twenty minutes doing icebreaker activities. Students introduce themselves by saying their name backwards, discussing their writing experience, sharing a 6-word story about their lives, and singing a lyric from a favorite song. I participate in the introductions, too.

“Now that you’ve had a chance to skim each other’s surfaces, I think it’s important for me to share some history about my life. Each of you this semester will be writing about challenging, personal life experiences and I want you to feel comfortable sharing your personal

⁴⁴ This section adapted from: Berry, K., & Hodges, N. (2015). Naked Teaching: Uncovering Selves in the Reflexive Classroom. *Journal of Education*, 62, 59-83.

stories. I'm a third year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication and this is my second time teaching Writing Lives. I'm the first person in my immediate family to go to college. My dad is an assembly line worker and my mom is a supervisor in a warehouse, but she spent most of my childhood waitressing. My experiences growing up in a working-class family form the foundation for my graduate studies, and also influence how I approach teaching and writing. I consider myself to be a blue-collar scholar, both working-class and academic. I've made a choice to go to college but I don't in any way see this as a *better* choice than the choices my family made. I also doubt they had the same choices I did. You'll get to know more about my history and views on social class throughout the semester, and we will read one of my stories about working in a factory. For now let's go through the syllabus."

Students pull out paper copies of their syllabus. "I'd like you to read through the opening narrative and let me know if you have questions."

I glance down at my copy.

This semester you will write evocative stories about your lives as a way to understand, cope with, and communicate social experiences. Through personal, reflective writing, we learn about ourselves and society, connect to others, come to terms with and reframe experiences, and create new ways of thinking and living. Writing is hard work. To be a better writer you have to write and read a lot. There will be no shortcuts in this class. I believe most deep, meaningful learning is wrought with confusion, doubt, and failure. Trust the process. Jump off the proverbial cliff and trust that you'll figure out how to land without turning into soup. When you finally reach ground, you might have a few scrapes and bruises, but you'll have the wisdom and resilience that comes from interrogating your vulnerabilities on the page.

I expect my students to stick at projects even when the going gets tough, just like my parents taught me. This semester, students wrote a 20-page paper that went through nine drafts. They stuck at the same project chipping away for more than a month and a half even though after the first draft they wanted to throw me out the classroom window. Luckily our room didn't have windows. I told them to stick to it. Writing is hard work. It's not supposed to be easy. Forget your muse. She's lazy, but if you really want her help, you better wake her ass up and sit her in the chair when it's time to write. I don't care how tired or unmotivated she is. If you stick with it, you will be proud of the product and process at the end.

At the end of the semester, my student, Rachel, leaves me a handwritten letter attached to her final paper about her relationship with her mother. She writes: *I loved when you spoke about how being an academic makes you no better than your working-class parents. That resonated deeply with me and was a real revelation for myself. I now hold that opinion too, and before never would have thought about it.*

It is important for me to be my working-class self in the classroom, to share stories about my family and community in ways that honor and appreciate them, not just condemn them.

CHAPTER TWELVE:
INTERVIEWING DAD

Back home in Montgomery County during Summer 2015, after interviewing Yub and mom, I interview my dad. I am nervous about this interview because I rarely talk to dad with any emotional depth. We are rarely vulnerable with each other

Before the interview, I down four beers. It's 11 pm. Dad just woke up about an hour ago from his after-work nap. He and Amy, his girlfriend, are sitting on the couch watching a TV marathon about Hitler on the History Channel. Dad jokingly does the "Heil Hitler" gesture. I sit in the recliner with my laptop and press record in Photo Booth.

"Alright dad, you just read my paper last night so what'd you think of it?" I ask. I emailed him "Manufacturing Stories" last night and asked if I could interview him today.

"I liked it," he says. "You looked at it from a lotta different ways."

"Do you think that's what it's like to work in a factory?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you disagree with any of the things I was sayin'?"

"Nah. Not really. The only thing I wished you wudn't done is dad didn't like to see ya use cusswords when it come from you. But when it come from someone else, it's puttin' what they said. I thought that was cool cuz different people ya know, talk different ways."

"I don't know why I cuss. My parents never did," I say sarcastically. Dad and Amy laugh.

“I like the enthusiasm you use toward it but like instead of sayin' asswhoopin', I wished you woulda said buttwhoopin'.”

“That's not what you say. And that's not how I felt when I worked there. I was angry.”

“It can make ya angry,” dad says. “Right when ya got the rock to the top of the hill he kicks it back down on ya. There's this night-shift supervisor at our plant, sits on his ass 70-80 hours a week. I worked overtime for him one time and I pulled the line cuz they'd fucked up the part,” he mimics pulling the line similar to one used on public transit, used to stop the assembly line. “He come over and said this ain't day shift. I said I don't give a fuck what shift it is. This ain't my job.”

“So what'd you think about my decision to go to college and get a Ph.D.?”

“I think it was a very wise choice.”

“What do you think about Yub wantin' to go to college now?”

“He's certainly young enough. I don't think you're ever too old but everything cost money and after a certain age it seems like you're better off just focusing on making money instead of just putting himself in debt to go through school then hafta try and pay it back. He needs to, I don't know, follow the example his brother set. He needs to work his way through college.⁴⁵ Cuz I don't think he's gonna apply himself ten, twelve hours a day like you do.⁴⁶ He may, but I think he'd do his class and then that's his day. He needs to keep himself busy. It keeps him outta trouble. He gets too much free time and he don't know what to do with it.”

⁴⁵ An example of how my family compares me and Yub.

⁴⁶ Lawler (1995) writes, “Most of the time, I am not exactly sure what I am supposed to do as a scholar. When I quit work at the lumber yard, I told the foreman I would be working part time and studying the rest of the time. He stared at me some and moved the wad of tobacco around in his mouth and finally said, “that ain't working.” He gestured toward the loading dock where two semis were jockeying for position. It was our task to unload the trucks. “Now that,” he said slowly, patiently, so that I could grasp the concept, “that's workin'” (p. 64).

“Do you think making money is the point in going to school? It's not why I went. I don't really care about money.”

“A lot of it's to learn some kind of skills you can provide to society, somethin' you like doin' where you don't feel like you're workin'. You get paid to do somethin' you like to do.”

“That's why I went. When I was younger did you think that I'd be in school still or even go to college?”

“I thought you'd go to college. I always thought you was a smart kid anyway. In first grade you was readin' the newspaper. You'd pronounce the words.”

“I don't remember that.”

“Your mom also read ya stories when you was a little kid.”

“Probably why I'm so messed up.” Amy laughs.

“It was mostly like child stories, you know, like before you'd go to bed. Seven, eight o' clock at night we'd sit in the living room and watch TV, she'd read a story. You'd sit there and get all buggy-eyed. Start gettin' tired.”

“I'm trying to remember, didn't my cousin Alicia go to college for a while? Or anyone else on your side of the family?”

“My half-sister Shelly actually graduated from Millikin. I don't know if she got an Associate's degree or a Bachelor's degree.⁴⁷ I know she went at least two years. I think she might of went four. She got some kind of degree like a social work.”

Throughout the dissertation process I've realized that my two family members who have went to college (Uncle Jeff on mom's side and Aunt Shelly on dad's side) have existed on the peripheries of our family. Aunt Shelly lives in another state and I rarely see her. She married a

⁴⁷ She graduated from Millikin College, the same college her son, Mason, is now attending.

guy who was college educated and when she's at family reunions, it is clear her family is culturally from a much different world than the rest of our family. I wonder if she experienced the same feelings of isolation, loss, guilt, and dissonance I've experienced?

“Do you feel like when I was younger you tried to instill in me the importance of school and education?”

“Oh yeah. I'd tell ya every day about seem like. Go to school. Continue your education. Learn some skills. Noone's gonna know it all. But you can learn how to learn. That's what I think you're good at. Researchin', findin' out. You may not know it but someone else does.”

“Learning how to learn. I like that. What other things did you try to teach me and Yub growing up? What did you want for us when we grew up?”

“I just wanted you to see that if you focused and kept workin' at somethin', you could achieve anything you wanted to do. Sometimes things just don't happen overnight. If ya got big dreams it can takes ya years but if you keep pluggin away a little bit everyday, stay focused on it, eventually you'll get there. Put your chin down and stay after it. Then after a few years you look back and see how far you've come. Sometimes you don't realize it when you're just walkin' a mile a day but at the end of the week you look back and you can't even see where you started from.”

“You should write a motivational book, dad.” We laugh. “Do you think I've changed at all since I've gone to college?”

“Yeah, you've grown up. You're a lot smarter. You've seen a lot of different things.”

“But how am I any smarter?”

“Now you not only pronounce the big words you read when you was a first grader, you know what they mean. If you don't know what they mean, you find out.” We all laugh. “I think

the more you know in life, the easier it is for ya. You also help others as far as ya are. Dad learns stuff from ya all the time.”

“Even Brownie [Amy's nickname] teaches me things.”

“What'd you learn from me? When to tap out?” Earlier me and dad were wrestling on the living room floor.

“Ah, you never tap out.”

“You just did earlier.”

“Yeah when it comes to physical. Live to fight another day.”

“How do you feel about your work, what you do?”

“I think we all need sumpin to drive, you know. We live life fast now. We don't saddle up a horse and take all day to ride into the grocery store. We just run and jump in a vehicle and fifteen minutes we're back. I think a vehicle's pretty important. It's a man's horse. You put your life in your own hands when you get in a vehicle. You gotta build that car right or somebody's gonna get hurt bad. So it's a pretty important job, I think.”

“Do you like your job at all?”

“I think I'm pretty lucky. I'm thankful to have it. Ya know there's others out there that probably work just as hard as I do and don't get paid near as much as I do. There's days that it's okay but there's times that, I guess after 21 years of doin' it on an assembly line at that pace, they probably don't give ya enough time for the quality that each vehicle should have. It's a big rush. It's all about numbers. And money.”

“If you had a choice of working in a office there, would you? I don't know, like mom applied for supervisor positions and stuff.”

“I wouldn't mind havin' somethin' that was a little less physical and usin' the brain more than your muscles but I couldn't see myself in a office. I wanna be down there on the floor where the car's built. To me, that's what it's all about. I understand it's important for them to monitor and take statistics on stuff. But I don't think that's the job for me. I like the physical labor of it. It makes ya sleep good at night when you work hard.”

“Or during the day,” I tease. “Daddy's gonna take a little nap. Just wake me up when you get hungry. Little sidenote - when you wake me up, I'm gonna be super angry.”

Dad and Amy laugh. “I sound like a terrible dad, wudn't I?”

“No you were just like waking a bear out of hibernation. We were hungry and scared to wake ya up. So I would beat up Yub and make him wake you up. And then you'd hit me for hittin' Yub. What a great parenting method, dad. Don't hit your brother,” I slap my hand mimicking him spanking me, “Oh, I understand now. You don't hit people.” They laugh.

“Wonder where I got that from?” dad says. “You know son, to be honest with ya, I don't think my dad's ever, one time, laid a hand on me. My real dad.”

“Really? Grandpa Peanut never spanked you?”

“Nope. I can't never ever remember him whoopin' me. I seen him pick Tim up by the shirt collar and paste him on the wall. Tim's feet were danglin' in the air. Now my stepdad beat my ass a few times. I mean *beat* it with a belt. My legs and back. I wouldn't hold still.”

“I think you took your lessons from him,” I pause. “Alright dad, tell me about your school experiences. Did you like school? I remember you tellin' me you thought about going to college for a while.”

“Yeah, Anderson, Franklin, Indiana Central, which is University of Indianapolis now. They sent me some letters wantin' me to come wrestle. But I was just ready to start makin'

money. When you're 18 years old, your world revolves around somethin' on four wheels. I wanted to work and get a car. In high school I didn't have a car. My buddies used to pick me up and take me to school. I wanted a car like everybody else. My mom was raisin' five kids. She couldn't afford it. You know if she can't afford a car, she surely can't afford to put me through school. I didn't wanna put the burden on my mom. Plus I was kinda burnt out on school, burnt out on wrestling. I was just ready to search into a new part of my life, workin' and earnin' money. Havin' my own place to live. I met your mom and I didn't wanna leave her.”

“Would you have done the same thing if you could go back?”

“I don't know. I guess that's kinda hard to answer. It's made me who I am today. The stuff ya go through in life is what builds ya. I suppose if I could do it all over again, I'd probably go to school. I'd probably at least had tried it so I coulda had that experience with all the other experiences I've had in life. When you look back you can realize different options you could of taken. I think that's how you learn, by going through different experiences. It's just like I was in a big hurry to move on. At that age, you make those decisions sometimes. But I don't regret it. I really don't think about it too much. You're only pickin' pieces of this to put in your-”

“Oh yeah, I'm not puttin' the whole thing.”

“Do you feel that you've changed at all since I went to college? I felt like you have. I feel like you're more laid back and less angry than you used to be.”

“You've even said that to me,” Amy says.

“I wouldn't say I didn't make wise choices, I did what I had to do, you know to survive. I wanted you kids to not make the same mistakes I did.”

We finish the interview and I turn off the computer.

“Dad's not a good interviewer is he?” he asks.

“You’re just acting differently then you normally do,” I say. “You’re acting more serious.” Amy shakes her head in agreement.

“Well I just figured that because you’re doing this for school...”

“No, just be yourself dad.”

A few minutes later I turn the computer recorder on when dad is talking about why women and children shouldn’t cuss.

“Listen, listen,” dad says. Hear it out.” Amy laughs. “Now I am bein’ serious about this. I’m with a buddy sittin’ around a campfire, I don’t even realize we’re cussin’. But you hear it come from an innocent child-“

“We’re talkin’ about women,” Amy says.

“Well I ain’t done,” dad says.

“This is gonna be an interesting transition here dad, how you go from innocent children to women,” I say.

“But you hear it come out of an innocent child, you realize then, you shouldn’t be sayin’ that,” dad says.

“That’s how they learned it,” Amy says. “Why can’t a woman cuss? You can cuss. I can’t. He’ll be tellin’ a story and he’ll be like F this and F that,” she says to me.

“Because dad’s sexist!” I laugh.

“Because they’re made of sugar and spice and everything nice,” dad says.

“No we aren’t!” Amy says. “We get mad just like you do!”

Dad pauses and we laugh.

“Why not cuss dad?” I ask. “Sometimes you need to. If someone don’t understand how angry you are or how upset you are.”

“That's right,” Amy says.

“I guess I don't like to see other people angry,” dad says.

“Yeah, but sometimes you should be angry,” I say.

“Even the Bible says there's such a thing as righteous anger,” Amy says. “You should be angry that kids go hungry in the world and different things.”

“Well there's things that we can change in life and there's things that we can't,” dad says.

“We need to focus on the things that we can.”

“Dad, droppin' some philosophy on us,” I tease.

“I could've been a philosophy major,” he says. I laugh.

“I was told I shoulda been one,” Amy says. “I was like oh no, I'm not gonna do that.”

“If I want you to have a philosophy, I'll give you one,” dad says. We laugh.

“That's the problem,” Amy says. “It's your world. We just live in it.”

“This is my town!” he says, mimicking a country song by Montgomery Gentry. “We speak English.” Earlier that week us three went to Little Mexico, the Mexican restaurant in town. At one point, Dad pointed at the chip bowl to ask for more chips instead of verbally asking. ‘That’s rude, dad,’ I told him. ‘No, it’s not,’ he said. ‘They don’t speak any English.’ The waiter spoke English. My dad just didn’t understand.

“You're an idiot, dad!” I tease.

I turn the recorder off.

Later that week, dad and me are watching Fox News. A story about the recent legalization of same-sex marriage comes on.

Dad says, “I just don’t know how we can continue as a society like this.”

“What do you mean,” I ask?

“They can’t reproduce.”

“Well, not everyone is gay, dad.”

“I guess for me, I just always go back to the Bible.”

“Well, that’s your first problem.”

“It says to go out and be fruitful and multiply. Gays and lesbians can’t reproduce.”

“And some people who are straight choose not to have kids, too. Are they sinners?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Alright, well someone can use the Bible to make any argument they want to make so...”

Fox News cuts to a story about Hilary Clinton. “Ain’t no woman ever gonna be President,” he says. “She already served eight years,” referring to her role as First Lady.

After we finish the interview, I feel like a lot was still left unsaid. Dad seemed reserved, partially because he always is. As a man in Montgomery County, he rarely reveals his emotions, and he often speaks in platitudes, trying to teach me a lesson and reinforce to me his view on the world. I think about all the questions I wanted to ask dad but I was too afraid to ask: Why were you so angry? Why did you hit me? How do you go to work everyday to a job you hate? Why are you so afraid of and angry at people different then you?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
LUNCH WITH GRAMMAW

After a great interview with grammaw the summer before, I decide I want to interview her again during Summer 2015, this time about me and my family's experiences with social mobility.

"You could look at my childhood and say there was a lot of negative stuff, especially with mom being on drugs, all the divorces, and moving a lot but I think another way of looking at it is that it actually helped me get where I am now," I say dipping a chip in the bowl of guacamole and pushing my phone recorder toward the middle of the table. "I'm not saying this in a negative way but--"

"You guys ready to order?" the Little Mexico waiter asks.

"Another minute, please," I say.

"Yeah, give us a minute," grandma adds.

I continue, "But it was a fairly unstable childhood."

"It was," she says.

"That helps me where I am," I say. "Being able to be comfortable with change and ambiguity."

"But it did give ya the eating disorder," she says. "That's the only thing that provided ya a sense of control." It also gave me a low-sense of self-worth, difficulty expressing and receiving

love, and the feeling of not belonging, feelings which manifested as anger, shame, embarrassment, an obsession with my body, and anxiety about my place in life.

“Yeah, you’re prolly right. Where I am now, it helps being a person that can see the gray area in things. I grew up in a family where people said one thing and did another.”

“Like what?”

“One of their favorite phrases was do as I say, not as I do. Dad would be spanking me, telling me not to hit my brother again. Or mom would have a cigarette in her mouth, saying if I ever catch you smoking, I'm gonna bust your ass. Or telling us not to fight, yet they fought all the time.”

“You know what my viewpoint is?”

“What?”

“Kids survive their parents. The parents don't raise 'em. Most parents are stupid half the time.”⁴⁸

I laugh, “Imagine if I grew up in a family where everything was smooth and there wasn't a whole lot of stress and change. I don't think I would be as good as I am now as a teacher, a

⁴⁸ “They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.”

- Phillip Larkin

writer, or an academic.” Not that I would wish my childhood – the poverty, violence, drugs, and shame – on anyone, but I also would not change anything about my childhood, which is a pointless exercise anyhow because I can’t change it.

“Honestly, I don't know how you came out of it. If I had the power I would give all those professors at Manchester angel wings. I would, because I think they're awesome people to take you under their wing like they did. They helped you find yourself.”

“They are awesome people.”

“I don't think you would've done it without 'em. I have never met any people I have more respect for.”

“I'm interviewing one of 'em, Dave Switzer. You met him on graduation day. His wife was the President.”

“You tell him I said he has angel wings, okay?” she says laughing. “The people that adopted you up there, that Jeri, I swear, there should be more people like that, and I know there are.”

“I've had her and a lot of father figures in my life, starting in high school with Coach Welliever and wrestling. He mentored me. It's just all that passion I have for school now, I put into wrestling when I was in high school.”

“Yes, if Nicholas had got that passion soon enough...I think he will. What are ya gonna get?” she says looking at the menu. “I'm gonna get that pollo con pollo,” she says, completely butchering the name and I smile. “I always get it though. I'd like to try somethin' different. Get anything you want. Make sure it fills ya up.”

"Are you ready to order?" the waiter asks.

“Go ahead Nate,” grandma says.

“Can I get the mushroom quesadilla dinner?” He writes down my order.

“Okay, can I get the enchiladas?” grandma says.

We eat our chips and guacamole for a few minutes.

“That's why I wanted ya to get an education,” grandma says. “You don't wanna spend all your life doin' somethin' you hate. Life is short. One day you look in the mirror and you're not old and the next day you look in the mirror and geez, you're older 'en shit.”

“Yeah, I don't know if I ever could've worked in a factory my whole life. I just knew from a young age I didn't wanna do that.”

“You'd do like everybody else did. You'd got married. You'd had a child. Then you'd start goin' out with the guys and havin' a beer just to help ya get through your life. Cuz it kinda sucks. Not your family but you're life. And then pretty soon your wife's unhappy because you have an outside life. You hate to see people make those choices at too young an age. You know, your mom may not realize how lucky she is to have two boys that's not in a rush to get married and bring a child into the world. You know what I'm sayin'? That should be the last thing you do.”

“I don't know why people are so in a hurry to do that,” I say.

“Cuz they're stupid,” she says. We both laugh. “They're in a hurry to be grown up and don't realize that bein' grown up can not be as much fun. The thing is, once you have a child ya just love 'em so totally that your whole life revolves around 'em. I'm gonna get another bowl of guacamole,” she says as I scoop the last bit out of the bowl.

“That was pretty good,” I say. “So are you feelin' better grammaw?” Last week, mom took grandma to the emergency room because of a painful flare-up of diverticulitis.

“I'm not feelin' perfect but I am feelin' better. I actually was taken the antibiotics but the antibiotics was makin' me sick.”

“Cuz you don't take medicine. That's a good thing really.”

“It is a good thing but when you try to tell 'em you don't feel right, that it's the medicine, they just cut it in half. Yesterday was a bad day. I could tell my hands was wantin' to draw up.”

“That happened to grandma Pat. They were prescribing her all kinds of medication that was making her even more sick.”

“The antibiotics I was takin', it says right on the paperwork that this medicine can kill ya. That didn't give ya a whole lotta confidence, now does it?”

“Hey sir!” she says to our waiter walking by. “Could we get another bowl of guacamole when you get a chance?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says.

“No, it doesn't. I bet the reason she keeps prescribing it is she gets paid every time she writes a script. Pharmaceutical companies have relationships with doctors.”

“I know they do. That's all they know actually. I mean, that is the way they're training them. They didn't have any training with natural healing or figuring out what causes your problem. They just give ya a pill that either cures it or covers it up.”

“Yep, it doesn't really solve the problem.”

“So your grammaw Pat was just trapped. You've got to take control of your own body and how you feel. Like I told the doctor, I've never taken medicine and now I'm on three or four different things. It's a big adjustment.”

“Is she still makin' you take that antibiotic?”

“She wanted me to take a half a pill. But I quit. I'm not takin' it. The thing is, what I was sick with can come back because I'm not takin' it. But I don't like to talk about being sick all the time...So you got any specific questions you need to ask me?”

“Yeah, I wrote some down. I guess the first one is what do you think about what I do in school? Like you went and saw my presentation in Chicago and you've read most the things I've written.”

“You want me to be honest?”

“Yeah.”

“I ask myself, where in the hell did that talent come from?” she says laughing.

“What do you mean?”

“It's awesome to be able to think and put something down on paper that is interesting, serious, and funny at the same time. It's like I can't believe it. That's my little Nate. It's awesome what ya do.”

“Most the stuff I write about is about our family, how do you feel about that?”

“Well, you put humor into it, and I would have to say, viewing it as a child, I'm not sure the humor would've been there at that age but you've developed humor over the years of the,” she starts laughing, “white trash mentality that you was raised in.” She puts her hand over the recorder on the phone. “That's pretty blunt.”

I laugh, “Well, that's true.”

“It is. I mean you put a twist on it.”

“Yeah, white trash doesn't have to be a bad thing.”

“No, it's not a bad thing but it's comical. You could've written it a different way. Let's say you wrote it as a bad mentality that made you fail in life. It could be used as a negative thing but you take it and use it in a humorous way.”

“Yeah, I feel like a lot of academics look at white trash negatively. I feel kind of defensive about that where I am, like I'm defending working-class people.”

“Oh, I never even thought about it like that.”

“For example that panel you went to, I felt like some of the other presentations people gave were talking about how their background inhibited them from achieving certain things.”

“That's the difference between you and somebody else,” she says.

“I'm tryin' to push myself to see how my upbringing is helping me where I am now.”

“You want me to tell ya why you turned out so good in like ten words or less?”

“Yeah.”

“Because your mom, regardless of the mistakes she made later on, actually worshipped you and Nicky. She was one of the most loving mothers, and the first two years of your life is where you get the viewpoint of yourself. She may've had issues later, but those formative years, she was an awesome mother. So that gave you the edge. That's my viewpoint.”

“Do you think that's what it is? She said she used to read to me when I was a baby.”

“Oh gosh. She acted like nobody else in the world had had a child. You'd have thought she invented parenting.”

“Well, that's funny cuz I interviewed her and she pretty much said any sort of success I have is because of you.”

“Oh, you're kidding,” she says laughing. “Well I did believe in ya when you needed somebody to go to school. I knew that you would make it. Even if you hadn't of made it, my love for you wouldn't have changed. We're just givin' each other all kinds of praise, aren't we?”

“Yeah, so do you feel like I do a good job of portraying our family? Cuz another thing I'm struggling with as I'm writing my dissertation is, not everything about our family or this town is positive, and I can't look at everything positively.”

“No you can't.”

“For example, there is a lot of racism and homophobia in this town and even in our own family, which are not views I agree with.”

“I don't either. Now, who in our family...you don't have to say any names.”

“Obviously my dad and Jeff.”

“Yeah, Jeff and his dad are real bad.”

“Well, his dad actually to me seems pretty open-minded.”

“Does he? Maybe with age. Are you talkin' against black people?”

“Pretty much a close-mindedness toward people different than them. This town has a feeling of that. Like everyone in this town is pretty much white and straight. Except now there's a Mexican community but we know how most people in town feel about Mexicans.”

“I doubt there's as many straight people as what we'd like to think.”

“Yeah, well most of them probably aren't openly gay because of how people in this town might feel about it. There's a close-mindedness here that I don't often find on campus. Not everyone is open-minded in college but there are definitely more.”

“I hate people that are judgmental, she says.”

“I know. You've always been like that.”

“The truth of the matter is, I've had friends over the years, one that's been a real good friend. She was always interested in everybody else's life. She knew the latest gossip. She knew who was screwin' who, who was flirtin' with who. She didn't have any kids, but she'd had cancer when she was younger. The thing is, if you spend enough of your energy living your own life, then you don't have the energy left over to judge other people. I just don't think God put us here to judge other people.”

“Yeah, but people think they know what God thinks.”

“I have a couple people come into the drycleaners. They must go to the same church. Something was said about they were guaranteed to go to heaven because they had been saved and I says, I'll tell ya, I think a prostitute standin' on the corner sellin' her body to feed her kids has as much chance of goin' to Heaven as anybody else. That's just my feelin'. I don't think we're here to judge.”

“Yeah, I don't either.”

“Close-mindedness, Nate, is so stifling.”

“That's why I kinda used to feel I'm two different people in a way. Because the kind of values that are appreciated on campus aren't as appreciated here. I still struggle to feel comfortable being myself here.”

“Well, why wouldn't ya feel that way? You watch TV? Does anybody say anything that's not politically-correct anymore? The minute they make a mistake and say something, what do they do? The next day they apologize for it. Like Donald Trump. I don't believe in teaching hate, don't get me wrong, but what he's sayin' is true. Our borders are not protected anymore. We got the drug cartels living in our national parks growing drugs and camping out and the people living

down along the border just aren't even safe on their own land anymore. So what's wrong with sayin' the truth? Is he sayin' he hates Hispanics when he says that?"

"Eh, I think they were mad because he said Hispanics are raping and killing people."

"Some of 'em they sent up here are not the best." *And neither are some of the Americans born here.*

"I think they didn't like that he said it as if all Hispanics are. Kind of like how most people in this town feel about Muslims or Middle Eastern people."

"The thing is, Nate, you used to be able to say what you thought, because we were a free country. I'm not sayin' preach hate or nothin' but you can't even express an opinion anymore. I knew a lady at Donnelley's who made a off-color joke and she got laid off of Donnelley's because it had the word Hispanic in it."

"Most the people in our family say what's on their mind."

"Your mom's more outspoken than most of em."

"Most of the people in our family are."

"You think I am?" she asks.

"Yeah," I reply. "Most everyone in our family says what they mean and means what they say." *But how well do they really listen to other's opinions?*

"I was talkin' to Brenda the other day and I said 'should I be honest with my friend here or should I just sugarcoat it?' She says, 'well mom, when was the last time you sugarcoated somethin'?"

"No sugarcoating in our family."

"You think we should though?"

“No. I like that about our family. I feel like people on campus think I am a person who says what I think and I don’t hear as much as the rest of my family.”

“No.”

The waiter brings our food. “Oh, thank you.”

“Enjoy,” he says.

We dig in. “Okay, got any other questions?”

“Yeah, um,” I chew my quesadilla and I pull a folded sheet of handwritten questions from my pocket.

“Now you tell me if I’m way too honest.”

“No, that’s what I like about you grammaw, among other things. Why did you decide to cosign a loan for me?”

“You wanna know the truth? I love you dearly and I knew your mom and dad was not able to. I just didn’t have it in me to say no. Even if you had failed, I still wouldn’t have taken that decision back.”

“Did you think I was gonna fail, honestly?”

“No. I had doubts cuz you was so shy, and then when I found out you had been drinking, I had doubts you would overcome it, but I think the Lord intervened there.”

“When I was younger, did you think I’d be where I am now?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“When I was younger and I used to go stay with you at your house, what’d you think my future was gonna be like?”

“Well, you probably won’t wanna hear this,” her voice cracks.

“Yeah, I do.”

“You know how my boys suffer from depression? And you know how your dad kinda suffers from depression? I prayed that you would escape that trap, but I honestly didn't think ya would,” she says tearing up. “But ya did.”

“I think we all have a little depression in us.”

“Yeah, but ya have to fight it every step of the way.”

“I know. That's what my humor is.”

“I know it is. But I'm not sure Nicholas has that edge of humor.”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Does he? Okay.”

“Well it didn't take long for you to start crying grammaw,” I tease.

She laughs, “No, it didn't.”

“When I interviewed mom, she cried through the entire thing.”

“Really? I do worry about Nicholas though. He has so much potential. I just hate to see him waste it.”

“He's takin' classes now. I think he wants to end up going to a four-year school and eventually be a professor.”

“He's definitely smart enough. But once you take on responsibilities, it's harder to do.”

“Yeah. Do you think I made a good choice in going to grad school?”

“Oh my god, yeah. Like I told your mom, I think he's gonna be a professional student,” she laughs.

“That's kind of what being an academic is. Teaching is like being a student. You have to prepare for class and you're learning along with and from the students. Plus you get new faces every semester to learn from.”

“That's what I would do. I would teach and I would take something new all the time. I think people get so bored with life cuz they quit learning. That's why your mom, I give her full credit. She's in there just goin' full force.”

“Yeah. I think I'm addicted to learning. I'm constantly pushing myself to find new ways of thinking about things.”

“Does your dad have any of that?”

“Not really. Not that I'm aware of. He is really stuck in his way of doing things.”

“Yeah, even when he was young. He hasn't expanded his horizons at all.”

“He doesn't have any desire to. For him, jumping outside of his comfort zone is one time he decided to buy a peanut butter Snickers instead of a regular Snickers. I came here with him a while ago and he told me he's never eaten a salad in his life.”

“You're kidding,” she says. “Isn't he bored to death?”

“No. He listens to the same music, eats the same foods, says the same things.”

“Now what about his girlfriend? Won't she get sick of that?”

“I think she is kinda like that too. Although he did just go on a vacation to Tennessee and he's never done somethin' like that before.”

“I almost think he quit livin' when your mom left. But he was so unhappy with her.”

“Yeah, he was so unhappy with Ralpa, too. He's really happy now. When grammaw Pat was alive and he was takin' care of her, he was really depressed. He lost a ton of weight. He looked bad.”

“He's always been depressed as long as I can remember.”

“Actually when I started noticing him have more life to him is once I left for college. Once his boys were outta there, he didn't have anyone else. I think he went through a period of

depression, then was like 'well I don't have them here anymore and I gotta figure out somethin' to do with my life or find a way to be happy.' That's the impression I got.”

“I have to admit, when your mom had her issues with the drugs, your dad stepped up for you boys. That's what I told your mom, regardless of what you think of Mike, he's been a good dad to those boys.”

“Yeah, he has but he's so freakin' stuck in his ways. He didn't really ever encourage me and my brother to venture out and try new things.”

“Nicholas said you guys were scared to wake him up to get food.”

“Terrified,” I reply.

“Isn't that terrible? Does he know that?”

“Yeah, we joke with him about everything now. He laughs and kinda denies some of it but I think that's because he feels bad and doesn't wanna think of himself as a bad father.”

“I'm glad he's not the only one who thinks he was a bad parent. Sometimes I feel so guilty over my parenting skills.”

“I wonder if every parent feels that way,” I say.

“Yes! The minute you have a child, God gives you that guilt complex. Regardless of what happens to your kids, it's like it's always your fault.”

“My favorite comedian, Louis CK, says that being a parent is the most important job you have and it's a job in which you make countless mistakes. 'Oops. Irreversible damage there.’”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Here's what Louis CK actually says during the interview on Conan: “Parents never get to say that it's hard. You don't get to say that. And it's the hardest thing in the world. Anything else that's hard, you get to say 'this sucks.' But when you're a parent, first of all, it's impossible. You make huge mistakes constantly, like 'Oops, irreversible damage there. Move on.' You don't get to sleep anymore. You don't have sex anymore. You eat standing up and fast. The entire nation depends on our success as parents and you don't even get to say 'it sucks.' You have to say stuff like, 'I couldn't even imagine my life without my children.' I can totally imagine my life [without my children]...that's actually all I ever do is imagine my life without [them]...and it's not a big fantasy. I'm not in the World Series of Poker. I'm just sittin' in a chair jerkin' off and eatin' chocolate.”

“Well we forget that we're not raising kids, we're raising adults. That's what Dr. Phil says.” I smile and she giggles. “Dr. Phil, I love his advice. Don't get me wrong, he's arrogant, but he's smart.”

I chuckle, “Do you think that education is important?”

“Well, I do have viewpoints on education. I'm gonna ask you a question. Turn this around. I had a teacher tell me that these little kids start school and they have an imagination and a memory that takes hold quick, but he says around the sixth grade, we lose it. Why is that?”

“The school system tries to weed that out of em,” I say. “I separate education and school. I see education as wanting to expand your mind, to find your passion, and to see the same things in new ways, that addiction to learning I was talking about earlier.”

“When you're that young that's what you want,” she says.

“Yeah. Kids are the most creative. They're not bound by the way society expects them to see things because they haven't learned that society says you shouldn't do this or that. And school becomes about memorizing the old ways we do things instead of encouraging new ways to think about the world. You get pigeonholed into this standard way of thinking.”

“In other words you rob these kids of the joy of learning,” she says. “Well how could ya change the grade schools to get kids interested instead of sittin' there all day listenin' to somebody talk?”

“There's so many ways. Give them options for doing things instead of telling them the *right* way to do it. For example if you're a history teacher, rather than having them do fill-in-the-blank worksheets where you write in dates and names, have them do things like talk about why they think that this event is important today or do something creative like allow them to rewrite history and think about how they would have wanted events to unfold and their consequences.”

“Right. And make it part of their history. Maybe they had family members alive during that time.”

“Yeah, make education personally meaningful to them. That's why I like teaching this class called Writing Lives. Students write about their own lives in order to not only learn about themselves but their communities and the society we live in. Like the teeth paper of mine you read. That was a story about me and mom's experiences with our teeth, but it was about more than just us. There are a lot of people who struggle with insecurities about their teeth, especially poor people who can't afford to get braces. Writing that was a way of learning about our culture by reflecting on personal experiences.”

“The truth is, Nate, a lot of the things poor people say they can't afford...when I look back, I could afford those cigarettes everyday but I couldn't afford to put braces on my kid's teeth. It was choices for my own benefit and not the betterment of the kid. It takes age to realize that.”

“Yeah, but the thing is,” I reply, “when you spend all your time working in a factory and taking care of your kids, you look for some kind of release, and I'm not justifying it in anyway but that makes sense why people do it. Maybe cigarettes were your release from working all day and coming home and screaming at your kids.”

“Oh, I did both,” she laughs.

“But in this class I teach, I let students write about whatever they want from their life. They use the writing as a way of healing or understanding their experience. It's open. And some kids have been so conditioned into being told what to do, when they're allowed to write about whatever they want, they freeze. They don't know what to do. Because they're not used to being able to do what they want and be creative.”

“Somewhere along the line, they lost it,” she says.

“Plus, people show their knowledge in different ways. For example, in our family, we have good storytellers. And that's a way of showing how we know things, through telling stories. Not necessarily through writing either.”

We pause for a moment to eat.

“Teachers are like everybody else,” grandma says. “They have some kids in the classroom that are clean and dress really nice, and some come that aren't quite so clean, haven't had a good night's sleep. They form opinions about the kids, too. Teachers are human.”

“Oh yeah. I tell my students, to be honest with you, I have favorites, and I can't help it cuz I'm a human and am drawn to some more than others. I try to recognize this, but I especially like students who actually do their work and are willing to participate in class, who don't get out their phones and text in class. I think some students really liked that I said that because I was being honest.”

“How can they get by and learn anything if they do that in class?”

“There are a lot of people going to college who aren't really committed.”

“So, they're just delaying growing up is what they're doin' maybe.”

“Yeah, and more and more of them are the first person in their family to go to college. It's just a new environment for them. It's a whole new culture.”

“Well are they even prepared? High school doesn't really demand that much out of a person, does it?”

“It depends on what high school. The more creative, rigorous schools usually are the expensive ones. For example, Southmont. I'm not saying the teachers there are bad. They're not. But it was a school that was very much about a strict, standardized way of thinking. A lot of the

teachers there were also farmers and grew up in this area. I hated high school. I thought it was a day prison.”

“I hated it too. Don't you think so much of it is about class division, who's got the money and who didn't got the money? Who's got the fancy car for the kid to drive to school? You feel like a damn loser if you don't have it all.”

“I think that's where a lot of my embarrassment came from. I grew up embarrassed by where we lived and about my class. I think that's why I feel so strongly about the importance of staying connected to family now. I feel bad about that embarrassment I had when I was younger.”

“Not only that, Nate. It's one of the most important times of your life. Your dad had taken custody of you and Nicholas and the first day you started school, he wouldn't let your mom come and see ya get on the bus so she sneaked up. Those are traumatic things for kids to go through. A kid wants their mom there, too.” Tears form in her eyes. “I don't wanna cry.”

I laugh, “Too late.”

“What we do to little kids when we're raisin' em, we oughta all be shot,” she laughs. “The thing is, young kids get married, have kids, fight and argue, cheat on each other, it's just life.”

“It's the Hellwigs,” I tease.

She laughs, “No, it's not just the Hellwigs. Okay, ya got another question?” she asks eagerly.

“Okay, do you think that I've changed since I've gone to school?”

“Oh my god.”

“And in what ways do you think I'm still the same?”

“Well, you're not as shy. I think you're still not the one that steps out in front and grabs attention. You don't crave that and you don't need it.”

“I feel like I am kinda like that in school. I crave some of that attention. Teaching and writing provide opportunities for to do that and help people at the same time. I grew up really shy and when I went to college it was a chance to sort of reinvent myself.”

“Well you have but not in a braggart way to where you always have to be the center of attention. It's just that you have a friendly nature. You know what I'm sayin'? Like at the Convention in Chicago, you're always the first one to extend a greeting. Now that's the difference between being the center of attention and being friendly.”

“Is there anything that you would change about what I'm doin'?”

“If I could, I'd probably put a shield around your heart so you never get a broken heart in anyway.”

“Yeah, but then I'd never learn anything.”

“That's true. I always just pray that regardless of what life hands you down the road, that you will not sink into the depression that the boys have,” she say tearing up.

Knowing she is referring to my uncles I say, “I'm actually not the first person in my family to go to college. Uncle Jeff.”

“I know. Jeff, he's my heartbreak.”

The waiter drops off the check.

"Thank you," I say.

"Need anything else?" the waiter asks.

"No we're fine. Thanks," grandma says.

“After our conversation at Applebee's last year, you told me to send him a letter. I sent him one and he never replied to me.”

“I know. It's too far gone. He's lost so many years. He's trapped himself into such a lonely existence. And nobody can fix it for him, ya know what I'm sayin'? Nobody can.”

“Yeah. It's sad.”

“It is sad cuz he has a heart of gold.”

“I know. I used to love bein' around him when I was younger.”

“I know,” her voice cracks. “I'd like to see him move away and try to find a life. I think he's judged himself as a failure. And he's just so smart. Ya know, everybody is responsible for their own life. You can't blame it on anybody else and you cannot expect anybody else to save ya. So why do ya think your mom's changin' jobs?” She changes the subject, obviously pained thinking about Jeff.

“I think she says she wants more money.”

“Is there ever enough, though?”

“Yeah, I don't know. She is gonna get like ten thousand more or sumpin with this new job. She talked about how she doesn't think that there's any opportunities to advance at where she is now. Sounds like that's somethin' she wants to do.”

“She didn't have a college education. She's advanced so far. It's just hard to believe.”

“Yeah, and I think one of the reasons is cuz she's an assertive person.”

“She never was before. She didn't have any drive at all.”

“Wudn't she doin' drugs at that time?” I ask.

“I think they smoked the pot. She wudn't doin' the hard drugs til later. Jesus God, ya know,” she laughs. “Have you ever done it? Be honest. Have ya?” She's smiling.

“Yeah. I don't like it.”

“I never did try it. Not once.”

“It's not a motivating kind of drug. It makes you not wanna do anything. And I'm not the kind of person that likes not doing anything.”

“Who in the hell wants to be chilled out the whole fuckin' night?” she says laughing. “If you wanna do anything in life, you can't sit around and be zoned outta yer head.”

“There are some people who I think that would be good for them”

“Uncle Jeff, if that was legal, I would say that would be a miracle for him. He could take away half his pills maybe and smoke a joint. But the thing is, the states, all they care about is makin' money. Colorado, they don't think about the people gettin' in the cars and drivin' while they're all zonked out, ya know...So you ever see yourself getting' tired of teaching? What would you do then?”

“I could see myself getting tired of it if students don't seem as interested in learning. Like I was talking about earlier with so many students goin' to college and a lot of them are just there for the grade or because they think they have to be, but not really interested in learning.”

“You think that's because the money's more available for 'em to go?”

“Maybe. And I think it's just a cultural shift. More people are goin' to school now. Like there's for-profit universities and other really shady programs poppin' up.”

“Yes. They could care less if you're qualified. Just get your name signed on that loan. And it makes the students think it's all about them. It's not. It's about the money.”

Grammaw pays for my meal. We walk out, hug, and part ways. I arrive home and notice I have a missed call from her. I call her back. She says, “I wanted to call and tell you this cuz I

didn't wanna cry in front of you. I've done a lot of things in my life, some I'm not so proud of, but the best thing I ever did was cosign that loan for ya. I'm so proud of you."

Finding Purpose In Academia

For a long time I've had mixed feelings about my family's pride. I often feel like my family judges themselves when we are talking, as if they're comparing their successes to mine. I don't feel as if what I do should be admired more than what my family does. It's just different. Therefore, I try not to internalize my experiences as a story of *upward* social mobility. However, my life as an academic is better for me because I don't want my parent's life. I don't want to go to a job everyday I hate just to pay the bills. Being an academic is better than working in a factory *for me*, but I don't think academics are overall better than factory workers. It's not the nature of the work that matters, but how one approaches their work, and also how they approach other people.

However, this belief creates ambivalence. I downplay my academic achievements, saying things like, *I'm getting recognized just for sitting in a chair and typing while my dad busts his ass everyday and doesn't get any recognition*, when I receive an award, or *we actually get paid just to read and talk to people*, when I feel exhausted after a long day of teaching. "My old self doesn't respect my new self. My old self says I'm living a lazy, privileged life. My new self says, what more could I do? My old self says, you're not doing anything productive" (Christopher, 1995, p. 140). This feeling keeps me overcompensating in school – spending more hours writing, more hours preparing for teaching, and trying to cover too much in papers and presentations. I try to make my work feel like my dad's assembly line work. It needs to feel stressful and strenuous. This summer, I wrote most of my dissertation outside in the muggy Indiana heat, sweat literally dripping onto my drafts.

I've resisted adopting the label of "academic" because I'm aware that most of society views this as a better, more valuable label than "factory worker," "white-trash," and "poor." Sure, there is a lot not to like about the working class life – the poverty, stress, anger, shame, and close-mindedness. However, academia is also filled with close-mindedness, stress, anger, shame, lack of community and compassion, self-indulgence, egotism, and little of the critical attitude we express as academics is aimed at our selves and our own institution (Bochner, 2014; Frenzt, 2008).

But I love what I do. I actually get paid to talk and write about things that matter to me. My life in the academy, particularly self-reflexive, narrative forms of research and teaching have allowed me to engage more openly with my emotions, and offer me a sense of purpose. Historically, academic research methods have been used as defenses to protect us from feeling vulnerable – from the uncertainties, emotional dilemmas, and moral ambiguities of the research process. Methods and theories are used as ways of justifying our detachment from the culpability we feel in witnessing suffering and doing nothing to intervene (Behar, 1996). This is why I am drawn to narrative inquiry, forms of research that encourage writers and readers to be vulnerable, to feel deeply, and show their personal engagement with ideas.

I feel like I belong here, in the same way I felt like I belonged in wrestling. Now I'm validated for wrestling with ideas. People care about what I have to say. They listen to me, ask questions, and read my stuff. I am respected and validated for my work with publications, citations, student evaluations, awards, applause, notes from students, and various forms of "thank you" and "good job." As a working-class academic, I want to use my role to help challenge stereotypical, close-minded views about the white, working-class and get my students and colleagues to see their lives as worthy of respect and praise as well.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

NAMING SHAME

This dissertation started out as a study about social class and mobility. I wanted to examine the complicated emotions associated with growing up in a white, working-class family, becoming a college student, and eventually identifying as a teacher-scholar. The first draft of this chapter focused mostly on social class and inequality, emphasizing how The American Dream narrative proved inhibiting and insufficient as an explanation for my own mobility. It limits the capacity for a meaningful and appreciative connection between my academic self and my working-class upbringing and family. As I reread what I wrote, I realized the analysis was too distant from the stories. It didn't move me, grab me by throat, or make my heart skip a beat.

Since I began this project as an undergrad at Manchester College, I have been determined to study these big academic terms: *social class*, *social mobility*, and *first-generation college student*. While I do believe this dissertation explores these ideas, it is about something more. As I wrestle with these stories and my family's words, how can I pin them down, if only briefly, to write something that *feels* true? This project started with a simple question: How did I get here from there? How did I go from the little boy in Crawfordsville living in a trailer with factory worker parents, earning bad grades, getting suspended, going to jail, being filled with shame and anger, and *hating* school, to being ten years deep in "higher" education, standing in front of classrooms and academic audiences who are interested in what I have to say? Sure, this is about mobility, about how I move through life – the ups, downs, twists, and turns – but especially

about what meaning I take from this journey from Crawfordsville to Manchester to Central Michigan to USF and back to Darlington and Crawfordsville. How am I still that angry boy who beat up his brother or that class clown who threw pencils at his teacher, and how am I different? What's changed?

As I reread the interviews with my family, I noticed any time one of them would reveal something that made them vulnerable, for example, expressing regrets about past experiences, I would get uncomfortable. In response, I cracked jokes, shifted topics, stayed silent, and drank alcohol...lots of alcohol. I rarely asked follow-up questions when uncomfortable topics came up, and I rarely acknowledged the shame, embarrassment, and anger I felt about my childhood, even though these were prominent, overwhelming emotions from my past. I suppressed these feelings. I also didn't interview Jeff because I felt like I was unable to open up about my feelings with men in my family and community, something that's obvious when you read my interview with my dad and stories of my interactions with Jeff.

Nor did I probe deeply into my family's weaknesses, disappointments, and remorse. Why? Have I not come to terms with my past? Am I scared of being honest with my family? I can be open about my insecurities, disappointments, and regrets with my academic colleagues but not my own family? Is my relationship with my family based on a sham? Henry (1971) writes "sham is a...concealment of how we really feel and the pretense of feeling something different" (p. 99). In other words, I've been feeding them bullshit, like they did to me growing up. Typically, we expect, tolerate, and even require sham the further outside our circle of family and friends we get. For example, with a grocery store clerk, we typically remain civil and go through the motions, even if we don't really desire to do so. But when sham becomes more

prevalent in our close relationships and family than it does in other public contexts, as has been my case, it “contaminates relationships instead of protecting them” (Henry, 1971, p. 100).

Throughout the time I’ve been writing this dissertation, I’ve been teaching Public Speaking, Writing Lives, and the Communication Senior Capstone. In these courses, I emphasize a personal, vulnerable approach to teaching and learning. I open up about my personal life and encourage my students to do the same. I want students to see their education as personally meaningful, and to develop themselves emotionally and spiritually, not just learn information. It seems I had been failing to take my own advice when I’m with my family. Have I really separated my family and school life that much?

Then I read Brené Brown’s book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (2012). Brown (2012) writes,

“As children we found ways to protect ourselves from vulnerability, from being hurt, diminished, and disappointed. We put on armor; we used our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as weapons; and we learned how to make ourselves scarce, even to disappear. Now as adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection – to be the person whom we long to be – we must again be vulnerable” (p. 112).

Somewhere in the process of reading this book and wading through the drafts of my dissertation, I experienced an epiphany: **I am afraid of vulnerability.**

This epiphany shocked me to the core. Since I’ve gone to college I’ve thought of myself as a man who lets it all hang out, who’s comfortable with uncertainty, and expressing my feelings and insecurities. I consider myself to be forthright, emotional, and able to talk about my insecurities with my peers and professors. But I’m not this way with my family. I also realized I’ve been using false vulnerability to keep me from developing vulnerable, trusting relationships.

For example, I was at a pub drinking beer and shooting pool with my friend, Max, when a current female student, Hannah, showed up. We greeted each other and chatted for a while, before me and Max resumed playing pool. Hannah was standing next to the table glancing at me when I bent over to set up my shot. I hadn't seen the puddle of beer spilled on the floor. I slipped and fell to the ground right in front of her. She, seemingly embarrassed for me, stuck her hand out to help me up. I of course was embarrassed. *Oh no! She's going to go back to class and tell everyone her teacher was drunk and fell on the floor.* I don't think I was drunk, or at least that's not why I fell.

I decide the first thing I am going to do in class on Tuesday is tell my students what happened, even reenact it for them. I was playing pool and slipped on a wet spot in front of Hannah. On the surface, this seems like me being vulnerable with my students. I am telling them an embarrassing story about myself, opening up and revealing myself as a human being, not just their teacher. But then I realize what I am doing is actually trying to control the narrative and prevent myself from feeling vulnerable. I didn't want the story to be told from Hannah's perspective, which I thought would emphasize the drinking part. I realized what I was doing and told my story to my class, including the drinking, allowing Hannah to add to the story. I discovered she was actually the one who had spilled the beer I slipped on and so we had a funny moment in class where I accused her of trying to sabotage me.

I've spent my life struggling to find a way to fit in, to belong, to be liked, and feel like I am worthy. In an attempt to fit in and be liked, I hid aspects of myself by clowning, acting out in anger, trying to be perfect, or disengaging myself from my peers. I now realize these methods of closing myself off, many of which on the surface seem like openness, were formed and shaped by my experiences in my family – watching, listening, and interacting with them.

What I have been struggling to come to terms with yet resisting throughout this dissertation is my struggle to love my family and community despite different pathways for work and life, and their sometimes close-minded, self-destructive beliefs; my struggle to love my academic community despite their sometimes close-minded, invalidating, and unsympathetic beliefs about the rural white, working-class; my struggle to love myself; my struggle to feel like I belong in the academy *and* in the working-class, and to understand my background as both an advantage and disadvantage, helping and hindering my life as an academic; my struggle to feel like my work is meaningful and worthwhile, and to convince academic colleagues that white working-class lives are worthy of understanding and validation, and have something to offer us, despite their faults.

Vulnerability is at the heart of loving, belonging, and feeling worthy as a person. My goal at the outset of this dissertation was to bridge worlds between my work and family, past and present, academic- and working-class. I now understand that my fear of being vulnerable is the most important factor standing in the way of bringing these worlds closer together. I can't write a story about my family and the struggles that result from leaving home without talking about vulnerability, and without taking the risk of being vulnerable with you – the reader – and with my family. Brown (2012) considers vulnerability “the center of the family story...If we want our children to love and accept who they are, our job is to love and accept who we are...Compassion and connection – the very things that give purpose and meaning to our lives – can only be learned if they are experienced. And our families are our first opportunities to experience these things” (p. 217-19).

If rural, white, working-class people can't be validated and loved by our society, how can we expect them to love themselves? If we shame, make fun of, and ignore, white trash,

hillbillies, and rednecks, how can we expect them to show compassion to others? In response to shame and invalidation, the white, working-class often responds with stubborn pride, defiant shamelessness, and rage as a way of covering up their feelings of social powerlessness and inferiority (Bouson, 2001). Shipler (2004) explains the consequences of this invalidation:

“They just build up anger inside of them, build up this sense of low self-esteem, which will not give them a desire to want to go further, because they think that they can’t. There’s no one saying that you can; there’s always someone saying ‘oh you can’t, you won’t.’ And so when you constantly hear that and even go to school and hear it...well eventually that’s what’s gonna happen” (p. 124).

White working-class folks often become caught up in “shame-rage feeling traps” (p. 108) that can endure for a lifetime and be passed from generation to generation. Where is the room for compassion when caught up in feelings of shame and rage? How can one be compassionate with others who feel them to be inferior and deficient? Even conservative journalist Kevin Williamson from *The National Review* (2016) believes the white, working-class to be trash, and blames them for their circumstances:

“Even the economic changes of the past few decades do very little to explain the dysfunction and negligence — and the incomprehensible malice — of poor white America...The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs...The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump’s speeches

make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn't analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul."

Williamson's solution to the rural white, working-class "problem" is not addressing systemic oppression, inequality, and shaming behaviors such as his, but instead he encourages social mobility. You're only deserving of respect and compassion once you get out and are no longer white trash. Each one of us is vulnerable to the kind of cruelty Williamson exercises. We wouldn't fear vulnerability (uncertainty, risk, emotional exposure) if not for cruelty. Throughout our life, we look for ways to defend ourselves against cruelty rather than being vulnerable. But Henry (1971) says this creates a two-dimensional, polarized life, similar to my dad's comment, "I did what I had to do to survive" or many of my family's either/or rationalizations, but "compassion gives life a third dimension, gives it depth" (p. 449). We are not born with compassion. Compassion must be learned. Unfortunately, training in compassion is lacking, yet we get plenty of training in cruelty in our professions, media, religion, militaries, politics, and families (Henry, 1971).

Learning And Exercising Vulnerability

What did I learn about love, belonging, and worthiness from my family? How did they model this? What did they tell me about these values in the interviews? Why and in what ways did they encourage and shield themselves from vulnerability? How are these lessons still with me today? How vulnerable are my home communities, Darlington and Crawfordsville? How do they shield themselves? How do I cope with being in an institution that has historically shielded itself from vulnerability through criticism and abstract theory? These are the kinds of questions I need

to face head on if I want to bridge worlds and live a good life. I believe the answers to these questions are already present in this dissertation.

I realize from reading through this dissertation that being vulnerable means acknowledging the anger, hurt, sadness, embarrassment, fear, and shame I feel about my upbringing and life in academia. “If we don’t come to terms with our shame, our struggles, we start believing that there’s something wrong with us – that we’re bad, flawed, not good enough – and even worse, we start acting on those beliefs” (Brown, 2012, p. 61). I have to name my shame. Put a name to it and shame starts losing power (p. 67).

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I had to stare my shame in the face time and time again. Throughout my childhood, I was convinced I was too poor, too stupid, too fat, and not cool enough. I lashed out in anger or embodied the role of the class clown to repress my shame, rather than coming to terms with it. As I went to college, I felt like I wasn’t smart enough and didn’t belong in this new culture. I cheated on an exam, binge drank alcohol, and started distancing myself from my family. As I continued into grad school, I felt like I couldn’t be myself with my family, like I shouldn’t express dissenting views or be critical of their views. Once again, rather than talking openly about my feelings of shame and belonging, I censored myself.

Being vulnerable means admitting honestly and wholeheartedly there are things I learned throughout my childhood that inhibits or cuts off my ability to feel and give love, to feel like I belong, and to gain a sense of worthiness. I also have learned to count on the cruelty of others rather than compassion, expecting “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005) rather than honesty, making it difficult to build close relationships. Being vulnerable means acknowledging the beliefs my

family and community have that hinder feelings of love, belonging, and worthiness. I can't ignore this as I have for so long.

Growing up in a family with multiple divorces, drug abuse, violence, rage, racism, etc., has a profound impact on my ability to love and feel worthy. I have been in two close relationships that lasted longer than three years, one of which ended during the writing of this dissertation. I knew from the beginning of each relationship that I could not imagine spending my life with this person, yet I stayed in the relationship, scared to express how I really felt. I suppose I stayed because it felt good to be loved and validated by another person, something I couldn't feel about myself. I internalized my guilt and shame knowing this person was falling deeper in love with me despite my not feeling the same way. The more she would show affection and try to deepen our relationship by talking about our future together, the more I hated myself. I felt like a fraud. The worst part is that despite my feelings of wishing I could die so that I could make her not hurt anymore, I struggled to even cry. I wanted to feel intense sadness, to suffer for everything I put her through. I hated myself for not feeling. Throughout our relationship, I had fantasies about my life without her in order to cope with actually being with her. Thinking about a future with her made me anxious and sometimes physically ill. I am scared that I am incapable of loving someone the way she loved me. I didn't love myself enough to accept someone else's love. I'm still not sure if I do.

I watched my mom date man after man throughout my childhood because as she says during our interview, she thought she needed in a man in her life to feel worthy. She's married four times. She fought with these men almost every day. I watched my dad date Ralph for more than a decade, though he rarely seemed happy with her, and they fought frequently. These were the models of love and intimacy I witnessed growing up.

Throughout my childhood, I was so scared to develop a meaningful relationship with Yub, to show love toward him, that during moments of vulnerability, I lash out in anger. I hid my fears behind my rage. Violence was normal in our house. Yub and I were terrified to wake dad up. Sometimes we didn't have a choice because we needed him to take us to school or a wrestling tournament, or to get some food because there was none in the trailer.

Anger is a secondary emotion, a way to prevent us from feeling shame, fear, rejection, humiliation, sadness, etc. Henry (1971) calls anger an “amalgam of feelings” in which anger is only one factor (p. 5), but we rarely take the time to reflect on the initial feelings that sparked the anger. I believe the root of much of my anger is shame, or what Henry (1971) calls “shame-anger” where the shame becomes overcome by anger. When I bullied Yub and other kids at school, I was defending against my shame by shifting the blame from myself to someone else, from internal to external (Bouson, 2001, p. 121).

Cruelty depends on vulnerability. Even as I temporarily release my shame with each punch, I also protect Yub. I avoid his face and spine, the most vulnerable parts of his body. I want to beat him enough for him to know I'm in control but not so much that I can't beat him again later. He is my punching bag, no one else's. If I ever catch someone else with their hands on him, they better run.

Growing up with Yub, I never felt like I was good enough. I felt worse than him in every aspect: worse wrestler, worse student, fewer friends, more overweight, etc. There are only two of us and I'm in second place? I also compared myself to my wealthier and more socially adept peers at school, becoming ashamed of my poverty, my body, myself. Unable to handle the shame, I lashed out with violence, hostile humor, and obsessive exercise and dieting – a method of aggression against myself.

Yub became a safer place for expressing my anger, rather than taking it out on the actual bully and getting suspended, though that happened as well. Freud describes displaced anger as an unconscious defense mechanism in which the mind substitutes a new aim or object for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable.⁵⁰ When Yub wasn't around, a toad had to suffice. At school, I found plenty of people to bully. But mostly I turned the anger inward, the self-hatred eating away at me, making me feel unworthy of having friends, of being a good student, of belonging anywhere.

In some ways, I feel like I am drawn to academia because it gives me a safe place to express my anger. The things I write and teach about are things that matter deeply to me. They are often injustices, things that aggravate me or piss me off. Storytelling gives me the opportunity to most clearly express this anger. My life in academia has brought my feelings of shame, not belonging and low self-worth with my family to the forefront, at the same time that it has provided me a sense of belonging and worthiness.

I grew up in an unstructured, chaotic environment with constant fighting, unpredictable emotions, moving, breakups, etc. It's not surprising then that I searched for something to give me a sense of control. As my grandma noted in our interview, the eating disorder (a phrase I hate) gave me that sense of control. It is something I still know I can control with a considerable degree of predictability, and thus I struggle with not obsessing over my image, nutrition, and exercise. This perfectionism – a shield from vulnerability – has extended into my other endeavors too though, especially my schoolwork. Perfectionism is stifling and inevitably leads to shame because there is no “perfect.” My work can always be better. My body can always look better. I need *everyone* to like me. To live more vulnerably requires me to be more comfortable

⁵⁰ Thanks to Art Bochner for this insight.

with my flaws and imperfections, and to overcome my fears of always wanting to please and be liked by everyone. I must learn to expect compassion, not cruelty.

I also grew up watching my family numb themselves with drugs and disengage themselves from the uncomfortable responsibilities of parenting. Yub still numbs his feelings of shame and low sense of self-worth with alcohol, pot, and self-deprecating humor. I approach drinking in a polarized way: Either I drink as much as I can or I drink nothing. I drink to numb the anxiety I feel around others, and feel like I'm capable of being vulnerable and getting attention.

I believe my obsession with my weight and working out, my work in academia, and my class clowning stems from a "shame-based fear of being ordinary...never feeling extraordinary enough to be noticed, to be lovable, to belong, or to cultivate a sense of purpose" (Brown, 2012, p. 22). As I've continued into academia, I've tended toward over-sharing or letting it all hang out, shocking people with comments they would never expect from someone they just met. I read a personal narrative about shitting to crowded room at an academic conference. I make satirical racist, sexist, and ethnic jokes, and say purposively offensive comments to colleagues in jest. Many people comment that they can't believe the things I get away with saying. But this too is a protective mechanism. "Vulnerability is bankrupt on its own when people move from *being* vulnerable to *using* vulnerability to deal with unmet needs, get attention, or engage in shock-and-awe behaviors...Sharing appropriately, with boundaries, means sharing with people with whom we've developed relationships that can bear the weight of our story" (Brown, 2012, p. 46).

Don't Be A Pussy

"Don't be a pussy!" As a man in Crawfordsville I was told this almost every day. If you cry, you're a pussy. If you're scared, you're a pussy. If you need help, you're a pussy. If you

show too much love, you're a pussy. If you feel anything but anger, you're a pussy. A man is strong and emotions are weak and feminine. "Men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: Do not be perceived as weak...Don't be a pussy" (Brown, 2012, p. 92). This is what I grew up seeing and learning about being a man (and not being a woman).

Masculinity is not biological. We learn how to perform masculinity (how to "be a man") from social institutions, media, school, family, and relationships. Masculinity is continually redefined over time and differs across cultures, families, and relationships, and intersects with class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical ability in various ways. In our society one form of masculinity is valued over others, what some scholars refer to as hegemonic masculinity: dominant, tough, and not emotional. Kimmel (2008) believes "Manhood is equated with power – over women, over other men" (p. 67). The paradox of being a man in our society is that "men have virtually all the power and yet do not feel powerful...Men are raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it. No wonder many men are frustrated and angry" (p. 67).

There are repercussions for those who don't measure up to society's arbitrary standard for masculinity and also repercussions for those who continually try to measure up: Stigma, discrimination, violence, shame. Kimmel (2008) writes, "Masculinity is a defensive effort to prevent being emasculated. In our efforts to suppress or overcome those fears, the dominant culture exacts a tremendous price for those deemed less than fully manly" (p. 67).

For my Communication and Identity class, I interviewed my 75-year-old Papaw about masculinity. The prompt I gave him a few days before our Skype interview was, "What does it mean to be a man, and could you tell me a couple stories to help show what you mean?"

Some of these stories I shared throughout the dissertation. Papaw's ideas of what it means to be a man were:

1. "I'll always thought you oughta pretty well stand up for what you believe in."
2. "I always kinda thought a guy oughta' make as many as friends as he can. You can't please everybody with everything so you're gonna have an enemy or two around somewhere, but I always tried to treat everybody fair, listen to their side of the story."
3. "I always like to be as truthful as I can – truthful as I can be without destroying my friends or family. Once in a while you might have to slip up just a little."
4. "A guy should work hard, even if it's something you don't like, if you can support your family and just try to get along on your own, not have to depend on other people."

When I asked him where he learned to be a man, he replied:

"Well a lot of it come from my grandparents. They were poor people. I mean they was scrapin' around when it was really rough times back during the Depression. There wudn't any money around. There wudn't any jobs around. But yet they always had something on the table to eat. They just managed to survive.

"My granddad had a lung removed, and my dad and his brother, both of 'em had to quit school and go to work on the farm just to keep things goin'. So they learned to be tough and strict when they were just young. My dad, he was tougher than nails for a little guy. They kinda passed that on to us kids. Although my dad, he was kinda like me. He was a fun lovin' guy and done a lot of huntin'. He was the kinda guy, he could find humor in anything. Some of the things he done at the time was sillier 'en heck."

This is the kind of masculinity my dad performed. As a father, he didn't spare the rod because he didn't want to spoil the child. He wanted to make sure I grew up to be hard-working,

responsible, and respectful of my elders. Dad was often angry and violent, a way of repressing the initial emotion that triggered his anger. Sometimes he completely shut down. My dad's "I did what I had to do to survive," mindset leaves no room for compassion and in some cases actively discouraged it because compassion requires vulnerability. Compassion is not necessary for survival (Henry, 1971, p. 369). For dad to open himself up, to be compassionate towards others means risking uncertainty and when you're already teetering on the edge of poverty and are socially shamed, you can feel like there is little room for opening yourself up.

Dad and Jeff's fear of and anger toward "outsiders" closes them off to new perspectives, and the desire to try new things. As men in our society, they learn to react to vulnerability in one of two ways: shut down or get pissed off (Brown, 2012). Jeff is similar in a lot of ways to the rest of Darlington and Crawfordsville. The strong emotions of fear and anger in these two communities are often displaced into more destructive practices like drug abuse, drinking, violence, racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

The blue-collar masculinity found in communities like Darlington and Crawfordsville requires an "other" to police their value system. If you aren't strong enough, straight enough, white enough, able enough, or are too feminine and nurturing, you aren't a man (Strasser, 2016).

"Exclusion and escape have been the dominant methods American men have used to keep their fears of humiliation at bay...Peace of mind [and] relief from gender struggle will come only from a politics of inclusion, not exclusion, from standing up for equality and justice" (Kimmel, 2008, p. 68).

We need masculinities that push back against hegemonic masculinity, masculinities that are more nurturing, caring, and feminine (Strasser, 2016). What I realized through the process of doing this dissertation is my unwillingness to be vulnerable with my dad and stepdad, and other

men in my community, only reinforces and validates their invulnerable, dominating masculinity. If I want to change what it means to be a man in this community, I need to serve as an example myself. I need to be willing to express my feelings with the men in my family and community. I need to be willing to show compassion, to openly challenge violence, aggression, and close-minded beliefs toward others. I need to embrace my feminine and nurturing self in their presence.

Poverty And Shame

I don't say any of this to blame my family or community. Blame is just another way of transferring shame (Bouson, 2001). I honestly wouldn't change a thing about my childhood. I'm serious. It's a pointless exercise anyhow because I can't and I have to figure out how to live the best I can given the experiences I've lived through. I do want to hold some members of my family accountable for the poor decisions they made and actions they took, but mostly I'm angry at a society that devalues and shames my family.

To live in poverty in America is to be vulnerable. Shipler (2004) writes, "poverty is like a bleeding wound. It weakens the defenses. It lowers resistance. It attracts predators" (p. 18). My family's feelings about vulnerability are shaped in large part by the material conditions in which they live. To live in poverty in America is to live with shame, and without the financial and cultural resources associated with America's idea of success. When you feel like your life isn't a success, you are "made to feel inferior, deficient, or both" (Bouson, 2001, p. 101). Some rural, white working-class people spend their entire lives trying to overcome or deny, and even pass on shame to the next generation.

Social class is a ladder of social comparison. Just think about the metaphor we use to talk about it – a ladder. Particularly in our country where class inequality is so vast, there is a

constant pressure to compare ourselves to others. Comparison inevitably leads to questions of belonging and worthiness, and in an unequal, hierarchical society, this can lead to feelings of shame. For this reason, Shipler (2004) wonders if “being poor in a rich country may be more difficult to endure than being poor in a poor country” (p. 9).

The American Dream narrative encourages and reinforces social comparison. The poor are blamed for their poverty. If you aren’t successful, it’s your fault because you don’t work hard enough. You’re at the bottom of the ladder; you’re not as valuable or worthy as those higher up the ladder. Christopher (1995) writes, “Middle-class, college-educated society really believes that college-educated people are worth more as human beings than non college-educated people” (p. 144).

We often build armor to minimize or rid our feelings of shame without making ourselves vulnerable, which keeps us from growing, learning, and living a wholehearted life. While this armor may help us temporarily get rid of our shame, it can also destroy and diminish our ability to express love and compassion.

Living Contradictions

The violence, shouting, and “because I said so” explanations I received from my parents, were ways they coped with the uncertainty and risk that comes with parenting. Rather than investing time into talking through ideas and resolving conflicts, they used a swift act of violence to temporarily solve the problem. They also spent all day working a job they hated, being told what to do and how to do it with no opportunity for dialogue or to express their anger. They seemingly displaced their anger, substituting their whiny, fighting kids for the real source.

I learned early that words themselves are meaningless, that people use language to suit their interests. “Do as I say, not as I do,” my parents said. ‘Stop fighting,’ they told Yub and me,

yet they fought. ‘Don’t hit your brother,’ dad would say as he was spanking me. They’d tell me if someone hits me at school, I should hit them back. I do and get suspended. ‘Stay out of trouble,’ they’d tell us, yet they both went to jail. ‘Better not ever let me catch you with a cigarette in your mouth,’ they’d say with a cigarette dangling from their mouth. They also didn’t do much to legitimate their authority and rules. ‘Because I said so,’ could only work for so long.

My family talks about the importance of family, yet always seems to be fighting. Mom divorced four times. So did grandma. I have family members who go to church, yet discriminate against just about anyone who isn’t white and straight, although I have a lesbian cousin, a black cousin, and another cousin married to a Mexican. In high school, I was told how important college is and that I need to do my homework, yet there was never any extended discussion of college and *homework* at home. I was told to speak a certain way in school – “proper” English, no vulgar language – but this was not how my family talks.

Although my parents provided a model of living contradiction, they still wanted to do what *good* parents do. Their idea of being good parents involved telling their kids not to fight, not to do drugs, to stay out of trouble, and to follow rules, even if they didn’t do these things themselves. But these early experiences at home and in school didn’t just inhibit me; they also prepared me for a life in academia. Observing them, I learned to question and challenge authority, to be comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, values I embody as an academic. Also, seeing my parents struggle and experiencing their unstructured parenting, I learned to stick with it when things get rough and to be able to handle chaos.

Poverty can be dark, traumatic, lonely, hard, and infuriating. That there are people in this country who work hard and still struggle to put food on the table while others who work no

harder make millions pisses me off. Thinking about my mom working three jobs struggling to make ends meet while raising Yub and me brings tears to my eyes.

But to say that anger, sadness, and humiliation was all that was experienced during these years would be a lie. There was laughter. Lots of laughter. And not silly, frilly humor, but deep down belly laughs at stuff most people find appalling. Humor was one of the ways we coped, when we weren't fighting and shouting. There were also many moments of joy, overwhelming happiness, and love, because sometimes family is all you got and when you live in a small trailer with four people, you get close.

I also learned the value of hard work. I know this has become cliché for working-class people to say but I saw tangible results of a work ethic from my parents on a daily basis. I don't think it's surprising that many blue-collar folks who go into academia become successful writers, researchers, and teachers. My parents were literally working each day that week to afford that month's electric bill, rent, gas, groceries, etc. There were occasionally instances where the bill was paid late and we couldn't afford certain groceries or gas, and times when my parents were scared they wouldn't be able to pay their bills. I explicitly witnessed the result of their work each week the electricity stayed on, food appeared in the fridge, and we didn't need to move again.

In the process of doing this dissertation, I struggled with being vulnerable with my family, refusing to acknowledge the shame, embarrassment, and anger I felt about my upbringing and being open and honest with my family. I also struggle to feel joy, love, confidence, and security in my personal and professional life. Now I understand that bridging worlds requires me to engage both my academic and working-class vulnerably. It may be the only way I will ever feel like I belong in any world, let alone both worlds.

The Bridge

Almost twenty-five years later, I'm still on the bridge. The only thing that's changed is the diaper. It took a while, but I stopped peeing on myself. I still feel the shout from home – from my family and friends, the working-class way of life. I'm also curious about the world out there, the mysteries and excitements of a different way of life that academia offers. But I think I'll stay right here on this bridge, far enough from home to satisfy my yearning *and* distance myself from the aspects of white, working-class life that discourage vulnerability, but never so far that I get too big for my britches.

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