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Making a Living, Making a Life

During term, in my early years as both English professor and single mother, I would sit in my chair in the living room—furniture purchased from someone’s basement—reading, thinking, preparing classes, grading papers on my clipboard. Or I would claim the occasional morning lounge in bed, accompanied by coffee, books, and papers. In subsequent years, immersed in a major project, I would stake out long-term residency at the dining room table—adopted from a friend’s attic—with books and note cards and xeroxed pages stacked up or strewn around in front of me. But that came later and usually happened only when my daughters were with their father. In the early years, I didn’t even have a dining room table or the capacity to take on major projects. Most times, when my daughters were home, with me, I would work in not so clearly defined areas of our mutual living space. I would be in my chair—with them and, sometimes, not really with them—but always in the midst of their lives.

Adriane, age four, would sidle up to me: “Do you still love me when you’re doing that work?” Or, more confrontationally, at age seven: “Which do you love more—me or your work?” I’ve been told that I was seriously remiss in my answer to the latter. But I had made a pledge of honesty to my daughters from the very beginning. And so I would say, “You can’t make me choose. I have to do my work, not just for money but for me. But I have to be with you too. I love you and I love my work.” My answer is deeply etched in memory by the surrounding cultural guilt that told me that there was only one right answer: “I love you most of all, my darling.” But I was obdurate in my pledge to be honest. Truly, I loved my work, even as my daughters were at the core of my being.

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I did always love my daughters, though I was often angry with them and pushed to the limit by the strains of single parenthood. But, at first, I didn’t love

my work, not with a real passion. When I took the job at The College of Wooster in 1976, Kara was five years old and Adriane a year and a half. I was thirty-one, newly divorced, and could only see this job as a temporary stopping-place, my good luck to make a living doing what I had always done: reading books. I certainly needed the income and I thought I knew something about teaching and about research, too. Reading had always been a passion. The rest was really just a way to make a living, for myself, for my daughters.

In my first year or two at Wooster, I often paced the floor in lonely tears, counted my quarters and dollars as I approached the checkout in the grocery store, fretted over childcare and child freedom. I did not feel like a professor, and, though I was developing a confidence that was unfamiliar to me, I kept asking myself whether I had any professional goals. The obvious first choice would be to carry on from my 1974 dissertation on Virginia Woolf, but I hadn't figured out how to go beyond the stale thinking I had already done, or how to escape the deeply ingrained practice of close reading, which felt sterile. Having loved grappling with ideas in my own undergraduate education and having grown up in a family of teachers, I knew something about teaching: the value of learning was woven into my worldview. But who was I, as a professor? And how did that fit into my relationship with my daughters, my life as a mother?

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When I was first offered the job at Wooster, I had laughed at the thought that I might want to stay longer than the initial two-year contract: how could I make the life I meant to make—a life that expanded into the future—there in a small town in Ohio? But by the time I was offered another interim contract, certainly nothing tenure track or secure, I yearned to make this place my home. Any prospect of an expansive future had succumbed to my knotty personal life and my effort to keep my daughters safe. I still thought short-term—and I could hardly have imagined that this would be the rest of my life—but I was grateful for some continuity in the life I was struggling to make, year by year, patching together terminal contracts.

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Clearly, making my life and making my living could not so easily be seen as distinct projects. When I sat in my living-room chair, I was not working in some separate space of my own, as Woolf so aptly suggested women need. But neither was I working under cover, as in the myth about Jane Austen, discreetly slipping my pages under a blotter when a guest or family member entered the drawing room. What I had gradually learned to aim for was some new balancing act: to do my work—openly and passionately—in the midst of our family life. When Kara and Adriane drifted in and out of the room, they knew that they would usually find me there at the heartbeat of the house, in the armchair with its matching hassock: books on my lap, papers on the floor around me and on the hassock, dodging my feet. Olive green, threadbare, with naked foam peering through, the armchair became a kind of alternative hearth. Here, work and family might come together, frayed threads criss-

crossing irreconcilable needs and competing demands.

I recall one morning in particular: I sat in my worn chair, desperate to make last minute class preparations for a twentieth century literature course. Kara had left for school; Pauline, our childcare giver, had not yet arrived. When Adriane, age four, came whining to my side, I scooped her onto my lap and read aloud to her from the book I held: Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* With its arcane diction, endless sentences, and obscure meanings, it was hardly a child's book. But Adriane already loved the rhythms of language and didn't seem to care so much that she didn't get the meanings. At least on that morning, she nestled into the sound of my voice, the flow of words, and the attention I gave her, however rifted.

That same morning in class, when my students complained about the arcane language and obscure meanings, I suggested that they follow the example of my four-year-old daughter: listen to the language—actually hear it—and immerse in the flow of words. I had been advised by child-free female colleagues that I should keep my personal life out of the classroom, but I was not so sure that they understood either the hazards or the value of breaching this prohibition. This time I took the desperate measure of bringing my mother-life into the classroom; my work life was, after all, a constant presence in my home life.

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Beneath the frayed surface of my life, other connections began to tighten. During my first year at Wooster, I had proposed a course called "Fiction by Women"; the visible focus on women led to my appointment to the Committee on the Status of Women. In 1976-77, this chain of association, tenuous as it was, pulled me into interdisciplinary work that was developing across the nation and toward an emerging discipline: Women's Studies. I was drawn into a leading role in the campus program by random circumstances and a dearth of women faculty members. But I knew I was choosing to enter a vortex of intellectual and social currents that had been pulling at me for years.

As appointed chair of the Committee on the Status of Women during my second year at the college, I received a directive: develop and propose a minor in Women's Studies. Still unseasoned and ill prepared for campus politics, I nonetheless understood duty. And so I worked with colleagues on the committee—most notably a generous and supportive male colleague, Jim Turner, from the history department—and drew up a rudimentary proposal: a smattering of "women in" courses, an experimental introductory course that was already on the books, and a new course called "Seminar in Women's Studies."

When our proposal won the nearly unanimous support of the faculty in February of 1978, I rejoiced in a triumph that was both personal and collective. In the spirit of triumph and responsibility, Jim Turner and I selected ourselves to team-teach the new course, as an overload, to a handful of eager students. In the dogma of the time, experiential insights from women's lives were central. Together, we met over lunch in the student dining hall, spring of 1979, probing

those insights, placing women's diaries and narratives in conversation with feminist theory. We argued out the meanings and repercussions of the rich but scarce texts of the era—*The Second Sex*, *Of Woman Born*, *Working It Out*, *Revelations*. Later we would add such texts as *But Some of Us Are Brave*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Making Face, Making Soul*, but at that point we had to supplement with xeroxed materials, news items, and personal experiences. As we drew upon our own gendered life experiences, I embraced a new breach in my public facade, re-forming my nascent professional identity, provoking a new passion for my work.

Jim's daughter, Sarah, was Kara's age peer—and eventual close friend—and his wife was also an academic and friend. Jim's and my shared experiences, differentiated by gender, gave us further means for probing our emergent understandings; the Turner family became a vital part of my human community in those early years. And my teaching in Women's Studies reinvigorated my love for talking about language and literature: I was partly finding and partly making an alternative home in academic life.

Still I suffered: who was I, as a professor, as a mother? How could I be both? Vividly, I recall a conversation at the home of other friends, friends whose dinner table became the nerve center of my adult social world throughout my life in Wooster. The discussion, late at night after numerous glasses of wine, turned on the question of what it means to be human. At what moment does a child become human? Is reason—and hence choice—the sole defining human characteristic?

At one point, another friend and colleague, whom I held in highest esteem, asserted: "Really, a six-month-old baby is no different from a dog." This struck me as manifestly false and unresponsive to the real question: how do we assess human selfhood on some continuum between responding organism and pure freedom of intellectual choice? And when does a child, in fact, achieve sufficient reason to be held responsible for his or her own choices? How does a child move from being the responding organism—which a new infant seems to be—to becoming the responsible adult each of us claims to be? I called my friend's comment "stupid" but then fell into a paroxysm of silence: I couldn't speak the evidentiary base for my real thoughts.

Grappling with the loneliness of my life, I knew that my own parenting experiences were relevant to how I understood these questions, and I wanted to be able to draw upon them as part of my knowledge base. Repeatedly, I felt that I *knew* some things because of what I had lived with my daughters, but I also felt that my colleagues would see that as ordinary life, not knowledge. And, even though I'd felt supported by the experience in "Seminar in Women's Studies," I hadn't yet developed the tools for professing this kind of knowledge, integrating it into my book knowledge. Despite my emergent campus successes and affiliations, I felt split, vulnerable, still alone.

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Sometimes, with Kara off in grade school and Adriane off in preschool, I

sat alone in my frayed chair at the heart of the house and simply settled into my solitude, resisting loneliness, guarding against interruption. In September 1979, during my first research leave—a ten week period, in which I was working on an article on Virginia Woolf—I sat in that chair and wrote in my journal: “here I can enjoy the movement of leaf shadows on the rug, wavering in the sunlight as the breeze nudges the leaves outside. Chang sits on the stereo looking out the window; the sunlight shimmers silver in his hair. With Mozart on the stereo, a cup of coffee beside me, I will savor. I will taste the available pleasures in this space of mine. Why wait for future, unavailable pleasures?” The Woolf article was languishing, though I would complete it and even publish it, again dutiful. My personal life was intractable and my professional identity was held hostage by the demands of textual analysis and professorial distance. I turned to the transient pleasures of language and sensory experience: light, the cat, music, taste. And, when my daughters later wandered through the living room, I turned again to Adriane’s lively squirming body and ready questions or Kara’s quieter presence and probing thought, as each in turn took her place beside my chair.

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At the same time, another alchemy was at work. In my journal, my private self falters, sounding forlorn and inadequate, falling short of phantom standards for both professor and mother. Yet during those same years, I not only took on the public campus role of proposing and leading the early Women’s Studies program; I also undertook a series of public lectures: marking my progress toward a new confluence of my personal life and my professional life.

The first lecture—as with much that I undertook in those early years—was in response to an external request, in 1979: that I participate in a symposium on critics and criticism, titled “Mimesis and Meaning.” At least I chose my own title: “Female Realities in Fictional Structures.” I spoke from notes for sixty uninterrupted minutes—not something I ever did in the classroom where I always felt the need to interact, to engage with what my students were thinking. But here I spoke and even gained confidence in my own knowledge in this interdisciplinary forum, buoyed by a new pleasure in public performance. Besides, I was beginning to discern a different relationship between “reality” and “fictional structure,” and to seek ways to tell women’s experiences beyond the confinements of traditional narrative forms.

Chafing at the limits of this old straitjacket, I soon took on another public lecture in the fall of 1980: “Feminist Literary Criticism: Two Frames of Reference or One?” As I recall, the audience here was exclusively faculty, invited faculty from other institutions as well. Here, too, I spoke from notes, poking through the fissures I discerned in the dense walls of my previous thought, using the capacity of oral delivery to dodge ideas I wasn’t yet ready to confront directly. I remember citing the metaphor of Scylla and Charybdis as a frequent favorite among feminist critics: I too was trying to slip through this impossible framing of our choices. I was exhilarated by audience response, but still

tormented by all of the impossible choices that lined the cliffs of my emotional and professional life. I regularly averted my eyes from the choice that I would not make: my daughters or my work.

The Women's Studies vortex that I had been drawn into seemed to have become a maze I was trying to slip through with cagey intellect. But meanwhile I was also worming my way through an endless series of performance reviews and interim contracts. Almost before I opened my own eyes to the very real consequences, I had agreed to yet another public lecture: January 1981, under judging eyes of review committees and tenure procedures. My lecture this time was open to the entire campus: "Women: Living Stories, Telling Lives." Moving in on a paradox to which I thought I could give form, not just a conflict with which I must live, I wagered my professional future on giving clarity to ideas I was not yet sure I had settled in my own mind. I drew on strands of thought from dinner table conversations, from small lectures with oral evasions, from committee meetings and classrooms and my own private musings; I laid out the core of the argument I had been trying to make for years. What is the relationship between cultural forms and self-definition? How is gender embroiled in both of these concerns? What are women to do with the stories that they/we have been given and the contradicting insights that we garner from our rifted lives? What are the consequences when women speak—claiming an "I"—and aim for an honest rendering of our own experiences?

I had many sources of knowledge for the questions I was asking: first and always, writers who had nourished my life when I had felt little other nourishment—Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Alice Munro, Toni Morrison; but then also narrative theory, feminist analysis, scholarly inquiry into the nature of selfhood—especially psychology and sociology. For me, these were not separate inquiries but all part of the same whole. Beneath the surface of the life I thought I could not contain, I had developed an insatiable hunger to figure out the central questions about how human beings make their lives. Exhilarated by my boldness in this lecture, nourished by my life with my daughters, propelled through a successful tenure review, I nonetheless still held off the other question: what does my own experience as a mother have to do with it all?

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Adriane's two questions about love and work are suggestive of questions that children regularly pose about parental love, present and absent. By the time she posed the second question—which do you love more?—she had already succumbed to the cultural binary, the imposed either/or choice. But her earlier question—"Do you still love me when you're doing that work?"—is the more complex expression of a child's ongoing anxiety. And it is the question I held in my heart with a resounding affirmation even as I continued with my work.

As I recall, she posed the either/or question while I was working on yet another lecture—this one to be delivered at the invitation of a former lover (still friend), at a sibling institution, about an author who would actually be in the

audience: Tillie Olsen. This was yet another situation designed to induce anxiety. My writing about Olsen had taken the form of textual analysis but it had been driven by personal circumstances. Olsen's short story, "I Stand Here Ironing," had focused questions that I myself had asked, as a single parent: what *is* the power of circumstances? How does a mother begin to understand "all that compounds a human being" (1989: 12)? How can a child overcome the hazards of her own era—or a mother determine how best to live her own life, with and apart from her children? Having written and published on this story, I was an "authority" to be invited to Kenyon College during a visit by Tillie Olsen herself. Having lived my own experience as a single mother, I nonetheless felt a need to be discreet about personal history.

As I was trying to finish this lecture, desperate for the time and focus that it required, Kara fell ill. I rushed her to the doctor, continuing, desperately, to work. Adriane hovered nearby—"Which do you love more, me or your work?"—needing attention too. Olsen's narrator begins, "I stand here ironing and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron" (1989: 1). Sitting in the doctor's office I did understand Olsen's narrator, tormented. And I understood, a bit, what it had taken for Olsen to have written this classic story, composing it as she rode the bus to work or, at night, as she moved her own iron back and forth to the rhythms of language. My lecture was titled: "Rereading Women's Lives: Tillie Olsen's Generic Female." It was decidedly born of my own experiences as a woman, as a mother.

When my former lover phoned the next week, congratulating me on my success, I spoke of my sheer exhilaration of productive solitude, my overwhelming need to *claim* that solitude as real and positive. But that was somewhat disingenuous: I was not alone and what I needed to claim was my life, and within it, my solitude *and* my commitment to my daughters. When Tillie Olsen had spoken of "the college of motherhood" in her own lecture during that same visit to Kenyon College, I had attended to that great paradox of parenthood: knowing my daughters, loving them, sharing my life with them had enriched my understanding far beyond what it would otherwise be; and yet that understanding must struggle continually to find expression, struggle against so many cultural assumptions about the meanings of motherhood—struggle, too, against all the odds which responsibility for children and interruption by children inevitably set up.

I knew that I regularly yelled at them, bemoaned their intrusions, wished them out of the room—sometimes even pounded the mattresses of their beds in sheer frustration. But not for a moment did I wish them undone. The incredible core of human connection, the mystery of human development, the particularity of their individual existences—these they brought to me; these things I would never wish away.

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When I then went on to write my first book, it was not the proverbial first book, wrought out of the dissertation. Instead, it was wrought from the

materials of my life: from teaching and lectures and dinner table conversations—and most of all from the ongoing simmering thought process: how am I to make sense of my own life, as a woman, as a human being, as a mother?

The book became an obsession, especially during the summer of 1983 when my daughters were with their father and I completed its first draft. Threatening as it was to my experiential and intellectual foundations—in my journal I put the question: “how can I write an analytical book in which every unit of analysis implicates me in my lived experience?”—I nonetheless completed and sent it off: *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*. When this first draft was rejected in December 1983, Adriane said, “All that work for *nothing*!?” and Kara, adopting the gender-neutral usage of her generation as well as a new preteen vocabulary, said, “Those *bitches*!”

Oddly, these responses helped to push me forward. They showed my daughters to be there for me as support, and they gave me impetus to carry on: that work couldn’t be for nothing. Although it took the following summer and part of the subsequent year, I dug back into the manuscript, once again wrestling my entangled ideas into some form. When we received the word in December 1984 that the University of Michigan would publish this version, my daughters were the first to rejoice with me. Indeed, by then, we were each other’s primary human community in any case: on leave for the academic year in London, 1984–85, forging new outlooks on our world, weaving together new strands of the lives we shared.

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“Do you still love me when you’re doing that work?” Our children ask us the questions of our culture. But our culture remains stuck in the agonistic form of the question—we are supposed to choose between our work and our children—when really our children may be wiser than that, at least with our help. The right answer is easy—“yes, I do love you when I’m doing this work”—but the real answer is also much more complex: an affirmation of the warp and woof of our lives apart and our lives together.

Having now taught at The College of Wooster for twenty-seven years, I am still amazed that this is how I have made my life. My daughters have gone on to other lives: Kara in London, Adriane in New York. Both decided early on that they did not want an academic life. But, like their mother in this, they have chosen lives committed to words and ideas: writers both. Sharing our lives, we learned not only how to love each other better but also how to ask the ever more difficult questions. I made a life with them, for them—and for myself. But really we made our lives together: work and love, inseparable.

References

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