Essays by the Members of the Great American Essays Study Groups Spring 2016

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STARTING OVER

DENVER, COLORADO, 1990

I

"I knew we should have packed the car last night! There's no way I can fit all of this in my Honda!" I say this out loud although no one is in the garage with me at the moment. I sigh and pick up my one and only suitcase, the smallest of the bunch, and put it on the floor behind the passenger seat and put my two boxes of books behind the driver's seat. So much for my stuff! I stick my head in the back door and call Julie, my 17 year old daughter to come and help. She shouts back from the other end of the kitchen, "Just a minute, Mom. I'm on the phone with Mark."

"Please get yourself out here. I need your help!" I shout back. "Tell Mark to come over here to say goodbye."

A few minutes later she emerges with tear-stained cheeks pulling her long blond hair into a quick pony tail. "My princess!" I think. "I can't believe she's about to start college!" She reaches out for a hug, and we hold each other for a long minute. I tell her everything will be OK. "Mark will be here in a few minutes, but in the meantime, let's figure out how to fit your stuff in the car."

Together we lift two of her three giant suitcases into the trunk and pile as many boxes around them as we can. We fill the empty spaces with loose jackets, boots, shoes, and anything else that will fit. Then we cram the third suitcase, the stereo, stuffed animals, and everything else into the back seat. Just as we close the doors, Mark arrives on his bike wearing sun glasses, shorts, and a t-shirt. He saunters in and asks if he can help. "Too late" I say, "but thanks for asking. I'm going inside to pack up some snacks for the road. We'll be leaving very soon, so enjoy your few minutes of privacy."

As I put the sandwiches, chips, and fruit I set aside last night into a shopping bag, Irv, my soon-to-be ex-husband of 26 years, wanders into the kitchen. "All set to go?" he asks as he reaches for one of the apples on the counter. I snatch it out of his hand and drop it into the bag. "We'll be out of here shortly," I say.

He follows me out to the garage where Julie and Mark are now sobbing on each other's shoulders, hanging onto each other as though for dear life. "Almost time to leave," I tell them as I put the food in the car. Then I turn to Irv and offer him my hand. He takes it in his, and we shake and wish each other a "good life." When we run out of platitudes, he pries Julie away from Mark, gives her a goodbye hug and kiss, and disappears into the house.

As I start the engine, Mark opens the door for Julie to get in, and they promise to write and call each other regularly. They hold hands through the window as I back out onto the driveway. Just as we reach the street, Irv comes running out waving his arms and shouting, "Wait! Wait! Don't go yet." I stop the car, wondering what he can possibly want. "Please," he says, "don't leave until you show me how to work the washing machine."

For a moment I am stunned, but then I find my voice. "Sorry, Irv, you'll have to ask the cleaning woman tomorrow. We've got places to go."

II

The Front Range of the Rockies fills the horizon as we turn west on the main road out of our subdivision and head toward the nearby freeway. Topped by a clear Colorado blue sky, the mountains are breathtaking this morning. The snowcaps sparkle in the sun, and the lower slopes are covered in soft shades of blue and gray mist. Out of the corner of my eye I glance at Julie, hoping to share the moment with her, but she is turned around in her seat waving goodbye to Mark, who is standing with his bike on the shoulder of the road waving both arms. When she turns back, she wails, "Oh, Mom, we're already miles from Mark!"

I try to summon up some sympathy, but I am practically giddy with the beauty of the morning and the excitement of leaving. Finally I say, "I know you'll miss each other, but think about the great times you'll have in Boston. And what a glorious morning for the start of our trip! Just look at those mountains!"

Once we merge onto the eastbound freeway, Julie settles down. She finds her favorite CD, slides it into the machine, and suddenly we are inundated by the jarring sounds of a new wave Gothic rock band aptly named Crude. After a few minutes I reach over and turn down the volume. When the noise comes to an end at last, I ask, "Is it my turn now?"

She gives me one of those looks. "Classical music I suppose. Yuck."

"Well, maybe just one turn for me, OK? Put on Schubert's Trout Quintet. I think you'll like it."

By this time, we are out of Denver and driving across the high desert of eastern Colorado. The mountains are barely visible in the rear view mirror, and in some places it's hard to tell the tops of the mountains from the clouds. Before we leave Colorado, we pull off the road for a quick, early lunch and a long farewell look.

Back in the car, we decide to compromise and listen to music we both like. We settle on "Simon and Garfunkee," as Julie used to call them. As we cross the state line into the boring,

wide-open spaces of Nebraska, we are singing "A Bridge over Troubled Water" at the top of our lungs for the third time. When we get to the last verse both of us are practically in tears:

Sail on silver girl.

Sail on high.

Your time has come to shine.

All your dreams are on their way.

See how they shine.

Oh, if you need a friend,

I'm sailing right behind.

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will ease your mind.

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will ease your mind..

Almost six hundred miles later, at about 9:00 p.m., we stop in Iowa City for the night. Julie drifts off to sleep within a few minutes. I set the alarm for 6:00 a.m., then lie awake trying to get comfortable, thinking about the events that brought us to this point. Until a few weeks ago, I had planned to head west to Berkeley, where I had secured a job as an editor at a progressive, sometimes subversive, quarterly, and Julie would have been on a plane headed east for her pre-freshman orientation at Boston University.

Two weeks ago, my would-be boss in Berkeley called to say that the magazine was going to shut down for about six months and would resume publication from its new location in upstate New York. I was devastated. Clearly, I would have to restart my job search from scratch. A few days later, our nephew (actually Irv's nephew), Jeremy, a young lawyer in DC, called to catch up on family news. He announced that he and Hildy, his wife, had just moved out of their small apartment into a row house on Capitol Hill. When I told him about my unexpected change of plans he said, "We have plenty of extra room now. Why not move in with us temporarily and give DC a try?" I could hardly believe my good luck.

Myra Barron
Great American Essays 682

Thanksgiving for Seventeen?

Family Thanksgivings began for Jerry and I with our parents the first year we were married. Now, more than fifty years later, we continue the tradition. Some names around the dinner table remain the same. But when we see Henry, Leo, and Lillian, they are no longer the faces of our parents who died many years ago, but of our grandchildren after whom they were named. Our family has grown and scattered. We still live in DC. We have three married children and seven grandchildren dispersed in Mississippi, Massachusetts and Illinois. My sister and her friend settled in Florida. Thanksgiving for seventeen? Who would come? Where would it be?

How should we plan it? We used to host the event, as well as host the weekend. As our family grew, it began to be too much for us and possibly for everyone else too. But we worried—what if no one suggested getting together? Or what if more than one child wanted to be the host? Then several years ago our three children and their spouses suggested it was now their turn. Each of their families would rotate as hosts, and they would trade with one another if need be. Three years ago it was Cambridge, Massachusetts; two years ago Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and last year Naperville, Illinois.

Does everyone have to come? No, but for nearly every Thanksgiving for more years then I can count, everyone has. And often we have even more as we realized early on that our children's spouses grew up with their own family traditions. So sometimes we've been able to include some of their families as well. At our daughter Jen's wedding in 1997, her fiancée Jerome's parents flew in early from Korea so they could share in our Thanksgiving. Our daughter-in-law Juliette's' parents join us from California when she and our son David host Thanksgiving in Cambridge. And when my sister Debra and her friend Gloria hosted the dinners in Florida in earlier years, the parents of our son Jon's wife Ellen, who also live in Florida, joined us.

Since family size, location and circumstances change, we treat logistics light-heartedly. Do we all stay in one house? Not possible. Often a nearby motel (hopefully with an indoor swimming pool) accommodates us. Should we help with costs? Yes—of

course! Other issues have come up. How to dress for the Thanksgiving dinner? We didn't realize we had a tradition until one time we invited another family to come to dinner whose husband was in the hospital. She asked how to dress. We realized we did dress up—though that has changed over the years. Do grandchildren sit separately or with the grownups? Is there a plan for Friday and for Saturday? We now leave all these issues—big and small---to our host. What about gifts? We do have another Thanksgiving Day 'tradition'—right after the meal each adult gives a gift of no more than $30 to another adult selected by Secret Santa. And each family also gives gifts to each of the grandchildren. In that way on Thanksgiving Jerry and I feel like we're able to celebrate Chanukah and Christmas with our families too. And after Thanksgiving dinner we take a family picture—which Jerry and I send out as our holiday card each year.

Our oldest granddaughter is now in college and her brother is in boarding school. How long can we be so lucky as to continue this tradition? A few years ago, I feared this was all too much for any one family and suggested skipping the following Thanksgiving. Our grandchildren-now having grown close with one another, were horrified! Will our grandchildren follow our pattern? All we know is next year it's Cambridge. Soon we'll all begin emailing, make our flights, plan the schedule, and get excited once again.

FEBRUARY 18, 2016

JACQUELINE M. BIRN

INHERITANCE, NATIONALITY, CITIZENSHIP

After reading a book about the role of Breton language for a girl born in Brittany with strong ties to the province of Brittany, and her struggle to become a real French citizen as a girl in a French school where she would be punished for using words in Breton, I realized how far I was as a child to be accepted as a French citizen.

My parents were Dutch citizens, both of them Jewish. My mother was born German, a Jewish girl from Hamburg, Germany. She became Dutch by marriage in 1930. My father was already in Paris since 1926, thanks to a young Dutch friend who had mentioned a job in business for him that my father accepted and kept for the rest of his active life, except during WWII when Jewish businessmen were not allowed to hold a profession.

My father spoke perfect French and read the influential newspaper *Le Monde* everyday. My mother, on the other hand, never mastered the French language completely. Her pronunciation and her grammar were far from perfect and it made me ashamed to hear her mistakes.

My parents remained Dutch citizens until they died. They wanted my sister and me to be totally French. They only spoke French with us. When they wanted to say something that was not for our ears, they spoke in German, which my father spoke perfectly well also.

My sister Manuela and I were born in Paris, but we were not declared French citizens according to the French law. We had the nationality of our parents. With WWII approaching, my father took the long and necessary steps to have us naturalized French at the local City Hall.

When WWII started, Maréchal Pétain declared that children, naturalized French, were losing their French citizenship. Thus we became Dutch again and did not regain our French citizenship

until 1947. This was most dangerous for us, because foreign Jews were the first ones to be rounded up and deported.

Miraculously, we survived the war in hiding, and we were alive.

After we returned to Paris, we were offered 4 years scholarship in a private school. The headmistress had been a hero in the Resistance during the war and she was very kind to us.

Manuela and I never spoke to anyone of our years in hiding. We tried to fit into the mold. However, our schoolmates went to church and catechism, they went to their cousins or their grandmothers for the holidays or on Sunday. We had no one to go to. All our family had been murdered - 200 members of our extended family were gone.

Manuela and I were each other's best friends. We went to the theater or to concerts or to movies, either with our parents or later on, with each other.

We were really very lonely, very different from the other children who were French and mostly catholic. My parents were not religious and we did not follow Jewish customs.

I, in particular felt stifled and I was not a happy child. My only joy was that I started to play the cello, which became my consolation and my first love. I studied the cello very seriously with the idea of becoming a professional cellist. However, I had terrible stage fright and gave up the idea to have the cello as my profession. I studied chemistry as my major.

Not having roots in France was strange and difficult. We were different from the others. We learnt history in class, but we knew very well that our ancestors were not French.

So, what were we? We were not catholic, like everyone else in our neighborhood; we were not Dutch because we had never lived in Holland; we did not speak the Dutch language and all our family was dead. We were Jewish but did not practice the Jewish religion.

Then I met Richard who was studying in Paris, we fell in love, we married and I started my life in America. I became an American citizen. It took over three years. I had to give up my French citizenship.

After Richard joined the American Foreign Service, we lived in many different countries and I was a foreign-born spouse playing the role of an American in each of those countries.

After coming back to the U.S., I started teaching French language and culture at the State Department. I took long and difficult steps to regain my French citizenship. I can vote in both countries, France and the US. I never mentioned that I was a first generation French person and I believe that I played my role quite well.

Now that I am retired, I talk about my youth and WWII and the difficult years that we miraculously survived. I wrote my memoirs. My friends talk about their normal lives, their college years and reunions. I see that I will never be like them because I don't belong here, I don't belong there. I am French but I am not French, I am American but I am not American. What I am for sure is a European Jew who survived WWII.

Susan Crowley
Great American Essays 682

THE CORNFIELD

My Subaru has landed nose down in the drainage ditch, and the back end tilts skyward. Ahead of me is a field of withered corn stalk stumps jabbing up through an icy crust of snow. Behind is the road slick with dirty slush that propelled the car into this unseemly position.

It has been snowing all morning, ever since I left my sister's place in central New York to go home to Washington. Confident in my alphabet of emergency travel aids—AAA, GPS and NPR—I wasn't worried about crossing 50 miles of farmland and wooded hills to reach Interstate 81. Besides, I figured, in this part of the state they brag about their massive lake-effect snowstorms and how fast they clear the roads.

My route took me over much more hill than dale, and there wasn't a plow in sight. After one especially steep, white-knuckle descent, I took a breather when I reached a long, flat stretch of road. But the respite was short-lived. The Subaru began to free-skate, etching an almost perfect S in the icy mush before careening sideways into this ditch.

I collect myself and slowly release my death grip on the steering wheel. My 10-year-old Subaru and I both appear to be intact. Nothing's damaged, except my pride. Things could have been much worse—what if I had collided with someone or some thing? Thank god no vehicles were on the road then—nor, come to think of it, are there any now. I look around for some sign of life--even a bird or a deer. But the only thing moving is the snow falling on the dead cornfield and the forbidding woods beyond, a winter version of "Deliverance." The only sound is the slap-slap of the windshield wipers. I need an escape plan.

Since I lost my husband not long ago, figuring stuff out on my own is a big part of my life. I think of it as adult education. Dan would probably be surprised that I can change the baffle—yes, the baffle--in the washing machine. Or disable Verizon's 12-volt backup battery, which, like a baby, beeps every few minutes when it needs a change. He'd be relieved that I've finally accepted my utter incompetence with the gas grill.

I don't know my lumens from my watts, but Dan would be impressed that I'm mastering the science of light bulbs. I'm learning about LED's, dimmables,

fluorescents, compact fluorescents, halogens and incandescents, about cool whites, warm whites and daylights. I am also learning that no two fixtures in our house or yard or probably our entire neighborhood take the same size or shape of bulb.

At the moment, baffles and bulbs are not top of mind. I need to get out of this gully here in "Deliverance" country *now*. The snow is coming down faster, and the wipers are icing up. I rule out calling AAA—they could never find me in this backwater. And who knows how long before a passing vehicle might stop to help—or who or what might be in that vehicle?

What would Dan do? He'd drive out himself, of course. Okay, but what if the tires spin and dig the Subaru in deeper? What if the car won't even budge? And which way to go—forward or backward?

Given the position of the car and the proximity of the road, logic suggests backing out as the best option. A powerful dislike of going in reverse suggests otherwise.

I shift into forward gear. My foot trembles on the accelerator. Don't gun it, I mutter to myself. I slowly but firmly press the pedal down. The Subaru hesitates, then suddenly climbs the wall of the ditch and bursts onto the frozen field.

The hardened snow and brittle stumps of last summer's corn crunch under the tires and provide unexpected traction. I pick up speed, barreling in a wide arc across the field. I feel good that I've freed myself on my own. And I've learned something new: the thrill of off-road driving.

Up near the woods, I find a narrow lane up that leads back to the main road. As I head for home, I'm sure I hear Dan cheering.

A BOY AND A TREE

MaryAnn Dubner

Belle Harbor is situated in the western end of Long Island; "along its soft underbelly", as someone told me later on in my life.

Our house was fourth from the beach--------148 Beach 131 Street---small but sturdily made of brick. We lived in that house for several years until I graduated college and married. Then my parents sold it and moved to an apartment in Woodside, Queens. (My father's business was failing and money was tight.)

Being "on the beach" as we said, subjected that house to high winds coming off the Atlantic coast. No dunes or boardwalks slowed them down. As they blew those winds kicked up beautiful white sand which entered every nook and cranny of the houses close by--- ours included.

When a hurricane hit, the ocean waters met our house, flooding the basement, ruining my mother's garden and causing general havoc in the area.

One spring, I must have been fifteen, my brother twelve, we helped my father plant a small oak tree in the front yard. The hope for it was to bring shade to the lawn so the grass wouldn't get burnt out so quickly.

As luck would have it the following September a hurricane hit. The young tree bent with the wind, gallantly trying to withstand its force.

In a flash my brother ran out the front door getting soaked to the skin immediately. He leaned his back against the tree trying to support it from the wind. He stood

there for what seemed to me an eternity--my mother yelling for him to come inside before he got killed. He stood his ground.

That's the picture I remember—my twelve year old brother, soaked to the skin, his back to the wind holding up that tree against hurricane force winds, my mother yelling while the ocean waters approached the house.

I never asked him why he did it and he never told me.

Jack Friedenthal
"Great American Essays"
Class # 681

CITIZENSHIP

It's Tuesday. Normally there is nothing special about Tuesdays. And, at least on the surface, today looks grim. It is cloudy and gray outside. It is raining and a cold wind blowing. But I remember that a primary presidential election is being held today. And I have always been enthusiastic on election days, from early morning when I look forward to voting until late at night when I remain awake until the results are announced. So why, on this Tuesday morning, am I not excited?

It could be the weather, but that has never bothered me before. It may be my lack of confidence in the capabilities of any of the candidates in either party but I have always been able to put that fact aside. Despite uncertainties about his or her integrity and intelligence, (what decent person would run for office), I have always been able to select someone to support. I recognize, of course, that my judgment has often been faulty, if not downright stupid. Too often I observe with dismay how the individual I chose for office has managed to be a disaster when elected. But again, that fact has never deterred me from voting the next time.

I think seriously about not casting a ballot today, but I have never failed to vote in any election since I became old enough to do so. It seems too difficult, even immoral, to break such a pattern. Thus I jump in my automobile and drive to the local school where my polling place is located. I drive past it twice before finally deciding to park and enter.

Inside the gymnasium where voting is to take place, I approach the woman and the man at the table hesitatingly. I show my identification but inform them that I am uncertain if I am there to vote. They seem disturbed, particularly as they view the growing line of would-be voters behind me. I decide to add some levity to the process. "Let me have the ballot that allows one merely to vote against the candidate that one likes least." The woman at the table decides to humor me. "That would be nice if such a ballot exists," she says, "but unfortunately it doesn't. Now please go ahead and take a blue ballot for the Democratic Party or a red one for the Republican Party so that you can vote." That causes a dilemma since I had not previously worked out in my mind which party ballot I want to use. So far I have not found a good reason to vote for either party. So I lean over the table and reach for both a red and a blue ballot. The people

behind the table appear horrified. "You can't do that," the woman gasps. "It's against the law," the man yells.

I argue, "Since it is up to me to pick a ballot of either party, there is no reason I cannot have a ballot from each. The parties are not in competition with one another in the primary. No one is hurt if I vote for each party." Somewhere, deep down in my brain, I seem to recognize a potential fallacy in my approach, but I am having too good a time to give up.

However, as I continue to insist that I am correct, the line of people behind me has continued to grow and exhibit anger. Finally, the man at the table takes out a cell phone and threatens to call 911. In response I grab a ballot without considering whether it is blue or red. I take it to one of the voting booths, find the line for a write-in candidate, and write down the name of my eldest child, a highly intelligent and well educated woman, and I drop the ballot into the voting box. I hear a sigh of relief from the crowd . On the way out I insist that I receive a second "I Voted!" sticker. I stick each on the opposite lapels of my jacket.

On the way home I keep touching the "I Voted!" stickers. I salute my neighbor's American flag as I drive by. Suddenly I am feeling wonderful. I have done my duty as a citizen. I have voted!

Jo Anne Friedenthal
Olli - 682 Great American Essays

New Shoes

Each August for fifteen years, from the time I was about five, I would prepare for the impending school by either being fitted for, or purchasing, a new pair of shoes. New shoes symbolized the start of a new school year and the beginning of a new experience. At first my mother would drag me to the Buster Brown store for a new pair of brown oxfords each year. "These are good for you and will make your feet better in the future," I was told with sincere urging. " Look, you can stand on this new machine and get the perfect size," my mother would say. But, each time they were stiff ugly looking things that would bring us back to the store several times to have the shoes stretched, or to have extra pads placed in the heels to make the shoes a littler more comfortable where my heels had rubbed raw.

It didn't always work that way. One small girl in first grade began, "I hate Jo Anne's shoes." Devastating, at best. But new classes, and new classmates have always been exciting to me. There is always a chance to meet someone new whom I could relate to, eat lunch with and face the world with. I made one lifelong friend in these early years who didn't seem to care what kind of shoes I wore.

As a got a little older I was pretty much given free reign to buy some new shoes and either a pencil case or a new purse with which to begin my new adventure each fall. On going to law school in Cambridge, Mass., and being one of only a small number of women, I was determined to look my best and thus purchased a number of pairs of heeled pumps. I don't think these shoes made me any more confident or attractive but I did make friends with the shoemaker. I broke more heels on the cobblestones than I would like to admit. My girlfriends at law school soon gave up the wearing heels project, but I stuck to the project for a long time. My roommate tried to convince me to "lighten up," but I felt strongly that I had to look professional. Today this emphasis on professional appearance is considered laughable at best.

During the years that my kids were growing up, I tried to keep in mind how I felt when I had to appear in school in new shoes that were not so stylish. As the years went by, new tennis sneakers, or in fact, old tennis sneakers became the style. At least until high school, popularity didn't depend on having the most in vogue shoes. When Amy, one of my daughters, had feet that turned inward, I traveled all over town to get her special shoes which looked like ordinary saddle shoes. These literally were two left feet. She felt better for not having to appear in orthopedic shoes and I was sure it helped her confidence. The new children she met and those who finally became her friends seemed to care little about the shoes. They played or fought like all kids. We were thrilled to be able to relax and know our little girl was getting along so well and that the thing we worried about the most didn't matter at all.

I spent the next 35 years practicing law, first with a large firm and then with an agency, where I was compelled to appear each day in the standard woman lawyers's attire, including the obligatory high heels. " Look very professional, but don't look like you are trying too hard,"- (whatever that meant) was the advice I received. I stuck religiously to what I thought was the professional uniform. I was five foot three and for many years looked quite young. I was convinced that clients expected the total professional look which, sadly, included high heels. It even took me a while to figure out that I could wear my tennis shoes while driving or walking to work. My biggest problem arose when the law firm's month lunches were held in a club atop one of San Francisco's steep hilly streets. This meant that I would have to walk up the hill with an often 6 foot colleague, chatting all the way. It was really coming down the hill that caused the problem. Going down a steep hill in high heels is no mean feat.

I like to think it was my professional prowess that made me successful. What role appearance, or in particular footwear played in my professional career, I will probably never know.

When I finally retired , a friend suggested that I would find lifelong learning classes enriching and enjoyable. I faced the first day of my new classes with somewhat the same trepidation as I faced when I anticipated going to the first grade in my brown oxfords. I zipped

up my best boots and went off. I found a wonderful assortment of folks with grey heads (and some I wondered why they were not grey.) They wore every variety of comfortable shoes. Most seemed to really be enjoying new learning and new contacts. None seemed to care at all about anyone's shoes. And, what was really striking was that neither did I.

Summer Camp with the Grandkids

I am driving to Hog Island, Maine, in the pouring rain with my two eight year-old granddaughters. We are about to spend five days together at an Audubon family camp. I am at least as excited as the girls, who are first cousins about six months apart in age. Five days to be a grandmother as well as a fellow camper and adventurer without the demands of the real world or the interference of their wonderful parents.

I never knew my grandmothers or grandfathers and, as a child, thought there must me some strange reason that most Jewish children didn't have grandparents. Once I more fully understood the reason, which was more horrible than strange, I was also able to begin to imagine what a loss that had been. But not until I had grandchildren of my own did I fully realize how wonderful and special that relationship could be.

It was still raining when we arrived at the ferry to take us to the island. But the weather changed. The boots bought in a hurry at LL Bean on the trip north were never needed. Ahead of us were five sun-filled, warm days. Cottages, a dining hall and a big building for "campfires" and other gatherings are nestled in the woods. Our room, which we shared with a close friend of mine and her eight year-old granddaughter, was right on the water. This was an adventure in itself: three kids and two grandmas in a room no larger than ten feet by six feet. Lots of togetherness, lots of giggles, lots of reminding the young ones to brush their teeth, hurry up, turn off the lights. Lots of fun.

The fragrance of the Hog Island evergreen trees reminded me of my first time at summer camp and away from home when I was only a year older than the granddaughters. The intoxicating sense of freedom and independence I had experienced so many years before seemed to infect the girls too. They loved being on their own, exploring the island, trying out new food and making new friends.

Days were filled with hiking and boat rides, games and nature lessons. It was thrilling to see seals and puffins and even the rings of Saturn through a telescope. Wading in the water,

collecting shells and building faerie houses in the woods were real favorites for the soon-to-be third graders. They could teach me about the birds on the island, and we learned together about the adaptation of animals and engaged in some nature writing exercises.

Although the days were bursting with activities, the cool breezes of the island and the gentle waves of the surrounding water nurtured reflection and created a sense of peace. I hope my granddaughters will look back on this brief interlude with grandma as a special time, just as I do.

From the nature writing exercise:

The water moves gently, encouraged by the soft breeze,
from the spruce trees hugging the mainland to the peaceful island.
A kayaker glides by in an orange boat, barely causing a ripple.
A motorboat speeds by noisily in the other direction, churning the water around it.
So many years were motorboat years: rushing, moving, producing, multi-tasking.
Now life is a slower moving kayak: a different pace, a time for reflection, losses, solitude and simple joys.
There is great comfort in knowing the gentle flowing water will endure.

Jeanne Kent

Great American Essays #681

Annunciations

The voices I heard several times in my life neither caused me to give birth to a savior, as was the case with the Virgin Mary, nor did they get me burned at the stake, as happened to Joan of Arc. Instead they caught my attention with their unambiguous messages to take actions that I otherwise may have been ambivalent about. I will relate here just two of the five incidents when I heard voices.

My first experience of hearing voices was when I was three months' pregnant and the sound of the voice stopped me in my tracks. It said unequivocally (I remember the exact words but not the sound of the voice): "It's a girl and her name is Livia." Well, what was I to do with this annunciation except to relay the information to my husband who welcomed the news of a daughter and the finality of her name. One less thing to come to an agreement on. However, as my baby bump developed, friends and observers came to the ready conclusion that I was carrying a boy, based on the tale of "old wives" that if you are carrying high, it's a girl, carrying low, it's a boy. As I was carrying my baby low, they said I should jolly well be ready with a boy's name. So, I decided on the name of Nicholas. I was ready for delivery and I was ready for Nicholas.

As delivery approached and labor became more intense, I turned to the wisdom of the voice and cheered on Livia as she made her way through to light and to our lives. It was in fact a girl and her name was Livia. One must imagine Gabriel having great fun delivering unanticipated annunciations to trusting women.

About three years after Livia was born, it was perhaps the mischievous Gabriel again or another messenger who delivered the second annunciation. I remember the words with absolute clarity so I will relay the scene as a script. It went like this:

VOICE – (like someone dropping in unexpectedly for a "chat")

*You **can** go to China.*

ME ------(startled at being addressed by a voice from nowhere)

What?

(I am walking hurriedly to the parking lot after a long day at work with a lot on my mind and in no mood to converse with an unknown, unwelcome voice.)

VOICE –(like a broken record)

*You **can** go to China. You **can** go to China.*

(The Voice does not comfort me, as is expected in Divine encounters, with the words *Do Not Be Afraid.* No need. I am clueless and therefore fearless about where this all **can** lead.)

ME TO HUSBAND – (one hour later at the dinner table)

*We **can** go to China.*

(I share the Annunciation word for word, as I received it. I interject the Voice's words into our dinner conversation, completely out of the blue as the Voice came to me.)

HUSBAND –(one second later)

Darling, what a great idea. I'll ask for a leave of absence from my job. China will be a fantastic experience for you, me and daughter Livia.

(He answers without the slightest hesitation. No apparent need to "mull it over." No second thoughts. He speaks as if a force from the Unknown dictates his reply.)

ME TO DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM IN CHINA – (next morning upon arrival at work)

*My husband and I **can** go to China for a year if you need English teachers for that program.*

(I nervously share the Annunciation, careful to use the word *can*, aware of the indefinite nature of the message. One must act on edicts from Voices. I must take courage from Muhammed and Mary.)

DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM IN CHINA – (one second later)

Oh, you are prefect for the job of Program Coordinator. I will arrange for housing for a year for you, your husband and daughter in the Friendship Hotel in Beijing.

(She appears to have been waiting for this message, rushing to the phone to announce to the world -- China-- that a Program Coordinator is chosen!)

Exactly four months and two days after this second Annunciation, we found ourselves in China. I can never know for sure whether I was hearing and acting on my own inner voice, my trusted intuition, or whether this voice was indeed coming from some unknown source.

In my quest to give context to the five times in my life when I heard voices, I consulted the website called *Intervoice,* the international hearing voices network. This site claims that its aim is to "show that hearing voices is a normal though unusual variation in human behavior and that the problem is not hearing voices but the inability to cope with the experience." I can't help thinking of the Virgin Mary, who was told by an angel that she was to give birth to the Son of God - or of Joan of Arc, who started hearing voices at the age of 13 and took those voices seriously enough to be burned at the stake for acting on them. These two cases must surely have created in the receivers of the messages "cause for pause" yet both embraced the messages of the voices and acted accordingly.

What I do know is that my telling of these two stories - confident that it was indeed a voice that guided me in naming my daughter Livia and in deciding to take a teaching position in China - was

inspiration enough for the stories to be retold and in fact reimagined by my daughter, from her point of view, as a college writing assignment. Later in life, she reworked the piece and titled it *Mother Tongues.* Her story was published and is now on the internet for all to read and accessible for as long as the internet lives!

I will never know from whence the voices came but am grateful to have a loving and beautiful daughter named Livia and to have had the experience of living in China. I anticipate facing dilemmas in the future and will consider hearing voices as normal, although unusual. I welcome any wisdom a voice may choose to impart to me.

Fred Pelzman

Great American Essays 682

WHY I PAINT

When people see one of my paintings for the first time, they tend to exclaim "I didn't know you were an artist!" And I invariably correct them with "I am not an artist, I'm a painter." I sense a difference.

An artist is one who has a passionate need to express himself through his art, whether in painting, music, dance or any medium of choice. An artist has something to say. He (or she) is unfulfilled, frustrated, unless doing his work. Art is the center of his/her life. "But do your work," writes Emerson, "and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce your self." That is what an artist does, and I, a mere painter, do not wish to be known by my paintings — I believe I am so much more than my "daubs," as Winston Churchill described his oils. I am a father, a widower, a walker, a singer, a conversationalist, a friend, a former ad man, civil servant, gardener and, by the way — a painter.

Painting provides me with pleasure from my initial charcoal sketch — although there are usually several attempts before I work up to one that pleases. Then I transfer the sketch from paper to canvas, modifying as I proceed, knowing that with oils I can always revise, delete — or start over: no problem. Then comes the sensational part: color! You have no idea how many exciting colors are out there waiting in tubes, colors you've never heard of, colors when mixed together form other colors, other shades…colors that can be made to jump when placed alongside their complement.

Bonus: When you paint you invariably enhance your ability to see. The sky is blue? What precise shade of blue? How does that sky-blue change from directly above — down to the far horizon. Time of day? Weather? Humidity? Clouds? After you've painted a while, you'll look at any scene — a field, a lawn, a tree, a flower — differently, and carefully, in terms of its colors.

When I nail the color just right — a thrill! And if I don't, how do I correct? Choices, decisions — chance? Here's where experience comes in. There's a saying: "Behind every successful painter, there's a mile of canvas!" (I'm on the 30-yard line.)

Don't get me wrong: it's not easy. Too often in class a student will groan "This is awful, why did I choose this set-up (if a still life), this view (a landscape), this perspective (a model)?" So? What's so awful? Who thinks a writer writes without editing? A composer composes in one sitting — every time? How many artists throw out (even burn) their early work, even after they're "established"?

My wife Frankie, a poet, wrote "I married a man whose glass is always full." I confess I enjoy almost everything I paint: I'm so excited when I complete one! One of my fellow students complained "The trouble with Fred is: he never suffers." I understand this attitude may not be a complete asset. When I repeated that comment to a new instructor he observed "That could be a blessing — or a curse!" So be it.

Not that I'm never frustrated: selecting what to paint, and then how to paint what I have selected, each stage I find challenging. Of course, when my instructor sets up a still life in the studio — part of my problem is solved: I'm simply expected to paint that. Usually this works out fine; after all, the instructor presumably has an eye for what makes a good composition. Occasionally, however, we don't see eye-to-eye. Faced with an instructor's set-up featuring three ugly gourds, I opted out, turned around and painted the paint-spattered studio sink. Frankie loved the result, and insisted on displaying it over our fireplace. Let's face it: pleasing her was one of my main reasons for painting.

I confess I paint with the viewer in mind. I like intriguing/luring and pleasing people. When I'm painting outdoors, if passersby come up and watch: No problem. I'll even pause from my painting and chat. While genuine artists may paint to express themselves, I paint to please. Seeing one of my paintings displayed in someone else's home is a testament, a confirmation that someone likes my work. And at least twice strangers have come up to tell me they own one of my paintings.

Another reason I paint — I like selling my paintings. I have no pride: for several years I displayed and sold at a local restaurant and even at a nearby dry cleaners. I've had one-man shows at Georgetown University Hospital and at the Yellow Barn Gallery in Glen Echo. When I practically sold out at the Yellow Barn, a fellow student complained I was "practically giving them away" by only charging $300-$500. So

what? Better to have them please people than stack them away in hopes of getting a better price.

I take pleasure simply in the act of painting, whether in a classroom, my studio, out on the street, in a park, on a motel balcony overlooking the ocean. Finding a view, sketching it out, mixing colors on the palette, placing them on my canvas — I am engrossed the entire process. And there's even more: once the basic design is laid on, the fun part begins: the finish, the personal touches, the highlights. "God is in the details," quoth Mies van der Rohe. My first instructor was more earthy, she claimed the preliminary work was simply "the meat and potatoes…then comes dessert!" This is where the creative stress begins to taper off, and pleasure increases. And that is where you start to think "By God! I'm pulling it off again!"

I read somewhere that happiness is fulfilling one's potential. I may not be an artist, but I am a painter. Not a very good painter, perhaps, but good enough. I'm lucky to have found I have a talent, a potential for painting. I partially fulfill that potential every time I paint. So that's why I do it.

Mary W. Poole
Great American Essays 682

A Brief Reflection on Feminism

A piece by Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* recently carried the provocative headline, "When Hillary Clinton Killed Feminism." The murderer wasn't just Hillary but her partner in crime Madeleine Albright who had the temerity to tell a younger audience that there was, in her words, "a special place in hell for women who don't help each other." It backfired, because young women today supposedly don't know, or never stopped to think, about the struggles earlier generations of women went through not just to claim equality with men but to be simply less invisible.

The idea that feminism was on its deathbed came as news to me. Was it because I had just finished reading the four Neapolitan novels of Elena Ferrante, according to one reviewer, "nothing less than one long, mind-and-heart shredding howl for the history of women…and its implicit *j'accuse*"? Or was it the image that comes back to me of the desperate wife clawing at the yellow wallpaper because she is forbidden to work and denied any say in the way she lives her life? That story was written in 1892; the two friends in Naples, hugging to themselves the power of words to make life livable, are our contemporaries.

I came late to feminism, probably because a woman, my mother, was head of our family, my father having died in Luxembourg in the last year of the Second World War. My mother would never have called herself a feminist, though with little money and some luck ("luck doesn't just happen" she used to say; "you have to make it happen"), she constructed a fulfilling life for herself and even published a book in her mid-eighties. I'm not sure my generation thought much about feminism either, until we had embarked on our "real lives" after school or college and had our eyes opened by Betty Friedan. My classmates and I dreamt of applying to *The New Yorker* and being taken on as staff and working our way up. We didn't know what a CEO or a hedge fund manager was, much less aspire to get there. Of course, even before the term became widely used we knew what feminism was; we internalized it. It had something to do with what happened to

Hester Prynne or Jane Eyre or Tess or Ibsen's Nora. It began to have more and more meaning as we grew older. Now I find myself viewing almost everything through a feminist lens.

I would like to tell the young women scoffing at Madeleine Albright's "special place in hell," the story of a gifted German girl called Elisabeth Hauptmann who wanted to be a writer and who went to Berlin in 1924 to live with the bad-boy playwright Bertolt Brecht in hopes of marrying him and becoming his collaborator. His collaborator she certainly was. She worked late into the night, finishing his poems, turning his brilliant scraps into coherent wholes, often writing things on her own to send out under his name (with his whole-hearted approval). It is now estimated that almost 80% of *The Threepenny Opera* is her work. At the core of the play is a situation she knew firsthand, the opposition between subservient women tired of being kicked around by ruthless men and those Brechtian men themselves, womanizers like Macheath (Mack the Knife).

When Brecht married someone else, Elisabeth attempted suicide but was dragged back to life. Her creative output was too important to the Brecht enterprise. After the Reichstag fire in 1933, Brecht fled to Denmark; Elisabeth was arrested but released, managing to get to the US where she worked as an instructor of German for $50 a month. She never received financial restitution for her creative work with Brecht. When she died in 1973 in East Berlin she left her papers to the East German Academy which failed to catalog them properly. Someone who went looking for them reported that they were wrapped in a brown paper bag like groceries.

Yet this story, with its overtones of fusty romanticism and hope denied, is not one that today's young woman could take to heart—she who is secure in her good job and her access to birth control and her membership in Match.com. We who are older need to remember these stories from the past, because they tell us how far we have come and show us by indirection how far we have yet to go. So whatever point Maureen Dowd was making in her piece about the death of feminism, I assure you, feminism lives: nobody has killed it, not Hillary, not anyone.

Dan Powers
Great American Essays 682

CRUTCH RACING

It was a warm , sunny Sunday in early April 1945. We, my wife and I, had no definite plans. After a long cold winter, the surprising warmth of the day was exhilarating. The war news from Europe was very encouraging and things were progressing in the Pacific. We were a fortunate family. Our only children, two daughters were away at college. Only a cousin was serving in the Armed Forces and he had been at Fort Dix for three years. Aside from the inconvenience of food stamps and gas rationing we carried on our lives as usual.

I suddenly had an idea. " Why don't we drive down to Atlantic City. I think there is just enough gas in the car to get us there and back."
"Why should we go there?, my wife asked." Well you remember the wonderful days we used to have there in the summer with the girls. The beautiful wide white sand beach, the Steel Pier and the exciting Boardwalk. Maybe we could get some salt water taffy; and off we went.

As we entered into town, it seemed almost deserted except for a large number of soldiers roaming the streets in groups or two or three walking together. We turned down a street that led to the beach and parked the car as close to the boardwalk as possible.

When we climbed up to the Boardwalk, we were stunned by what we saw. The beach itself was deserted and entrance to it was barricaded and there were numerous light towers. But what was really shocking was the Boardwalk itself. It was full of soldiers ,most of them amputees. Many were sitting at tables, playing poker or rolling dice for coins or match sticks. Other soldiers were crutch walking up and down the Boardwalk. In one area a group of soldiers on crutches with one pant leg rolled up because of an absent limb were lined up together for what appeared to be a race, and when someone blew a whistle off they went as fast they could go. At a finishing point down the Boardwalk there was cheering and congratulations for the "winner", as well as an exchange of money passing among the gamblers., other soldiers on crutches. Instead of those large, glamorous chairs that people hired for others to push them down the boardwalk, there were numerous soldiers pushing themselves, in small wheel chairs, frequently with both legs missing.

A soldier was reading a book, sitting by himself on one of the benches,,his crutches resting against the bench next to his empty pants leg. We asked what was going on here and where were all the regular hotel guests? He said " Don't you know all the hotels are closed and some such as the Traymore and Haddon Hall had been turned into hospitals. Atlantic City is one of the largest hospital for wounded in the United States and it is the amputation for the East Coast. We are all out here on the Boardwalk getting some exercise and waiting for our stumps to heal so they can be fitted for prostheses". " Are they really having crutch races? Isn't it dangerous that they might fall and injure their stumps." "Listen, he said, We all feel like losers-we lost our place in our unit. and we lost parts of our body. If you win the race, you are a winner, and even if you don't win, the fact that you could race so far, so fast down the Boardwalk makes you a winner. We are all waiting for the day we can get our artificial limbs, so we can really be winners again. So the guys racing really represent all of us, back on the

winning team after two or three operations, first to remove the dead part of your leg and the other one or two to create and shape a stump that would fit an appliance. Walking again without crutches, that would be a real winner."

My wife and I turned and looked down the Boardwalk as the whistle for another race could be heard. We looked at each other nodded, said goodbye and headed for the car. That was quite an afternoon, shocking and yet inspiring in a way. We arrived home with just a bit of gas left. I turned on the radio to hear the news that the U.S. Army had just landed on Okinawa. The landings were a success, but casualties were heavy. The wounded were transferred to hospital ships, the first stop on their evacuation to West Coast Hospitals. I wondered if the people on the Boardwalk in Venice , California, were ready for Crutch Racing to begin.

Daniel Powers

An essay in short story form based on the experiences of a 13 year old kid,and his widowed mother, who spent every weekend from November 1944 until May 1945 in Atlantic City while the kid's 19 year old brother [also a kid], went from crutches to walking.

East Olive Kate Ratiner

A short time ago, during the process of buying and setting up a new computer, which is a story unto itself and not a happy one, I had to come up with yet another password, then select three of the listed security questions and supply the answers. One question asks: who was "your favorite elementary schoolteacher," and I really had to laugh – I had only one. For the entirety of my first eight years of schooling I had only one. Mrs. B. And every kid in school had her too. There was no "favorite" about it. No picking and choosing.

Which reminded me of an idea I had had a few months, or possibly years, ago. That I ought to write something for my first grandson about how very very different my growing up was from his. One teacher for eight years for example – how many teachers had he had in his first eight years? How many buildings had he gone to? How many classrooms had he sat in? The first time I walked into his elementary school, I was in a long, wide hallway with classroom after classroom opening off to the side of the hallway. It made me dizzy. For eight years, I had only one classroom, one school – East Olive, located in East Olive Township, Butler County, in southeast Nebraska. One building, one room, with just Mrs. B and her 15 to 20 some students, first to eigth grade. The one room schoolhouse. In the midst of the flat flat Nebraska farmland.

It was a rather small brick building. What is now called a split-level; a few steps up from the front door to the classroom, a few steps down to the basement. The classroom was maybe 25' by 30', but time plays tricks on your mind. Windows across one wall. Two-thirds of the room taken up by desks. The front third had the piano, the blackboard and pull down maps – I loved it when Mrs. B would pull down the maps. An orange crate and thin plywood table where Mrs. B would work with, say the 5th and 6th grade kids, while everybody else was supposed to be studying their own work. The teacher's desk, and yes, the big Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. Off to the side opposite the windows two coat rooms – one girls' one boys'. Also a small library room, cabinets and book shelves to the ceiling on one wall. Like most kids, I think, I wanted to read the big kids books, the grown-up ones. So I would climb up and stand on top of the cabinet to reach the top shelves and pull down the books I wasn't supposed to be able to read. There was a black telephone mounted on a wall of the library, with a receiver shaped like a miniature megaphone. To call out, you had to lift the

receiver and wait for the operator to ask – in person – what number you were calling. It was a party line – you could never really know how many people were listening in on your call. One of my assignments in second or third grade was to call the grocer in town and place an order for Mrs. B's groceries. I was so nervous when I was calling I started to cry, and Mrs. B had to order her own damn groceries.

The desks In the classroom were like the ones you now see in a museum, a row of wooden lift top desks, seats which connected to the front of the next desk in the row.

The basement had brick walls and a cement floor, small window panes along the top of one wall. A coal room and a furnace room. On days we couldn't go outside for recess, we played Pump Pump Pollaway down there – getting hot and sweaty running from one side of the room to the other, trying not to get tagged.

No bathrooms in the building when I started school. Outside, two outhouses, set at the back edge of the schoolyard, spaced far apart. Two seaters. VERY cold in the winter. But the worst was the times there was a wasp nest just under the seat. We just had to take our chances. It was not at all uncommon for one of the boys to ask to go out to the privy, do his business, and then disappear over the schoolyard fence into the corn field, gone for the day. We did get indoor bathrooms, installed at the rear end of the coat rooms, but I don't remember when.

The schoolyard was big. I don't know how many acres; maybe two current day ball stadiums, minus parking, would fit in the schoolyard. The Monopoly piece schoolhouse sat in one corner by the gravel road that ran along one side of the yard. Fields, mostly corn as I remember, lined the other three sides. Just a gravel drive and area to park in front of the building. To one side, a merry-go-round made of pipe and thick lumber seats. Very heavy. If you were running pushing to get it going so you could jump on the seat and lost your footing and fell and got whacked in the head with the edge of the seat you were toast for the day. If I rode it too long when it was going fast I got car-sick, and upchucked the rest of the day.

Behind the merry-go-round were two groups of pine trees, and in between the trees the door to the cyclone cellar. Big, thick creosote lumber, lying on a slant at one end of the five or six foot high mound. It was the only elevation in the whole yard. I don't remember ever having to use the cellar, though I do remember going in it. A small, cold, damp, dark earth room.

In the summer, the tumbleweeds rolled across the yard at a furious pace on a windy day. There were networks of mole and snake tunnels all over the yard, and we spent many recesses expending lots of labor and sweat carrying buckets and buckets of water trying to drown them out, a hundred per-cent unsuccessfully. Lunchtime on nice days was spent outside sitting on the grass, trading parts of our homemade lunches for something that looked better than our own. I suspect that particular negotiation continues today.

In the winter the flat ground was perfect for making huge fox and geese tracks in the snow. Big, big circle with a home in the middle for the fox and four bases on the circle with paths to the center. The geese had to run from base to base without getting caught by the fox. With all the space we had, It was a long run from base to base. Recess didn't ever seem long enough. On one winter day every year Mrs. B mixed up batches of taffy, put a glob in a round pie tin for each of us, and we went out and set the pan in the snow to cool, and as it cooled and hardened we would pull and double it over, pull and double it over, time after time until it was thickened and ready to cut into pieces.

The year I was in the seventh or eighth grade we had more snow than usual – which was a lot in Nebraska – and there was a good couple feet covering the ground for weeks. We crossed the fence into one of the fields and spent many recesses making an igloo. An actual igloo, that five or six people could sit in, with an entrance tunnel we had to crawl through to get inside, and a hole at the top that we covered with a gunny sack. We cut two-foot blocks of snow, lifted them off the ground and built up the walls much like building a brick wall. We were very proud of our igloo.

Enough rambling. How much has changed over the years. Someday you can show this to your kids – yes it might be – and add your own story of "how it used to be."