

## Finding Ourselves Through Others

Nancy Atwood, July 27, 2008

I'm so honored and pleased to be with you today, and a little awed by the responsibility. For inspiration, I'm hoping to channel my grandfather, who was a Unitarian minister. His name was Frank Wright Pratt and he wrote a book called *Boyhood Memories of Old Deerfield*. That's the Deerfield in the western part of Massachusetts, where he grew up. I understand that his book is still for sale in the gift shop in old Deerfield village.

My grandfather has a chapter in the book on his education. He writes ruefully that as a student he was, "very poor in foreign languages, spelling and mathematics." He goes on to say, "If my descendants read this book, I can hear them asking, after reading of my incapacities, 'Was the old fellow a complete moron, or is there **something** he was good at while a boy in school?'" Then he tells us about subjects he **WAS** good at and that he thoroughly enjoyed. They were literature, natural sciences, history and biography. Biography! My eyes lit up when I read that word "biography," because that's what I'm interested in too. And biography is related to autobiography, sometimes called memoir, which is what I'm going to focus on today.

For the past 5 years or so I've been studying memoirs by people from poor and blue collar backgrounds who went on to become successful writers. The two readings that we've had today were written by authors from this group. All these writers grew up in environments where going to college was unusual, and becoming a best-selling author was too fantastic to even consider. But that's what happened to the 3 writers that I'm going to discuss today. They became bestselling authors.

I'm going to talk about these authors—one woman and two men—from the viewpoint of how they came to establish their identities as writers. And I'm going to put that process into a larger context—what it means to establish an identity. By 'identity' I mean identities that people are comfortable with, that work for them and that bring them satisfaction.

My main point about these desirable identities is that they come about because of an individual's interactions with others. To find one's own identity sounds like a solo operation, but actually it comes about in concert with other people. Think about the Lone Ranger. He sounds like a pretty independent fellow. Think again. Those of us of a certain age remember that there wasn't just the Lone Ranger all by himself. There was also Tonto, and that he was the Lone Ranger's clever and trusted Indian companion. So this talk will be not just about the Lone Rangers of writing, but about the Tontos who helped them on their way.

To illustrate this idea of identity growing out of interaction, I'll start with Maya Angelou, the African-American poet whose memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is famous. Originally named Marguerite Johnson, she was about 10 years old when Mrs. Bertha Flowers came into her life. Mrs. Flowers was what Maya Anjelou calls the "aristocrat of Black Stamps." Stamps, Arkansas was where Maya Anjelou, then Marguerite, grew up. Bertha Flowers was on the highest rung of the social ladder among black people in Stamps, Arkansas. Marguerite lived with her grandmother who owned a grocery store. Mrs. Flowers got her groceries at that store and she needed to have them delivered. Mrs. Flowers said she preferred to have Marguerite, not Marguerite's older brother, deliver her groceries. For Marguerite, this was a great honor because of what

Mrs. Flowers represented to her: I quote: “She acted just as refined as white folks in the movies and books” and with her “rich black skin...she was more beautiful, for none of them could have come near that warm color without looking gray by comparison.” There are many kinds of identity, and Mrs. Flowers was a role model for Marguerite of racial identity. I quote again. “It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself.”

Marguerite not only delivered the groceries to Mrs. Flowers, she also became the recipient of Mrs. Flowers’ hospitality, in the form of cookies and lemonade. Eventually they had long chats, which they later called Marguerite’s “lessons in living.” One of these lessons had to do with identity of a different sort—what we might call class identity, in the sense of encouraging respect for the rural working class people Marguerite grew up with. Mrs. Flowers said that “some people, unable to go to schools, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.”

So Mrs. Flowers emboldened Marguerite about race and class. Mrs. Flowers did something else highly specific to Marguerite herself. She saw her as an individual with unusual intelligence. Mrs. Flowers said, “I hear you’re doing very good school work.” However, there was a **but** in that sentence. “I hear you’re doing very good school work, **BUT** that it’s all written.” And here Mrs. Flowers reached out to put her finger on the very problem that she knows Marguerite needed help with. Mrs. Flowers says, “The teachers report that they have trouble getting you to talk in class.” Those of you who have read the book know that when Marguerite was 8 years old she was raped by her mother’s

boyfriend and that after that, because of the trauma, she stopped talking—she became almost totally mute. Mrs. Flowers knows about this silence and finds a way to help her that fits perfectly with who Marguerite is. She is a voracious reader. On that first day when Marguerite delivered the groceries, “Mrs. Flowers,” and I quote, “said she was going to give me some books and not only must I read them, I must read them aloud.” On that first day Mrs. Flowers demonstrated to Marguerite how spoken words have a “far richer meaning” than written words. She read aloud to Marguerite the first pages of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Marguerite had already read the book, but when she heard Mrs. Flowers read it with her “cascading” voice, she was awestruck, hearing “poetry for the first time in my life.” Of course, *A Tale of Two Cities* is prose, not poetry, but when Mrs. Flowers read it aloud it sounded like poetry. And so began their long-term relationship, with Marguerite visiting Mrs. Flowers, borrowing books and reading them aloud to Mrs. Flowers. Thereby over time Marguerite recovered her power of speech. That little girl grew up to be Maya Angelou, who ultimately read aloud her own poetry at the inauguration of a president of the United States—Bill Clinton.

On that first day, however, when she first delivered the groceries to Mrs. Flowers, she had no idea of what lay ahead. But after she left Mrs. Flowers’ house, she did know that something important had happened. She ran down the hill back to her grandmother’s store, thinking excitedly to herself, “I was liked and what a difference it made.” She was liked by this esteemed person, not just for being her older brother’s little sister or her grandmother’s granddaughter, but for being her unique self. Mrs. Flowers’ nurtured her development and that was the “lifeline” that she needed to get back her voice. “I was

liked,” she says, and, above all, “I was respected for being Marguerite Johnson.” She appreciated herself because Mrs. Flowers appreciated **her**.

Now I’m going to move on to talk about another author, Russell Baker. Some of you probably know of him as a former columnist for *The New York Times* and as a host for Masterpiece Theatre. His memoir is called *Growing Up*. He’s someone who was lucky and found an identity at an early age that worked for him for a lifetime. He too grew up poor, but his pathway to success, unlike Maya Anjelou’s, was relatively uncomplicated. When he was in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class he wrote an essay called “The Art of Eating Spaghetti” and the teacher read it aloud to the class. Russell Baker describes what that was like. “He was reading *my words* aloud to the entire class. What’s more, the entire class was listening. Listening attentively. Then somebody laughed, then the entire class was laughing...I was feeling pure ecstasy at this startling demonstration that my words had the power to make people laugh...It was the happiest moment of my entire school career.” The reaction of the class had a profound effect on Russell Baker. He says, “I had discovered a calling.” At age 16, after that event, he began to think of himself as a writer.

He expresses an idea that I think is central to the concept of establishing an identity: the idea that you’re good, maybe better than other people, at this thing that you’ve discovered you like to do. Russell Baker says, too modestly, about writing: “It was the only thing for which I seemed to have the smallest talent.”

When you discover that you have a talent for something, then you want to keep doing it. And you appreciate the person who recognized your talent. After Russell’s teacher read his story aloud, the teacher, Mr. Fleagle, said, “Congratulations!” and commended the story to others as an example of how to write. Later he gave him an A plus. Russell

Baker says, “Mr. Fleagle had opened the door for me....After that I ranked Mr. Fleagle among the finest teachers in the school.”

So for Russell Baker the process of finding a lifelong identity was pretty easy, but for another writer, E. Lynn Harris, it wasn't so easy. Now in his early 50's, Lynn Harris is one of the most popular black male novelists in America, that's according to *The New York Times*, and the winner of the James Baldwin Award for Literary Excellence. His memoir, *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted*, recounts a series of vicissitudes that he encountered on his way to finding an identity. Having grown up poor in Little Rock, Arkansas, he thought that the path to happiness was using his natural smarts and social skills to work for corporate America. So in his 20's he applied for a job as a well paid salesman for IBM. There he learned that what's on the outside—that is, clothes-- may count for more than what's on the inside.

He writes, “It amazes me when I think back on getting a job with IBM, a company very concerned with image. For my final interview with the branch manager [just before he was hired], I wore a black open-collar shirt with a gold chain around my neck. My suit was a well-worn navy blue double-knit number with a matching vest. In addition, I had one of the largest Afros ever known to man, which I would braid nightly to ensure height and bounce.

“On my first day at IBM, my fashion fiasco continued when I wore a modest Sears and Roebuck gray pin-striped suit that had a certain shine to it, with a pink shirt and a brown and blue clip-on tie. I didn't know how to tie a regular tie.

“My first manager, Leon, a well-dressed black man, called me into his office after our first lunch meeting.

“Lynn,” he asked, ‘have you ever heard of Brooks Brothers?’”

“No, sir, I haven’t,” I said.

“He told me he was giving me an advance on my first month’s salary and suggested I take the afternoon to go to a store called Brooks Brothers and see a man whose name he wrote down on a card. ‘Tell him I sent you, and don’t leave until you’ve spent every penny,’ he instructed.

“As I was leaving his office, excited about my new wardrobe, he had one more piece of advice. ‘Lynn, when you leave Brooks Brothers, burn that suit,’ he said, and smiled. On my first day at IBM, I had my first dress-for-success lesson. The first of many lessons I would learn.”

Lynn Harris is gay. Other lessons he had to learn were to accept his identity as a gay man, to overcome dependence on alcohol, and to come to realize that what really made him happy was writing novels. A turning point for him came when he was taking care of another gay black man named Richie who was dying of cancer. Up to that point, when Lynn was in his early 30’s, he had never written a short story or even a poem, but he liked to write to Richie. Everyday after visiting his friend he left him a card or letter to “let him know how much his friendship meant to me”—he knew that his friend was dying. One day after reading one of his letters, Richie looked at him and said, “You know, you write great notes and letters. You should give up this sales b-s and write a book”

“What kind of book?” I asked.

“You could write about us. Not just me and you, but all the children’.” [Meaning them and other gay, black people] You should tell our story’.”

“‘You think I could do that?’”

“‘Why not?’”

“‘I don’t know’.”

“Richie placed his hand on top of mine and looked at me and said, ‘Promise me you’ll think about it.’”

“‘I will’”

Lynn Harris kept that promise. He kept thinking about writing, but it wasn’t until he was in his mid thirties, sober at last, that he bought a desktop computer and decided to start. He got down on his knees and prayed to God to give him “the words and courage” to write, to tell the story of people like him and his friends, “to make people realize that being gay wasn’t just about sex, but about love.” He realized that being a salesman for IBM was all about impressing other people, but that writing fiction was being true to himself and to his talent. Once he began writing he discovered that he had an extraordinary imagination and could easily create inside his head a whole roster of characters and scenarios. Best of all he was happy. He was amazed at how characters in his novel, many of them gay and black, “were coming to life in my mind.” Here’s a quotation from Lynn Harris, a person who has finally found his identity as a writer of fiction peopled with interesting personalities: “I found myself looking forward to the next day when I could return to my new friends.”

We can’t all be successful writers, so I hope it’s clear that this business of finding an identity applies to a range of aptitudes and activities. Some people, for example, are really good at being mothers—that’s where their ability and inclination lie-- and that’s

their primary identity. And of course some people are really good at being IBM salesmen and find their niche there, even though that job wasn't right for Lynn Harris.

To take a personal example from my own background, I want to go back several years to the 1970's when I was working for a planning agency in Boston called United Community Services. We were working on a project designed to produce a big report about mental health services. My job was to staff some task forces that were supposed to figure out how to deinstitutionalize the state mental hospitals. We generated a bunch of statistical data and reviewed theories about what was wrong with state hospitals and how to empty them out, but it all seemed a little abstract to me. I had a master's degree in urban planning but no hands-on experience. I had absolutely no idea what actual mental patients were like, and those were the people we were supposed to be helping by closing the state hospitals and integrating them into the community. So, in order to get actual experience, I decided to become a casework volunteer at Boston State Hospital in Mattapan. That required committing myself to visit a patient every week for a year and to spend a couple of hours with that person outside the hospital, going for a walk or maybe getting a cup of coffee.

My patient was Eleanor, a woman in her late 40's who had been at Boston State Hospital for about 25 years. She wore a sack- like, flowered cotton dress, was missing a few teeth, and had a hand tremor from the anti-psychotic medicine she was given. This was back in the days when state hospitals were filled with lost souls—nobody had visited Eleanor for years. The patients wandered aimlessly about the wards or sat on benches staring off into space. Warehousing was an apt word. The place smelled of too many sweaty bodies cramped together in a darkly lit room where nobody opened the windows.

Well, I had my first visit with Eleanor and after that I got in my car and cried all the way home. All those things that I had read about what was wrong with state mental hospitals were true! But I had committed myself to being her friendly visitor. So for several months Eleanor and I had our weekly get-togethers—a little halting at first, but as we got to know each other, they got easier, much easier. One day stands out vividly in my mind. That day represented a turning point in my life and had a huge effect on the formation of my own identity. I came onto the ward of the state hospital and saw the usual array of patients pacing and sitting silently. They were all basically strangers to me, except for one person, Eleanor, who suddenly looked up from the bench where she was sitting, sat up straight, and smiled broadly. She was happy to see me! She was no longer the anonymous stranger I'd seen months before crouched down in her seat and staring ahead blankly. She was a many-sided person! We had a relationship! I was important to her and she was important to me. To realize that was the turning point. I wanted to help actual, real, alive people and not just write reports about them. Shortly after that I applied to social work school and began a career as a mental health counselor that lasted for several years until I retired in 2003.

Finding a new identity when you're retired is an issue. Maybe you can go on forever being a former this or a former that, but I think you'll probably want to latch onto something a little more substantial. So I'm happy to report that I've found a new identity. It's as an active member of First Church in Boston, and especially as a big advocate and worker on behalf of Learning Community. I wasn't always as active in this church as I am now, but over the years many people have helped me to make the connections that add up to my finding this new, satisfying identity.

Let's look back again at the three authors that I talked about earlier. Maya Angelou, then Marguerite Johnson, Russell Baker, and Lynn Harris and at the turning points that helped to form their identities as writers. All those turning points involved other people. For Marguerite it was the kindly and literary Bertha Flowers. For Russell Baker it was his teacher, the enthusiastic Mr. Fleagle. And for Lynn Harris, it was his terminally ill friend Richie who told him that he was such a greater letter-writer, he ought to start writing for a living. We know that writing is a pretty solitary occupation, but for all these people the inspiration to write came not just from inside their heads, but from making connections and from feeling the caring of other people.

I'd like to end with a quotation from a drug rehabilitation program in New York City called Marathon House. They specialize in helping people to overcome obstacles and to find new and better identities. Here's their slogan:

“You alone can do it, but you can't do it alone.”

That's good advice for all of us. Thank you.