

responsibilities of our own. We were not sure how involved we could afford to be.

Dad's decline 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, but by the end of 2003 we knew it was time to make some drastic changes. We 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-like brother Bruce and my good-old-boy brother Buddy found a place for Dad at the War Veterans Nursing Home in Monroe. 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. Registration paperwork and a doctor's check-up took a couple of hours. 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 watch 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 falls out of bed, or anxious imaginings about what else could possibly happen. Our little family has accepted 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. I was eager not to follow my parents' footsteps and my journal was the

friend who 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, overland 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. 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 into 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. We 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.



Photo by Cowen Studios of Shreveport LA

Carlton Harris
Captain Shreve High School
Class of 1994

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. 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. 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 birdseed 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 logjam in the river at the bottom of this hill not far from where my own logjam 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 current 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 my illusion destroyed, I have had to be more creative when looking for playmates. I welcome the chance to interact with young children. 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 likely they could remain playmates, for me or for each other.

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 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 7-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 7-Up 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.

When I retired, I visualized telling the story of my teaching experience in a novel way and seeing it in print. 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 follow 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

I could about being a writer, I went to the computer, made my reservation for the next one offered and sent in a deposit. In early July I drove my trusty four-cylinder, air-conditioned Toyota Corolla across the endless hot, dry plains of Texas, eager to begin my new path. I planned to spend a day exploring the shops and galleries of Santa Fe before going to the workshop in Taos.

I wanted a storyteller, the southwestern culture's clay figure with a lapful of children. The role of storyteller seemed like the logical transition for me, as I moved from teacher to writer. And although I searched many stores, none of the figurines seemed to connect. I really wanted to like one or another, but something was not quite right about each one. Those



Little Laura

with misbehaving children didn't appeal to my schoolteacher self, and the chubby matrons didn't look enough like me.

I left Santa Fe the next day for an early arrival in Taos to continue the search for a storyteller figure and again had no luck. It was time to let go of that idea and settle in at the Mabel Dodge Luhan House for a week of intense writing practice. This lodge, a gathering place for Georgia O'Keefe, Willa Cather, D.H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams and others, was where I watched with awe as my magical pen, under Natalie's guidance, joined the universal dance. Ah. The workshop was what I had come for.

The following Christmas, in my new life as a writer, I gave each of my teacher friends a candle wrapped in an angel-adorned ribbon and the advice not to burn it at both ends. It was what I was learning for myself in retirement. When Kathy sent me a thank-you card with a storyteller on the front, I put it on my refrigerator. The picture next to her note was of me as a small child sitting in a rocking chair reading to my dolls. Me! A storyteller! Maybe I've been one all my life.

Three-and-a-half years later, in May 2004, I traveled to Boulder, Colorado, to begin a year-long commitment with a long-distance writing group, focused on completing a book. I already had a manuscript of school stories, but felt I needed outside help writing a book about my son's death. I also hoped to avoid the discouraging pile of rejection form letters
