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A Home of Her Own:
(Writing) a Family Story of Separation and Second Chances¹

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Abstract

On March 16, 1996, I interviewed my mother, Beth Tillmann, about her parents' divorce and her life as a foster child. From detailed notes taken during our phone conversation and from family stories told to me throughout my life, I constructed a narrative titled "A Home of Her Own." Its structure and tone mimic the way my mother speaks about the dissolution of her family of origin and her attachments to and separations from those who tried to help her rebuild a sense of home. After the story, I discuss what narrative representations of loss offer the writer, the participant, and the reader.

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Loss finds its way into each of our homes. Sooner or later, through experiences such as abuse, separation, and death, individuals and families grieve for needs not met, ties unbound, and dreams never realized.

One source of pain in my family history in some ways culminated, and in other ways began, with the divorce of my maternal grandparents. Although Victor and Myrtle Blaisdell separated in 1960, 11 years before my birth, their disjoining fundamentally altered who my mother would become, and by extension, who I would become.

By the logic of our culture of "family values," Beth Tillmann never should have become the woman I know as my mother. The first 18 years of her life--as a neglected little girl, the offspring of an alcoholic mother, a daughter of divorce, a foster child for eight years, and later a teenage mother herself--read like a recipe for poverty and despair. In the 28 years that followed, however, she would graduate from college, become a compassionate and skilled public health nurse, sustain a 27-year commitment with my father, and successfully raise three children. How? I believe that my mother has used her childhood pain as a resource to fashion a protagonist self-in-a-story that helps her give meaning to the epiphanies in her sometimes distressful past (see Denzin, 1988), cope with present circumstances, move toward a future of hope, and communicate that hope to others. These are narrative's tasks.

I base "A Home of Her Own" on family stories told to me throughout my life and on detailed notes I took during a phone conversation with my mother on March 16, 1996. In the following pages, I attempt to recount my mother's experiences as she does--in a story that moves back and forth through time, with scenes sometimes vivid and detailed and other times sketchy, like memory itself, and in an often muted tone where a current of strong emotion rises to the

surface only occasionally. I write this as testament of my mother's capacity for survival and of the potential in all of us to reach the other side of loss.

* * *

A Home of Her Own

Ten-year-old Beth wanders that liminal state between sleeping and consciousness. Distant accordions and fiddles play German polka--her father's favorite music.

"I'm home," she thinks. "Just a bad dream."

The tempo picks up. Smiling, Beth reaches out, saying, "Dad?"

"Beth?" someone calls.

"Dad?"

She opens her eyes slowly, running her hands along an unfamiliar headboard.

"It's Barb, honey."

Beth recognizes the voice of her foster mother. "Where am I?" she asks.

"You're home," Barb says.

"Home?"

* * *

One year before, Duane and Merlin, Beth's brothers, left for Herman and Alice Jones' farm in El Paso, Wisconsin. No fanfare or explanation signalled their departure. One day the boys lived with their parents and siblings; the next, they moved away.

Not long ago, the big car came for the youngest children, Roger and Larry. Their father was working when social services pulled into the dirt and gravel drive; their mother was probably screwing the neighbor out in his barn. Neither parent kissed their sons, reassured them, or said,

"Goodbye, my darlings." As the big car pulled away, Roger and Larry climbed up on the back seat and turned to face their siblings, Marge, Beth, Pat, and Gary, who stood bewildered on the front porch. The children created no drama; no one cried, kicked, or screamed as the social worker drove the boys to Plum City, where an aging couple took them in.

Soon after, the big car came again, this time for Pat and Beth. They had nothing to pack, save a few tattered clothes and their school books. It may seem strange, but after struggling to survive amid the daily chaos of almost total unsupervision, leaving home felt more like a vacation than a rupture of childhood.

* * *

Sometimes, after everyone retires for the night, Beth cries softly to herself--so much space in this foreign house, so much room in this bed for one.

* * *

"You awake Beth?" Barb asks from the doorway.

"I'm awake," she says.

For a moment, Beth wishes to return to her polka dreamings, but then she caresses the crisp, clean sheets that cover her bed--her very own bed. In her family's rural, two-room abode, they had a pair of double beds for 8 children.

Each night, Beth competed with Marge, Roger, and Larry for a share of the quilts and a spot on the mattress as far away as possible from Pat, who wet the bed. On many bitter winter mornings, Beth awakened damp, cold, and smelling of urine. The siblings teased Pat unmercifully for her incorrigible bladder. Their mother tried to beat Pat's habit out of her, and when that failed, she stripped Pat from her bed clothes, pinned a diaper on her, and forced her to wear it as a badge

of shame.

But those times have passed. In this place, Beth encloses herself in warm, dry layers of bed linens she need not share.

"Come downstairs, won't you?" Barb requests.

"Okay."

As Barb turns to leave, Beth thinks fondly of her new nightly ritual. Each evening at bedtime, Barb follows Beth up to her room, pulls back the sheets and blankets, directs Beth to crawl inside, and tucks the covers beneath her chin. Not wanting her to leave, Beth begins to chat; and even when it's late, Barb leans in, eyes fixed on her foster daughter, and listens.

Barb never speaks in the sharp, bossy tone Beth's mother used. Used, that is, when she bothered to come home from the neighbors' farm, where they allowed no children. Barb never says, "Leave me alone!" or "Get the hell out of here!" Barb never prefers invisible children.

No one fears a besotted rage in Barb's house. She would never strike her husband with a fire poker, making his arm spurt blood and the children huddle in corners, under beds, and beneath the kitchen table.

* * *

Beth misses her dad sometimes. He likes whiskey too much perhaps, but he's a gentle man and a jovial drunk. Her father raised his hand to her only once. A girl of seven, Beth laid her pants on the iron stove to dry. When she turned her attention, they caught fire. Dad struck her bottom not in anger but in fear of loss, and when her eyes welled with tears, he caressed her cheek and said, "I'm sorry."

Her mother will visit just three times this year, but her father comes every Saturday. Never

possessive or jealous, Barb and Dan Schmiechen encourage her relationship with her dad. Barb always greets him sweetly, "Well, Victor, my goodness. Come on in."

Dad takes her shopping, then back to the two-room place she used to call home. While he sits a spell, Beth makes him French toast, just as Barb taught her, with cinnamon sprinkled on top. After breakfast, they walk to the sand pits and throw horseshoes. Later, they hop in Victor's car and travel the county to see her siblings.

That year, she cuts a wallet-size print from her school pictures. On the back Beth writes, "Dear Father, you are the best father in the world. I wouldn't want anybody else. With great love, Beth."

She learns to love Dan, too, of course, but for different reasons. His ministry helps her find God, and his hearty, full laugh comforts her like nothing else in the world.

* * *

Amid the search for her robe, Beth takes in scents of bacon, eggs, and pancakes on the griddle downstairs. The Schmiechen household gathers for three meals every day, each prepared at its usual, predictable time.

In her parents' house, meals came sporadically. The children rationed and stashed food for times when the cupboards sat as empty as their stomachs. Sometimes they ate only potatoes for supper, sometimes nothing at all.

* * *

Within a few weeks, Beth settles into the Schmiechen home. She finds contentment in the orderly life they offer.

Pat, on the other hand, doesn't adjust so easily. One day, she scribbles blue crayon across

the bathroom wall. When Barb confronts her, Pat blames Beth, and both girls spend the afternoon scrubbing.

"What's the matter with you?" Beth asks, handing Pat a damp cloth.

"I don't like it here," Pat tells her.

"Why not?"

"I wanna go home," Pat whimpers.

"Home to where?" Beth asks.

"To Mom and Dad."

"You have no home with them anymore," Beth tells her. "None of us does."

The Schmiechens prove unable to awaken Pat from her dream of family reconciliation. A year after the girls moved in, Dan and Barb enter Beth's room.

"Pat will be leaving soon," they tell her. "A family with four boys wants her to live with them."

"And me?" Beth asks. "Will I be leaving, too?"

"No, Beth," they assure. "You'll be staying right here."

That week, the big car came and took Pat to her second foster home.

* * *

Three years later, the big car came for Beth as well.

"I've been offered a parish in Tomah," Dan explains to her. "I want you to come, too. I've asked your father for permission to adopt you, but he loves you too much. He can't let you go."

"You're leaving without me?" she asks.

"I'm so sorry, Beth. I feel like you belong with us."

"You can't stay?"

"I wish we could."

Barb cries when the big car appears outside. This time, Beth cries too.

The social worker drops her at the home of her former history teacher. Jim Kenall and his wife, Marcy, treat Beth well, but she never feels the same kind of ease she experienced with the Schmiechens. Night after night, she lies awake writing letters to Barb, her tears blurring the ink into murky blue streaks.

One evening, Jim sits on the edge of her bed. "I know you're unhappy," he says. "But you don't have a family anymore. You're in our home now, and you must learn to make the best of things."

So she did. When they asked her to wash the dishes, she gladly obliged. When Marcy roused her Saturday morning to help clean house, she got up. When they requested that she baby sit the boys, she agreed. For those who sheltered and cared for Beth, she made no trouble.

* * *

Four years later, she left her second foster family for college. Beth met my father that year. His brown eyes enchanted her; his wit moved her to leave a high school sweetheart. She became pregnant in February of 1969; they married that summer.

My parents found an old, run-down apartment near the Eau Claire campus where my father studied accounting. It was, to be certain, a cheap, dumpy place. But there, no one shouted; there, those who left always returned, and there, my mother could start over and build, at last, a home of her own.

* * *

Commentary

Had my mother collapsed beneath her losses, I would have understood. But, as she tells it, the circumstances that weighed so heavily upon the Blaisdell children--poverty, neglect, divorce, and separation--also served as a foundation upon which she could build a courageous self. To accomplish this, my mother rhetorically positions herself as a heroine who knew how to glean from the available resources.

Of course, it is not a story she created alone. In conversation with caring others, such as her father, her foster parents, and now, her daughter, Beth has engaged in a relational project/process of co-construction (see Ellis & Bochner, 1992), creating a self-in-a-story, an autobiography that is really sociobiography (Gergen, 1991, p. 164).

An important sub-genre of sociobiography is the account. As the work of Harvey and his colleagues shows (Harvey, 1996; Harvey, Orbuch, Weber, Merbach, & Alt, 1992; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990; Weber & Harvey, 1994), when we experience loss, we often feel the need to account for what is missing, to name its significance in our lives, and to draw meaning from it, for ourselves and for others. According to our culture's canonical family story (see Bruner, 1990), two biological parents, who stay together "until death do they part," provide for and nurture their children. When a family strays from this pattern, as my mother's did, members experience the deviation with a sense of loss. That loss calls forth the human impulse to narrate, to produce an organized account that makes the experience somehow comprehensible and meaningful.

Though I see how my mother's story functions in this way, I must admit that I sometimes wonder if her renderings (and my renderings of her renderings) deny the pain of her losses. She speaks of those days matter-of-factly, almost as if she refers to someone other than herself. I know

my mother as a sensitive woman who laughs often and cries easily. But her voice never quakes when she talks about her childhood, and her eyes don't well with tears, though she might respond in these ways to something as mundane as an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Originally, I had planned to write a graphic, experience-near, first-person account of her losses. When I interviewed her, however, she recalled little about how the neglect and the separations felt. I thought about probing her for details and challenging her sometimes tidy account of coping. But why? My mother's narrative works very well for her. She speaks a story in which she can live and presents herself as a character with whom she can live.

As all life stories are, hers is a selective, partial, incomplete, and *fundamentally revisable* rendering of events (see Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1996). While remaining faithful to circumstances and feelings, my mother's story aims less to recapture what "really" happened than to put the occurrences to use. Thus, the question for her, and for all of us, is not "What is THE true story of this life?" but, "Given these experiences, which story (or stories) can be told and for what purposes?" I believe my mother has chosen wisely.

Of course, "A Home of Her Own" is not my mother's story but MY story of her story. Constructing **this** account **this** way, I believe, has implications for the author, the participant, and the reader.

As I reread what I have written, I ask myself, "What kind of character have I created for my mother in these pages?" and, "What kind have I crafted for myself?" Young Beth, I see, emerges as both a victim of circumstances beyond her control and as a person who rises above those circumstances. I self-consciously present Beth in this manner to offer my mother (and others who know such losses) an image of herself as strong and noble, an image that meets her "narrative

challenge" (Bochner, 1994) by bringing peace to her remembered past and by offering her a vision of herself she will want to sustain. Though the narrative ends 19 months before my birth, I am implicitly a character in the story as well. By constructing Beth's life with my father as a second chance, I too become an opportunity for her growth, a means for my mother to create for herself what others failed to provide. This "act of meaning" (see Bruner, 1990) endows my existence, as well as hers, with purpose. The characters, in the end, offer my mother and me "possible selves" (Gergen, 1991, p. 72) who return to where we have been in order to discover where we might go.

For me, writing "A Home of Her Own" also transformed the fragments of my mother's past into a coherent and meaningful whole. Though I wrote from a distant, third-person stance, I found the process of creating the narrative quite painful and troubling at times. In trying to mimic her speech, I sensed an abyss beneath the words. But was this my own projection based on how I imagine I would feel in her circumstances? Had she resolved the losses and moved on? Or was her tale merely a cover for unhealed wounds? Still, the story she tells has enabled my mother to build a constructive life. Perhaps to continue building, she needs to leave her pain in the past. Perhaps the pain I experienced in writing her experience allows her losses to be recognized and grieved so that she and I can move forward, together.

For you, the reader, this account offers both instruction and companionship. Specifically, it shows the human condition in its cycles of loss and renewal. Over the past several years, a number of social scientists have turned away from more traditional modes of representation and embraced narrative to understand for themselves the experience of loss and to help others sense and feel it. They have investigated such emotional journeys as cancer (Butler & Rosenblum, 1991; Frank, 1991; Paget, 1993), abuse (Ronai, 1995), abortion (Ellis & Bochner, 1992), anorexia

(Kiesinger, 1995; Mukai, 1989), bulimia (Kiesinger, 1995; Tillmann-Healy, 1996), racism (James, 1994), disability (Zola, 1982), abandonment (Jago, in press), and the death of a partner (Ellis, 1995a), a brother (Ellis, 1993), and a friend (Cherry, 1996; Ellis, 1995b). Like these works, "A Home of Her Own" connects the "experiential particularity" (Baumeister & Newman, 1994) of specific losses to the more general experience of readers who grieve, now or in the future, for dashed hopes and plans. In the end, such accounts teach us to ask not, "How can I recover what was lost?" but "Through this pain, what can I accomplish, and who can I become?"

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