

evening meals, refrigerating leftover chicken stew and salads for individual grazing later. We spent hours quietly sitting in the same room with our books and journals. Or we ventured out alone for solitary walks through the neighborhood of multi-colored trees, collecting leaves to preserve as memories.

It was perfect. I couldn't have guessed Carolyn would offer me my first extended opportunity to tiptoe back into the world. Life keeps putting people on my journey I am willing to trust, with lessons I am ready to learn. Carolyn, once choir director at our church, sang the soprano of our beach duet while I, the alto, practiced finding sustained harmony in the presence of another.

But even though we had a shared history and were successfully spending time together, we talked around the death of Carlton, using "God words" for generalities, and avoiding the specifics of our personal pain. Was this also part of our history, the feelings we were told as children not to share? I was saving most of my emotional ramblings for the safety of my notebook, still unsure how to connect with another person. It wasn't until the second-to-last day in Maine that I felt comfortable enough to venture deeper into the conversation. I was grateful she hadn't pushed. She has two children about Carlton's age, who were his friends, and she had a big brother Tommy who died of cancer in his early thirties. I asked her when Tommy had died.

January 11. The same day Carlton died. She probably knew that all along and was just waiting for me to ask.

Birthday on the Beach

In the middle of November 2003 my family was closing in on me. Dad was put in the hospital because his heartbeat was irregular and the doctor wanted to explore the possibility of a pacemaker. I agreed to meet my brother Bruce at the registration desk to help check Dad in, but ended up spending the night in his hospital room to prevent him from trying to leave, like he had done on a previous occasion. I did this for the family, the responsibility I still felt as the "big sister." However, in the morning I was tired and grumpy from sleeping on a plastic loveseat, listening for sounds of escape. All I wanted to do was go home, take a bath, and crawl into my own bed. Unfortunately the doctor made his morning rounds before I could leave and very emphatically told me that someone needed to stay with Dad. After the doctor left the room, I waited about ten minutes, went home, and called Bruce. I repeated the doctor's instructions and confessed I couldn't stay another night. Later that afternoon when I delivered clean clothes to the nurses' station they told me Dad was doing fine, so I slipped away.

November 28, 2003, would have been Carlton's twenty-eighth birthday. I wanted some time to myself,

but it was beginning to look like the only way this could happen was to get out of town. I remembered the trip with Carolyn a month earlier as a refreshing change of scenery, and my chaotic family doing fine without me, so I went to the Internet to explore a getaway route and ended up booking a room at the pet-friendly Holiday Inn Express on the Biloxi beach. I envisioned myself on the Mississippi coast in the warm sunshine with Princess for company and my books and notebooks for some serious work on my collection of school stories.

I began the seven-hour road trip, heading east on Interstate 20. The farther I got from Shreveport, the better I felt. Maybe this was the feeling Carlton had when he started his drive to the West Coast - a way to untangle from the web of Fletts. I decided within the first hour that I would stay as long as I needed to. Bruce had the motel's phone number; they would be fine without me.

After driving across northern Louisiana and through the bottom half of Mississippi, my hotel room, with its little refrigerator, microwave, HBO and coffeemaker, was just perfect. I never realized how welcome maroon paisley bedspreads and mass-produced art work bolted to the wall could be. I set up my computer on the desk, spread out an assortment of books on one bed, stretched out on the other, and promptly fell asleep. Two hours later, after the refreshing nap, I walked a couple blocks down Highway 90 to a seafood

restaurant for dinner then returned "home" with a Styrofoam doggy bag containing enough fried fish and French fries for a second meal. After putting it in the little refrigerator, I crawled back into bed. I could work on the book in the morning, when I was more rested.

The next day was cool and overcast, and the HBO guide on top of the television advertised two movies of interest. I showered, dressed, and wandered to the motel lobby for a fairly substantial "free" breakfast. After helping myself to danishes, orange juice, coffee, boiled eggs, and a banana for later, I returned to the room and leashed my loyal companion for a brisk morning walk down the highway. When we returned to the room, I released the princess, kicked off my shoes, crawled under the warm covers, and grabbed the remote. I would work later.

But after two movies and a leftover fish lunch, the motel walls began to close in on me. I got in the car for a drive down the highway to Ocean Springs, a bedroom community across the Biloxi Bay, and the setting of my first teaching job in 1971. I was a young hippie then and remembered the little town being rather cool and arty. It was still a bedroom community, but now it was full of little boutiques and restaurants, appearing a bit more yuppie-like. Maybe this was the current definition of cool and arty.

When I returned to the motel room, I flipped through some of the books spread out on the second

bed. Nothing held my attention for more than five minutes, so I picked up my journal.

I'm not working. But I'll be staying a couple more days. There's still plenty of time.

On the third morning the sun broke through, luring me out into its warmth. I hurriedly dressed, returned to the lobby for the "free" breakfast and another banana, then grabbed my bag of notebooks and pens. My plan was to spend most of the day walking up and down the beach. This was, after all, what I had imagined when first planning the getaway. The effort of picking up one foot and then the other on the sandy beach reminded me of other beaches I have walked. In a casual restaurant overlooking the water with an oyster poboy and a cold bottle of beer, I noted mammoth casinos on piers looming in the distance, where grand hotels and fancy restaurants once perched. On the walk back, there was another sense of déjà vu while wandering in and out of half a dozen souvenir shops packed with t-shirts and shells. When I returned to the room, I didn't even think about book work; my mind and journal were busy recalling a full day of observations and pleasant feelings.

By the fourth day I was beginning to get restless.

I've been unwinding in the sun's energy and my memories long enough. Obviously I did not come to work. Maybe I was looking for something else, like an excuse to play, and beaches held fond memories of where I have played.

Packing my car to begin the trip home, I noticed how relaxed I felt. There was no anxiety churning in my stomach, no thoughts spinning in my head. The witness of my journal told me I had been doing exactly what I needed to do, accomplishing little in conventionally productive ways, but a great deal in the way of taking care of myself. Heading home, I saw myself as spider, the Indian symbol for storyteller, ready to return to the web without getting tangled in it.

Role Models

My poor Daddy. He bumped his head on a low branch of the large, spreading magnolia tree in front of the family home a couple of weeks before the Flett family reunion was to convene here in 2001. He was the last of seven children from Milbank, South Dakota, and the son of the town's doctor during the Great Depression. His nieces and nephews and their grown children were coming to Shreveport, many for the very first time.

Daddy had ended up in Shreveport, after spending four years in the South Pacific during World War II, supposedly because he couldn't face another Midwestern winter. My parents were both in radio broadcasting in the late 1940s. They met and fell in love across a crowded room. Or so the story went. Mom, a first-generation Southern belle (her parents originally being from Pennsylvania), created this lifetime role while majoring in drama at LSU.

Our little '50s family grew up with the models of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and June and Ward Cleaver as the ideal American families. Did we ever question whether or not Ozzie had a job? Or how June Cleaver could clean house in her heels and pearls? And when Wally was in trouble his parents never looked as upset as ours. My family must have been ahead of its time, appearing much more like those portrayed later in *All in the Family*, with its grumpy father and eager-to-please wife. Or *Wonder Years*, whose parents seemed constantly overwhelmed by the adolescent angst of their children.

But in 2001 when Dad bumped his head - on a Southern magnolia tree, no less - it triggered something that had been lurking just below the surface all these years. And it was happening at the time the Flett family was finally coming south to visit.

For the next year-and-a-half, Dad declined, as he angrily fought the confusion swirling around him. It was a new experience for the whole family, and we tried, each in our own way, to respond the best we knew how. Rage in him, a practicing alcoholic, was not new. But this time was different. My brothers and I, each facing middle-age challenges, had adult responsibilities of our own. We were not sure how involved we could afford to be.

It was taking its toll on Mom too, the Southern belle caregiver, whose skills included hosting ladies' luncheons and singing in the church choir. Her

coquettish ways weren't working. She believed he was "acting" this way on purpose, or just being stubborn. Of course, the mental breakdown she experienced my senior year in high school seemed to reinforce her own stubbornness, which she willingly held on to. She argued that he had not been officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's by the family doctor and refused any further information. We were at a stalemate.

Our family was still fragile from the death of Carlton by the end of 2003. We knew it was time to make some drastic changes, and looked to each other to see who was willing to take the lead. My brothers and I had initiated a family discussion several months earlier, dropping hints of how living arrangements might need to change for the health and safety of everyone involved. I was not eager to take on much else, not sure of my own stamina. My business brother Bruce and my outgoing brother Buddy found a place for Dad at the War Veterans Nursing Home in Monroe and with the help of the family doctor, who prescribed antabuse to control Dad's drinking, a plan was set. This was a decision the children had to make without Mother.

Buddy and I arrived at their house to take Dad to the VA for a checkup. We just neglected to tell them it was the VA one hundred miles away. Once we were on the interstate I called Bruce, and he and his wife went to Mother's to pack a bag, and deliver the news that

"they" wanted to keep him for a few days, then got on the highway to meet up with us in Monroe.

My poor dad watched the scenery pass from the front passenger seat on the drive to Monroe. His younger son Buddy (Deane, Jr.) assured him that we were almost there, just as Dad used to tell us on family vacations. I sat quietly in the back, unsure of my role, my pen noting pieces of conversation and observations. I also checked the electronic Amber Alert highway sign we passed, informing motorists of missing children, to see if Dad's name was on it.

After an hour-and-a half we arrived at the attractive modern facility with a fishing pier and pecan orchards. There was a couple hours of registration paperwork and a doctor's check-up, and then it was time for us to leave. Dad looked so helpless and confused when we told him good-bye. This was hard, even with a kind staff assuring us he would be in good hands, and my brothers and I remembering what life had been like for quite some time at the family home. With tear-stained faces we told ourselves that this was for the best, commented on how clean and friendly the nursing home seemed, and avoided each other's eyes. While we were busy justifying it to ourselves, we wondered aloud how we would explain it to Mother.

When we got back to Shreveport we gave her a brief synopsis of the event. Just the facts, as we knew them. He was there on a trial basis, to see if this was a workable solution. Her vivid imagination filled in the

gaps. After a few weeks on her own, she began to appreciate the calmer environment, and no further explanation was needed.

It has taken time and practice to adjust to this new phase in our family's life. One or more of us makes a day trip to Monroe every two weeks, then passes the news to the rest of the family. And we watched other veterans, besides Dad, in different stages of their own war stories.

Dad silently sits in the dayroom with no particular assignment, and Mom has her empty castle back under her control. There are no longer circular discussions about the difference between Alzheimer's and dementia, or 911 calls in the middle of the night when he fell out of bed, or anxious imaginings about what else could possibly happen. Our little family was accepting the fact that we could never make that Donna Reed image fit.

Having witnessed my parents' identity crisis, I approached mid-life with a fear that I was also hiding behind a role that no longer fit. Eager not to follow my parents' footsteps, my journal was the friend who has appeared to show me a way to get to know myself better.

Cruising

About a year after Carlton's death I was invited to be a chaperone for some high school Girl Scouts going on a Caribbean cruise. I fondly remembered my own Girl Scout trip to Mexico, over land to the Cabana, a scout hostel. Two of these young ladies had been enthusiastic second graders in my science class, and when they were in middle school I went camping with their troop. So when one of the leader mothers couldn't go, Patricia, the other leader, remembered me and called.

She and I would take five sophomore and junior girls to Cozumel and Costa Maya, Mexico, aboard a Royal Caribbean cruise ship during spring break. I didn't know much about cruises, but I did know high school girls probably wouldn't want to be roped in working on merit badges. I picked up my notebook.

*Can I handle being stuck on a boat
in the middle of the Gulf of
Mexico with a couple thousand
people for five days after a year of
near solitude? Won't I be
overwhelmed?*

*Not if you don't want to be. What can
you do ahead of time?*

I can talk to my friend Erma. She's been on a couple of cruises and she's an introvert.

That's a good idea. What else?

I can take you along for company.

Great. I'd love to go. I've never been on a cruise before either.

Three of the teenagers were assigned to a tiny cabin with me. The miniature bathroom and closets crowded the entrance. Two bunk beds at the other end of the room were separated by a narrow passage that led into a small sitting area in the middle large enough for a loveseat on one side, a dresser/dressing table on the other and a cumbersome coffee table with sharp corners filling the center. Patricia, another adult and the two other scouts were in a second cabin down the hall. I handed out room cards to "my girls," claimed a bottom bunk and a part of the closet, then proceeded to look over the schedule of events for the evening. The young women, all very responsible, followed suit and the adventure began.

Each morning I climbed over erupting cargo bags and suitcases that covered the limited floor space to wake up teenagers with a simple "good morning", then stood back and allowed them to emerge in their own unique ways. For five days they roamed the ship, went to activities designed for teens, lay out on the deck, ate, shopped for souvenirs at the ports, and had their own special vacation. Patricia and I sunbathed, people-

watched, ate, explored the adult on-board activities, and went shopping. I continued to amaze myself with active participation.

We met as a troop at our assigned table for formal evening dinners, tried escargot and calamari for the first time and shamelessly ordered two different desserts apiece. Afterwards we watched elaborate stage shows in the auditorium, the adolescents sitting on the opposite side of the large room. In Cozumel we snorkeled the clear blue Gulf waters together looking for Nemo, gathered for lunch and shopping in Casa Maya, and assembled on the circular staircase in the middle of the ship on the return trip home for an appointment with a professional photographer. But most of the time Patricia and I just passed the teenagers on our way to a line dance class, as they participated in a stem-to-stern scavenger hunt.

Periodically I pulled away for quiet time in the small, deserted ship library to write in my notebook, or slipped into the minuscule cabin for a quick nap, then later met up with others in our group for ongoing grazing at the continuous buffet or to listen to a variety of musicians in one of several lounges.

All of us were taking charge of our own good time, finding what we needed and wanted from this trip. I quickly learned to do the give and take dance with a roomful of high school girls and a boatload of strangers.

No one on this ship knew about Carlton's death. Even Patricia, who knew I had a son. On the last full day of the trip as we enjoyed a leisurely lunch, she casually asked about him.

I stammered for words and my eyes filled with tears. I told her briefly what had happened. There were several moments of awkward silence, as we both searched for something else to talk about.

I later noted the incident in my composition book, as I reviewed the fun I had had around all these people. The trip was exactly what was needed. A break from Laura the grieving mother. And a chance to be Laura, cruising.

Connections

Stoner Hill

I took my scruffy dog, the albino dove, and one lone tetra fish to Leah's kindergarten class to teach a lesson comparing and contrasting "fur, feathers, and fins." The dove and fish were former occupants of Nature Lab, the hands-on science class I taught for the younger children at Stoner Hill Elementary School until retiring in May 2001.

I was first hired at this school as a science teacher for the fourth and fifth grades while their regular teacher was on sabbatical, and because she was returning for the next year, the position was not permanent. However, when an enrichment teacher's job for the younger grades became available, I volunteered to develop an extension of the science program. The principal agreed to the idea and left me on my own to clean out a cluttered classroom used for storage, develop an activity-based curriculum, and find materials to teach science concepts through inquiry. And for six years that was my all-consuming passion.

Outside the classroom we grew fall and spring vegetable gardens. At one end of the campus we planted sixty saplings for an arboretum. Inside the classroom, in the company of a diversity of caged animals, we experimented with sound and light, hot and cold, liquids and solids, and discovered "doing" science was much more fun than just listening and watching. We traced the changes in water by dancing the "Water Cycle Boogie" and learned to measure carefully by making gingerbread in a Dixie cup. I was learning at least as much as any student assigned to this class.

Walking to Leah's room with the caged bird on a sunny day in 2004, I passed a line of second graders eager to greet my feathered friend. Some of them knew the mama bird when they were four-year-olds in my classroom. They remembered her as the one who laid eggs and laughed. It was a connection more than half a lifetime ago for these cherub children.

After leaving the bird in the kindergarten classroom, I went back to my car for Princess and the fish bowl and decided to return to the room using a different route, hoping to keep disturbances to a minimum. The nature lady walking a frisky dog down the breezeway might possibly stir up whirlwinds of excited children. We passed twelve-foot trees planted once upon a time by my little foresters. Continuing, we traveled over a hill of barren schoolyard where the organic vegetable garden had been. Walking around the end of the building took us past my old classroom.

There stood a 25-pound bird seed bucket full of blooming orange amaryllis - another remnant of Nature Lab.

Stoner Hill Elementary School sits on one of the highest "hills" in our otherwise flat northwest Louisiana city. To the east is the Red River, dividing us from the neighboring town of Bossier City. To the north is the downtown business area. To the south and west are large residential areas.

Captain Henry Miller Shreve settled the town of Shreveport in the 1830s after breaking up a log jam in the river at the bottom of this hill. Not far from where my own log jam began breaking up. Stoner Hill was the sacred ground where I became aware of the seeds I could plant in small children, and where I allowed children to plant seeds in me.

Writing for the Market

I retired from teaching to write a book about my experiences in Nature Lab, entitled *Paying Attention in Class: One Teacher's Story*. It was a collection of lessons from children, animals and the great outdoors that I had learned and wanted to share. But I couldn't find a publisher. The education presses sent me form letters explaining how it didn't fit their needs. I wasn't sure what that meant.

It was discouraging. The present emphasis in education seemed to be about improving test scores. Hands-on ideas were popular five years earlier. I wanted to scream to anyone willing to listen that education is a process, and no one idea is separate, to be discarded for another. What was this intense focus on scores overriding educators' knowledge of child development, learning styles, and the once-popular philosophy of teaching the whole child? Maybe I should have made that clearer.

Maybe I should have described the student population where I taught. It was a low socio-economic minority school, halfway between a popular private school and an academic magnet public high school. Many of my young students lived undetected in the high-crime area of a government housing project across the street from the high school. Their families, often headed by a single parent or grandparent, were victims and perpetrators of abuse and neglect. These children didn't have pets, or go to camp, or dig in their backyards. They couldn't even play safely outside.

It was my belief that all children could benefit from an interactive class such as mine, and it was my intention to recognize the universal gift of creative play in children. Perhaps the importance of a class like this would have been easier to recognize if the reader knew who my students were.

But when presenting district or state workshops I regularly met with teachers who told me that too much

activity doesn't work at their school; their children were too "low." Again, I felt the urge to scream. Sure it won't work, if that's what you believe. Was I willing to say that in those workshops?

Many of my most enthusiastic students struggled in their reading and math classes, but mine, a magical room inviting imagination and creative effort, seemed to be a natural fit for the curiosity and wonder all children innately have.

Would Carlton have had different survival skills if I had encouraged his creative side? I regularly affirmed his test-taking skills and logical thinking, the emphasis I was now questioning. Nature Lab began the year of his first suicide attempt. Was I offering an environment for children that my own son yearned for? Was this why I began to pay closer attention to the needs of the children around me? Was he asking to be included in this quest for the universal child? Wasn't this a class that I, the avid Girl Scout camper, would have enjoyed? The questions are overwhelming.

Should I rewrite my first book, describing my particular students in an effort to make it more marketable? Can't I find another way to convince the education presses that all children need opportunities to celebrate their creativity? Will I ever be able to explain this passion so people can hear me?

I do know that the two-and-a half years I spent writing about my classroom experiences was a constant reminder of my own creative urge and the preparation I needed to help my scared inner child learn her

lessons when she was faced with the death of her only birth child.

Looking for Playmates

I felt such emptiness when I looked at pictures of Carlton as a young child. He was so full of life. One photo, taken when he was three, shows his light blond bowl-shaped haircut framing big blue eyes and wide grin. His arms spread open. The little boy who asked endless questions and ran everywhere he went. He was the precious child I was given to share life and joy with. My tears told me to pick up my pen.

*My heart hurts. What do I do now
that this magical playmate is gone?*

*It's time for a reality check, Laura. He
hasn't been that little boy for a long
time. He was looking for his own joy
and reason to appreciate life.*

I guess we all are.

With that illusion challenged I have had to be more creative when looking for playmates. Young children are obvious forms. Part of my job as teacher was to rein in some of their unbridled joy in order to teach school skills. It was hard to fully appreciate what they had to offer when I was so busy imposing my adult world on them. This was probably why volunteering in Leah's kindergarten class once a week was much more fun. I could drop in for a couple of hours, play as hard

as possible, make magic and silliness and a general mess, then leave, Tinkerbell-like, as Leah lined them up for an orderly walk to lunch. I worried the longer these cherubs stayed in school walking in straight lines and preparing for standardized tests, the less obvious they could remain as playmates.

My frisky Princess is a good playmate. She runs full throttle in circles around the house with a pink flamingo Beanie Baby dangling from her mouth, then collapses into a fluffy puddle, snuggling beside me while I write. Our leisurely walks are more my preference, as she stops to smell the roses and everything else along the path.

Adult playmates can be harder to find. We are busy with images to protect, schedules to meet, and bills to pay. Maybe we learned those adult things when we were in school. I exercise caution when approaching these "grown-ups," hoping to find someone with whom to play. We give ourselves permission to be more relaxed unwinding at happy hour on Friday, or listening to music, or celebrating birthdays. But other occasions are trickier, as we gather to discuss study skills or writing, or salvation, or hold forums to solve the community's education problems. Such settings can be challenging to our playfulness when we are taking ourselves so seriously.

If I begin to wilt in a room full of heavy, hot air, I look for a way to lighten the atmosphere, so I can breathe again. I listen for cues, watch for breaks, or

wait for an invitation. Sometimes it never comes and I decide the environment is too stifling for me. Sometimes I find playing in my head is enough; I just have to remember not to laugh out loud at inappropriate moments. And sometimes, with a bit of luck and attention, I find the opening I've been waiting for - another playmate waiting for a cue, a chance to release a chuckle or two, or an opportunity to comment on the silliness over the plight of things in general.

I continue to look for playmates because I truly believe that hiding deep inside all these adult-form straight guys, myself included, are playful children just waiting to be invited outside.

So what do I do when I can't find anyone to play with? Well, as little Laura waits patiently for an outside invitation, Mama Laura looks within and finds a most compatible partner, the little girl she knows best. She is careful not to take herself too seriously or overwhelm her child with suffocating rules, as we two learn to play together as one.

A Change of Plans

It was raining outside, and I couldn't walk in the park. The inconvenience convinced me that I could get through another day without going to the grocery store, but I grumbled to myself, wondering how to release the cabin fever that was building inside me.

When I was an elementary teacher, rainy days meant "inside recess," which also meant lots of noise from board games or a class game of Seven Up. There was no recess from teacher mode either. I was expected to monitor the games for cheaters and peekers, and the only way for me to go to the bathroom was to pair up with the teacher next door and one of us watch two classes at a time.

As a science enrichment teacher I found rainy days a different kind of challenge. Many of our activities took place outside. If it was raining, board games or 7Up didn't cover the lesson's objectives. I needed an effective way to teach inside the classroom and still make it motivating and fun. I needed a Plan B.

It was a practice in flexibility and learning to accept what is. Successful teachers know they must adjust and work with what they have, but having a Plan B is for more than just the classroom. It's for times when life in general isn't going quite the way we expected.

Four years ago when I retired, I visualized telling the story of my teaching experience in a novel way and seeing it in print by now. I envisioned myself featured on *Oprah* as the clever teacher who put the fun back into learning. I saw myself confidently sitting on her sofa chatting away with the equally self-assured hostess, as we solved the problems of the nation's public school system. She has yet to call, but then no education publishers have scooped up my ideas either. One editor's rejection letter was kind enough to

suggest I submit my manuscript to memoir presses, but I haven't found a connection there, either.

I didn't plan for my second attempt at writing a book to be following the death of my only child. I thought he had found his path and would be climbing the computer career ladder in sunny southern California for quite some time. But this did not happen. I needed a Plan B.

What will I do today? It's rainy.

Is that a bad thing?

I can't go walking in the park. Just getting out seems too much trouble.

Maybe it's a Plan B day, a chance to discover another way to entertain yourself. Put your clever little teaching philosophy to work and find the fun in learning.

Storyteller

In the summer of 2001, after retiring from 30 years of teaching, I went to a writing workshop in Taos, New Mexico. The teacher, Natalie Goldberg, was the author of two of my favorite writing books, *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*. Natalie's book jacket biography tells of workshops she gives and includes a website address. Eager to learn everything
