Real Children and Imagined Homelands
Preparing to Teach in Today’s World

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The diverse experimental schools that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century, and were the seed ground for what later became known as Bank Street’s developmental-interaction approach to education, were linked by a single guiding intuition—education promoting self-expression, active engagement with the material world, and study of the immediate community can bring about social change. Some schools stressed individual development and others placed greater emphasis on social awareness. All were committed to the progressive vision of creating a more just society through educational reform.

Today this progressive intuition is increasingly hard to sustain. Children are growing up in a time when physical and psychological
violence are on the rise and the gap between rich and poor is growing. The new global culture is fostering childhoods that are more fragmented and less coherent than ever before. As adults, we are forced to confront childhood as a time of risk, threat, perhaps even loss, rather than of hope and possibility. We console ourselves by clinging more tightly to notions of childhood innocence and world ignorance. For it is not just individual children who are now vulnerable, but the very idea of childhood itself.

Despite the discomforting childhoods faced by many, I continue to believe that educators must use children's experiences, no matter how painful, to promote learning in the classroom. The successful curriculum builds on rather than competes with the children's lives. How can we best prepare ourselves and a new generation of teachers to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century? How can we work with the actual lives of children while preserving the atmosphere of awe and wonder that brought many of us into teaching? Given the politics of identity and intensified focus on human differences, what strategies can we use to turn our schools into caring communities?

To answer these questions, I move between my own classroom, filled with adult learners clutching cups of coffee, soda cans, and half-eaten sandwiches after long days of teaching, and the classrooms I visit in the mornings where the children are constantly in motion and the energy overflows the curriculum. I move too between the stories my students tell about their work, stories that leave us refreshed and eager to get back to the classroom, and my own stories of trying to teach teachers in a more meaningful way.

Becoming a teacher provokes a biographical crisis. Memories of nurturing adults, long forgotten peers, and once-familiar neighborhoods are awakened. At the same time we focus on the children before us and question our abilities to reach them. We are naturally curious about their futures even as we may worry about our own professional prospects.

Working with new teachers, I try to take advantage of this biographical crisis. I ask them to write brief narratives about an early separation from an adult, a favorite play space, a difficult moment of childhood. Then, we read these aloud. As we look for common themes among the stories, the students realize that their own words have an uncanny way of getting to the heart of the matter. Later, I ask them to relate their narratives to the novels we have read and philosophy we study. Now they place their individual experiences in a larger social context.

There is an extensive literature that describes the possibilities and pitfalls of using autobiography and personal narrative in teacher education (Casey 1996; Graham 1991). My own use is consistent with Bank Street's developmental-interaction approach, which stresses the central role of studying children in making curriculum. It is also consistent with recent work by the reconceptualizing movement to broaden our dependence on psychological lenses for understanding children and to incorporate phenomenological, feminist, and queer theory perspectives (Keesler and Swadener 1992; Macedo 1998; Tobin 1997). Elsewhere, I have written about how the psychological gaze often leads educators to underestimate what children know about the real world and to overestimate their own ability to protect them from it (Silin 1996).

Like the experimental progressives, I understand that teaching is a form of research and therefore begins with a question. The only remaining source of absolute authority in my postmodern house, Webster's Third New International Dictionary, says that when we research we conduct a careful or diligent search, a close search as in researches after hidden treasure. In the courses I teach, I have been searching for the connections between how we understand our own childhoods and the way we teach other people's children. Can researching our own lives serve as new teachers as effectively as studying the traditional texts of child development? What do we learn about teaching by returning to our childhood homes?

I was recently reminded of the difficulty of this task when my life partner and I were visiting Asheville, North Carolina, our first trip to the American South. On a gloomy, overcast day our hosts offered us the use of their car along with a list of local historical sites. As our first destination, we chose the home of the writer Thomas Wolfe, a stately white Victorian house that once blended unobtrusively into a residential neighborhood. Now it is revealed in a most disturbing way—bordered by an abandoned factory, a superhighway, and a modern office building.

When we reach the front door, a task made complicated by the effects of all this urban dislocation, sometimes called renewal or revitalization, we learn that we have just missed the start of a tour. Fortunately, the young woman in charge takes pity on us and we are permitted to join a group already in progress.

The house is much like it was when Wolfe lived there. No fancy restoration, no climate control machines, or other paraphernalia of the well-financed museum. Upstairs, we pass directly into the many bedrooms, which were rented out to boarders and were the source...
Chicago and I rarely got to see her. However, I remember that she and my mother were very much alike, and their bowls were identical. My mother says that my grandmother and her mother, my great grandmother, made their bread in the same way, and in the same bowls.

On Thursday nights, my mother took her bowl down from its high place in the kitchen cabinet. This place signaled the regal value of the bowl. I also understood that her bowl was put out of reach because it was designated for one calling only—bread making. While she gathered her ingredients, I stroked the bowl to feel the smooth texture of the wood. I liked to smell the unique "doughy-yeasty" scent that lingered from years of use.

As she blended the flour with the yeast and added the eggs and oil, I sat off to the side and watched. She cracked the eggs like a master chef, and poured and measured the flour perfectly, without powdering the kitchen in a layer of dust as I knew I would have done. I focused on her hands as they kneaded the dough. They created a rhythm of folding, flipping, pushing, and punching. Over and over, she would go through these motions. She made it look so easy. She tried to teach me but my hands grew tired after a few seconds of kneading. I couldn't compose a rhythmic beat like hers. She grew impatient as I experimented.

My grandmother died soon after I moved out of my mother's house. When my mother asked me if there was anything I wanted from her belongings, I requested her wooden bread bowl.

Since that time, the bowl has travelled with me to every place I have lived. It has an esteemed spot on my kitchen shelf. I mastered my mother's, grandmother's, and great grandmother's bread making skills. Unlike my mother, however, I prefer to make my bread in the very early hours of a Friday morning. As I try to get the dough into a workable consistency, I focus on my hands. I look down as they are entangled with dough, and I pause. Soon I realize that I am looking at myself and not at my mother.

Both my mother and my grandmother had wooden bowls in which they prepared bread dough. My grandmother lived in

of family income. We are informed by our knowledgeable guide, who takes such obvious pride in delivering his well-rehearsed comments, that Tom, as we learned to call him, was always resentful because he did not have his own room. While growing up, he was constantly shifted, depending on the flow of boarders. Most often, he slept in a close-like enclosure, only a passageway between two larger rooms.

I am struck by how unusual it is to stand here in the middle of Wolfe's home—no barriers restraining our movement, no playless partitions obscuring the natural light. We are actually in the rooms. We make the floor boards squeak with our steps, can walk up to the dusty green walls to inspect the photographs and other memorabilia, look out the window and take in the view, turn toward the cavernous ceiling from which a single bulb is suspended, emitting a light too dim even for reading.

I try to feel the space as a child might, wonder what it was like for one who grew up here to return as an adult—cognizant of Wolfe's own admonition, the title of his now famous novel: "You can't go home again." I ask myself if I would want to go home again. What is it that I expect of students as they revisits their own childhood homes?

When we write about childhood our words take on a life of their own. Through our stories we construct a social world more than we express some truth about the past. "In the end," Jerome Bruner (1987) says, "we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (15).

With time, memories fade, facts are confused, history inter- venes. Because memory is never pure, always colored by successive layers of experience, it does not offer a direct route to the child's point of view. It is difficult to sort out what we remember, what has been described to us by parents, and what we learn from the old photographs, report cards, and first attempts at writing carefully stored in attic trunks. Recording our memories, we understand that childhood continues as a dynamic force within us. We learn more from the emotional truth of our stories than their literal accuracy. It is this truth that connects us to our own past and to the present of our students (Gullestad 1996).

Susie Lefstein, a student in my graduate seminar, writes about this feeling of connection:
Susie comments that she has been familiar with psychological theories of attachment and separation for a long time. But in writing this story she gains new insights about their relevance. Susie understands the way that physical objects—the wooden bowl—connect us to those who are absent; she recognizes that we often know others best through repeating the same physical task; she appreciates anew the spiritual comfort of traditional practices.

Thomas Wolfe tells us that we can’t go home again. As adults, we are permanent exiles in an unwelcoming diaspora called the “real world.” Ruth Behar (1996) suggests that childhood is a kind of imaginary homeland. Teachers have a unique drive to know this homeland. For each of its provinces is an image of the good childhood, that which we want for all children. These images inform our daily interactions with children. They cause us to value particular activities, ways of being, and modes of apprehending the world. Childhood is forever lost yet always present.

Susie Leibstein teaches us that we store up meanings and emotions in the body that can be reawakened and reexperienced. These body-memories can be a source of personal strength and resource for our teaching (Smith 1991). They open the way to reimagining childhood. I am not proposing that the body houses some essential truth about us or that we reengage in a nostalgic journey back to a simpler time. Rather, there is much to be learned from the powerful images we create in our written narratives. The rugged landscape of childhood keeps revealing new wonders. Our imaginary homeland is forever being transformed.

In contrast, when we consider stage theories of development, attachment as a long ago phase of childhood, we are impressed by the distances that separate us from children. We focus on everything that the child isn’t and, by implication, everything that we are. Mature adults have become. It can be unsettling to realize that childhood is not a linear story, the past laying the foundation for the future. Yet we must resist the desire to fix the past so as to explain the present and plan the future. Time is far more complicated, childhood a dynamic part of the present.

Perhaps I am unduly sensitive about these attempts to fix the past. With two elderly parents, much of my time these days is spent trying to restore their health and to repair their physical environment. I fret uselessly about carpets worn black with dirt, chairs lumpy with broken springs, lights covered with torn shades. I desperately want these things to matter to my parents—but they don’t.

When I visit, I organize the kitchen counters littered with dozens of pill boxes, bottles of cough syrup, and warnings about the dangers of the very drugs keeping them alive. I try to create order out of the confusion brought on by so much illness. As we talk of new diagnoses and treatment options, I fervently sort through piles of unopened mail, stacks of unread magazines, accumulations of unused coupons. I seek to control an uncontrollable reality. My parents are dying.

In their dying they are teaching me about childhood. It is a different lesson than I expected. In their sixties and seventies my parents frequently shared memories of their childhoods and re-told our family history. They asked about my old friends, classmates, and teachers while regaling me with stories of my early years. I often found myself impatient and distracted during these conversations. Now in their eighties, my parents are no longer concerned with the past. The demands of the body imprison them in the present. They ask me to listen with my heart rather than my mind. I gain fresh insights into their individual strengths and weaknesses. I am required to re-stage the family drama I thought I knew so well.

Reflecting on the past can be disturbing for different reasons. Jenna Laslocky, another student in my graduate seminar, remembers being totally immersed in childhood play. She also describes feeling detached from these memories, as if watching some other self. A high school incident signals a critical turning point when the observer and the observed become one.

It was tenth grade English class. We had a substitute, a largeish woman with long, straight hair, and not altogether clean.

As I walked to my place at the cluttered teacher’s desk, I had a brown crocheted shawl around her shoulders and was knitting something bright red. The class was winding to a close, and in the idle moments before the bell rang, small conversations had sprung up around the room. I was talking with Kathy, who was my friend. She was always about Matt Caputo, upon whom she had a crush, maybe about the school play, which was Cabaret that year and which featured a kiss between Betsy Van Ummerson and Steve Perton.

A noisy to-do across the room distracted me. There, a cluster of some five or six boys were laughing, laughing quite loudly.
Jimmy Romero was crawling on the floor, baby-like. He pretended to put something in his mouth, and then he began to scream. With this, the boys doubled over, their faces red with laughter. Some wiped tears from the corners of their eyes. One or two glanced over at me. Jimmy then stood, exited his small stage and returned, this time acting out a mother's role. He shook his finger at the place where he'd been acting the infant role. "You stupid, stupid baby! Stupid baby! Now see what you've done! Now you're going to be ugly—ugly for the rest of your life." More laughter.

I have a scar on my mouth. It's just a small mark now, but it's my measure of the world. When I was nine months old, my parents left me with my grandparents and went into New York City for the day. I was teething at the time, and in my grandparent's house I came upon an extension cord which was plugged in and which had prongs on both ends. I put it in my mouth and burned half of it closed.

Jenna goes on to describe the round of endless reconstructive surgeries she experienced as a young child, and to analyze the ambivalent feelings aroused by the growing attention and cruelty of adolescent boys. She writes:

But there was a point when it became too much, when I could no longer delude or comfort myself. And that was the afternoon in that too-bright room. Was it the public humiliation of Jimmy's performance? His daring to appropriate and distort the facts of my life? Was it simply one too many?

When I told my parents, they believed me. Although I asked her not to, my mother went to the school guidance counselors. When the intercom interrupted our science class Jimmy and three of his cohorts were summoned to the guidance office after class. It seemed that the moment was validated by adult authority, set in stone by adult mishandling.

Jenna's understanding of her childhood, of the physical and emotional scars she carries, changes dramatically over time. While she has always known the importance of that day in that too-bright room, she had never really understood it. To Jenna, becoming a teacher means becoming aware of its meanings so they are not projected onto the children.

In writing about her past, Jenna reexperiences feelings of powerlessness and agency. Acting on her own behalf brings "success." She knows how easy it is to culminate in our own oppression as well as the unanticipated consequences of speaking out. This knowledge has become integral to her classroom practice. As a teacher Jenna knows that individuals can experience isolation and excruciating pain. She is also attuned to how groups of people in our society may be mistreated. Distrustful of the silence about race, class, and community in the private school where she teaches, Jenna asks her seven-year-olds if there are concerns about the larger world they want to discuss.

After describing their fears about the environment, accidents caused by drunk driving, guns, drugs, gangsters, and fires, Jenna writes:

Dana said she worried about two things—pollution and how her father smokes so much. Her chin began to quiver and tears began to fall. She talked about how she kept telling him to stop and he wouldn't. She was afraid he was going to die. The room got very quiet and with unusual gentleness, several boys and girls in the circle went to comfort her. Michael sitting beside me whispered that Dana's crying was going to make him cry, his eyes felt tingly. Despite some anxiety on my part and a half wish to stop the conversation then and there, it seemed important to offer Dana some privacy and to let the next child speak. Her eyes too filled with tears as she began to talk about how she was afraid her cousin would get killed. After further discussion of death, the children began to talk about what it felt like to see homeless people—sometimes they were frightened and felt worried when they saw children asking for money.

The conversation went on for forty-five minutes and we'd only gotten halfway around the circle. This was pro-social behavior unlike any I'd yet seen among these children . . . and there was an urgency to the discussion. "This is important . . . this is really important," Michael kept interrupting. And when the end of the day came, the children wouldn't rest easy until they saw "discussion" listed as the first thing on the next day's schedule.
Jenna's group is becoming a community through listening to and caring for each other in the face of their concerns about death and violence. Jenna herself is learning that real teaching, teaching that engages and unites, works through a crisis. Our challenge is to contain the crisis without foreclosing the powerful, often confusing emotions it evokes.

Like Jenna, Hilary Lewis has a strong commitment to hearing the children out. But her history is different. As a white, middle-class teacher in a poor, African American Headstart center, she knows how developmental norms often ignore cultural context, silence community values, and label children as failures. This experience leads her to redefine her primary role as "community builder" rather than "facilitator of individual development."

She introduces the subject of homelessness to her four- and five-year-olds by telling them about her encounter with a homeless woman and her child on the subway ride to work. Hilary wonders aloud if the children have ever been asked for money. Receiving positive replies, she probes for why people might need money. The children answer—"clothes, a house, food, "a sock, a coat, a pad, a table," a clock, a picture, a place for playing, toys for the baby, a dog to play with the baby, and "a TV so she can see if it's hot or cold and because you might want to watch something on cartoons."

In the midst of this conversation, the children begin to talk about their experiences of moving from one house to another, belongings packed in boxes, feelings of fear, anger, sadness, and excitement spilling all over Hilary's carefully worked lesson plan. At the next meeting the children explore what it might be like to be hungry, the dangers of sleeping on the street and in other public places. Again, midway in the conversation, the children turn to moments of discomfort in their own lives:

Shanequa: Sometimes my mom go to see my dad, but I was alone with my brother, my big brother, and my big brother play music, and I was sick on the music, that's why my mom not here.

Hilary: Once you were alone with your brother and you got sick?

Lynda: From the music?

Hilary: You didn't like the music?

Shanequa: (shakes her head, lower lip jutting out)—And I was alone, and I sat on Mommy's bed and I said, "I want my mom." (Hilary acknowledges how difficult it can be when caregivers leave us and another round of stories is unleashed.)

Jessica: My Mommy goes away and my big sister makes me sit down in the room.

Devon: My brother be hitting me.

Ariel: My sister hit me.

Jahitiem: My cousin don't let me play.

Dawn: Me and my sister watch TV. But it is scary cause my mother not there.

In the end, the children agree that the best remedy for these unpleasant moments is to report them to their parents.

A third meeting begins with a book about a family living in a shelter. Now some of the children share their own experiences of eating in soup kitchens and sleeping in shelters where Kim observes, "They have beds and all the kids sleep with the big kids." Naturally this leads to a discussion of sleeping arrangements in the children's own houses—brothers and sisters who sleep together, moms and dads who do not; children who sleep with their parents, and others who seem quite confused about which beds they regularly occupy.

No matter how complicated the domestic arrangements, all the children identify with the child in the story book who is frequently separated from his mother. Again, there is a flood of stories about the difficult times of childhood—parents who are unable to pick them up at school, older siblings who fail to take responsibility for them, school bus drivers who become angry, children left unattended in neighborhood stores, and mothers who cry on being reunited with their children.

Hilary's conversations tell us that children know about homelessness through firsthand experience, from observations of others, and by making inferences from their own lives. They also tell us that children move easily between the subject of homelessness and moments of dislocation, abandonment, and separation in their own lives.
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Like Hillary, I see this movement not as an egocentric concern with self but as an empathetic attempt to grasp the lives of others. Like Jennie, I believe that it is only through discussions in which relevant social issues are tackled and authentic emotions are expressed that we can build caring communities of learners.

I want to be clear. Teachers are not therapists and teacher education is not a form of psychoanalysis. But neither do Friday afternoon feeling circles, or Monday morning reviews of appropriate classroom behavior, adequately prepare children for the real world. In my work with teachers I try to counter our tendency to avoid the disquieting, darker sides of human experience. There is no formula to make us comfortable with the silent and unspoken. Nor do we want to dishonor the secret and sacred aspects of our lives. But we can prepare ourselves for difficult conversations with children by staying in touch with the imagined homeland of our own childhood. Listening to the emotions that run beneath the surface of our childhood stories, we are able to join with students whose outward circumstances may be very different from our own.

We can also help students who are very different from each other join together.

Adèle Schroeder, an experienced teacher and graduate student, wants to talk with her nine-year-olds about AIDS. She also wants to model how adults choose significant events to write about. During the first meeting she shows the children a tin of "precious things" that she has collected over the years. It includes a farewell letter from a friend with AIDS.

After working my way fondly through each of the items in the tin, I came, finally, to Larry's letter. As I talked to them about this gentle man my family had come to love so dearly, I struggled to keep the quiver in my voice to a minimum. I hadn't intended for it to become such a tear-jerking experience. I wondered aloud how I would write this story. Would I write about how he died? How he lived?

I asked the children what they would be most interested in knowing. Their hands shot up and they offered many suggestions. Simone wisely cautioned me, "You should tell about why you loved him cause otherwise nobody will really care too much that he died." One by one they shared either advice or stories about people they knew who had died of AIDS or other diseases.

It quickly became clear that almost everyone had a story to tell. Feeling rather smug that things seemed to be working so well, I looked up to see Michael slumped down on the rug, tears streaming down his face, and his hand politely raised as he waited for his turn. "My father was sick for a long time before he died. He had lung cancer and he knew he was dying and I knew and he was so sick and I was scared."

I began to feel panic as three more kids started to cry and several more were struggling not to. As I moved across the rug to Michael, he put his head in my lap and continued to cry as we kept talking.

There is a part of me that feels like I may have crossed some line. Had I been Orwelling around with their emotions? Was this what I had wanted to happen? What was I going to do now? We were ten minutes late for lunch already. We ended our discussion, and Michael stayed in the room for lunch with four classmates who were eager to comfort him.

In the second meeting Adèle made a chart about what the children knew about AIDS, the questions they still had, and where to find answers to them. The third meeting focused on reading a children's book, Losing Uncle Tim (Jordan 1989), about a boy whose uncle dies of AIDS.

Adèle reports that she was most impressed by the natural way that the students comforted each other during this tender story. At the end of the day, she observes a boy from another class crying one of her students, "Hey, you look like you've been crying." "Well, what do you expect?" responds Gabriel, "We were just talking about AIDS. Who wouldn't be crying?"

Gabriel is not only learning to accept and express a full range of emotions. He knows that school is place where students discuss serious issues. I am reminded of the intensity of Michael's words during Jennie's class meeting: "This is important. This is really important." Important work involves risk. We often ask students to take risks yet are reluctant to follow our own advice. We do not trust that.
our students can respect and learn from each other. Nor do we want to place ourselves in their hands, to appear vulnerable in front of them. We tell ourselves that the classroom belongs to the children and that our own stories would only distract from their learning.

I return here to my classroom of adult learners where in 1985 I first spoke about being gay. I acted out of neither the desire to become a role model for lesbian and gay students nor the wish to promote greater tolerance among straight students. Rather, it simply seemed the best way to lecture new teachers about the connection between our personal and professional lives and not talk about being gay. It was a matter of integrity, of the authentic voices I hoped students would assume in their own classrooms.

I teach that education is an ethical and political practice, a concept difficult for some new teachers to accept. I am obligated to discuss how my experiences as a gay man inform my understanding of the public world I illustrate course theories from my own life: the treatment of lesbians and gay men by psychiatrists as an example of social control in the "helping" professions; the history of gay liberation as an example of movements for social change; AIDS as a critical issue ignored in many schools.

I don't know if coming out in class helps me communicate my concerns about the state of American education. But I do know that our conversations are richer when I leave behind the pose of the omniscient narrator. Then students are forced to question their prior assumptions about teaching and learning.

For early childhood educators steeped in a culture of "niceness" and a psychological language that universalizes experience, acknowledging the extent of our differences may be especially challenging. Sometimes, however, we must chance giving up being like our students, or even being liked by them, in order to foster authentic dialogue. Real identifications are earned only when we struggle to make sense of the "other" and recognize that our knowledge is always partial, incomplete, and unsatisfactory.

There are students who say that I have an "agenda." To some this is a description of a well-structured course, to others an angry accusation about a lack of professional objectivity, and to just a few, a valued perception that teachers may be committed intellectuals. Of course the students are right. I do have an agenda: I am clear from the first day of the semester that I bring to class a critical view of education, a demand for more socially relevant curriculum, and the experiences of a gay man who has participated in dramatic social changes over the last thirty-five years.

Other students comment on my "radicalizing" politics and commitment to feminist viewpoints. No one refers to my sexual identity. What they do say is that I have created a course to address my "personal concerns" and that teaching seems to be a "very personal experience for this instructor." Despite these comments, I believe that when I teach as an openly gay man, I do not reveal anything of an inappropriate or even shameful nature. Traditional distinctions between the personal and professional are in question now, and I want my students to understand that it's the life we have lived as well as the disciplines we study that shape our teaching.

And if my sexual orientation makes some novice teachers uneasy, it also asks them to consider how they will want to be known by their own students. How and why will they reveal information about their families or difficulties growing up? Is the traditional gendered ideal of the teacher without a self only acting in the best interests of their students still relevant in the postmodern classroom? At the same time they question what we can and should know about students. Do we read the detailed reports of last year's teacher before the year begins? How readily do we probe at parent conferences for information about a child's home life or ask for outside "evaluations" of difficult students?

Whatever our decisions, telling our own stories and receiving the histories of our students is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the beginning of our work as teachers. Stories are not abstract fictions separate from the world "out there." They link individual lives to particular cultures. They provide insight into the material contexts that limit some and offer a broad range of possibilities to others. Beyond the risks of self-display and the benefits of personal empathies lies the potential for increased social engagement.

Unfortunately, in too many classrooms I see teachers rush to reassure children that complex social problems can be resolved—the homeless will be housed, a cure for AIDS found, prejudice erased. In others I see the use of "conflict resolution" strategies to manage interpersonal differences before they have begun. Many adults are unwilling to leave children with disquieting emotions or unanswered questions. The narratives of my graduate students suggest that building classroom communities often takes place through a crisis, moments of confusion and unanticipated feelings. Then, students draw together even as teachers try to contain the unruly emotions that have been aroused. Only by living through such crises do children
learn the most important lesson of all—education can address the things that really matter in our lives.

I believe that adults, like children, learn most effectively when they are asked to share their histories. Staying in touch with the emotional truths of our own childhoods, we invite children to bring a broader spectrum of their experiences into the classroom. Most people welcome the opportunity to write personal narratives. I am continually amazed at how eagerly they offer their sometimes funny, often painful stories to the class and the pleasure they receive from hearing me read them aloud in the following weeks.

A student struggles all semester with her desire to write about the death of her mother after a long and complicated set of illnesses. But is it still too soon, the emotions too raw? Can she connect these events and feelings to our course readings? What, after all, does her less have to do with teaching?

On the last night of class I divide the group in half and ask each student to read a brief selection from her narrative. Amy listens distractedly to the other students. When her turn arrives she is silent, tears well up in her eyes. In a barely audible voice she says she is going to pass Lynda's death over and take her hand and then begin to read her own story of growing up Catholic in a Protestant neighborhood. When she is finished she turns back to Amy and gently asks if she is ready now. Taking a deep breath, Amy answers by reading a powerful account of her mother's illness: her own feelings of loss, rage, and shame; the responsibility of caring for her younger brother. Now we are the silent ones. Stunned by the beauty and honesty of Amy's words.

After class Amy confides that she still has reservations about receiving a grade for writing about her mother's death. I talk about the power of personal narrative as a tool for public education and about the experience of vulnerability in the pursuit of community. I argue that I have relieved her uneasiness.

Later that evening, alone in my office, I can not attend to my desk littered with the busyness of the day. We have come to the end of the course, to the edge of our experience together. We all took risks, made ourselves vulnerable, tried to communicate our deepest fears and the wellspring of our desires. Paraphrasing the words of anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996), I gain a new understanding of the intuition that guides my own work now:

Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that education that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore (177).