One of the struggles that I have experienced when approaching writing is that I tend to allow my extreme emotions to flood my work in a sloppy and uncontrollable way. The words on the page become dogmatic and preachy. I almost feel as though I need to force the reader to agree with my point of view.

Learning to distance myself from my writing has been helpful. Instead of telling my opinion, I have been challenged to show it through what happens on the page. I have tried to buffet my overly ambitious nature by writing from another's point of view or by writing about issues that are less emotional for me.

The following book review was a huge step in a new direction for me. I was greatly disturbed by many of the issues that were addressed in the book, but I wanted to express my opinion in a calm and dignified manner that would not turn readers away. By using dialogue to express the book's and my own message, I was able to create the emotional distance that was required for me to write an appealing rather than an offensive review.

This was my first truly effective use of metaphor. I was able to maintain the real meaning of my message without coming across as being close-minded by associating the message with a neutral object. Whenever I felt that I was developing a harsh tone, I would return to my metaphor and calm my erratic thoughts.
"This is ridiculous. I am not reading a book about Zen Buddhism and how it can enhance my writing. It's a bunch of crap and I should not be required to waste my precious time studying it. Unbelievable!"

She said this as the deep red rose in her cheeks and her heart palpitated furiously. It was evident that she was miffed, ticked, beside herself. Of course she was biased, but aren't we all. That's what makes us unique individuals. It took some pushing, but the window was beginning to budge.

"Now listen to what I have to say," encouraged the voice behind the page. "Much of this information is quite practical. All you have to know is that there are no rules to writing. Just let go and let it flow."

"Well that seems easy enough. It's almost freeing. I could really like that. I get so frustrated when I get stuck in my writing process that perhaps this relaxed environment could spur on some creativity. But what about ideas, the meaningful element of writing? What if what I write doesn't make sense? It's a worthless scrap."

Again she was becoming critical and flustered, but she refused to give up. She wanted to see if there was any validity to this book. Her real desire was to improve her own writing ability, but the methods of
conventional writing were deeply embedded in her mind. Something would have to break through the window.

"No, no, no. There's that rigidity again. Forget all of that junk you've learned before and only write. Write at night. Write in the morning. Write at your desk. Write in your bed. Just don't forget to write. Put down what comes to mind and refuse to edit anything. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar are all of second importance. Keep the pen in motion and go wild."

"That's too... wide open. I have nothing to follow. No guidelines or directions to pursue. I need something to focus on."

Her heart screamed for structure. The freedom was too much for her to grasp. But that was fine and expected. The pages began to reveal some solutions to her dilemma and detailed some topics to explore.

"Look around and write," beckoned the now familiar voice.
"Remember the past and relive it on the page. Glance around and choose objects to describe. Anything can be an inspiration. People, places, events, animals, colors, a chair, a sign. Anything and everything can be evocative. Our lives and our experiences provide the meat of writing. Write about them. Be obsessed with them. Be one with what you are writing about. Ignore yourself and concentrate on what you see, smell, hear, taste, and feel. Disintegrate the you of familiarity and mesh with your environment. What is left is great writing."

"Wait a minute. You had something there and then you lost it. I
think you’re pushing this oneness thing a bit too far.”

The window was up and the screen was being installed to keep the bugs out. She continued.

“I agree that almost anything can be a great driving force in our writing. If we’ve experienced it, it’s alive to us and valid for exploration. The things that are closest to us are bound to have the most potential for exciting writing. They are bountiful, expressive, real. But if we try to actually step out of ourselves and to experience reality as something else – a chair, a dog, a snowflake – we are losing our individuality which is of utmost importance. No longer are we a unique, special, or vital entity. My perceptions are different, yet still alive and flowing. No matter how hard I try, I will never be able to ‘forget myself’ and become something else. I am too much a part of myself to disconnect. Everything I see, feel, hear, touch, and taste is perceived in relation to who I am. I realize we don’t agree, but let’s see if we can find some more common ground. I truly want to be a better writer.”

“Great! How about the fact that the outside world is the expression of the inside world? What you’ve got stored up in your soul can bring vigor to your writing. Listen to Katagiri Roshi. He says that ....”

The screen was firmly placed in the frame of the window and no leaves, bugs or undesirable elements were going to enter. She was open but filtering.

“Now wait. I’ve listened long enough and I’ve learned what’s
necessary for me to become a better writer. Practice is the next step. I realize that and am willing to concede. But why all these disturbing interjections? Just when I am free to learn and grow, I am stunted by these religious proverbs. Some are valid. Others are not. Freedom is great. Ignorant flirting with spiritual powers is not. Much of the Zen talk seemed foolishness and empty to me. Was it necessary? Oh, I could get dogmatic and really challenge the socks off you, but what would I gain? I take it all with a grain of salt and accept its uselessness to me. Suzuki may have been afraid to die, but I'm not!"

Seeking to understand others and their ideas is of utmost importance in the scheme of life. Uneducated acceptance, however, is dangerous. Pam Barber once said, "It's easy to hear the loud voices, but difficult to discern what they're saying." Sift through the trash and find the meaty bone. Open the window, but be sure to install the screen.
Reading and writing are vitally connected exercises. It is obvious that without writing reading would be impossible, but it is much less apparent that writing is drastically impacted by reading. Reading of any kind enhances writing by providing motivation and inspiration to the writer. Opinions are created by reading and opinions are expressed through writing. The cycle is broken if either component is neglected.

I have come to understand this dependent relationship more clearly by reviewing and criticizing the works that I read. This particular critique was written in response to Thomas More’s *Utopia*. If I had not been required to write this paper, I may not have been so touched by the work itself. Superficial glances and reactions to the book would not be appropriate for a formal opinion paper, so I had to look deeper and more critically at the original work. Developing my opinions would not have been necessary if I were not asked to write them down. Writing them down would not have been effective if I had no intimate association with the book itself. By being “forced” to formulate and demonstrate my opinions, I learned to appreciate the intense relationship between reading and writing.

Reading a book is not just an educational requirement, it’s a part of developing personal opinions and convictions. Writing provides the format for such personal maturing.
Whenever a new theory of societal organization is introduced, people are prone to evaluate the benefits and disadvantages which the theory exhibits and to formulate opinions as to the viability of the concept. Thomas More’s *Utopia* has been an object of discussion and evaluation for hundreds of years and has many opinions associated with it. My personal opinion holds that there are many positive and desirable aspects of Utopian society, as well as some highly detestable and contradictory features. I do not believe that More intended his readers to seriously consider the existence of such a society, but wanted to arouse our attention to the positive and negative aspects of civilization as we know it, and how we can make it better. Therefore, I find it necessary to look into the attractive and unattractive points of Utopia and create my own opinion.

The reading of literature before meals is a tradition and very desirable activity of the people of Utopia. It provokes interaction between citizens and becomes a stimulus for intellectual discussions. The acquisition of knowledge is a prominent goal of any civilized society and is goaded by the reading of profound literature. The fact that these works are read aloud at meals assures that every member of the society
will at least have the opportunity to expand their intellectual horizons. I am able to advocate personally this idea. In my own home, the Bible is read aloud after meals and is an inspiring and thought provoking experience.

Most people would agree with the Utopian idea of not having to pay for anything, and I am no exception. The sense of security, that results from knowing that all the basic needs of life are provided by the government, is enough to persuade me to reside in Utopia. There would be no need to worry about what one is going to eat or where one will sleep while traveling, because the universal equality of the Utopian society provides shelter and food to all its citizens. The lack of monetary influence would insure that there would be no poverty. Now who in his right mind argue with that?

Another attractive trait lies in the Utopian convictions about war. The people of this community loathe war, yet will fight their hearts out if it becomes necessary to defend their country or protect “friendly powers” (More 109) from invasions and dictatorships. If war can ever be justified, I believe it would be so in the Utopians’ defensive view rather than in an offensive movement. The common purpose and motivation behind the warriors of this society is stronger and more beneficial than that of a country which is not worth protecting. I admire these people for their desire to refrain from bloody insurrections and to solve problems using reason and intellect. After all, is that not the way in which all troubles
are ultimately corrected?

The restrictiveness of the Utopian government is definitely an unattractive portion of their society. Utopians are not allowed to learn a second trade, travel outside of their districts, or get divorced or remarried unless they are given special permission from the Mayor and Council of their towns. The lack of individual freedom which results from these restrictions is a significant obstruction of personal rights. I find these stipulations difficult to accept, because they are in direct conflict with other Utopian beliefs. Since knowledge is highly stressed in this society, I do not understand the reason for not permitting a second trade to be learned at will. In the area of travel, I values my uniqueness too much to allow someone to tell me when and where I can go. Likewise, I feel that I would be best qualified to evaluate my own marital situation, not a public official who was not involved in the relationship.

The marriage ritual of the Utopians is, in my opinion, utterly disgusting. This ritual consists of presenting both future bride and groom to each other while naked and in the presence of a married chaperon of the same sex as the revealed individual. I believe marriage should be based on the inner beauties of a person, not his or her physical appearance. This marriage ritual is in opposition with another part of Utopian life which strongly enforces purity before marriage, and therefore reveals an undesirable inconsistency within the culture.

The final negative area deals with the role of the men in Utopian
society. Men are given total responsibility to discipline their wives, yet no one is designated to discipline the male. I find it hard to believe that the male species is free from rebuke in any society. My religious beliefs hold that wives should submit to their husbands, as in Utopian culture, but husbands must submit to God, which is not a part of Utopian culture. I also disagree with the idea of Utopian women and children confessing their sins to the men of the family. The only One who is worthy to forgive sins is He who is without sin, God himself. Since the Utopians claim to believe in and worship an almighty god, Mythras, they need not glorify any human by asking them for forgiveness.

With both the appealing and repulsive features of Utopian society in mind, I assert that this type of organization is purely a figment of the imagination. However, it is necessary to acknowledge all aspects of More's vision of a "perfect" society so we can be aware of what kind of culture and organizations are most successful and satisfying.
Entry #13

Character development is crucial to writing effective fiction and nonfiction. Readers need to sense the type of person that is being written about as if they were standing in the room. Nothing causes disinterest faster or ruins a story worse than undeveloped, flat, and stale characters. A common misconception about character development is that it has to occur over many pages of text.

The short piece that follows is an example of building depth into two different characters without writing volumes to express their relationship to one another. It is only a vignette, yet clearly portrays the attitudes, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of the characters in a realistic and understandable way.

I have found that writing short scenes like this one is a great resource for characterizations in future narratives. Whenever I have trouble creating a believable and vibrant character, I can sit down and write a short vignette that will give me a better idea of who that character is without waiting until the end of a twenty page story to find out.
It was a typical Sunday afternoon. Lynn was relaxing from a hectic week of college life as the dull gray sky and unmoving campus soothed her and intensified her lazy mood. She loved these rare days, yet knew what a few hours would bring.

The phone call always came at about 8:30 every Sunday night. Most of the time it was refreshing and Lynn anticipated talking with her mom. There were Sundays, however, when Lynn wished the afternoon would never turn into evening, especially since the engagement.

The ring of the phone made Lynn's heart drop. Lifting the receiver, she prayed to escape a difficult confrontation. Before she could greet her, a flow of words gushed forth from Lynn's mom.

"I've decided that August would be best. October's too cold and June is too muggy. Six-thirty in the evening will be the perfect time. I've always dreamed of a candlelight ceremony. The ambiance will just add to your beauty, Darling."

She talked in a matter-of-fact style, as if the plans were settled. No one had asked for her assistance in making decisions, but then again she didn't need an invitation. Mothers have certain rights.

"I agree, Mom. August is a beautiful time. We were just wondering
if it might cause some difficulty for our friends. Some will be headed back to school right about that time."

"Well you need to remember, dear, you can’t please everyone. If your friends are loyal, they’ll come no matter what the date. What is important is whether or not the relatives can make it."

The tone of her voice was what infuriated Lynn. All-knowing and wise, her mother seemed to radiate an air of condescension that made her skin crawl. "Who's wedding is this anyway?" she thought. This thinking was futile though. The mother had already taken ownership of this special occasion by maternal right. The daughter was almost helpless to have her wishes heard.

"Most of the family will be able to attend in late summer," she continued. "We must keep that in mind. I've got the list right here of all the people we must invite. Aunt Josephine and Uncle George, Millie, Sam and Billy...."

Lynn's heart was pounding uncontrollably. The words were flowing without cessation now. She wondered how she could tell her mom gently that the plans had changed. She and John agreed on having a small ceremony with only a few close friends and her mom was planning to invite people she was not even remotely familiar with. This strife had become common over the past few months, the pressure mounting. Now Lynn felt that it had gone far enough and was not going to let it continue.

"Mom, I've never even met Millie and Sam. John and I would feel
She knew the rebuff was coming and she awaited it with fear and excitement.

"Oh, you'd feel more comfortable, huh? Well, what about me? Am I supposed to sit back and let you neglect our loved ones? How could I feel comfortable with that? I've waited half my life to prepare for this wedding, young lady, and I intend to invite my family to join with me in celebration. You can't deny me that."

She could and she would. What patience was left had just been rubbed away and Lynn did all she could not to erupt in frustration. John's suggestion to elope was sounding rather feasible at the moment. But why should they be sent into exile? After all, it was her mom who was being the intruder.

"That's not fair Mom. It's not your wedding. Don't make this harder than it already is. We all want to remember this day in a special way. Let's not ruin by being selfish."

It was said with honesty and sincerity, yet the sting was not softened. Even through the distance, Lynn could imagine the look on her mother's face. Betrayal had leaped in her mother's heart at the rebuke and now she was silent. Lynn's heart felt as if it would break. If she had seen her mother then, she surely would not have recovered from the pain. No more words were said or needed.
The mother hung up the phone with the hope that it would ring with an apology. The phone remained silent.
Entry #14

One of the obstacles in my mind about writing was that it was only meant to be used as a source of educational discourse not natural conversation. I found myself trying to be as wordy and flowery as possible to impress my professors and other students. To my amazement, my depth of vocabulary had nothing to do with my quality as a writer. The messages that I was trying to communicate were being confused and lost in the midst of my verbose style.

In order to develop a more natural tone in writing, I practiced writing about myself in a conversational manner. I wrote to imaginary audiences as if I was giving a speech to them. My personal testimony as a Christian was the most appropriate material to write about in a conversational style, because it was simply my life story. I knew it well and wanted to tell other people about it. Writing the words down was as natural as speaking them. And that's what writing should be, a natural overflow of words from the heart of the writer.
How many of you out there are true, old-fashioned romantics? Come on, 'fess up. Well, I'll be the first to admit that I'm a romantic through and through. I've always dreamed of that one special Valentine's Day when my Knight in shining armor would ride up on his white steed, sweep me off of my feet, and offer me a heart-shaped box of chocolate candies. Obviously, I'm not much of a realist. In fact, the closest I've ever come to this dream is a Snickers bar from my mom, because she felt sorry for her lonely daughter on Valentine's Day!

The fact that I never got a heart-shaped box of chocolate candies never stopped me from dreaming that one day I might get one. The one thing, however, that did ruin my romantic vision of chocolate candies was that whenever I bit into someone else's candies, it was always filled with coconut. I hate coconut! It's bitter and tastes like you're eating granules of sand.

Well, believe it or not, my life was just like one of those chocolate candies only a few years ago. I seemed really sweet on the outside, but for those who knew me well, I was a bitter surprise to bite into.

You see, as I was growing up, I seemed to have it all together. (Whatever that means!) I had an encouraging family, good grades, all the right friends. I was involved in more activities than you could shake a stick at: Student Council, National Honor Society, Varsity Basketball, Volleyball and Softball. You name it and I'd probably done it. The scary part was that I was actually believing that I had my life in perfect order. I was storing up the trophies, certificates, ribbons, brownie points and anything that I could get my hands on. I figured that people had to like me. After all, look at all I was doing!
That attitude was exactly what got me into trouble. I began to place all of my significance on the activities that I was doing and felt more and more pressure to perform for other's approval. For any of you who are like that, you know that it gets very tiring trying to please everyone. The happiness and acceptance that I was hoping to gain continually slipped away from my grasp. Defeat and frustration became quite familiar to me.

Now, you've got to remember that no one else knew that I was struggling so terribly. I hid it well. The chocolate coating was still surrounding me, but it was getting very thin. The performance based life had finally run me into the ground.

As I approached my college years, I looked back on my life and wondered if it was of any value. I realized that people would soon forget all the things that I had worked so long and hard for. My achievements would pass into obscurity and my memory with them. So what was the point in striving so hard to succeed? Why should I seek the attention of others? Where was the significance that I longed for?

My dilemma led me to seek the advice of a trusted friend. This particular friend of mine has always stayed close to me through the best and worst times. No matter what I was facing, this special friend always seemed to have the right answer for me. Many times before I had approached him for help, and he was always able to calmly reassure me. And this time was no different.

Let me explain a little bit about this friend. We met at a Wednesday night youth program at my church when I was about eight. I was listening intently to the man that was speaking and understood that the many things that I did wrong were evidences of my separation from our perfect and holy God in heaven. I wanted so badly to go to heaven and was terribly
upset that I was restricted from doing so. Right about the time that I was going to bust out in tears, the man told me that the story didn't stop there. He carefully explained how the God of the universe sent His own son, Jesus, from heaven to earth to befriend the people that He made. I was told that God planned for Jesus to take care of my sin by sacrificing himself for me. Since he lived a perfect life, Jesus could pay the penalty for my sin and unite me with God forever. I could be forgiven, live in heaven with God, and have Jesus as my best friend. The man continued to tell me that all I needed to do was tell Jesus that I accepted his favor of paying for my wrongdoing.

This news excited me. I'd always heard wonderful stories about heaven and I'd always wanted a best friend. So, that night I talked with God and told him that I wanted Jesus' death to count for my sins. At that moment I understood that I was reconciled with God, because I had begun a special relationship with Jesus.

As I looked back on that decision, I was reminded that Jesus said that he would never leave me and that he would carry me through all of the struggles I was facing. For so long, I had neglected this friendship and had forgotten all that it held for me. I began finding out more about Jesus and what he wanted to do for me and came to the understanding that he didn't expect me to do great things or perform for his acceptance. He wanted me to feel free from the bondage of seeking significance from others.

This realization gave me a brand new fervor for life. Sure, I still have struggles and yes, I'm still involved in many activities, but the one aspect of my life that is different is the peace that I have in my inner most place due to Jesus. I felt the love and acceptance that I had worked so hard for over so many years. The bitterness that once consumed my
heart has been replaced with the sweetness of knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord, Savior, and very best friend.
Entry #15

Most aspiring writers look to the famous for inspiration and hope of success. We often look to those who have gone before us to see what they did to achieve such rank in the field of literature. Any special methods of writing or intriguing quirks that might add life to our own writing are searched for in the lives of the great writers of our time.

I have always been interested in T.S. Eliot and his works of such great depth and thought. It baffled me to think an ordinary person could write such moving poetry. I decided there must have been something unique about his life that enabled him to write intensely and profoundly.

What I found out about Mr. Eliot was shocking. He was a normal man, a banker. Although he was well educated and had traveled much, he was not way out of my league. Writing about T.S. Eliot made me realize that writers are ordinary people with extraordinary ways of expressing what they know. This did give me hope as a writer. I didn't find any specific advice to follow from his life to assure me of success as a writer, but I did find the courage to be myself and write from what I know. That's where good writing comes from.
He is considered one of the foremost English poets and critics in our time. Likewise, he is without a doubt one of the most influential American poets in this century. These statements may seem paradoxical, yet both are similarly truthful. They describe the man whom both America and Great Britain claim to be her own, T.S. Eliot. The fact that any anthology of American or British literature is bound to have equal pages dedicated to this famous poet raises the questions of where Eliot considered his home to be and how that fact influenced his works. Was he an American or English poet? To answer this question, it is crucial to understand the early years of Thomas Stearns Eliot as well as the reasons for his moving to England and residing there for the rest of his life.

The poet was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888 to a strict Unitarian family. His grandfather was a preacher and his family became entrenched in a lifestyle that advocated good works, man's perfectibility, and a distrust of ritual (Sisson 127). Eliot earned a bachelors degree as well as a masters degree at Harvard University before leaving the United States permanently after 1914. These
early formative years had a definite impact on Eliot as evidenced in his later claim that his time in Missouri and Mississippi influenced his life more than any other place he had been. Many of the views of America that Eliot held were developed during this time. Eliot felt as though democracy in America had seen it's glory days prior to the Civil War and was headed for destruction. He was inspired greatly by Henry Adams whose family was influential and prominent during these early years of the United States. Sigg claims that Eliot was so attracted to Adams and his views that he based his poem "Gerontion" on the historical ideas of Adams (112). The reference to Henry Adams's autobiography in this poem is one of the few American influenced allusions that Eliot uses in his poetry.

A travel grant and scholarship led Eliot to Germany and ultimately England to study at Sorbonne and Merton College in Oxford. At this time, he began his dissertation on the philosophies of F.H. Bradley who had a great impact on Eliot's view of the individual and relationships. This trip abroad reaffirmed the poet's desire to live in European society - a desire that had been established during his many experiences as a Harvard student. His move to England was finalized with his marriage to an English writer named Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Amidst much disapproval from his family, Eliot remained in London for the rest of his life with a few visits to America in his later years. He worked for several
years as a banker in Lloyd’s Bank and for many more as a publishing firm director with Faber and Faber. During his first years in London, he began writing literary reviews for various periodicals such as Athenaeum and the Times Literary Supplement. Later he would become an assistant editor of the Egoist as well as founder and editor of the influential Criterion.

During this period, Eliot engulfed himself in English life and literature. He began an intensive study of the Elizabethans who exhibited the poetic drama that is revealed in Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral, Family Reunion, and The Cocktail Party, according to Warren (152). Eliot concentrated most of his time and energies on criticism of English writers and works rather than American counterparts. As Eric Sigg asserts, the essays and reviews that he did write concerning America were harsh complaints against his family’s religion and his own genteel upbringing (8-11).

If anyone was questioning whether or not Eliot was serious about his translocation to England, their questions would have been answered by 1927 when he officially became a British subject and joined the Church of England. On occasional trips to America, he was noted as having been Europeanized as he walked down the street with a cane which was very un-American (Sigg 186). His success as a poet and critic in the literary world of London and his strained relationship with his family due to his marriage began tearing Eliot
away from his native homeland. Although he claimed to have been greatly impacted by his life in America, his poetry proved otherwise. In fact, "Eliot rejected his American origins so thoroughly in later life that it seems presumptuous to try to make much of them" (Chace 109). Most of his images and allusions dealt with England and her people. In "The Wasteland" alone, Eliot makes use of numerous places in England namely Bradford, London, Moorgate and Margate Sands. The phrase "Hurry up please its time" in line 141 of the same poem is repeated four times and refers to a familiar saying in British pubs. Other English influences such as Queen Elizabeth and the Thames are also mentioned in the poem.

Eliot was a fond admirer of Dante and often quoted other English poets such as Shakespeare and Spenser. The opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are quoted from Dante's "Inferno" and has great significance in the characterization of Prufrock. The reference to Hamlet in line 111 is just one example of the many allusions to Shakespeare that Eliot employs throughout his poetry, especially "The Wasteland". "Little Gidding" concludes with an allusion to Eliot's most admired poem, Dante's "Paradiso".

In further examining the issue of Eliot's nationality, it is essential to investigate his reasons for leaving America and the influences that convinced him to stay in England. Eliot may have been born in the United States, but his temperament and social
consciousness was purely English in nature. He was "an American who wasn't an American" (Eder 52). His personality needed and enjoyed the tradition, established institutions, and the thorough society that England offered and America was lacking (Eder 58). While being educated at Harvard, Eliot had been exposed to the European atmosphere through his many associations and experiences including an excursion to Paris. He understood that England was a great place to develop as a poet and he wanted to do just that. In fact, when he arrived in London, his association with the famous American poet Ezra Pound became more and more vital to this goal. Pound helped to get his works published, find him work as a critic, and establish him as a poet with a respectable reputation. And this proved to be profitable since Warren claims that Eliot's reputation is ranked with such great names of English literature as Dryden, Pope, and Ben Jonson.

Eliot wanted to leave America because he was not particularly fond of many of her attributes. He believed it was "a cultural desert" (Eder 56) with limited available resources for literary inspiration. American society was not suitable for him to build a lasting reputation as a poet. He was very conscious of the genteel tradition that he was raised in and, according to Sigg, he did not feel that it was conducive to a budding poet. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a good example of how Eliot undercuts this tradition.
He emphasizes the superficiality of the women that are talking about high art and Michelangelo. Eliot looked to figures like Conrad and James of Great Britain and found no comparable writers in America, thus leaving American writers with no one to follow. In the area of religion, Eliot's family had convinced him that Puritanism was warped and held nothing for him personally, so he turned to Anglicanism. Abrams states that this conversion was a great inspiration to Eliot's later works of drama that focused on religious themes, ideas, and characters (2501).

With all of this convincing information, one would think that Eliot had definitely become a complete Englishman. This question is left unanswered and more complex than one might imagine. In actuality, he started life as an "alienated American and ended it an assimilated Englishman" (Eder 74). Eliot considered himself to be an American poet, yet claimed to be "royalist in politics, classicist in literature, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (DiYanni 366). Obviously, Eliot was influenced by his associations with both countries, but one can simply not argue convincingly which nation can rightfully claim him. And this is not necessary. The wonderful impact that T.S. Eliot has had on literature in the English language is so profound that it is hard to imagine what might have happened if he was not born in America and moved to England. His poetry and criticism might not have been as powerful as what we have come to
know today. In fact, "unless we recognize Eliot’s emigration and repatriation as crucial life choices and personal assertions, much of what Eliot deemed important and much of his career’s significance - and its oddness- will escape our notice" (Sigg 112).
Works Cited


Entry #16

Many times I have found myself frustrated, because I could not explain something with the intensity that was within me. I want people to experience the joy, excitement, nostalgia, anxiety, and everything that goes through me at any given moment. I want others to share in my life and experiences in an intimate way. Writing has helped me to do this.

Memories that storm through my mind can not be translated accurately until they are put on paper. Searching for the appropriate words to describe thoughts, events, and emotions from the past makes those thoughts, events, and emotions real again. Reliving the past is possible through writing! There need not be regret for what is gone or pain for what seems lost.

When writing this document, I was in the midst of dealing with the loss of my youth and the unknown of my future. I longed for the past, but was anticipating the future with eagerness. Reconciling these conflicting issues was made easier through writing. I was able to look fondly at my adolescent years and immortalize them for myself on paper. Giving my future some kind of framework by writing down my expectations allowed me to be free from the fear of going ahead blindly.
I've had an epiphany. I've come face to face with the reality and meaning of life. The unanswerable questions of time have found their solutions in me. I, a lowly student with no recognizable talent or worth, have forever become immortalized through my own writings. Without knowing or intending, I stumbled upon the essence of humanity. After reading these contemplations and discoveries, you too will understand the past, present, and future.

Life is a continuous cycle of experience and interpretation. We come to an understanding of ourselves as we interact with our environments- people, nature, etc. Our present reality is defined by our past experiences, and our future reality is anticipated in light of those same experiences. This is not to say that what we've been will automatically determine what we are to be. However, what we experience in the past can encourage and teach us in the present to grow and enjoy life in the future. As we interpret what we experience, we react, respond and make decisions accordingly. Our memories are a gift from God allowing us to experience again the beauty of times gone and to correct mistakes for times to come.

It all starts when we are children. I remember times as a young girl
walking across the yellow field of broken grain. The trek was more than enjoyable, it was thrilling. I anticipated the fun I would have on the rope swing just ahead. My excitement mounted so quickly my trot became a jog became a run within seconds. The field was wide open with three sides lined with trees. Not just trees, but unique representations of beauty, like humans. Gently blowing in the breeze and waving in the autumn sun, the leaves and branches were alive, vibrant, real. They were communicating. Speaking God's majesty, power and brilliance. Even now the memories flood my mind and overpower the anticipation of that day.

The trail I traversed was not worn or even trampled. Over the uneven ground I trod toward the corner of the field and the small ravine with the wooden foot bridge. The swing was made of heavy rope that toughened my hands as I squeezed it firmly. A round wooden seat sat on the huge knot at one end of the rope while the other end ascended into the trees somewhere. I was beckoned by the mud-lined sides of the ravine. What a freedom to feel the cool breeze rippling across my skin and the warmth of the rays on my back as I swung through the air. Brown, rust, gold and burgundy surrounded me. Small patches of each scattered the ground beneath me and crinkled as I dragged my feet to slow the swing. The damp, moist smell of accumulated decay was lovely to me.

That smell often passed through my nostrils at Halloween time. Burning leaves and the shadowy cover of branches looming overhead mixed with a dull gray sky to create an environment of wonder for all the little
monsters. Again, a thrill would captivate my heart as I eagerly awaited the night of begging, laughing, and scheming. Joining with the other emotion-filled kids, I would kick through the soggy-crisp leaves toward the next lighted porch.

That was when I was alive. That was when my soul soared. The purity of a child's perception was mine and I fully gave myself to my adventures without reservation. Thinking back on these times is what makes them a present reality in my life. As I interpret the meaning of those times for myself, I find excitement and satisfaction. I am reunited with that intense life-giving time if only for a moment. That vital period of time came and went very quickly but comes again in the form of beautiful and believable memories. What a hope, joy, and relief this truth brings. What I leave behind, I CAN grasp again in the future. The field and ravine and bridge and swing and leaves and Halloween sky are just as much mine today as fourteen years ago. The happiness, excitement, and beauty that I experience today will be with me, in a very real way, forever. Let me show you how the cycle of experience and interpretation continues into young adulthood.

A different season of life had begun, but the context of life was the same. Again, it was the time between summer and autumn when the anticipation of fall overwhelms. A feeling of maturity as young adults was abounding, yet youth and vigor were extremely close to our hearts. Football season and the consuming fire of new love were before me. The
sky was the same as before, a solid, dark and mysterious sight. The entire environment seemed to give me the sense of significance that I longed for along with every other adolescent since the beginning of time. I was anticipating an identity apart from childhood ignorance which had recently changed from childhood innocence. Of course, I didn’t realize this then. Only by interpreting this experience now do I understand it's significance.

Nevertheless, the bleachers overflowed with overanxious teenagers. Pizza, hot dogs, and damp grass mixed in the air to intensify the craze. As the girls in short skirts jumped and screamed, my eyes focused on the heavily armored team entering the stadium. The pit in my stomach grew bigger and bigger until it exploded just as number three came bounding into sight.

My eyes never looked back to the field until someone nudged me and said that HE was in the game. A tragic miracle had just taken place. The starting quarterback got rocked and was out for the season while number three was taking the field in his place. The volcano in my gut blew up again. This was the Port Huron High vs. Port Huron Northern football game. THE game and MY guy was making the passes. It was all a blur until the end. We won, he was a hero, and every student in the stands was stampeding over the walls onto the field.

I saw him across the crowded field, but he was embracing someone else. She was a good friend... until that moment. When she left, I walked up behind him and tugged on the big yellow three on his back. In
one enrapturing movement, I was in his arms and three feet off the ground. All he said was my name. He was crying with joy and my heart was doing the same. A continuous eruption was making me weak and unable to comprehend what was happening. Was he going to kiss me? I couldn't wait to tell all the girls about it.

What makes this memory so significant to me? It not only connects me with my past, but also gives definition to my present and a heritage to my future. If I interpret this memory in relation to my present experience, I realize how important that embrace was in establishing a bond that still holds me today. If I analyze this memory in terms of my future, I understand that it was the spark that started the inferno within me that will never be quenched.

Adulthood concludes the cycle of experience and interpretation by continuing it. My walk with Dan the other day can illustrate this. We walked hand in hand through the park, totally wrapped up in each other and creation. The plush emerald grass was still moist from an earlier rain. A solid-smooth atmosphere of realness ushered us along a shallow stream running swiftly over rocks as they jutted out. We walked through narrow paths in the woods snapping twigs and crunching leaves as we went. The berries in the bushes, the weeds and muddy slopes drew us nearer. Our turtlenecks and sweatshirts kept the chilling wind from piercing our souls. Marmalade colored leaves were joined with canary yellow ones to brighten our path. They radiated life and we grasped it with both hands.
Candles light the path I'm going to walk. Jade and burgundy still surround me, but white embraces me. Number three is waiting at the end. It's dusk and the gray of the sky is filtering through the windows. Her alto voice even blends beautifully with the scenery. It's slow and relaxed, a prolonging of the enjoyment of that which is to come, because of what has been.
Entry #17

My perspective of writing used to be quite limited. I was under the impression that good writing always came from personal experience. My writing was greatly restricted because of this misunderstanding. I did not think that I could write passionately about something that I had never fully experienced. The truth was that I could not write passionately, because I was limited by my own experiences. If I had really considered the implications of such a view of writing, I would have understood much earlier that creativity begins with experience but is not totally limited by it. I've never died, but I can still write about death if I just use a little imagination.

Breaking down this barrier was aided by this particular experiment. I have never traveled a rocky incline or met a prophet who gave the answers to life's toughest questions, but my imagination could explore and create such a situation. Embellishing a simple scenario as this allowed me to expand my vision for what my own writing could become. Now my options for topics to write about are unlimited.
The human experience is an amazing adventure! At least for some it is. For those who are motivated to explore the treasures of this world, to take risks, and learn from their mistakes, life is unique, exciting, and abundant. The others are left with splinters. If you'll follow me, I'll explain.

The rocky incline is to my right. It ascends into the dark of night among the brilliant diamonds in the sky. It's slopes are light in color, but rough to the touch. I walk slowly, but steadily, along the rocky and rooted path. Soon the slope is gone and I'm in the midst of tall, slender trees with leaves at their bases. Small sticks and thick roots cover the sides of path I travel. I can hear the crunch of the path beneath my feet and know this is real. A cool-warm breeze lightly caresses my skin through the loose clothes draping from my limbs. My burden, contained in my Jansport backpack, is light for now.

The trail that veers right is narrow and deeply wooded. The air even seems thicker. At the mouth of a cave, the trail widens and the black sky is visible again. Thin smoke is rising from a dimming fire. Someone has been here before me. My vision sharpens and I see him sitting across the heat from me with a thin gray-black beard and strands of the same color covering his head. His smooth eyes welcome me with a placid and almost
lonely stare. The appearance of the old man is clouded by the fairy tales and children's stories in my memory, but the gift he gives is not. I reach into nowhere and grab a triangular cut log and place it on its end in the fire. He reaches into a small leather pouch and extends to me the meaning of life.

It's a small piece of wood worn smooth by the touch of many hands. I cradle the block in my hands and stroke it with curiosity. What does it do? How can I use it? What good is it? The wise old man answers, "Whatever you make of it, so it is."

My feelings are dull, if any. I only feel as though I should be feeling something. The wisdom of the man seems nothing close to profound. I'm not in awe. This whole incident could easily be forgotten, but not the block of wood.

As I hold it in my hand, I begin to reflect and consider its significance. Since it's wood, it could represent Nature. No, that's too easy. What can I gain from this gift? It's coming to me very slowly, but I'm beginning to clue in on what the wise man meant. If the block is to be anything I make of it, could it not symbolize life and experience? We live life only through hands-on experience, whether that be first or second-hand. The more opportunities to search life and try new things, the more our life takes shape. As our hands and others' hands come in contact with the wood, a smooth surface begins to appear. I learn from the experiences of others and try not to view the world from my limited point of view any
longer.

That's where the splinters come in. If we're not willing to rub some of the rough edges away with risk, we are going to get hurt time and time again. Take chances, be vulnerable, and smooth the wood.
Entry #18

Have you ever thought of writing as therapy? People often write letters to express their thoughts and feelings to others in a clear and nonthreatening environment. You can always be sure that you are saying exactly what you intend when you write. After all, the evidence is before you and words can be rearranged and deleted as necessary to assure the proper message is being communicated. It also makes you feel better to lay everything out and bring order to confusing emotions. Writing helps sort out and organize the crazy thoughts that swirl through our heads daily.

This particular piece enabled me to find meaning and significance in some of my recurring dreams from childhood. As the writing progressed, I began to see an area of common ground between my dreams and the spiritual battle that was going on inside of me. Writing allowed me to become my own therapist.
Looking down the blue carpeted stairway, I began to feel the walls and the ceiling moving in on me like a garbage compactor on a piece of flimsy tissue paper. I was without protection and at the mercy of all the forces of the universe. There was nowhere to go but down. If I tried to hold the walls apart with my trembling arms, defeat would be inevitable. If I opted to jump, a broken limb or death might be the extent of the damage. To say that a panic swept over me would be an understatement, but it's close. Alone and without aid, I feared what lied ahead but had no choice in the matter. Did I fall? Was I pushed? Did I jump of my own accord? Either way I was airborne. Spinning and twisting in soft easy circles, I glided toward the bottom of the staircase. Nothing violent, just smooth descent like a cascading waterfall. I landed on my feet. The landing never bothered me. It was the feeling of utter helplessness that ripped at my innards all the way down. My arms flailed in vain to grasp anything stationary. All of my efforts were hopeless.

Whether in my dreams or when facing reality, I would struggle with my own vulnerability for years to come. A continual fear of being overpowered haunted me. Spiritual or physical battle, I knew not. But the intensity and reality of this flea-like existence was crushing me.

* * *

Dozens of people swarmed through the dust-filled street that had become a battleground. Women screamed and babies screeched as they ran hysterically to find shelter nowhere. Army tents laid scattered across the compound. Soon they too would be destroyed by the devastating blow.
Nobody could escape the impending doom. I would see to that. I found comfort in their lostness, joy in their fear, and peace in their distress. You see, I was invulnerable.

My hands, strong and stable, were holding a bazooka in firing position. Without trepidation or concern, I loaded the weapon. Razor blades were my ammunition of course. Sharp end first would be placed in the top of the machine. The blade would slide through the entrance, turn ninety degrees, and exit at breath-taking speed. Never did I miss a target. A smooth clean cut through the esophagus, wind pipe, and spinal cord. What power, control, and confidence I had. I awoke in horror.

It wasn’t until several years later that I would begin to understand the significance of these early dreams of mine. The discovery was made in another dream-like episode.

Sleeping next to my sister at my grandma’s house, I felt relaxed and safe. I was exhausted and could not spend another moment awake. A deep and heavy sleep fell upon me. Looking around the room, I could see everything clearly, as if the light was on. The suitcases filled the corner to my right. The single light fixture hung in the center of the ceiling. And the thick, burdensome blankets draped over the edge of the bed. My eyes were closed? How could that be? Everything was so vivid and real. Surely my imagination could not be so keen. Then the urge came. I tried to do the only wise thing and pinch myself, but nothing moved. My arms, legs, head, heart, eyes, and ears were paralyzed. Was it fear? No. I screamed at Darcy, but no reply. I was alone, vulnerable, helpless. Again, the forces of the universe were closing in and I was defenseless. I prayed.

With all of my heart I cried out to God for His mercy. “Wake me up. Please, stir my soul from slumber and protect me from these wicked demons!” My whole being poured into my plea. In a moment of unspeakable
glory, I was awakened. The fear, distress, and vulnerability was gone. Truly He heard my cry and answered.

* * *

Now I realize the relevance of these incidents in my life. For so long I tried to find peace and significance in life. Feelings of defeat, frustration and helplessness always awaited me. I sought to find aid and protection within myself and was only left in despair. In trying to take control of my own life, I only hurt others and was left alone. Only Jesus and a personal, vital, life-giving relationship with Him could satisfy my longings for protection and love. I may not be invulnerable, but He is.
Entry #19

Nonfiction motivates me. Whenever I have the opportunity to write about my personal experience, I take it. It's easy to write when you already have characters developed and conflicts created. Writing about what I know is fun and rewarding, but there came a time when a greater challenge was needed.

I ventured into fiction with very little preparation. I vaguely remembered writing a story in third grade about a day in the life of a teddy bear, but beyond that I had never tried creating fiction. For weeks, I struggled with this next piece and could only produce the first scene. I found it very difficult to build depth into characters that I didn’t know personally and to create interesting conflict without using events from my own life. This was the challenge I was seeking, but I needed help desperately.

After meeting with author David Hoppe, I understood that before I could write a reliable and worthwhile story, I had to know the characters and storyline as if they were real people and events. Fiction took more work than I had previously known. I had to plan and organize and create before I could even begin writing fiction. I learned a valuable lesson from the experience of writing this story; revision is a long and necessary process. The difficult time I had with revision revealed to me that I had never seriously attacked any piece of my own writing with a critical eye. The complexity of the revision process did not discourage me in the least,
rather it encouraged me to know that I was developing better writing than ever before.
Soft, expressionless eyes were at odds with his sharp facial features. The firm jaw clenched tightly while the long, slender nostrils sucked the air in briskly. Long, gentle hands with smooth ridges, bubbling blue veins, and perfectly cut nails gripped a ceramic coffee mug and transported it every few seconds to the firmly shut mouth and waited for an opening to appear. He felt distant from these physical aspects of his person. He appeared angry, but anger is a feeling and he couldn't feel. Only from the outside could he sense anything. Within was nothing but numb, a mighty numb that was more powerful than any emotion or feeling he had ever endured.

Black holes are a mystery of science, but a reality of nature. They exist in all their power and might and complexity. Nothing can escape from these swirling bodies of chaos and energy. Endless, infinite, eternal these whirlwinds extend beyond human comprehension grasping all in their path as if with powerful talons. Many believe them to be collapsed stars.

Nothing moved as he stared out the bay window of his living room. The booming music from the bedroom reverberated in his head. Within and without, there was a strange pallor that filled his world. Even with the frozen beauty all around him, Jim Smith could not grasp any concept of beauty. The clear icicles dripping from the eaves troughs, the sparkling shimmer of the frozen layer of ice over the snow covered ground, and even the sweet sight of children sledding all bundled up like Michelin men were of no consolation to this man in his stupor. Not a drunken stupor mind you, but a deep pit nevertheless. To him, the snow and ice and children seemed part of a bad dream or a joke with a forgotten punch line. They didn't have meaning in his world of confusion. All that was real about that particular day was the cold and endless dampness. Jim wasn't sure he understood what he was going through, but he was certain that he didn't want to try to straighten out the mess he'd made.

The only thing that could momentarily snap him out of these melancholy moods was his Eagles record. His favorite song began to play
and he sang along. He could only remember one line verbatim. It just had a special ring to it. He echoed the tune and rhythm casually, moving his lips as if to convince someone watching that he knew the words. When the line came, he stopped faking it and gave it all he had. He knew the truth of those words intimately.

“You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.”

For outsiders, Jim’s predicament appeared to be like one of those horror stories about the POW’s in Vietnam. Confined to small metal boxes and tortured mercilessly, these prisoners experienced the ultimate punishment. They were stripped of their freedom. Since no one can truly relate to such devastation of a human life and spirit without experiencing it first hand, empathy is impossible. Only half-hearted attempts are made in an effort to pacify any uncomfortable feelings the ‘sympathizer’ might have. “Ooo, isn’t that terrible? How awful that must have been for you!” No real understanding has been achieved and the isolation and pain of the victim is increased.

The hurt that his wife, Natasha, was feeling was not unknown to him. He knew that she was suffering because of him, but he actually didn’t care. She deserved it according to Jim. The ‘it’ would refer to his treatment of their marriage. No he never yelled and hollered or ranted and raved or complained and cried. He was silent and that was killing her. The mighty numb that he felt inside was directly thrust upon Natasha, and she was left bewildered. Jim slowly began to withdraw from contact with his wife until eventually they no longer even slept together. Coldness penetrated their relationship. She tried every possible way to break through to her husband, but he never budged. Literally! Natasha found him prostrate on the couch every night when she came home. She never knew exactly what was causing his fatigue and isolation, but her hope was that his work was keeping him extra busy or that he was just going through mid-life crisis a little early. Either way she prayed his condition was temporary. The alternative possibility was too frightening for her to consider. No, she was almost positive that there was no one else. Jim was a moral guy, a good man and she was not going to betray his trust by thinking such thoughts. That is the process she underwent to assure herself every time doubts arose. And it continued to work for awhile.

And so they appeared to be living happily ever after with a picket
fence, 2.3 children, and the third pew at the local Christian Church.

Life was things. And bad things at that. Work was a thing that enabled him and his family to eat. He endured it like a bad cold. Eight hours. Eight hours. Eight hours. Eight hours. Eight hours. Done! Jim believed that his job was Dante material for hell, level after level of anguish. People would come in daily and ask for money and get it. Thousands passed through his hands every day. That was the frustration about working at a bank, the money passed through but never stayed. That struggle didn’t last long, because he was moved up to customer service specialist. What a promotion! Now he got to deal with people’s complaints rather than their money. Employee relations was next and even worse. But the most tragic placement he was given was just outside the doorway. Panic and hard times came in the midst of all the S&L scandals, and he was booted. No one told him that a college graduate with two kids, a house payment, two car payments and a wife with an intense penchant for spending money might lose his job. He was totally unprepared and never recuperated from the shock.

Jim never imagined the ‘real’ world would be so complicated and unfulfilling. Everything they said was a lie. The future was supposed to hold dreams, promises, success. CRAP! Total crap was more like it. He had listened with great eagerness and hope to the advice and encouragement of the experienced ones. He honestly expected to find joy in life and waited for it patiently. What a naive fool you say? Jim would agree, for now he knew that patience and expectation were only naivete in disguise. He had finally attained the rank of ‘experienced one’.

He went to college in order to find freedom and independence. He found no time, routine hangovers, and draining relationships with women. The women thing especially bothered him. They wanted more than he felt he could give. More time, more money, more conversation, more thought. He didn’t want to mess with the hassle of building depth into anything. Two dimensional was always his style. Quick fixes were also his specialty. In fact, Natasha was one of those quick fixes. The experienced ones had told him that marriage and a family were necessary for happiness in life, so he did it. Natasha seemed like the best bet—Elementary Education major, stable family, high morals, and great legs. They dated six months and married shortly after their final semester at the university. Soon, soon happiness and contentment would follow. He
was sure of it.

He watched Natasha walk down the sidewalk and out of view. Without warning he began to cry. Not heart rending shrieks, but soft and steady pulsations. Sometimes, like now, he really felt terrible about what had happened and was still happening. Most of the time, however, he blamed his wife. At one time, they were happy, life was fulfilling, and the road ahead was optimistic. Now, he only saw the tire treads above him as he lay flat on his back like Wile E. Coyote. If she had been able to meet his needs to a higher degree, he would never have had to do what he did. (The tears flowed.) Natasha was too busy taking care of 28 kids every day to pay attention to the bored bank employee she lived with. The bitterness he felt stemmed from her decision to have a job and a life of her own instead of staying home and living for him. He was convinced that the fire would still be burning between them if she hadn’t been so selfish. He had to have his needs met somewhere, didn’t he? This was Jim’s reasoning, rationale, and motivation for his actions. The tears stopped. He had convinced himself once again that he was justified. The numb returned as Jim wandered into to bedroom and put the needle on the record.

If they only had more money, this wouldn’t be a problem. They had been without an overabundance of financial security since day one, and the situation wasn’t likely to change anytime soon. For their honeymoon, they had to drive a rusted out Volvo from Michigan to Colorado, because the air fare was sky high. From that day on, it would always be the next best option, the more affordable choice, and the blue light special. The experienced ones had always said that once you’re financially stable life was smooth as Cheez-Wiz. Following this knowledge, Jim and Natasha took out a loan for a beautiful two-story Victorian house with the understanding that with two incomes they had a possibility of paying it off in the distant future. With Jim being ‘let go’ this was no longer a possibility. New clothes were no longer a seasonal purchase. They came only in time of great need. The kids, Nathaniel and Nicolette, were an added joy to the Smith’s financial plight. A college education was for the most part out of the question, and summer jobs were not an option. Jim blamed Natasha for this one too. They got the love and attention that he deserved as her husband. He believed he had a right to have the affair! Kim gave him what he needed and wasn’t sorry for that. And it was all so innocent.
"How was I to know what would happen?," he thought out loud.
"What d'ya say?" his wife answered.

He could hear "The Best of the Eagles" blaring forth from the record player. It soothed and assured him to know that someone could identify with his situation. "We are all just prisoners here of our own device."

The soul is an amazing concept very similar to that of the wind. We know the wind exists, but we can't see it. We prove the wind's existence by noticing the rustling of the autumn leaves and cool breeze across our faces. The same is true of the spirit or soul. It is real enough, but only evidenced by a stirring of some kind, a movement within and without. The physical, emotional, and intellectual are all very important, but without the stimulation of the soul we are nothing. Void of spirit means void of life.

He got like this often of late. His wife would find him outstretched on the bed apparently unmoved by the music pumping wildly through every room in the house. Natasha had just begun to attach the term "slothful bum" to him, but Jim knew she was mistaken. After all, he had been a very active child and adolescent. He was the kid that always brought the most Campbell's soup labels each week, going door to door to collect them. In junior high band class (before being musically inclined was nerdy), Jim was always first chair. Athletics and academics attracted Jim in high school, because they brought the most recognition. Starting full back, National Honor Society president, and a truck load of college prep classes met his needs for significance during these years. Jim knew that such a successful person would never grow up to be a bum.

"The day's half gone, Jim. Why don't you get up and do something?"
Something like a grunt was all that was heard.
"C'mon! I've already been out to the store today and all you can do is lay there like a fish. What's wrong with you?"

His soul was being grated like a brick of Colby.
She didn't expect him to respond. She had said similar words, threats before, but none of them had connected with her husband. So she continued.

"Why don't you do something instead of sit around like a...waw-WAW, waw-WAW-waw, waw-waw-WAW, WAW-waw...." Her speech continued and seared Jim to the core. He could feel the forces within him struggling
to break free. This time the numb was conquered by a surge of tremendous energy and momentum, and he couldn't stop the words from shooting out. The ammunition had been loaded for years. Now all he needed to do was aim and shoot. Bazookas never miss.

Jim was trying to refrain from sobbing but to no avail. It gushed forth. His face was contorted with pain and his limbs became weak. He wanted to take the words back and be numb again. Crashing against the bottom of the abyss would have been better than the never-ending free fall he was experiencing.

"You're pitiful! Do you expect me to take you back after that? Two years?!
"I'm really sorry babe. I just-"
"Spare me the sweet talk."
"Okay, but listen, please. I didn't mean to do it at first. I just didn't feel like you cared any more. I had to-"
"You HAD to! Give it up Jim. You didn't have to ruin your kid's lives, or lose your job, or be a worthless husband. No, but you chose to. You got you into this and I'm never helping you out of it. Oh, how could you do this to me and the kids?"
"I didn't think it would go that far. I never thought I'd hurt anyone."
"That's the point! You never think. You're the only one that matters to you."
"I was lonely. Can't you understand that? You know the problems we've had as well as I do."
"All I know is that I want you out of my life, out of my house, out of my...Just go! Leave. Now!"

The gravitational force is too intense; there's no escape. Even light with all its mighty speed cannot break free. The star has collapsed in on itself. The autumn leaves have fallen and the wind cannot be seen.

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Kim was a regular customer at the bank where Jim worked. She
deposited her check every other Friday at Jim's window. The relationship proceeded like a textbook affair. Everything was casual and friendly in the beginning, but as they continued to divulge more information with each visit an attraction flamed. Jim's promotion to customer service specialist was done in perfect timing. His office was a great place for Kim to get financial advice and for romance to flourish. They realized that they both were having marital difficulties and found each other's company refreshing. After a few months of seemingly innocent conversation, the pair began going to lunch or coffee across the street at Charlie's Cafe. Once their conversation outgrew Charlie's, the Motel 8 off I-94 seemed more appropriate for their needs.

When they were together, Jim felt an intense freedom. No kids, responsibilities, work. It wasn't Kim that set him free, it was the denial of the truth. The truth that he was financially ruined, that his marriage was over, and that he had let down his family and himself. Only the times with Kim could keep his head from spinning wildly in frustration, anger, and self-pity. But after each rendezvous, the flood of reality swept over him and the guilt returned. The relationship with Kim fulfilled Jim's need to escape for quite a while, but the guilt never waned nor subsided. He thought that the initial pang of regret would fade away even as the relationship would fizzle. Long term commitments were never his thing, but he couldn't seem to shake this one. It had been going on so long, he had learned to cover up the regret with numb. He closed himself off to all sense and feeling.

Kim was persistent and told him that Natasha had to be told. He agreed only because he thought he could reconcile with his wife and begin to lead a normal life again. But the thought of telling his wife about the affair made him physically ill. He had gotten used to the deceit, but facing the truth was more than he could bear. His worlds were colliding and he needed another way out. Kim was the back up plan. If Natasha lacked sympathy Kim would take him in. So, when he found the note in the hotel room saying that she had gotten back together with her husband, Jim fell into his deepest hole yet.

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After the explosion and confession to Natasha, Jim sought professional help from one of his college buddies that had gone into psychiatry. The doctor's office was the first step in any direction for him. He just knew that getting professional help would be looked upon as an effort to succeed. He wanted to make sure that people would look back at his life and see that he had tried to succeed in the end even though success was not for him. Somewhere inside he knew the situation was beyond his control, but he couldn't find the strength within himself to let go. When you have nurtured for so long, how can you kill?

The music floated up from behind the psychiatrist. A familiar tune that had been following Jim wherever he went. It felt great to Jim to have this understanding and comradeship.

"They stab it with their steely knives, but they just can't kill the beast."

"Jim, how do you feel?," asked his friend.

The word hit with the force of an H-bomb. Emotion was non-existent in his world. After the fatal outpouring to his ex-wife, the numb returned to stay. He couldn't process the question, so he sat in silence.

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.
If you're happy and you know it then your face will surely show it.
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.

"Are you angry?," questioned the doctor. "Hurt?" "Frustrated?"
"Ummm...yes. I'm angry... no hurt about my.... Well, I don't like..."
"Yes, Jim?"
"I don't know! I've tried to feel good, but I don't know how. Nothing is worth it."

"What do you mean nothing is worth it, Jim?" asked the doctor.
"My life isn't worth it. I can't find what the meaning, purpose of it all is. I live, but that's not enough. She took the kids. Kim left too. It wasn't supposed to be like this. No one prepared me for failure. What's good about being here?"

It was starting to surface. The inner darkness was confronting the light, yet the light had to fight. Other forces were working against
inertia, especially gravity. And the gravity of the situation was strong.

Dr. Hamzavi’s prescription was like a topical ointment applied to a six inch knife wound. He was to join a therapy group and take weekly walk in the park to stimulate him. This was supposed to bring hope and fulfillment to a thirty-nine year old man who had lost all understanding of what love, joy, and peace were all about. What the knowledgeable doctor failed to realize was that he was leading his patient further into the abyss where the pull was greater. Jim had to go against nature, gravity, and the outside cure. From the depths to the heights was the way to the light. Only from within could a disease of this nature be healed, and Jim had begun to heal from within. For the music came from within and gave him the confidence he needed to continue to heal. He was satisfied for once. The fulfillment and joy of life was now his. He resolved to allow the pain to overcome him. Knowing that he had no power over the numb, he checked out.
Entry #20

My second short story was an even greater challenge than the first. I attempted to use dialogue to develop characters and to create a more natural environment for the reader. Since dialogue has always been very difficult for me, this story underwent many revisions. In fact, I was so frustrated with this work that I could not write on it for several weeks. I felt it was going nowhere and wanted to set it aside for awhile.

My unwillingness to commit myself to this story was a result of an understanding that it was going to take many pages and hard work to develop the conflict to an effective level. I was not accustomed to writing stories of great length and depth, but now I was going to have to become accustomed quickly.

Writing this short story broke me from the bondage of writing for other people, such as professors. I wrote for myself and the sense of accomplishment that it would bring. I was given the freedom by my instructor to write when I had the chance and to turn it in when I felt it was done. This relaxed environment allowed me to take the quantity of time I needed to develop the quality story I was working toward.
Commitment

I had almost given up on them. Things just weren't working out and I thought that I really didn't care much for any of them any more. In fact, I pretty much dreaded talking with them or even writing to them. It wasn't that I hated the girls or anything. I just didn't know how to relate to them after living such mutually exclusive lives for so many years. We used to be close back in high school, but that seemed like a lifetime ago and I didn't see the sense in putting forth a huge effort to keep something alive that didn't seem to have any value to me. Besides, I'd been told that nothing is ever as good as we remember it. It made me feel better to think people just drift apart and there was no sense trying to stop the rafts from floating away. We lived so far apart we only saw each other once a year anyway. And to tell you the truth, I wouldn't have cared if we stopped doing that. It could saved me some money in gas.

Well, that's how I was viewing the situation before the last time we all got together. I had already made plans for the following year so I would have an excuse not to meet up with them again. Of course, I was going to tell them how sorry I was that I couldn't make it and that I really would miss them and how much I always looked forward to our time together, but I was not going to continue to go through the awkward weekends any more. I figured it would be so much easier to remember the great times in the past than to frustrate myself trying to create new ones. I realize now that I couldn't have been more wrong in my life.

* * * * *

Every summer after graduating from high school, the girls and I returned to the basketball court to prove our undying loyalty to the game that brought us together. The Gus Macker 3 on 3 tournament became our proving ground. Desiring to assure ourselves and any other doubting foe that we were still in the game, we signed up to conquer the 25-30 year old division. Our continued agility surprised the arrogant, one hundred ten pound teens as we left the other teams spinning in our dust. Within ten minutes of play, automaticity kicked in, the shots effortlessly dropped through the hoop, and the moves felt like we'd been practicing together all
summer. It even surprised me at times to see how well the four of us worked as a team, at least on the court.

Melanie was the real athlete. The rest of us just passed her the ball while she made us all look great. It didn't matter what sport it was, Melanie could play them all. At one time, the football team even wanted her to be their place kicker. She was built like a Mack truck - 5'11", broad shoulders, wide hips, and huge feet. The lane cleared out when she bulldozed through toward the basket. When she moved those hips to get position for a rebound, bodies flew. Her long, straight hair always flowed behind her in a pony tail reminding everyone that girls could play ball too. Her sense of humor was great. Melanie could have me rolling within seconds of seeing each other. Impersonations were her favorite material, especially quoting lines from movies and commercials. "Whhhat's hhhhappening hhhhhot stuff?" was her trademark. Colleges had pursued Melanie since her freshman year for athletic scholarships, but an unexpected pregnancy in her senior year halted all her hopes for an education and a continued athletic career. None of us talked about the situation then, but it was always in the back of our minds. I always wanted to let Melanie know how I felt, but I never had the nerve to talk with her. I kind of felt like it wasn't any of my business and let it rest. I hoped that she knew that I didn't look down on her for getting pregnant, but I never came out and told her. I found out years later that this failure to communicate caused more pain than I had known.

The academic overachiever among us was Kim. She was always the one studying by flashlight on the bus rides to and from our games. Valedictorian, full ride to Purdue... the whole bit. It was hard to believe that she was so intelligent, because she didn't come across as an overly smart individual. Her nickname was "witless", due to her lack of common sense and her inability to get a joke the first time it was told. This minor flaw in Kim's character never affected her performance on the court, so it never bothered us too badly. We just made fun of her the rest of the time. Kim and I were probably the closest pair of the gang. We grew up shooting baskets in my driveway and learned the secrets of the game together. That was probably why we could read each other so well when we played. We were the starting guards on our team. I brought the ball up the court and she would shoot off of my pass. I never even had to look for her sometimes. I'd just throw and she'd be there to catch it. But this intense connection ended abruptly when we left high school. We went two different directions in life and lost all our common ground. Kim got a degree in electrical engineering, a job with Mobil Oil, and an apartment
with her boyfriend in Chicago. And that's all I ever knew about her after high school.

Competition was stiffest between Kendra and I, especially when it came to boys. She was beautiful and tended to draw the attention of all the guys I was interested in. I acted like it was no big deal, but it drove me nuts. Kendra was tall and thin with thick, naturally curly brown hair, while I would've been described as a short and thick dishwater blonde. I always said that muscular legs were in just so she wouldn't get too stuck on herself. Not that I was jealous or anything! Anyway, we usually got along fine, but never made much of an effort to get to know each other intimately. We were satisfied with being buddies on the basketball team and acquaintances elsewhere. I actually thought Kendra was a pretty good ball player, but never told her for fear that she would think that I was complimenting her. I usually just held out my hand to slap hers when she was running back to play defense after a good play. Didn't want her to think that I was too impressed. When Kendra went to nursing school, I lost track of her. We only heard about each other through Melanie and Kim.

* * * *

John and I traveled from Cedar Rapids, Ohio to Port Huron, Michigan for the tournament every summer. He got a kick out of the four of us trying to relive our athletic prime, but he also understood why we did it. He saw us at our best back in high school, and he knew the intensity that had flowed between us for so long. The physical distance had led to emotional distance, but with a few thumps of the basketball it all came back. It was the time off the court that was hard to endure.

As we drove into town, my stomach did a double twist and I took a deep breath to keep from getting the nervous gitters. With each year that passed, I felt a little more distance between the girls and myself. Christmas and birthday cards just didn't lend well to building healthy relationships. Things seemed a lot easier in high school. We had the same interests, ideas, and even beliefs. We liked each other because we were the same. It brought us a sense of security in a time of life that was characterized by insecurity. We confided in each other, because we were sure that we would get the response we wanted. The drinking scene was out of the question for athletes, so we didn't party like the rest of our friends. The sense of competition between us pushed us to get excellent grades and join every possible student activity together. We took the same classes, played the same sports, participated in the same groups,
and hung out with the same people. The differences between us only became noticeable as we grew up and learned to be individuals with a purpose in life outside of bouncing a ball, spiking a ball, or batting a ball.

That acknowledgement was what brought the tumbling routine to my gut. Over the years, our conversations had turned to boring recitals of our current job status and family updates, always ending with memories of the good ol' days. I was sure that this particular time would be no different. John dropped me off at Denny's to meet the girls then went back to the motel. Our husbands always stayed at the motel instead of eating dinner with us, because they were sick of hearing the same stories over and over again. I wasn't the only one who was simply enduring these relationships.

I was nervous knowing that I had to tell the girls that this would be my last year to play in the tournament, but didn't have time to dwell on my nerves because Melanie was already waiting in our booth. She was always the first one there.

"Hey tough guy!" she shouted in her Rocky Balboa voice.

"Mel, you look great," I said as I embraced her.

"Thanks. How's Johnny doing? You two thinking about kids yet?"

She was getting the basic conversation pieces out of the way quickly and I feared we'd be left without anything to say in a matter of minutes. Trying not to embellish too much yet, I answered:

"Oh, John's great, but the kid thing is a little ways down the road yet. Give it a year or two."

"You said that last year. I think you're just afraid to have little Johnny's running around paying you back for all the stuff you put your parents through. You know you'll have to install maximum security to be sure they're not crawling out the windows at night like we used to."

"That's a scary thought! I wouldn't wish that on anyone. We were kinda crazy weren't we? Sneaking the car out of the driveway at two in the morning, getting caught by Coach Johnstone skinny dipping between classes down in the canal. Man, we were pretty stupid."

"Yea, but we had a bawl doing it didn't we?"

All I could do was nod my head and raise my eyebrows in agreement. The conversation was flowing now, but I was thinking of something to say in the future so there wouldn't be any uncomfortable silences to deal with. Knowing that she didn't work, I decided to use my last option and ask her about her family.

"You didn't say how Tim and Teresa were doing. Everything okay on the homefront?"
I knew immediately that I had overstepped that boundary that we had established over the previous years of separation. Melanie looked down and took a long drink from her coffee mug. Trying to appear unflustered, she answered jokingly, "Tim who?"

It had always been so hard to tell when she was kidding and when she wasn't, I didn't know how to answer her. I just looked at her with a half smile and chuckled like I knew what she was talking about.

Just then, Kendra and Kim came through the door and saved us both from a difficult situation. I stood up and waved them in our direction. My nervousness had actually turned to excitement as I saw them walk in the door. Even though our conversations weren't always intriguing, the tournament was always a blast. Seeing Kendra's tall and lanky body striding my way gave me an urge to get on the court right then. We really did have a great time playing together, and remembering that helped me relax.

We did the usual ritual of greeting each other with smiles and hugs and shrieks of feigned joy then sat down to eat and spread all the good news we had. Of course, we would never burden each other with the bad news. There wasn't time for it, and we weren't that close.

Everything seemed normal with Kendra. She was as beautiful as ever, loving her nursing job, and full of spunk. Before the rest of us had a chance to ask her about her dating life, she started spewing information at us about the wonderful pediatrician she was seeing.

Things were going just as well for Kim. She told us that she had just been promoted at Mobil Oil and was making more money than either one of her parents. We were genuinely excited for her, but were even more ecstatic when she informed us of her upcoming wedding.

My contribution of good news was that John and I had just bought our first home and were moving in the week after the tournament. Now, I thought this was a big step in my life, but I didn't realize that Melanie was so interested in homes. She started tossing questions at me left and right about how much we paid, how many rooms, full baths vs. half baths, color schemes, carpet vs. tile. Anything and everything. She had been full of questions for Kendra and Kim too, and I guessed that she didn't want to talk about herself. Never before had any of us been so interested in each other. I could tell that Kim and Kendra had also clued into the fact that something was up with Mel. Kendra dared to be the one to ask.

"So Mel. How's everything with you?"

Quickly taking a bite of her Works burger, Melanie nodded her head and mumbled, "Fine. I'm doing fine. How's your chicken Kim?"
“Good thanks.”

Kendra was not going to be routed so easily. She persisted in asking Melanie more specific and less easily ignored questions.

“You and Tim doing okay?” she asked.

“Well, in a way yes. The divorce will be final next month.” She said this in a nonchalant manner as if she had just asked for extra onions on her burger. The three of us looked at each other and had no idea how to respond to this type of news. Good things were the only appropriate topics we were used to discussing and this was far from good. I tried my best to appear concerned without coming across too nosy.

“I didn't know the two of you were having problems. Were you going through counseling or anything?” I asked.

“No. We just didn't have anything in common anymore. I knew it wasn't going to last forever, so it's no big deal. He's not even asking for custody of Teresa. It's been an easy proceeding. In fact, I'm really enjoying the single life again. You don't know what you're missing, Sue.”

“'I’m sure I don't, but I'd rather not find out either. Are you sure you're okay with this? It seems like it happened rather quickly.”

“Yea, Mel. You never mentioned anything before about you guys not getting along. What happened?” Kendra inquired.

“Really you guys, it's not that bad. It's almost over and I'm doing great. In fact, I'm doing better than ever. Teresa stays with my mom during the day while I take classes at the community college and work part time at Target. I'm busier than ever and don't really have time to think about the divorce. People make a bigger deal out of it than it really is. Now, I didn't come here to dwell on this. No more discussion about it. We've got more important things to discuss, like how were going to win tomorrow.”

She changed the subject, and we followed her lead as usual. None of us wanted to dig deeper than our emotional commitments would allow, and we feared vulnerability might hurt. We let the subject drop and talked about the next day's activities until we went back to our motel rooms.

Unlike any of our previous weekend conversations, this particular one stuck with me as I got into bed that night. I couldn't believe that the dissolution of Melanie's marriage had no effect on her. It would have torn me to pieces. I knew enough about Mel from the past to tell that she was hurting more than she let on and for some strange reason, I wanted to help. My initial plan to tell the girls that I was backing out of our annual trip was halted. My conscience wouldn't let me walk out of her life without doing the best I could to make sure I'd been a true friend.
Something stirred me to want to get involved and find out more about what was really going on inside of Melanie. I decided to talk with her when we got a chance.

* * * * *

The courts were crawling with people the next day. Parking lots were transformed into mini basketball courts and local vendors lined the perimeters ready to sell t-shirts, towels, water bottles, sausages, pizza, and coke. Music, mixed with the pounding of thousands of basketballs, filled the air and brought a smile to my face. The whole atmosphere of the place was alluring. Even if you had never played basketball in your life, you'd be tempted to try after going to a Gus Macker tournament.

We had planned to meet at the practice court to go over our plays and to warm up about two hours before we were scheduled to play. When I got to the court, everyone was there except Melanie. The three of us didn't think much of it at first and just began stretching and shooting around. Twenty minutes later we began to get concerned that Melanie had not shown up yet. She was usually the first one to show up and we had never known her to actually be late for anything.

"Where do you think she is?" Kim asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we should call her hotel and find out if she's left yet," said Kendra.

"Does anybody know where she stayed?" I asked.

"Not me."

"Me neither."

"Well, maybe she's waiting at the court for us. Let's go check it out. We can scope the other teams out while we're there," I said.

Without saying, we all knew that something serious was wrong. We walked to our court in silence and searched the grounds for Melanie as we went. Five minutes before game time, Melanie finally showed up. She was running with her high tops hanging from her shoulders and her hair still down.

"Where were you?" I asked as I grabbed her shoes to untie them.

"I'm just late. Can't anyone ever be late? The game hasn't even started yet. What are your undies in a bunch for?"

I just shook my head and refrained from answering her. I knew it wouldn't be good for the team to have us fighting before the tip off, but Kim and Kendra were already steaming.

"Thanks for coming to practice Mel. Playing cold isn't as easy as it
used to be. You better tell me that you were practicing at the Y or I'm really going to be upset," Kendra warned.

"Shut up. I've carried this team since we were in high school. You guys wouldn't be anything without me, so chill. I'm here aren't I?"

"Hey, don't get cocky with me. Just get your butt ready to play."

"Alright guys, knock it off. We work together remember. We're not going to go anywhere with you all fighting and everything. We'll talk about it later," Kim said.

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm here, so let's drop it. If you want to be stupid and play without me, then go ahead. But I'd say you all need a fourth player."

"You're right Mel," I said. "We need you, so put your hair up and let's go."

From that moment, I knew that the cards were stacked against us. No rhythm, no intensity, no fun. Mel was passing the ball with the force of a cannon, nearly knocking Kim and I over a time or two. The rim seemed to attract the ball every time we shot. Ping and off to the right. Boing and off to the left. Even Kim's shots weren't falling. Kendra couldn't get open for anything and Melanie was going nuts on everyone. She was throwing elbows and hips everywhere.

Driveway ball has always been a call-your-own-fouls game, and the Gus Macker was intended to follow this same pattern of honesty. There usually aren't any problems on the court and teams get by fine by calling their own fouls. This particular year, however, our team had a big problem. Melanie was knocking the other women all over the place. She wasn't even trying to get the ball, she was out to kill someone. Being aggressive is one thing, but knocking someone out cold is another. Melanie put her left elbow in the nose of one of the other players, breaking it and leaving the woman unconscious. Our team was verbally warned that we would be disqualified if we continued to be so physical, and a Gus Buster was sent to officiate our game. Gus Busters were only used in situations that were out of control, and that seemed to be our case. A huge crowd followed the Gus Buster to see the results of the intense game he was officiating. Blood always drew attention.

"Mel, you've got to calm down. You're going crazy out there. Just play you're game and don't let the other team get to you. I've never seen you like this. What's the problem?" Kendra asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'm not just going to sit back and let those guys push me around. If you can't handle a little bit of action, get off the court."
"That's exactly what's going to happen if you don't relax. They'll take us all off the court and send us home. I didn't travel four hours for a thirty minute game, so take it easy out there," Kendra yelled.

The whistle blew and we resumed the game. We didn't last ten minutes. The crowd started to dissemble when they saw how terribly we were playing. Passes were dropped, we couldn't dribble, and we never made another basket. Nothing was clicking. We'd lost all sense of intensity and unity on the court. Kim and I couldn't even feel the bond that had been so familiar to us on the court for so many years.

Frustration was deeply written on Melanie's face this whole time, and I felt like she was going to explode at any moment. She'd already had three fouls called on her since the Gus Buster came to ref our game, and she wasn't easing up for anyone. I could see the other team's anger for having to deal with such an obnoxious player and was glad Mel was on our team, at least until she lost all sense of decency.

Something snapped inside Melanie and she went berserk. As she was going up to shoot, one of the big women from the other team blocked her shot. It was a clean block, but Mel took her out just the same. It was all in slow motion, but still only took a few seconds to register in my brain. Before I could react, Melanie had nailed the other player in the jaw and an all out brawl was started. Imagine that. The crowd rushed back to see the action- grown women throwing punches. Much more intriguing than grown men I'll tell you.

Kendra, Kim and I hurried to get Mel off the other player and then off the court. We didn't even stop to ask when we played next. We knew we already had been or soon would be disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct. Our weekend had come to an abrupt end with a day and a half left in Port Huron. Sitting down on the curb, we considered our situation. None of us were pleased, but none of us knew how to react. We'd never been disqualified. Heck, we'd never had anyone foul out before. Our competitive spirit's were hurting badly, especially Kendra's. Mel was breathing normally by this time, but stared ahead like she was dazed. Tensions were high between us, and we waited for someone to break the silence.

"What is your problem, Mel?" Kendra threatened. We travel all this way for you to get us kicked out of the stupid tournament before we even get to the Toilet Bowl bracket."

"I got us kicked out? I was the only one standing up against those ruffians. You're all lucky they didn't try to kick your butts sooner."

"Let's not just sit here and blame each other," I interjected. "Why
don't we go watch one of the other games and try to relax. Then we'll talk about what we're going to do next."

"I am NOT sitting around here to WATCH basketball all weekend," Kendra hollered. "I'm leaving. I've got better things to do than hang out here all weekend. See you guys around. I'll give you a call or something."

No one asked her to stay. We pretty much knew that the weekend was ruined, but I wanted to salvage what I could.

"Why don't we go to Coney Island and get something to eat?" I said.

Kim responded quickly, "Actually, I've got some work I can get a head start on at home. I can use the extra time. Bryan's waiting for me at the court anyway. We'll just head out today."

"Are you sure? We can go out with the guys later tonight if you hang around for awhile."

"No thanks. We've got a long trip and better start while it's light out."

"Okay, I'll give you a call. See you later. Mel, how about you? Do you want to get a coney dog and fries?"

"Sue, you don't have to hang around just 'cause I don't have anyone here. I'm fine. Just go get Johnny and go. I'm not going to ruin your whole weekend by letting you babysit me."

"I'm not asking you to eat because I feel sorry for you or anything. I never get to see you and seeing as we've got some extra time on our hands, I thought we could grab a bite. Come on, let's go," I said.

We sat in the corner booth that had always been our favorite place to celebrate our victories in the previous years. I ordered two coney's with cheese, a large fry and a super size shake so we would have some time to really talk. Mel's outburst was totally out of character, and I guessed it had something to do with our conversation the night before. She still hadn't said why she was late, and I was determined to find out. Unlike in years past, I wanted to get involved and see what I could do to help Mel through whatever she was going through. I guess I was sick of wasting those long weekends on basketball and not using the time to help my friend.

Mel was still spacing out and hadn't said a word since we left the curb. I wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about the divorce or what happened today or if she just wanted to eat, but I opted for the first choice and was right. Before I had a chance to ask her anything, she started talking.

"Sue, how have you and Johnny made it so long? You guys seem so happy. It seems like you guys never fight."
"I guess we've just been lucky, that's all. We have some pretty nasty fights, but they never last long. We try to talk them out before too much time goes by. It's not that we don't fight. I guess it's the way we've learned to deal with them."

"Tim and I were fighting alot at the end."

"Is that why you're getting the divorce?"

"Not really. I mean, I'm not the one getting the divorce. He is. I was willing to put up with the arguing, but he was...."

She swallowed hard and looked up at me with hurt in her eyes.

"He was having...uh, seeing someone else."

"Oh, Mel I had no idea."

"I never told anyone. Didn't think anyone would understand or listen to my problems. You guys all have such perfect relationships and lives and all. I was the one that messed up. Of course, you knew that already. I guess I should have known this is what happens to teenage marriages. Isn't that what they always say. You probably expected this all the time."

"What do you mean, I expected this all the time? I didn't know you were having problems."

"No, but you thought we were making a mistake by getting married right out of school. And I guess you were right. I messed up bad."

"Melanie, I never thought you were making a big mistake. I was proud of you for keeping Teresa and not having an abortion like so many other people. It took a lot for you to give up your athletic career and I respected you for that. I don't know if I would have been able to make such a sacrifice."

"You never told me you felt that way. I thought for sure you were disappointed in me and disgusted that I got pregnant."

"Sure, I was disappointed. But I wasn't condemning you. We all make mistakes, Mel. Lord knows I have my share."

"Man, all these years I thought you looked down on me for what I did. I guess it doesn't matter anyway, it didn't last."

"Mel, I'm so sorry for not letting you know how I really felt. To think that we considered ourselves such good friends, but never talked about all you were going through. I'm so sorry for not being the friend that you needed back then. I hope you can forgive me?"

"No that's okay. It's not your fault. I made a bad choice and have to pay the consequences. I just didn't anticipate having to pay for so long."

"Listen to me, Mel. I want your forgiveness. Don't just blow this off and blame yourself. I made a mistake too and want to make it up to you. I want to be here for you now, when you need someone."
"Thanks Sue, but I really don't think you'll understand. You and Johnny don't have the same kind of problems that Tim and I had. I just need to put it all in the past and move on."

I was convinced at this point that I was going to have to work hard to get Mel to open up. I had failed her for so many years, there was no way she was going to trust me in just ten minutes. There was a sidewalk that went along Lake Huron just beyond the Coney Island. When we finished our meal, I asked her to go for a walk so we could talk more about the divorce. I knew she needed more than just a pep talk or some encouraging words. She didn't even need a time to vent her anger. Mel needed a friend, someone to listen to her and cry with her and help her through the darkness. I'd been to a similar point in life and knew that I needed a close friend to get me through too. The solution was spiritual.

As we walked along the lake, I realized that I was going to have to be vulnerable if I expected Mel to be. She still hadn't told me what happened with Tim, and I felt that she was a little hesitant. Since John and I had gone into full time Christian ministry, Melanie had been uneasy about talking over serious issues with me. I think she felt like I would beat my bible over her head or something if she made one wrong move. I wanted her to know the changes that had happened in my life as a result of my relationship with God, but I didn't want her to get defensive and feel like I was preaching at her. Honesty seemed to be the best way to go, so I did.

"Mel, I feel like I should tell you something before we go on. When we were seniors, I did something that I'm not very proud of and something that brought me a lot of pain for a long time. Nobody knew, because John and I didn't tell anyone, but I think you need to know. I want to tell you, because I want you to know that I have made mistakes. Big ones. And I can understand how you may have felt and what you're going through now. I'm not perfect, but I do feel a peace about what happened, and I hope my experience can help you right now. When we were seniors in high school, I got pregnant too. But instead of keeping the child, I had an abortion."

"Sue, I had no idea. What did you...how long...where...."

"It was at the end of the basketball season. I was about three months along. I couldn't imagine the humiliation to my family and myself, so I took the easy way out. Student Council president gets pregnant and forfeits her right to serve. I couldn't bear to hear that. Anyway, it was a selfish decision and a big mistake. I'm reaping the fruits of our decision now. We've been trying to have kids for three years, and the doctor says we probably won't be able to."
Mel didn't say anything. She didn't know what to say. I felt it was best to let her register everything I was saying and then let her respond later. I continued my story.

"If I ever appeared angry or upset with you over the past few years, it wasn't because of you marrying Tim after you got pregnant. I just wish I could have a beautiful little girl like Teresa. God's blessed you in a wonderful way. He's turned your mistake into something good. Remember that."

"You guys never let on like anything was wrong. Didn't it cause some strain in your relationship with John?"

"It's been hard, but I really think God has our best interests in mind. If we never have a child, we can handle it. We've even thought of adopting. The one thing that has pulled us through this has been Christ. I know you don't feel comfortable when I talk about spiritual things, but Mel this is real. God has really been active in our lives. I would never have made it this far without His supernatural peace and interaction."

"I don't know, Sue. I find it so hard to trust anyone after Tim left with that other woman. It's hard to see God in a good way after something like that happens. How could He let all these bad things keep happening to me?"

"Mel, He can't help you if you don't want Him to. He's not going to force you to trust Him. Let me explain how things changed for John and I when we gave everything to God and let Him deal with it all."

We sat down on a bench and the story unfolded slowly. Melanie was intently listening to every word I said. I had never felt such a bond between us before, not even on the court. We'd found common ground once again, and this time it was solid ground. It was ground that could hold roots firmly, and we dug our roots deep into the soil.

* * * * *

That was two years ago. Now, I'm sitting here watching Mel and her new husband drive off to Cape Cod for their honeymoon. The flowers in my hand remind me of the fresh new relationship that has sprung between us. I never thought two people could be so close. And I certainly never thought I would be standing here as Melanie's Matron of Honor...seven months pregnant.