

Dear Rachel: This is How



Charlene L. Edge writing memoir, 2012.
Photo by Hoyt Edge

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This week, while sorting through files, I found a piece of personal history I wrote on April 24, 2007, for Rachel, my daughter. She had asked me to write something for her, " ... about how you've gotten to the point where you are now—to the point of knowing what you want—to be able to write this book and do your art!"

This is what I wrote to her ... 13 years ago.

Dear Rachel

Since I've just stuck the quiche in the oven, I have a few uninterrupted moments to begin. Here I am on April 24, 2007, nearly 20 years after we climbed into our red Chevy wagon and drove down Route 29 away from The Way International headquarters. Getting out of the middle of rural Ohio, out of that cult, to enter the broader stage of "the world," took every ounce of strength I had.

During the previous couple of years, you know I had to let go of old ways of thinking and muster a lot of gumption, hoping that somehow by jumping off the cliff of the known and out into the unknown I'd be okay. I think you know that my having gone back to college the last year we spent there surely had boosted my self-confidence, but I was still pretty scared.

Education helped

The year before we left, going back to college helped me recuperate mentally and emotionally from the chaos and confusion in the ministry, especially at Headquarters, and from making the painful yet sound

decision that I had to leave it. My first English professor at Ohio State, S____, certainly got me to believe in my capabilities as a writer, even jotting on one of my assignments that I was a “born writer.” Well, I’m not sure if people are born to be artists or not, but writing did come to be the only way I could really express myself completely. I usually feel hemmed-in when talking, either by other people talking over me, or by distractions in the environment, or by something else seeming to be more important than what I might have to say.

Anyhow, that teacher’s influence was crucial, as well as others at the time who saw the writer in me and fanned the writing flame, like J____, P____, and your grandfather. Dad B. out-and-out told me he thought I should write a book about my experience in The Way. You might remember my reaction. I said no, that I didn’t see the point. He said he thought it would help others if they read my story and avoided what I’d been through. It might help those who were trying to get out of a group like that. At the time, helping others was the furthest thing from my mind, so I sort of laughed at the idea. I never wanted to try and tell anyone anything again, after believing I had been telling people God’s Word for 17 years only to finally wake up and realize I had been propagandizing them.

Friends and teachers helped

Next, J____ encouraged me with comments like, “Someday you’ll write the unauthorized history of the ministry.” And “One day you’ll believe you are important.” P____ told me to write a novel, creating fiction from the whole experience. She was very serious when she told me to freelance when we got to Florida after leaving HQ. So, these key people planted their seeds in my heart, and I believe I am here at this point now largely due to those seeds growing and blossoming. Today, I sense some fruit beginning to come along.

L____, since 1991, has been a powerful influence on my writing life, as you know. She inscribed the following in a book called *Walking on Alligators*, a gift she gave to all of us in her editing class in 1993: “Charlene- Oh what a serious and fragile woman I thought you were when I first met you in E391. I could literally see ideas moving through your whole body, so

intensely would you think. And that intensity has proved a hallmark of your writing, too. You have channeled your passion well. Don't ever stop." – L____. So how do you turn away from that?! I couldn't and didn't want to.

Journaling and essays helped

Over the years I wrote in journals, on napkins, on scraps of paper anywhere, at lunch counters, in my car, in doctor's waiting rooms, in break rooms at work, and corner booths at Panera. Anyhow, L____ has been and still is my mentor. Even last night to celebrate my last day in corporate America, she opened her heart and her home to me, feeding me a lovely dinner and more grist for the writing mill.

In 2004 when L____ published my story in *Shifting Gears: Small Startling Moments In and Out of The Classroom* (Red Pepper Press. 2004) I felt enormous relief. *Finally*, I had shaped a story from my Way experience after trying to do it little by little since 1986 when I returned to college; all those journaling attempts were merely for myself, definitely not with publication in mind.

An earlier attempt had been at Valencia Community College in 1990 for a creative writing class. In my paper titled "From Fundamentalism to Freedom," I brought in some of my story within the context of the overall theme of the paper, which was that by giving up the fundamentalist's view that America was founded as a Christian nation, I had now found the real freedom that our founders envisioned—freedom to pursue happiness and not have our government run by any religion.

Anyhow, back to *Shifting Gears*. After it was published, I think you and I talked about my sense that the story wasn't over, that I had to write more. Because I had to cut so much out of the story to fit the page limitations of that book—21 stories by women of Rollins College—I felt cramped in my telling. The 17-years-worth of experiences were squashed, and I couldn't convey much of their meaning in the essay. So, I decided that somehow I'd write a book sometime and get the whole thing worked out, formed, and

finally communicated. My body has been carrying it around like a baby for 20 years.

The work-a-day duty

Working full-time and in a busy, yet wonderful marriage, seemed to make little time to focus on writing a book. That's probably an excuse. But because those Way years are so highly charged with emotion affecting all the years following it, I felt split in half sometimes: living my present life, while thinking about making art of my past.

In my corner cubicle at the computer software company where I've worked for the past decade, well ... you know how it's been—stressful and unpredictable. And I have dragged myself through most of it, not liking it but making the best of it. After all, I got lots of time off to take all those trips around the world with Hoyt, and I've enjoyed a hefty paycheck—a first for me.

The failed special dispensation

You probably remember when I got permission to work four days a week and did that for six months. But frankly, I felt that schedule was not working out for me. As soon as I got settled in to write, I had to yank myself away and put myself back into the mode of proposal writing, which is so strictly deadline-driven and tiring. All I did was rush to work and rush around at work.

Some writers can do it: work late at night or early in the morning on their own stuff and go off into the world to jobs to pay the bills (in fact, I did that for three years in Tampa when I was writing lots of poetry), but this project is *jealous*. It won't tolerate strong competing energies. When I finally realized that, I laid it aside, went back to my day job full-time, paid off my car, and figured that maybe when I retired I'd write the book.

Maybe I was just plain afraid of telling it then. Maybe I was not ready somehow. All I know is that the story has haunted me too long to ignore it. The longer I stayed at my proposal writing job, the harder it became to find happiness in the corporate world with my story nipping at my heels.

Not only that, but something else I haven't been able to ignore came to the forefront: my dreams.

Probably not good to ignore dreams

Regularly, I've had dreams about The Way ministry, Dr. Wierwille, people in the Way Corps, you when you were little, etc. Recently, just after I resigned from work on March 19, I had a dream that seems highly symbolic. My printer burst into flames, churned out pages and fire while Hoyt and I tried to find water to pour on it. In the end, we succeeded, but then I woke right up.

Immediately I remembered a piece Annie Dillard had written about her typewriter exploding like a volcano. I tried to find where she had written that and finally discovered it in her book, *The Writing Life*, which I just re-read. What a fabulous work of art on the art of writing. She'll be my tutor in this project, I said to Hoyt at dinner a couple of weeks ago.

Not only is she my tutor, but also William Zinsser as he speaks on his audiotope: "How to Write a Memoir." And you probably remember Brenda Ueland's, *If you Want to Write*. I think I gave you a copy long ago.

And I don't want to leave out *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. I first read that while living in Tampa on Southview Ave. Late at night I'd sit on the porch and read it. When I got to her description about creative women needing a place of their own to work, a room with a lock on it, I wept and wept, yearning for the day that might happen for me, but not really feeling it ever would come.

Woolf writes of Jane Austin and Emily Bronte: "What genius, what integrity it must have required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking."

So why now?

Why this year—and not last—does this opportunity to write without shrinking present itself? Seems the timing is right. Hoyt's and my ability to

make it happen financially and my willingness to actually commit to doing it have met up, like two rivers at the delta.

He offered to find a way a couple of years ago, but at that time I felt we couldn't, that I was making too much of this "need to write this story," that I was just complaining about my job too much, a job that really was a good one with lots of good benefits. I reminded myself that probably 90% of American's didn't like their jobs either, so I should just shut up and make the best of it.

But Hoyt kept it in his heart and his wanting to see me become a more fulfilled person is what has motivated him. He keeps saying he knows I need to "get this out of my system." Since he's written a book and many articles, he recognizes this need and honors it. I am grateful beyond words.

Some things must be done

During the past few months several phrases have helped me stay the course about quitting my job, like good ole Shakespeare, " ... to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

And Robert Frost's, "There are two paths in the woods and I chose the one least traveled--and that has made all the difference." And this one from L___ kept coming to mind when co-workers would insist I would change my mind about leaving because I was so good at my job: "Just because you're good at doing something doesn't mean it's good for you to do it."

An old story can be relevant now

Lastly, I do want to say that given the horrible war in Iraq and the unbelievable violence perpetrated by religious fanatics (blowing themselves up for their cause) I feel more and more like speaking out about what I understand. Extreme right/wrong thinking can lead to acts like that.

I've begun to feel a little guilty. I'm beginning to suspect that by holding back my story I may be selfishly keeping back information that could contribute to the larger conversation that's going on about religion in the world and specifically in this country.

We shy away from calling out certain groups as destructive because we're afraid of offending someone. We acknowledge that freedom of religion is a civil right for all, but when groups practice beliefs that are destructive and violate human rights and dignity, then it's time to say something.

Taking a risk

It's a complicated issue, and I sure don't have all the answers, but so many people are addressing the topics of religious conservatism, fanaticism, and freedom, that I just cannot resist adding my own two cents anymore.

And you know, I'm not a trained psychologist or philosopher (although it helps being married to one!), but I do know what happened to me. I can remember what I witnessed. It's my story. If I don't tell my story now, I think I'd be betraying myself.

I know it's cliché to say this, but life is short, and I just don't want to spend the rest of my days in that old corner cubicle not having taken this chance.

Now for that quiche...

Love,
Mom

Thanks for reading!

Your writer on the wing,

Charlene