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Beyond Survival: An Exploration of Narrative Healing and Forgiveness in Healing from Rape

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Beyond Survival:
An Exploration of Narrative Healing and Forgiveness in Healing from Rape

by

Heather Curry

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
Department of Women's Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

I am immeasurably grateful to my husband, Demian Miller, for his unwavering compassion, unflagging support as partner and father, and tremendous critical insight; also to my children, Otis and Oscar, whose presence in my life brings innumerable riches, surprises, and revelations, and who remind me that there is no better place or time to be than right here, right now; to my mother, Leanna Burgin, for her insistence on helping me finish, even when her body told her not to, and for sharing the burdens and bounties of this journey; to my sister, Leanna Curry, for her willingness to “go there” with me, time and again; to my father, Tom Curry, whose friendship and guidance have meant so much to me; to my stepfather, Will Hotchkiss, and stepmother, Mary Curry, who have helped keep me on this track, and who have been the best of grandparents’; and to Elizabeth (Betty Jo) and Dieter Miller, my mother and father-in-law, who blow the myth of the nightmare in-laws to shreds.

I am, of course, eternally thankful for the wisdom, patience, and empathy of all the friends who have helped me process and understand this work along the way: Erica Anstey, Angela Bingham, Dan Stepp, Dr. Charles Martin, Laura Hirko, Michelle Paynter, Tara Dougherty, Heather Weaver, Kori Cohen, Wendy Kieffer, John Honeycutt, Rebecca Willman, Dr. Allison Pinto, Dr. Sara Crawley, Jamie Vascotto, and so many others.

Finally, this work is dedicated to the millions of rape victims, survivors, thrivers, and yes, perpetrators in the United States, whose stories and journeys connect to mine and help me to heal. It is my sincere belief that as begin to heal into our collective wholeness, we can irrevocably shift the mechanisms of violence and victimization that the very structures supporting the rape phenomenon are undone, never to be resurrected.

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Beyond Survival:

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ABSTRACT

This work explores: liberatory possibilities and limitations of narrative in healing from rape; the work and meanings of forgiveness, specifically seeking a complex definition of forgiveness drawing on spiritual, feminist, complexity, and phenomenological philosophies; and the relationships between narrative processes and forgiveness. I use an autoethnographic approach, offering my story of rape and healing in the aftermath. I attend to the physicality of the narrative, and to the way in which memory resides in the body, thus creating an embodied text. I examine current models of rape recovery, and the terms used by organizations, practitioners, and authors of rape narratives to frame the recovery process, contending that current models and the language of recovery fails to recognize the dynamic and non-linear trajectory of healing. I return to my own process of forgiveness, which is illustrative of the unpredictable event of forgiveness, which grows from the dissolution of self and other.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. The Outward and Inward Impact of Rape

In the group of more than twenty women I know and am close to, only five have not been either raped or sexually assaulted in some manner, most often attempted rape or serious sexual aggression. At a national level, the statistics for incidences of rape and sexual assault are a profound cultural indictment. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) reports 248,300 victims of rape in 2007. The 2007 data also shows that 17.7 million American women reported having been raped and/or sexually assaulted in their lifetime. These numbers suggest that every two minutes, someone is raped. Every two minutes. Possibly more. The women who surround me, who connect to my pain through their own, humanize those numbers. We each approach our paths and our past differently, but every one of us knows this is a legacy we are compelled to discontinue. In order to do so, we must begin to understand the phenomenon of rape differently; we must begin to see that it is perhaps our healing that offers the means to prevent the wounding.

To be clear, the focus of this work is not the act of rape. My work centers instead around healing, specifically the possibilities and limitations of narrative therapy and the work of forgiveness. Yet the scope of the phenomenon cannot be ignored. If the rate of incidence since 2007 has remained steady or decreased only slightly, then significantly more than 18 million women are very busy with the project of healing from sexual assault and rape. They are consumed with issues of prevention and safety, with education

programs for potential victims and perpetrators, those programs addressing responsible and safe alcohol consumption, campus safety, domestic violence, police protection, the list is endless. More importantly, significantly more than 18 million women are trying to locate a new sense of self, trying to understand why it is that this story, this story which they carry around inside of them, which often threatens to rip them apart at the seams, which rocks the foundations of relationships, which lies at the base of a good deal of substance abuse and addiction, suicide attempts and successes, eating disorders, abusive relationships—this story is one we often sit on, like a child on their busy hands. Perhaps we don't want to make anyone "uncomfortable," or we sense it will not be well-received, or we simply cannot look at it anymore because we fall apart every time we do.

But what if? What if *we* looked at it? Not just the one who experienced the assault. Not just the group of us who have experienced *assaults*. Not just the one, the group, and those who help us in the aftermath, but *we*. *All of us*. What if we wrap our collective self around the phenomenon, accept that it is all of ours to understand, and to address? And then perhaps we are not so easily undone by it, because we know that when we lean back into that treacherous space of memory, when we are suspended between the path of healing and the riptide of the past, there are thousands, better yet, *millions* of hands outstretched to break our fall.

I propose that we must begin to view healing as its own phenomenon, one which, though inextricably tied to the trauma of rape, and in perpetual dialogue with the memory of rape, takes on a life of its own. It is fraught with struggles, with moments of liberation and moments of frustration, with pain and celebration. It warrants a great deal of care, because healing is always dynamic, always occurring. Healing knows no past tense.

And so, we must ask some critical questions: What is our cultural understanding of healing? How do we frame the process of healing? Where do we locate the process, and how can we heal as a community—a community that is also affected by the act of rape, even if we don't own the location of victim or perpetrator? If the statistics reveal a shared cultural wound, then let's pick up healing as a shared cultural path. Rather than patting victims of rape on the back, saying "Good job," and "What can we do for you," we might consider that all of us are impacted by rape, are implicated in its proliferation, and all of us must heal from the violence of the act. What if our understanding shifted radically, so that our interconnectedness guided us, and so that healing methodologies evolved in response to our shared wound?

The following work seeks to reframe healing in exactly this way—an individual process which potentiates community-scale healing, given the conditions of visibility and receptivity. I propose that healing cannot remain individuated. The locus of healing cannot remain discrete. Neither can it be presented as a compartmentalized, linear path. How might telling the story be truly transformative, pointing toward wholeness, rather than further cementing contracting and wounded identities? If, in storying the trauma, the rape victim shatters the silence and gains agency through the co-occurring processes of finding voice and giving words to an experience that defies the linearity of language, is this transformation an endpoint? If the storyteller is seeking recovery, I ask recovery of what or whom? If, in telling, one seeks to reclaim the identity she lost during and after the rape, I would suggest that healing remains elusive in such a project. I posit that therapeutic approaches which suggest "recovery" as a goal, and fail to examine the practical implications of such a discursive practice, stop far short of liberation.

Additionally, in theorizing healing, this project ultimately points to a theory of forgiveness which grows from an environment of active healing, and then feeds back into the environment from which it has grown, thus nourishing continued healing. Drawing on Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness as an event rather than an act, one which transcends the language of economy and exchange, forgiveness will be articulated as distinct from absolution, penance, retribution and even justice. Derrida's theory of forgiveness, however, while influential on this work, is not an inquiry into the limits of the self. It does not question the premise of the discrete self, and so I look to a rich body of work from contemplative traditions and theories for what I (and perhaps many others) consider to be the greatest gift of forgiveness: forgiveness, if an event beyond the confines of economy, offers emancipation from the identificatory trap in which storying trauma often leaves us. It presents us a pathway toward wholeness which heals the wound sustained upon the separation of self and other. Finally, and with this gift in mind, I explore the ways in which telling the story of one's rape may potentiate forgiveness, and how the process and act of forgiveness changes the rape narrative.

It should be noted that this is a deeply personal work, through which I am exploring my own healing path. My thesis is not merely a reflection of my own healing, but a part of it. In the most remarkable moments, the ones where I am not thinking about what to write, or choosing the words with which to write it, when everything simply spills onto the page, memory comes alive, and I find myself foundering for some sort of anchor, something to tether me to who I believe I've become. Through all of this, I am discovering that the richest gifts sometimes ask us to come undone. The sense of silence and erasure I felt after my experience with rape has now transmuted. Silence has become

potent, rather than oppressive—a pause in which I open to the richness of suffering, despair, the boundless presence of and capacity to love, and the inevitability of transformation.¹ I am not poeticizing the power of silence. I can recognize its liberatory possibilities because it is a choice now. I am not *being silenced*; I am seeking it out, because in turning inward, our interconnectedness, the temporality of identities, the process of contraction that binds us to our wounded locations of victim, survivor, even assailant or rapist, is illuminated. In such moments of awareness, the structures of identity tremble, and I see that the sense of erasure I felt growing up after the rape has evolved into permeability, and I am finding that more often, I welcome the startling sensation of walls crumbling.

II. Overview of Chapters

I have chosen to foreground my own experience with rape and my path of forgiveness and situate it within the cultural social, spiritual and theoretical contexts that have shaped the way in which I have told it. I rely upon the theoretical framework of autoethnography in order to contextualize my story of rape and healing. Autoethnography is defined by Denzin as focusing the “ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self experiences occur” (Denzin, 1997, quoted in Jeanine Minge, 254). I also seek to create an embodied narrative, thereby, as Jeanine Minge writes, “Recreating the Body to Find the

¹ In her work, *Bare Bones Meditation: Waking Up from the Story of My Life*, Joan Tollifson quotes Meister Eckhart: “There is nothing in all the universe/ so much like God as silence” (47). I have been influenced by the way Tollifson writes her narrative with such a careful attention to the power of silence, creating narrative pauses in which we can experience it with her. While others (e.g., Toni Packer, Trungpa Rinpoche, J. Krishnamurti) have illuminated the potency of compassionate silence, Tollifson writes about it experientially in a way that has informed and guided my own writing in this work.

Body” (252). As such, Chapter One is dedicated to telling the story of rape and then reflecting upon the experience of telling. In reflection, I attend to the physical, psychic and spiritual dimensions of response as I engaged in this process, watching specifically how emotions manifest in the body.² This will be expressed at times through the inclusion of relevant journal entries, or sections thereof, which I have been recording for the last year while doing my thesis work. I weave them together in an effort to make sense of how the story has changed through the work, and how I have changed through telling the story. I admit to the difficulty in attending to the event of rape in this way. I feel a profound dis-ease when locating this story in the body, when examining my physicality so closely, and this work likely reflects that struggle.

In my efforts to see how others who have experienced the trauma of rape are offering their stories and framing their healing processes—really an effort to locate resonance in our shared processes—I have reviewed the stories of other survivors as they appear on Take Back the Night and The Forgiveness Project’s websites, but due to the understandable limitations placed by the organizations on the use of those stories, can only speak to their influence on my work in the abstract. I also considered the possibilities of offering my story to other survivors through other venues and seeing whether resonance exists, but will do so when I don’t run the risk of “data mining” other women’s trauma and healing stories.

² Joan Tollifson proves influential here as well. *Bare Bones Meditation* chronicles her whole experience, and she attends viscerally to the embodied self. Toni Packer’s *The Wonder of Presence: And the Way of Meditation* was also a profound reminder that attentive awareness is not simply a mental process, nor just an emotional process, nor just a physical process. She notes the intimate and immediate link between self-judgments and physical sensation. In chronicling what is happening in the body, I want to create a narrative pause in which I can “live for a moment without seeking for a description, an explanation, a comment” (80). There is, of course, the irony of writing with the intent to grow in awareness, but I acknowledge those paradoxical stumbling blocks, and trust that the work will be revelatory for its author.

Chapter One then explores in greater depth theories of narrative and textual healing, examining first how others—Roberta Culbertson, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Gloria Anzaldua, for example—frame narrative healing. I have recently stumbled upon the body of theory regarding narrative healing, and though further research would incorporate and respond directly to existing theories, this work seeks primarily to understand the active state of healing as it presents through narrative rather than the construct of narrative therapy. I also want to note that in reviewing the literature, I found that feminist theorists have not often picked up the project of theorizing *healing* from rape except within the context of feminist counseling models, and those are often dated and fail to excavate the terms used sufficiently (e.g., Yassen and Glass, 1984). I will reference these works, but have found literature from the fields of psychology, literature studies, criminology, and texts which discuss spiritual approaches to healing to be much richer at this point.

This chapter also examines theories of forgiveness, attending to how theorists from different disciplines and practice fields are conceptualizing, prescribing and proscribing, and reacting to the work of forgiveness. I propose a working definition of forgiveness which builds loosely upon theories of performativity and phenomenology³, and on the resonance between spiritual philosophies and traditions which problematize and liberate us from the self/other dualism.

Finally, Chapter Three focuses on the rich and sparsely explored territory between theories of forgiveness and theories of narrative healing. I wish to understand the relationship (or potential for relationship) between the two processes. Having proposed a

³ Specifically, I found Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on temporality, and protention and retention most influential. Derrida's work on forgiveness will also be explored.

liberatory definition of forgiveness, I look here at the ways in which narratives of trauma, if we attend consciously to their evolution, and to ours as we engage in the project of constructing a narrative, evidence the performative nature of identities and point to a deeper, transpersonal conception of self. It is in that awareness that forgiveness manifests, not as a conscious project per se, but as a spontaneous revolution in awareness, a sudden opening, and, although I don't propose or assume universality of experience, can be fleeting.

CHAPTER TWO

TELLING—THE PROMISE OF STORY

“The most important part of healing is to tell your story.”
Linda Braswell, *Quest for Respect*, 15

“For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and body...”
Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 97

I. Introducing the Quandary of Telling

I am going to tell the story, knowing that the story is an artifact, knowing that crafting a beginning is exactly that—a bricolage of memory fragments, a grasping of a moment in time from which everything will unfold. It will be incomplete, a fiction. There will be much left unsaid, and a whole set of histories before the moment of rape that are inextricably bound to it, but will not be available to the reader of this story—or possibly even the writer. The story changes with every telling, and parts of it, of who I have been as the teller, no longer feel familiar. But I can see those versions of me standing up and falling apart, one after the other after the other. Statues of sand, crumbling in succession. I have a sense of the first time I called the event rape, and I see that child-me, wounded, angry, shaken loose from who I had been before. The self fractures with such a realization; suppositions of continuity fly out of reach.

There is, of course, nothing to do now but tell the story, but the question remains, how? The narrative is woven together over time, the moment of rape revealed through the process of healing afterward. I wasn't present for the rape. My body was, and it stores a set of events my mind cannot recall.

My story is not mine, both in the sense of rape as phenomenon, and in a most immediate sense: it is historic reconstruction, a patchwork project, a borrowing of others' memories in order to make sense of the absence of my own memory. Over the years, I have struggled to piece together what happened from others' recurrences of the night, but cannot locate a recognizable "me" in those narratives. Jeanine Minge's difficulty in presenting her story in lucid detail in order to bring the reader "into the scene," when the memory she holds is "clouded by the beer and bong hits," is one with which I empathize (255). I feel the peculiar tension of this project, of trying to cohere a set of events that are smudged in the mind's eye, or, in my case, unavailable altogether. This is a story told in relationship, released to and witnessed by the reader of this work. How will it be heard if I cannot reconstruct it in lucidity? How to be the reliable narrator of an event for which I was not a reliable participant? At least not in the sense of recording a navigable, articulate memory.

I'm avoiding writing *the story*, though, letting the mind create logic puzzles, inescapable paradoxes. These puzzles are secondary projects, diversions—we know memory is unreliable; we know memories are rooted in the subjective experience of the teller; we know that one story, as told by five people, will change from person to person. But I would say that the story of the rape in and of itself is not what matters most—the rape is already over. The moment no longer exists. As Almaas states so frankly,

“Regardless of the stories you tell yourself, at this moment, this very moment, there is only this moment, here, now. Nothing else exists” (60). However, memory is not so easily dispensed with, and so what calls for our attention and care is the storyteller and us as the witness. The project is not to help sustain the memory, but to humbly witness the process of telling. In witnessing, the listener becomes now part of the story as well. Both parties are changed in the telling and become bound to one another in shared knowledge. The system holding the story expands.

I realize I have shifted positions. I will necessarily be both the teller and the witness⁴. Gloria Anzaldua writes, “There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it, a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge” (64). When I look at this story, I will do so, conscious of the tension between seeing and being seen. I will hold my child self as I hold my children—gently, knowing that the breakages will occur, the shattering will occur, and I can only hold it, make space for it, until it heals. In telling the story, I am acutely aware of the exchange of identities, of the ever-shifting location of self. I am both living my story and seeing it unfold. I will let it be a spiritual act, then, an act that calls forth the

⁴ I am calling specifically on relational conceptualization of the witness as articulated by Leela Fernandes: “First, the witness becomes implicated in the situation or form of oppression being observed; that is, the presence of the witness changes the dynamics of the situation at hand and is not simply an external observer. Second, the act of witnessing represents a learning process for the witness. The subjects being witnessed, in effect, represent the teachers in this situation” (84). In this case, I am witnessing the experience of the child-me, letting her be the teacher. In consciously taking up an active witnessing, it is my intention to “change the dynamics of the situation at hand.” Clearly, I can’t affect the moment of the rape, but I can affect the continuing dynamic of the rape phenomenon by holding the space for this story to unfold.

“transpersonal self,”⁵ the “I” who draws strength from knowing this story was never mine to begin with, that I existed there only for a moment.

II. Making a Castle from a Grain of Sand: Assigning a Beginning

I am flipping through a book entitled, *Femalia*. It is an artistic rendering of the vagina in all its glory, a book that stands easily alongside any Georgia O’Keefe collection, a book that solicits gasps and nods and “That’s incredible”s, and I am profoundly uncomfortable. Not the sort of discomfort that precedes and accompanies cognitive breakthrough, the kind that pairs up with excitement, but a prudish dis-ease that leaves me a little ill. This is a class full of women who identify readily as feminists. We talk about discursive practices, the body as a performance, we have keen intellects and intuitive, inquisitive minds. We can speak of woman as a category, move with grace and fluidity through our modes of subversion, upend notions of binary gender with a sweep of the hand, a flicker of the wrist. We are not supposed to be undone by pictures of vaginas. And I am crawling deeper inside my skin. These are wounds. These pages should be glued shut. No one should see that level of vulnerability, captured and laid out on a page.

...

The starting point of this story always changes. I can’t recall exactly how the plan developed, only that Jamie—a girl infinitely cooler than me—and I schemed mightily to

⁵ I’m alluding to the work of Frances Vaughan, specifically *The Inward Arc* (2000), in which she explains, “The term *transpersonal* means, literally, beyond the personal...The transpersonal self that transcends personal boundaries, remains as an *experience*, distinct from what is *experienced*. The transpersonal Self may first come into awareness with the awakening of the inner witness or observer of experience that remains distinct from the contents of consciousness such as thoughts, feelings, sensations, or images” (39).

make it happen. A Thursday night party at Jeff Hill's house. Jeff Hill was, of course, a senior—this fact alone was enough to warrant our attendance. We were freshmen, lowly ninth graders invited to a senior skip party. They could have had leprosy and we would have gone. I snuck out that night. My mother had no idea I was gone until some horrible hour of the morning, three or four, before daylight breaks and when any reason for my absence would be a terrible one. I never fully understood the depth of her terror or rage until recently.

As it was, they had beer at this party, and we, Jamie and I, were two of about six or seven girls there. We covered the requisite kegger activities—quarters, “I never,” bullshit, etc. We flirted—an activity at which I generally bombed. Miserably. To compensate for my social awkwardness that year, I'd been cultivating my beer drinking skills and working up a smoking habit. That night, I drank until I felt comfortable, which meant I was quite drunk. Here's what I recall: there were five or six guys playing basketball in the driveway, Jamie was among them, since she was tall-ish and fairly coordinated. I was sitting on the trunk of a car, talking to “Matt,” a pimply-faced short kid whom I remember as being nice, and in every other way unremarkable. I was easily flattered by attention in general, and while I can't recall how it came about, found myself kissing him. We decided to head off to a more private place, and went back to a room. I remember sitting on an office chair. I remember he was on the bed. Or perhaps it was the other way around. I remember what I was wearing—shorts (borrowed from Jamie) with a paper-bag waist, gathered with a brown belt, a gray sweatshirt. Why do I remember the clothes I was wearing? And then the absence, a blackness which can only

be deciphered in the body, a blackness which yields nothing of that night, but can only be made sense of by the versions of me articulated in its aftermath.

Next: I remember the sick pounding of daylight on my eyelids, the terror of waking up naked from the waist down, knowing that I wasn't in my own bed, the immediate wash of shame and embarrassment. I remember hurrying to put on my pants, and I remember stumbling down the hallway, knowing I was in, as the saying goes, "deep shit." When I "remember" this, it would be most akin to a series of film clips. There is no continuity, no flow between them. They are jarring in the seeming arbitrary ways they arrange and re-arrange themselves. I remember using the bathroom. I was bleeding again, my body having paused mid-menstruation for two days. That would be my first clue something had happened. I remember a brown bathmat, Formica countertops. The house was a cinderblock number in a neighborhood of houses just like it. Date palms in the front yard. I remember a guy saying outside the bathroom door, "Have you seen Heather? Her mom's here." And a lot of laughter, because everyone knew I was in "deep shit." And I was. My mother's face when she's angry is rigid as stone, but her eyes, which are dark like mine, turn even darker, a blistering sort of anger that sparks around the pupil.

As we drove out of the neighborhood, she pointed to the house across the street and told me she found me because that house was one of the houses she'd grown up in. Palmview Estates—1950s suburbs, her parents vaulted out of poverty for the first time in my mother's young life. Her brother had tortured her there, she said, pushed her into the cacti clumped together in the front yard. Chased her through that yard wielding a butcher knife. He would have killed her if he could have. I wish I could recall her tone of voice.

What would it have sounded like during such a pause? Maybe her anger swelled and flattened. It happens that way. I know that now, though I didn't at the time. I assumed her emotions were continuous, unrelenting until an end was reached. At the time, my mother's story didn't mean much, but memory makes meaning of the inconsequential, lends it a peculiar significance from which I now draw literary parallels. My mother and I are now linked in story to that geographic location, linked in our histories of violence.

At home, she sees the bruise on my neck, the vaunted hickey, a badge of desirability. She asks if it was worth it. She is smiling slightly, her mouth turning alternately up and down at the corners, disgust and ...something else. I couldn't figure out where I stood. She was still furious, but she was also, what was it, proud? Was she proud? And of what? She has always put a lot of stock in physical beauty, and perhaps—Well. Perhaps it is best to let that one lie. Any conclusion is just me now reconstructing a psychological moment, trying to make sense of a tiny muscle movement. She went to her closet and pulled out a belt, purple, v-shaped in the front, with two metal prongs that hooked into coordinating holes in the back. She told me to lie face down over her bed. She pulled down the boxer shorts I was wearing, my underwear, and spanked me. I was fourteen. The shame I felt from the night before couldn't stand up to the mortification of that moment. Even now, writing it down, I feel nauseous. I don't recall the physical pain of the actual punishment, though I remember the metal prongs left small cuts in my flesh. They healed, the faint scars eventually faded completely.

We have talked about it, my mother and me. Neither of us knew that morning what had happened the night before. She, too, feels residual shame—the shame of not being able to protect her daughter, of failing me. It is compounded by the fact that she,

my sister, and I all share a history of rape. This shouldn't be a legacy. We shouldn't be able to so easily connect to other women around acts of violence, around our shame, our despair, our need to survive. Right now, I am watching my breath, feeling it shorten, I can't breathe into my belly. I am boiling beneath the skin, rage pushing at the thin coat of flesh.

Rage is never a constant at any point in time, however. It comes in waves—swells and recedes, just like any emotion. Toni Packer refers to anger as “powerful energy surges” (65). She suggests letting anger “be awareness! Awareness is boundless energy!” (65). Then can anger give way to compassion? Or love? At this moment, I can only sit with that inquiry.

III. The Naming Ceremony

So I have written the story now, but what to do with it? This work unravels from that contemplation, a series of questions to which I have no answer. For example, of what use are the distinctions, perpetrator and victim? Do I gain understanding of the world in which this event took place if I construct and then believe such a polarity? Can I act in love—can I act out of compassion—if I root the story in that binary? My inclination is to answer “no,” but the polarity I describe has served me in the past, so simply answering “no” doesn't address my questions dynamically. Believing him to be the perpetrator allowed me to wrest free from the guilt I felt from imagining my culpability in the act of rape. I was also able to acknowledge and validate my anger—which is too soft a word, my *rage* toward this man, toward the system which gave one group of people power over another, which excused violence toward women en masse.

To be clear, the victim/perpetrator dualism served me: it informed my feminism, and allowed me to seek and to find solidarity with other rape victims. We created a safe space around that duality, and I don't wish to discredit the importance of that part of the journey, either. Both my anger and my story created connections along the way; they were useful. Take Back the Night identifies one of their primary modes of raising awareness, asserting that "survivor speak outs are an inseparable part of Take Back the Night. Most present-day rallies offer survivors of violence an opportunity to give voice to their experiences and publicly affirm their transition from victim to survivor" (2006). I never worked up the courage to attend a Take Back the Night Rally, but I believe for those who are in the beginning stages of working through the impact of sexual violence, such a venue can be a crucial component of healing. I came to Women's Studies. I don't think I ever could have anticipated finding an academic program that would provide a place for healing, but what should education be if not a call to wholeness?

Now, the sort of psychic distance afforded me by that oppositional relationship no longer provides comfort. On one hand, I found power in the name, and on the other, the category itself masks the anecdotal, individual quality of story, and encapsulates a moment that knows no universal expression. Along the same line, but with different intent, Diana Eck explains her earliest encounters with the works of Krishnamurti:

No one in my world had ever asked about the value of labeling, discriminating, and categorizing experience or suggested that by doing so we distance ourselves from experience. We call it a beautiful sunrise on the Ganges and don't ever really see it because we have dispensed with it by giving it a name and label...Did

the label provide me with a shelter or barrier to shield me from real encounter and questioning? (349)

Toni Packer asks similar questions regarding the role of memory: “So is it possible to experience anything without it immediately leaving a memory trace in the brain that demands repetition with its pain and pleasure? Is it possible to behold anything without instantly creating attachment?” (76-77)

The name “rape” suggests a social and political history, in fact several social and political histories, all of which define “rape” and give it meaning, all of which imply the polarity I have discussed. But there is a moment when the line blurs between perpetrator and victim, when you see them as an historical unit, each implying the other. And as long as the victim is still a victim, so the perpetrator is still the perpetrator. This relationship can only be static. We cannot evolve here, where we are both locked in resistance, entrenched in oppositional identities. In *Bare Bones Meditation*, Joan Tollifson, provides the following inquiry about the homophobic and heterosexist attitude of the Catholic Church:

Is it possible to see that antigay attitudes are hurtful without interpreting them as the deliberate act of a free agent aimed at me personally? Hatred, bigotry, and prejudice don’t come out of open listening and love, obviously. They come out of conditioning, fear, ignorance, and hurt. When we hear them spaciously, with interest and compassion rather than with hatred and blame, it breaks the cycle of violence, of attack and defend. (135)

So how to transcend this damaging relationship? How to allow one’s self the process of continual becoming? Continual change and evolution? “Matt” and I are not

those selves; we are not those two people anymore. Moreover, we are bound together by the living system. Toni Packer writes, “[I]t struck me that ‘taking the sin of the world upon oneself’ and ‘other people’s wrongs being one’s own wrongs’ had the same quintessential meaning: In undivided presence without the separating feeling of self, there is only one world, one humanity, one indivisible life” (70). His pain is my pain, and mine his. I hurt with the choices he made that night, but so must he.

I don’t recall when exactly I called the experience rape for the first time. I feel as though I should recall how it happened, with whom, what I felt when I named it. Why does it seem we so are so often unaware of colossal moments when they’re occurring? There was significance in naming it, of course. The word became an encapsulation. The story was already told when I claimed “rape,” or at least *a* story. I have grappled with this for years. In naming the act, I assigned “Matt” and me particular identities in a transhistorical, translocational narrative. “Matt” became the perp, the rapist, the assailant. I became the victim of his assault. Here’s the interesting thing about this process: agency manifests in laying claim to one’s victimhood. In saying, “I was a victim of rape,” a path out of silence and shame was revealed. A terrific discursive irony. How to give one’s self, though, to the inevitable transformation this naming presents us? How to *give* what seems to have already been taken? Survivors meet our limits here, at this crossroads. Whatever identity emerges in the aftermath, and however wounded it is, we cling to it, wrap it around ourselves against the fear of further erasure. We cocoon ourselves in our wounds, because we can at least trust in their continuity. As Parker Palmer discusses in *A Hidden Wholeness*, we throw up walls between our outer and inner lives, unconsciously, protecting our deepest emotional selves from what we perceive to

be the pain of the world outside of us (2009). This cocooned and sheltered self contracts away from pain, and in so doing, becomes fractured, wounded.

The question remains, then: when does a cocoon become a coffin?

I am sometimes at a point in healing when I think calling the event “rape” feels wrong, not because my consent is in question, or because I disagree with a bottom-line definition of rape (sex without consent is rape—period), but because I feel the discursive limitations of the word, and because of how I feel as an individual who is always and actively healing and changing. There are moments—moments of deep, if transitory, liberation—when the word loses meaning for me, when I don’t recognize how my life trajectory contributes to the legacy, or when the legacy seems distant from me, when who I am now can only nurture and witness the child who was raped, but can no longer be there, in that moment, as her.

At other times, naming the pain, allowing for the encapsulation to occur, is a deeply connective process, and grants me access to an emergent wisdom, the source of which is the entire body of women who have been raped. Our collective narrative corrects the provisional and far-reaching shortcomings of the legal and justice systems, of the practice and disciplinary fields of psychology and psychiatry, social work, international studies, women’s studies, of the community networks which often vigilantly maintain a lockdown on the reality and scope of rape. Our collective narrative shows the profound difficulty in defining rape clearly, because even detecting patterns of rape, even offering names such as “acquaintance rape,” “date rape,” “stranger rape,” “rape as a war crime,” does not approach—not by a mile—the dynamic presence of rape in a woman’s life. We accept the failures of language in this case because the name brings visibility to

the phenomenon. In uttering, “I was raped,” I am now joined in wisdom, despair and healing to this body of women.

IV. Meeting the Shadow

I confronted “Matt” when I was twenty. He kept cropping up in places, at parties, bars. He was friends with my friends, and I endured the shame of both reliving the rape and having a number of people I called good friends react with disbelief when I told them that that was what it was—rape. I ran whenever I saw him, found a viable excuse and got the hell out of... well, wherever I was. And then one night, I simply got tired of running, tired of avoiding him, tired of pretending it was alright he was around. We were at a pool hall. I had just left another bar because he’d shown up, and then I turned toward the front door and saw him walk through. I left, and was halfway to my car, and then stopped. I looked at my friend, Tara, and said, “That’s it. I’m done. I’m going to do it.” She knew what I meant. I’d talked about it for months. I strode back inside. I’d thrown my shoulders back, squaring them up for a fight. I’m sure my breath was very shallow. I could hear my blood, so I must have been breathing very fast. I approached him at his pool table.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m sorry?” But the thing was, he knew it was coming, so the confusion wasn’t at all convincing, not even to his girlfriend—a wispy blonde who would swerve toward me in her car later that night in the parking lot. I never harbored any ill will toward her. I was threatening her constructed reality. Never mind the fact that he had shoved her down a staircase a month prior. She was broken; I knew where she was coming from.

“Yeah. We need to talk. Now.” I was shaking. My hands quivered. My chin quivered. He had the advantage, but surprisingly, he conceded.

“Can we do this outside?” He was looking around the bar. I looked at his girlfriend. She was enraged. Her eyes snapped. I wanted to hug her. It was a strange impulse, but there it was.

“This will only be a minute. I’m sorry. It has nothing to do with you.” And I was sorry. The strangest thing is, I trusted him. I’m not sure I can explain why, but I felt utterly trusting. Perhaps I trusted my own strength rather than him, but regardless, we were both a part of the same history, and somehow, talking to him took all of his power away in my mind. He couldn’t lie to me.

We stood outside, behind the Silver Q. The music was pounding out through the glass of the back door. If I detach myself and review the picture in my mind, if I stand at a distance and look at the two of us, standing close, heads angled toward one another, we must have looked like two lovers—an image which characterizes the strangeness of the event. I can’t remember verbatim what I said, but I remember a few specifics.

I said, essentially, “Look, you can tell all the lies you need to, since you’re too weak to admit the truth, but you and I both know what happened, and even if we’re the only two people in the world who do, that’s enough. The fact is, I’m sick of leaving every time you show up. You may not have ever thought about that night after it happened, but you can damn well believe I have. For six years now. And I thought long and hard about pressing charges. Because I could. The statute of limitations isn’t up for another year. And even if rape could never be proven, statutory rape sure could. But I’m not going to. I don’t see what I would gain from it. And maybe you have something to say about all of

this. Maybe one day I'll want to hear your side of the story. Maybe you're not as bad as I think you are, and maybe you feel so awful about it that you have to lie about what happened, but I know you're lying. And so I don't care to hear what you might have to say right now, unless you can say it to everyone else you've lied to."

I talked for a long time. I talked calmly and quietly, and I was fierce, but also strangely tender, because I wanted to believe that he was hurting as much as I had been. That all those years, he wished like hell he could take it back. "According to Mahayana teachings, aggression always arises from pain" (Gross, 12). I believe he was in pain, and if he is still abusive toward those he cares about, than he is still in pain, and I get that. I get what his world feels like if pain was the source of his actions.

Right now, though, I feel rage, feel the need to know if, when walking along the side of a busy road, if he considered walking into traffic, but stopped because he didn't want to change the life of someone else in such a horrible way. It's such a strange anger, anger for that child self, anger at what she believed about herself, at how she internalized that hurt. When I was fifteen, I went to a party with some friends, and, as was most often the case, found myself hugged up against a wall, waiting for my ride to say we could leave. I went home that night, and, before going to sleep on the couch, took a two-thirds full bottle of ibuprofen and a mostly full bottle of iron tablets. I puked for the better part of the next day and told no one, because once it was over, I realized how ridiculous it was. Ibuprofen and iron tablets. I was such an amateur. I'm re-reading the moment I just described about meeting "Matt" outside the bar, and I realize there's something missing. If my voice was low, even soft, it wasn't gentle. I did tell him how much of my life I'd given over to him, how much I'd lost in the silence after that night. I did tell him

that I was giving him that pain to carry, that justifying his actions would be his burden now. Not mine. *Not mine.*

V. On Memory, Anger, and Matters of Identity

I have broken from writing this several times. I have put a memory down on paper only to erase it seconds later. Words seem deficient, impoverished. I feel like this is laden with half-truths, and then I question the need to lay bare everything. For whom? And in writing, I question whether or not I have forgiven. I put quotes around his name, and feel myself sneering internally as I do it, because I'm letting you know that his identity doesn't matter, that he is being erased. I am taking away his voice in this telling, because he has no idea this is being written at all. And somewhere inside of me, that feels powerful. Yet, what on earth do I mean by powerful? Certainly not the transformative sense of power, the creative sense of power, the well-spring of power that abounds in love and acceptance. No, I need a different word. This kind of power calls to mind the image of me standing over Matt's inert body, one foot planted firmly on his chest. This is retributive, vengeful. And honest. I have a hard time looking at that, but there it is. It pisses me off that he gets to remain anonymous, that I bother with protecting his identity because there was never a trial, never an official record of his crime. I find myself drawn to narratives of justice and fairness, to railing against the lack of both. I scale out to observe the persistent presence of rape in our culture, in our species. And now, if I pause, I feel the tension in my jaw, feel a fist around my lungs, closing and constricting the free flow of breath. And the knot of tears in my throat, burning my eyes and nose. How is it that this mess of emotion is still so accessible?

Wrong, not accessible, because that would imply that I'm actively tapping into it. I feel immersed in this anger, this grief. I feel as though I'm drowning in it.

So much of the time now, I don't feel angry, and when anger arises, I don't know what to do with it, nor do I know how to just let it be. Let it be. The teacher within me peering over the shoulder of this writing me, this me committing emotion to paper, this weakened, judging, hurting me who wants to wall off the tears, because who the hell am I to cry when women have wounds so much larger than mine? More than *18 million women*. At moments like these, I also feel trivial, melodramatic, my story insignificant against the rape pandemic. I compare my story with others, feel ridiculous taking up another's time with it. These thoughts arise and I watch them wash into my consciousness and recede. The tidal flux of emotion and thought is unbidden, and in my moments of deepest awareness, I do not try to control it, simply watch and feel. At other times, I shut it down—I reach the point at which my cup is full, overflowing, in fact, and I find something else to do. There is always something else to do, so this response comes easily. I have compartmentalized this work, kept it away from my children. I make sure I take a few minutes and return to my mother identity before I walk back into my house. Or I work late at night, putting sleep between this me, this storyteller/ shaman/wounded-child me and the mother-me. They are not so different—both are mothers in their way, but I nurture the children differently.

V. Sensemaking

I find it difficult to let the memories alone, to just watch them unfold when they arise, to abstain from the incessant sense-making of moments and patterns. In writing

this, I find myself cataloguing the ways in which I divorced my sense of self from my body. For example, for the three years after the rape, I wouldn't use the bathroom at school. I remember feeling horrible anxiety at the spectacle of a public restroom, at the moment of vulnerability when someone saw me enter or exit a stall, or the thought of someone hearing me pee, or, worse still, change a pad or a tampon. I'm sure I must have, at some point, reached a crisis of the most embodied kind and used the facilities, and maybe, in those moments, I told myself, "Look, you've done it. It's not so bad. You just use the bathroom, which is what everyone else here is doing. Just using the bathroom," only to find myself equally anxious the next time I had to.

Even now, the moments of incontrovertible, textual embodiment, moments of reckoning with the body on the page, give me, to borrow a rather handy idiom, the willies. I read Jeanine Minge's work, and cringed at the voice she used to tell her story, the deliberate deployment of the sexual self, the liberal use of the word "vagina." And I'm a feminist, for god's sake! A feminist who gets wholly uncomfortable, even now, with the word, "vagina." It's almost laughable. For years, I couldn't stand the word "moist" because it was too tied to the functions of the body, too viscerally vaginal. Even now, I shudder internally when I use the word.

I remember, too, in my earliest moments of intimacy with my "first love," Dan, I would feel overwhelmed with grief, and start sobbing. At the time, I'm sure I made sense of it the same way I do now, because it seemed an explanation was required. I remember using the word, "revirginated," explaining that I felt as though I'd found my way clean of the rape. As though, because Dan honored my experience, and ceded the initiating rituals to me more often than not, I could remake that moment with Matt, or erase it. I wonder

now at my need to claim a virginal experience, why that seemed so important. I know that in my earliest efforts to share the story, I sometimes claimed I was a virgin. It was never a premeditated revision, but I suppose it was an indication that I still held onto my shame. The impact of rape was so much more potent, it seemed, when the victim was a virgin, and who would believe someone who had already consensually had sex with someone else? This line of reasoning is textbook, right? Lamb notes the paradox of the “good girl” in rape discourse, writing, “Just as earlier when the public believed that good girls couldn’t be raped, representations of the victim [now] showed the public ‘good girls.’ On the one hand, a victim needed to be ‘good’ to arouse sympathy; on the other hand, she was still deviant or damaged goods” (2006, 49). Lamb discusses the outward projection, politicization, and consequence of goodness, suggesting that the paradox of the “good girl,” a narrative which shapes our story of self in the aftermath, finds resonance in the public perception. In my case, the compulsion to be perceived as “good” was as keening as physical hunger. If I could be seen by others as “good,” then perhaps I could believe it.

In the six years following that night, I grew up in ways that were often predictable. I would generally characterize the bulk of my remaining high school years as a project in self-loathing and devaluation, which took shape as an overpowering silence in most social situations. I might now be inclined to say that such silence was likely the manifestation of the imposed silence from that night (though that may be taking literary license—sometimes it is difficult to tell in this business if literary license supplants the truth of a given moment or reveals an embedded truth of a moment

previously hidden⁶). But broad characterization of those years flattens the depth and dynamism of the actual experience. In the midst of it all, I fell in love for the first time, and I believe it was in the safety of that relationship I began to see my way out of the terrific burden of shame I felt.

VI. The Beginning of Forgiveness

Two close friends of mine are getting married in Gainesville. The ceremony and reception are at their house. It's a beautiful late spring evening, the lawn and kitchen are overflowing with people I know well and rarely see since moving to Tampa. I watch the strange dance of too many people in too small a space, and then see, in a brief clearing, that familiar, banal face. He looks at me and looks away. We've done this so many times, that I can almost tell myself it's insignificant, *normal*. I am in a conversation with a woman who finds herself in the awkward position of being friends with both of us, and she does the unthinkable. She calls Matt over to talk with us. I stand there smiling for a few seconds, trying to grasp what's just taken place, trying to find my way out of the blanket of shock, and then, suddenly, realizing I don't have to stay there, don't have to engage in polite conversation, I turn away and leave. For the next year or so, I tried to figure out the intentions of the mutual friend, who said the Matt she knew was one of the gentlest people she'd ever met. And then trying to reconcile this Matt with the one who pushed his girlfriend down a set of stairs. And this Matt with the one who violated my trust, my humanity when I was fourteen. And that Matt with the one who cannot be

⁶ I am thinking here of the tension between "witnessing and creative writing" of which Christine Clegg wrote in "Feminist Recoveries in *My Father's House*" (1999). Can carefully detailed and evocative writing be epiphanic? Can it be a way of revealing our lives to ourselves as sacred?

defined by any of those events or characterizations, but who holds all of these conflicting and possibly conflicted versions of self.

But why the compulsion to understand him? I don't imagine for a moment that he has spent time on a parallel process, and yet I am drawn to understand how is it that someone can hurt someone else without ever looking back? He never called it rape; I know that. His is a predictable response—the oft-cited research of Kent State University in 1982 comes to mind. "...More than 30 percent of the male students admitted to using force or threats and coercion to get sex when the woman they were with were unwilling to consent, and 4 percent more admitted to using physical violence. This 4 percent thought the violence was normal and acceptable. They did not label it rape; nor did they consider themselves rapists" (Ledray, 22). More recently, extensive work by Lisak and Roth (1988, 1990) and Lisak and Ivan (1995) on non-incarcerated, sexually aggressive males tells us that more often than not, men who commit "date" or "acquaintance" rape do not identify as rapists, nor do they acknowledge that what they've done is rape.

So what's going on? What is threatened by acknowledging the violence of rape? It is not the purview of this work to theorize fully the set of conditions which lay the groundwork for this denial, but feminist and non-feminist theorists, scholars and practitioners concerned with the root causes of sexual aggression have posited a "culture of rape" which supports cultivating a willing blindness to the dehumanizing impact of conflating sex and conquest. The notion of sex *as* conquest has been generated as a part of the very structures of masculinity, and so has emerged a broad set of analyses that seek to undo the "boys will be boys" and "men have uncontrollable urges which must be satisfied" mythologies (e.g., Brownmiller, Ledray, Lisak and Roth, Lisak and Ivan,

Buchwald et.al.). I draw upon a variety of feminist and spiritual influences when I say that I think facing the act, naming it, requires the one who committed the rape to witness the pain of the other, of the one upon whom the violence was visited, and in so doing, to witness one's own suffering and vulnerability.

But there's more at stake than empathy. To say, "I have done this; I have wounded another human being," means to face one's self, to look at one's self, means looking at the violence within us. It means the undoing of attachments to versions of ourselves, and it means the inevitability of transformation. In *The Active Life*, Palmer quotes Annie Dillard:

In the deeps are the violence and the terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together here. This is given it is not learned. (30)

I wonder if we might create a community in which one can face themselves, can ride the "monsters deeper down," deep enough to reveal the architecture of violence, the deepest held assumptions about self and other, about humanity, about masculinity, about value and worth. Krishnamurti writes:

And to go into the problem [of violence] I must be *completely* vulnerable, open, to it...Now it must be obvious to me that I am a violent human being. I have experienced violence in anger, violence in my sexual demands, violence in hatred,

creating enmity, violence in jealousy and so on...But can you see the face of violence clearly—the face of violence not only outside you but inside you, which means that you are totally free from violence...? (51, 56)

I have given up the expectation that Matt will call what occurred rape, that he will acknowledge my outcry. I imagine a great deal of his self-understanding would be undone by calling what happened rape, and I suppose an act of deep beneficence would be to hope for that gift to be bestowed on him. And on me.

...

I am reading Susan Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), and feel myself sliding backward, back into a space of grieving. Brison recounts the story of Ruth Elias, a Holocaust survivor, pregnant when she entered the death camps. She gave birth, and her newborn was immediately subjected to an experiment, the cruelty of which is rarely paralleled. Nazi physician Joseph Mengele wished to see how long a newborn could survive without food, and after witnessing her newborn's starvation helplessly, Elias euthanized the infant with the help a Jewish doctor (57). I want desperately to have skipped over that story, but now it is lodged in my memory, and I can feel my own helplessness, my own inability to make the world safe for those I love. My entire body is in revolt, trying to shut out that knowledge. I always feel emotion in my stomach, as I imagine many do, and right now it feels as though it's curled into itself. The muscles in my shoulders and torso are tightening toward the center. I read that story as a mother who often writes while nursing my child. Oscar, at 18 months, is fat with my milk. *My milk*. My body nourishes him. My body, which I reclaimed after the rape, and then surrendered twice over—with gratitude—to my children.

Brison writes, “How [Elias] managed (how she manages) to continue living is incomprehensible to me. I realize, though, that I manage to bear the knowledge of such atrocity by denying that such a thing could ever happen to a child of mine. I can (now) live with the (vivid) possibility that I might be murdered. But I cannot live with even the possibility that this kind of torture could be inflicted on my child” (57). Brison talks about the shift in her preservation drive—from herself to her child. I know that raw rage—the fury that arises at the very mention of someone hurting a baby. I know, too, that whereas I used to find even the thought, however brief, of my death terrifying, that terror has been supplanted by one far more profound: the terror of someone hurting my children. This recognition might reflect a not-so-simple exchange of cages. Fear of death is fear of death is fear of death. But it might hold a much richer set of gifts as well. I see the limits of my compassion, see the animal rage in me boiling over. This self slaughters anyone who dares hurt her babies. And I lean into the source of that rage. I lean into the fear that guides it. I am forced to see the violence in me. Could this awareness guide me to tear down another wall? Right now, writing this, I am testing the strength of its structure, and finding it unyielding. It won’t happen now, but perhaps...

The grief I felt in reading Elias’s story is entangled with a softer, sweeter emotion, though—one that isn’t rooted in suffering, but in celebration. Or perhaps they are inseparable. Brison writes: “He is the embodiment of my life’s new narrative and I am more autonomous by virtue of being so intermingled with him. Having him has also enabled me to rebuild my trust in the world around us. He is so trusting that, before he learned to walk, he would stand with outstretched arms, wobbling, until he fell, stiff-limbed, forwards, backwards, certain the universe would catch him. So far, it has, and

when I tell myself it always will, the part of me that he's become believes it" (66). Even in his absence, I feel the impression of Otis's hands on the back of my neck; can feel the feat of Oscar's breath on my chest, his small body uncharacteristically soft with sleep. I can see the way he, like Brison's son, trusts in my ubiquity, trusts that my arms will always be sturdy enough to catch him. Otis, at five, will leap off the arm of our living room chair without warning, assuming even now that I'll simply materialize to catch him. I have learned so much from them.

...

It is several years later, and I'm pregnant with my first son. I'm lying on an acupuncture table. The woman who is the acupuncturist is kind and remarkably intuitive. We are talking about... I honestly don't remember. Something not wholly unrelated, but clearly not directly linked, and I suddenly and without warning break down. The sense memory of shame, that creeping tightening of the gut, the pin-pricks of the hair follicles opening, the tingling along my forearms, my back, my legs, leading to a sudden and jarring image. The bland steel of lockers, the din of voices and lockers slamming and shoes on concrete, it is a wall of sensation, apart from me. I am standing in front of Brendan Crapo, and he is a lifetime away now. Brendan, the only boy who danced with me at the 8th grade prom, who was always kind to me, gentle and funny and harmless. Harmless. "Heather gives tail at the drop of a hat," he says. And I laugh, because this is Brendan, and he doesn't inflict wounds. I laugh, but am bewildered. The hickey on my neck is concealed by my hair, which I've also taken to wearing so that it conceals a good part of my face as well. I feel numb. "Heather gives tail at the drop of a hat." This would be the sole means of interaction with Brendan that I remember over the next year, a year I

spent growing ever more diaphanous, a year I spent erasing myself. And here, on the acupuncture table, with someone who is a relative stranger, I am feeling this over again. I tell her vaguely about the rape, and she listens to me as I explain how I thought I'd healed, how I thought I'd released this story, and then replies, "You have to release him as well." She asks if I have a totem (I don't), then offers me her stock totem: Henry. Henry is carpenter, with a toolbox, a hat, coveralls, and I imagine a handlebar moustache, of course. She tells me to envision the shape of the anxiety, its length, width, even its color. She tells me to picture Henry walking up that mass, which is sword-shaped, pulsing, yellow or orange. Henry presses it into a manageable size, balls it up tightly so it will fit in his toolbox. He walks to the edge of the universe, which has a definitive edge, a sheer face shooting down from the edge into oblivion. He takes the ball of my anxiety out of his toolbox and drops it into the darkness. I left feeling raw, feeling the paper thin boundary between me and the world that held me.

I get it. I do. We are tethered together in my memory, he and I, inextricably bound to the performance of rapist and unconscious victim, parts we will play over and again. In memory, we are still sitting in the halo of light by the desk in that back room, poised at the beginning of a moment that will irrevocably bind us together in violence. In memory, I am still waking up, naked from the waist down, struggling to make sense of what happened the night before, and to cover my vulnerabilities and *recover* the person I had been before I blacked out. Releasing him means releasing my need to fill in that gap, because he's the only one who really knows what happened. Releasing him means I release my hold on victimhood, my rooted identity as a wounded soul. It means I am no longer "locked in a duel of oppressor and oppressed" (Anzaldúa, 78). Liberation can feel

rather terrifying sometimes, though. What now? How do I recognize myself? What do I look like without that story tucked around me?

Writing my thesis reminds me of this tension. While more than five years have passed since the moment on the acupuncturist's table, I can still palpably sense the sudden weightlessness I felt, watching that story take flight. I can feel the strangeness of its absence, the muscles of memory seizing, spasming around the echo of it, the picture of me I held in my heart and head straightening up, stretching into—no, *claiming* space. But it aches, this sudden freedom. *What now?* I take heart in Griffin's words:

Healing does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject...I am using the term healing to suggest the ways in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself...Of course, the body can never return to its pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a 'truer' self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all—in a narrative of love and care (524).

The whole self now is an integration of all the versions of self that came before, during and after that night, those I've clung to and those I've found and still find painful to observe or reflect upon.

CHAPTER THREE

HEALING, FORGIVENESS, AND NARRATIVE

This chapter defines the terms, healing, narrative healing, and forgiveness, terms which I believe are often deployed without sufficient explication, and which are the guiding processes for this work. In exploring narrative as a healing methodology, I ask: how does it free us from the confines of victimhood? But also, in what ways might it delimit the healing process? Finally, this chapter raises the question whether there are particular ways with which one engages her own narrative, ways of telling, that lead toward a deep and lasting transformation.

I. Seeking a Complex Definition of Healing

In *Quest for Respect*, Linda Braswell titles her final section of the slim manual, “End of the Quest,” and writes, “You’ve come to the end of your healing journey. You have grown and changed because you’ve taken the first big step.” Linda Ledray, in *Recovering from Rape*, also asserts the notion of completion: “You’ll need to evaluate your resources, choose the coping strategies with which you feel most comfortable, and begin the process of resolution...The process may be a smooth, relatively easy one, or it may be a very difficult one that takes you years to complete” (115). I know those words would likely carry a great deal of comfort for anyone who has just experienced rape or sexual assault—a lifeline thrown into the depths of pain and fear. So I don’t say the following glibly, because I understand how much that lifeline can mean: the idea that the journey has an endpoint, that there is a point at which we complete our “recovery,” that

recovery is even possible, fails to honor and express the dynamic elements of the healing path. Braswell briefly touches upon the growth and change after such an experience, but I wonder what it might feel like to hear someone say explicitly that a person healing from a rape experience may find their story now liberating, now isolating, now a connecting force, now a cage? That healing is always and forever a capacity within us? We can say it is catharsis, but it is also so much more. Healing is the abrasion of the soul space you thought you knew, it is the cauterizing, then the debridement; it is the co-occurring pain of grief and celebration of birth; it is coming to terms with your story only to find yourself undone by it at a later point. And it is seeing all of these conflicting spaces and holding them as sacred.

Parker J. Palmer writes, “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness—mine, yours, ours—need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.” (5). Sutherland also wrote about healing, saying that it is not rooted in the “elimination of disease [or devastation]”; rather, it is “a falling in love with the poignancy of being alive: taking the great injured heart of the world for my own and coming to respect the essential mystery of life” (3). Both authors elucidate the painful wisdom of suffering, noting that suffering has the capacity to offer astounding gifts—new ways to love ourselves, a way to love our world with all its pain and pleasure, a way to love this living system we co-create. With such boundless love, there is no assignation of blame, no imagined line between self and other, victim and perpetrator. Exploring the roots of devastation reveals those insights not as thoughts or theories, but as cellular truths. In the aftermath of trauma, we have the opportunity to “embrac[e] brokenness.” In

wholeness, there is nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to *do* about the past. It happened. Simply that. With this in mind and heart, I wish to posit a liberatory exploration of healing which reflects the transitory nature of it, and views it as a relational, unpredictable and complex process.

For these purposes, I critically engage Sharon Lamb's work, "Forgiveness, Women, and Responsibility to the Group," which, though broad-stroked, historicizes the trajectory of rape recovery and matters of forgiveness over the last thirty years. While her work exists in conversation with many, many others', and while some of those voices and perspectives are also present in this chapter, Lamb's work integrates many of the key issues I seek to discuss: recovery, forgiveness, community, and discourse. I found that I was impelled to respond and her article provides a handy framework with which to craft a response.

That being noted, what is a liberatory exploration of healing, though? And how *is* healing different from the project of recovery? So often, we leave these words unexplored, or we presume their interchangeability. As part of this project is to reclaim a particular lexicon, it is important at this point to offer an emergent definition of healing, which sets it apart from recovery discourse. The concept of emergence is used in complexity science "to describe things that are unpredictable, which seem to result from the interactions between elements, and are outside any one agent's control" (Westley, et.al., 128). Complexity science evokes the relational quality of the healing process, and opens us up to see it as a dynamic, nonlinear, recursive process, which is always unfolding. If healing is an emergent property of a community organizing around sexual violence, whether by conscious intention or unconscious reaction (both/and?), then so,

too, must a definition of healing be an emergent process. Thus, my efforts are not directed toward asserting an encapsulation, but toward opening the doorway for an ever-evolving conceptualization of healing. How healing manifests is never predictable, and in that spirit, I would say that it brings more than agency, more than will, more than speech. All that we can perhaps count on is that healing offers the promise of a re-cognition, an awakening to our own humanity, irrevocably changed, but strengthened in our openness, our compassion, our empathy.

Ann Burgess and Lynda Holstrom's work on rape trauma syndrome is most commonly called upon to provide a model of recovery (e.g., http://www.hopesurvivors.org.uk/pg4-rape_effects.html; <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/effects-of-sexual-assault/rape-trauma-syndrome>; <http://www.teenhealthfx.com/answers/857.html>). Burgess and Holstrom looked at RTS as occurring in three major movements. These are often called the acute phase, the outward adjustment phase, and the resolution phase, though the King County Sexual Assault Resource Center (KCSARC) offers what I believe to be a more integrative approach, calling the three movements: the acute stage, the underground stage, and the reorganization stage.⁷ KCSARC also discussed the impact of the individual's developmental stage on one's emotional expression. I'll briefly describe the KCSARC

⁷ In Kelly and Smith's article, "The Journey of Recovery After a Rape," the authors point to work done by Harvey (1996), which proposes an "ecological model that describes recovery from psychological trauma as multidimensional phenomenon. She believes that recovery involves the following outcome criteria: 1) control over the recalling of events that previously intruded unbidden into awareness, 2) remembrance of the past with feeling, 3) recall of feelings without overwhelming arousal, 4) ability to predict and manage symptoms, 5) repair and mastery in the domain of self-esteem and self-cohesion, 6) repair of a survivor's relational capacities, and 7) assignment of new meaning to the trauma" (34). I use the three-stage approach because it is the one most commonly referenced by organizations dedicated specifically to rape recovery, but Harvey's model resonates with the specifics of the three stages.

model, and then revisit the preliminary description I laid out at the beginning of this section.

- The acute phase: manifests as numbness, shock and disbelief, little or sudden and effusive emotion, and lack of memory. Physiological responses vary and some are localized to the site of penetration. Nausea, disorganized sleep patterns, and disrupted eating patterns are also common occurrences. Fear and disorientation are guiding emotions, and victims are noted to be most vulnerable during this phase of healing. Relational support is critical.
- The underground stage is observed as the phase in which victims often actively block the assault from their daily experience, and may appear “over it.” They may be reticent, or may simply refuse, to discuss the experience.
- The reorganization stage often involves revisiting the emotional life. This is a time of undoing, and some of the initial responses seen in the acute phase can re-emerge. KCSARC notes, “Violent fantasies of revenge may also arise.” They also reassure survivors that, “despite the great difficulties, these reactions are a normal part of the process of integrating the experience and of reorganizing a life, which has been seriously disrupted.”

While I critique approaches which either seek or unwittingly encapsulate and isolate the healing process, the stages that have been identified by therapists and rape crisis advocates and counselors needn't be discarded. All resources that reference Burgess and

Holstrom's work note rape survivors will move back and forth through the stages—they are not presented as a linear pathway. They are, however, presented within the context of individuated *recovery*, a term which has tremendous limitations, namely that it is not a progressive, process-oriented term. It is terminal. It has an implicit end point. One recovers a lost item; one recovers from an illness. At a most basic level, to recover is to gain something lost.

Healing, as I define it in this work, is distinct from the goal of “recovery” in that it involves the death of the former self; it imagines no return (Griffin, 524), only the unpredictable process of moving forward from where you are. *Healing* is open to non-linear progression, and rather than recovering the former self, the emergent self grows miraculously but surely, not only from the experience of rape, but from all that occurs after. The intention becomes critical precisely because of the unpredictable, but lasting, patterns of healing. When a bone is fractured, it must be set so that the body can then reorganize itself in such a way as to support the optimal healing of the fracture; the bone will heal regardless, but the setting helps it heal straight. So, too, does consciously attending to a healing path, articulating the healing as it occurs, guide the journey toward a deep sense of well-being. By well-being, I mean having the capacity to not endure suffering, but see it as “the trusted gateway to awakening the heart” (Brach, 212). We can see the inevitability of facing the suffering even in the work of Burgess and Holstrom, but I wonder what a model of healing that seeks not endurance, but deep, transformative excavation, might look like.

This in mind, when healing remains individuated, suffering can threaten the foundation of a human being so that they may not find a pathway out. In Chapter 1, I

discussed the process of connecting through story with the community of women who have been raped or sexually assaulted. It is this connection that reveals the gifts of suffering. Fernandes writes, “There can be no more sacred endeavor than to see, to understand, the injustices inflicted upon individuals and social groups—that is, to bear witness to the suffering of others...To witness suffering...is to witness a part of the deepest unfolding of the soul” (91). I have read survivor narratives, have held in heart the stories of women I know and so many I don’t who have closeted this hurt inside them, have lived with the fractures they’ve sustained from traumatic memories. We collect around our shared pain in order to find a way out of it. I question this sometimes. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher and Martha Roth write about the process of witnessing while editing their work, *Transforming a Rape Culture* (2005): “Our reading plunged us deeper and deeper into despair. We began to sink into the morass of hopelessness and frustration such reading inevitably evokes” (2). But in the wisdom of suffering they discovered that they “needed to change our way of thinking about the issue from one of reaction to a proactive search for possible solutions” (2). If I question the emancipatory possibilities of collective suffering sometimes, it is because sitting with despair, being open to it in order for it to transmute, is a profoundly wrenching process. It is disillusioning, and while, as Palmer writes, “As our illusions are removed, like barriers on a road, we have a chance to take that road further toward truth,” disillusionment comes with its own peculiar pain (*The Active Life*, 25-26). If, however, we connect through our shared wounds, but also reach out toward a healing process that is integrated into community, we can begin to make sense of our individual suffering, to see that we do not shoulder the weight of either the event or our healing alone.

In the days, weeks, even years following her rape, Susan Brison experienced a profound isolation. She wrote of cards she received intended to cheer her up. One in particular, from her parents, featured a “blue bird of happiness” on the front and made no mention of her assault (10-11). She asserts: “The prevalent lack of empathy with trauma victims, which is reinforced by the cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization...results, I realized, not merely from ignorance or indifference, but also from an active fear of identification with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own” (Brison, x). How to connect, then, through our fear? How to connect in a way that allows us all to heal?

In order to understand how and whether existing approaches speak to the question of healing into and with community, I turn my query to the practice field and ask: what is it clinicians and practitioners seek to do? Is it to heal the individual? Is it to prevent rape? Could it be to undermine and radically change the dynamics that allow rape to continue as a pandemic, transhistorical, cross-cultural issue? Parker Palmer points to the curious quandary of the professions: a profession’s sustainability requires the very phenomenon it seeks to heal at an individual level, to exist at a community scale.⁸ I don’t intend to implicate rape recovery professionals in a conspiracy to maintain the rape culture, but we must consider where the locus of healing—of truly transformative processes that might in fact liberate us from the persistence of suffering from rape—exists, again, looking at the ways in which we are all implicated in, injured by, and responsible for healing from the act of rape. As such, I want to point to the unintended consequence of the rise of individuated healing methodologies which create and then rely upon a set of professional interventions that invariably further isolate the scale of the rape phenomenon to the micro-scale. What

⁸ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 42.

if we take in earnest the possibilities and capacities of the “restorative community”? Peter Block, in his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, writes of the restorative community that it is one which “produces new energy rather than holding us in place” (47), and that it “is created when we allow ourselves to use the language of healing and relatedness and belonging without embarrassment” (48). This requires a new set of conversations, a novel way of discussing an age-old phenomenon. Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth note in their preface, “Protestors against sexual violence seldom address the fact that underlying attitudes toward women in our culture are causal—a fact that many of the essays in this book discuss—and that these attitudes can be changed” (1). They point to the first, and most critical starting condition: the singular belief that change *is possible*. While proposing a theory of change in a “rape culture” isn’t the particular project of this work, it is a critical inquiry, one that points to the *possibility* of doing the seemingly impossible. Block and Palmer’s work illuminates not only one of the central stumbling blocks to healing from the rape phenomenon (i.e. the isolation of the healing process), but then tells us it is possible to build a new road.⁹

I do imagine healing as a community-scale phenomenon. When I discuss community-scale healing, it is with the awareness that scaling out from the individual to the community necessarily politicizes the event. In Griffin’s analysis of textual healing, the author examines Yoruba healing rituals as offered to rape and domestic violence victims, and notes that, as with the style of self-help tract Lamb critiques, “these texts fall

⁹ Block’s work, which is specifically aimed at community-building, runs the danger of polarizing individual healing versus community restoration. I think Palmer’s work on contemplative action and active contemplation speaks to the co-occurrence of individual and community processes: “Action, like a sacrament, is the visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power...when we act, the world acts back, and we and the world are co-created” (17). “Until we know the hidden wholeness we will live in a world of dualisms, of forced but false choices between being and doing that result in action that is mere frenzy or in contemplation that is mere escape” (29).

short of actually linking notions of healing with political action” (523). Griffin’s analysis doesn’t discount the need for a focus on personal healing, but instead recognizes the exchange of healing processes from “individual bodies to psyches to communities” (523).

I contend that Lamb, while astutely problematizing the individuation of healing therapies after rape, further divides the “anti-rape movement” by creating a generational divide: those who participated in the activism of the 70s, and those who have grown and been recipients of the self-help and medicalized approaches in the decades following the 70s. Effectively, she ignores the relational exchange between the outrage of the group, the healing of the individual, the healing of the group, and the rage of the individual, and supposes a definitive point of departure from the group-wide agency of the 70s with the “medicalization of trauma.” Her work in this way echoes the issues of professionalization Palmer, McKnight, Block and others have discussed, but I might suggest that the two approaches—personal healing and politicized, group-based healing—are not so dualized, nor so distinct. They are mutually evolving and mutually informing. Group outrage and agency didn’t end with the 70s; it is *supplemented* by therapeutic approaches. That said, neither are sufficient for deep healing, hence my consideration, however preliminary, of a systems-based understanding of emergent healing.

II. Victim, Survivor and the terms of Healing

As well as the isolation of recovery, we have a great deal of work to around the discursive stumbling blocks that litter the pathway. In this analysis, I consider the terms “victim” and “survivor” for the ways in which they bookend the progress of healing and delimit a psychic space for an individual who is healing. Lamb’s work prompts us to

view the evolution of the terms within a wider social context, noting the ways in which the attention paid to the individual's healing fails to see the impact of the terms deployed on the group which has historically been under assault. She begins by discussing how and when the image of the "angry woman" who had survived an incidence of rape was supplanted by the "helpless girl" (49). Lamb theorizes that the "medicalization of trauma," through which Post-traumatic Stress Disorder became visible and a common diagnosis, changed the spirit of rage and outrage which had defined the anti-rape movement through the seventies. She points to the illocutionary act of the PTSD diagnosis. With PTSD, the prior group work of grappling with the emotions of humiliation, shame, and anger was abandoned in favor of treating individuals' "symptoms of numbness, fear, and helplessness." Popular culture picked up this representation and images of rape victims as "objects, lacking in agency, and helpless," began to define not only those who had experienced rape, but also the public response. Rather than attending to the phenomenon and the systemic supports for its continuance, sympathy for the "helpless victim" became the leading project. Consequently, healing methodologies evolved in conversation with this shift in public consciousness.

Lamb goes on to discuss the term "survivor," which seemingly offered a discursive exit from the trap of the victim identity. She asserts that there were unintended consequences for vaunting the survivor identity. Most notably, deploying the term, "survivor," "instantaneously degraded the word "victim": 'I'm not a victim; I'm a survivor' became the cry of victims turned public speakers. And this cry separated women who had been victimized from one another in the way that women and girls have been socialized to do" (49). Lamb's point is well heard. We have clung tenaciously to the

concept of “survivor.” From the formative texts on survivors’ groups (e.g., Yassen and Glass 1984) to the proliferation of rape narratives (e.g., Sebold, 1995; Venable-Raine, 1998; Levin, 1998), to the virtual forums on which those who have been brutalized by rape spill story after story after story, the “survivor” identity is ubiquitous. The authors’ explanation echoes Lamb’s. The word “empowerment” frequents these accounts; through claiming their space as “survivors,” they feel now empowered to heal. So what to make of those for whom the word does not resonate, for any number of reasons? Does Lamb’s concern ring true? Does our cultural embrace of the rape “survivor” necessitate the devaluation of the “victim”?

I would suggest, however, that the way Lamb handles the discussion fails to engage the voices of either “victims” or “survivors.” In fact, the voices of those who have grown the anti-rape movement in response to their own experience are entirely absent. She defers instead to “experts” in the field who chronically depersonalize their analyses, and thus closes the theoretical invitation for those who have been victimized by rape to set the course for a reintegration of healing paths into a broader community. Such work might well have been an opportunity to scale out the alchemical aspects of speech and narrative had those voices been present. Susan Brison notes that the illocutionary and witnessing acts actually transform memory, and open the pathway for reconnection with community: “The communicative act of bearing witness not only transforms traumatic memories into narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world, but also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in other” (xi). What is needed either in Lamb’s work or in

response to it is, I believe, a forward direction, or at least a form of inquiry that helps create the starting conditions for deeper change.

Finally, while I believe the insight into the ways in which the sub-categorical identities of “victim” and “survivor” operate divisively within the larger anti-rape movement is a critical insight, I also posit that she stops short of fully and sufficiently excavating the premises upon which her argument is built. Because her argument rests on identity practices, Lamb would do well to point instead toward a set of liberatory practices. Or maybe that is our project. Lamb has revealed the wounded identity spaces, and though she doesn’t lead us toward a re-visioning of those practices, perhaps it is now our work to begin the “ceaseless stripping away” of those identities; perhaps now we can *dis-identify* from the locations of “victim” and “survivor” altogether.¹⁰ If those at times embattled locations are no longer so easily mapped out, is novelty now possible? Might we forge new and more dynamic pathways? I note that it is just as likely that another category will spring up in the absence—thriller seems to be one emerging in rape recovery discourse, but neither should that impede or squelch our efforts at reframing. And it may be the case that, as with the healing phases in Burgess and Holstrom’s work, we need to begin to see those locations as transitory, always present in us. Can we sit with that tension? Can we sit with the tug-of-war between victim and agent and yet not attach to them? Perhaps releasing ourselves from those traps requires another step: releasing the one who visited the trauma upon you.

¹⁰ Leela Fernandes, 2003: “Disidentification, as I will illustrate, is a two-fold process. At one level, it rests on a letting go of all attachments to externalized forms of identity as well as to deeper ego-based attachments...At another level, disidentifications not simply a negative process of detachment but a positive movement of creating a different form of self...this process of disidentification is not simply a theoretical exercise in imagining a different kind of self but a practical process for thinking about a different basis from which to work for real struggles for social justice” (27).

III. The Liberatory Possibilities and Limitations of Narrative

Therapeutic lore vaunts the benefits of telling the story of the rape, and presumably, in storying trauma, the one who was silenced by the act of rape relocates speech and reconstitutes and empowers the self through speech. In discovering voice, the victim claims agency, and becomes, as previously discussed, a survivor, having survived, first, the violation, and then the telling of the violation. Judith Levin speaks to the way in which story becomes a connection between personal experience and the phenomenon of rape, and the way in which that connection can lead to action. Yassen and Glass echo her sentiment: “This term [survivor] allows them to become empowered to confront the problems resulting from rape rather than to accept these problems passively” (252). However, while storytelling might offer a roadmap toward liberation, where do we go from there? Does the story find its endpoint, and if we are simply telling the story of the rape, where lie the possibilities for deep transformation?

Regardless, and with seemingly few options to choose from, we—rape victims, survivors, and thrivers—venture bravely forward with our stories, holding them out as offerings, reaching forward tenuously toward connection with others who may understand how these stories have shaped us, have bent us into living question marks. They, too, might know how our memories of trauma have frayed the edges of a coherent self, so that we struggle continually against the very story we hold so tightly—this our effort to show ourselves as whole and apart from the event altogether. We are perpetually “locked in a duel” with ourselves and our histories. In this way, telling the story becomes a way of resolving this impossible tension. We utter our history; we

acknowledge the fact of what happened; we accept what we must—that we are irrevocably changed by the event, and that there is no former self to resurrect. I don't presume that every teller finds her or his way to such a revelation, but without the story, without the speech act of telling the rape, the myth of recovering the former self maintains its potency, and there is a foreclosure of transformation, an end-stop to one's cognitive awareness of inevitable change.

On the other hand, while the narrative is undoubtedly critical to the healing process, we mustn't ignore or leave unexplored the paradox of telling. If we do, we overlook and thus fail to honor the way in which the trauma story emerges from the body, and is not the wound itself, but a way of making sense of the wound. In recounting a violation, the recounting is separate from the memory of the violation, a process of distilling, re-imagining, and rendering that which is unlinguagable into story (Culbertson, 178). The memory occurs before speech renders it communicable, and in the utterance, in the telling, the teller places distance between her and the experience. In the moment of recollection, one who has experienced trauma is wrenched from the present self; the senses are assaulted by memory, the fabric of the present shredded. And yet, one is still in the present, and the recollection is inextricably tied to the present moment, and to the projections into a future moment. Merleau-Ponty explains, "With the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change: I still have it in hand and it is still there, but already it is sinking away below the level of the present; in order to retain it, I need to reach through a thin layer of time. It is still the preceding moment, and I have the power to rejoin it as it was just now; I am not cut off from it, but still it would not belong to the past unless something had altered, unless it were beginning to outline itself against, or

project itself upon, my present, whereas a moment ago it was my present” (484). Though there is a sense of immediacy in Merleau-Ponty’s explication, “a moment ago” need not be defined as immediate. We are always in process of creating the “moment ago.” Through the exercise of authorship, of “linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on,” in looking at the relationship between moments and identity, the survivor pieces together a self capable of telling the story (Culbertson, 178).

Roberta Culbertson talks about the “protolanguage” of trauma, that it is a language populated by the guttural noises of pain, of the flesh under attack. It is a language with which one engages at a cellular level, and so to set it to words in the aftermath abstracts the experience and sacrifices “certain dimensions of the truth” (191). Jeanine Minge also evokes the elemental quality of memory, telling us, “I store in my body the memory of rape. The body knows” (266). I have written a similar sentiment in journaling, and I see now how I remain disconnected from my body, referring to it as *the body*—a container for a story that is not mine.

The body feels the creeping shame that locates itself at the base of the skull, the back of the neck, the shame that clenches the gut long before I can recall the source. The body feels the vulnerability of being naked, the draft of air on bare legs, the knees locking together to hide what lies between them. Long after I stake my claim on a healed space, the body reminds me how precarious my claim is.

In body memory, the injury does not contain itself within language, and because I was unconscious during the violation, the body is the only site of memory. How to tell, then, what is only stored in a cellular space?

In Farah Griffin's work on textual healing, the author discusses the legacy of racist constructions of black women's bodies, which has fragmented black women's self conceptions in the present. She stresses the importance of touch as it evidences in Maya Angelou's memoir of her days dancing, when, prior to going on stage, she would find herself at the center of the older women with whom she danced, all of them touching her—her back, her behind, her arms. Angelou sees this caring touch as a moment in which the older women join with her in the dance. This passage struck me because I see parallels for women who have experienced rape. The fragmented body, in order to heal, requires a way of telling the story of the body that reconstitutes love, beauty and wellness in the telling. The telling, too, details the love imbued in physical touch, in reaching out to trusted hands so that one's story is received, heard, released and responded to in a way that is healing. Touch becomes integral to the story of healing.

I wonder if writing or telling the story in such a way that the physical is graphically detailed becomes a way of embracing the body again, of putting together what has been split apart, of reaching toward wholeness. How might offering the story occur in such a way that it liberates rather than binds one to memory? Can this also occur in silence? I suppose that question is answered by how the silence occurs, whether it is an invitation, compelled by and occurring within the soul space, or it is impelled by a sense of systemic constraints. Is the silence, in other words, an agentive act, or is it a response to feeling agency denied?

Culbertson also writes, however, that it is indeed critical to construct the narrative, in spite of the provisional loss of authenticity. She notes that for some survivors of horrific trauma, in this case Cambodian refugees she has worked with, she

has observed a transformation, and “developing the proper narrative has had a salutary effect, though at a price” (notes, 193), which she describes as “tam[ing]” the “transcendent, the wild power of the body” (191).

She writes, “telling, in short, is a process of disembodying memory, demystifying, a process which can only begin after memories have been re-membered and the mystical touched by a buried self seeking its own healing. Here mind and body are the same, the healing essentially physiological and energetic, moving finally, as in all good healing, to reintegration with a community of others” (Culbertson, 178). She and others have noted the particular importance of telling within the context of community in the aftermath of sexual violations—acts which remain “unspeakable” in the public domain. Judith Levin questions this imposed silence in her work, wondering if she is then to internalize the message that she is “bad,” and noting that in the absence of the story as a connector, the absence of connection with other survivors, this is the message that comes home (14).

I began this work with my own story, and I did so because I believe that the therapeutic lore of storytelling as a powerful healer is often accurate. I also think that the way in which the story is told, as well as the way in which it is received is critical. And so, it would follow that simply telling the story isn’t enough. I have read the bank of stories on Take Back the Night’s website—one after the other after the other. They are given often as spare accounts of what happened, and some allude to finding strength in the aftermath, some talk about how broken they feel. The ones that stay with me are the ones that do neither, just tell the story of the rape, nothing more. These encapsulations of a moment that creates a lifetime of change and process—these feel to me to be the most searing, perhaps because there is an anonymity to them. And I am, of course, making

sense of them without the feedback of the authors, but I cannot help but feel that the absence of reflection illuminates a deadening, a continued inability to relocate one's full humanity. You see, healing brings us more than agency, more than will, more than speech. Healing offers the promise of a re-cognition, an awakening to our own humanity, irrevocably changed, but strengthened in our openness, our compassion, our empathy. As it was, I stopped about three-quarters of the way down, disheartened. In addition to my projection about the individual authors, I found that given without further context, without an indication of not only how the survivors felt telling their stories, but also without knowing how these stories, which were told anonymously, would inform policy, without some explanation of how TBTN perceives the storytelling to be more than a mining effort, but truly a way to dispel the cloak of shame and secrecy that leaves rape an act between individuals, it seemed voyeuristic, it seemed devoid of hope or intention. As I said, I believe story-telling offers one dimension of the healing process, but taken by itself, it can bind us to memory.

IV. Seeking a Complex Definition of Forgiveness

My point of query unfolds from a desire to understand how it is that forgiveness may potentiate liberation from our deep entrenchment in the provisional wound of the self/other dualism, and perhaps how it is that the self/other dualism could be tethering us to the experience of the rape. As such, I seek to offer in this section an exploratory definition of forgiveness. My conceptualization of the term reflects the convergence of multiple sources of wisdom: Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness as a non-economic event; Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of performativity for the way in which he reveals

the artifact of identificatory processes; the aforementioned work from the field of community building which approaches healing as an emergent property within communities; and perhaps most influential, those voices which have guided my spiritual path—voices from a breadth and depth of contemplative, spiritual philosophies and practices, all of which have illuminated for me the deep connectedness we share with each other, with our world, with all that is.

Forgiveness is a particularly contentious point among theorists, practitioners and survivors (not necessarily distinct categories): specifically the need and desirability of forgiveness as a dimension of healing. There are multiple ways to envision forgiveness: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of other, forgiveness as the providence of God and God alone. In the discourse around rape recovery, those working in therapeutic capacities stand firm in their understandable ambivalence, or remain silent on the issue altogether. As evidenced in the model of the recovery stages, forgiveness is simply not a part of the conversation. Braswell's description of "letting go" alludes (perhaps unwittingly) to forgiveness: "Letting go of the rape means you go on with your life in a healthy manner. Holding on to the pain, the anger and the depression puts limits on your potential growth. ...The rape keeps you prisoner. The rape reaffirms you as victim. From that point of view, you see the world as a hateful place. Letting go of the pain restores you and enables you to reclaim your personal power" (52). Yet she never utters the word forgiveness, albeit her description of letting go is consistent with how some individual narratives of healing and forgiveness.

Self-directed forgiveness is one both Braswell and some survivors speak to that is seen to be a critical part of the process. For example, Belinda, a "survivor," shares her

healing journey: “I was blaming myself...it wasn’t my fault...when you start healing you start forgiving yourself, knowing you were not the one that caused it. You have to forgive yourself, then you start healing” (Kelly and Smith, 347-348). In Belinda’s case, however, she also notes that she believes forgiving the rapist is necessary, albeit she says she is unable at the time of her interview to forgive the man who raped her. Though her narrative was brief, Belinda’s journey stays with me. She seems to have set forgiveness as a goal, something at which she will work diligently until it is achieved. Her sense of “failure” is the very reason we must excavate the terms we deploy. How does forgiveness occurring? Must Belinda present it as a gift to her assailant? Does it require an apology? Is it an act that requires exchange? Something given, something gotten? If so, it is likely that in many, many cases, those of us who have experienced rape will be waiting a long time. We look again to the aforementioned work by Lisak and Roth and Lisak and Ivan on non-incarcerated, sexually aggressive males who commit “date” or “acquaintance” rape. As previously mentioned, these men often do not identify as rapists, nor do they acknowledge that what they’ve done, even after they’ve acknowledged using coercion (alcohol, drugs, threats) and sometimes physical force to obtain sex, is actually rape (1995, 1988, 1990). So in the absence of a recipient for the gift of forgiveness, what does forgiveness come to mean?

It is not sufficient to isolate the process and outcome of forgiveness within the individual who has experienced the rape, or to isolate it within the singular relationship between survivor and perpetrator/s. As with healing, forgiveness is an act which, while it occurs on one hand at an individual level, it has co-occurring implications for the broader community on the other. If we take up the healing project as a community, forgiveness—

in its multitudinous dimensions and manifestations—will necessarily be part of that conversation. Sharon Lamb rightly levels her critique at forgiveness therapies which “fit all too neatly into an individualized psychological view of victimization that erases the social and gendered context in which such harm has been carried out” (46). She stops short, however, looking at how forgiveness may actually point to the deepest sort of political agency: that which undoes the very categorical identities she has problematized in her work.

Feminist philosopher Robin Schott, in responding to Card’s *The Atrocity Paradigm*, problematizes forgiveness as an advantageous end at all. She is explicit in her critique of any “philosophical position that proposes forgiveness as a desirable option for moving on, for both victims and perpetrators” (204). She asks if forgiveness is a “burden” rather than a “power”. Schott instead asserts the benefits of “righteous indignation” as a useful part of the “ethical healing” process (207). I wonder where this leaves us, though. Not just as victims, but as a group, who cannot remain in a wounded, ever-contracting space in order to realize our liberation. Righteous indignation leaves us defended against the other. When she writes, quite plainly, that she “cannot find it compelling that any of these women should forgive the aggressor in order to move on in their lives,” several questions arise for me. First: to presume that righteous indignation leaves any room for “moving on” fails to acknowledge that righteous indignation walls one inside of their defenses. How is it “these women” are to move on? Second: in the absence of a clear definition of how Schott conceptualizes “forgiveness,” I can infer that she envisions it as an act, a transaction, in fact, between victim and perpetrator. If, however, forgiveness is reconceptualized as a liberating event, one that moves us out of the polarized and

polarizing acts of economy. Schott notes that “the psychological literature suggests that this response is a powerful and satisfying form of anger compatible to the quest for justice” (207).

Feminist philosopher Christine Clegg’s work on *In My Father’s House*, a narrative written by an incest survivor, points to the ways in which a narrative of forgiveness not only appears to retract from the “brutal truth” of incest, but is often seen to “represent a failure of allegiance to the greater political cause,” (Clegg, 76). Clegg and Schott’s critique of forgiveness rests upon an articulation of self and other, subject and object, and requires differentiated and material identities. Neither author offers explication of their deployment of the term, “forgiveness,” but one might presume, by the manner in which they react against it, that it is an act of direct exchange, given by the victim to the perpetrator.¹¹

If Schott, Clegg, and the women who explore forgiveness in Kelly and Smith’s work elucidate the generally held conceptualization of forgiveness, then it will not be a liberatory act; rather, it stands likely that forgiveness becomes a “burden,” an elusive goal. This definition of forgiveness depends upon a transaction; it is a gift bestowed, or perhaps it is an act which requires restitution, an act cousin to justice. The language of economy clearly defines this understanding of forgiveness, and so it would seem to only reinforce the self/other dualism. The possibilities for deep transformation within the confines of economy are markedly spare.

I want in this work to excavate, then to merge concepts of forgiveness which unhinge categorical identities, which, instead of pointing to recovery or restoration,

¹¹ Schott, in writing of women who endured profound sexual violence, whose bodies were leveraged in war, states plainly that she does not believe these women should feel at all compelled to forgive their assailants.

illuminate a path of thriving, integration, and wholeness. I don't say this glibly. I've thought a great deal about forgiveness, about what it means to both do so myself and reveal it as a liberating moment to others. And I have even asked myself if I believe I've actually forgiven, and what the implications are if I haven't. I think of Thich Nhat Hanh's, who related a moment of awareness he had upon learning of a 12-year-old girl who jumped out of her boat and drowned herself after being raped by a Thai sea pirate,. He writes, in response to the cries for retributive justice, for the pirate's death, "In my meditation I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, I am now the pirate. There is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I cannot condemn myself so easily" (242). Rhonda James, a local rape crisis counselor in Richmond, CA, in considering the recent gang rape of a 16-year-old outside her high school prom, speaks from a place of compassion echoes this awareness: "I think it's easy to start seeing yourself 'other' than the person you're abusing. It's easy to 'otherize,' if you have been otherized," James said. "We see it where men gather." (www.npr.org, 3/4/10). I cannot intellectually hold onto this awareness; I can't reason through it in my mind, but at a much deeper level, it resonates.

At times, I begin to see forgiveness as a location, a soul-place I inhabit. It is possible, though, that envisioning forgiveness in this way means, too, that I see it as transitory. If I can inhabit it, then I just as easily leave it. Walk out and shut the door. Even this line of exploration depends upon categorical identities, upon a discrete self which bears the wound and an assailant who inflicted the wound and to whom I offer forgiveness. This project doesn't feel liberating, and since it seems to be the most

commonly held perception of forgiveness, the reactions of Schott, Clegg, Card, and Lamb are, in my opinion, quite sound.

For the purposes of my own healing path and for the purposes of offering new directions for relevant fields, I look toward a more transcendent understanding of forgiveness. Such a definition, while not separate from the processes of recognizing the materiality of the conditions of systemic oppression in which rape occurs, rests on disidentification from “attachments to externalized forms of identity as well as to deeper ego-based attachments to power, privilege, and control” (Fernandes, 27).

In seeking a way of conceiving forgiveness as a transcendent process, I came across a work by Christian Lotz, which looks at, among other things, Derrida’s theory of forgiveness. Lotz writes: “Derrida certainly goes far beyond other conceptions of forgiving, since he (implicitly) claims (1) that forgiving does not belong to the order of punishment, (2) that it must be conceived as something that is beyond functionality, and finally (3) that it is not a possibility of mutual recognition and love; rather, according to Derrida, forgiveness is the very event that must be conceived as a “phenomenon” that escapes the structure of giving and returning (economy)” (Lotz, 268). Forgiveness, in this light “must be conceived as a “phenomenon” that escapes the structure of giving and returning (economy)” (Lotz, 268), though I would argue that it does not “escape,” but actually transcends economic relationships. Indeed, it is an “event” which occurs beyond identity practices. Forgiveness is the dissolution of the separate self. It does not require that one distinct individual offers it to another; it does not occur as, first, self-forgiveness, and then forgiveness of the perpetrator, because the event itself is the shattering of those locations.

John Welwood notes that individuals must often work through their anger—in this case, rage—in order to “arrive” at “genuine forgiveness” (5). Such models of progression sometimes fail to convey the sort of phase transition in emotional work—often the work itself is a busying of the mind and heart, a project which holds one’s vulnerabilities at bay until the survivor is able to open herself to the radical event of love that is forgiveness, knowing that reconciliation is not on the proverbial table. I understand that my description of forgiveness looks at it as an event of love, and that might seem at odds with Derrida’s theory of forgiveness. However, I am calling on love as a ubiquitous energy, one available and manifesting in multiple iterations, one of them being forgiveness. I posit that love is the root source of forgiveness, and neither does it rely on the language of exchange.

This is not a prescriptive work. I, at least in part, agree with Kelly and Smith when they write, “Recovery from a rape experience is a deeply personal, highly individualized, and multidimensional phenomenon” (339). I believe they point quite rightly to the complexities of the healing path and how they intersect with the conditions of individual women’s lives. I believe, too, that the concerns voiced in Clegg’s work and by Lamb are also valid. While the healing path is personal, it is also one that belongs to a larger narrative of healing, and if we continue to ignore the generative, communal qualities of healing, then we are unlikely to discover a means of “transforming a rape culture.” I believe the conception of forgiveness I’ve pointed toward is one that liberates us from either over-personalizing the healing process to the exclusion of community or ignoring the dynamic way in which healing unfolds in a person’s life. It occurs in the

moment when self and other are no longer discrete and bounded categories, and so offers us a way to heal into our interconnectedness.

V. Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Narrative and Forgiveness

In the previous sections, I have offered emergent definitions for healing and forgiveness, as well as exploring the liberating potential and limitations of narrative as a healing methodology. In Chapter One, I sought to tell my own experience with rape as a liberating narrative, one which potentiates the forgiveness event by illuminating the permeability of the self/other boundary. It would follow logically that this chapter would examine the relationship between narrative process and forgiveness. I have been considering the questions of how might storying trauma open a pathway toward forgiveness, and how might forgiveness potentiate the deepest sort of liberation? I wish to understand here the ways in which forgiveness is both bound to story and at the same time frees us from the entrapments of the signifying potential of telling. I am finding, however, that I am struggling mightily to write this chapter, and after many hours of staring at the computer screen, pages blank, mind churning incomprehensibly, I can only reflect on the difficulty itself, and hope that the relationship I propose to explore will reveal itself as I work through this chapter.

Part of this difficulty is that if I am to honestly engage with this work, I must acknowledge my own ambivalence about forgiveness. Because it lacks materiality, because it is not immediately located in the body, nor does forgiveness have a definitive end, a sense of finality to it, I am having some trouble writing about how it has manifested in my life. I cannot point to the health benefits (which some studies say are

immense) of forgiveness, because I have no point of reference. I have no comparative element of poor health which has improved as a result of forgiveness. I cannot root it in a story of reconciliation, because we haven't spoken, and he has never asked for my forgiveness, so I'm not sure what it would feel like to give it. What is it I would be giving? I have found copious works explaining *why* we should forgive (see, for example, Worthington, 2003; Enright and North, 1998), but I have yet to see someone else explain *what* forgiveness is precisely, and *how* it manifests between people. I vacillate between a feeling of relative surety of my commitment to forgiveness as a necessary step in my healing, and an at times disconcerting sense that I have no idea what it even means. I sometimes feel as though I have committed to an idea—an idea which remains abstract, disembodied, and thus distant.

That being said, I find myself returning to the moment I described in Chapter One between Janet, the acupuncturist during my first pregnancy, and me. I wrote that forgiveness is not immediately evident in the body, but if I go back and examine that moment, I see a different story. I see that the body, which held on to its defenses, to a lifetime of anxiety, of clinging to a story of my woundedness, in a way I imagined I had resolved, was the *primary site of* forgiveness. When, in my mind's eye, I watched “Henry” drop the tangled knot of anxiety over the edge of the universe, I felt as though I'd crept out from under a fog, stepped into clear, empty space, and stood up for the first time in years. In my third trimester, during which sleep eluded me every night without fail, I slept that night without waking even once. The knife of tangled emotion that had been lodged inside my solar plexus, extending from my pubis to my throat, was simply—very simply—gone.

And now, as I recount that story again, I feel a space open up inside of me. Once again, I am reminded that without attention, the old conditioning, the old defenses still lurk in the recesses of my consciousness, though more ghostly, more diaphanous than before. This—this “ceaseless stripping away” of the artifact of me—is the work required here. In committing process to paper, in watching it unravel before me, I realize it is not “the story,” or even the story of the story, but this forever iterative, recursive circle of stories. Again, Merleau-Ponty intuits our moments of protention and retention, inextricably tangled, each transmuting the other. The moment of the rape, now spun out through the moments in the aftermath, was always pregnant with the life that would unfold after. If I see this relationship, if I can hold the awareness of time as it unfolds, and create a pause in which I am not the moment, but observing it as it occurs, then I create a pathway out of entrenchment in the stories.

I think of Krishnamurti’s teaching: “A fact is to be seen, and the seeing is not through the word. When a fact is interpreted, it ceases to be a fact” (51). I don’t dispute this wisdom, and yet I wonder about its implications for narrative healing. Can one simultaneously advocate the benefits of narrative process and at the same time recognize the provisional loss of “the fact” in the telling? Provisional because the loss is tempered by the gift of healing embedded in narrative work. As previously mentioned, Roberta Culbertson grapples with this conundrum in “Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self,” and I find her work immeasurably insightful and evocative, but I struggle to resolve the tension nonetheless. Perhaps these are locations, though, a sort of soul geography, in which I move from reflection and sensemaking to present awareness to (at times) grasping and all it entails—these are not

fully differentiated, but bound at their core as a system, one shaping and being shaped by the others.

In Chapter One, I briefly mentioned Sunsanee, a Buddhist nun who ran a women's shelter in Bangkok, caring for women who have endured sexual brutality. Brown, who interviewed her, noted that "Practicing meditation, learning mindfulness, she finds, brings the women away from the painful memory and back to the present moment and so assists healing" (243). In my earliest musings in which I responded to Brown's brief synopsis of his interview with Sunsanee, I wrote "What if there's a way to be with the memory and not tell the story of it, simply to honor the way in which the body stores it? It's not moving away from, but letting go and falling into maybe." I was trying to articulate an internal movement—the movement of into and through rather than moving away. You move away from the mountain, it generally, notwithstanding a natural disaster, it remains a mountain, which is fine (even preferable) when it's a mountain we're talking about. But in the case of traumatic memory, it seems leaving the memory intact, a mountain that shadows everything in the valleys below it, means we are thusly crafted inside the shadow of the memory. I'm not sure about the project of seeing the moment without telling its story/ies, since it is in the telling that we often realize our transformation. What I've explored, and continue to explore, through this work and after, is the healing potential in looking at that moment, of telling its story, and while seeing that it does not exist except in story, knowing, too, that re-storying the moment so that it is shaped by where and who we are now may very well liberate us from our entrapments which maintain our stations as victim, agent, survivor, thriver. Moreover, the story, if told over time, evolving through ever-widening circles of compassion and our growing self-

and-system awareness, at least makes possible the forgiveness event. I have posited forgiveness as a sort of combustion, or perhaps a collapsing, of identity structures, if it is the moment of seeing our most defended vulnerabilities, which relied on the notion of not just an other, but an other against which we define and tactically armor ourselves. The narrative act, if we attend in particular to its evolution over time, and mindful of Krishnamurti's assertion (as best I understand it) that the word interprets the fact and thus pulls us away from the present moment, also acts as a mirror, one which necessitates seeing the vast number of faces which combine with our ours to create it. We are like those pictures in which the artist/craftsperson puts together millions of photographs—people's faces or flowers or buildings—and the collection of them culminates in a shockingly detailed picture of, say, Bill Clinton or a frog or what have you. And if we see those faces within ours, can we continue to hate them? Or is an act of love required?

In a feminist context, and in relationships which are developed by and thus inform my feminism, talking about love of one's assailant is tricky business. How do face another's pain, another's suffering and anger, and espouse forgiveness? Simply answered, you don't. You cannot. I cannot. This work has brought me into contact with women who have laid bare their wounds and shared stories that have rocked me to my core, to borrow a most appropriate cliché. This work is an inquiry, not a prescription, and if I hold that forgiveness is an event, then it is also unpredictable and ecological. As this work is rooted in my experience with rape and healing, I return to story as my way of locating the moment/s of forgiveness.

The work now is to explore *how* it occurred through story. I must then look at how the story has evolved, and who I have become as its teller. I return, not to the event,

but to the first utterance of “rape,” my first attempt at making sense of what the body held. As I mentioned, I don’t recall when that was exactly, but what I do recall is the way in which naming the experience released the grip it had on me. The crippling shame I felt began to give way to anger. I stayed with the anger for a long time; on one hand, the anger felt liberating; on the other I felt defended and at times weary. Inevitably, I experienced another tectonic shift and began to seek a deeper and broader understanding of who I was within the narrative of rape. Specifically, I sought out other’s stories, finding a particular sense of exhilaration in seeing myself in the lives of others—an exhilaration in our collective outrage, a creative turbulence growing out of the power of a collective voice.

Outrage, however, couldn’t offer healing at the root, couldn’t mend the fractured self. I can look to the story, but as I’m writing this, I am aware that storying forgiveness begins to feel disingenuous, begins to feel as though I’m framing my process as a markedly linear, always forward-moving one. I didn’t find my way to forgiveness any more than I would find my way to a cold or a car accident. As I consider what this work has come to mean, I realize that I am learning a lesson I have learned many times over: there is no going back, and while forgiveness is not static, it is relational and shifting, it is also woven into the fabric of who I am now. Frankly, an economic relationship would be easier to understand. I would have something to ask for, and something to give. If ultimately unsatisfying, there is nonetheless a certain comfort in the clearly bounded self /other dualism transactional forgiveness relies upon. However, it is in telling the story yet again that I realize the event has occurred: forgiveness has happened, and it wasn’t mine to give.

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