

from my first book that were collecting in my guest room. The biggest attractions for signing up, however, were the writing teachers, Sean Murphy and his wife Tania Casselle. Sean had been a co-teacher with Natalie in that summer of 2001, and I had fond memories of his quiet encouragement.

I drove to Boulder, retracing my path through New Mexico, and again allowing time in Santa Fe and Taos. I still wanted a storyteller doll and began wandering in and out of stores with that same unsettling feeling. I walked into a Santa Fe gift shop, and a clerk named Mary stepped forward and asked if she could help. I told her I was looking for a storyteller doll with no misbehaving children. She showed me a lovely standing figure dressed in blue with a long dark braid down her back. Her eyes are cast heavenward, and the six happy children holding on to her were all behaving. I liked her immediately.

"The doll was made by a nineteen-year-old young man named Clayton whose mother also makes storytellers," Mary explained.

Something stirred inside me when I heard it was made by the son. Even the name sounded familiar. I was not yet sure what I had found and decided to continue my search. But nothing compared to what Mary had shown me.

Tired and hungry, I stopped for lunch. While picking at my organic salad of field greens, sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese, and walnuts, I could think only

of Clayton's storyteller. The proud upright woman. The contented children. It was the doll I had been looking for. I finished eating, paid, then quickly returned to the shop. Maybe I had not been ready for her until I realized how much I needed her help to tell the story about my own son Carlton.

The storyteller now stands silently beside me on the table by my blue flowered sofa, looking up at the skylights, with happy children holding on to her, lending me courage to keep pushing my pen.

Metaphors

I, the neophyte writer, and he, living in Hollywood, the movie capital of the world, were struggling to find a way to communicate, so one way Carlton and I connected during our infrequent phone conversations was by discussing books and movies. We talked about the books we were reading. Two of his favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut and Fyodor Dostoevsky, had been mine when I was his age. And when he began quoting the Gnostic book, the *Gospel of Thomas*, I checked out a copy from the library.

But most of the conversations were about movies. Carlton went to new releases every Saturday morning and belonged to a movie rental service, so he was a very good source for recommendations. When he suggested a movie I might like, I would rent it as soon as possible so we could talk about it in a future conversation.

We considered *Mulholland Drive* a story about reincarnation, or at least reliving your life with a chance to make different choices. After watching *The Matrix* we both expressed a desire to escape our own perceived entanglements.

I rented *Minority Report* on his recommendation and told him in a later phone call that I identified with the older woman in the greenhouse. She developed the program that nursed the pre-ops back to health and released them into the world. It reminded me of my job as a public school teacher, helping nurture the minds of the students, and then releasing them into the real world. Maybe he was seeing himself as a pre-op. He didn't say. I didn't ask.

The Red Violin and *13 Conversations about One Thing* were several stories woven together as a spider, the storyteller, might spin into a web, a technique I was beginning to relate to.

K-PAX, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Signs* were movies alluding to a greater force, something beyond what we see. What were you trying to tell me, Son? Or were you asking? Is it something you believed? Or wanted to believe? I liked the movies and the idea of this greater plan, but I wasn't able to give Carlton any absolute assurance about it. I was still looking for it myself.

The last e-mail I got from Carlton was a list of movie recommendations. *Best in Show*, *Quiz Show*, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Waking Life*. It was several

months before I had the courage to rent them. I intensely watched each one, searching for clues, a defining theme, anything relevant. Looking for an assurance of a greater plan. Was this a collection of man's search for meaning? Could I not hear what you were saying, Carlton? Was part of your frustration not being able to communicate with me? What were we missing in our own conversations by letting someone else's movies and books tell our stories?

All I really know now is my interpretation of what Carlton was trying to tell me and my own inner child spirit's story.

During our final phone conversation, Carlton asked me if I knew why I was here. Because I was immersed in my story of Nature Lab at that time, I told him I thought I was here to connect children with nature.

"Yeah, Mom," he said, "listen to the children."

"I'm trying," I replied, unsure what he meant by that. I wish I had asked.

He asked if he was in the book. I proudly assured him he was all the way through it and actually named several times.

He told me he didn't know why he was here in the world. He said he didn't feel very creative.

"I felt that way at your age. It's a temporary feeling," I answered, perhaps too quickly.

I didn't remember how hopeless that "temporary" feeling was in my mid-twenties. I could have told him

how hard teaching was and how scared I was that I had chosen the wrong career. I could have mentioned how tired I was of being a bridesmaid in all my friends' weddings, without a prospective partner of my own. Or told him that I was so sad at the age of 23 I swallowed a dozen aspirin, then panicked and called the poison control hotline. Unfortunately during this conversation, I was fighting my own uncertain feelings of career choices, love options, and concerns about whether or not I wanted to hold on. I, the menopausal woman, was doubting her own ability to create.

I didn't know how to listen to my son. I didn't know how to talk to him. I was busy listening to myself, learning how to talk to me. I wish now I had said, "You were here, Dear One, as my outer child to teach me of the child spirit each of us carries within. You gave my life purpose when I needed it most. You validated my ability to create."

We talked to each other through the metaphors of books and movies. Then he left for his next adventure, and my job became storyteller, to weave together as honestly and clearly as I could, the story of Carlton and Laura and all the other children looking for their own creative natures.

Tears

I had no tears and little feeling for days after the phone call from Kelly. In fact I was terrified that if I

ever started crying I would never be able to stop. For months I lived obsessed with this fear. I allowed myself a few tears in private, or in the bathroom of a friend's house or public building, but that was all I was willing to risk. What caused this fear?

I've probably stuffed tears all my life. My mother told me as a child that I was being too dramatic, like Tallulah Bankhead. I wasn't sure who that was, other than a famous dramatic actress, but based on my mother's tone of voice, it was not someone I wanted to be. I remember my own boy-child going to his room when he needed to cry. Did I send him there? What did I say? How did he hear it? I'm afraid to know those answers.

So here I was with more than 50 years of accumulated tears, living in dread of a major dam burst. It would be impossible to hold this back forever; I'd explode. So I developed strategies to control my anxiety and my tears. I began crying as much as I could at home before going out, as if to empty what was just below the surface, and collected people around me whom I could trust in case I lost control, or planned ways to get home immediately if I felt a major attack coming.

But even with careful planning, I found myself tearing up in public when I heard a song Carlton would listen to, or a young person saying "Whatever" like he used to, or when I recognized his shy smile in someone else.

I spent at least a year putting excessive stress on this leaky dam, when one Monday morning Mary Relindes Ellis, the author of *The Turtle Warrior*, visited my book club. Her book is a beautiful but painful story of abuse, war, and death. I hadn't been able to finish it before the meeting and confessed to the other women sitting in the circle that its darkness had troubled me. Several members encouraged me to keep reading, assuring me that there was redemption. I made a mental note to pick it back up when I got home.

Ms. Ellis began by telling us a little of her own chaotic family background and then she read passages from her book. She would look up periodically to connect with the audience. Once her eyes met mine. Mine immediately began their rain dance. Oh dear, I really didn't want to share my story here. I had come to hear hers. But her eyes were filling up too, as if answering mine. Neither one of us ever shed real tears; there was just a lot of watery exchange.

How could we be so connected? We were strangers. We had never met before. We didn't know each other in "real life." But here we were sitting in a circle of book lovers, sharing something truly profound. Something beyond words. After this experience could I really continue to see tears as a weakness to be ashamed of? Or could I now see them as something so intimate it can't be expressed any other way? In my lifetime of holding back, how many of these deep

connections have I missed? Is this the quiet desperation Thoreau named? Am I willing to risk tears to find out? My questions continue.

Mantras

When Carlton was a young child, three sayings became his mantras. The first, "My name is Carlton," appeared when Matt, his adoptive father, tried to give him nicknames. They were silly names, Biscuit Boy and Doodle Bop, and meant to be playful. But Carlton didn't like them and would sternly remind Matt, "My name is Carlton."

I identified with that feeling. When I was a child my mother pinned a nickname on me I hated. Tuni-bell. She would use it in front of my friends and their parents. I was mortified, but my protests didn't seem to change anything. How would anyone ever take me seriously with such a stupid name?

"You're not the boss of me!" he would proclaim when he felt challenged. This declaration was usually aimed at me. I don't remember specific demands that set off this reply, although I do remember him saying it to me once in a parking lot. Did I think I was just trying to keep him away from moving cars? What did he hear? Were these his early attempts at questioning authority? What did I honestly expect from the child of a hippie chick who so regularly challenged her own mother?

The third saying appeared when he was eight. We were completing his homework ditto sheet together. A statement was given, and he was to mark an F for fact or an O for opinion in the blank before it. The challenge was to consider whether or not the statement could be proven. From this school assignment came his mantra, "That's your opinion," and it would emerge any time I was taking charge of the situation. Maybe it was his way of telling me that my all-important pronouncements might not be provable facts, or that they weren't necessarily declarations he agreed with.

These were powerful sayings. Out of the mouths of babes. They ran through my head often after he left home. It was a part of him I missed — his honest way of challenging authority in such a straightforward, childlike way.

During one long-distance conversation we had a couple years before he died, Carlton talked of being frustrated with the business world. He was hassling with car insurance and trying to get a California driver's license, and he complained of the superficiality of Hollywood. I reminded him of his mantras.

"They are your truths, Carlton. They tell you who you are."

I don't know what he heard, as I repeated his words. I was only trying to give back some of his personal wisdom.

When I was a child I had a mantra, too. "Other people have other plans," I would defiantly say to my mother when she told me how other people did things. Did I feel the need to take up for these absent "others" my mother was passing judgment on, or for myself when I didn't want to follow her way?

I sit here now with my son's mantras running through my head. "My name is Carlton." "You're not the boss of me." "That's your opinion."

Why did he leave, God?

I don't know how to answer that, Laura. What is your mantra?

"Other people have other plans."

That's your truth, sweetheart.

Leaving Home

By the time Carlton was in high school he was ready to leave home. His senior year was full of plans of going away to college, and in the fall of 1994 he left for school in Jackson, Mississippi. But it didn't turn out as he expected. He came back after a rather lackluster year, frustrated that his plans had gone so awry. He didn't volunteer much about it and because I wasn't having much success talking to either him or his father at this time, I wasn't much help. Maybe we were all hoping it would pass.

Once he moved back to Shreveport, it wasn't long before he was leaving the family home again, renting an apartment here, attending a local college and holding a couple of part-time jobs. Then came the first suicide attempt.

He moved home. Again, we didn't talk much about the situation. I asked if he wanted to talk to a therapist, and he tried one for a couple of sessions, but then wanted no more of it. He said she didn't have his experiences. I thought maybe he just wasn't sure what he was getting into. Matt has had a psychiatrist since his suicide attempt over thirty years ago, and my mother has dabbled with therapy, on and off again, for about as long. Something was not quite right about each one.

I watched and encouraged Carlton as he pursued a spring semester of college here in Shreveport with more deliberation. He talked to his professors, hoping to be more successful in their classes. He even shared some of their conversations with me. Maybe he thought education was an answer. I had certainly modeled that kind of thinking. But even the more conscientious application to his studies for a semester didn't turn out as he planned. I didn't know what else was going on in his head, and I didn't know how to ask. What did he want? I could only think to give him time and space.

Carlton lost interest in school about the time Matt moved out. I told my son he needed a full-time job if

he wanted to stay at home and he returned the next evening with a job at a local department store offering medical insurance and a chance for advancement.

But a week selling ties and living with his mother wasn't what he wanted either. He quit to take a computer tech support job in Eugene, Oregon, that he found on the Internet. When I expressed concern, Carlton didn't want to talk about it. He needed to leave again.

This dear young man worked so hard at finding his place. Initial results from conventional avenues only caused him frustration. All I knew to do at that time was get out of the way and let him keep trying. So early one February morning in 1998, I hugged him hard at the kitchen door and tearfully watched his packed car pull out of the driveway. He called every night from the road, recounting his day and mapping out the next. But once he was in Eugene, all I received was an e-mail with his phone number and address and for the next year-and-a-half, he didn't answer any phone calls or e-mails. I told myself that what he needed was a chance to be on his own to learn his path, so I "worked" at learning mine.

Then one day in the summer of 1999, he called to tell me that he was moving to Hollywood, California, with a friend, and I began hearing from him every few months. He still didn't answer calls or e-mails, but I was grateful when he initiated the connection. It sounded like he was finding what he wanted, and I was

able to let go of more worry. He came home only twice — Christmas 1999 and the 2001 family reunion. I tried not to overwhelm him while he was here, despite being anxious to know how his life was unfolding. In hindsight, maybe the busyness and distractions of Christmas and the family reunion kept me from being as available to him as I, his mother, could have been.

Oh dear. My mind spun as I retraced these events in his abbreviated life and my part in them, wishing I could change them, live them over, and make different choices. I turned to my pen.

What was he looking for? What was it he wanted that he couldn't find here? What more should I have done? Why did he encourage me to leave? Could he see something holding me back here, too?

I don't know. Why are you still here?

I tried to leave. I wanted the darkness to swallow me, too. I was so scared.

So why are you still here?

Unfinished business keeps me here. The flickering light my pen scribbles toward. Whoever you are in my journal talking to me, teaching me how to take care of myself.

And what have you learned?

How to identify what is going on around me and how to put my feelings into words, so I can look at them more honestly and learn from them without becoming too overwhelmed.

On the Trail to Oregon

My 79-year-old mother's 88-year-old sister Jo lives on the coast of Oregon, but the numerous breaks in her osteoporotic bones prevented her from traveling. Her 90-year-old husband Ralph died in the spring of 2004. The only way Mother could visit her involved a flight change in the sprawling Dallas airport.

It seemed the two would not be able to get together. Mother talked about it a lot. She said she wasn't sure she wanted to go, but continued to talk about it. My urge to seize the day rather than live with regret pushed me to offer to accompany her. She hesitated and counter-offered with excuses and conditions, but after a little time and compromise, a plan was set for ten days near Waldport, Oregon, at the end of October, 2004.

I considered what this might mean for me. I wanted to see the ocean and my Auntie Jo again, and I was hungry for more family information from a primary source. I wanted to know what it meant to be a Mechlin woman. My mother and I shared a long and difficult

relationship, constantly pushing against each other to be who we wanted to be. I wanted to know more about what that struggle meant. I wanted to learn all I could about mothers and their children.

The Dallas airport was our first real challenge and I was grateful to have Mother as an excuse to ride the little cart from Delta gate 1A to gate 37. We landed in Portland without a problem, but the drive from Portland to Waldport, using my cousin's car and e-mailed directions, along with Mother's insistent navigation, was very tiresome. When I followed the highway according to my cousin's instructions, she adamantly told me this was not the way Uncle Ralph went. Were there two correct ways, I wondered? Did it matter?

Let it go, Laura, I told myself, stepping on the accelerator to speed up this part of the journey. It was much too early in the trip to tangle. We went Uncle Ralph's way, so she began worrying aloud about what I had eaten for breakfast.

I packed books and notebooks in preparation for this trip and planned walks on the beach and side trips into town as additional outlets. My aunt has a wonderful live-in sitter Ron who treated all three of us like queens, a job I originally feared I might be responsible for.

My poet uncle's writing group met at their house one day, and I bravely read the story "The Phone Call" for my first audience. A few days later I took a day trip

alone into Newport to peruse an eclectic bookstore crammed with new and used books, and made a bracelet in a shop devoted entirely to beads. Throughout the week my aunt and uncle's collection of friends stopped by for stimulating conversations on the state of the world. I volunteered at a literacy center run by my aunt's friend, where a nine-year-old girl and I took turns reading to each other. One evening Mom, Aunt Jo, the sitter and I went to the Newport community theater to see a local production of *Cabaret*, and I sat between two women very much in love with the arts. I found myself participating as so much more than a daughter and niece. I was a Mechlin woman.

However, the older women continued to give me constant unsolicited advice and "constructive criticism" and call me "Lolly," another of my childhood names. But I practiced overriding the frustration in my head for a later session with my notebook.

Nevertheless, the last full day we were there, a fight was building inside me that I feared I would not be able to contain. I didn't want to end such an enlightening trip by slipping into twelve-year-old behavior, and thus fulfilling a possible expectation. I left the house to walk in a light rain (without the suggested umbrella) to the beach. Arriving at the water's edge, I sat down on a driftwood log and cried. But within a few minutes I was standing, yelling into the ocean. "My name is not Lolly. I am not twelve years old." The ocean roared back. I repeated my cry and the

ocean again responded. Back and forth we screamed until my tears were drained. The clouds broke, the sun shone through and, to the south towards land, a rainbow arced across the sky.

When I told my cousin Nancy Jo about it in a long-distance phone call later that day, she said, "Oh, that's God answering, 'And this is my daughter in whom I am well pleased.'"

I liked the way this generation of Mechlin women interprets that experience.

Mothering

For several years after Carlton's death I obsessively reviewed his life, desperately trying to figure out where I went so wrong. What was the glaring error that shut him down at the age of 27?

I mothered the best way I knew how. Advice from Dr. Spock, the leading expert at the time, was assimilated as well as my college-graduate self could understand it. I was particularly fluent in colic, leaning heavily on Spock's support through Carlton's restless nights.

His dad moved out when Carlton was four months old. We had married soon after his commitment to the Army was finished. Maybe the challenge of both fatherhood and husbandhood was more than he signed up for. Although my friends assured me he would

change his mind as soon as he saw the baby, it didn't happen, and my independent self took over.

Carlton was six months old when we moved back to Shreveport to live with my parents, where I learned first-hand what support I appreciated from them (rest from the demands of mothering) and what I preferred to do for myself (feeding schedules and the need for daycare). It was time to find a place for just the two of us. The newly-liberated woman-self needed some rooms of her own.

When Carlton was in second grade, I took a sabbatical and we went to Austin, Texas, so I could pursue a doctorate in education. But by the next summer, following my advancement to candidacy, the title I chose instead was wife. Maybe I thought what we really needed was a man around the house.

I sent Carlton to the best daycares and magnet schools, enrolled him in t-ball and soccer, and celebrated his birthday parties at McDonald's and the skating rink. He earned his black belt in *tae kwon do*, was the head chorister in the Shreveport Boychoir, and played on many baseball teams along the way. I did what I thought other mothers were doing, pushing ourselves and our children, trying to fit in.

When he became a less-than-conscientious student in the seventh grade, I relied on my experience as a middle school teacher. I helped him get organized then held him accountable for his own unstable grades. The teacher/mother self appeared.

In high school he pulled away, becoming moody and uncommunicative. I remembered a similar feeling from my own high school days. Because I had wanted more separation from my family, I tried to allow his struggle. I searched for ways to put up my own boundaries and respect his, but I was experiencing challenges with my husband at this time, too. I obviously needed some separation from the demands of my style of mothering the people in this house.

When Carlton went off to college I gave him my blessing. When he came home, I welcomed him back. When he wanted his own apartment, I balked, trying to explain the expenses of such an adventure, then reluctantly released him. After his first suicide attempt, I welcomed him home again to regain his footing in a safe place because I thought that was what I would want. I tried talking with him, but received only evasive answers. When he left for the West Coast, all I knew to do was to let him go because I knew I still wanted my own release, too.

I mothered the best I knew how through the different stages in my own life. I related to him the way I thought he might have wanted, but I realize now that it was the way I wanted to be mothered. Maybe Carlton was trying to tell me that. It was certainly what I was trying to tell my mom.

And now, with no biological child on Earth to mother, I sit here with myself — my other child, the one I've been wanting a mother for all my life. Mama Laura

needed to know how to take care of little Laura, and the pen has served as family counselor while we learned how to communicate. We watched closely as it scribbled our scariest fears and most passionate desires into the notebook. We saw our deepest thoughts, the ones we haven't been able to share with anyone else. And we talked to each other as only someone with this kind of intimate information could, telling in our most intimate and honest way that we are safe and loved.

Mr. Know-it-All and the Mystery Man

There was often a debate raging in my head between Mr. Know-it-All and the Mystery Man. My left side (rational thinking), so heavily relied upon in the past, fights with my right side (creative thinking) which yearns for release but fears losing control.

I would replay a phone call over and over in my head, considering all the layers of possible meanings and wondering which to follow, amazed at the different facets of simple conversation and how they paralleled other events. Was life supposed to be this complicated?

Complication can be stimulating to a thinking person, but nothing went unexamined. A movie, a song, a news story, a chance encounter, a casual phrase, all got the third degree in my overactive mind, as I tried to piece
