

Abstaining from Whine

The first audience to hear my story "The Phone Call" was my uncle's writing group in Oregon. It was a group of people I might never see again, so I decided it could be a safe place to share something this personal. We took turns reading our offerings as we sat in a circle in my aunt's living room, a view of the Pacific Ocean in the background. Several writers received immediate, encouraging feedback. They were told whose writing it sounded like or where it might be submitted for publication. I was feeling comfortable with this group. I could do this. So when it was my turn, I read my story with a voice that broke only once, near the end. When I finished the room was very quiet. I wasn't hearing the feedback I had expected. The only comment I remember was from a man who told me his sister had a child who died. I wasn't sure what that response meant. I sat still, waiting. Soon the next reader began. I felt like I was underwater with muffled noises swirling around me. I couldn't understand what was happening. After the readings, a man walked up to me and told me he was a psychologist. I needed that voice. I could hear those words and was back again in my aunt's living room.

The next day a retired architect from the group told me he liked my writing because it wasn't whiney. I

heard that as feedback I had expected, and it felt good. My rational brain began to process it. He named a behavior I wished to display in public, while I searched for relief from this overwhelming fear and accepted my experience as an opportunity for growth.

But just because my writing didn't sound whiney didn't mean I was abstaining from the childish behavior. To declare that I didn't spend a lot of time fighting it, or getting really angry at God, or feeling close to giving up would be an outright lie. Almost every morning for the first two years I would lie in bed, stare at the ceiling, and consider what I might be able to accomplish during the day. Then I would have to make an intentional decision to get up. Every night, again in the same position, I spent time deliberately letting go of the day's accumulation of fears, shame, and regrets so that I could get to sleep. But these holding-on and letting-go sessions were not just limited to my bedroom. I found myself making them over and over throughout the day, everywhere I went.

I admit to screaming, slamming doors, and throwing pillows and books inside the house. Princess, the albino dove, and these walls have all witnessed this unruly behavior. I'm not sure what I have said during these tantrums, but I'm quite sure it wasn't "nice." OK, I could be a very angry child.

At night I cried long and hard into my pillow. *It's not fair, God, I choked. I've tried so hard to be*

good, to do what I thought I was supposed to do, and this is the thanks I get? Well, that certainly sounded whiney by most standards.

But I worked hard to keep this fussy child to myself. I didn't think anyone else should have to deal with her. After all, I was a grown-up and should act like one, at least in the presence of others. So I spent much time alone with my notebook, afraid of unleashing my monster child on some innocent bystander.

In the first months following Carlton's death, when I was so agitated, the writing in my journal should have produced enough heat to start fires. But two years later as I read these journals, I saw fierce rantings for sure, but there was something else. Calm, rational words were woven in between the rage, showing me other perspectives. How could they come from the same pen?

Often by mid-afternoon the living room began to close in on me. My internal energy was depleted. I was tired of sitting still on a sofa with my notebook because I was afraid of disturbing the world. My pen identified this feeling and suggested a walk in the park, or a movie, or a library visit, or a get-together with safe friends. I was taking care of the lonely child. This extension beyond the sofa reminded me that I *did* want to be with others again.

I needed this compass from within. Something that knew how to take care of me when everyone else was

busy with their own whiney selves. I needed to be able to hear the nurturing mother-voice who whispered those loving words through her pen.

No, I am not "cured." I guess this is probably all part of the process. As hard as I try, I can't seem to completely abstain from my childish behaviors, and there are still panicky times when I'm afraid I'll cause too much damage. I try to listen to those who can help best — God, me, and my mother nature.

Doing Research

A new friend showed up in my life as I was becoming comfortable in this adventure called writing. Actually she was not "new." Scotty is two years younger than I and was in my brother's third-grade class. On a spring Sunday afternoon in 2002, about six months before Carlton died, she attended the weekly Trapped Truth Society reading. We recognized each other from the past and immediately reconnected.

She, coming off a messy divorce, and with two young teenagers, had picked up writing again, having been a journalist earlier in her adult career. The stories she shared on Sundays were about chaotic relationships. My offerings at this time were anecdotes from my teaching experience. With Scotty, Lee (an African-American man who wrote about growing up in rural Louisiana with 13 brothers and sisters), and me, what

was once a writer's group of poets was now being challenged by our prosaic ways.

Scotty was a great affirmer of my novice attempts at writing and I, having already experienced my own messy divorce and the raising of a teenager, offered some proof that she too could survive.

But when Carlton died in January 2003, our relationship changed. We began sharing concerns about the expectations of mothering and our roles in the family, and wondered with frustration how we were supposed to be everything to everybody. We exchanged notes on the research we had done on our own, lending encouragement to each other.

We began spending more than Sunday afternoons together. She was more outgoing, and I needed help reentering the world. We went to hear my brothers' band and her friend's band, which landed us in casino lounges, biker bars, and singles dances. Not a problem, we thought, with an air of detachment. We writers were here to observe the human animal. We were merely doing research.

We also went to several art openings at her friend's gallery, where we sipped wine, nibbled cheese and crackers, and studied the newest exhibits. We had favorites, and they were not necessarily the same. I struggled to articulate why I liked the simple big red barn better than the swirling acrylic moon pictures she chose. Another creative friend dubbed us the "Art

Divas," a name we modestly accepted. After all, it was for the sake of research.

Scotty and I exchanged new "other worldly" ideas, testing the reaction of the other as we gave voice to our inner thoughts. We discussed our dreams, spirituality, Kabbalah, and channeling, even though we didn't really know what we were talking about. We were trying to find words to connect to something too elusive to pin down. Again, it was where the research was leading us.

We compared families and growing up in the same white middle-class Shreveport neighborhood in the '50s and '60s and found we shared similar secrets and questions, harbored through the decades. We wondered about others in this setting who may have these same hidden stories, and how we might find out.

Everyone should have a "Scotty" friend, an honest, trustworthy reflection of where you are and what you're thinking, a person outside yourself to offer support and encouragement through the scarier parts of the journey.

We did it creatively, assuming the roles of writers when we needed to, and witnessing growth in ourselves and each other. Who knows? Maybe it really was research for the sake of our art.

Dancing at Weddings

The dancing started at Allison's wedding, her second marriage after a traumatic first one, and all her friends were there to celebrate. Because it was on July 3rd, we sent the happy couple off under an arc of lit sparklers at the end of the reception. But for me the real celebration for me happened before the fireworks. A local country western band began playing the traditional daddy/daughter dance. A few couples then moved to the floor, followed by several little girls in swirling party dresses.

Children naturally dance when they hear music. They haven't yet learned restraint. I remember a young Carlton dancing with abandon and rolling on the grassy hillside of the outdoor festival's amphitheater where his uncles' band played. He was so full of life.

As I watched these dancers at the wedding on the shiny hardwood floor, my body began moving to the music's rhythm. But I held back; I had no partner. I concentrated on Martha and Al circling the floor and the little girls twirling and spinning, while I waltzed in my head. A few minutes of this mental dancing, however, wasn't enough. I stood up and began moving around the table where my friends were sitting. It was not exactly a dance, more a continuation of the rhythmic swaying that had been going on inside me. My

swaying around the table and Martha and Al's dancing merged and we moved onto the floor. Once out there, I saw other women in groups. Some of my friends joined me and the other women, and our individual expressions connected into one big circle. The frolicking children tumbled into the middle of it. It was so full of joy.

The next wedding I attended was for Mary Margaret's son James. At the church I watched three of Carlton's childhood friends serve as groomsmen and swallowed the ache in my throat as I wished for my notebook. But the reception with a disc jockey soon followed, and I was ready to dance again. First there was a mother/son dance, then a father/daughter one. As I waited my turn, I began that moving-around-the-tables thing again. A young groomsman I didn't know asked me to dance, an idea a friend had set into motion. He was very polite and talked about his mother. This time there was no women's circle or dancing children, and after several couple dances, the younger guests took over the dance floor. The bride Danielle, hiking her wedding dress up to her knees, led the young women in a line dance. I recognized it as one I had learned on my cruise. This was the opening I had been watching for, and with Allan, the groom's father, encouraging me I was out on the floor in line with the younger women.

The next wedding was Mary Margaret and Allan's other son, Allan, Jr. It was in Dallas, so several of the

Steel Magnolias decided to make a road trip. I eagerly packed my dancing shoes, wondering how this one would work.

It was an elegant wedding in a traditionally ornate church, which was a bit unnerving for me, and there were many more strangers there than at the last two. At the fashionable hotel reception, a twelve-piece band began playing. My body started moving again. But this time I planted myself firmly in the upholstered seat, intent on acting like a grown-up. Maybe I wouldn't dance this time, I sighed, and mentally began journaling about it. But while the band was on break, Shanán, the bride, came over to the circular table where her new mother-in-law's friends were sitting. She sat with us for a while, then still talking, got up and moved us to the dance floor. Soon several middle-aged women, Shanán, and her friends were swaying together to a recording of Abba's "Dancing Queen." It was perfect.

Dancing is a way of celebrating, letting go and giving in to the universal rhythm that moves our world. I want to be a part of that celebration, and weddings are appropriate places to join forces. Maybe this is a place where women and children can lead.

Valentine's Day

Oh dear. It's time for another national celebration of coupling and I'm busy wrestling

with a concept of wholeness within myself. What if I don't get any valentines? I guess this is another holdover from third grade. How can I creatively address this Valentine's Day phobia? I've still got two days. I can send myself a card.

I went into my spare bedroom/junk room for watercolors and paper, then settled on the living room sofa for inspiration. First I painted a big red heart in the middle of a page torn from my sketch pad, added a stylized splash of color in each corner, representing flowers. I smiled as I admired my creation. With a black Sharpie pen I wrote "I love..." in the middle of the heart and proceeded to list traits I love about myself all around it. "Your sense of humor," "your tenacity," "your smile," "your compassion." I was a bit tentative at first. After all, I have had fifty years of being told "humility" was a virtue. Of course, I thought, and added "your humility" to the attributes.

I grew bolder and the page filled. This valentine was for my eyes only; I didn't need to explain it to anyone else. When it was covered with words and color, I slipped the paper into a large self-addressed manila envelope, added an extra stamp to prevent something as tacky as insufficient postage, then drove to the post office to drop it in the outside mailbox. I felt an immediate surge, thinking of the special valentine I could look forward to.

Monday the 14th came. I went to my book club meeting and the Head Queen of the Pulpwood Queens

began by passing out pink Mardi Gras beads and rhinestone pins for everyone. I put on my new jewels in celebration.

After the meeting I drove across town to pick up Princess where she had been boarded over the weekend. As she was handed to me, I received the kind of Valentine love only a tail-wagging, sloppy-kissing, fluffy friend could give.

By the time we got back home, the mailbox was holding two cards for me — one from a cousin and one from a new friend in Oregon — and a rejection form letter from a publishing house. But the big envelope with my homemade valentine was not there. I was consoling myself with the thought that at least I would have mail again on the 15th when the mailman walked up to hand-deliver it.

That evening I attended a community education forum. The crowd was smaller than usual, perhaps because of the holiday. But sandwiches, chips and cookies were laid out for the participants. A Valentine dinner, I mused, and helped myself to the spread. I mentally added this offering, along with the gathering of compatible people full of stimulating conversation and a shared vision, to my growing list of valentines.

As we left, the forum coordinator handed each of us two long-stemmed red carnations. Flowers, too! I'm not sure I could have imagined a more loving day, even if I had planned it myself.

God's Plan

February 28, 2005, was Dad's 90th birthday and I felt it should be special. The whole family hadn't assembled in one place since Christmas dinner in 2003 at my brother Bruce's house, and my father now lived a hundred miles away at a nursing home.

I assumed several plans were being considered as each participant played with his or her own idea of how the patriarch's special day could be celebrated. Once upon a time, as the big sister and assistant mother of this family, I thought it was my responsibility to be in charge of such an important event. I wasn't so sure anymore.

Buddy was to play solo acoustical guitar on Friday the 25th in Monroe. That's great, I noted. He would already be there and the rest of us could drive over Saturday morning. I volunteered to bring Mom and the grandchildren.

Bruce had an appointment with the financial director of the nursing home on Friday. This was to be the director's last day and there was a lot of unfinished business over Dad's Army pension. It seemed logical to me that Bruce would stay overnight in Monroe and join us in a Saturday morning party. But that didn't seem to be Bruce's plan. He thought he

might just see Dad that evening after his meeting and then come home.

The celebration wasn't unfolding the way I imagined, which could be a real challenge for me. But I was trying to take less responsibility for other family members' lives and actions. I could still take Mom, the grandkids, and a cake over there, like I volunteered. If that was all we had, that would be enough. At this point I wasn't even sure Bud's idea was to meet us at the nursing home on Saturday morning.

Friday came and Bud called me before heading east to Monroe. He would spend the night at a motel there and be at the nursing home in the morning for the party. I asked if he would bring his guitar, assuming that was something he had already planned.

"I haven't even thought of that," he replied, agreeing to the idea.

Two hours later, Bruce called from Interstate 20, thirty minutes west of Monroe, to tell me the social worker just told him the finance director didn't come in on Fridays. My brother turned the car around in frustration, returning to Shreveport. But later that day, when he was back home, the finance director called, asking where he was. It was an obvious miscommunication. They rescheduled a meeting for Saturday morning. When Bruce called to report this new development to me, I envisioned a party coming together after all, but quickly picked up my notebook

to write rather than talk about it, so it would "just happen."

Early Saturday morning the younger grandchildren's mother dropped Jake and Laura Beth at my house. Avery the teenager was driving her own car so she could stop to spend the night with friends at the college she would be attending that summer. I was to take the kids, a bakery German chocolate cake, a two-liter bottle of root beer, and paper plates and cups to Bruce's house, where we would get into his Voyager minivan, stop by Mother's house to pick her up, and then drive the hundred miles to Monroe. Bud would show up with his guitar at the nursing home after he woke up.

Once at the home, the social worker offered us a private meeting room, and behind closed doors we became the magical Flett family again. Bruce and I climbed on top of one of the tables to demonstrate the line dance to "Sentimental Journey" the way our third grade teacher had taught us. Jake, Bruce's son, eagerly joined in on top of his own table, as Bud picked out guitar chords and Avery and Laura Beth danced together on the floor.

Dad and Mom were sitting next to each other, holding hands, smiling and watching the festivities. Several times Dad said, "My, what an attractive family!" I wasn't sure he remembered what part he had played in this little family, but his expression showed he liked what he saw at that moment.

It was a beautiful, loving way to share our family connection.

Earlier in the day, as I started my car to head over to Bruce's house with the grandchildren, the radio blared out a song about old ladies and babies — Neil Diamond's, "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show." A song for our journey.

And I wasn't in charge.

Jake and Laura Beth

When Jake and Laura Beth's mother went on a cruise for a week, the kids stayed with Bruce. He normally kept them on Sunday and Wednesday nights and is usually a very available dad, but the day-in and day-out responsibilities can be draining for the custodial parent, based on my own experience during Carlton's first seven years of life.

Sunday night of that week, I was at Bruce's house eating supper with his family and looking at their schedule of after-school activities. Jake did karate and Laura Beth took dance lessons, and between the two of them every afternoon involved transportation. It reminded me of the hours I spent carpooling Carlton to *tae kwan do*, or boychoir, or baseball practice, and it looked like something Aunt Laura knew how to do, so I volunteered. The dinner conversation then shifted to a discussion about the best way to pick up the kids at

after-school day care with the proper outfits for each scheduled activity.

When we finished eating, we put their gym bags in the trunk of my car, gave each other final instructions, and the week was ready for takeoff. Bruce seemed pleased, but hesitantly asked if I could also help with homework. OK, I knew how to do this, too, and agreed to be the homework hotline when they were really stuck, but a third and fifth grader as smart as these children shouldn't need much help.

The week went smoothly enough. I picked up one or both from day care and drove them to their lessons, where I waited for them to change into karate or dance clothes and bring me their bags now containing school uniforms. These two cherubs were notorious for leaving a trail of belongings wherever they went, so I tried to round up everything I could at this point to avoid circling back later. When I picked them up from the lesson to return them to their dad's, they changed their clothes again, repacked their bags for the next day's activities, and put them back in the trunk.

Throughout the week the homework hotline was not called, although I grilled each child about what work they had and whether or not they needed help every time they climbed into my car.

After their lessons on Thursday I took them to Bruce's house and stayed with them until midnight, while his band played a gig. My job was to serve them the chicken and dumplings Mother had made, supervise

homework and baths, and get them into bed at a reasonable hour.

Things went amazingly well as we fell into a routine. After dinner there was an initial balk from Jake about the bath, reminding me of my own son at this age. With Carlton I spent much time trying to explain the virtue of cleanliness. This time, however, I just turned on the tub's faucet, left the bathroom, and began clearing the dining room table. There was no discussion. Jake climbed in and stayed a good thirty minutes.

Laura Beth used Jake's bath time to get full attention for herself. We sat together on the living room sofa and looked through the packages of pictures her dad had taken. She filled an empty photo album with the "best" ones, most of which included herself, then left it on her dad's bed as a surprise. Meanwhile Jake had emerged from the tub, put on his pajamas and planted himself in front of the computer. I wondered how many evenings Carlton got the attention, like Laura Beth, to do something of his choosing with me. Or, like Jake, to be left alone to make his own decisions. It seemed so obvious now.

Winding down from their busy lives, they were ready for bed by 8:30 without any fuss.

I finished cleaning the kitchen, replayed the evening in my head as if talking to my notebook, and reminded myself how complex this mother job is. And how important. It was so hard to know these things when I was in the middle of them.

This modern world gets busier and busier, and we drag our children along at its harried pace. We may be forgetting to schedule some unplanned time, just to be available.

Being available for myself is something I am learning better now, as I take constant notes on everything around me. Maybe we could all use some unscheduled time in our overwhelming lives to learn what else we want for ourselves and our children.

Appreciating Teachers

Teacher Appreciation Week means different things at different schools. When I worked at a middle-class magnet school, like the kind Carlton attended, I was inundated with homemade treats and teacher gifts. The PTA furnished lunch every day in the lounge, with specialties from the kitchens of parents or catered fare from local restaurants. We were all lavished with much more attention than any of us needed.

However, most of my teaching career had been in lower socio-economic schools, where parents spent most of their resources on survival, so gifts there were of a different kind. A spring picture hastily drawn on notebook paper and thrust at me by the young artist as she jumped off the bus. A cherubic face lighting up when he pulled out the four-inch carrot from our garden, or a reconnection with a former student now working at Wal-Mart, who

enthusiastically recalled making dried worm candy as a second grader in my class.

These are precious, lasting gifts for sure, but there are times (like after a week of mandatory standardized testing) when teachers could use a little more obvious appreciation. My recently-retired teacher friend Kathy decided to do something special for our Stoner Hill friends on this designated week and called me Monday morning to solicit help, since we both had more time. Her idea was to provide lunch for them, and in our grandiosity we decided to offer more than sandwich trays and chips.

"What about the homemade comfort food of chicken spaghetti?" she proposed.

"Great," I quickly responded and volunteered to call the school secretary to find out which day would be best while Kathy perused her collection of cookbooks.

"Tuesday," Ms. Allred told me on the phone five minutes later, as she checked the school calendar.

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yeah, that would be nice."

"OK," I replied, realizing we would need to get right to work.

Meanwhile Kathy had found a recipe that fed thirty. We could each make a complete recipe in our individual kitchens that afternoon to serve together in the teachers' lounge the next day, so we drove to Sam's

Wholesale Club to buy supplies in large quantities. It all sounded very logical.

But after shopping at Sam's we needed to stop at the local grocery store for some of the ingredients (only two bunches of celery instead of the ten pound package available at Sam's), and it was nearly two o'clock by the time we returned to Kathy's house to divide the supplies. When I finally got home with my share of ingredients, I immediately began boiling three large chickens in my two biggest pots and reading the recipe's fine print for the first time. It said to put the chicken stock in the refrigerator overnight to remove the fat. Hmm. As limited as my cooking confidence is, I had chosen not to veer from the printed instructions. That meant I would need to get up really early Tuesday morning to put the sauce together and let it simmer for four hours. So I chopped onions and celery, and deboned chickens, getting all the ingredients ready for early morning bubbling. Halfway through this preparation I had to stop to run a cycle of dirty dishes. I needed a break from all the frantic kitchen activity. I walked into the living room, fell on the sofa, and picked up my pen.

This is getting complicated. I'm not sure I can do it. My kitchen isn't used to all this commotion.

Why did you want to do it in the first place?
