



## *'Keep It In the Family'*

### **Casting Sociological Lights on the Secrets of My Life**

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author applies various sociological theories (phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, social exchange/rational choice theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and the postmodern perspective) to explore her experience with abuse and familial conflict while growing up. The author writes, "Morrie Schwartz says we must love one another or die. The fact is, there is no foundation, no secure ground, upon which people may stand today if it isn't the family. It's become quite clear to me as I've been sick. If you don't have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don't have much at all. Love is so supremely important. As our great poet Auden said, "love each other or perish" (Albom, 91)." She continues, "This message made me feel that I needed to write on a piece of paper about all the people I had problems with and tear it up. I should move forward with forgiveness and acceptance of everything that I have gone through. I will keep an open mind for my future and learn from past mistakes that become my own life lessons. There will be no more secrets in my life."

There are many things in my life that I can reflect on and many questions I have as to why I do the things I do. Sociological imagination enables us "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Wallace and Wolf, 108). If I use my sociological imagination, I can explore deeper and try to analyze my self in relation to the larger picture. After all, I'm just another girl in the world. I have closed many doors from my past because I did not want to deal with the issues. I was even scared to sit down and write about them. In *Writing As A Way of Healing*, Louise DeSalvo writes "I was stopping myself from writing my own life story. I feared I

would find it unbearable" (19). I'm hoping that during this process I can find answers to some of the questions I have, like how my family affected me growing up. Sociologist Robert Merton's concept of dysfunctions suggests that "the item may have consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system" (Wallace and Wolf, 48). In my case, my dysfunctional family may have disturbed my adaptation to the world.

This story begins with my father, who migrated here from Korea after his sister married an American partly so that she could bring her poverty stricken siblings out of Inchon. They had lost both their par-

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ents from illness at a very young age and another two brothers died along the way. The four of them won a ticket to America because of their older sister's sacrifice. My mother, who grew up in a one-bedroom apartment with her parents and brother, met my father at a college dance. My father courted my mother until she proposed marriage to him. Little did he know that she really wasn't in love with him, but using him for payback towards an old fling. They soon married and gave birth to my older brother. I followed a year later. I couldn't agree more with SUNY Oneonta Ira Omid (pseudonym) in her article in *Human Architecture*, "Links in the Chain: Untangling Dysfunctional Family Ties." I felt as though we had a similar family background and sympathize with her statement, "Is there such thing as a normal family? I would like to think so after having grown up the way I did" (Omid, 10). Ira grew up in a hostile atmosphere because of siblings that did not accept her father marrying their mother. Even though my story is not the same as hers in details we could relate to a few things that has happened to us in our dysfunctional upbringing.

I would like to say that I had a perfectly happy childhood, but that is so far from the truth. My warm, loving, safe, stable environment was at a minimum and I did not have close relatives or family vacations. I was deprived of the typical childhood **norms** of interacting. **Sociologist** James Coleman suggests that these norms sometimes involve "fundamental conceptions of rights" (Wallace and Wolf, 370). Deprived of such norms, there were rights that I was entitled to but never received. Instead, I suffered from physical, mental, sexual, and verbal abuse in the course of both my **primary and secondary socializations**. These socializations involved were my family and my peers.

I remember so vividly the day that I went downstairs into the kitchen of our home and sat down on a chair holding a

pamphlet book about a frog. It said to tell a parent if you are ever uncomfortable with someone. It was just like McGruff the Crime Dog's ad 'Take a Bite out of Crime,' except it was about sexual abuse and a frog. My mother was cooking dinner and, being only five years old, I tried to gather up the nerve to bring up the topic. So I handed her the pamphlet and she looked at it and said "yeah?" I told her I was uncomfortable around grandpa.

My mother immediately turned off the stove and rushed me up to my room. I learned then and there that I was not alone. My grandfather did the same things to my mother when she was growing up, except that my grandmother never believed her. Instead, she made excuses for him. When it was my turn, my grandmother finally believed. I was no longer allowed to sleep over my grandparents' house and the issue was never spoken about again. I was told constantly growing up not to talk about problems with others, I had to keep it in the family. In the film, *The Matrix*, there is a scene where Neo meets Morpheus. Morpheus explains to Neo that the matrix is a computer-generated dream world that the A.I. (artificial intelligence) created to keep humans under control. It was the world pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. I almost felt as though that is what I did in order to avoid the issues in my life. I closed the door behind me and created a fake reality where everything in my life was just fine.

It was not until seventh grade when issues were brought to the surface again after I was chosen as one of the troubled teens in my class to participate in female-group counseling once a week. I accepted because it was an easy out from my social studies class. As I am thinking about it now, all my closest friends were in that therapy group. Apparently my whole Jr. high clique had issues.

I was very quick to tell my stories because someone was actually willing to lis-

ten. I told them of the discomfort I had with going to my grandparents' house and how my grandfather would always tell me not to tell anyone. It was a secret between us. I told them about my mother's affair and how I hated my father. I felt bad, because I knew I was breaking my mother's rule to keep it in the family but I realized I was depressed and it felt damn good to get attention. A social worker was sent out to our house soon after and I realized the extent of my mistake. My mother was so mad at me. She told me that when the social worker came to the house I was to lie and tell them that I was fine and I was just going through puberty with mixed emotions. I started to believe that my mother's story was true and thought that maybe I was overexaggerating. After all, she was the adult and I was just a little girl. What did I know? This time I closed the door and promised it would never be opened again, until now.

Here I am now, a twenty-six years old reflecting on my haunted past—opening a door that I had closed so long ago, reflecting on my family secrets and lies that have shaped the way I am and how I think of myself. I'm smitten by what Edmund Husserl defines **phenomenology**, as the "interest in those things that can be directly apprehended by one's senses" (Wallace and Wolf, 263). I wonder if the things I do or think about in my point of view are even real or just made up in my mind. Are my senses accurate? Is the way I see my family even how they see themselves? According to William Isaac Thomas social actors behave and play their roles depending on the **'definition of the situation' they find themselves in. However, this becomes complicated when various actors, say, in my family, have differing definitions of the everyday lives of the family.** Individuals have different interpretations of the same situation (Wallace and Wolf, 202), and I doubt how I saw and sensed things happening were the same as the way others did.

Although I call out issues I had growing up, my mother would probably say that my brother and I had a great upbringing and my father would say that at least I wasn't the one who grew up in a shack in Korea begging for food. To better understand whether or not my life was good, I would have to use George Herbert Mead's **role taking** theory of the self and put myself in their shoes. They would be right if I looked at it their way. At least I had a roof over my head. Both my parents were alive and well. I did not have to share a bedroom with my brother. My family's **social class** was lower middle class by the time I was in Jr. high. There were hard times when we didn't have money for food or heat or medical bills, but we pulled through them. We were what Nazli Kibria would consider a support network in her book, *Families in the US: Kinship and Domestic Politics*. We as a family were a household that worked and contributed together. There was a physical, emotional, intellectual and dependent connection among all the members of the household (Kibria, 55). We made it through these difficult times by helping each other out.

Now when I look back at those years I can't complain because there are other people who have or had it worse than I. In the film *Affluenza* the term was defined as being an unhappy condition of overload, debt and anxiety. My family definitely suffered from spending more than we had and I quickly connected to this film. Though we had financial hardships, I saw what it did to my parents. I think this made me have no desire for material things growing up. I may look at my family in a broader level and its place in society, but as I dig deeper, there are still issues at the micro, everyday level that I still have to explore.

My relationship with my father was great when I was a little girl. If I ever felt love from anyone in my family when I was little, it was from my father. He used to tuck me in every night, stroke my hair and tell

me bible stories until I fell asleep. He answered all my curious questions on life and tried to make me wise. I used to wait for him everyday after school until he came home from work. He made me feel safe and warm and loved. I remember how awful I felt when I had to keep a secret from him that my mom made me promise not to tell.

This secret was that while he was at work and my brother at school, her other lover would come over. I was never allowed to come down stairs when he was stopping by for lunch. I was not allowed to tell my father or brother anyone stopped by. My mother was having an affair with the pastor of our church, who was also the principal of my elementary Christian school. I was only four and couldn't go to school yet so I would be home all day with my mother. One time I was really thirsty so I snuck down stairs and I saw them cuddling on the couch. That's when I realized that my mommy was doing something wrong.

I'm not really clear about what happened back then, but my mother tells me the pastor knew he was sinning and had to end their arrangement. He moved down to Florida but came back a few years later and contacted my mother. The affair began again when I was in third grade and this time, I didn't keep it a secret when my father came to me for the truth. It didn't matter that I broke this promise to my mother though, because she came home that night in tears and told my father everything. I was off the hook. I don't even know if my brother ever knew anything or if he was always kept in the dark. That week we had a family meeting and my parents announced that they were going to get a divorce. My brother couldn't stop crying and I remember being ok with it. I was actually happy and thought that it was for the best. My parents were constantly fighting and yelling and it scared me. I just wanted it to be over and I actually thought it would be cool to have split parents.

One night my grandmother came over in a rage because my mother had called her to tell her that my parents were arguing about us. We were called out of our rooms and given an ultimatum on deciding which parent we were going to go with. It felt like a scene from the film *Twelve Angry Men* where a bunch of jurors had to make a decision to put a young boy, a possible murderer, into the electric chair. All of them agreed the boy was guilty but one. I was that one. My mother, grandmother and brother all wanted us to be with my mom but I wanted to go with my father. My brother and I both agreed that we did not want be split up. My father shouted in a bit of rage that if my mother took us then he would never see us again and if he took us then she would not be able to see us. Nothing was even resolved that night. My grandmother was angry at me for choosing my father and being the one juror who did not agree.

As awful as their fighting was, my parents came to the conclusion that they would not get a divorce and try to work things out for the kids. We left our second private school and moved to a nicer area. It was here that I began to hate my father. The relationship between my father and I changed drastically after we moved and I started fourth grade at a public school. As I started to go through puberty and adolescence there were a lot of things that I did not understand about my racial identity. I never knew that I was different until I met the kids at the public school. In Christian school, race was never an issue. I was asked constantly by other students what my nationality was. When I was in Jr. High my Korean background was used against me by other clique members and they called me racist names when they were mad at me. I became ashamed that I was different and I hated my father for it. The way I felt about myself was a result of what the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley calls the **Looking Glass self**. This concept is "the

self you understand as a result of the information reflected back at you in the judgments of others with whom you interact" (Wallace and Wolf, 2003). Cooley's own definition is clearer, noting that the looking glass self involves three aspects: how I imagine others perceive me; how I imagine them judge me; and the negative or positive feeling I get as a result. Even if others may not have seen and judged me as ugly, in *my imagination* of how they saw and judged me, I perceived myself as an ugly person and different because I was Asian. It was what had been reflected back to me by my secondary group. I processed this information rather quickly and that contributed to my already low self-esteem.

When my father came to the U.S., he had to go through the **assimilation** process. This meant that he had to conform into American values, culture, and norms and leave his Korean culture behind. He was quick to forget about his past and never talked about Korea to my brother and I. He would not teach us the language if we asked him. I used to ask my aunts and uncle how to say certain words in Korean. I think that because he did not teach us about his heritage, it was harder for me to accept that I was Korean too. I always wondered, and still do to this day, why it has been such a dominant part of my identity. I am equally white as I am Asian so why do people not call me out on my 'whiteness?' It started to form a sort of **cognitive dissonance** in me. I began to be racist towards my own kind. I didn't like Asian people, they annoyed me, I thought they were ugly and yet, I was Asian. When I read the article by a UMass Boston student, titled "Why Do I Not Like Me?," in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, I felt as though I could connect with the author C.G. She had moved to America when she was younger from the Philippines and began to gain a lot of weight. She wrote "I never knew what a big deal physical appearance was until I was constantly in-

sulted and made fun of most of the time in my family gatherings" (C.G, 2). I felt as though I did not know that physical appearance or race was important until I had been constantly insulted by my friends and my peers. Being part Asian was like another secret that I had to hide. Luckily, as I grew older I realized how ridiculous I had been to be ashamed of my heritage and became proud of who my father is and happy that Asian blood flows through my veins. I called everyone who made fun of me ignorant, but I was the ignorant one then.

On top of losing a close relationship with my father back then, I had my mother to deal with. After her adultery, she went into a depression and became ill. My grandmother had to move into our new home with us so she could take care of my brother and I so my mom could get better. I felt as though this was the time where my mother and I had swapped positions. I took on the **role** as mother. I became a mother to my own mother and still am. In her article, "Life is Change: My Adolescent State of Mind," UMass Boston student Lora Aurise writes about her relationship to her mother after being raised by her father. She wrote "I kept telling myself it was only temporary and regardless of my mother's personality, she was still my mother and I was determined to make things work because this was my decision" (Aurise, 7). After reading this I felt like it explained my whole attitude towards my mother now that I am older. No matter how crazy my mother is or what she puts me through, she is still my mother and I disguise my animosity towards her because I want to make things work. Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of **dramaturgy** suggests that individuals play roles in the theater of everyday life, where, similarly, there is a front stage and a back stage to their performance. The back stage is usually used to prepare for the performance and the front stage is the actual presentation of self or follows a script, often involving efforts at impression manage-



ment (Farganis, 341). I find this theory helpful in understanding my behavior toward my mother, because I have to often prepare myself in the back stage and use **impression management** in the front stage to act out happiness when I meet or talk with her.

At first I was excited that my mother turned to me for support, I wanted to be her best friend. But I did not know that the things she would tell me throughout the years I grew up would greatly affect me later on in life. I carried the weight of her problems on my shoulders as well as my own. She quickly became a burden on my life. I **internalized** her issues and accepted her norms resulting from her own process of socialization. She was my mother and I learned we must keep our secrets in the family. Thus I participated in letting her views socially construct my reality.

When looking back at certain family issues, I only think that the experiences that I have gone through have only made me a stronger person. I wanted answers to my questions and wanted to fill the missing pieces to my puzzle. As Louise DeSalvo reflects on Wayne Muller's saying, "your life is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be opened," (9) I am beginning to think my closed doors are gifts to be open.

So now that these doors have been opened again, I have been looking to understand how the past has affected me and where my place is in this world. To me, being just another girl in this world, makes me feel like a little dot, that's in a classroom, that's in a university, that's in a city, that's in a state, that's in a country, that sits on a spinning globe. I am insignificant. Or maybe that is what I believed after growing up in a dysfunctional family.

I can see that the past 5 years I have been living in Massachusetts has been a life changing experience for me. I dread going home to my home state to visit and I would like to fix the resentment that is keeping me away. According to **Functionalism**, society

is a "system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole" (Wallace and Wolf). However, my family didn't have this functionalist perspective. "A moment when there is no 'I,' no 'you,' only 'we.' One of connection and communion, of 'conspiracy'—a breathing together" (DeSalvo, 207) is a moment that I dream about having with my family. Family should be a cohesive group and the roles should all work together to make it a functional unit. We could not work together as a whole to be a family. My mother's mind was focused on herself, my dad's mind stuck in Korea amid an American culture, and my brother and I grew apart. It appears that our family lacked a **collective conscience**, which Emile Durkheim defined as "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society" (Wallace and Wolf, 20). That is perhaps one reason our family institution was dysfunctional.

According to Karl Marx's **conflict theory**, "economic characteristics [are] the sole crucial determinant of both social structure and people's chances in life" (Wallace and Wolf, 74). In our society and other cultures there is an ongoing struggle that exists between Marx called the '**proletariat and the bourgeoisie**.' In more familiar terms, upper class, middle class, and lower classes in society are engaged in various forms of struggle with one another. In the film *The Big One* Michael Moore documents fortune 500 companies that make huge profits and continue to lay off their workers. Moore calls this "economic terrorism," throwing people out of work just to make a little more. I relate my family to this conflict because I lived through this struggle my whole life. As I mentioned before, both my parents were raised in poverty, on opposite ends of the world. My father had grown up in a shack in Korea, where his bed was a rolled up mat that lied upon dirt. I could never imagine living like that, but he did. My mother was raised in a one-bedroom apart-

ment, where she shared the room with her younger brother and her parents slept on a pull-out couch in the living room. After examining why my parents had ruined my life, I learned a few things and one was that it was not entirely their fault. They were dealing with their own life perceptions and circumstances. Louise DeSalvo mentions how looking at pictures of her parents reminded her of the good times that they once had. She writes "I learned that my parents weren't the cardboard cutouts I'd held in memory. I learned they'd had problems, that there were reasons for their behavior. I started again to feel the love for them I'd felt years before, while also still harboring feelings of sorrow and resentment against them for how I'd been treated" (140). I had realized that my parents had bigger issues in their lives that I did not understand as a little girl. The small world to me was not so small after all. I had finally grasped the bigger picture.

Although I'm not a communist, the inequalities of our society aggravates me at times. I see now how hard my father had to work to make it in America and take care of his family. I hated growing up poor, but I understand that it was not his fault. My father did the best he could as a factory worker. He had dedicated 30 years to this company and I watched him struggle. My dad would come home at times stressed and angered with this company, always worried if they were going to let him go. I remember just recently how excited he had become when they finally allowed him overtime. I wondered why it had taken so long for them to give him this opportunity if he wanted it that badly.

In the film *Tuesdays With Morrie* Mitch Albom visits his dying professor, Morrie, and learns life lessons from him. On one Tuesday, Morrie tells Mitch about his father, an immigrant from Russia that worked at a fur factory. It instantly reminded me of my father, an immigrant coming to America and taking on the first

job that he could get no matter how much he hated it. They both invested themselves into their work, but did not make much money off of it. My mother did not help this circumstance, because she jumped into marriage as soon as she could to get out of her own situation.

I learned later that she only worked as a teacher so we could go to the Christian school we attended for free. She spent all of my father's money on furniture and nice things that we could not afford because she was excited to have her own things finally. It became an addiction and it caused many fights between her and my father. When we had moved to another town after her affair, we left the ghetto that we had lived in and tried to start new in an upper class area by renting a house my uncle owned for cheap. He wanted a better education for my brother and I but we realized fast that we did not fit in.

We wore second-hand clothes from thrift stores and didn't have money for a 'hot' lunch. When we went to our friends' homes, they lived in mansions. We were embarrassed to invite them to our house, which was in the same town but deteriorating in the middle of the woods. I felt the difference in classes after moving here at such a young age. This *conflict* gave my parents a feeling of status-power or a head-start in our *capitalist society*, yet they had no power at all. Although it was luxury to our parents who came from nothing, it was hard for my brother and I. It was another secret that we had to keep in our family. We were not rich, we didn't even own the house we lived in. My uncle gave my dad his old Mercedes to fix up so he would blend in with the other families. Everything was a lie to the point that they fooled themselves into believing we were upper class. I grew jealous of friends who had everything, yet lucky that I could be their friend so I can enjoy the things they owned that I knew I never would. I definitely got a taste of these *social "goods"*, which is considered

by the sociologist Randall Collins to be wealth, power, and prestige that, according to him, people pursue in all societies (Wallace and Wolf, 139). Since my brother and I had the chance to get a better education in our new town, we were prepared to strive for higher education and gain this wealth and power.

Collins wrote about *stratification by education*, where 'education qualifications have been used as a resource in the struggle for power, wealth, and prestige' (Wallace and Wolf, 141). Although I was angry that my parents had moved us to a town that my brother and I did not fit in, I did not realize then that it had been for education purposes. They were trying to make things work after my mother's affair, as well as to enroll us in a good school system. To ensure that we got a good education, my parents felt that it was necessary to do this. After graduation we would go to college and continue on the path of using the *credential system* to pursue good careers later in life; Collins states that central to the credential system is education, 'education being a way to set up entry requirements for jobs and limiting competition' (Wallace and Wolf, 142). I was not sure if I would even fit in at college because I always thought that it was where the rich kids went and that I wouldn't be able to afford it. I knew my parents didn't have a college savings for us, so I tried to do well in school in case I could get scholarships.

All of these beliefs that were instilled upon my brother and I as children were part of our *cultural system*, which is a part of what sociologist Talcott Parsons includes as an aspect of his theory of system levels. The cultural system is also known as the symbolic system which is made up of religious beliefs, languages, and national values (Wallace and Wolf, 26). I was raised to believe that studying and working hard would get me further in life and to gain power, prestige and wealth. I am now aiming for my Juris Doctor degree. People al-

ways ask me why I want to be a lawyer and the first thing that I can think of is that in our society, it is good to be a lawyer and working hard will attain wealth. I do not want to be poor, I do not want my children to have to live the way my parents did or be raised the way my brother and I were. Going to bed without dinner and boiling water to take a bath will never be a part of my life again. If we did not have the *cultural capital* provided by my parents to get a good education we would not be determined to get a higher education. So I have to thank my mother for working at the Christian school and my father for moving us to a better town, which helped me prepare for a prestigious career.

Being a female lawyer will also break the norms handed down from the traditional social organizations characterized by mechanical solidarity. When having *mechanical solidarity* "people are basically similar in their social roles; there is little specialization or division of labor" (Farganis, 56). In traditional societies, the basic social roles were strongly attached to different sexes. Today, since most lawyers are still men, they dominate the business world. There is still no equality between men and women in most walks of life. Parsons believed that men are the *instrumental leadership roles* in the family, but I would be the one breaking that norm. According to Wallace and Wolf, Parsons argued that "the instrumental leadership role must be accorded to the husband-father, on whom the reputation and income of the family depend. Likewise he states that because of the occupational responsibilities of the father, the mother must take on the *expressive leadership* role in the socialization of the children" (Wallace and Wolf, 30). These are the roles that my mother and father took on in our family.

I am not a huge feminist, but I like the idea of gaining power that females deserve in our society. *Power* is defined by Max Weber as "the probability that one actor within



a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [or her] own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which the probability rests" (Wallace and Wolf, 122; notice the gender of the language). I feel like being female has had a huge impact on me growing up and I am angered at times by the male dominance in our society. I often ask myself, how can I gain this power, wealth and prestige as a lawyer, when I am known to be universally inferior to men? According to Judith Lorber, "gender inequality—the devaluation of "women" and the social dominance of "men"—has social functions and a social history. It is not the result of sex, procreation, physiology, anatomy, hormones, or genetic predispositions. It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structure and individual identities deliberately and purposefully" (Paradoxes of Gender, 35). What Lorber means to say is that this gender stratification has been socially constructed in our society.

The *gender stratification*, according to Rae Lesser Blumberg, needs to be "confronted explicitly or existing inequalities will tend to reproduce themselves, even among people who consciously reject them" (Wallace and Wolf, 149). I feel as though my future in law will be competitive, but I will be confronting this gender inequality once and for all. It is a lot more than most women do, who allow the oppression to be part of their lives. In the article, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy," Catherine MacKinnon writes, "Pornography is a means through which sexuality is socially constructed, a site of construction, a domain of exercise. It constructs women as things for sexual use and constructs its consumers to desperately want women, to desperately want possession and cruelty and dehumanization" (327). The thought of this absolutely disgusts me and it makes me sad that women who are porn stars or work in

the sex industry contribute to this objectification. I always believed that it was degrading to women and any man who consumed this material was a pervert, or those who spent money on prostitution or at strip clubs only believed women to be a commodity. The sad part is that it doesn't even start at pornography. The degradation of women has been a norm in our society from the beginning.

I feel as though much of my concern in this degradation is partly from my own past. The impact that my experience with my grandfather has left on me is to strongly believe that the dominance of men and submission of women is real. My grandfather's sin to women was an expression of a pervasive social reality and as MacKinnon writes,

It is not only that over a third of all women are sexually molested by older trusted male family members or friends or authority figures as an early, perhaps initiatory, interpersonal sexual encounter. It is not only that at least the same percentage as adult woman are battered in homes by male intimates. It is not only that about a fifth of American women have been or are known to be prostitutes, and most cannot get out of it. It is not only that 85 percent of working women will be sexually harassed on the job, many physically, at some point in their working lives. All this documents the extent and terrain of abuse and the effectively unrestrained and systematic sexual aggression of one half of the population against the other half. It suggests that it is basically allowed" (332).

It is sad to think that in our social system, this gender difference and sexual oppression are accepted. I wondered if I was born a male, would I have had the same ex-

perience with my grandfather? It is possible, but I always blamed part of it on being a girl in this world.

When speaking of gender differences, I also think of suicide and how men are more likely to commit this act in our society. "Many studies have identified a strong link between suicide and diagnosable mental illness, especially depression. So because women suffer from depression at a much higher rate than men, they would seem to be at higher risk for suicide. But women actually commit suicide about one-fourth as often as men" (Science Daily, 1998). I lost a dear friend of mine to suicide. He was my best friend in college. I knew that he had a lot of personal issues and struggled with mental illnesses like depression and alcohol addiction. Thomas Szasz would probably say that my friend's *mental illness* was just a psychiatric diagnosis of how far he deviated from the social norms of our society (Wallace and Wolf, 390). Unfortunately, this would eventually lead to his death. I remember how painful it was to find out what had happened to him, because I was out of town for a while. When I got back and tried to contact him, he was no longer available for me to joke around with. I had no way of reaching him because his parents were victims of a murder-suicide a year earlier and we had no mutual friends. It had just been the two of us in college. I began calling city halls for records and finally I succeeded. G. R., age 24, died on December 20, 2006 by a gunshot wound to the head. I cried for hours and I could only think about how angry I was at him for giving up. It reminded me of my father. Why are men more likely to commit suicide?

When my parents were still trying to make things work to keep our family together it only made matters worse. They both suffered from mental illness and my brother and I both had to cope with it. I remember one winter day I was waiting for my father to come home from work and he was late. I waited for hours and became

very worried. I knew that he wasn't really mentally stable at the time because of his stress from work and my mom. I knew my father was depressed though, because he would not talk to us anymore, he slept a lot and often went missing. This particular day though, I knew that something was wrong. When he came home late that day he did not look like his normal self. He had said he was involved in a car accident and slipped on a patch of ice. That following Sunday, my grandmother and uncle were over and I overheard my uncle telling my mother that my dad told him that he tried to commit suicide by driving the car into a tree. Obviously the plan was unsuccessful and he ended up coming back home, but it horrified me. It was another secret I had overheard and grew up with. According to Emile Durkheim, my father was probably a candidate for *anomic suicide*. "No living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means" (Farganis, 66). My father was living in a world at the time where his norms were conflicting. He was living in a new cultural system, trying to give up the one he grew up in and he was dealing with a marriage that was dysfunctional. He couldn't even be a father to his kids. We took this opportunity to walk all over him in his weak state. I took advantage of my father's weaknesses, hated him for it, and now regret the way I acted as a teenager.

Now that I am older, I can only look back to the past to understand the things that happened to me. I can now question the big and small pictures of stories I had internalized about how society and I interact. In *postmodern perspective*, "the most important component is the rejection of the idea that there can be a single coherent rationality or that reality has a unitary nature that can be definitively observed or understood" (Wallace and Wolf, 421). My views of what happened in my childhood are changing as I am getting older. Michel Foucault emphasizes "the particular way in

which we see and comprehend the world, and that this is also what governs how power is exercised" (Wallace and Wolf, 386). How critically I view my past, and society, can provide me with less or more power in shaping my life and those of others. This power is to get over the scars, the depression, and the bad memories of my past. The older I became, the more I understood. I have forgiven my grandfather, my mother and my father, because I realized that they had their own problems in their back stages and that I only saw their actions on the front stage and how they affected me through my own eyes.

A good thing that my parents did for my brother and I is that they let us learn from their own mistakes. They obviously haven't learned from their own experiences because of the way they act now, but I use their lessons to guide me down the right paths in my life. I feel sorry for my father because he is a lonely old man living by himself, which contributes to his depression. He has become a hoarder, collecting trash and useless items that cover his floors and walls. He will not let my brother or I clean this mess up without a war. I finally gave up.

My mother lives in a studio apartment with my controlling, abusive step-father and still suffers from depression. She has gained a lot of weight, which has started a new array of health problems. She dreams about her first love, the man she should have been with in the first place. It would have avoided all the mess that happened afterwards when she married my father. Now, she can't decide if she should stay with her chauvinistic husband or run away to another country to be with her one true love. I need to work on my relationship with my mother, because I can't deal with her burdens anymore. I rather have a mother than be one. I can only hope I will not make the same mistakes that she has.

My brother is still stuck in our home state and lives in an apartment attached to

my father's messy house. He had developed alopecia a few years back and lost all his hair, including eyebrows and eyelashes that will not grow back. He never strived further than a B.S. in exercise science and is currently unemployed. I wish that we were closer because he is all that I will have for family in the future, but it is hard when I left him behind. I chose to leave years ago and I love Massachusetts now.

I want to be successful in life so I am hoping to finish school in a few years and have that J.D. I'm hoping that I can rebuild family ties with my parents and my brother and I know that I must start now to achieve that. I cannot let my family bring me down anymore. I have to stop worrying about all their problems and focus on my own. Yet I still need to have a relationship with them. Moving away has helped me drastically with this. I feel like a better person with no burdens on my shoulders, except that I am not close to my family. This is the only thing that I would like to change.

Morrie Schwartz says we must love one another or die. "The fact is, there is no foundation, no secure ground, upon which people may stand today if it isn't the family. It's become quite clear to me as I've been sick. If you don't have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don't have much at all. Love is so supremely important. As our great poet Auden said, 'love each other or perish'" (Albom, 91). This message made me feel that I needed to write on a piece of paper about all the people I had problems with and tear it up. I should move forward with forgiveness and acceptance of everything that I have gone through. I will keep an open mind for my future and learn from past mistakes that become my own life lessons.

There will be no more secrets in my life.

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