

on eggs, feeding babies, and giving flying lessons. It was an equal partnership. The babies have since been given away, have flown away, or have died, so now the caged mother is left alone in my sunroom to sing her mourning song and occasionally break into a sound resembling laughter. I understood her sad tune, but what triggered that joyful sound? Did she remember the thrill of seeing her children learn to fly? Was she recalling a funny story from our class?

Several years ago there was a rather noisy, messy pair of light-blue parakeets sharing this sunroom with her. They were also in my classroom for a while, until I realized we didn't need any more noise or mess. They left school earlier than the rest of us.

In June 2001, less than a month after my retirement, the Flett family reunion gathered in my backyard for a crawfish boil. It was the last time Carlton was in Shreveport and the first time he met most of my dad's side of the family.

My niece, Laura Beth, left the parakeets' cage door open after trying to pet them. The in-and-out traffic through the sunroom door was too much temptation for the adventurous girl bird. Out she flew, leaving her mate behind.

On the last day of the reunion, after taking Carlton to the airport, two cousins and I were sitting in the quiet of my house when we noticed how lonely the little boy bird seemed. He was used to following the antics of his more active partner. We decided he too should

be set free, if that's what he wanted, so I unhinged the cage, opened the sunroom door, and out he flew. Within minutes of his escape, we heard what had to be two parakeets answering each other somewhere high in the neighbors' trees. Was this the joy of flying free?

Eighteen months later, after Carlton died, I received many cards from his friends and business acquaintances in California because his friend Michael had given them my address. One was from a woman telling of her friendship with Carlton over the Internet, sharing their depressive tendencies and how they worked around them. I was relieved to know he had someone to talk to.

She said she and Carlton shared a favorite movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and quoted from the movie about how some birds are not to be caged and when they are released there is a rejoicing, even as we miss them.

Carlton must have known the loneliness of being a caged bird wanting release. I see the lonely boy parakeet on the day I took him to the airport. The last time I saw him. I can't catch my breath. Maybe he was feeling like a caged bird. I'll keep scribbling.

Ah, but his scattered ashes lie on the path of songbirds. Perhaps he's truly flying free.

I listened to the song of my dove in the next room, as I sat on the sofa scribbling to connect these thoughts. I was the caged mother bird mourning her child, laughing occasionally at memories, and writing for my own release.

Reaching Out

Reentry

Often I had overwhelming fears I would never return to a normal life. Before Carlton died, I'm not sure how "normal" I was, sitting on a sofa all day writing about teaching experiences. Afterward I wondered what normal was supposed to be for me. Maybe being aware of my life, learning from the past, watching the present and visualizing a future was the best I could hope for. I didn't really want to be as removed from the world as I had been, but I wondered if I would ever feel safe enough to reenter the fray. Could I let go of these paralyzing fears long enough to participate in a more active life again?

One morning I sat and wrote until I got antsy, then took a brisk walk in the neighborhood park with Princess. When I came home to try writing again that restless feeling returned. I wanted to be "doing" something else, so I consulted my rather short list of safe things to do.

Surely there is something I need at the grocery store. A trip through cereal aisles and frozen-food displays doesn't seem very exciting. Maybe I could sit in the sunroom and type my stories into the computer.

I got off the sofa and turned on my computer to begin tapping in new work. But the pokey computer was too slow to react, making me impatient. I knew I didn't want any more anxiety.

It's nearly noon. Too early to take a nap. What else can I try? I could get some lunch out, then go to the library to write.

I liked that idea, so I picked up my woven bag full of pens and notebooks and drove to the nearby barbeque restaurant. However, when I pulled in, I felt uneasy. The parking lot was nearly full. *Breathe*, I told myself, and pushed past the uneasiness so I would not automatically return home. I parked the car and went in. There was a long, loud line extending to the door. The crowd inside matched the abundance of cars outside. "*Breathe, Laura,*" I repeated, inhaling the sweet, smoky air, and willing myself to stay. I could at least get a sandwich to go.

By concentrating on my breath while waiting in line, I found I was ready to stay and eat. I took my chopped beef sandwich and side order of cole slaw to a booth by the window and set my black-and-white notebook beside my plate in silent support. I watched the noisy crowd of people eating their lunches. They were making small talk with each other, while their eyes darted

around the room. That was interesting. They didn't appear any more confident than I felt.

I finished my lunch with renewed energy and decided to drive to the nearby library branch. Pulling into its nearly-full parking lot without a second thought, I turned off the engine, pulled up the emergency brake between the front seats, and got my bag. I climbed out of the car, closed and locked the door, put my keys in my pocket, and took several steps toward the library. But I stopped, turned around, and walked back to the car to peek through the window and double-check the position of the brake. Satisfied by this compulsive little ritual, I headed toward the building with confidence, passed through the sliding doors and down the center of the busy modern media room to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the periodicals section. I dropped into a comfortable chair with a view of the duck pond, letting my bag fall to the floor. As I bent over to dig out a pen and notebook, the sunlight through the glass warmed my back. I was ready to write again, eager to "see" what I had been "doing."

*Here I am. One foot, or maybe one
word, in front of the other.*

You're doing great.

*Why do I get so scared? Was
Carlton's fear of people my fear of
people?*

I don't know. What do you think?

Are there people in here worrying about the same thing? How do we get over it?

I can't speak for them. What about you?

Well today I ate in public, and went to the library. And lately I've been out more with friends. In the morning I'm not real sure what to do unless I have a specific appointment. I still have no "normal" schedule. But talking to you helps.

I'm glad.

No really, you help me sort out my thoughts and listen to how I feel. I'm not as apprehensive as I was. I think I'm getting braver.

Stacks

There was a stack of papers taking up space on my kitchen counter. Assorted stuff that piled up since the last time I cleaned off the limited work area a few months ago. There are stacks like this all over my house and they could easily overwhelm me, if I let them.

So while waiting on the microwave to heat a cup of coffee, my mind swirling around unclear thoughts, I tried tackling the nearby stack.

I couldn't find a new place for everything in that counter stack. I threw some things away, moved others to another stack, and put one on the refrigerator (which is just another form of stack). When I was finished there was still a stack on the kitchen counter, but it was smaller.

Feeling somewhat accomplished after sorting through the disorganized pile, I walked into one of the spare bedrooms. It has no bed or any clear purpose, except to hold stacks. It also contained the boxes of Carlton's things, as it used to be his bedroom. My eyes scanned the room and rested on a table full of stacks. On top was the envelope I received from California nearly four months after Kelly's phone call. It contained official copies of the death certificate and the coroner's report, stating "multi-drug intoxication" as the cause of death. A wave of nausea rose in my stomach and I slowly backed out of the room. This was not a project for that day.

I tried the next bedroom, which actually has a bed but would be of little use to a guest because it is also covered in stacks. There were books, watercolors, sketch pads, and journals — products from my creative endeavors. I understood the purpose of this room better, so I lingered long enough to begin clearing the bed for potential company by skimming papers and remembering when I wrote them or why. I took several of them into the sunroom to set next to the computer.

I was not exactly sure what my plan was for these writings; they just needed to be near the computer.

In the sunroom I became sidetracked leafing through another stack on top of the half-empty file cabinet, until the dryer buzzed from the laundry closet. I set the papers down and walked toward the sound. I pulled out warm towels and folded them, then took them to the linen closet in the front bathroom near the guestroom. The bed in that room was still not completely clear, and there was a new stack by the computer in the sunroom, but my towels were clean and put away.

This mess didn't happen overnight. To think I could dig through it in one determined effort was to invite frustration. Little by little I have excavated the stacks, letting them take me where I needed to go.

It's a metaphor for my life now, chipping away at old memories, accumulated in no discernible order. I am constantly choosing what to let go of, what to find a new place for, and what to leave for another day.

On my computer there is a program called defragmenting. I turn on the "details" while it scans one line at a time, cleaning up pieces of scattered information. Sometimes it seems to hit a snag and send the search all the way back to the beginning. This is similar to my grief journey. I would make it through a couple of "good" hours or days, sorting through my life, increasing my pace, thinking I was back on solid ground.

Then wham! a sad memory or a wave of anxiety would knock me back to what felt like the beginning.

This book evolved the same way. I would work on one little story, only to be reminded of two others. Sorting through the accumulation of memories seemed to have no order. Often I have felt I was running in circles, but I wasn't yet ready to give up. I visualized a spiral, spinning outward in an ever-widening arc to replace this mindless, tail-chasing image.

Life hasn't been a simple walk down a clear, straight path. When I let go of that idea, the journey becomes more of an adventure and the scenery more enjoyable. These triggered recollections of 55 years are showing me all the whimsical diversions and rich layers of the experience known as Laura Flett.

Cleaning House

My house is comfortable, but it's a mess. In addition to the books and papers resting on every available horizontal plane, clothes drape over chairs and a light dust covers every surface.

When Carlton was young, Saturday mornings were designated for cleaning the house. I became Dragon Lady, lighting fires under husband and son, expecting everyone else's schedule to fall in line with mine. No one was happy. The house might get straightened, but we were all a mess.

Now I live alone, except for the shedding Princess. I no longer have the rigid schedule telling me Saturday morning is the only time this house can be cleaned. There is no one to blame for the clutter but myself. Well, I have pointed out that the dog's toys are scattered throughout the house, but no more than any of my things.

Somehow I've moved past the mindset that my house needs to look a certain way, no longer caring as much about how presentable it is. I guess that happened soon after I realized it was now all my responsibility.

On an afternoon when a friend was to stop by, I ran the vacuum cleaner in the living room, took the kitchen garbage outside to the compost bin, dusted with a lemon scented spray and loaded the dishwasher with the last 24 hours of dirty dishes. It only took about twenty minutes, and the front rooms really did look and smell better.

When the cable man came to fix my Internet connection, the sunroom, where my computer resides, got its own twenty-minute cleaning. I ran a dustmop over the tile floor littered with birdseed and feathers from the dove's cage, emptied an overflowing trash can of paper, and closed the louvered doors to the laundry closet full of detergent bottles, empty hangers, and dirty clothes. It didn't take much, but it was a noticeable improvement.

Sometimes I do hit a limit on how much mess I can live with. This usually happens when I can't find last month's electric bill, or I've tripped over scattered books and toys one too many times. So I whip into a cleaning frenzy for an hour or two, until I feel more organized, or have at least found the nearly-overdue bill.

A bright yellow sign was hung on my kitchen doorknob advertising window washing and gutter cleaning. Yeah, that was a pleasant image. I've had my windows professionally washed before and the whole house sparkled. But I never called them, even though their sign hung on the door for a month.

In a television interview J. K. Rowling admitted to living in absolute squalor for five years while she wrote her first Harry Potter novel. I can picture a rather creative mess piling up around her as she spun her magical story. I liked that scene and have often borrowed the quote to explain myself.

If the mess isn't making me anxious, then it must be at an acceptable level for me, and balance is what I am looking for. I'm learning how to identify what I can live with, rather than just reacting to an outside standard that sets off inside fireworks.

An interesting thing happened the day an out-of-town friend dropped by unexpectedly. I hadn't seen her in a while and I immediately launched into my knee-jerk apology for the mess, closing a bedroom door and sliding a stack of books to the floor so she had a place

to sit down. My friend countered with a lengthy description of her own messy house, as if we were finalists for the coveted Slob of the Year title. Cute. Later, replaying the competitive conversation in my head, I had the thought: Maybe we could start a new trend.

All the wasted energy on those Saturday mornings long ago, when no one really wanted to be cleaning, can't be called back. I was trying to please some perceived outside authority. For now I can just be careful not to waste any more time worrying about it. I want this house to feel safe as I'm busy cleaning up my inner mess. The outer mess will get the attention it needs, as it needs it.

Two-Part Harmony

Carolyn, a childhood friend, called to offer a trip away from the safety of my home. She wanted me to go with her to the Maine coast for a week in October 2003, to see the fall foliage. I had never done this, and she had made the trip several times. She would find a house to rent and her daughter, who worked for Delta, could get plane tickets for next to nothing. I knew Carolyn liked this kind of detail decision-making more than I, but I soon discovered that even deciding whether or not to go was too hard for me. I took my uncertainty to the notebook.

Carolyn used to be very outgoing. She might overwhelm me.

That was years ago. How is she now?

Well, she's been living alone for a while. And she knows my introverted side. We had a good time in that mountain cabin in North Carolina a few years ago.

Then this could be fun too. Talk to her about it.

So I did. We talked about what we might do up there for a week. I wanted to be assured that the adventure wouldn't be too structured, and I found we both just needed a healthy dose of Mother Nature and a break from our own responsibilities. I decided this could work.

It was an invigorating experience, staying for a week in a quaint cottage by the Atlantic Ocean in the tiny town of Friendship, Maine. I chose an upstairs bedroom, a loft with a slanting ceiling and a view of the water, furnished with stenciled furniture and a quilt-topped bed. I took Madeline L'Engle's *Two Part Invention* up there to read. I tested my old scouting skills at the fireplace downstairs in the living room, gathering tinder and kindling from the nearby woods.

We drove to neighboring towns, pulling off the road to take pictures of the colorful scenery and wandering in and out of bookstores and craft shops in little villages along the way. We spent a brisk afternoon at the lighthouse, Carolyn's favorite spot, watching the

ocean crash into the rocks. On another afternoon we ate fresh clam chowder at a local café. Carolyn and I cooked and shared most 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 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, then 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. 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 artwork 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. From Milbank, South Dakota, he was the last of seven children and a 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 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 '40s. 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
