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STUDY GROUPS 681 AND 682

# ESSAYS

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# The Snowman

We left the South Side of Chicago when I was six and moved into our nearly finished house on the North Shore in the late fall of 1954. My parents had decided to move out of Chicago because most of their friends and neighbors were fleeing to the “safety” of the suburbs. But although they thought they were protecting us from bad schools, sketchy neighborhoods and crime by moving away, other dangers still lurked.

I had never lived in a house with a yard, and by summer we were supposed to have almost a half acre of lawn and flowers. But for now, only an expanse of rich black Illinois soil met my eyes as I gazed out the window. A bitter winter followed a bucolic autumn of golden oak and elm trees, and burning leaves in the street. To my great joy, it eventually began to snow and soon there were at least a couple of feet in the back yard, replacing that black expanse with white until spring.

My mother had never before lived in a house. She had grown up in apartments in St. Louis and Chicago, and she had no idea what “outdoors” even meant. Although she liked to arrange flowers, she had never grown any. This house for her meant not only an escape from the influx of African Americans into her former neighborhood in Chicago, which until then, had been primarily white and Jewish. It was also a badge of emerging into the upper middle class with its requisite checklist: congenial neighbors stopping by for coffee or perhaps, something stronger; playing a game of bridge; shopping at the newest mall; learning to play golf; having a two-car garage with a second car; traveling to exotic places and sending your kids to public schools that would point them toward college.

As the snow piled up the neighbors hid in their houses. My mother withdrew but longed for the companionship and camaraderie of her old neighborhood. She missed the ease of hopping on a streetcar to go out without fear of crashing her new Chevy Impala convertible on the ice and snow-covered roads. She sank into a morose depression, although we didn’t have a name for it at the time. My father wasn’t around much except on weekends. He was working hard to pay all their new expenses.

My friends and I built forts, had snowball fights, and I constructed my first real snowman, which looked just like “Frosty the Snowman”— coal lumps for black buttons and eyes, stick arms, carrot nose, topped off by my father’s hat and real pipe. As the song predicts, eventually spring came even to that winter wonderland, and Frosty began to melt, along with the snow around him. His arms fell off, the carrot was eaten by a squirrel, and Frosty began to shrink.

As he diminished to nothing, my mother grew concerned about my father’s hat and pipe. One day, after school, she told me to put on my galoshes and fetch them. My big black galoshes fit easily over my shoes and they buckled up to keep the snow out of the tops. Although it was getting warmer, I still pulled on my woolen overcoat, hat and gloves and headed out the back door while my mother watched from the kitchen window. I noticed right away that the path out to the snowman was trampled down and the snow on it was melting faster than the deeper greying snow on either side. The snow along the side of the path was probably higher than the tops of my boots so I chose the path. As I got closer my boots started to sink into the mud below.

I reached the spot where Frosty has spent the winter and retrieved the pipe and hat that had fallen into the mud, and stuffed them into my pocket. As I turned back to the house, each step plunged me deeper and deeper into the mud and I could feel the suction grabbing at my boots. After a few more steps, the force of the suction became stronger than my ability to drag my feet out and I sank into the ooze up to the tops of my boots. I didn’t know what to do so I began to yell for help.

I could see my mother beckoning from the window to come back inside. She seemed to think my cries for help were part of a game. But since they did not cease, reluctantly, she sent my sister out to rescue me. My sister was proud of her shiny red boots with white fur tops that our mother had bought for her at Marshall Fields. With some resentment, she finally headed outside along the slushy path to get her little brother out of another predicament. She too started to sink into the mud, which eventually reached up to the white fur of her boots. She joined me in screaming for help.

My mother was furious that she might now need to “rescue” both of her wayward children. This was more than she had bargained for in moving out of the city. These were certainly risks that she had never contemplated. She put on her dainty boots with high heels. They were more for shopping on Michigan Avenue, not for tromping through snow and mud. I’m not sure she had ever even seen mud before. She squeamishly set out on the now well-trodden path, only to sink in and get stuck before even reaching my sister.

At that point, we all started to scream HELP! in unison. But the neighbors' houses were far away and no one knew who we were, or couldn't hear us or just didn't care. Mother began to yell FIRE! and eventually a distant window opened and a stranger's face appeared and then quickly disappeared. The window slammed shut. We couldn't see the street in front of the house and no one driving by could see us either. It was starting to get dark and really scary. After a long time we heard far off sirens that gradually grew closer. Finally, several fire engines and a police car came racing down our street with lights flashing and sirens blaring and turned into the driveway. Neighbors finally poked their heads out of windows to see whose house might be on fire.

We continued to scream until several firemen in full firefighting gear appeared around the side of the garage. They were dumbstruck by the absurdity of what they saw-- one lady, one teen, one kid all stuck in the mud up to their knees, 25 feet from their house. "Lady, don't you have any neighbors who could help? Why you wastin' our time with something so foolish?" Mother began to cry. She said she didn't know anyone else who could help. Two of them pulled on their tall boots and slogged out to us, I suppose trying not to laugh. First they picked up my mother and pulled her free of her boots and carried her back to the "safety" of our suburban home, next they released my sister and finally me. I guess we could have just pulled off the boots ourselves and trudged back to the house barefoot through the mud, but no one thought of that at the time.

Fortunately, someone had heard us and I guess the local fire department didn't have anything better to do that evening so everything worked out all right. The memory of that momentary shattering of the myth of an idyllic suburban life gradually faded, to be replaced by neighbors who dropped by for coffee, who played bridge and golf at the country club, and we attended good schools and colleges. Although my father didn't participate in that escapade, he gradually became totally disillusioned with the bubble of suburbia, and when my sister and I were grown, he chucked it all in and moved to Europe in search of other dreams. As for the boots, they are probably still sunken deep in the rich soil below the lawn and garden that eventually got planted and flourish to this day.

# Keep the Court Supreme

Obamacare Is Back In! Gay Marriage Is In!! What else can the Supreme Court have the guts to rule in favor of? I predict its next major action will be passed with a 9-0 vote because of a simple change in the calendar. The two months of each year greeted with almost universal disapproval by the people interviewed are February and August. So the nine solons will eliminate them. There will be lots of discussion, much of it in tones with five letter words. Justice Scalia loved February because he skied a lot; Justice Ginsberg is thrilled when August comes around because it gives her time to play Summer Theatre roles.

But the country as a whole will not be inconvenienced. Take February, for example. Schools in areas where temperature is predicted to come in lower than 32 degrees above zero will close and the government will shut down. Even in Minnesota a temperature lower than 32 degrees below zero will force schools to close during the afternoon. And who needs August? People are already bored with summer because vacations, which sounded glamorous in the planning stage, turned out to be dull and costly. Everyone is ready to go back to work and school.

Of course, a minority will be shocked. What will happen to Valentine's Day, usually scheduled on February 14? Think of all the people who write little ditties for Valentine's Day cards, print, and illustrate them. Not only will they be out of jobs, but lovers and schoolchildren all over the country will be depressed. How will we celebrate Presidents' Day, always celebrated on a usually unknown date somewhere between Washington's and Lincoln's birthday so it really won't matter? At least we don't have to worry about August since nothing happens then anyway.

I'm a firm believer that nothing is a problem unless you make it one. It is very easy to divide February into two parts, with 14 days being added to January 31 and 14 days added to the beginning of March. We could then make Valentine's Day January 14 and Presidents' Day March 8 (don't worry, it adds up). March then becomes two weeks longer by making March 1 the old February 15. This wouldn't change Daylight Savings Time from its current March 8 and the first day of Spring the old March 21.

See how easy it is?

# My Aunt

Not even the rabbi had two dishwashers. But my Aunt Gertie, who never cooked and never entertained, did. One for milk, one for meat. She ordered all their meals from the local Kosher restaurant. She and my uncle Ben lived like hermits in one of the most beautiful Tudor houses in town.

Every time I came home from college or anywhere I lived afterwards, my mother reminded me of my duty to visit Aunt Gertie. She would call and make the appointment for me. Then, on time, I would go over and ring the bell. After an inordinate amount of time, I would hear several locks turning, the door would open, and Aunt Gertie would show me into the lovely little reception room. All four feet ten of her, chubby, rouged cheeks and wearing a black silk dress. (After I got married my husband would be drafted to accompany me.) She would announce that she was going to bring in some refreshments. Despite my protests, knowing what that entailed, she insisted. In the meantime, I kept standing, not knowing whether to sit on top of the sheets that draped the furniture or remove one.

Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes later she'd return with a few pieces of candy — I don't know how old — on a shiny silver dish which had probably just been polished for the occasion. She would then ask a few questions about my life, answer a few questions about hers, and then usher me into the paneled, book-lined library where slight, thin Uncle Ben would be sitting, swallowed up by a huge leather chair, reading the paper. He would beam me a smile, kiss me, and tell me how wonderful it was to see me. We would ask and answer the same questions, eat another stale piece of candy, and leave, accompanied by Aunt Gertie who would have been waiting at the door. No matter how much exertion I knew my visit had cost her in preparation and disturbance of her peace, I also knew that I had made her day.

Aunt Gertie and Uncle Ben had three sons. When they were little they were clothed in dresses and had long hair — until they had to go to school and acknowledge that they were boys. One of them is married and has two daughters. Another taught at the local college, and nobody ever

knew what the third one did. We did know that Uncle Ben's money from my grandfather's furniture store came in very handy for them.

Every year Aunt Gertie made a pilgrimage to New York. She took a four-hour bus ride, stayed in a hotel, had her meals sent up to her room, and each day ventured out to buy an object of clothing — a black hat, a black dress, a black coat, black shoes.

In 1972, a great flood hit Wilkes-Barre and nearly every house was affected. Gertie and Ben's first floor was completely covered in water, sheets, dishwashers and all. After the flood, they had it cleaned out and from then on lived on the second floor with a hot plate. After they died, their two unmarried sons moved into that upstairs space and as far as I know, one of them is still there. The other died.

Aunt Gertie was my mother's brother's wife. Uncle Ben was the oldest of her five siblings. My mother was in charge of all the reclusive or unfortunate or sick people in town. For some of them she was their main link to the outside world. She called each of them every day, often sent them food, and most of all, made me visit them.

I would like to believe that there was more to Aunt Gertie's life — books, friends, hobbies — more than a few visits from her niece and phone calls from my mother. I'd like to believe that everything in her life cannot fit on one page.

# A Loud Silence

My mother died in 1993, a few days after her seventy-ninth birthday. She died of the family disease, breast cancer. Her mother (my maternal grandmother), had died of it also, although it was never discussed. My cousins and I were just told grandma was sick and died.

My mother had two bouts of breast cancer. The first bout was in 1987 and it was not discussed. Even though I was already an adult with two children, my parents barely mentioned that my mother had breast cancer. She just got over it, no discussion. The only real information I had was that my mother's oncologist was named Dr. Kancer, an apt name for an oncologist if there ever was one.

Relapse came six years after the first bout. This time my parents were more open about things and my father started to lean on me for support. It was a difficult time for everyone in the family. I lived in DC then and my parents were living on Long Island. Not only did I have one child in college and another in private school in DC, but I was the owner of a business that supported the family, covered tuition and everything else required.

During this second bout my mother spent her time left shuffling between North Shore Hospital and home on the south shore of Long Island. My father started to fall apart and would call me at 9:00 AM asking me to get on a United Shuttle and come to New York as soon as possible. He would pick me up at LaGuardia Airport. I made so many trips back and forth, I got to know the flight attendants. Despite the horror of that time a few good things did arise. Firstly, I learned a great deal about both of my parents' families during my dinners with my father and, secondly, a miracle happened, I became more organized and less of a procrastinator about my life and business. Since I never knew when I would have to drop everything and run to catch a plane, I began to complete all projects. I left little to chance so that others could act in my stead. As for learning more about my forebears that was a blessing too. Prior to this, my family were silent about that had happened more than a generation ago. I now learned about where they originally came from and some history.

The one truly negative thing that did not come out of this time was the one that, I felt, was the saddest. I never got to say goodbye to my mother and to have closure. Because cancer was such a pejorative word in our family, we could not discuss it. I was not allowed to speak to my mother of her pending death and nor could I tell her how much I loved and admired her. It was

tacitly understood that if I said the word, or alluded to it, I would be inviting the angel of death. So, no goodbyes, no speaking of the past, no nos.

There is no good way to lose a parent, whether suddenly or over time. But losing a parent with whom you should have had time to come to closure and could not is like double jeopardy. It is like throwing a game for no valid reason. The silences are deafening.

After my mother 's death and the silence surrounding it, I vowed that in the future I would not keep silent nor be embarrassed to share things with others. Since 1993, I have had major cancer three times, a triple by-pass, a stent, and several other things that make me body scarred. In fact, I am lacking in so many body parts that I cannot will my body to science because there is not enough inside me to make studying it worthwhile. Also, after my mother's death my husband developed mesothelioma and Parkinson's Disease. Between the two of us, our medical charts used to have to be transported on a gurney they weighed so much. I kept none of this a secret. I quickly found that as soon as I acknowledged the "worst" others felt less alone and less of a need to keep their own secrets. They could talk about the bad and it would not destroy them. In fact, it eased the burden.

Oh, and of course, having a sense of humor, being able to laugh at yourself, and knowing that life is not fair, it just "is" helps immeasurably.

# Still Alive Notice Schwartz

Will pass away in the far distant future (but way too soon) due to causes still to be determined. Born on June 20, 1941, to David H. Schwartz, a dentist, and Tillie Atkin Schwartz, a real estate investor (born ahead of her time). Phillip was born in Rochester, N.Y., with two club feet, both of which were corrected, without surgery, due to a recently discovered technique. (Had he been born several generations earlier, he might well have been abandoned, as an infant, in the middle of a forest. Aware of this fortunate timing, Phillip never gave a thought about whether he might have been better off if he had been born in an earlier, more glorious period in history.)

He was a second generation American, whose mother did not graduate from high school, yet he always expected that he would attend and graduate from college. His primary reason for attending college was to be able to get a good-paying job, which would allow him to live independently from his parents and, at some point, get married and support his family. (His parents fought constantly, mostly about money, and they got divorced when he was fifteen. He thought it was important that he not fight with his future wife about money and they not get divorced.)

Phillip graduated from the University of Rochester as an accounting major and headed to New York City and a job with Haskins & Sells, a CPA firm. He spent almost fifteen years living independently, including four years attending Fordham Law School at night and passing the Bar exam. (During his early thirties, he got several years of therapy to try to determine why his life had not yet morphed into the “married with family” life he had been expecting. At some point he realized that he would need to develop at least a few communication skills in order to have any hope of finding not just a wife but also a lifetime partner.)

Fortunately, (maybe, miraculously), just about this time, Phillip met Lyn J. Peters, a sexy, self-sufficient, intelligent woman, who would soon become President of the Village Independent Democrats, a liberal Democratic political club in Greenwich Village. He was also active in the club and was elected New York State Democratic Committeeman for the district. Phillip and Lyn

dated for a while, lived together for three years, got married at the Explorers' Club in Manhattan on May 20, 1980 (the exact day that Mount St. Helens erupted); had first daughter, Elizabeth Ann; moved to Ridgewood, N.J.; had second daughter Karen Jane; and, in 1987, moved to Rockville, Maryland.

Phillip retired from a trade association, American Insurance Association, after 30 years. He volunteered to do mediation at the Maryland District Court, to assist at Travelers Aid at National Airport and to drive seniors to doctors' appointments. He competed at the Maryland Senior Olympics track and field events for years and accumulated gold, silver and bronze medals (at progressively slower speeds and in progressively older age categories).

He led study groups at OLLI at AU, was elected to the Board of Directors and served as Chair of the OLLI Board. He will continue attending study group classes at OLLI at AU into the far-distant future. In lieu of flowers, please contribute generously to OLLI at AU or, at the very least, to the card and gift for Susan Willens.

# Books Are the Problem

What to do with the books? I have been struggling with that seemingly simple question lately, a struggle at least partially attributable to my antecedents from whom I inherited a bit of an Irish sense of humor, an endearing or irritating—depending on your point of view—German penchant for cleanliness, and, at least to a certain extent, a pragmatic but idealistic Scandinavian moral code. It was likely the two latter qualities that prompted me to read a recent article in the *Washington Post* Local Living section, bearing the dour sounding title, *Swedish Death Cleaning: The Scandinavian Way to Declutter*. Reading, I found myself nodding my head in strong agreement with the underlying premise: as you age you want to remain independent and not become a burden to others, and an important piece in not being a burden is to take responsibility for dealing with your belongings so that others do not have to do so one day. Or, to put it bluntly and quote directly from the article, “If your family doesn’t want your stuff when you’re alive, they sure won’t want it when you are dead.” Undeniably true. But, what to do with the books?

To be clear, I am working on de-acquisition in general. It’s a necessary part of life at a certain age and the inevitable result of living in a consumer culture. Sadly, my progress is slow. I find it difficult to sort through closets; cull the now unused china, silver, and crystal; consign the jewelry; acknowledge that there will never be enough flowers to justify all those vases. And, if dealing with those things is hard, it is infinitely more painful, in truth, it is unmitigated hell to sort through the intimate shared biography that our bookshelves represent. Eleven assorted bookcases in our modest home, all of them full of paperbacks and hard-covered volumes, some abused and some pristine, the vast majority of which we acquired together across a fifty-year marriage.

Now, this is not Catherine the Great’s library. Few rare books are included, although we always prized certain signed editions, a hand full penned by well-known figures, most by friends. Beyond those, you would have to say it is an idiosyncratic collection, with novels in the living room, books on Freud aptly, if subconsciously, placed on the lowest shelf in the den, Judaica above him, and poetry occupying the top shelves.

I certainly don't mean to give an impression of us as an erudite, literary couple. Readers, yes. Scholars and experts, no. Yet, I have come to realize that books were somewhere near the heart of our time together, beginning with courtship trips to Discount Books and Records at Dupont Circle—where my husband introduced me to I. B. Singer and I persuaded him to read James Baldwin—through the middle years of our marriage when gifts given on holidays and birthdays always included a book or two, despite the fact that reading time was a rare respite, and continuing through the last few years preceding my husband's death in July, a more quiet period, when we fell into the habit of reading aloud to one another, wanting to make certain that our small discoveries and pleasures were shared.

Which brings me to another problem faced in letting go of books: the insidious way that the words found within haunt us and demand rereading. In taxing times and lively conversation, we often searched for small passages, lines of description and dialogue, fragments of poems that somehow had adhered in the mind and clarified our impulses and predicaments. Take for example the closing lines of Galway Kinnell's poem "Promissory Note" in which he speaks of his own death as a moment of transfer. Perhaps to the reader, but in my mind to the beloved, he says:

I will cross over into you  
and ask you to carry  
not only your own memories  
but mine too until you  
too lie down and erase us  
both together into oblivion.

The poet generously provides the words and understanding that I need. I am now the carrier of two memories. Running my finger along the spines of our books—the ones that he loved, the ones that I loved, the ones we both loved—is an aid in fulfilling that responsibility as well as a comfort. So, I will give an Irish shrug and smile to the dust accumulating on our books and bookshelves and dutifully shred old papers, box up dispensable household goods, fold and donate usable clothing, and make gifts of interesting curios. As for the books, there will be no Swedish Death Cleaning for them. They are here to stay.

# My Way or the Highway: How Not to Win the Heart of a 3 Star Chef

It turned out to be an experiment which totally changed me. In the summer of 1960, after my senior year in High School, I felt I was the luckiest in my group of American students. I grew to love my new “French family” in Roanne (even though when we arrived at the house I was given a maid's room ... totally separate from the main house where my four “brothers” and one “sister” lived. I was, however, never ever made to feel like a second-class guest. I ate all meals together with my French “parents”, their five children and on many occasions the “grandparents”. My new family quickly included me in all of their activities.

Marie-France, my French sister, would put me in back of her on her red Vespa and with my long hair blowing in the wind, hugging her around the waist, we went along country roads most days to “le club tennis.” There we would meet up with her gang and her oldest brother's group of friends. We listened to Dalida and Johnny Holiday on the radio, swam, played tennis, rolled boules, and especially flirted a lot.

Another activity I remember was a fun family trip to Biarritz. We drove to the beach each day where I was shocked to find bikinis and bare breasts for the first time ... nothing like that in Atlantic City! Going topless was certainly not for me although I did end up buying a bikini. I vividly remember the many delicious family lunches and dinners, often around a table outside in a vast garden of lavender under a pergola of roses. Oh, those creamy sauces, succulent meats and pungent cheeses, not to mention the crunchy baguettes, and tartes! I learned to eat quiche, tarte tatin, crème brulé, fromage fraiche and drink wine. M. and Mme. Alex insisted that I call them “Papa” and “Maman,” since they considered me their “adopted American daughter” they had said. This acceptance made me very happy. I loved getting to know each of my four French brothers and my very beautiful sister who was just my age.

Food was indeed the focus of the day. Maman was a fabulous cook and with a young maid's help prepared all the meals. We ate a big meal at noon when Papa returned from his bathrobe factory for lunch and then a lighter meal in the evening. We often spent hours talking and laughing around the table. I had gained pounds by the end of that summer.

One unforgettable day, the Alex family decided to take me for lunch to a restaurant owned by their very good friends in Roanne. The restaurant was called "Les Frères Troisgros." This was not just another bistro or brasserie, but a truly elegant restaurant full of fresh flowers, splendid cutlery and crystal on white tablecloths. (I did not know it at the time, but it was a very famous 3-star restaurant in the Guide Michelin.) The formally dressed waiter took our orders; I chose "saumon" with a sorrel sauce. After some champagne and several small courses beforehand (for first time I saw edible flowers on a dish), my saumon finally arrived. I cut into the salmon and found that, although it was cooked on the outside, the inside was totally gelatinous, in fact RAW. To explain ... I have never been able to eat any fish or meat close to rare let alone raw. It is hard to express how repulsed and embarrassed I was. I finally asked if I could speak to the waiter and request that my salmon be more cooked. We all waited and suddenly a man emerged rapidly from the kitchen and stood right beside me. He was wearing a tall white hat so I guessed he was the head chef. It was Monsieur Troisgros himself, good friend of Papa. "What is the matter with your food?" he said to me with irritation. I tried to explain that I was not used to fish which was raw inside and would prefer to have it cooked more. He quickly explained to me that he did not wish to change the way he cooked this dish. "It is nouvelle cuisine and this is the way I want it in my restaurant. If I cook it more it will not be my creation," he said. I wanted to hide under the table in humiliation as he stared at me with his refusal. I felt like an ugly American, but I just could not get myself to eat the fish. I was used to the American idea of "wanting to please the customer." This is not always true in Europe, I learned.

That memorable summer with my French family did change my life in many positive ways. My French became fluent and I enjoyed the warmth of this wonderful welcoming family. I decided to major in French in college with the idea of returning to France for a junior year which I later did. I have visited this family many times and we are still in touch. I even hosted one of the Troisgros sons in my home in DC. I have also hosted the children of Marie France and her brothers. After graduate school I became a French teacher and, as a true Francophile, have helped to spread my love of French culture and language to my students. My husband and I go to France every year. I am active in Washington Accueil, a French organization at the Embassy where I get to use my French and meet French people who come to DC to live. And most of all I

adore French cuisine and remember the joy of discovering it that summer when I was a student on “The Experiment for International Living.”

I still do my best to avoid sushi.