A TEACHER’S SOULFUL INQUIRY:
EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
USING
THE DIVINE COMEDY
AS A GUIDE

by

ANGELA RITA ROTUNDO

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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A TEACHER’S SOULFUL JOURNEY: 
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Angela Rita Rotundo, Doctor of Education, 2001
Department of Adult Education, Community Development, and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

This is a reflexive inquiry about a teacher’s story as she journeys through life
and her professional teaching experiences. Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy is used to
recreate a metaphorical journey towards self-understanding partly influenced by the
interactions of people she meets along life’s path. The voyage transcends time and
space as it weaves through the three poetic realms of Dante’s afterlife. Past experiences
reminiscent of the poet’s Hell are symbolic of the soul’s desire to remove certain
impediments before progress can be attained. Achieving success in this realm is never
attained alone, making it necessary to have a guide to facilitate the learning process.
The experiences of Purgatory represent a time of healing because understanding the
human condition and ridding oneself of negativity raises the spirit towards hopefulness.
Finally, the narratives of Paradise are contemplative in nature. Being capable of
enjoying beauty in all that surrounds humanity and the full extent of one’s individual
capacities are the final vision towards the attainment of spiritual truth and a more
holistic way of living life.

This personal articulation of a journey driven by a teacher’s practice and
2) state that “an expression of who teachers are as people. that is imbued with the
beliefs, values, perspectives, and experiences developed over the course of a teacher's lifetime.” Reflexive inquiry frames the grand narrative by permitting the storyteller to give meaning to the experiences and restructure the inquiry to promote personal and professional development.

The cast of characters that are presented throughout the journey are fictionalized as literary protagonists that serve to inform an understanding based on the influential power of teacher practices and beliefs. They provide support when exploring the quintessential and epistemological question of ‘Who and what am I?’ presented in a complex series of reflections that provide validation to the process of self-narrative.

Constructing meaning from experiences and reconfiguring the processes to find hope in the face of adversity is the driving force behind this reflexive inquiry. Situating past personal experiences in the present using the literary metaphor of the Divine Comedy’s various chants provides a creative fluidity to emerge from the research landscape to that of personal knowledge. Providing this self-presentation is an invitation to readers to celebrate life as it unfolds. The celebration is not in finding answers to universal dilemmas, but in the validation of self-exploration. Embracing the diversity of teaching ideologies and practices became the inspiration behind the soulful inquiry that validates the search for the deepest truth of a human being’s existence and the authentication of actions as a way to define a teacher’s spirit and professional development.
Acknowledgements

"O thou in whom my hopes securely dwell.
And who, to bring my soul to Paradise.
Didst leave the imprint of thy steps in Hell.
Of all that I have looked on with these eyes
Thy goodness and thy power have fitted me
The holiness and grace to recognize.
Thou hast led me, a slave, to liberty.
By every path, and using every means
Which to fulfil this task were granted thee.
Keep turned towards me thy munificence
So that my soul which thou has remedied
May please thee when it quits the bonds of sense."
(Sayers. 1962. Paradise chant (canto) XXXI. v. 79 -90. p. 329)

I was blessed with the opportunity to take a metaphorical journey through the realms of Dante’s afterlife as I wrote my thesis. Just like the poet, I was able to write about my experiences of isolation and completeness. Yet these travels would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my family, friends, and former teachers. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to those who believed in me and in my desire to restore my wounded spirit by telling my story.

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Ardra Cole, my thesis advisor, for being instrumental in encouraging me to embark on the journey of self-knowledge and undertake the arduous work associated with transformation. You gave me the opportunity to recover my lost self and find hope wherever I could on the road to freedom. Your influential writings and supportive teachings using reflexive inquiry helped shape my personal and professional life. I am thankful for your dedication, patience, and wisdom in the evolution of my story writing. In the final analysis of the pilgrimage you helped me see that life is the greatest teacher of all.
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To my brother, Rino Rotundo. thank you for being wise beyond your years and for giving me the strength to overcome all the countless obstacles that were strewn along my path. Your sense of humour and faith in me encouraged me to move forward and complete the task. Even when the end did not appear in sight. you made it possible for me to see that the road towards betterment was not far.

To my father, Francesco Rotundo. who came to a new land with the hope to give his children a better life. Your own journey into the unknown so that your family may have known the privileges associated with higher education gave me the empowerment
to delve into my studies and reclaim the loss of dignity and self. Your story telling
inspired me to explore the unconscious depths of spirit and acknowledge its relationship
with the poetic rhythm of life. Catching a glimpse of who we are and how our identity
affects what we do are the lessons you taught me that profoundly impacted my studies.
Thank you for sharing your gifts of adoration, sacrifice, and truth with me. You have
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your stories and the printed words in the books you gave me.

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the course for this soulful inquiry. You gave me the courage to recognize the
importance of following your own dreams. Your comforting words and faith in my
abilities to persevere have inspired me to find the way towards enlightenment. Your
courage, spirit, and devotion have always been my guides. Thank you for always being
by my side. I am grateful for all that you have done for me, especially for giving me the
gift of self-worth.

To my husband, Frank Vergura, who has always believed in my potential and
given me the hope to achieve all that matters to me. Your patience and support have
sustained me throughout many difficult times. Thank you for your encouragement,
love, and trust in me. Your actions of self-sacrifice have not been mere acts of
kindness, but those of hope that helped foster my spiritual identity. Your love made it
possible for me to contemplate the journey to look back on my life and scale the
mountain of self-knowledge to ultimately find the process that leads towards salvation.
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Preface

The Pilgrim’s Plight

My library is adorned with books that display my interests and professional development, but there is one book that is a legacy. This book, yellowed-paged and bound by scotch tape, is a historical document. It is a source of inspiration and pride as I look back on my life as a teacher. The book is appropriately called *Tempo di Raccolta*, which literally translates to “A Time to Gather”. The illustrations that grace the front and back covers of the book depict the life of a farmer. There is a lonely tree that stands in the middle of the field, in the foreground of the book’s front cover. There is something fascinating about this simple and yet poignant drawing. I believe there is a story waiting to unfold as I glance at the cover. Five farmers sowing the land in the vast green space with a golden horizon of grain and rolling hills in the background elicits the significance that this book is rather special. Like the tan-faced cultivators, the children who will study from it will also extrapolate nourishment from the bounty of the earth and then sow their own seeds of knowledge.

As I turn the frail and cracked dry sheets of paper the inside page portrays two children. Their identities are unknown as their backs are against the reader. They are sitting on a rocky hill under one massive, distorted tree looking down from the their viewpoint. The clear blue sky is the only indication of a background. What they are looking at is also unknown. Perhaps the illustrator is trying to depict that what one learns is a mystery that will unravel itself as the exploration beyond the horizon begins. The representation beckons the reader to continue turning the pages and discover what lies in the book.
This distinguished book is my mother's grade five school textbook. Children of her generation used this one publication to learn about religion, history, civic education, geography, science, grammar, and arithmetic. In a small agricultural town named Vinciaturo, all the students used this reference tool from which to learn. The town is nearby the capital city, which is also the name of the province, Campobasso, in the region of Molise. This district is approximately three hours south of Rome nestled in the Apennine Mountains. Along with Abruzzo, the geographic area of Molise, is also one of the most mountainous regions of central Italy. Between the mountains and the Adriatic Sea, there are fertile hills with valleys and rivers that grace this beautiful and bountiful land. The children's families were more commonly farmers and lived lives of poverty, dependent upon the elements of the earth to provide them with some form of wealth. Money was scarce as the families lived through the tribulations of World War II and so one school textbook had to suffice.

What is particularly impressive about my mother's book is how concise and very thorough it is. When the children completed their studies using this book, they would be fairly knowledgeable to pursue intelligent discourse in a range of subject areas. The fifth grade in Italy marks the end of a child's elementary education. The special feature about this volume is that it can always be used as a source of reference. The information is relevant and easy to comprehend.

I am blessed to have obtained this heirloom. Of course, there is an understanding that I will share it with my brother. My mother taught us to not be possessive with sources of knowledge. What may be purposeful for me, then, may be equally important to my sibling. True to the title of the book, it is a sharing of
knowledge. When one gathers, she is pulling in material from all directions. The symbolic feature of harvesting profoundly impacted my belief that there comes a time to put books down and stop reading. There is a moment to start living: that is, commence living the life of the words that I had read, and not only in my mother's book, but in the many that rest neatly upright on my shelves.

I found this treasure among many cultural paraphernalia that were nestled in my parents' library. I began my adventure scouring through interesting artifacts for a project I was working on, then became enthralled by the beauty and yet simplicity of this never before seen book. I carefully turned the aged pages and began my voyage to another world. I wondered what it was like to teach from this guide, what it was like to learn from this text. How did the students respond to this source of information and how did this book change my mother's life? I realized that coming across this treasure was symbolic and that, since there is an exceptional bond between books and me, I would take my source of inspiration and begin to look back on my life as a teacher. It is my intention to discover what I learned and how it has shaped me into the person I am.

Who am I? This is a question that has caused me a great deal of confusion in the past. I used to primarily identify myself by stating what I did for a living, but did not truly understand the magnitude of this distinctiveness. Now, however, I am comfortable in saying that I am a teacher, but truly understand my role to be that of a traveller and the journey is life. It is a life that is not solely dedicated to school, but one that encompasses humanity, as we know it.

It has taken me some time to come to the realization that who I am as a person is embedded into my identity as a teacher. The roles are interchangeable. Since the
defining characteristics are synonymous of each other. I will ascertain then that I am a teacher who has committed herself in detracting the chaos of a life in school by focusing on becoming a stronger individual. Finding the path towards freedom from fear and adversity in schools, while discovering my common link with teachers is the process that I have chosen in order to make my life as a teacher more meaningful.

This yearning to recover the lost "teacher" self began when I entered the classroom for the first time. Everything I fought to forget as a student now came surging into the limelight. I did not want to become the teacher I hated in school. Furthermore, I began to see the realities of teaching in a faltering system and I did not want to be part of it. This became more complicated as each day passed in isolation within the confines of my classroom walls and as I spoke to burnt out colleagues with lists of complaints and cynical spirits. I could not believe that this was the profession I had chosen. I wanted to make a difference, but suddenly I felt alone in facing the task that I believed was reserved for a select group of individuals.

My decision to go back to school and obtain post-graduate degrees was my way of attempting to solve the problem. I believed that I was living in obscurity and if only I could be a better teacher, then I would see the light. I began to search for answers and after a few tribulations: I came to discover the magic that occurs when the heart and the mind work in unison. It came by way of new learning experiences that included discovering my true spirit. Until that point, my education appeared limited, irrelevant, and subject-oriented. This may be purposeful if playing a fact-based knowledge game such as "Trivial Pursuit" or "Jeopardy", but to live a life with oneself and others, it has pitfalls.
I began my search for courses that were invigorating and promised an awareness of the interconnectedness of body, mind, and soul. I felt that the class texts and manuals I was using as a teacher were not the only places for answers. I knew that the lives of the students in my room would help me in my quest towards self-discovery. Discarding the regular conventions of teaching and searching for soul became my objective. I wanted to journey through the pain and exhilaration of success to share a story of soulful inquiry. I knew that something was not right with the way I felt and I also knew where I wanted to be, but it was the journey that became my obstacle. I then discovered the possibility to travel back in time to re-acquaint myself with who I was and how I had evolved.

As an undergraduate student, I specialized in Sociology and majored in Italian Language and Literature. One of my program prerequisites for my major was to take a course, The Divine Comedy. I was unaware at the time of the incredible transformation that would occur as I studied one of the most significant literary works of art ever created. The book that inspired me as an eager and receptive student became a metaphor of my life. I felt that I was a pilgrim in the world of teaching, learning, and research. Like Dante, I needed to experience the turmoil of Hell and the complexity of Purgatory to ultimately reach the enlightenment of Paradise.

The Divine Comedy is a poem that has one hundred chants (canti) that use periods of time to explain the complexities of the universe. One of the main themes of the literary work is that of exile. Dante was exiled from Florence during a period of political strife and it was that situation that determined the rest of his life. It also had a profound effect on the structure of The Divine Comedy. His story is one of a journey
leading him back home. His pilgrimage, however, is not terrestrial, but celestial in nature. Dante's story is an autobiographical enterprise in that he is trying to ascertain meaning in his life. He does not present himself as poet but as a human being trying to make sense of human nature. He is the recorder of a journey that took place. The purpose of writing the poem is to lead humanity from a state of misery in the earthly world to the eternal bliss of Paradise. Dante realizes that in order to lead individuals he had to write a poem in which the audience had to participate. The first person reference, "I" becomes the main character. Dante links all the episodes as he universalizes his own character and experiences in order for the audience to follow him. Similarly it is important for me to also ensure universality when recounting my story. I want to invite readers to learn about my journey while reflecting back on their own experiences.

Dante Alighieri was born in late May 1265. His beloved Beatrice died when Dante was 25 years old. Although their relationship was nothing more than a mere acquaintance, she enthralled him since they were children. They never had a courtship of any kind and yet she was the chosen one to lead him to finding a truly spiritual re-awakening. He was an influential member of Florentine society when he was condemned on charges of baratry. Once the charges were made official, he had to seek refuge elsewhere, which meant he had to leave the city of Florence forever. In 1302, he began his journey to seek sanctuary from various courts throughout northern Italy. Florence did offer Dante amnesty as long as he admitted to his wrongdoings. Dante refused and sought asylum wherever it might be granted since the death sentence had been extended to his two sons as well. His wife Gemma decided to remain in Florence.
Dante finally settled in the mosaic city of Ravenna. He settled in nicely since scholars and others who shared similar interests surrounded him. In 1307, he began writing The Divine Comedy. His poem was written as a symbolic journey depicting the drama of salvation. As the main protagonist he emerges from the dark wood and reaches the summit of a mountain to his plight.

Dante confirms through his poetry that a logical understanding of human misery must precede renewal. His ability to understand comes to Dante by way of the Roman poet Virgil, another significant character in the poem. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my voice of reason was to be my thesis supervisor. Without her support, I could not have moved forward.

My thesis supervisor's help was instrumental in helping me extrapolate the importance of my research and its association with my identity. There were many delays along my journey because of the deeply ingrained doubts and inhibitions I had developed over the years. Like Dante, I found myself on a slope towards vastness and uncertainty. Virgil appears and tries to persuade Dante to take the journey and mentions that there have been others before him in order to give him encouragement.

I decided to borrow Dante Alighieri's, Divine Comedy, as a metaphor for my self-exploratory journey throughout my life as a teacher because it allowed me the opportunity to communicate my thoughts with passion, authenticity, and sincerity. The book is about a celestial pilgrimage to one's roots. It is an autobiography of a soul (Grandgent. 1972. p.xxix). Like Dante, I want to share my story and find a place of comfort and safety that detracts the chaos of life. In Dante's theatre, the poetic realm is
similar to universal space. He documents his travels through three kingdoms of after life in a discussion that is narrative in structure.

This book is a cyclical reflection of where I am at this stage in my life, where I have been, and where I would like to be. During the writing of my doctoral proposal and course work, I was still in the dark forest that opens Dante's poem. The scene provided by the stage of Hell and the first chant (canto) of Purgatory is an example of the human condition trying to achieve a positive identity. Like the protagonist, I was trying to recognize the good and avoid the obstacles in my way; however, I could not travel the journey alone. I needed to be endowed with the strength to foresee the necessary insights to turn reason into proper guidance and to rejoice in the small victories that lay ahead. I needed to trust the process, my companions, and myself as Dante did. I wanted to move from a state of exclusion to one of inclusion.

At the age of thirty-three, I began pondering the thoughts that clouded my mind with vivid flashbacks to my formal education in a sterile school environment. I began writing my doctoral thesis proposal realizing that I was bored with learning about theories, curriculum, school renewal and restructuring, and other current educational issues. I was tired of teaching and learning things pertaining solely to the development of formal education.

I was bewildered by this thought! How could I, being disciplined and devoted to my profession, not want any more professional learning experiences and resources? What was happening that I could not select an interesting and contemporary topic that was engaging and significant for the educational community? I grew frustrated with every passing day. I was working on my fourth revision when I realized that my thesis
had to address the real issues in my life. I needed to break free from the debilitating stronghold of the academic assembly that shaped me. but that did not nurture my soul.

This realization was distressing. I felt that I could not break free from tradition and begin to search for something personal because I thought it would be deemed as being selfishly radical. I was distraught and embroiled in an entangled web of self-deception and conformity. The internal struggle to do what was right took a great deal of courage because I no longer felt that I belonged anywhere. I was now alone in the world and I would only have my experiences to provide me with companionship. I needed to do this for me, but my underlying commitment was also to those that would read my research. I knew I wanted to learn more about the universal theme of self-exploration. In my opinion, learning about myself would provide the answers to understanding the bigger picture called life. Knowing how I relate to our world and how it relates back might provide me with a better sense of my existence.

I needed to look at my life as a teacher and discover an understanding of what it is like to be the gatherer of information and the sower of knowledge. I needed to stop trusting the system that cradled me into its tight grip and expand my horizons by trusting myself. I realized that finding the way towards enlightenment would sustain me even in moments of failure. I also believed that there might be others who were just as confused and disillusioned with the system and issues of identity as I was. The search was on to learn about my role as a teacher in an educational system that I believe does not always encourage self-preservation and self-awareness as fundamental elements to be developed and maintained.
In order to pursue my learning adventure I needed the assistance of re-creating a metaphorical journey because I could not express the complexities in any other way. That is when I turned to borrowing one of most significant books in my life, which is Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. I knew that I wanted to share the stories of the people I met along life’s pathway who would inform my understanding of what it meant to be at that particular place and time in my life. My goal was to achieve a better sense of self-understanding and concurrently create an articulation of the universal journey we are all embarked upon. Hopefully, through the sharing of life stories, I would find ways to thrive in the face of adversity that would surface in order to make sense of my life as a teacher.

With each new story or reflective moment, I began to develop my capacity to become more open and vulnerable. I began to ask questions and not be disillusioned when there were no definite answers to be found. The process of rediscovering my true self was the gift I found in the pursuit of higher education. Discovering that reflexive inquiry methods could form a theoretical perspective from which to make sense of my living contexts had a significant impact upon me. I decided to reclaim my identity by permitting myself the appropriate choice of research methodology that spoke authentically to me. If this story was to be a significant endeavour then I needed to respect the voice that longed to be heard. Through the countless stories of my life as a student and that of a teacher, a reader would have the opportunity to engage with the dialogue and have a companion along the road toward compassionate inquiry, if he/she chose.
As the educational journey progressed and the demands of thesis writing became a distinct reality, I initiated my search for meaningfulness. It was my desire to extrapolate the essence of my transformation and link it to my newfound spirituality. Writing the thesis had to be a proclamation of self and of human experiences. I wanted the thesis to become a publication that would lay the foundations for a newfound spirituality in schools whereby all members of the community would share stories and grow in harmony. Telling and retelling stories would be a way to understand the order and disorder that clearly defines the human spirit. The purpose of the writing adventure would also facilitate an end to the loneliness that prevails in schools. By sharing stories, teachers make an effort to belong to a community. It is in that sense of belonging that the journey towards healing and freedom becomes attainable.
Cast of Characters

She-Wolf: The she-wolf is the image of sin. She deters Dante from scaling the beautiful mountain by keeping him in the dark wood. The she-wolf metaphorically represents my kindergarten teacher who similarly prevented my progress because of the oppressive situation in which I found myself immersed.

Minos: In classical mythology, Minos is the legendary king of Crete who, after death, became a judge in the Underworld. He represents my elementary school principal who will be remembered as a fiercely controlling individual who condemned anyone who did not abide by his standards.

Cerebrus: Cerebrus is the three-headed hound of Hell. His physical description and antics are representative of one of my administrators during a two-year period. His inability to show compassion and his need for domination warranted a place amongst vile villains.

Pier delle Vigne: Pier delle Vigne is a family friend who emigrated from Italy around the same time as my parents. He was a successful businessperson with a diploma in drafting. He and two partners owned their own construction company. Six months after his marriage, he took his own life. He was significant in tutoring me to read effectively.

Cornelia: Elementary school bus driver who was paid privately by parents willing to receive the individualized attention including door-to-door service for their children.

Francesca: Francesca is representative of my grade one teacher who was punished for inspiring a creative approach to reading. Francesca is the forsaken lover in chant (canto) five of Hell. She succumbed to the tempting literature she read to Paolo.

Paolo: Paolo is Francesca’s lover and innocently finds himself enraptured by her seduction. He is my teacher’s husband who helped facilitate their pet’s visit to the school.

Medusa: “According to the Greek poet Hesiod, there were three Gorgons: Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. All were hideous winged monsters, with human faces and sharp claws, and with living serpents for hair. Only Medusa was mortal, for she had at first been a human maiden, who was changed into a Gorgon because she had offended the goddess Athene” (Sayers, 1949, *Hell*, p. 323). She symbolically represents my grade two teacher who underwent a transformation in my eyes when she did not care for her student’s soul. She became the grotesque Gorgon who frightened me.
Cato of Utica: Cato was a Roman statesman. "A strict republican of the old school, nurtured in Stoic philosophy, he at first opposed both Caesar and Pompey, but when the civil war broke out he found himself obliged to take sides with the latter. After the Battle of Pharsalia he escaped into Africa and, after a terrible march across the desert, joined forces with Metellus Scipio, who had the command of Pompey's African forces. Caesar defeated Scipio at the Battle of Thapsus, and Cato, rather than make terms with the victor, committed suicide. He became for the Romans the typical example of Stoic virtue. In the Purgatorio, Dante makes him guardian of the approach to Mt. Purgatory" (Sayers. 1949. Hell. P. 311-312). Cato represents one of my former students who attempted suicide but, unlike Cato, survived. Their struggle for affirmation was parallel. Furthermore, my former student would be able to find redemption for her guilt in Purgatory and, thus, shares a commonality for reprisal just like Cato of Utica.

Camilla: "A warrior-maiden vowed to the service of Diana. She assisted Turnus against Aeneas and, after killing many Trojans, was slain by Aruns" (Sayers. 1949. Hell. p. 311). Camilla symbolically represents my grade three teacher who tried incessantly to appear like royalty, but her mannerisms were short of being humane. In fact, she was rude, selfish, and had a bitter face. I believe the remarkable coincidence of the names linked to the famed royal scandal was too good to ignore. Alas, my grade three teacher who was supposed to service those of us who appeared meek and mild-mannered became a despised celebrity at our school.

La Pia: "Pia dei Tolomeir, daughter of a Sienese family, is said to have married Nello, or Paganello, a Guelf leader, lord (among other castles) of the Castello della Pietra in the Maremma. He wanted to marry a rich heiress so. Nello took her away to Pietra and there (in 1295) he murdered her – some say by exposing her to the unhealthy air of the place; others, by throwing her from the castle window down a precipice; others say simply, "so secretly that nobody ever knew how. Since Dante classes her among the victims of sudden and unprepared death, he probably discounts the first of these theories" (Sayers. 1955, Purgatory, p. 109). La Pia symbolically represents my grade four teacher because of her inexperience in facing the preying monster who would compromise her ideals. Although she did not lose her life, she did give up part of her soul to protect her student.

Marcia: "Marcia was the daughter of Lucius Philippus: second wife of Cato of Utica. Dante uses her story as an allegory of the noble soul returning to God at the end of life; in Purgatory, however, where she is mentioned as an inhabitant of Limbo, she seems rather to symbolize those natural aims and affections to which the Cardinal Virtues are direct" (Sayers. 1955, Purgatory, p. 372). She represents my grade four assailant who later became my friend.
Filippo Argenti: “A Florentine knight of the Adimari family, of very violent temper, and so purse-proud that he is said to have had his horse shod with silver (hence his name “Argenti”). The Adimari were of the opposite faction to Dante and bitterly opposed his recall from banishment” (Sayers. 1949. Hell. p. 121). He symbolically represents my grades five and seven teacher because of the discerning quality describing his violent temper.

Ruth: “Wife of Boaz, great-grandmother of David” (Sayers. 1962. Paradise p. 388). She is representative of the grandmother that I longed to have close to me.

Matilda: She is “a friend and an attendant to Beatrice: image of the Active Life” (Sayers. 1955 Purgatory p. 373). She symbolically represents my grade six teacher who was among the few teachers who took care of me when all others appeared to have lost their human side. She also acted more like a friend towards her students instead of a stern teacher.

Angel of Generosity: Symbolically, she represents my grade eight teacher for going beyond her call of duty. She gave her students memories to treasure for a lifetime. She treated her students to more than materialistic rewards she also gave them meaningful experiences.

Belzecue: “In Italian, Malacoda means evil tail. The names of the demons in the Fifth Bowge are thought by some to contain allusions to various Florentine officials who were Dante’s enemies” (Sayers. 1949. Hell. p. 206). Belzecue symbolically represents my grade thirteen-art teacher because I believe her to be my first enemy. She deceptively appeared to be friendly when she had her own political and personal agenda. The derogatory reference to and “evil tail” portrays her as a demon and all the evil that is associated with the creature.

Lucia (St. Lucy): “She is traditionally associated with the special gifts of the Holy Ghost, and it is possible that in the ‘Three Blessed Ladies’ (Mary, Lucy, and Beatrice) who interest themselves in Dante’s salvation we are to see an analogue of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit or, in St.Hilary’s phrase, Basis, Image, and Gift Mary, the absolute Theotokos, corresponding to the Basis: Beatrice, the derived God-bearer, to the Image: Lucia, the bond and messenger between them, to the Gift” (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. p. 381). My professor for several graduate level courses, who is also my thesis supervisor, is representative of what Lucia symbolized for Dante. My professor gave me the opportunity, in a sense a great gift, to go beyond the confines of my mind. She united the possibilities that I longed for and made the journey complete. Since St. Lucy is the patron saint of sight. I believe it was appropriate to honour my professor, thesis supervisor and friend with this pseudonym.

St. Bernard: “This famous Abbot of the Benedictine Order was born of noble parents in the village of Fontaines, near Dijon. Burgundy. in 1091. At the age of 24 he was selected to be the head of a branch of the monastery of Citeaux, and
setting out with a small band of devoted followers. he chose a site in the
diocese of Langres in Champagne. where he made a clearing and founded his
famous abbey of Clairvaux” (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, p.362). My uncle
represents St. Bernard not for his nobility because he was born into poverty.
but for his enlightenment and wisdom that only age and experience can bring.
His stature is god-like for his sense of goodwill towards humanity is what he
lives by. He inspired me to reach my destination towards a more hopeful life.
as The Divine Comedy’s St. Bernard helped Dante reach Heaven. My heaven-
like moment came when I saw Dante’s resting-place and it was due to St.
Bernard for he made it possible for me.
Chapter 1

The Soul’s Approach to The Divine Comedy

With the bright sunlight illuminating my obscure path I was in search of hope to nourish my ailing spirit. I just did not know that I had embarked upon a pilgrimage beyond the despair that I had come to identify as my life. Unknowingly, I was yearning for someone or something that could direct me along life’s straight path for the one I had been relying on forever was deteriorating. I was transforming into a ghastly creature that was unrecognizable to everyone. My discoloured skin, lifeless hair, disappearing smile and sunken eyes indicated that it was time to substitute the old leader for an energetic and optimistic neophyte. The inability to concentrate on the remotest idea, frazzled nerves, and lack of purpose seemed to embody the life of the old guide who walked out the front door with no promise of a return with someone new.

The white wooden door was forcefully secured shut and locked with a scratched silver key from an overloaded set that dangled rhythmically. The hurried pace of my feet pounding with each step on the cement slabs revealed the new time of day that had lapsed too quickly. I was dishevelled and out of breathe. I gasped for air just like the ignition’s desire for its fuel in order to initiate movement. The suburban commute to the city’s tenacious arms, huddling its long lost citizens for the temporary work sojourn, was a familiar event in my life.

The silver speeding train abruptly halted at the end of the platform, giving its passengers a physics lesson on gravity at 8:30 in the morning. The scramble for any remaining seats began as soon as the doors opened, with bursting passengers scurrying to their next destination. I didn’t mind being pushed for I knew that I was still alive.
Exhausted and seeking support. I gripped the slippery steel pole with thousands of fingerprints left from its dependents: I took hold of the only safety feature available to me in the cramped quarters. I felt strange. Somehow my positive outlook was diminishing. That particular day, my ability to appreciate the life I was sculpting seemed faded.

I began to aimlessly record the events of my surroundings and notice the solemn look of obvious university students with overloaded knapsacks, silent faces, and insecure futures. Once the train found its way to the designated campus stop, the frantic spring to the sliding door became an inevitable reality. The race to get out before the doors shut and to get to class was on.

Attending university was my new reality. The journey to the education edifice had become my new home and travelling by train part of my daily ritual. On the trains, I glance at the pensive faces, some with their heads buried in the daily newspaper, some finishing a required reading, others trying to catch five more minutes of sleep. Curiously, I wonder what their lives were like. What events will shape who they would become? Are they, too, in search of higher education? Why don’t we connect? Why is there such silence on the train broken only by the mechanical music that screeches every time there is a turn, a stop, or an advance? But most of all, why do I think about all this? I did not know the answer to this question until I became reacquainted with La Divina Commedia (The Divine Comedy).

It was a crisp winter morning with the brilliant sun trying to melt the frozen icicles arranged in a random pattern from the old building’s eaves troughs. The squirrels acted like escorts as they crossed students’ paths almost to say: “I know a
shortcut”. The forceful wind smacked my face as though the promise of a new day was going to present me with something I was not prepared for. There was an impending transformation that would affect me greatly because of an experience I had twelve years earlier. My re-introduction was January 6, 1998. It was a day like any other, and yet, the beginning of a journey towards salvation.

My hands grasped the course selection booklet with room numbers and time schedules as I walked insecurely along the wind tunnel corridor of The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). This graduate experience was very different from my accustomed walk along the serpentine pathway of concrete slabs found at St. Michael’s College during my undergraduate years. The woven pattern leading to the antiquated buildings that housed eager minds and brilliant scholars was a faded memory from long ago, yet in that moment, it stirred something in me that I did not believe existed anymore. Oddly, in that moment I had an epiphany to an earlier time in my educational career. I thought of my many professors, but the one who held my attention was the striking figure who taught La Divina Commedia (The Divine Comedy). His powerful presence of knowledge hushed a room of nervous students who awaited the distribution of the course syllabus. His assertive voice was capable of soothing the soul, yet it could simultaneously command respect. His eyes sparkled with ingenuity. He spoke Italian very eloquently and on his subject matter, he resonated with determined passion. The occasional creak of wooden chairs scratching the aged hardwood floor was the image I recalled with every step I took towards the revolving doors of my new reality. The musty-smelling room with ivory cracked paint chipping away from the faded walls was different from the modern building that was built the year of my birth. The dark brown-
bricked walls and orange décor lacked appeal and was simply outdated. The darkness impressed upon me a chilling fear and an unwelcoming reality that made me apprehensive about furthering my studies in this place. I was hoping that the course material was enough to sustain my interest. Regardless of the aesthetic disapproval, I made my way up to the designated floor and classroom. My first impression of walking in to find the chairs arranged in a circle took me by surprise. How could I properly write using my lap as a table? Why would this be the preferred classroom arrangement of furniture? Surely it must have been left like this from the previous day? At that moment I did not realize the professor’s intention of creating balance, inclusion, and connectedness.

I was not sure I was going to stay in the course before I even stepped into the room. I was completing some of my remaining courses for the program I was in and this one was either going to substitute an elective or it would be dropped. I settled myself near the door ready to make the great escape if this proved to be yet another course promising enlightenment, but not delivering universal insights. As the classroom quickly filled with students, the unassuming professor walked in with a calm disposition unlike any other teacher who usually appears frantic on the first day of class carrying bundles of paper. After a brief welcome, he explained the reason for the classroom furniture set up and invited us to introduce ourselves to everyone. His humane approach seemed strange to me. My limited vision of the ‘whole human being’ approach in university courses stopped with this professor. Phrases and words such as “looking at the whole person”, “the realization that things are not working well”, and “a balance between personal development and the world around us is required” were
foreign concepts for me. I was riveted and puzzled by the allowing of such a course. Would this course follow rigorous academic practices? Would it be recognized on a transcript? I was thinking in measurable modalities.

The need for respect was at the forefront of my academic and career decisions. I believed that I had it all figured out. I was working towards my doctoral degree in education and I would find my dream job in academia. I had a small but nice home, good friends, a great family, and a teaching job that I was good at. This degree would be the next step towards career advancement, and so I pursued it vigorously. Everything was calculated and time line projections were the driving force behind my motivation. And then, as though from outer space, I landed into an unfamiliar setting from where I could not, or rather, would not leave. I was captivated by what I felt. Nothing extraordinary happened except that at some moment in the classroom listening to my professor’s discussion, a faint inner voice told me that I was not living the truth. I had come to dislike my job. I felt lonely and misunderstood. I was tired of pursuing something that may not lead to fruition, and my health was deteriorating due to excessive stress. To everyone around me, however, I appeared to have the perfect life. People would often say, “You’re so lucky!” I felt that they knew something more than I did. Who was I to doubt these individuals? Maybe I was the one blinded by reality.

The feelings of confusion, desperation, and loneliness prevailed. I was irritable, demanding, and exhausted. Each day I had to push myself out of bed to face the unrelenting list of things to do that no longer appeared meaningful to me. I had become programmed into something I thought I had to be. I was not attuned to life. Sadly, I realized that my life was fragmented and I did not feel that I had an interrelationship
with any living organism. It was as though I was exiled from existence and I resigned myself to the status quo.

My newfound awareness of and admission to true reality distracted me from my impending turn during the introductory circle time initiated by the professor. I was next and I had to recompose myself. As my heart raced my mouth stated the essential facts about my identity. I felt exposed and ashamed that someone might have known the realization I had just experienced. I felt as though I was losing my mind. The denial that kept me prisoner was suddenly on parole. All the distortions, misconceptions, fantasies, and inappropriate role models held a tribunal without me and unleashed me to a life condemned with the challenge of figuring out what was ailing my spirit. My greatest challenge would be to go forth without fear. I needed to dance to a life of balance between divinity and humanity. My soul was malnourished by the calculating mind.

As the course syllabus made its way around the room, I sat mortified by my new actuality. I wanted to run out of the room, yet I was compelled to stay and listen to the wise man before me. He shared his life story with strangers. It warmed my heart that this person trusted the process and his students to discuss the initiating incident that brought him to Canada and eventually to Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). A life was mapped out for all to see and select the point whereby a connection could be made with this individual. On many levels I immediately felt a bond with my teacher, yet it was his determination and sense of loss that he experienced in life that would resonate loudly with mine. I knew I could not go anywhere because I needed to
learn how the story would end. Even with the exposed ending, it unexpectedly felt right for me to continue pursuing this call to awareness. I sensed that I belonged somewhere.

The morning passed quickly with his discussion on the rationale behind Holistic Education. I believed in his convictions because I too wanted to heal. A floodgate of emotions was released from deep within me. Subconsciously I knew that for too long I had been fixated on the superficial problems in my life and I hoped that in resolving them, I would not have to deal with further issues. I prescribed to the glorification of the rational mind. Speaking to and from the heart were words I heard from new age "gurus" who had no responsibilities. Meditation was something that people did if they had time. I did not prescribe to that philosophy and/or practice because it could not be measured in quantifiable methods. How could anyone feel better just by chanting unrecognizable sounds? I did not know where I was headed. but this course and teacher's approach cried out to me. I admitted to myself that my cynicism had become an all-encompassing entity and it was time to do something. Perhaps staying in this course would be the answer.

The following week proved to be just as rewarding as the first class. The discussion on the differences between reflective thinking and contemplation was thought provoking. I appeared to be less apprehensive about coming back to the class. I looked forward to the time spent sharing stories of contemplative experiences. It inconspicuously spun a web of interconnectedness with my classmates. Unexpectedly, the group became action-oriented, spiritual, intuitively sound, and conscious of change. The discussion of shared experiences evoked a change in us to become more effective leaders and caring individuals. After the collective story experience, the professor led
his class through the theoretical perspective of reading through and highlighting important points in the required text. As each page turned methodically past the other, a word, specifically a name abruptly halted my thought processes of the moment. There it was in bold black print in the position of a sub-title: Dante. I was familiar with this individual's work. I had just thought of him and his poem the previous week. walking to class, now his name appears before me in the course text.

Puzzled by the re-acquaintance with my old undergraduate studies. I did not immediately make an association with the poet's work and its contribution to a contemplative life. Intrigued by the familiarity, I read on as the class discussed meditation practices. It suddenly made sense to me why this man was a literary hero of the Renaissance and why after 700 years his message was still significant. He understood and wrote about the connectedness with a higher power or order. He believed in the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things. Finally, he adhered to the philosophy that enlightenment is gained through knowledge and experiences. An unexplainable peaceful feeling overcame me. I felt that infinity was just beyond the pages I was reading. I had the chance to become reacquainted with an all-encompassing, omnipotent, permanent companion whom I did not fully appreciate during our first introduction.

Suddenly, I felt comforted by the binding force that would move us closer together towards completeness, safety, and creativity. Maybe I would no longer see myself as separate but being part of the whole that Dante spoke of through his writings. Strangely, I felt overjoyed. Could this coincidence be the key to something I was subconsciously searching for? The connection seemed bizarre to me, yet I was
intrigued by the twist of fate. I believed that it was a higher power divinely creating a sensation above all matter that was forcing me to follow something that I could no longer ignore. Intuitively, I supposed that the light and lightness of being was soon to be mine to rediscover and I was determined to pursue it.

That same night, I searched for my old university boxes that stored countless course notes and books from years gone by. Dusty and aged, I found my original copy of The Divine Comedy followed by the three English translation volumes that appeared worse for wear than the Italian version. What was it that drew me to this book? It was a struggle just to interpret the old English writing and yet that evening it flowed easily as I read the first verse. It felt as though I was holding a sacred text. The poem about journeying through the afterlife in search of love spontaneously created harmony in me at that moment in my life.

As I fervently flipped through the highlighted pages loosely attached to the book's spine I drifted in and out of consciousness from the events of my first day in the course. I recalled being enrolled in that class more out of obligation than of interest for it was a required credit to obtain a major in Italian Language and Literature. Up until that day, September 10, 1986, I did not know who Dante Alighieri was. Yet, something unexplainably bizarre happened that morning. It was almost as though from the moment I became a student of the Divine Comedy, a reflective process began. A stronger sense of perception grew just from being in that room, but I would come to forget it all in exchange for a productive life rather than a contemplative one.

As I began to read through my first day's notes, I realized how significant this literary masterpiece was. My summaries of each chant (canto) were meticulously
recorded and highlighted. so why did I ignore this work? Maybe I did not actually ignore it because it was an experience I had not forgotten. Going to my doctoral class rekindled my memory of pursuing the Divine Comedy at St. Michael’s College. as opposed to any other course that I studied during my four years of undergraduate studies.

I wanted to re-familiarize myself with this man who is known as a contemplative. Who was this remarkable individual named Dante Alighieri who could write brilliantly? What was it that inspired him to write the epic poem? Reading through my notes it was not difficult to see why this poet was so captivating. The margins revealed secret transcriptions of ideas and words. Behold: my attention was drawn to the green circled and yellow-highlighted words: exile, journey, and time. Why had I done that? Did I know something about me that I have suppressed for too long? These words evoked a yearning within me to attain a better understanding of Dante’s poem, La Divina Commedia (The Divine Comedy).

There was a sense of peacefulness I experienced from the warm glow of the lamp’s light. the dark room. and oversized binder filled with notes from my past. I was transported to a time when my youth determined who I would become now. I wanted to re-discover that free spirit and learn what motivated my life and decisions. What were the critical facts and events that were the genesis of my life? Intrinsically. I knew that the answers would evolve through the exploration of this wonderful coincidence that rested on my lap. It was as though I was a pirate who discovered a treasure map in a glass bottle and now was set on a course of discovery through unexplored terrain. I felt certain that the fragile pages held secrets to living and learning.
Chapter 2

Orphaned from Reason

At 21 years of age I thought I knew who I was and where I was headed. I was working part-time in a dental office as a chair-side assistant. My determination to be the best even led me to take a radiology certification course while pursuing my undergraduate degree. I felt invincible. No feat was too small for me. Involving myself in many activities made me happy. The more I accomplished, the better I felt. I was addicted to success.

Aside from earning money to support my studies, I needed to find work or volunteer experiences that would secure my place on the Faculty of Education student roster. Determined to achieve my goal of admission, I relentlessly pursued various activities involving teaching of some form. I began working as a Heritage Language instructor on Saturday mornings teaching Italian to children from grades four to eight. Two evenings a week, I taught English as a Second Language to recently arrived immigrants. Lastly, I was taking the training classes mandated for the upcoming summer position as a Parks and Recreation Playground and Project Supervisor. This list does not include my involvement at the church as a youth group member trying to lend a hand whenever it was needed. I taught catechism classes and prepared activities for the youth members of the church. I was so busy being involved in creating a life that I did not understand what life was really all about.

Studying a piece of literature that poignantly explored the notion of universal themes such as the search for a meaningful life and learning to love, appeared arrogantly insignificant for me. After all, I was not lost in a dark wood, or so I thought.
Looking back. I was placing myself in an awkward predicament that would affect me in the years to come.

I believe it was the necessity of completing a required credit and the professor’s interesting lectures that kept me in the course. I must admit that the literature did stir positive feelings in me, but I was too impatient to properly experience the benefits of the poem’s theme of self-discovery as one journeys through life with hope and faith in humanity. I was on a mission to graduate from my undergraduate studies, apply to the Faculty of Education, receive my admission, and become a teacher.

As a young adult. I had thought I had finally overcome all my obstacles from childhood and adolescence. I also convinced myself that becoming a member of a higher education community would secure my acceptance in this world. I was on my way to rectifying the wrongs in my life and becoming the hero who would save afflicted children and the educational system of which they were part. The Divine Comedy was just another vehicle that would transport me to my final destination. I fulfilled the requirements necessary to earn a credit and proceeded to the next item on my agenda. I did not imagine how metaphorically sound my analogy of transport was until I was faced with the images of the “Inferno” that patterned my understanding of life. It was the deep slumber of avoiding reality that caused me to deviate from the true path and seek refuge in the aggression of alienation. Distancing myself from anything that could possibly inflict pain meant abandoning a life of meaning.

I could not fully appreciate Dante’s plight in the dark and entangled forest where he felt lost from life’s path until I experienced the same disenchantment. How could anyone with goals and ambition be lost? My goal was to abolish the doubt and
insecurity that characterized my life growing up as a child of Italian immigrant parents. The tyrannical teachers who impressed fear upon me further consolidated this objective. I had decided to divest myself of the pain by taking charge of my life and resolved to make a difference where it did not happen for me. The dramatic turnaround did not appear abnormal to me. It took many years of sorrow to create the fearful and submissive student: yet overnight it seemed that I blossomed into an assertive, self-righteous, and determined individual.

There had been no time for exploratory education for me. I had decided that upon graduating from grade thirteen I would re-invent myself by selecting a university different from that of many of my friends and forge a career that would allow me to make amends for the mistreatments I received. I was proud of my newfound independence. I often commented that only three students from my high school, including myself, decided to attend the University of Toronto. It was further clarified that one student was in nursing, another in engineering, and that I was enrolled at the Faculty of Arts & Science. Conceitedly, it was as though I needed to be congratulated for taking the daring plunge into loneliness. I wanted everyone to know that I did not need friends because I was focused on achieving success. Distractions would only hinder my progress so I began to gradually cut myself off from anyone and anything that could impede my path. The sad reality was that no one really cared that I was venturing into the city instead of attending nearby York University or that I wanted to concentrate on my studies instead of socializing. I was alone even before I declared that it was my decision. Foolishly, I feared the risk of ruin: failing in friendships, studies.
relationships and anything else that mattered. The natural progression for me was to pursue my career goals because it was an area of my life not affected by my past.

Remarkably, it did not appear peculiar to me that I would join the ranks of teaching despite the negative experiences that I had in school. It was not difficult to convince myself that I would model my behaviour after the few teachers who treated me with respect and would ignore the influences of those who breathed terror into my life; however, it was the invalidating influences that prevailed. What seemed to be taking control over my life was really oppression bearing its soul. It had become intrinsic to me, shadowed by the disabling characteristics of fear, to exercise the need for authority. Fear was buried deep in my subconscious. It lay gestating for the right time and circumstance when I would become exposed for the impostor that I was. I had never been taught to confront adversity. Learning to stare fear in the face and positively re-construct my life to include contemplation, vision, and support would become my struggle.

This remembrance of my first encounter with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* that evening would unknowingly shape the latter part of my life. Almost like a long lost friend, the literary piece resurfaced for an important reason. one I would not come to understand until I began working on my doctoral thesis. In the meantime I followed my course and the poem with a newfound respect for learning.
Chapter 3

Setting Out with Blessed Souls

I decided to adopt a positive attitude and try to attune myself to the connectedness that the professor was trying to establish with his students. I felt like a child who goes forth when striving to walk independently and breaks away from her parent's secure grip. Venturing into the conscious act of contemplative experiences represented that all significant step towards personal freedom. I would come to learn about trust, letting go, listening to my heart, empowerment, authenticity and spirituality. The greatest challenge would be integrating these concepts into my existence. Experiencing the literary coincidence would consolidate my position in the course and its practices towards self-knowing and my relationship with divine essence.

Skeptically, yet enthusiastically I endeavoured to follow my guide's desire to follow through with the novelty of meditation and the development of contemplative awareness. I felt a calm surrender in my attempt to develop a loving attention to life by focusing the mind. On a selfish note, I was hoping that it would reduce my stress; after all I was going through a reforming process that frightened, but also, empowered me. It was important for me to find a way to live freely and if this spiritual component promised help, then I was willing to try to get in touch with the part of me that lay behind the different roles I had.

Fearful of relinquishing control, I knew that this spiritual practice could integrate the polar extremes of the ego and the self. My ego was emotionally immature and it was time to define the underdeveloped soul. Surprisingly, in as much as the meditative experience is lonely, I felt more integrated with the world. Like a fawn that
struggles to stand on its feet when it is born. I could barely stand. overwhelmed by the realization that I had abandoned my responsibility to cultivate and nurture my soul. I was too busy taking care of everyone and everything that I had surrendered to an existence of deception. I was chained to an identity that stifled my growth.

Receiving an invitation to meditate faithfully for the minimum six-week duration was a gift that assisted me in more ways than I could imagine. The meditation practice helped heal the disabling characteristics of fear. I was invited to overshadow the negativity by developing compassionate attention, awareness, and mindfulness. The class was simultaneously earning a university course credit while nurturing their wounded souls. Little by little the meditation started reducing my anxiety and stress. Furthermore, I wanted to get in touch with my true self and the feelings that accompany a journey of self-discovery. Finally, it was important for me to explore the uncharted terrain that dealt with the different facades and roles I had to play on a daily basis. I also believed that this experience could bring me closer to understanding Dante’s mission. I was struck by this amazing coincidence and I had to pursue it to its final destination.

Experiencing meditation for the first time was an exercise in practicing how to “let go”. It is something with which I have always had great difficulty. Furthermore, I am terrorized by the ultimate letting go, namely death. This issue has always been a fearful one for me. Rarely do people think that they might die unless they are reminded of how fragile life really is. I had a medical experience where I was forced to breathe slowly and await my fate. I remember losing myself in the slow moving flight of the dreary clouds that hovered over the top floor of the specialist’s office window that
fateful afternoon. The procedure would reveal the truth of whether it was a complicated matter or one that would forever divert me from my life goals.

As I awaited my fate, I continued to practice meditation to develop and enhance my inner and outer selves. Each road I traveled seemed to have a pothole that halted my speed towards betterment. Each stop sign I was forced to wait at prevented my progress to my desired destination. I was not cognizant of the importance each hardship would play in my life as I continued along my divergent path. Despite the difficult news, the faithful practice of a mantra allowed me to live somewhat freely. I stumbled into an overcrowded elevator after receiving the standard note pad page of medical procedures. My ego was crying the victim’s all too familiar tune of. “Why me, Lord?” The humble self replied. “Why not me, Lord?” I turned to see the solemn faces around me and I wondered what plagued their hearts. Ironically, the crowded and smelly elevator was a place that created an overwhelming feeling of solitude during the few minutes it took to reach the ground floor. I stepped off the elevator ill prepared to live my life with a new authenticity.

I chose to use a mantra as my form of meditation. In light of my undetermined fate of the upcoming procedure, I wanted to explore prayer as a source of comfort. I was a little apprehensive about beginning the meditation practice because I did not think I could be successful at it. After my first experience in class, I realized that I could not focus well. I had to find a way of calming myself before attempting to silence the loud and tense voices from within me. Furthermore, I was struggling with my conscience because I felt somewhat guilty turning to prayer in a time of need, but not always making it part of my life prior to the worrisome news. I tried to convince myself that
despite my infrequent practice of traditional prayer. I had never abandoned my heartfelt
talk with God. I came to learn that this act is called mindfulness. After much
negotiation. I finally gave myself permission to become reacquainted with scripture and
prayer as a form of spiritual healing. The mantra became my sedative and sanity during
my time of uncertainty.

The meditations became very relaxing. I found myself being drawn into an
almost surreal realm of existence because of the mantra's rhythm. It felt airy and
liberating. I was not afraid of the darkness that cradled my meditative state. I could
breathe again. It seemed strange to feel that way because I was obviously breathing in
order to be alive, and yet I knew that my regular breathing patterns were panic stricken
and anxious. It took me approximately two weeks to train myself to breathe properly
and be patient with the meditation process.

It took a health-related issue and the course of meditations to remind myself that
I could enable change. but I could not impose change simply because I wanted it. I was
embarking on a journey to embrace the good with the bad. Reading through the
assigned literature pertaining to Dante and meditating gave me the courage to seek
support and encouragement. I realized that I had found importance and self-identity in
assuming the role of self-nurturer and that I rarely accepted or asked for help in return.
Longing for help had been a sign of weakness and lack of control. I began to work on
distinguishing between complaining to relieve pain and complaining as a method of
reinforcing negative stress. My heightened awareness was my starting point. I was
beginning to focus better as the learning sojourn prevailed. It was comforting to know
that I was living with two new incredible gifts that were helping me overcome the
obstacles in my life: the practice of meditating and the reacquaintance with Dante’s Divine Comedy.

In addition to taking the contemplative course, I was also taking a research and inquiry course in teaching that further encouraged me to pursue The Divine Comedy. I was enrolled in a course that encouraged the pursuit of thesis research. In the preparation process, reflecting on different forms of inquiry was the basis for obtaining the credit. Among the respected approaches, the arts-based method of inquiry grasped and sustained my interest. The road was paved for discovering different approaches to what it meant to teach and do research. I was invited to participate in activities that would promote the release of intuition and imagination through reading, writing, conversing, and listening. By considering alternative research methodologies inevitably led to growth. Finding my particular form that best embodied my individuality became my learning objective.

It was January 14, 1998, during a discussion led by the professor that my form preference became evident. I have always loved and learned through the sharing of stories. The narrative experience best demonstrates my understanding of knowledge processes, and their relationship. My new epiphany inspired me to look at this familiar poem as a metaphor strategically placed in my life at this time for me to probe deeper into its significance. Our wise professor gave everyone the opportunity to dwell upon and culminate the experiences of our lives as part of the thesis journey. The liberation I felt in becoming my own guide was the catalyst that would finally lead me to where I wanted to go. The veil of uncertainty was finally lifted from my head and now I could
see the idea of incorporating literature, which has always evoked passion in my life. As a companion I could depend upon as I set off in search of myself.

As I began to realize the significance of all these fateful coincidences: I became my own self-invention. I was evolving in my unprecedented divinity. The Divine Comedy was the chance to return to myself.
Chapter 4

Lost in a Dark Wood

I was enthralled by the allegory present in Dante’s Divine Comedy. I would rush home and quickly complete my obligatory chores in order to spend as much time as I could with my companion. I was fascinated by the text and its hidden truth. The subtle distinction between literary reality and historical facts of Dante’s time intrigued me. An awe-inspiring feeling caressed my soul as I turned to the first chant (canto) of Hell. My eyes followed the linking flow of letters arranged cleverly in the triple rhyme. My breath stopped after the first verse. I knew that this was the beginning for me. This is where Dante begins his voyage of recording a journey that took place in search of happiness:

Midway this way of life we’re bound upon. I woke to find myself in a dark wood, where the right road was wholly lost and gone. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v. 1-3. p. 71)

The power of Dante’s words spoke loudly to me. I was half way through my life when I came to realize that I too was a wandering soul living aimlessly from event to event. The dark wood, in abstract terms, is a place that had no occupying space. It’s there, but it’s not there. It is a figment of Dante’s imagination but also my emotional state. He proceeds to see frightening beasts that really represent sin in general. The dreadful animals that come towards him pushed him further into obscurity. They trap him so that he has no choice but to proceed into the unknown:

Even so was I. faced with that restless brute which little by little edged and thrust me back, back, to that place wherein the sun is mute. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v. 58-60. p. 73)
With every word I read Dante's description and purpose of his journey drew me closer to him. His use of the pronoun "we" sets the stage for all his readers to participate in the familiar yet unique position of travel. His journey can really be anyone's journey. I decided to discover where this literary passage would take me.

Dante's point of no return began in a dark forest surrounded by beasts pushing him to delve into the haunting images found only in the deepest circles of Hell. My soul wept as I felt his struggle with the insatiable creatures. It was as though he felt my own weakness. A man I had never met and would not ever meet appeared to be writing exclusively for me. His capacity to capture the essence of humanity through words, dreams, desires and instructions was like a mirror reflecting my exposed soul. His teachings through the first few verses were attuned to my suppressed sufferings. My enslaved heart was leashed just as the ravenous beast that prodded me into the shackles of injustice. I too was deserted from the joy of life just by following the lawful course of action for a young child who is required to attend school. I became aware of my first beast of burden in kindergarten.

As a teacher, I believe the kindergarten class is the sanctuary of an elementary school. It is there that an impressionable child is either going to love or hate school. In my case I developed both emotional states. My love-hate relationship with the educational system has been the substance of inseparable weakness and also relentless strength. I adored learning, but as far as I could recall, school was the setting and, at times the individuals, that created feelings of animosity.

The misery began when I was abandoned in the dark wood to face the agonizing emotional torture of a bitter victim. My kindergarten teacher was a big, burly woman
with a thick English accent. She had a cold demeanour that she shared willingly with her impressionable students. I cannot remember with fondness the fun of kindergarten because it was not a lively and inviting place. The teacher owned the classroom and we were disposable accessories. We could not adorn our distinct personalities creatively nor could we talk freely in class. The teacher dominated the environment and she dictated what we were supposed to learn. I did not like my classroom and, more importantly, I did not like my teacher.

Like Dante’s impetuous interruption in the first chant by the three beasts roaming the entrance to the dark woods, the She-wolf was present in my life too and there was no escaping the sharp claws that silently punctured my transparent sheath. The beast that impeded my way represented the violence that interrupts the development of faith in humanity. My progress was hindered not only that year, but in the many that would follow. I could not carry my burden, for I did not understand the ability of a supposed caregiver to consume a life heeded with anger towards a five-year old. My innocence was my hope and the insidious reprimands forced me to neglect my child-like thoughts in order to survive the path I was lawfully impelled to pursue. It was many years before I felt I could break free from the stranglehold she had impressed upon me. As a result I remain focused on learning more about Dante’s encounter with the beasts in the first chant (canto).

As the dark clouds of night fell. I probed deeper into the words that stared back at me in the dim light of the solitary desk lamp. I wish I had been capable of freeing myself from the clutches of the unforgiving eyes and sorrowful smile I saw in my mind. I kept going over in my mind that a kindergarten teacher needed to be the epitome of
patience, gentleness and kindness. After all, the children before him/her are innocent and vulnerable. For the first introduction to the world of school and life, it would be best if the children co-existed with an individual who had a zest for life and love for humanity. When I envision a kindergarten teacher, it is usually someone who hugs her students and bends down on one knee to talk to them at their level. She would have encouraging words and would be successful in creating a safe and enjoyable environment.

I look back on my memories of kindergarten with fright. Recalling the image of the towering authority figure looking down upon me smothered my soul with trepidation. It was all those uncertain moments that formed my first encounter with the sharpness of misery. The tyrannical teacher’s tormenting triumphs would revisit me with all the bitterness I associate with unresolved mysteries.

I was particularly fearful of her voice. The agitation associated with the possibility of my classmates or myself being yelled at when a question was asked was the descent into Hell I faced on a daily basis. Needless to say, I rarely called upon her for anything. Furthermore, I remember deliberately not communicating very much that year. To do so would have been a dangerous game because so much depended upon her mood and whether you were a favourite student or not. Her goal was to do her job and leave the premises. She did not act as though it were a privilege to be surrounded by gifts of life. We would stare at her with wonder, but certainly not with delight. I think we could not fathom this individual’s mean spirited ways.

Everyday was the same routine of wondering who would be scolded and who would not last the morning and would cry for his/her mother. One autumn day after my
horrifying experience of being the class bully's pawn in his game of self-gratification. I knew with certainty that this teacher would never have a special place in my heart. I longed to forget my introduction to this forsaken place that housed the vile teacher. It was my hope to recapture the wonder and promise of a first school day as a way to heal the loss I was imprisoned by.

Magically I was transported to that place where no one can alter the power of the imagination's will. Roaming the infinite sky that lay behind my bedroom windows, I remembered the ideal world my mother promised me. The sun shone brightly that September morning as my mother scurried to fix my hair. The slight wind caused concern for my overly anxious mother. Her detailed creation was to remain intact for the day, after all this was an extraordinarily special event. I was to look my best. It was a momentous occasion in our humble Italian household. The first steps towards a brighter future lay before me adorned with the coordinated outfit. The last bobby pin was inserted in my hair. I appeared to being primped for an executive meeting rather than joining the ranks of tiny tots emerging from a Toyland existence to the formal and structured environment of school.

I was uncomfortable as I squirmed my way into the white tights and black patent shoes. My gold-buttoned vest with a red, blue, and yellow check pattern kept me conscious of every breath I took. The little skirt caused me some distress as the forceful wind began to blow harder with every passing moment. That morning was proving to be a very stressful event in the life of a five-year-old girl.

The scent of burned toast filled the kitchen area much to my delight. I was too nervous to think about eating, but I did promise my mother that I would try to nourish
myself with something light before heading off for my first day of school. With one final check, I was ready to pass inspection. Mother was ready, too. She was armed with the camera in her hands, ready to snap the life-long memories of my introduction to the world of higher learning. She smoothed the folds and caressed the flyaway hair strands before the next photo was taken. The meticulous care that went into creating the perfect image was annoying, but mother said that I would look back on this day when I was older and admire the preserved moment in my young life. It was the usual babble for me, or so I thought.

There was something special about this day and it was not only the two-hour preparation that led me to believe so. It was a time that first steps would be taken to lead me into the abyss of knowledge and power. Certain feelings were stirred inside of me that made me pause and hold that picture still for a moment. Life would change from here on in. It was time to take the plunge into the world where childhood lessons bare the forgotten meaning of virtue.

The rather long ride soon came to a halt as the brown brick building unlavishly beckoned our presence. The walkway was void of flowers that were commonly seen in picture books. The Canadian flag proudly swayed in the mighty wind. It appeared majestic to me, being propped so high above the ground. This place must have been special to bear the symbol of our common land and our home. A smile soon appeared upon my face as that comforting notion of being at home entered my mind. That unqualified feeling soon disappeared as we made our way into the darkened and dingy corridor. Noisy children and impatient parents impeded our way towards the office where the information about my destiny awaited. There, a white sheet with black bold
lettering my name appeared before our eyes. I was assigned to the She-wolf's senior kindergarten class and it was the last classroom down the hallway closest to the office area. We carefully followed the hastily given directions and waited by the door only to be instructed that this was not the right place. Newly registered kindergarten students and their parents needed to wait outside by the class exit doors and anticipate the arrival of the teacher. The black-wired fence area kept the anxious people contained in a small grassy area. The steel door had no decorative welcome sign nor did it provide a class list for the new academic school year. All eyes were on the door leading towards academic salvation.

The grip of my hand tightened as the moment drew near when leaving my mother would become my inevitable dread. She sensed the agitation and comforted me with her endearing smile and words of encouragement that all would be fine. She added that I would make friends with little effort because I was a special girl. It would be days, months, and years before I would come to believe that no one saw me as a special girl in the sense that my mother meant.

As the door opened, the towering figure of bestiality appeared all commanding and prepared to sanction the beliefs of a political community rather than impart the love of learning for the greater good of humanity.

And next, a Wolf, gaunt with the famished craving lodged ever in her horrible lean flank, the ancient cause of many men's enslaving. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (cantio) I. v. 49-51. p.72)

In her practical and teacher-like apparel comprised of a brown tweed sleeveless dress with a stark white blouse beneath it and matching brown shoes, she commanded that we assemble ourselves in two lines. This was my first introduction to the division
of genders and there would be more to learn as the days in the forsaken place accumulated.

The sobbing began for many children around me who desperately resisted the notion of letting go of their parents. My mother hugged me good-bye and promised to eagerly await my return. Furthermore, she said that I would love school and I would have stories to tell her when my time was over. With a lump in my throat and prospective tears in my eyes, I courageously slipped my hand from hers and followed the boisterous voice of destructive souls.

She was the worst – at that dread sight a blank despair and whelming terror pinned me fast, until all hope to scale the mountain sank. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v. 52-54. p. 72)

The belligerent person ordered the parents to leave the children in her possession and to return by 11:30 a.m. The few children left crying were forcefully led away from their parents’ clutches and made to proceed towards the harrowing woman’s den of desolation. The strong steel door clanged like thunder. Inside we were made to assemble ourselves in the cloakroom and ordered to find our names and place our belongings in the correct cubby spot. Some children did not know how to read their names and chaos soon prevailed. A roaring yelp resonated throughout the cement-blocked walls and a command was issued to stop crying and sit down. The fiery eyes and malevolent face depicted a message of contempt for the unassuming children. The message was clear in that the senseless crying was to end or there would be serious ramifications.

Even so was I. faced with that restless brute which little by little edged and thrust me back. Back, to that place wherein the sun is mute. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v.58-60. p. 73)
And so, the endless day progressed languidly with everyone cautiously aware of not disturbing the authority figure that loomed in our presence. The objectives of our first lesson of the day were successful. We had learned to become submissive and conform to the hierarchical structure of the teacher over the student. The year became a battleground for survival. Each passing day proved to be a new lesson on the road towards educational enlightenment.

The savage brute that makes thee cry for dread lets no man pass this road of hers, but still trammels him, till at last she lays him dead. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) l. v. 94-97. p. 74)

I remember trying hard not to give up on my teacher after all it was ingrained on my brain from my parents that a teacher is a virtuous individual who only has the child’s best interest in mind. They believed that in due time this teacher’s true colours would shine through and having a little faith would probably be beneficial in aiding this woman. However, what little confidence I had in this woman became certifiably non-existent after my terrible fall.

Vicious her nature is, and framed for ill: when crammed she craves more fiercely than before: Her raging greed can never gorge its fill. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) l. v. 97-99. p. 74)

It was hard for me to sleep in part because of my painful cheek, but also because of the vivid images permanently photographed on my mind. The flashback floated aimlessly as I drifted in an out my drug-enhanced sleep. The medication the doctor prescribed to alleviate the pain from the broken cheekbone did not numb the feelings of violation.

As I neared the end of the chant (canto), I felt weak from the sorrow of recalling the sufferance from my despotic ruler. The invader possessed me and it was a struggle to let go of my grief-stricken beginning. My mind was tired and my heart was empty.
carried on reading each line with the haunting memories of an injured child. The loneliness that prevailed in my quiet room resembled that of my early childhood. I became an introvert by desperation and it suited me well for anything more meant uncertainty. I distanced myself from any impending obstacle after all I did not want to provoke or place myself in a predicament leading to more injuries.

With tears slowly cursing my cheeks I relived my affliction in the silence of the night. Dante’s words cast the memory and I embraced the quiet communication revealing itself. The flashback took me back to the day when I was playing nicely with two docile girls when unexpectedly I felt a shuddering jolt of forceful hands land on my back that instantaneously placed my body in motion. Dynamically and vehemently I succumbed to gravity and became part of the cement sidewalk where our skipping game came to an abrupt end. The evil energy caused great distress for me as I recall the overwhelming darkness unfold before my eyes. With no recollection of the instant trauma, I was awakened to the shrieks of horrified children staring and pointing at my disfigurement. It was an unpleasant sight of blood stained clothes and exposed flesh. I sat bleeding profusely in the cloakroom with sandy colored wet paper towels in one hand.

Until their cheeks ran blood, whose slubbered smears, mingled with brine, around their footsteps fell, where loathly worms licked up their blood and tears. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) III. v. 67-69. p. 87)

Unfamiliar with my surroundings and confused about my injury, I realized that something terrible had occurred.

A heavy peal of thunder came to waken me, out of the stunning slumber that had bound me, startling me up as though rude hands had shaken me. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 1-4. p. 97)
The principal arrived to take my assailant away for an effective reprimand and to inform me that my mother had been called to take me home. That message was my only comforting notion throughout my dreadful ordeal. The teacher looked at me with repulsion, instructed me to stay in the cloakroom and returned to her “masterful” teaching.

The beauty of a soul shines when a human being bears compassion to another, not because they must do a good deed, but because the heart rejoices in knowing that human misery has stopped, even for a moment. My teacher possessed no intention in my moment of woeful sorrow to console my disheartened soul. She mechanically followed protocol and divorced herself from being considerate, thoughtful and respectful.

Never you hope to look on Heaven – behold! I come to ferry you hence across the tide to endless night, fierce fires and shramming cold. (Sayers. 1949. *Hell*, chant (canto) III. v. 85-87, p. 87)

I returned to school a couple of weeks later after nursing my broken cheek bone, black eye, cut lips, concussion and scraped skin. It was business as usual in the senior kindergarten class. Time had not changed my melancholic state. What I had left was part of which I had become.

Through me the road to the city of desolation, through me the road to sorrows diurnal, through me the road among the lost creation. (Sayers. 1949. *Hell*, chant (canto) III. v. 1-3, p. 85)

The only way out of this chasm was to live in my mind and escape the perils of the classroom reality. With the exception of a few children bewildered by my return and uncertain about my appearance that greeted me, the unfeeling and contemptuous beast of burden did not welcome me, nor did she inquire about my state of being. Part of me
died that year like an animal left strewn by a country road and it would take many sunsets and evening stars before I could see the beauty of a quiet land.

I rose, and cast my rested eyes around me, gazing intent to satisfy my wonder. Concerning the strange place wherein I found me. (Sayers. 1949. *Hell*, chant (*canto*) IV. p. 91)
Chapter 5
Finding My Way Into Teaching

My soul was intoxicated by Dante’s experiences. Each passage was a charitable attempt to give meaning to the human rages I was unknowingly clinging to. I delved further into that time in my life when the world seemed so contrite and void of kindness. I picked up the two volumes entitled Purgatory and Paradise. They seemed similar to Inferno, but the overviews were definitely distinctive. I paused to read what Purgatory’s introduction offered as far as evoking the muse was concerned. Dante describes a new landscape and environment that offers the invitation to journey towards redemption and forgiveness. I wanted to be consoled from the distressing memories of yesteryear and learn of the life that emerged from the written word. I needed to pursue the literary wisdom that was before me.

The murmurs of anguish must have been quelled for I treaded forward from my kindergarten days to become a teacher. In fact, for as long as I could remember I believed that I always wanted to become a teacher. but it was one fateful day that consolidated that feeling and I did not turn back on the divine sign.

For to the second realm I tune my tale. where human spirits purge themselves, and train to leap up into joy celestial. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) I. v. 4 – 6. p. 73)

Like Dante’s undertaking climb upwardly around the cornices of Purgatory, I too navigated towards the resurrection of worthiness. Perhaps if I became an educator I could turn away from sin and authenticate my vocation by serving others in a manner I was not privy of experiencing. Dante wanted to gain understanding and experience the importance of regeneration that he too had somehow lost. Reliving the poetry was my
way to make amends for my spiritual death. Drying the tears with each passing chant (canto) was euphoric because I was finally beginning to make sense of the inconsistencies and hurtful incidents. How did I eventually come to cloak myself with the responsibility of exacting harmony in my students' lives? As Dante's sound of music becomes prevalent in Purgatory. I heard a tune in my mind that evening singing the song of unwavering determination to make amends for the disrobing of the sacred shroud that covered my body and soul.

I was in my third year of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto and I was not taking my full load of courses. I wanted to gain some work experience and determine if teaching was really to become my choice for a life-long profession. I was fortunate enough to be hired by a school board to supply teach on my two days off from school. I was excited by the prospect of having my own class for a day or two. As luck or fate would have it. I was placed on the roster and my first placement arrived one late autumn day. The dispatcher gave me my school location and told me to report there by 12 noon. As the receiver was gently replaced on its hook. I realized that my very first assignment was to take place at my former elementary school. It seemed strange that out of all the schools in a vast region. I would be given that one particular school.

Like the one who sees what takes away his breath. who half-believes. and then must hesitate and doubt: "It is - it can not be." he saith. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory chant (canto) VII. v. 10-12. p. 110)

As I dressed myself and prepared to make my way over to my teaching assignment. I thought of the students I would be meeting and what kind of afternoon we would have. I brought my plan book that held a variety of handouts for each grade level in the event of an emergency. I felt confident that I was ready for the unexpected. Yet.
the unexpected came, but not in the traditional scholastic manner. I was unaware of the tumultuous emotional response I would experience returning to my formative years.

Not what I did, but what I did not do, lost me the sight of that high Sun. the prize thou seekest. whom too late I learned to know. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) VII. v. 25 – 27. p. 119)

As I pulled up into the narrow driveway I realized how small my elementary school was. The dingy and faded bricks revealed the aged institution that housed many children who were eager to learn. As I made my way up the path that led to the steel door with no windows, I drifted into a flashback trance of yesteryear. I remembered where I stood relentlessly day after day waiting for the school bus to take me home. It was my only comforting thought of the day knowing I would soon be home with my mother.

The sodden ground belched wind. and through the rent shot the red levin. with a flash and sweep that robbed me of my wits. incontinent. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) III. v. 133 – 135. p.89)

I pulled the doors open and found myself inside the small foyer. Nothing had changed! It still had the familiar wall hangings and numerous plaques. The décor was the identical orange and brown tones of the 1970’s. The office door was closed and uninviting. The strong-hinged door held the people inside captive and the individuals on the outside distanced from the upper hierarchical level of the school. My feet took small steps towards the counter where a secretary was nestled secretively behind her spectacles. typing voraciously. Clearing my throat. I hesitantly introduced myself. handed in my pay period form. and asked for my teaching assignment. Shuffling some papers on her desk. she handed me a note that had the name of the classroom teacher. grade and room number. We exchanged documents and I made my way towards the introduction of my teaching career.
O power divine, grant me in song to show the blest realm's image—shadow though it be—stamped on my brain; thus far thyself bestow.

(Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) I. v. 22 – 24. p. 53)

The pale-coloured walls and scuffed floor appeared to be symbols of an institution that was neglected and deprived of vibrancy, intellect, and care. To live in that environment for a great portion of the day would be promoting a lifeless existence. The mouldy smell that caressed my skin and nasal passages was profoundly offensive. Walking past one class and then another, my heart began to skip a beat as I realized the odd familiarity of the last room where I would be spending the next four hours. Shockingly, the classroom was my old kindergarten class where I spent many days crying to be released from the horrors of an uncaring individual and distant classmates. It felt as though a full circle was drawn before me when the door opened. I began my education in that room as a student and now, as a teacher. An exhilarating emotional response was evoked in me. The wonder and sorrow of years gone by held my breath as my feet made their way around the familiar room.

But what I saw so carried away to gaze on it, that ere I could confess, I had forgotten what I meant to say. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) III. v. 7 – 9. p. 73)

The cloakroom was the same. It was one of my favourite places in the classroom because it symbolically indicated that the time was drawing near when a reunion with my mother was inevitably close. My hands touched the small hook that had held my possessions. Bothersome children who liked to play tricks and hide clothes when the teacher was not looking had not respected them. My eyes feasted on the bright colours that created this transformed place. If only I had known such a feeling. The artwork had been rarely displayed because our time was spent perfecting our names. Even the few students like myself who could diligently demonstrate our
ability to identify ourselves in the written form had to sit still for a great portion of the morning printing and re-printing our names. The painting centre had been used minimally and when it was, great care had to be taken to not spill any paint on the floor. The ramifications would be quite serious or so the teacher professed. No one dared challenge that frightening and towering image of scorn. The voracious voice capable of travelling continents would remind us that the containers were to hold the paint, which in turn held the brushes that were used to paint on paper. We cautiously attempted to paint, but many of us subdued our desire for fear of the impending reprimands. The few artistic renderings that were hung to dry would not have much longevity in the room. The paintings were folded, still wet and placed in our cubby spaces for home delivery. The walls were adorned with pre-designed stencils and cut outs of cute animals, letters, and polite homogeneous children involved in various activities. Our ownership of the classroom did not exist. Very few signs of our presence adorned the class. We had no connection to this room except as a place of woeful wonder. As children we had no understanding of anything better and thus we accepted our fate and awaited our liberation. This familiar classroom was inviting and promising for the students. Crafts were displayed proudly and the brightly colored walls beckoned children to stay and share a little about who they were.

The time was drawing close when the students would be arriving with their bright smiles and faces eager to be taught something new. It was the right moment to familiarize myself with the plans and make the necessary provisions. In that instant, a stranger appeared quietly at the door. She was an educational assistant who was assigned to a student in my room; she mentioned that if it met with my approval she
would be willing to trade roles for this class. The teacher I was replacing had left complicated, but yet detailed plans on how to execute the craft activity for the afternoon. The educational assistant had already been prepared by the teacher earlier in the morning on how to expedite the afternoon activity. After the familiar attendance taking and circle time, this kind individual was willing to take the responsibility to carry through the plans that only she and her colleague knew how to orchestrate with minimal chaos.

I welcomed and accepted her offer. The children responded well to her and followed the routine explained by their classroom teacher the day prior. We had a wonderful afternoon sharing the teaching responsibilities. This learning experience was profound because I made the decision to pursue a teaching career that fateful afternoon. A sense of rectifying the wrongs that were endured during the formative years of my education was the driving force behind the decision. Being aware of my compassionate attitude towards the smiling and trusting faces that ominous afternoon, guided my spirit in selecting the vocation that would become an all-encompassing life entity for me.

I put the books down for the night. Remembering my kindergarten year was an unsettling experience, but entirely exclusive in affecting my decision to become a teacher. I was compelled to further my reading of Dante’s Divine Comedy. The few chants I read reawakened the silent secrets that submerged themselves in my soul. With a companion I had the courage to confront the obstacles found in the scary woods as he did while preparing himself to embark on a soulful journey through the afterlife. Reflecting that I was indeed lost like the pilgrim before his voyage into the depths of deception and wrongful doings of Inferno was an admission whose time had come.
With a force greater than I, I surrounded myself with the literature and delved into the unknown to re-discover the triumphs and tribulations of my life, except this time I would try to make sense of the experiences.

The realization I had in class was coming to terms with my loss of faith in humanity and now I had accepted an invitation to discover something I had a right to know and practice. I was glad that Dante had come into my life not only once but twice. This impeded progress of time could be understood and appreciated by Dante’s three brutish animal figures that hovered around him, edging him deeper and deeper into the perils of the forest. His symbolic journey exploring the various elements that affects humanity was music to my ear. Coming to terms with the nature of sin and its ability to affect human nature was Dante’s conscious attempt to resolve the quest for the humble awareness of soulful living. I wanted to understand the symbolic representations of damnation and his quest to attain a blissful existence.

Dante’s journey through the forest leading to the gates of Hell, where he discovers that it is a place void of commitment and full of cowardly acts fascinated me. I wanted to learn more about the souls he met who have not contributed to society or God. *The Divine Comedy* became my companion similarly to Virgil’s role in Dante’s life. He was the guide who protected Dante as he waited along the shore, watching the horrid looking helmsman escort the new group of souls across the Acheron River of death. I wondered if I was like the characters in Dante’s poem that sinned against creation, but more importantly against the gift of intellect. Was my soul to be damned because I had abandoned all hope and sinned against society and myself without trying to make amends for my choices? I did not want to refuse an opportunity to make
different choices. Had I not selected virtuous living in exchange for romanticized failings? Would I be capable of imaging something better for myself?

The chant (canto) I submerged myself into symbolically indicated that the damned souls lacked faith. They did not have hope in life and led a condemned existence. The characters silently spoke to me. Dante's convincing portrayal of each character made me feel that I, too, was one of those lost souls being escorted into horrid situations while unprepared. As I returned the book back on my shelf, I did not know what to expect. Could I find redemption when I did not know it was mine for the asking? Perhaps like the damned souls sailing on the river of death, my ignorance would be my plight. I decided to venture into the solitude of recollection, deliverance, and recovery because my present life was indeed akin to death itself. I wanted to learn how to withdraw myself from things that frightened me. My increasing sense of fear promoted a debilitating lack of faith that would take an experience of soulful inquiry to set me on the right path.
Chapter 6

Bestiality and the Beautiful Maiden

As I prepared myself to complete an assignment on a significant and influential piece of literature for my research and inquiry course, I was reminded of *The Divine Comedy*. It had become an intrinsic part of my life in the few weeks that I re-discovered the passionate chant (*canto*). With excitement and determination I enthusiastically decided that my paper would describe the powerful expressiveness of Dante’s poem and its influence on my life. It had been a long time since I found myself eager to write anything, let alone a university course assignment. With my re-energized attitude, I began to write about the poetic masterpiece that was helping me to become more happy, healthy, and hopeful. Dante’s stories gave me the inspiration to search for the sense of unity that I was longing for.

I began my piece by stating: “If I could inhabit a book it would be Dante’s *Divine Comedy.*” I stopped and looked at the word “inhabit.” Why was I compelled to occupy myself in a book, which is preposterous? That’s when the celestial pilgrimage took flight in my mind. I wanted to live with the *Divine Comedy* as a metaphor. Dante’s poetic theatre was welcoming. Its universal appeal enraptured me with its invitation to participate in the journey of self-discovery. My first stop along the route was recalling why literature had a profound affect on me. This in turn led me to reread the fifth chant (*canto*) of Hell. It is perhaps the most riveting passage for me because of its raw passion that yearns to be satiated with the lust found only in literary brilliance.

In the previous chant (*canto*), Dante had shown his own fictional pride and passion by comparing himself to infamous poets who were respected in literary society.
He took the opportunity to purge himself of the arrogance he felt he manifested as an influential writer in the fifth chant (canto). Dante’s self-criticism and awareness of his position in literary history was self-righteous. I believe that it was one of the many reasons why I wanted to continue this literary exploration. I was intrigued to learn about his personal perspectives and their impact upon his readers. Like Dante I wanted to be judged on my merits. Furthermore, it was necessary to identify our motivations be they honourable, self-indulgent, or weaknesses of the heart. Perhaps if we had been secure with ourselves, then the need for recognition for a job well done would not have held such importance. I could see myself in Dante because we both sought intellectual praise and felt the necessity to embark on an educational journey. Only by persevering through the voyage could we become better aware of ourselves in relation to life.

For when the ill soul faces him, confession pours out of it till nothing’s left to tell: whereon that connoisseur of all transgression assigns it to its proper place in hell, as many grades as he would have it fall, so oft he belts him round with his own tail. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 7–10. p. 97)

Dante’s skillful technique of incorporating how judgments are passed in Hell shows his readers that if one commits a sin, he or she will be punished. Minos is the hideous judge at the threshold of the second circle of Hell. He assigns each soul to a circle and places them there for eternal torment. He questions Dante’s presence amongst the dead and eventually he accepts Virgil’s reason for the journey and allows the two to proceed. Francesca, my grade one teacher, would not be fortunate for Minos would condemn her, along with Paolo, her husband and helper. Unknowingly, Paolo found himself enraptured by Francesca’s desire to spread her love of literature to him. Similarly, in the fifth and sixth chants (canti) of the Divine Comedy, Francesca’s seduction sanctions her lover. Paolo’s common sense and he soon falls into the poetic
swoon of literature which eventually leads him to engage in adulterous behaviour. The two protagonists are gentle souls who let their passions rule their choice. Before they could repent for their sins, they found themselves caught in the whirlwind of destruction and self-indulgence. They steadfastly believed in the principle that such an indiscretion should not have led to their demise. Unfortunately, Francesca’s headstrong belief that forgiveness is not necessary for her sin led her to a state of eternal damnation for the lustful.

As Dante proceeds along the dim place where sounds of grief caress his ears, he comes to learn how justice appears to the lustful. The sinners are there because their passion overwhelmed their ability to identify reason.

Into this torment carnal sinners are thrust. so I was told – the sinners who make their reason bond thrall under the yoke of their lust. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 37-39. p. 98)

Furthermore. Dante takes the opportunity to show his readers that the language of love can be attractive, but it can also be deceptive. He finally meets Francesca and Paolo who eliminate all distances from life and literature. His desire to talk to the two lovers, who are intertwined in an eternal embrace that cannot be divided even in the afterlife, is Dante’s way to move from the impersonal to the personal. In order to draw them closer to him. Dante speaks the language of love.

So, as they eddied past on the whirling tide. I raised my voice: “O souls that wearily rove come to us. speak to us – if it be not denied. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 79 – 81. p. 99)

Dante cleverly demonstrates that love and speech are connected. Francesca presents herself to him and describes her situation that eventually led to her destruction. She states that the nature of sin is appealing and love is seductive.
Love, that so soon takes hold in the gentle breast, took this lad with the lovely body they tore from me: the way of it leaves me still distrest.  
(Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) V. 103 – 10. p. 100)

When Dante sees Francesca, he is reminded of his former self. It is necessary for Dante to come to terms with his perspective in order to continue along the journey in the attempt to achieve pure love. Dante understands that Francesca and Paolo’s love leads to spiritual death, but his own Beatrice’s love represents new life. Dante must experience a mystical death of his former ability to love and write poetry in order to obtain Beatrice’s adoration. He is overwhelmed with pity because Francesca substitutes literary laws for absolute laws. She takes the law in order to consummate her desires. It was not divine love that led her to adultery; rather it was her obsession with literary seduction. The act of reading for pleasure brings the two lovers to their demise. Love enters through the eyes and, as they glance at each other, they continue reading until their reading became a real experience through a kiss. Francesca and Paolo submerge themselves into the literature thereby creating an inability to differentiate between life and fiction.

As we read on, our eyes met now and then, and to our cheeks the changing colour started, but just one moment overcame us – when we read of the smile, desired of lips long-thwarted, such smile, but such a lover kissed away, he that may never more from me be parted. Trembling all over, kissed my mouth. I say the book was Galleot. Galleot the complying Ribald who wrote: we read no more that day.  
(Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) V. v. 130 – 1 38. p. 101)

Once their lovemaking is completed that day they no longer need literature. It is the power of words that brought them together. Francesca blames the book for her demise, but ultimately it was her responsibility to not consummate the relationship. So too. Dante blames himself for he has written books that affected the innocent and naïve. He feels guilty because he may have contributed to the downfall of the two lovers.
While the one spirit thus spoke, the other’s crying wailed on me with a sound so lamentable. I swooned for pity like as I were dying, and, as a dead man falling, down I fell. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 139 – 142. p. 101)

When I read the passage I understand it to mean that Dante is coming to terms with a sinful past. Perhaps I should relent too by letting go of my literary dependence? At times I too live the fantasies presented by the fictional characters I encounter. I am capable of being seduced by literature too. In fact, it crossed my mind that it was the Divine Comedy with its powerful ability to make me lose myself in the fervent words gracing the ivory pages that facilitated the escape from the world of conflict to one of optimism.

My earliest recollection of my introduction to the power of literature began at home, but it was poignantly defined in grade one with the help of my teacher. As I reread chant (canto) five, my teacher appeared before my eyes with her frosty-pink lips and enthusiastic love of reading to the class. Was she seduced by literature too? Was she doing something wrong to us by interconnecting reality and fiction? After all, the principal did walk sternly into the class the afternoon she brought Mr. Mugs to meet us! Had my teacher surrendered to her passions and senses like Dante’s Francesca character in chant (canto) five? She wanted to render reading as an all-encompassing revival of the soul. She was excited every time we picked up our readers and turned the pages for a new story. I think it was her love of reading that trapped her into an unfortunate situation with the principal, whose judgment of her is parallel to Dante’s character. Minos.

The revived memory of the cold linoleum floor was synonymous of every shared reading experience our teacher gave us when we assembled ourselves in front of
her. She sat in a stately manner on her aged oak rocking chair. I hear her excited voice as she shares her secret that today we would meet someone out of the ordinary. We had recently completed reading the first series of the Mr. Mugs books and as a special treat she had invited "a special friend" to our class. I remember my excitement brewing as the time drew near, when suddenly the anticipation came to an unforeseen end. An expected guest was ready to grace us with his presence. A firm knock on the door produced a tall, slender and rather distinguished man. He entered the classroom in an elegant manner followed by a massive and hairy dog. My teacher warmly greeted this impressive-looking person with the dark suit and introduced him as her husband. In unison, our mouths fell and our breaths were shortened by the marvel of such a relationship. As the snickers dwindled and the silly glares vanished, the teacher proceeded to inform us about the reason for this most unusual visit. As Paolo moved aside, there he was Mr. Mugs, in the flesh.

Thus, when such things engage our ears or eyes as bend the soul towards them totally, time passes, and we mark not how it flies. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) IV. v. 7 – 9. p. 95)

Fiction had indeed turned into reality right before my eyes. I recalled the shrieks of delight filling the room and the orderly sitting arrangement becoming quickly dishevelled. Poor Francesca was frantic as she tried to gather everyone's attention, but Mr. Mugs commanded all the focus. The resemblance was uncanny. The excitement was unbearable because everyone was frantically asking questions anxious to know how this magical and intelligent dog managed to escape the confines of the class text and appear in our midst. The teacher and her husband pleasantly tried to harness our tumultuous behaviour. In due time they explained the marvellous coincidence. Paolo
and Francesca owned a dog just like Mr. Mugs, the main protagonist from our reading series and they felt that we would enjoy meeting him.

Explaining the distinguishing features between fiction and non-fiction was a challenge for the pair because many of us had no concept of such abstractions. We were convinced that Mr. Mugs had indeed jumped out of our readers. It did not matter what our teacher tried to render intelligible or how she incorporated aspects of the hidden curriculum with that mandated by the government. As a class we were just thrilled that our teacher had a dog like Mr. Mugs. Instantaneously, she became the best teacher ever! That was my one of my favourite days in grade one because a connection was made for me between reality and fiction.

School became real for me. I was impressed with the fact that Francesca was a regular human being with a husband, home and a dog. She was a normal person! To a six-year-old child, knowing that your teacher is mortal just like yourself is perhaps the greatest wonder of the world. She engaged us in wanting to learn more about Mr. Mugs and his adventures from that day onwards.

Just as my learning experience became authentic, it was halted because my teacher was somehow forced to change. I know it had to do with Minos’ invasive interruption in class that day. She told us that she could not invite Mr. Mugs back because it was against the rules. What rules? Was there a posted sign that stated no friendly, overgrown dogs allowed in class under the strict supervision of a responsible teacher?

There in the threshold, horrible and girning, grim Minos sits, holding his ghastly session. and, as he girds him, sentencing and spurning: for when the ill soul faces him, confession pours out of it till nothing’s left to tell:
whereon that connoisseur of all transgression. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) V. v. 4 – 9, p. 97)

I overheard Minos’ diplomatic tone informing Francesca that Mr. Mugs did not belong in an educational setting. His dramatic entrance into our class hushed our jubilation. Intuitively, we knew that our teacher was in trouble and that our delightful afternoon was coming to an awkward end. We returned to the confines of our restrictive steel-barred desks that allowed only one entrance or exit.

A place made dumb of every glimmer of light, which bellows like tempestuous ocean birling in the batter of a two-way wind’s buffet and figh. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) V. v. 28 – 30, p. 98)

Minos commanded that we place our heads on the hard tabletop and wait for our teacher’s return. Where was he taking our teacher? Mr. Mugs left unwillingly with Paolo and we did not have an opportunity to properly say good-bye. The force of the wooden door provided the closure that perpetuated an overwhelming sense of sadness amongst all of us. We were overcome with grief when our newfound friend slipped away right before our eyes.

And like a baby stork, that longs to fly and flaps its wings, and then, afraid to quit the nest, flops down again, just so was I. (Sayers, 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXV, v. 10 – 12, p. 263)

The disappointment of that day was not enough to deter us from wanting to learn how to read well. Every day that followed we enthusiastically and spitefully picked up our readers and eagerly learned about another one of Mr. Mugs’ adventures because of our teacher’s passionate ways to bring the words to life.

Thence do we speak and thence we laugh, thence take wherewith to fashion forth the tears and sighs thou’st heard, belike, from the entire mountain break. (Sayers, 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXV, v. 1-3, p. 105)
I think we all became proficient readers that year because no one seemed to have difficulty reading aloud. Our teacher would praise and thank us for a job well done when we each took turns reading a passage. Not even Minos could interfere with our untouched desire. My caring teacher helped us make connections with the real world by providing us with opportunities for authentic responses. She created a situation whereby her students could display their vulnerability and not have it crushed. She demonstrated the practice of reading and encouraged us to take the same risks.

Francesca helped us develop our powerful skill of reading so that we could be in charge of our own lives some day.

And they persist, I think, in this same mode, so long as by those fires they are annealed, for it is by such treatment and such food that the last wound of all must needs be healed. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXV. v. 136 – 139. p. 267)

My love of reading, fostered in school by Francesca, would soon become my salvation. I did not know it at the time, but shortly thereafter my awareness of a problematic life grew and I turned to the alluring charm of words to escape from the perils that haunted my soul. I read series after series: from Ramona by Beverly Cleary to all the Judy Blume books by the time I entered grade five. I lived my life with Encyclopaedia Brown, Nancy Drew, and the Hardy Boys for several months until I finished the sets I received as gifts. Once I entered grade five I needed something more to sustain my interest so I devoured novels that discussed social issues such as drug abuse, divorce, and the death of a parent, friend or pet. The challenging material I would scour the libraries for lasted throughout my elementary school years. By the time I entered high school, I enjoyed reading existential novels and works by literary heroes.
My literary evolution expanded to include required university material, but at that stage I found my need to read dwindling rapidly. I no longer nourished my soul with words, but deeds became the focus of my life. I was so involved in trying to make something of myself by working and studying that I abandoned my enjoyable time with books. I only read what was required and the newspaper if I had a few moments to look at the headlines. I did not recognize that I was slowly abandoning what made me happy. It would be many years later after graduation and well into my graduate studies before I would come to remember what it meant to abandon an old friend. Books had become my friends. The stories kept me alive. They comforted me during a cold winter's night. They sat beside me on the beach. They walked with me in my knapsack. but most of all they harboured my identity. Feeding my imagination determined who I would become. The lessons taught and the characters I met helped shape my own character. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why The Divine Comedy had become my focal point not only for the duration of the graduate level course I was taking, but also as a lifelong companion that I could refer to when I needed to embrace my soul with humanity.
Chapter 7

Reading for Love

My grade one teacher fostered my enthusiasm for reading at school. But it was my mother who first inspired my love of books. Furthermore, she promoted the understanding between reason and faith, which is what I saw in reading. Through her passion for books my mother inadvertently made the ability to discover oneself a credible process of spiritual rebirth. There was not anything that I could not do in my mother’s eyes and that notion was transposed onto reading. In addition to fostering my self-esteem through reading, she also ignited my mission for charity work. I wanted to teach my friends to read too; however, I humbled myself to meagre situations. After all, I was prone to passion rather than reason.

Now from the grave wake poetry again. O sacred Muses I have served so long! Now let Calliope uplift her strain. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) I. v. 7 – 9. p. 73)

From my early childhood I can recall precious moments whereby my inquisitive nature was put to a resting pause by reading about my newest interest. My need to learn was promoted because of the stories that always prevailed in my home. Through the many narratives told and retold of my parents’ experiences. I came to cherish the importance of story telling and reading. When my parents shared their memories with me. I delved into a free-spirited world where soul searching, remembering, and active listening prevailed. It was very empowering to be able to assess, construct, and reconstruct the events of two people’s lives I treasured very much. What I recall being particularly appealing about the sense of story was the spontaneity behind each one. I lived my life among narratives without really knowing it.
It has taken many years of learning and experiences to understand my parents’ ways and how they contributed to my development. Their teachings and love have among many other things, made me a reflective thinker. It is my goal to go beyond and become a contemplative who is driven by the action associated with introspective thinking.

Open thy mind, the truth is coming: know, when the articulation of the brain has been perfected in the embryo. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXV. v. 67 – 69. p. 265)

I have come to visualize stories as beautiful intangibles and the narrative process as the pursuit of that beauty. To me they are helpful entities in trying to create order in the chaos of life. The musing processes reflect the things that we call beautiful which are simply mysteries that are difficult to explain or comprehend. A person’s narratives are just as complex and puzzling. Many questions can reveal a wealth of knowledge and surprises from unexpected places. By embracing the unknown, one may actually receive a precious gift and/or a new experience. The beauty of storytelling is that it exists even in the fleeting moment when the words are no longer spoken.

My love of reading is also due to my gentle-natured father who faithfully brought me to the library every week to replenish my supply of books. They nurtured my imagination as I was whisked away to exotic destinations.

Even now thy mind came entering into mine, its living likeness both in act and face; so to one single purpose we’ll combine. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXIII. v. 28 – 30. p. 214).

We would also enjoy the silent films that were featured in the small screening room adjacent to the reference section. There were never many people viewing the early morning comedy festival of Laurel and Hardy. I loved hearing my father’s belly laugh as we watched their physical antics, but more importantly I loved going to the
library with my father. I recall my father lovingly tease me about the abundance of books I had selected. He still chuckles every time he sees my latest acquisitions. He taught me to respect books as tools to empower the mind and soul. It would be many years later that I would impart my love of reading to my students. I read to them as my mother read to me. They experience my excitement and fond memories when I invite them to relish the voyage across the printed pages.

Now as a teacher with every first day of school I begin by reading one of my favourite books. The book is entitled *Angela’s Airplane* by the author Robert Munsch. This humorous book describes the adventures of a young girl whose father took her to the airport one day and the story that occurred when she became separated from him. What follows is a tale of curiosity and ingenuity. The protagonist’s personality has an eerie resemblance to mine. In part, that is the main reason why I select this delightful storybook to read because I would like my students to become better acquainted with me. Not long thereafter my students begin to notice our quirky similarities. Our class discussions soon take “flight” because I have exposed some of my personality traits. My students are no longer as reluctant to participate in the welcoming exercises. This teachable moment is very important to me, but not necessarily part of the prescribed curriculum. I am reminded every year about my grade one teacher’s struggle with the hierarchical order that suppressed her desire to make our learning experiences real. I often wonder if I would ever be reprimanded like Francesca for not following proper protocol or the correct age-appropriate reading material.

It has been my experience that the struggle for authority is predominant in school culture. The main power still lies with the principal and, as a result, the
assumption bestowed upon him/her is to model appropriate values and quality leadership. That day in grade one, my principal had just exercised his authoritative right to impose his judgments and values upon a teacher.

Events shall hammer home into thy head that courteous judgement with much stouter nails than this and that that other men have said. if nothing stay the hand that bears the scales. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) VIII. v. 136 – 139. p. 130)

He had no understanding of the situation and he refused to listen to our pleas to have Paolo and Mr. Mugs stay with us. He had to control the teaching process. My teacher was not given the respect to decide upon which vehicle to use in order to motivate her students. The dictatorial inspection that was conducted caused a visible nervousness for her that seemed to last forever. Our teacher had changed! It appeared that she was somehow distant and almost afraid. It certainly could not have been about us because she still cared for her class. She smiled and greeted us hello and good-bye. but her eyes seemed different to me.

The transformational experience that we endured that fateful day had a lasting impact upon me. I internalized her scorn and defiantly vowed to never have anyone treat me with the disrespect she was given.

Here Michal’s image, on the other side, looked on from a great palace window. seeming a scornful lady and a mortified. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) X. v. 67 – 69. p. 145)

However, my vigilant behaviour would be put to the test years later when I too felt the oppressive clutches of the undignified leader who had to exercise his authority in order to validate himself as an individual.
Chapter 8

Knowledge of the Damned

Prior to my days at the Faculty of Education, it was always my mission to promote the love of learning amongst my students. Like Francesca, I too would try to find interesting and creative outlets to elicit a variety of student responses. I am certain that my divergent application of the curriculum caused concern for my Napoleon-like principal who controlled his terrain and subjects by intimidation tactics. Yet, the domineering figure would never question something he may have been concerned about. Instead, he would enter the classroom unannounced and noisily make his way to my desk in search of the day planner. Once he had completed his mission to disrespectfully invade my territory while I had my students’ attention, he would walk around between their desks and randomly call upon some of them to display their notebooks. This evaluative scenario was always conducted with the element of surprise and irreverence. There was never a dialogue about what he was searching for or what he found. There was never an apology or admission of untimely interruption.

The principal’s abruptness is like Dante’s description of Cereberus, the three-headed hound of Hell in the third circle of Upper Hell. The gluttonous creature presented in chant (canto) six of Hell guards the threshold of the classical Hades. But in my case this symbolic dog protected his teachers’ territories for fear of the unknown. In my opinion the principal was unaware of how to practise mutual respect or the necessity of having an open line of communication. For him, exercising power meant that he had total control over his teachers and school. We were not professionals or human beings with the capacity to think rationally.
Cereberus. the cruel. misshapen monster. there bays in his triple gullet and doglike growls over the wallowing shades: his eyeballs glare. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) VI. v. 13-15. p. 104)

Cereberus. my principal. had difficulty being an effective leader. To me. a strong administrator is someone who can balance the pressure of the community. school board policies. ministry requirements. and foster teachers' and students' needs. This is a tall order for any human being. but with the sharing of responsibility. coupled with a strong and collegial community. a positive learning and teaching environment should emerge. I support the idea that in order for a principal to be effective. certain conditions should be implemented that promote success. One way to ascertain that success would be for principals to relinquish some ownership of the school. They should trust teachers to be decision-makers for more than their immediate classrooms.

So. step for step. like oxen in the yoke. beside that burdened soul I held my way so long as my kind schoolmaster would brook. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XII. v. 1 – 4. p. 158)

The opportunity to work together could only positively consolidate the professional relationship. This situation does pose an element of risk-taking from an administrator's point of view: however. the rewards would far outweigh the momentary vulnerability. Working with colleagues to structure a shared vision is empowering for all members of the school community. Actively engaging teachers in personal and professional growth experiences could only create a more positive school environment.

My political strife began at the tender age of six in Francesca's grade one class when I became aware of the insensitivity to what she had been subjected. That internal conflict would resurface when I began a teaching career of my own. It would intensify with every story a fellow colleague shared with me and it continues to culminate with
my present feelings of victimization created by the educational reform policies of the current government.

I can confirm that, since I have been living with my companion. The Divine Comedy: our relationship has helped me deal with the indignities caused by the perturbed political party hell-bent on destroying the dignity of education. During the humiliation of a contractual strike. I found myself referring to the poem for consolation. Reading about Dante's exile, which was caused by the political unrest of his time. I did not feel so forlorn. Dante's perseverance empowered me to be hopeful that eventually the persecution would end. As my poetic hero took his craft seriously. I too placed a great deal of importance upon my profession so much so that I took the harassment very much to heart.

To this day I feel like Dante who kept meeting fellow Florentines in Hell. There is a desire, similar to his, to meet the individuals who persist on creating a school system that will have its students and teachers wallowing in filth, drenched in the rainfall of tears, while being mauled by gluttonous creatures like Cerberus.

And I, poor sinner, am not alone: all these lie bound in the like penalty with me for the like offence. And there he held his peace, and I at once began: 'the misery moves me to tears. Ciacco, and weighs me down. But tell me if thou canst, what end may be in store for the people of our distracted town. Is there one just man left? And from what source to such foul head have these distempers grown?' And he: "Long time strife will run its course, and come to bloodshed: the wood party thence will drive the other out with brutal force. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XI, v. 55 - 66. p. 105-106)

While working on my studies. I am forced to relive the indignities once again. In the quiet of my home. I am compelled to relive the two painful political battles I experienced. One of them was the 1997 provincial political protest and the other was the 1998 contractual strike against my school board. I close the Divine Comedy and
watch the wretched politicians condemn the sanctity of my vocation. The babble
confuses me, yet immediately, the panic sets in when the speculation of another strike
could truly become an imminent reality by September 2000. With sadness streaming
through my body. I ask myself "How could this happen again?" This injurious and
malevolent agenda will forever haunt this generation of students and teachers until the
heretics will stop worshipping materialistic dogma. The long-term selfishness of
believing that humanity can be moulded into a business proposition is a fallacy that will
make sinners of us all. Even the well intentioned could succumb to the relentless
decimation and change their convictions for their own basic need of survival. Riches
and false hope would prevail in the society of avaricious politicians. The large number
of authority figures who are responsible for making humanity strike at itself over and
over in the weak commonplace. will condone oppression. Will I be among those who
concede to the destroyers of souls or remain steadfast in her principles to face the
punitive charges?

I turn the television set off and I proceed along my journey with Dante. I reach
the seventh chant (canto) of Hell whereby the hoarders and spendthrifts are condemned
to roll huge boulders around the fourth circle of Hell. Malevolently. I wish that the
political mortals would find a similar fate as that presented before me in the eloquently
written passage.

More than elsewhere. I saw them thronged and pressed this side and that,
yelling with all their might. and shoving each a great weight with his
chest. They bump together. and where they bump, wheel right round,
and return, trundling their loads again. shouting: "Why chuck away?"
Why grab so tight?" Then round the dismal ring they pant and strain
back on both sides to where they first began still as they go bawling their
rude refrain. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) VII. v. 25 – 33. p. 105)
Disturbed by my own self-indulgent thoughts for the wrathful. I know it is time to pause and decline my selfish appetite for vindication. I decide to pick up the book of Purgatory because of my need for redemption. This draining ordeal was blinding my judgement like the suffocating smoke Marco Lombardo endures in chant (canto) sixteen of Purgatory. Historically, not much is known of this man who lived in Venice, Italy during the thirteenth century, except that Dante felt he deserved to be placed among the angry souls that were searching for deliverance. Dante tells his readers that he was known for his hot-temper, but also his charity and benevolence. It felt as though this character was mirroring my image with every descriptive word Dante wrote. for I too was responding to the troublesome politicians with frustration. I endured sin itself by allowing my heart to smoulder in self-pity. I did not want to stagger blindly in the contempt that was growing wildly in my mind. The struggle to maintain focused on the pursuit of goodness was challenging. In that hour of sorrow I had to heed my fright and surrender it to the liberating literature.

Now by my faith I bind me to content. “Thy will,” said I: “But all my mind’s so vex’t with doubt. I’ll burst if I don’t give it vent. Singly at first, now doubly I’m perplex’d by these they wounds, confirming, as they do, here and elsewhere. my problem’s theme and text. The world indeed is barren through and through, as thou hast said, of virtue and of worth, sin-laden and sin-clouded – that’s most true; but show me, pray, the cause of all this dearth, that I may see it and make others see, for some in heaven locate it, some on earth.” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XVI, v. 52 – 63. p. 189)
Chapter 9

Hardness of Heart

The two transformational graduate courses came to an end but the sense of empowerment did not. I took away with me the understanding of relational knowledge. There was a growing reciprocity between life and my spirit now that I had not witnessed before. I had received the invitation to reject the loneliness and accept the possibility of inclusion. My euphoric learning moment was a gift I needed to share with others for my experiences told me that I was not alone in my feelings of loss.

I decided to incorporate the Divine Comedy into my thesis research for it had become a significant part of my life. My challenge became living in the present but also recapturing the lost lessons from my past. I needed to learn how my life realities interacted and impacted my existence. It began with research, but it quickly evolved into something bigger than an academic challenge. This poem was a calling. It seemed to have a life of its own and so I made the decision to let it unravel itself in my life and wait patiently until its due course, whenever that may be. In the meantime, I began with the initial steps towards becoming grounded in life’s intricate moments.

I had to look deep inside myself and come to know how I identified myself. Sadly, it did not begin with my name, rather I saw myself as a special education teacher. My profession was my individuality. I proceeded to write out my educational philosophy. My affirmative and staunch approach prevailed in my writing. I held steadfast to the opinion that to educate a child is the greatest responsibility human beings can bear. Further supported by the belief that this is especially true if the child
has special needs. I continued with my preacher’s homily that in responding to the exceptional needs of a child, members of the school community must work collaboratively to solve problems and creatively determine which decisions would most benefit the child. They are responsible for ensuring that all of the students achieve the expected outcomes while addressing the special learning need(s). Who was I? What had I become? Did the academic language I had internalized bind me? I felt as though I could no longer see, hear, or feel reality. My entire identity was limited to being a teacher.

In chant (canto) seven of Purgatory, Dante meets a fellow compatriot, Sordello, who is located in Limbo with innocent children. He is there not because of anything he did; rather, it is what he could not do. In his case, he could not profess his faith in Christ because he did not know the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Sordello’s role in the chant (canto) is to inform the travellers that progress cannot be made without the sun’s light to guide them. Dante and Virgil must stop for the night and proceed in the morning. The sun symbolically serves as a representative of spiritual enlightenment, and no reconciliation of the soul can occur without it. To me, my role as a special education teacher was similar to Sordello’s plight. I could only see myself as the person who would save the afflicted students that needed “special” attention and found themselves in the predicament of not knowing what shortcomings lay ahead of them. They were often punished, banished, or belittled for simply being diverse individuals.

I should have viewed myself as a vehicle towards the betterment of the students’ lives. I found personal gratification in being that all encompassing hero who is
determined to fix all. My role as a special education teacher should have been similar to the symbolic sun of Dante's *Divine Comedy* whereby it is the light to guide the way through darkness, but it is not the light itself. Logically I knew that my students would learn how to compensate for their uniqueness and promote their own sense of wellness. Yet I felt responsible for their progression whether it was an attainable possibility or not. Despite the fact that I knew children are resilient. I continued to shape my identity around the role I play in school.

Not what I did, but what I did not do, lost me the sight of that high Sun. the prize thou seeks, whom too late I learned to know. Below there in the deep. a region lies made sad by darkness only, not by pain. and where no shrieks resound, but only sighs. (Sayers. 1955, *Purgatory*, chant *(canto)* VII. v.25 – 33. p.119)

I believed that the teacher has the primary responsibility to modify the educational program to promote the child's ability to succeed. My focus was still on expanding the child's abilities to further enhance their level of self-esteem. I should have relinquished some control by expecting that other teachers who work with my students participate in the students' learning. In doing so there would be a sense of recognition and respect for each other's level of expertise. I felt so debilitated when I reread my autobiographical research. Nowhere did my focus change to include something more than portraiture as a teacher. I concluded my paper with the message that a child benefits from a teacher's aptitudes and collaborative approach in planning and executing an individualized program for him/her that focuses on giving the student the necessary coping strategies and remediation to be successful in school and in life.

If anyone was in need of remediation it was I. My world had become limited to being an educator. The barriers I presented in the written document spoke loudly to me. My voice was powerfully derived from my teaching experiences. I needed to explore
who I was beyond teaching. What method would facilitate my path towards self-inquiry? The Divine Comedy was my introspective friend that provoked some insightful questions. Just as Dante comes to the understanding between reason and faith after asking Statius, a soul in the sixth level of Purgatory, questions pertaining to the relationship between the body and the soul. I too opened my heart for that truth which would set me free.

In chant (canto) twenty-one of Purgatory, Virgil, who is capable of answering such difficult questions and has already done so in the previous chant (canto), decides to give the responsibility to Statius who can provide a more theological perspective. Statius' explanation serves Dante's purpose of informing his readers that his spiritual progress is forthcoming. The aerial body experience that the soul envisions is really Dante's way of showing spiritual renewal to his readers.

As a teacher I know that I am capable of providing alternative approaches to help students have a better feeling of himself or herself; however, I also know to take my teachings and apply them to myself. It had become necessary to search for the correlation between the intellect and spirituality just as much as it was for my students in order to foster a holistic development of self.

The magnitude of the teacher's role is powerful for all students, but special consideration must be acknowledged for those students who confront daily obstacles and challenges due to their limitations or special needs. The aforementioned objective had become my driving force. I found solace in knowing that I was my students' advocate. I was proud to be the teacher who would invite her students to learn in a safe, encouraging, and rewarding environment. In my classroom I provided security for the
child to err, but not to be ridiculed. Recovering from their challenges was my operative purpose. I tried to ensure that the disability was as invisible as possible in order to promote the child’s success. Yet, my mandate was too restrictive. Because I felt that I had to have the control to promote the child’s success, I was taking away from their responsibility to cope with the disability. It was a difficult realization I came to when I could not longer protect them from everything. I had abandoned myself in the cause of doing right by the children that I had done wrong by me in letting go of my own self-identity.

In chant (canto) twenty-seven of Purgatory, Virgil does what a good teacher is supposed to do. Guide students along their journey and, when the time is right, let them soar independently. Virgil gives Dante the ultimate push to make him go through the flames of purification. He tells Dante that Beatrice, the love of his life, is waiting on the other side ready to escort him through the next phase of his journey. Overwhelmed by fear, but determined by love, Dante takes the next step and finds himself closer to his beloved. After the trying and exhaustive leap of faith, he falls into a deep sleep. Dante includes the profound slumber experience as a way of showing the readers the necessity of preparation. Dante must sleep soundly to fully contemplate spiritual life and self-determination.

I needed to facilitate the students’ preparation for a fulfilling life beyond school with the realization that there would be obstacles in their lives. No amount of time devoted to their development would alter the possibility that they too would encounter difficulties from which no one could shelter them. Like Dante’s fire, I had to teach them to leap over the flames without getting burned. They also needed the opportunity
to rest, for they were constantly being made to change or “fix” their disabilities rather than work with them.

And like the shepherd who beside his sheep hold silent vigil under the night sky lest the wolf scatter them from out their sleep. (Sayers, 1955. *Purgatory*, chant (canto) XXVII. v. 82 – 84, p.283)

This newly acquired philosophical perspective, as a teacher would have been beneficial to me as a child when I was introduced to the world of special education in my own life. My parents and I did not receive support, guidance or resources to promote an understanding of my “disability”. Nor did I have the other extreme whereby the teacher was my advocate. Luckily, the aim of special education is now to further educate children on intellectual, social, recreational, and vocational levels with a team of specialists including their parents. Having been raised by Italian parents whose first language was not English proved to be very challenging, to say the least. So much so that decisions to disregard their rights as parents were nullified that year that my grade two teacher arbitrarily decided that I was “special”.

It was time to gather our readers and sit on the dirty and worn brown carpet. The pattern and specks of dirt fascinated me because I tried to make pictures in my mind. For the most part, I ignored what Medusa (my grade two teacher) said. Sometimes I would stare at her wondering what she was like. I wanted to ask her why she was so mean and why she did not like me? It is strange that I would know that she did not like me for she never admitted so, but this strong feeling echoed inside of me. She never smiled at me and her stern look always seemed to indicate that I was doing something wrong.

As the other children made their way to the carpet area, I began exploring the remainder of the text wondering which story would delight my senses next. A forceful
voice demanded that the book remain closed for she did not instruct anyone to open it. With a fierce and frightening slam. I tightly fastened the book and raised my head slightly to see if she was talking to me. It did not matter for I was certain that she was.

Anxiously I waited for the title of the story and a brief plot outline to entice my curiosity. but it would be fifteen minutes before we could attempt reading for her grammar lesson took precedence. Every story was dissected into its technical aspects of grammar and structure rather than its relative significance and creative elements.

It appeared that Medusa was finished teaching when she randomly began pointing to students who had to read the story. It was interesting to note how many children bowed their heads trying to avoid eye contact with the insensitive individual. I was among the frightened children who sought shelter behind her bangs and hands. My attempt to distance myself from this absurdity was futile. As soon as my name was called I began to feel as though I were caught in a whirlwind. The emotional response of panic overwhelmed me and I began to frantically investigate which story we would be reading so I could familiarize myself with the words before my turn was up.

Although I loved reading, I developed a phobia about reading aloud in class. I would make the silliest errors and I would not respect the rules of punctuation just so I could finish reading as quickly as possible. The problem became so grave that my teacher enlisted me to join the rank of the “special class”. There was nothing special about being withdrawn from the familiarity of my classroom to walk the long, sterile corridor to the tiny office where the learning disabled struggled with their deficiencies and their self-esteem.
The incredible sadness that enveloped my heart as I slumped into the tiny chair was cumbersome. I did not bother looking around to see the other children for my shame became my companion. I just remember the teacher’s voice that slowly would repeat the phonetic phrases to facilitate the reading process. I just wanted to shout and inform everyone that I could read. If I had had the courage I would have told the despicable creature that I was capable when she indignantly pointed her finger to me and invited me to leave the class and get extra help. She had already made the necessary provisions. Obediently and scornfully I raised my limp body and carefully walked around the maze of folded legs and followed the directions to the abyss of embarrassment.

With music: and its image in my ears left such impression as one often catches from songs sung to an organ, when one hears the words sometimes and sometimes not, by snatches. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) IX. v. 142 – 145. p.138)

I felt like Dante did after awaking from his dream in chant (canto) nine of Purgatory when an eagle is snatching him up, but in essence it was really Saint Lucy bringing him to the Gate of Purgatory. He describes his state of confusion that ultimately has a happy ending. At the time I did not know my fate.

The bus ride home was longer than usual that day or at least it appeared so in my mind. I needed to wrap myself in my mother’s loving arms for it would be there that the world would be normal again. She would cup her silky smooth and ivory coloured hands gently around my chubby cheeks and lightly feather away a stray tear. She would comfort me and make me forget about the unsuspecting journey that I was mandated to take. I found comfort in dreaming and picturing the scene when I would return home and be amongst the flowers of a garden that mark my absence and rejoice my return.
Yet, I did not know how to tell my parents that all this time they were wrong about my intelligence. I needed salvation as Dante did awaiting the arrival of Beatrice, his guide to eternal enlightenment.

While those fair eyes are coming, bright with bliss, whose tears sent me to thee, thou may'st prospect at large, or sit at ease to view all this. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXVII. v. 136 – 138. p.285)

As everyone knew from school, if you were sent to the special class it really meant that you were stupid. This was confirmed by my classmates’ reactions when I left the class directed by their ridiculing smiles and unsympathetic eyes. The lamb was out of the den and motioned to face the hungry wolves prowling through the wooded countryside. The sense of isolation and condemnation suffocated me as I accepted the unjustified fate that was granted to me because of my terrifying trepidation. The uncaring and absent hearts could not begin to understand the affliction bestowed upon the defenceless victim.

Trembling up the concrete steps I hesitated ringing the doorbell of my sanctuary. My heart sank as the moment approached when the door would swing swiftly permitting my entrance. I could not bury my sadness for it was too consuming. Dante describes a gambler’s reaction after losing at a game of Hazard in chant (canto) six of Purgatory and it resonated with my shame of telling my parents that their only child was deficient.

The loser at the hazard, when the game breaks up, sadder and sorrier lingers on alone, re-plays each throw, and drinks of wisdom’s cup. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) VI. v. 1-4. 110)

Mother immediately sensed something terribly wrong and scooped me up from the porch and lovingly placed her warm cheek against mine. She whispered gently so as to draw me out of my rigid cage of humiliation. Like a dam that holds back the force
of raging waters. I had held the stream of tears that now flowed unceasingly. At first, I was like a soldier valiant and self-assured before heading off to war, but shortly thereafter acted as though she knew that she was not coming back. Her sorrowful voice would trail off into the gusty wind across the plains of war.

My lifetime long the heavens must wheel again round me, that to my parting hour put off my healing sighs: and I meanwhile remain outside, unless prayer hasten my remove – prayer from a heart in grace: for who sets store by other kinds, which are not heard above? (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) IV, v. 130 – 136, p. 98)

The darkness of my classroom and the silent laughter could not conquer the fear that possessed me. I became motionless in the airy breeze of offensiveness. The silent audience members of the open theatre that had fallen before me could only see my tears. I was like the excommunicated from chant (canto) four of Purgatory who saw no salvation for a time equal to their earthly lives. I was too late to obtain salvation from the grips of a mammoth monster that would sooner send me into the abyss of aberration than give me attention.

The mighty sun of my life soon radiated her energy over the telephone demanding an explanation for the disrespect caused unnecessarily to her star. In broken English and without self-conscious distress, she relayed the information she had just learned. Patiently she waited for the principal to address the inexcusable actions of an indifferent teacher. The sporadic spurts of acknowledgement that my mother was still on the line, were my only clues as to how the conversation was unfolding. My mother's insistences of being informed when life-altering decisions are made gave me hope that I was not mistaken. I still wanted to believe that the teacher really had my best interest at heart, but her approach made me think again of the unnecessary degradation I had
endured without my parents’ consent. The acceptance of an apology and the time for an appointment ended the conversation that despicable afternoon.

My pillar of strength and faith led me to the comfort of the family room where we sat and discussed ways to find more peace in my life. My mother helped me imagine a way to reduce my focus on the evaluative aspect of reading and just read to enjoy the story. The imaginative strategies that held back the power to ignore the violator of dreams helped me walk again without the hand that warms my heart. I momentarily felt the impact of independence once more reign passionately in my heart. As Beatrice revealed herself before Dante in a chariot filled with blossoms in chant (canto) thirty of Purgatory. I too felt the reigning moment when my mother’s assistance would give me another chance at educational enlightenment. Beatrice sternly questioned Dante for not following her vision and her presence in his dreams. She relentlessly tried to get Dante to give up his self-destructive behaviour, but it had to take her attempt to summon Virgil to be Dante’s guide in order to lead him back towards her. She was upset at his obvious denial of her presence and love after her death. Dante had given up as I did, and it took someone’s profound love to get us on the right track towards deliverance.

You keep your watch in the eternal day, so that nor sleep nor darkness steals from you one-step which the world takes upon its way. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XXX. v. 103 –105. p.310)

Provisions were made immediately that same evening to invite our family friend, Pier delle Vigne, to provide his assistance with my reading. He was a professional who spoke fluent English and Italian. Frequently he had unselfishly given of his time to help my parents where my limitations prevailed. In exchange he received the love like that of a family that he had left behind in a remote village of Italy. The
home-cooked Italian pasta meals would beckon his presence and together the few hours of wine. good food and cheerful memories would lessen the feelings of isolation and awareness of being immigrants.

That evening I received the grandest book ever! It was a big hardcover issue of Pinocchio. The delight of receiving such a precious gift encouraged me to tackle each page with insurmountable determination. As a family we sat huddled around one another. I began sailing through the printed words that are capable of awakening a silent world in the darkness of night. I felt the hope again because I was given the brilliance of the sun. Each punctuation point was greeted with its respected attribute rather than the rush of a damaging whirlwind. Over time my confidence was on the road towards recovery and I no longer felt the need to rush through my reading to avoid being in the spotlight. My greatest terror was to mispronounce the words before my eyes. all because of one individual who had a different agenda when it came to nurturing the soul of an innocent child.

Minimal contact was maintained with my teacher that year after the special education incident. There is still a void in not knowing the details of the resolution. My parents assumed the responsibility to seek remediation if I ever required it. They felt that an injustice had occurred and they no longer had complete faith in a faltering system. Their frustration lay in the uncertainty of not knowing what decisions were being made due to their lack of language comprehension. The disrespect was not only given to me. but to my parents.

Our family friend, Pier delle Vigne, was an example of a good teacher to my family and me. He was a wise person for his years. It was the most disheartening
experience to learn that he had taken his own life two years later. Every December sixteenth is marked with a special sadness but also reverence to a wonderful human being who could not see the potential for betterment. He saw it in others, but he could not let go of the insurmountable expectations he had indiscriminately given himself. Speculations ran rampant amongst the circle of common acquaintances, but the truth lies only in the heart of wonderful man I knew.

So, in a scornful spirit of disgust, and thinking to escape from scorn by death, to my just self I made myself unjust. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XIII. v. 70-72. p. 151)

So much potential and good character vanished like a rainbow on an overcast day. At ten years of age I had no understanding of what suicide meant, all I knew was that I wanted a chance to say good-bye. When I learned that it was not possible, I became angry and did not respect what he did. The innocence of youth made me believe that there was no problem grave enough that would warrant taking one’s life. I had simplified what must have been a very painful decision for him to make just like Dante describes in chant (canto) thirteen of Hell. In his brilliant poetic manner he describes an unnatural setting of wild vegetation that really is the embodiment of the tormented souls who committed suicide. His main message is that these individuals deserve this ghastly state of afterlife for they disrespected God’s will and authority by taking their own lives.

There is no sense of forgiveness in the chant (canto) just a descriptive account of the violation of God’s eternal plan. Even after the pain and selfish thoughts, I prayed that he would find peace in the other realm of life. I hoped as a child that God would let him into Heaven and not punish him by sending him to Hell. I also supplicated that he
would continue to be my eyes and wisdom throughout my schooling. I lost a friend, a
teacher and advocate that dreary December day.

Here shall we drag them, to this gloomy glade; here shall they hang, each
body evermore borne on the thorn of its own self-slaughtering shade.

The world he opened around me where his teachings had once abounded would forever
be in my heart. With his affirming presence and the love of my parents, I came to
believe that I was indeed deserving of special treatment, but the kind that leads us to a
place where you can take a chance on believing in hope. I wanted to give my students
that same kind of care, but I had to come to terms with the amount of consideration I
was giving them. The excessiveness had become detrimental to my wellness because of
my own self-neglect and unrealistic goals and expectations.
Chapter 10

The Purgation of Pride

There are contrasts of jubilation and of horror when I recall with vividness the events of my grade two year, but particularly the day I was sent to receive special education support. It defines a very sad time for me in my life. Yet that experience would give me foresight into the future. Defining my existence changed that day because what I was told and who I believed I was had a different interpretation for my teacher and classmates. Furthermore, my personality could not flourish under such oppressive circumstances and I knew it. I either had to change or accept the defeat. I subconsciously chose to be defeated and I have struggled with that choice my entire life. I accomplished what needed to be reckoned with, but the liberal heart always questioned everything and trusted no one.

Living a life of scrutiny and suspicion hampers the creative spirit. Like the flame from a candle that can easily be extinguished by a forceful breath, so it happened to be that my light ended the day I became aware of the cruelty around me, in particular a teacher’s. Perhaps, it was naïve of me to not understand that idealism must one day meet realism, but there are degrees of knowing to who children should and should not be exposed. Like Dante’s purgation of the pride that he rids himself of in chant (canto) twelve of Purgatory. I had to release myself from the overbearing self-importance that determined my beliefs and actions. I could not let go of the wrongs that I had experienced. It was as though I was life’s only victim and it would be years and many experiences later that I would come to know that life was full of disappointments and that others, perhaps, endured even more detrimental experiences than I. After all, I had
the love necessary to comfort me from life's struggles. Like Dante, who unbeknownst
to himself had the imprinted "P" for pride on his forehead removed from the Angel of
Humility, it also took me a while to realize that the trauma would end and I would be
able to move on with my life.

Then I behaved like one who goes along quite unaware of something on
his head. ill winks and smiles make him suspect what's wrong. (Sayers.

As a special education teacher, I could never bring myself to tell my students
how delayed they really were. I also did not choose to purposefully lie to them, but my
methods are to encourage the positive attributes they possess and build upon their
ability to cope with their learning disability. It would be devastating for them to hear
about statistics such as percentile ranking, grade equivalency, and age equivalency in
comparison to their peers. If their self-esteem were already in a fragile state because of
the insensitivity of others, to have their teacher promote the numbers rather than the
whole individual would only hinder their personal growth.

I was fortunate my parents put an end to the emotional torment as soon as they
were made aware of the experience Medusa had put me through. In my role as a special
education teacher, I have taken the utmost care to nurture the vulnerable students who
reluctantly sought extra support. The memories of segregation are still vivid in my
mind. I have made a conscientious attempt to rectify the negative experiences that all
special education students have had to tirelessly endure. It is my mission to make the
classroom as inviting as possible for the student. I also try to foster a positive
relationship with each smiling face that greets me. I want them to feel that they are
indeed special, but not because of their cognitive domains, but because of their sacred
hearts.
In chant (canto) ten of Purgatory, Dante similarly professes that the purgation of pride is not the worst thing the souls could endure because Purgatory is temporal. As with my students the turmoil of formal schooling will end. It is life after their formal education that really matters. Encouraging my students to learn how to love and accept themselves for all that they have to offer is my main objective throughout the year. This includes both their limitations and strengths so that they can embark upon life's journey with the fortitude of revelation.

Heed not the form of the affliction - nay, think of what follows: pray you. think. this woe cannot. at worst, outlast the Judgement Day. (Sayers, 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) X. v. 109 – 111. p. 146)

My parents' struggle to obtain all the facts promoted my sense of advocacy for my students' parents as well. Often parents sign the necessary documentation without proper consultation or understanding of the special education process. It is my goal every new academic year to take the time to listen carefully to what the parents have to contribute in regard to their child who is in need of remediation. My objective is to treat one another as integral parts of the planning and decision-making team that only has the child's best interest at heart. Developing the mutual trust by considering each other's judgment, opinions and suggestions has been beneficial in consolidating a relationship with the parents and student. I believe that because this courteous and rightful stance was not be given to my parents and me, it became very important for me to ensure that it did not happen to others.

The gift of empathy is one that can go the distance especially when emotions are riding high and families are experiencing some tribulations. Like Dante's happenings of chant (canto) thirty-three in Purgatory that recounts his journey towards removing all
memories of sin. one must recognize the difficulties before rejoicing in the introspective.

But since I see thy mind is turned to stone, and dull as stone, so that it is not lit by my words' light, but dazzled and outdone. in heart I'd have thee bear them - if not writ. then at least pictured. for that cause which brings the potent home with palm-leaves bound on it. (Sayers. 1955. *Purgatory*. chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 73 – 78. p. 333)

It is hard to say then what I mourn most in my teaching career. I'm not certain if it is the loss of idealism or my personal identity. or perhaps the combination of the two. My story of loss is not really a unique one. Unfortunately. I have learned that the stories of shared loss abound throughout every teacher's repertoire of life and career experiences.

It was my first year at a new school. I felt fortunate to obtain a transfer close to my home after many years of commuting for approximately two hours every day. Although I had been warned that it was not going to be an easy transition moving to my new area, I ignored the advice given. To me teaching was the same no matter where you were. In my self-assured state of mind, I also believed that it is what you make of the teaching situation that promotes success or failure. I was determined to obtain my transfer and I received one after a number of interviews. It would not be soon after that I would come to regret my decision and humbly realize that each situation presents itself with its own set distinct attributes both challenging and accommodating at the same time.

The school community was different from my former schools. The area consisted of middle class homes that belonged to primarily one ethnic group. Nothing could have prepared me for the language deficiency the students exhibited and the general lack of parental involvement in my students' lives. Their parents worked very
hard to provide and maintain a higher standard of living that they did not enjoy as immigrant children themselves. This was the norm at the school and I had to adjust myself accordingly. I trudged along with my system of promoting communication between the parents and the school community. I paved my way in a new school and community, but most importantly with my class and their peers. Erasing the boundary lines between teaching and life has always been my subconscious and conscious way of being. Sometimes painful episodes seep their way into the erased perimeters creating a need for restraint. but what follows could not be held back for the affliction was already in motion and its final destination was upon my doorstep.

I had a group of students that usually kept me company during outdoor recess. but one person would faithfully walk with me or come to exchange salutations. Cato was a beautiful student. She had gorgeous dark blonde hair with cascading curls framing her afflicted face. Her expressive green eyes revealed so much hurt and desperation that one had to look hard to find a little laughter in them. Cato could talk to me about anything. I thought she was this way with everyone, but I soon discovered that she was a silenced soul. She had a warm, caring, and vulnerable personality. I did not have to look hard to find the beauty, but she and others did.

Cato had a difficult family situation. I could not determine with certainty that she was subjected to physical abuse. but intuitively I am confident that she endured great emotional trauma. Her home life was unique for a 12-year old girl. Her father worked long physical hours as a labourer and did not offer much support to his distraught daughter. Her mother was not well physically after a debilitating car accident. She had spent close to one year in the psychiatric ward of a neighbouring
hospital. Her significantly older sister was married and living in her parents' home confined to tight quarters and a baby on the way. Her much older brother led a typical bachelor lifestyle. Although he lived at home, he just returned there to sleep. There was little interaction. Cato essentially lived alone in the household. She had had difficulty identifying with her classmates since she was retained in grade one. Furthermore, she encountered many conflicts with her classroom teacher who did not appear to understand the reasons for her misbehaviour. She was isolated in the classroom and at home.

Cato was a friendly face for me at my new school. I cannot say what drew us to each other. I felt that a metaphysical force that magnetically attracts two souls together and would dynamically bind their need for redemption.

Then I to him: "Poet, I thee entreat, by that great God whom thou didst never know, lead on, that I may free my wandering feet from these snares and from worse; and I will go along with thee. St. Peter's Gate to find, and those whom thou portray'st as suffering so. So he moved on: and I moved on behind. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v. 130 – 136, p. 75)

Cato seemed to have a special connection with me that made her friends in my class envious. They would tell her to leave me alone because I was their teacher and not hers. I would try to diffuse the situation by inviting everyone to walk with me. Soon a large group swarmed the "Queen Bee". These eager adolescents were fighting for my attention. I used the recess breaks as learning opportunities and relationship bonding sessions for the lonely girl. She began to make friends with some of her classmates, and I was relieved to know that at least in school she would find some peace of mind. I was wrong! Her marks did not improve, she eventually had some tense moments with a few of her peers, and her relationship with her teacher appeared more
strained than ever before. Cato was becoming defiant and she was distancing herself from everyone and everything that mattered to her. Finally, her plight came to a halting and desperate end.

It was a dreary April day. It rained relentlessly and the grey clouds hovered miserably over our heads. No teacher training could have prepared me for that day. One of Cato's classmates nervously came to my classroom door and asked to speak to me privately. I stepped outside puzzled by this strange visitor. He was afraid of being caught out of class, but thought that I should know what Cato had done, for I was the only one that could help. I sensed his fear and the mysterious message was beginning to make me nervous. I asked him to explain what he saw. He proceeded to tell me that he saw Cato taking some pills by the coat rack while he returned from a washroom break. It seemed that time stood still for me. He answered my questions and I tried to alleviate his fears. It appeared as though I was someone else. The teacher in survivor mode appeared and the vulnerable one took a seat in the spectator's section.

Everything happened quickly from that moment on. I cannot accurately recall the events that proceeded from the devastating news I had just heard. I do remember dealing with the suicide attempt because her classroom teacher and principal thought it would be best that I handle it since I had a relationship with Cato. Besides, I spoke Italian and I could inform the parents of what had transpired.

The principal was interrogating Cato when I was released from class to "handle the problem". I was amazed and fearful of how slowly and insensitively everyone was reacting to this distressing situation. Why hadn't anyone called for an ambulance? Why weren't her parents called? What took them so long to get me coverage for my
class? Why was the principal disciplining her? I could not believe the worthlessness of the crisis intervention team. Would Cato be safe in the midst of the incompetence?

I remember making the dreaded phone call to her mother. How do you tell a parent that her child attempted to take her life? I had no private office and no time to think about translating the dreaded news into Italian. Luckily for me the semantics of the language have a poetic sound. The harshness of the news could be eliminated if I were careful in my delivery of speech. I was disillusioned and disheartened by her mother’s reaction. I could better understand at that moment the turmoil this child was going through. Her mother’s resentment of her daughter was real. She would not have been in the accident if it had not been for Cato’s desire to have a new Halloween costume that fateful night. At the tender age of ten, Cato learned about the tremendous power of guilt and how it would strip her of a mother’s unconditional love. Her mother’s words to my plea for her to meet us at the hospital were: “E proprio necessario che io vengo all’ospedale?” (Translated: Is it really necessary that I come to the hospital?). Alas, my third shock of the hour. Was this woman really saying this? I think I may have raised my voice at that point. I thought she was in a drug-induced stupor and did not understand what I had just told her. I was wrong again. She did hear me. This time she asked me if she should call a taxi. I told her to do what she felt was best, but that I needed to end the conversation so I could accompany her daughter to the hospital.

The principal decided that it would be best if he drove us to the hospital. The fifteen-minute ride was long and painful. Cato and I were in the back seat. She was scared. I desperately tried to keep up with the steady stream of tears that ran down her
face. At the same time the volume of music playing in the car annoyed me. The man who drove seemed to be oblivious to the situation. There was no human kindness or empathy for the child’s pain and the teacher’s torture. I had to be strong for Cato, but inside my stomach was churning. I was afraid for the beautiful child that I held in my arms. Upon arriving at the hospital, I was faced with a multitude of legalities and procedures. Luckily we brought her health card number from the standard school emergency form. I was instructed by the principal to sign the necessary documents while he made himself comfortable in the waiting room area. He felt it would be best if I stayed with her. I was not about to abandon her to face the poking and prodding alone. His matter of fact voice and abdication of responsibility proved to be excessively uncharitable for me. I did not dignify his remarks with a comment. I left him abruptly and I made my way to find Cato along the vast corridor.

Cato had been moved from where we last saw each other. A kind nurse sensed my despair and asked if I was Cato’s mother? I told her that I was her teacher and that her mother was probably not going to arrive any time soon. The few people in the hallway turned inquisitively in my direction when they heard me say “teacher”. Their facial expressions were visibly puzzled by my involvement with this child and for me to be in an emergency ward of a hospital. It did not appear to matter to the psychiatric nurse because she took me by the arm and escorted me along the corridor to the examining room where Cato lay helplessly. The sight of Cato being hooked up to machines bewildered me. She was mumbling for mercy from the doctor giving her the “charcoal” substance-like medication. At that moment, our eyes connected and she appeared to be lucid for she held out her free hand. She smiled slightly and pleaded for
me to stay with her for she was scared. The doctor confirmed that my presence would be appreciated.

I tried very hard to hold back the tears. A few escaped when Cato began crying. She started to gag as the medicine was being administered. I wore some of the black stains on my clothes that day, but I also had them in my heart. Where were the people who supposedly cared for this child? Where was my support system? It became clear that we just had each other. Our clenched handgrips consolidated the pain we were experiencing. At that moment the doctor stated that she was out of immediate danger, but I could not leave until the drug screening would come back from the laboratory. The extent of the damage could not be assessed properly until the medical team knew the chemical compounds she had ingested. I would have to wait so I could authorize the next course of events. Furthermore, the doctor suggested that I take a break for Cato needed her rest.

Preoccupied by the notion that my principal would probably want to be kept abreast of what was happening, I decided to follow the doctor’s orders. As I sluggishly entered the waiting area, I saw my principal gazing at the television. He was oblivious to my presence and to my depressing condition. The daytime drama, The Young and the Restless absorbed him. I was no match for the soap opera. This was painfully real and he appeared to not want to deal with it. I sat next to him and, as I talked, he maintained eye contact with the screen. He nodded occasionally and asked if I needed a ride back to school. Surely, he was joking? Was he contemplating leaving me at the hospital alone? He made reference to how late it was getting and he wanted to head back. I reminded him that Cato’s mother had not arrived and that we really could not
leave until a legal guardian was present. I also told him that I would not feel
comfortable leaving until I knew she was out of danger. Reluctantly he agreed to wait
until a family member arrived.

Eventually, Cato’s mother did arrive. She brought a family friend with her
because no one else could make it. Cato was alert at this time and relieved that the
worse was over. She was overcome by panic when she heard the loud booming voice
of her mother filling the sterile hospital corridor. Once again she pleaded for me to not
leave her alone. I greeted her mother at the door and explained what had transpired
over the past four hours. She was overwhelmed with disbelief that her daughter could
be so irresponsible. She abruptly made her way towards Cato’s bedside and proceeded
to scold her in front of everyone. Her dialect was harsh and punitive. There wasn’t
anything romantic about the Italian language at that point. Cato’s hand grasped mine.
The tension she endured was clearly marked by the tight grip she held on to. I had to
intervene. Sadness and disgust for this woman’s insensitivity overcame me. I told her
to maintain her composure because Cato had been through a terrible ordeal and that
there would be plenty of time to discuss what had happened, and that all Cato needed
right now was her mother’s unconditional support.

I was summoned by a nurse to go to the waiting area because a gentleman
wanted to see me. Intuitively I suspected that it was about our impending departure
from the hospital. The principal was standing by the exit doors when I entered the
waiting area. He pointed out that Cato’s mother had arrived and it was time for us to
depart. I told him to wait while I ensured that it would be fine for us to do so.
Furthermore, I needed to put some closure to this dreadful day. I did not want to leave
Cato just yet, but I had no alternative. As we said our good-byes, she thanked me and asked me if I would see her again. I promised to keep in touch.

I thought what I had already endured was difficult, but it paled in comparison with what followed. Cato was placed in the hospital’s psychiatric ward. She did not have access to a phone and had restricted visitors. She had to undergo a regimented treatment program that did not allow for distractions. Her friends and I were considered distractions. I had to plead to the doctor to let me see her. Finally, the day arrived when I was able to visit her. I brought her a stuffed companion and some of her favourite treats. We hugged for a long time. She assured me that she was comfortable and she made some friends. I could not imagine who they were. I didn’t see anyone. I only heard the occasional shrieks, yet Cato seemed desensitized to the noise. In a few short weeks, she had aged. She told me that she was moving into a group home situation and would be placed in a section 27 school in a distant region from where she resided. She appeared terrified of the impending and inevitable transfer. There was so much changing in her life. How much more could she withstand?

It would be three months before I would see her again. I was worried for her welfare and I was alone in feeling this way. No one seemed to care about this child or me, for that matter. It was business as usual. The year ended without any reference made to Cato and her ordeal. In June, I learned that I was going to be one of the grade eight teachers at my school and that Cato would be in my class for September. I was told to keep a watchful eye on her and deal with the situation quietly. What was the mystery that revolved around this child? Why was everyone afraid? Why did everyone treat her like a disease? The bureaucratic defences that would follow paralyzed me. I
discovered levels of disrespect that I did not know existed. Everyone involved from the board administrators down to her social worker had his or her personal agendas that did not necessarily coincide with Cato's best interest. She was the sacrificial lamb at a glutton's feast. Everyone tried to absolve him or herself of responsibility. Every time I made a suggestion, I was given stares that made me feel uneasy. At one point, I was told in private to sit back and observe. It was not my place to intervene. Everyone was afraid of being sued and saving money was the main objective to be attained.

Cato and I survived the year. She had made another failed suicide attempt. This time she was sent home to recover for two weeks. She completed her grade eight year and was excited about high school. She felt that it would be a new start for her. She also had friends in the older grades who would look out for her.

The last time I saw Cato was during the Christmas holidays in 1996. I was shopping with my mother when we ran into each other. She looked great. She was hanging out with some friends. They moved ahead as she stopped to greet me. After a few pleasantries, she gave my mother a hug and said, "You have a beautiful daughter, signora." Those were the last words I heard her say as she ran off to catch up with her friends. I was glad to see that she was capable of being a free spirit, even if for a brief moment. My tearful eyes followed her until she vanished in the crowd. I prayed to God that He would keep her safe from harm.

I lost a great deal of trust in the school system because of Cato's story, but at the same time I gained the determination to face adversity. I believed whole-heartedly in a system that was suppose to advocate for children's rights. Instead I received a detrimental dose of reality. I was too idealistic. I lost my innocence as a teacher who
thought she belonged to a community that could make a difference. I have since
learned to accept control for my own actions. I may or may not ever be part of a system
that has a vested interest in the welfare of children before its own needs. I tried to come
to terms with this reality but I concluded that I only have faith in my abilities. I would
like the opportunity to share my experiences and thoughts with others and learn from
them as well. but until that day arrives. I will need to concentrate on empowering the
voice of the silenced student and teacher.
Chapter 11

The Dreaded Despot

After the difficult emotional distress of Cato’s ordeal, I became more alienated. I found the consolation I longed for through literature. I delved into my novels and lived the life of the characters presented before me. I was able to cope with the pain of my formative years through the written word. At times I would read silently with the novel slightly in my desk while the teacher explained the boring lesson. I also made sure that I completed my class assignments quickly so that I could return to my safe world of reading.

High fantasy lost power and here broke off: yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars, my will and my desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and other stars. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 142 – 145. p. 347)

I learned many things through the pages I read. Similarly to Dante’s experience in the last chant (canto) of The Divine Comedy. He has finally attained the wisdom that made him stray from divine knowledge and his creator. He discovered his own failings and tribulations by embarking on a self-motivated journey. I had no one at school to ask. for the teachers would be too busy “teaching” or marking and my friends did not care for what I was inquiring about. Essentially, I was alone in my class. The strange thing is that as much as I felt alone, I was always included in the disciplining regardless of my involvement in the misbehaviour.

For a child who detached herself from the class, I found myself always being punished for someone else’s misdemeanour. Coming to terms with the concept of one bad apple spoils the bunch was a difficult and unfair concept to comprehend as a young girl. It made no sense to me to behave properly if I was going to be reprimanded
anyway. Yet, I continued to react as a “good girl” and hoped that my classmates would one day behave properly. It was a violation of my character to be incriminated with the offensive language and accusations that my teacher charged her class with. I was not part of it. How could she include me in her punishment when all I did was sit quietly and read while the others mischievously planned and executed their plans of pranks?

The particulars of my grade three year seem vague to me, but I do recall the confusion of switching portable classrooms and that the one we were assigned to was not ready. To complicate matters, my teacher went on a leave of absence and we were assigned to Camilla. She did not appear to be pleased with her situation because we rarely saw her smile and the fact that we were housed in the library must have added to her frustration. I, on the other hand, thought it was the best set-up possible.

The usual chaos of the class and students who required the use of the library made the afternoon particularly challenging. The antics of the few class clowns did not subside regardless of the countless warnings to stop. Older students began to participate in the juvenile behaviour displayed by several girls and boys. In a matter of no time at all, the decibels of volume had increased dramatically. It was even too much for me and I prided myself on the ability I had developed to drown out the excessive noise that surrounded me as I buried my nose into yet another novel.

The distinction between that afternoon and the countless others of unruly classroom behaviour was the teacher’s reaction. Camilla had reached her boiling point. The loud crash of the metre stick as it plunged down with great force and landed on top of a student’s desk at the front of the class, was the first sign that this day was going to be different. When the sound finally stopped resonating in my sensitive ears, I opened
my eyes and saw the image of a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her face was red, her hair was frazzled, her eyes filled with rage and fear, and she had an unsteady stance. She was a pressure cooker ready to spew out her steam and contents.

See how he scorns all instruments of earth, needing no oar; no sail but his own wings, 'twixt shores that span so vast an ocean's girth. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) II. v. 31 –33. p. 82)

What appeared to be a great deal of time in reality was only seconds. With the similar loudness of the broken metre stick the utterances from my teacher’s mouth had the same force exhibited moments sooner. I stared at her with bewilderment and agitation for she resembled all the evil that I believed was a demonic possession of her body. What she said was not as important as how she said it. It was a dramatic performance that left the library patrons and my class stunned. The brief moment of silence was interrupted by a few giggles at the back and almost as instantaneously as the evil spirit inhabited her mind and soul she snapped and commanded respect. The description of the irrational behaviour that the students were displaying was virtually skipped over; it was the punishment that hushed the abusive behaviour. The teacher had finally had it and she wanted everyone to know.

She assigned us silent work for the remainder of the day in the form of copying many pages from the dictionary. The punishment did not fit the crime and certainly not for the few of us who were quietly reading or completing the booklet filled with reproducible copies of meaningless work. The ultimate threat was being told the pages were due by the end of the day and if you were not finished it meant staying after school. One brave soul who travelled to and from school by bus like myself raised his hand and asked if it applied to the students who took the bus too. The thunderous voice exclaimed that her punishment applied to everyone.
Why all this dawdling? Why this negligence? Run to the mountains.
slough away the filth that will not let you see God’s countenance.
(Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) II. v. 121-123. p. 84)

The second chant (canto) of Purgatory is significant for me because it represents
the reality of progress and that nothing should impede it. not even beautiful words
found in literature. I chose to isolate myself, but the attempt was futile because I still
had a mission to accomplish. Like Dante who had to scale Mount Purgatory to find
absolution. I too needed to find a way to belong to the class and pay my dues until I
could be saved from the teacher’s wretchedness. Separating myself from the class
environment did not prevent any disappointments because I was included in everything.
I was foolish to think I could remove myself from the painstaking difficulties my
teacher imparted on her class. Just as Dante was naïve to think that his presence in
Purgatory could benefit the newly arrived souls. I too felt stupid for thinking that my
good-natured characteristics would absolve me from punishment.

My heart ached when I discovered that I would not be spared. I also became
frightened because I lived one and a half miles away from school and I had never had to
walk home alone before. I knew the route the bus took weaving in and out of streets in
the subdivisions filled with homes. but I had to think about an alternate way. I was
determined to finish this ridiculous request for respect so that I would not have to deal
with the possibility of being left to walk home alone and unsure of where I was heading.
Confident in my ability to write quickly and neatly. I believed that I would not have to
contend with the anxiety of not being able to get home. As the minutes passed I began
to feel this compelling urge to negotiate with the tyrannical dictator, but I knew that my
attempt would be futile. I nervously looked at the clock and flipped through the
remaining pages left only to realize that my worst fear would soon become a reality. I
recall having eight more words to copy and the dismissal bell about to ring momentarily.

My fear gave me the courage to try and reason with the teacher so I left my seat and approached her desk. The bowed heads looked up to see what was going on and with the weight of their stares and the uninviting glare of the teacher’s eyes I continued my trail towards humiliation. I politely called my teacher’s name so as to get her attention in an unobtrusive manner and I waited for her to acknowledge me. With an affirmative response. I began my nervous attempt to ask for pardon even though I had nothing to be excused from. I recall stating that I had eight more entry words to copy from the dictionary and that I could not miss my bus for I lived the furthest away of anyone in my class and I would not have company going home. I offered to finish my work at home and have my parents check it if that would be permissible. My polite and reasonable request was renounced with a boisterous. “Sit down!”

Let come to us. let come Thy Kingdom’s peace: if it come not, we’ve no power of our own to come to it, for all our subtleties. (Sayers. 1955. *Purgatory*, chant (canto) XI, v. 7 – 9, p. 150)

I was bewildered and my face burned with embarrassment as my faith dissipated. I returned to my seat quickly and tried to make up for lost time for I was still thinking there may have been some way I could make it to the bus. after all. Cornelia usually waited a few minutes for the students out in the portable area. My last few words were not as neat as the beginning, but I did not care. At that point I was on a mission and my teacher did not care for my well being. so I did not need to hear her praises for work completed well and neatly. My legs scurried past the students who were taking their time because they were “walkers”. Out through the front doors I flew thinking that I still had a chance. but the mini-bus was turning onto the major road away
from the school. The big buses were getting ready to leave too. The school policy was not to switch buses even if you were to go to a friend’s house. but I thought I could reason with the driver and get brought to the closest intersection near my home. However, my opportunity did not present itself for the repeated knocking on the bus door did not produce a welcoming response. The driver ignored me. She must have realized that I was mistaken and could not be bothered to hear my plea. It was devastating to be so close to remedying the problem only to be met with further opposition. I turned my back towards the bus and headed down the sidewalk that would lead me to the main road near my home. There was nothing left to do but face the unavoidable.

Show which direction will more speedily bring us to where the stair goes up: or show the gentlest rise, if more than one there be. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XI. v. 40 - 42. p. 151)

I began my voyage with much trepidation. As Dante opens chant (canto) eleven with a prayer to God. I could hear myself saying one too. In an almost meditative state. I carried the weight of sinfulness. I must have been wrong in order to deserve this treatment. I could not imagine that a teacher would not have sympathy for a young student. I thought I did present myself in a humble manner so as to not offend the teacher and her need for discipline. My mind shifted between the classroom and the reality I was now facing.

The cars whizzed by quickly on the main road and I soon began to think of crossing the intersection because I was on the wrong side. My pounding footsteps were quick and airy for speed was of the essence because I knew my mother would soon become frantic when she did not see me get off the bus. There was no time to admire the route for my nervousness was growing rapidly and my determination running
scared. After what appeared to be forever, my street finally converged with the main road just around the bend. The next challenge was to cross the road carefully because there was no intersection with a stop sign or a light. My feet touched the road with independence and caution. Anxiously turning my head back and forth several times, I began my journey to the other side. With great relief the adventure ended quickly. The walk would not be too far now. As the street began to curve I saw my house and then running seemed to be the appropriate choice to end the ordeal. Out of breath and nervous about my mother's reaction, the steps slowed down once the driveway mark was reached.

One of the neighbours who had convened on our front porch informed my mother that I was home. Forcefully, my mother pulled herself out from the small crowd and ran towards me dropping on her knees. The neighbours' cackles and my mother's indiscernible questions muddled from the crying made it impossible for me to relay my story. Once everyone was assured of my well being they made their way back home and my mother took me inside to hear the events that led to my walking home alone. My mother was infuriated towards my teacher and it did not take long to understand that.

The inevitable phone call was soon placed to the school, but by 4:30 p.m. there was no one available to deal with my mother's frustration. As much as Camilla was wrong, I did not want to be singled out and pay for my mother's interference.

The night was long and morning did not pass soon enough. There was a sense of urgency to get the ordeal over and done with for I knew this was the beginning of the end for me. I had come to learn and expect that you do not cross a teacher's path
because she will seek her revenge in alternate ways. Many of my classmates had fallen victim to this unfortunate turn of events. They learned that from being right they ended up being wrong.

As we entered the school office the principal greeted us with his usual diplomatic voice. He invited my mother into the office and I followed quietly hoping not to be noticed by anyone, especially someone who could inform my classmates that we were visiting the principal. As the door closed behind him, he sat himself comfortably on the vinyl tarm chair. He grinned a confident smile and an insincere offer was given to us as he stated boldly, "What can I do for you?" My mother began by excusing herself for her broken English and taking up his time, but she felt that this matter was of great importance. Once her apology was clearly stated she began by asking him "What would you do if..." question. She informed him of the events that had unfolded and along the way made him determine the proper protocol for a situation like the one I had endured. He apologized to me for my inability to get home safely from school and he congratulated me on being a "tough cookie" by finding my way home. He also made me promise that I would talk to him if there should ever be a problem in the future. He assured my mother that he would have taken me home or called me a cab if he had known what had transpired. Regardless of my mistake, he did not want me to feel that I was in any way responsible. He was merely trying to make me aware that I would have a support system if I needed help. Furthermore, he called in my teacher and, after a discussion behind closed doors in another office; she came in and apologized to my mother and me.
It was satisfying to know that my mother had solved the problem, but it did not take away my fear that I had gotten my teacher in trouble and now she would make me pay for it. As though the principal could read my mind, he asked me to stay behind once he extended his apologies again to my mother and I bid her farewell. He invited me to sit down in the chair and with a friendly voice he began rationalizing the teacher’s behaviour while comforting me. He made me promise that if I ever felt frightened by something that she or any other teacher did, I could talk to him about it first before “worrying” my mother about it. I nodded my head and he shook my hand as he led me out of his office. There was something about what he did and said that I did not trust, but I accepted his idea and moved on. I could not deal with the unrelenting fear that the teacher imposed upon me anymore, so I decided that if she punished me for no reason again, I would take him up on his offer. Dante’s poet friend, Forese, tells him that had it not been for his wife’s prayers his progress through Purgatory would have been minimal. He needed her help as I needed the principal’s.

And streaming tears and sighs did so entreat, that from the waiting-place she drew me soon, and from the other circles loosed my feet. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXIII. v. 88 – 90. p. 249)

The year passed and no incident ever occurred where my safety was jeopardized; however, I never fostered a relationship with the teacher. She ignored me completely. Of course my academic progress was not hindered, but the social aspect of school was non-existent. I completed reading comprehension activity sheets: phonics dittos, math textbook pages, and I read fervently book series after book series. The significant lesson taught was to fear and distrust the authority figures. Yet, with all the unfortunate events that had occurred up to the tender age of eight, I still joined the ranks of teaching as a profession. What happened to me as a child would have turned off
many people, but why did I persevere? Recounting this story and others, appealed to the sense of triumph and tragedy; however, distinguishing between the two forces has been a great source of oppression for me. Haunting feelings of fear clouded my judgement now because I had been taught how to deal with the debilitating experiences of discouragement, control and trepidation. Fear was my companion at school and as I grew more conscious of my surroundings and existence, it began to take a life of its own at home too.

But who are you, whose cheeks are seen to teem such distillation of grief? What comfortless garments of guilt upon your shoulders gleam? (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXIII. v. 97 – 99. p. 215)

Becoming more mature with every passing year, I was aware of my parents’ needs and their fear of incompetent teachers. They worried constantly when I was at school. The only time they were fine was when I stepped off the bus. The warnings and worried looks began to affect me greatly. It was not a joy to go to school because I never knew what the day would bring me and how it might affect my parents. And so, I dreaded school and more importantly the despots that ruled our fates for hours on end.
Chapter 12

Pageantry and Prophecies

Being a child of immigrant parents was my first initiation into joining the ranks of the teaching profession. I became an unassuming advocate for my parents at a tender age. The differences between my parents and most of the other children’s that I knew were pronounced. Not only was the language they spoke different, but also all aspects of our lives were unique.

Dante meets Virgil, his guide, for the first time in chant (canto) one of Hell. He discovers that he and his newfound friend are compatriots and as much as the introduction was frightening for Dante, he began to rest assured that he was not alone now that he had a fellow citizen and famous poet by his side.

It spoke: “No man, although I once was man: my parents’ native land was Lombardy and both by citizenship were Mantuan. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) I. v. 67 – 69, p. 73)

I often wondered as a child if my parents’ journey would have been easier if they had the support that Dante received. Inasmuch as some relatives were in Toronto, everyone was struggling to survive the new ways and new life. I felt ill equipped to assume Virgil’s role, but almost as divine intervention would prevail for Dante. I too found myself amongst family members that would depend upon me for sustenance. It was a great deal of responsibility. but conscientiously I assumed my caretaker role.

My father immigrated to Canada on December 22, 1955 from a mountainous area east of Rome. My mother immigrated with my father on September 20, 1961, after they were married. My parents met shortly after my father returned to visit his family in 1961 and as clichéd romantic stories go, it was indeed “love at first sight”. They met
in April and were legally married by July 2nd in a civil marriage in order to begin the paperwork necessary for immigration. On August 27th, they married in church, followed by a beautiful reception and honeymoon. As poor as they were, they chose a few important destinations to visit before embarking upon their lifelong triumph of a life abroad.

After World War II, Italy experienced a great deal of economic hardship. It was difficult for both my parents’ families, but especially my father’s, to earn a living. Many distressful situations plagued his family and soon there were no options left but to seek refuge in a country that would welcome people to rebuild their lives. He often refers to Italy as his birthmother and Canada as his adoptive mother. He respects Italy for contributing to his identity, but Canada has given him the opportunity to nurture it. He had a difficult life from the time he was born. It was very distressing learning about the hardships he suffered through the vivid stories he portrayed. It became a natural feeling to want to protect my father after all that he had been through. The only way I knew how to do so was to become his advocate in a land where he did not have the advantage of knowing the language and norms. Abolishing ridicule, stress, and indignities from his life has always been my mission. To some extent, I wanted my father to experience pride, probably due to my envy of others. I desired us to have a “normal” family life, unknowing what “normal” truly was. I received mixed messages from home and school. My life was good at home and yet, when I compared myself to others at school, it seemed strange. I longed to be like the others.

The sin of envy is explored in Dante’s chant (canto) thirteen of Purgatory. There the envious sit with their eyes wired shut unable to see the sun’s light. They can
only hear the voices of the virtuous and ask for redemption. Dante depicts the
difference between pride and envy beautifully in this chant (canto) by showing the
element of fear in the envious. They are so afraid of their superiors and of their
possessions that they begrudgingly look upon them with hatred. As difficult as it is to
admit for me, I was envious and fearful for most of my childhood. Acceptance was
important to me and as long as I was different, I would not be welcomed into the inner
circle. I would spend my time standing on the periphery glancing admiringly at life's
drama unfolding before my eyes. My eyes were wired shut too. I believed that the sun
did not grace its warmth upon my face and so I lived in isolation and gazed at my
neighbours from afar.

"Father," said I, "what is it that so cries?" And even while I questioned
him thereof. lo! The third voice, saying: "Love your enemies". (Sayers.

I was in grade two when I began learning my multiplication facts with my dad.

After supper we would sit together at the kitchen table while my mother prepared
dessert and coffee and he would begin drawing the multiplication table and fill it in with
numbers. One night I recall telling him that my class was not doing this kind of work.
We only had to add and subtract. My dad patiently told me that I would enjoy learning
this new math activity and that he would like to show it to me. I loved watching him
repeat making the multiplication table night after night and fill in the numbers that I got
right. As I was learning how to multiply, he simultaneously would teach me how to tell
time. I thought that was grand because no one in my class could ever tell how long it
would be before recess break, but I knew because of my dad. I felt so smart because of
him. Ever so gently he would remind me to always be humble about what I knew and
never to hurt anyone's feelings. He further encouraged me to share what I knew with
those that did not have the opportunity to learn the interesting things that I had been taught. In many ways he was helping me connect with my classmates from whom I felt isolated.

From a tender age, I was aware of learning as an opportunity to share, care, and be morally responsible for the well being of others. My father was a great teacher then and still is now. He always began sharing his advice or knowledge with me in the same manner and that is by stating that he does not have the intellectual backing of a degree, but his experiences can offer some assistance. It is frustrating to hear himself belittle the essence of who he is, but the fact that he did not have an opportunity to obtain a formal education and "piece of paper" that follows the school experience is very disheartening for him.

My father's inability to feel completely qualified has been a point of contention for me because there is not much I can do to erase the hurt and indignities he endured due to the missed opportunity to learn when he was a young lad in his war torn country. I believe that part of the grand plan my father had in coming to Canada was in part to give his children the gift of education. He always states that it does not matter what career path we would have chosen but that we would have had to attend school, read books and learn about life through any means. I recall him saying that even a mechanic who uses his hands needs to be able to use his mind. He empowered my brother and me to seize the chances our great country has prepared for its citizens to take life by the reigns and forge ahead with determination. He really believed and still does that "knowledge is indeed power".
I can still remember the small kitchen table and the simple tools that consisted of pencils and a few sheets of paper that contributed to my learning. There are many more examples of when my father and mother were, and still are, among the very best teachers I have ever had. Learning my multiplication facts and telling time were colossal accomplishments for a little girl. It was not soon after those special times that I had with my father that I began to adopt the teacher role; however, there was one particular night that I remember sensing my father's frustration with his own work.

My dad tried to disguise his anguish, but, like me, his emotions were transparent. His smile would vanish when he was worried about something or someone. After some careful coaxing my mother and I tried to draw out what was causing his sad expression. As he recounted the day’s events, he mentioned lastly that his employer gave him a promotion. Baffled as my mother and I were, we tried not to seem unsupportive and proceeded to ask him why he seemed depressed over such good news. We thought it was grand that, after he had been successful as a drywall latherer, he was made head foreman of the company he worked for. He saw the new role as one with more responsibilities. He had to do more than read and interpret the blueprints. He also had to log the day’s events and write out purchase orders, among other duties. He was particularly insecure in doing work that required him to read and write in English.

Dante explores the theme of humility in chant (canto) ten of Purgatory. The sinners carry heavy stones along the ledge while being surrounded by beautiful Christian bas-reliefs. Carrying the ponderous weight on their backs indicates a self-
inflicted humility and their desire to move beyond their inclination to pride. Just as I believe my father's humility and above all else shame would have deterred him from moving ahead. I also believe it was my overwhelming sense of pride that gave him the push he needed.

He therefore: "Be consoled; it is right meet I do my duty ere I quit this spot: justice requires it. reverence stays my fee" (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) X. v. 91 – 93. p. 145)

When my father came to Canada he took some English speaking classes. but after a while he had to prioritize his time and work at maintaining two jobs. One job was to earn a living and the other was to support his mother and siblings back home. There was no more time in the day to take remedial language classes. He was a survivor and a quick learner. He carried on the best way he could except for the new opportunity that he was now granted.

My mother and I were so proud of my father. He knew the language barrier would be an obstacle for him and he questioned how he would cope. I recall my father talking to my mother about the ridicule he endured from the estimators and architects that would inspect the job site. I would hear about the snide remarks they would make about his language deficiency. After listening to his concerns I took the opportunity during one of the silent lulls to provide a solution and my help. After contemplating what I was going to say to not hurt my dad's feelings. I volunteered to be his teacher if he needed anything. My father's eyes were glossy. I thought I had offended him, but he sat me down beside him and he praised God for the opportunity I was given to be able to go to school. It was many nights after that fateful day that I would teach him how to write numbers. key words and phrases to do his job with relative ease. He even made a wallet size card with the correct spelling of numbers so he could write cheques and
complete the purchase orders. My father would show me his work and ask for my suggestions and corrections if any had to be made.

Dante indicates the sinner’s insecurity about his time spent in Purgatory. He depicts a scene whereby progress appears to not be made, yet there is the understanding that Purgatory is temporal and when time ends so will the torments. My father’s insecurity seemed to abound during those difficult times. He would put on a brave face, but there was the deep-rooted fear of faltering. In some way I knew he felt shame in asking his daughter for help. Being the provider and traditionalist that he was it could not have been easy for him to seek assistance. I do believe that, over time, the wounds did heal and a better understanding of the situation prevailed.

“Master.” I faltered, “that which creeps so slow this way – it does not look to me like men: it’s like – my sight’s at fault – I just don’t know”. (Sayers, 1955, Purgatory, chant (canto) X. v. 112 – 114. p. 146)

To this day I am still my father's advocate for language related issues. I will make important phone calls or read and respond to letters that are difficult for my father to deal with independently. We shared a great deal in our life together. I am his teacher as much as he has been mine. I learned how to be a good teacher because of my father. He taught me how to make learning fun and to ensure that the learner's dignity is respected in the process. He has contributed to my successes and continues to be an integral part of my learning journey. He always comments on how he is looking forward to the completion of my doctoral studies and a reserved seat at convocation. I too am looking forward to the end of my studies in order to begin a new journey. I especially long for my graduation ceremony when I will search through the balcony-seating area to spot my father’s smile. The same smile he gave me as a child when he and I learned something new.
After looking at my anticipated future I am reminded of the verse in chant (canto) one of Purgatory when Dante is about to embark on a new life phase that would bring new learning experiences. He is on his latest journey in a different landscape and environment. He is moving upwards and renewing his spirit with Virgil’s assistance. However, Virgil’s role will be different in Purgatory. His presence and importance will diminish as the pair ascends the mountain. Other influential figures will prevail and facilitate Dante’s understanding.


My advocacy role is but one of the many I learned to adopt being a child of immigrant parents. I soon became aware of my distinctiveness when I was introduced to school. Prejudice became a known concept to me as my awareness grew with age. Although we were not visible minorities, it did not change the critical powers of the aggressors who lived in my neighbourhood and frequented my school. We knew many violent acts of unkindness. but by far the cruelty displaced upon my loyal friend and companion, Georgie. was the most vicious act of barbarity that I had come to learn as a child. Even Dante describes acts of violence towards God’s creatures as the ultimate sin and thus the offenders are condemned to a miserable life in the lowest levels of Hell.

Those men do violence to God. who curse and in their hearts deny Him. or defame his bounty and His natural universe. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XI. v. 46 – 48. p. 135)

It was a long and tiring trip back from Montreal. but the wedding was fun and it was nice seeing my mom’s only relative in Canada. Her other cousins live in New York and they were present too. It was a distant family reunion. but nevertheless it was special for everyone.
I held the map and told my father the route he should take. The excitement of being his navigator was too much for me. I even stopped reading so I could follow the signs and assist my father. I must say I was relieved when he told me to take a break because it was a long stretch of driving that would not require my help.

The enthusiastic attempt to read my novel from cover to cover, the excitement of the weekend, and the monotonous driving brought on a deep sleep for the rest of the way. The exasperated sighs from my parents awoke me as we pulled into the driveway. The opened garage door was the first sign of despair. Simultaneously, the three of us ran out of the car and went into the garage to see if Georgie, our family dog was all right. The ghastly sight and silent whimpering will live in me forever. Georgie had been stoned violently and two legs were severely broken. The bones were shattered and blood coated his fur. Mom tried to hover me so I would not see the extent of the infliction, but it was too late. With one swoop my father carried our dog in the car with my mom running after them with the old blanket kept in the garage. My dad did not want me to endure more distress, but I insisted on going with him to the veterinarian. The drive comprised of me asking my father if he was certain that Georgie was going to be fine. My father made several attempts to avoid answering the question truthfully. He knew as I did, but I could not bring myself to accept, that the injuries Georgie endured were not going to be healed. My dog was fighting to hang on, but the assault was too aggressive as the doctor told my father. Apparently the stones did not only hit his legs, but there was sufficient trauma to the head too. Georgie was put to sleep. I lost my best friend and family member forever. I longed to have this crime vindicated.
and as Dante explores in chant (canto) three of Purgatory, it is the search for knowledge and not being able to attain it that permeates the lack of hope and fulfilment.

And you have seen such great souls thirst in vain as else had stilled that thirst in quietness, which now is given them for eternal pain. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) III. v. 40 – 42. p. 89)

It was never discovered who could have committed such a vicious crime to a loving dog. but my family and I suspected it was the neighbourhood gang of hoodlums that always committed acts of vandalism and swore profanities at the ethnic families who lived on our street. Our next-door neighbour who was left in charge of our dog did not notice anything suspicious. They were very bewildered to learn how the unfortunate incident occurred especially when Georgie had spent most of the day playing with her family. They told us that it was not long thereafter when we returned home. The mystery remains unsolved, but one thing is for certain and that is that the innocent victim was assaulted because he happened to reside with an Italian family.

The obscenities and the name calling of “Wops!” were common occurrences that we unfairly had to deal with; however, the taunting of my missing dog was more than I could endure. The menacing juveniles, who would ride their bikes recklessly and intimidate the neighbours, would spread their poison willingly because of their insurmountable hatred for differences. The teenage boys would shout, “Hey kid, where’s your dog?” The sound of their cackling laughter would drift off as they sped away on their bikes, but their dirty deed would live forever in my heart. Intuitively, I felt their hatred for me and I believed them to be perpetrators of the violent act against Georgie. I desperately missed my dog and his unnecessary death would never be avenged because proof was not available to charge the assailants. Justice would not be
served. Subconsciously, I internalized the sadness and set off to exonerate all the evils that innocent victims fall prey upon.

I felt that I belonged to a diseased society like the one Dante describes in chant (canto) twenty-nine of Hell where the sinners spend their time scratching their sores and scabs. They lethargically carry their disfigured bodies and suffer in silence. The sinners in this circle of Hell were the fraudulent members of society at one time. They falsified everything from things to people. I was exposed to those fraudulent people. Their cackles and sneers were evidence of their hideous crime against my dog, my family and me.

"Alas, dear Sir! His death by violence," said I. "still unavenged by any of them who shared the affront, has rankled to this sense". (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXIX. v. 31 – 33. p. 253)

As a teacher, I have had the opportunity to teach many students of diverse backgrounds and educating them about their differences and celebrating our global village have always been my primary objectives. Racial and prejudicial comments are not tolerated in the classroom and the heavy disciplinarian stance is taken if ever a student makes the error of disrespecting others due to their differences. I tell my story to my students as a way for them to learn about the unfairness of discrimination. I also choose a literary piece that further accentuates the futility of hatred and the fear that is induced by insecurity.

The pain of losing my dog has also helped shape me into who I am today. I have tried to take the violation and turn it into a positive teaching experience. It frustrates me when students speak like their parents and show no just cause for hating a specific ethnic group when they do not know anything at all about them. As a child I wanted to be accepted for who I was, but I experienced rejection on all fronts. I could
not understand why such importance was placed upon my heritage rather than me as a person. If only they had gotten to know me they could see beyond the stereotypes. School was the worst place of all for the indignities I suffered. I began thinking that no one wanted to involve themselves in squabbles between children: however, there was much more to the sly cultural remarks when the oppressiveness turned physical once more.

My ethnicity was no longer the only trigger towards violence, but some of my peers were offended by my intelligence, too. It was not cool to be Italian and certainly worse to be bright. In my case, I had two strikes against me and to further debilitate my chances at being accepted was the fact that La Pia, my fourth grade teacher, liked me. She was a caring individual who took pity upon me and tried to protect me from the childhood torment that bullies inflict upon their victim.

Dante’s ‘La Pia’ is introduced in chant (canto) five of Purgatory. She asks for Dante’s help and prayers as he journeys through the level of the late repentants. It is said that her husband for either jealousy or for his desire to marry a richer heiress murdered ‘La Pia’. Nevertheless, her death was unexpected and this is one reason why Dante places her where he does. I suspect that my teacher was unprepared for the turbulent year ahead of her. Sometimes we just needed to look at each other and we knew what the other was thinking. Ever careful of not infringing upon the rights of my classmates, she never spoke ill of them, but there were subtle suggestions that she was astonished by their behaviour.

I would spend my recess breaks helping her with the classroom chores like creating new bulletin boards, or tidying up the art centre, and my favourite work of all.
correcting tests. It was an implicit trust that she gave me that I will never forget. I never told my classmates that I knew their scores. La Pia trusted me to never disclose their marks before she was ready to return their work. It was a mutually beneficial relationship because I hated to go out for recess and she had less work to do. It was also an added bonus that she understood Italian because during parent-teacher interview nights my parents could speak without impediments and truly understand what progress I was making. La Pia was like me. A child of immigrant parents and it was that commonality that fortified our relationship that year.

"O thou that in such bestial wise dost sate they rage on him thou munchest, tell me why; on this condition." I said. "that if thy hate seem justified, I undertake that I, knowing who you are, and knowing all his crime. will see thee righted in the world on high. unless my tongue wither before the time". (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXXII. v. 133 – 139, p. 275)

Inasmuch as she tried to shelter me from harm there were moments in class and during the recesses when I had to go out that I had to face the inevitable. The ridicule of some classmates or their friends was something I dreaded. They did not know me: yet, they acted as though they did. My name and ethnicity became an issue. My heart froze like Dante’s description of the last circle of Hell in chant (canto) thirty-two.

Cocytus, the river of mourning, is beneath the fires of Hell. There lie lost souls and a city that rests in silence. The sinners found there have all committed crimes of treachery, which ultimately are punished by murder. They are condemned to have their heads embedded in ice so they can see the severity of their punishment. My assailants longed for the times that they could torment me like Tydeus gnawing away at Menalippus’ head in the last verse of chant (canto) thirty-two. The bullies were not
satisfied with mere name-calling they had to see the broken spirit. When the tears
flowed and the head hung in shame. they knew they had won the battle.
Chapter 13
Angel of Generosity

Grade four was the beginning of a more positive relationship with a teacher until elementary school ended. I wondered if La Pia was looking out for me since she knew about my past troubles. Maybe she ensured that the last three years of life at my school would be spent with people who were what good teachers should represent. I could see how my teacher would go out of her way to please one of her students. She was cheerful, funny and she loved music. Her interesting projects and conversations made the class a great place to be. It would have been complete if the sacredness of school had been present even during recesses and before and after school breaks. Unfortunately, the taunting I was subjected to grew fierce and more indignant as the days passed.

The pressure mounted until one fateful day when I learned to stand up for my rights. As Dante reaches the centre of his journey in chant (canto) fifteen of Purgatory, I had reached my limit too. All I wanted was to be able to share of myself with others and they in turn would reveal their identities with me too. Dante was also searching for an understanding between the earthly and heavenly possessions that abounded in life that would ultimately lead us closer to God’s love and knowledge. As Dante progressed through the cornice and prepared himself for more complicated discussions and revelations leading him to divinity, I yearned for that same degree of participation amongst my peers too.

Silenced that lyre’s sweet music, and reduced to stillness all its sacred strings, whose tension by the right hand of Heaven are drawn and loosed. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XV. v. 4 – 6. p. 186)
As usual I dreaded the time clock as the big hand approached the time indicating that recess was to begin at 10:20 a.m. If only there were a way I could stay in and avoid the daily harassment and ridicule started by Marcia. Marcia was an angry child. She compensated for her own possibility of being ridiculed by being tough and hurting others before they had a chance to hurt her. Her parents were Dutch and she was black. The students found it strange to understand her unique circumstance and would make comments to such, but it ended there because Marcia would threaten them with their lives if they ridiculed her. She was in control and would determine the picks of the day or week to relish in spiteful behaviour and name-calling. If anyone ever dared mock her, she would teach him or her a lesson that would not soon be forgotten. And so, the bully developed and maintained her reputation by finding victims and punishing them for their sensitivities and weaknesses. Marcia exuded power and strength by manipulation. As much as she was not well liked by anyone, no one dared confront her for fear of losing his or her life.

Before him stands a throng continual: each comes in turn to aby the fell arraign: they speak – they hear – they’re whirled down one and all.
(Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) V. v. 13 – 15. p. 97)

Marcia was like Dante's deplorable place known as Caina, in chant (canto) five of the Hell. Caina is the first ring of the lowest circle of Hell. The souls that were confined there committed perfidious acts against their own kind. Recesses were dreadful because of Marcia and her coerced comrades. Furthermore, there were limited spaces to hide for the playground was small. Up until the parish priest began worrying about the church’s flower garden, a few of us would take to running to the church bell tower’s enclave. It was slightly off school property because the parking lot separated the rows of portable classrooms and the church. I would make my way through the
maze of portable classrooms and cars before reaching solemn ground. I waited until the bell rang and then run back trying not to get noticed. For months my safety precautions to avoid the class bully worked, but as life would have it, my luck ended.

An announcement was made one morning by the principal warning the student body that we were all to remain on school property during recess breaks and that serious ramifications would result if this rule was not respected. Desperation ensued because it would be a matter of time before I would become Marcia’s next victim. Her face lit up as the principal closed his morning messages for she knew now where the defenceless souls found shelter. I could almost see her licking her lips with delight at the prospective feast that would soon take place. My eyes caught a glimpse of her and simultaneously she turned her head too and mouthed, “You’re next!”

If there were ever a time I would come to know what it felt like to have a heart attack that was it. My heart pounded and pumped blood profusely. My days of hiding were over and it was time to deal with this dreadful girl’s evilness. My thoughts did turn to seeking assistance from the teacher, but Marcia promised to injure anyone who got her into trouble very badly. It seemed that this girl had covered all her tracks. She also had other kids working for her in exchange for their protection against her abusive antics. As much as they felt sorry for some of the victims, they could not risk betraying the mob boss. Marcia seemed to be grooming herself for a profession whereby any gangster would be proud of her achievements. She had the language and attitude fitting for a delinquent.

I was about to encounter my ultimate fear as Dante describes in chant (canto) seven of Hell. He describes the pitiful scene of Hell as he goes lower into the depths of
sin. At the entrance of the fourth circle of Hell where the hoarders and spendthrifts are found, he meets opposition with Pluto, one of the souls damned for eternity to carry and roll the heavy weight of stones. Virgil needs to use the words of power to dismiss the evilness presented forth by Pluto. Virgil’s words give Dante the strength to overcome the wrathful behaviour and scenery of this lowly place. The voice of reason gives Dante the courage to carry on. An unknown force gave me the strength to go beyond myself and greet the rebellion.

He said hearteningly: “Let no fears do thee wrong: he shall not stay thy journey down this steep: his powers, whate’er they be, are not so strong”.


It was a lovely spring day with the sun shining brightly and the birds chirping delightfully as if to mark the end of a difficult year. I feared that Marcia might be in my class again the next year for we were a small school. Several weeks had passed and the perpetrator had not stalked me for she was too busy taunting my classmates. It almost seemed as though she were saving me for last. One by one she victimized people in my class and the other grade four class. No one dared turn her in for fear of further repercussions. She got away with all her loathsome deeds. My fear surmounted to the point that I did not want to go to school any longer. but I could not tell my parents for I knew they would try to put an end to the deplorable behaviour this bully and her entourage displayed. I did not trust that she would be punished severely enough to deter her from resuming her role as the terminator. Occasionally she would come back from the principal’s office with a smug look upon her face as if to indicate that she was beyond reproach. I did not think a scolding or detentions would deter this infective creature from hunting her prey. And so, I carried forward in the best manner that I
knew how to survive. I kept close to the portable so I could run inside if she made her approach.

One day, I was walking quietly with two friends discussing the latest novels that we had read when we were encircled by the vultures. Almost out of a western movie when the drift of sand along with rolling tumbleweeds rise from the ground and a shadowy figure appears dressed in black, did Marcia appear before my eyes. My friends were thrown out of the circle and soon the group began swarming me ready to lunge for the attack. Marcia's comments are but a distant memory for me because of the sheer claustrophobic and petrifying feelings that engrossed me at that moment. My trance-like state was broken when the physical antics began by pushing me from one side of the circle to another. I was their ball that they were tossing around which eventually caused me to back up against the school's brick wall. The cackling laughter and audience chants were causing a confusing whirlwind in my mind. Her face and voice appeared amplified as she moved closer for the ultimate kill. Her fury knew no scorn. She was out to avenge her image and selfishly gorged upon her insatiable appetite.

Then, as the sails bellying in the wind's swell tumble a-tangle at crack of the snapping mast, even so to earth the savage monster fell. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) VII. v. 13 – 15. p. 110)

Inside of me a rage of fear and panic was brewing and ready to explode. All I could understand and feel was the need to be liberated from the corner they had pinned me into. My muscles were tense and sore. The only recollection I have of that moment is the strength that my adrenaline provided me as my clenched fist broke free from the stronghold grip of one assailant and rose to the occasion of piercing through the bodies and straight to Marcia's face. Momentary silence shocked everyone to the point where
no physical contacts were maintained. Everyone watched as the crimson blood began to trickle down her nose. Her bewildered look was something no one had ever seen before. She was genuinely shocked, as I was to realize that I had resorted to physical brutality. The guilt set in almost as immediately as the rage did. My parents taught me to resolve conflicts by talking to people and negotiating outcomes for everyone to be happy. The Utopian existence that they promoted was not respected among the masses that surrounded me. My defence mechanism took ownership of the perpetrator in the only way possible to escape the confines of her violence.

As I read Dante’s harrowing details of human villainy in chant (canto) eight of Hell, the images flash before my eyes of the avaricious attempt made upon my life by a brutish girl. Dante was ready to understand the extent of human brutality in this chant (canto), but it is not without revulsion. The sinful rage that I found myself clinging to made an already deplorable situation far worse than it was. I was not prepared for the indignation and I longed for heavenly intervention.

Was an arrogant brute in the world, nor in his whole life can remembrance find one sweetening touch: so must his raging spirit writhe here and roll. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) VIII. v. 46 – 48. p. 117)

As everyone began to step back, the yard duty teacher arrived and grabbed Marcia and me by the shoulders and directed us into the school. As we made our way into the office as if we were criminals. I began to shed tears for I knew with certainty I was in trouble with the principal now. I glanced over to see how Marcia was fairing in this unfortunate ordeal. She was still bleeding and had now stained her T-shirt. I found myself in the midst of madness. The teacher’s anger. Marcia’s injury. and the voice inside my head were making me desperate for escapism. It resonated with Dante’s despair in chant (canto) nine of Hell. His terror increased when he did not feel
reassured that Virgil knew his way around the levels of Hell. Furthermore, the Furies, who in Greek mythology were goddesses that patronized those who perpetrated grave offenses, were trying to deceive the visitors. They wanted Dante to turn to stone, but a heavenly messenger managed to ward off the evil spirits just in time. It was Virgil’s reasoning ability that saved Dante from the madness. He quickly instructed him to turn his back to the wall and quicken his pace to avoid entrapment. His good sense to seek further assistance proved to be beneficial for the pair. My voice of reason was La Pia who professed my innocence and understood my brewing rage over the humiliation I had endured since the beginning of the school year.

I was not long stripped of my mortal shell when she compelled me pass within yon wall to fetch a spirit from Judas’ circle of Hell. (Sayers. 1949, Hell, chant (canto) XXV. v. 25 – 27. p. 123)

The yard duty teacher plopped us on two chairs in the office after dragging us through the hallways in a fury. She demanded to see the principal immediately as the secretary acknowledged the commotion of our presence. After Minos and the teacher spoke momentarily behind a door left slightly ajar, he came out to assess the situation. In a true principal’s voice he commanded, “Well, what happened here?” Marcia put on her best-victimized voice and fulfilled an Oscar award winning performance when she scornfully stated, “She punched me for no reason at all!”

It was impressive for me to see that I was not the only one who was flabbergasted by this down right incredulous lie. What was she thinking of? The principal retorted, “Is that a fact Marcia?” With an approving nod, she confirmed that she was an innocent bystander to my outrageous attack. He then turned towards me and saw my nervous composure and ordered an explanation for the morning’s problem. Fear-stricken I began to recount the countless taunts my classmates and I had endured
over the course of the year. I told him of our secret hiding place so as to not be hunted
down like savage animals, the pleas to be left alone, and finally the encircling torment
that culminated by defending myself in a moment of sheer panic. The words were all
coming out in a coherent manner, which surprised me because I was very nervous to be
in such a position awaiting punishment after constantly being under the attack.

Minos carefully noted all that I had stated and walked out of his office to call
our teacher. When she arrived surprised to be greeted by the likes of two of her
students. I began to really worry. I was afraid of the outcome and there was not
anything I could do about it. We were excused from his office and told to wait by the
secretary's desk area until he had a chance to discuss the events that had just unfolded
with our teacher.

After what seemed to be an eternity. La Pia called Marcia into the office. When
the door opened I thought I would be invited in too, but the two of them walked out and
I was left there wondering what had happened. They did not even look at me as they
emerged from behind closed doors. When I heard my principal hang up the telephone
receiver, I automatically assumed that he had finished speaking to my mother. In
actuality, the principal had called Marcia's mother to explain the whole upsetting story.
Minos told me about the necessity of the phone call and that he would need to inform
my parents too. Before he hung up the receiver, my mother wanted reassurance that I
was fine and that I could continue with my day.

The principal proceeded to tell me about the fact that there would be no more
harassment and to be certain that I would be safe being my teacher's helper during
recess breaks. I was very grateful for the empathy both my principal and teacher saw in
offering me a job helping around the classroom. He apologized on her behalf and encouraged me to face the teasing in a diplomatic manner. He assured me that the bullying would end and if I found myself in a difficult position again that I should seek assistance from a teacher before taking matters into my own hands. He smiled and walked me out of the office and whispered quietly. "Don't worry, she had it coming". Sensing my guilt and bad feelings he must have realized that I was not faring too well during the interrogation. As funny and calming as he tried to be I had so many questions and issues plaguing my mind. I was worried about returning to class, facing Marcia again only to be injured for crimes that were not committed, and finally having to explain to my parents that I let them down and resorted to the basic human instinct of survival. With an encouraging pat on the back, he confirmed that all would be well again.

Minos acted like Virgil in chant (canto) seventeen of Hell. Virgil finds himself protecting Dante from the Geryon’s back as they make the ascent to the further pit of Hell. Dante must see the impact of sin before he can finally grasp the importance of salvation. However, he is carefully placed before Virgil so he is not close to the venomous tail. Despite his character flaws, Minos did serve as my protector that day and each day that followed. I had permission to remove myself from the negative influences that harassed me.

"Now," said my guide, "we must a little bear aside, and make our way towards this same malevolent brute that clings and crouches there". (Sayers, 1949, Hell, chant (canto) XVII. v. 28 – 30. p. 175)

I made my way back to the mildew-smelling portable to be greeted by cheers from my classmates. The teacher tried to regain control of the class and took the moment to teach her students about finding an alternative way to settle differences.
From that day forward she became a mentor for me on how to discipline a class effectively and how to care for a student who does not fit the common mold. The recess breaks were spent correcting homework that the teacher had secretly entrusted me to take care of. Some days bulletin boards were taken down and put up with stimulating posters and/or stencilled designs. Other days I could spend my recess breaks outside with a few friends sitting on the portable porch leisurely reading novels or finishing homework from the previous period. I enjoyed my grade four-year towards the end because it was finally safe to be at school.

Eventually Marcia and I became better acquainted and occasionally I would see her after school too because as it would happen she lived at one end of my crescent shaped street. She was made to apologize to the entire class and me. Watching her humbly ask for forgiveness stirred a sense of empathy in me. I began to wonder why this girl had so much anger and hatred inside of her that she had to share in negative ways. Pondering such thoughts made me aware of her family situation. Could the two be related? It would be months later and in a confidential moment that I would learn that my suspicions were indeed correct. Marcia felt rejected by her birthmother and hated being part of a culturally diverse family. Rather than wait for others to make fun of her she initiated and perfected the role of the class bully. Everyone would be too afraid to challenge such a deplorable individual so no one would need to see her vulnerability. When I knew this information it created a renewed sense of respect for this troubled girl. She was actually very clever for concocting a new identity for herself. Like Dante on the Geryon’s back Marcia grabbed hold of her life. Being abandoned some how gave her the right to infringe upon everyone else’s happiness.
With determination she climbed the monster and prepared herself for a voyage into the depths of despair.

So I climbed to those dread shoulders obediently: “Only do” (I meant to say, but my voice somehow wouldn’t come out right). “Please catch hold of me”. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XVII. v. 91 – 93. p. 176)

Eventually my family and I moved from the neighbourhood and I did not see Marcia again but I always treasured that fateful afternoon when she trusted me enough to share her most intimate thoughts on her life’s struggles. She was grateful and thankful that I stood up to her because she admitted that playing the bully was taking a toll on her. She was always getting into trouble at home and at school. She also hated not having ‘true’ friends. She just wanted to ‘be normal’ and be liked for who she was. It was a revelation to me that after all that was known about this girl, our defining moment would be the day we fought. I would not have chosen that moment as the turning point we both needed, but somehow it became our journey. She felt relieved after that day to become someone new and I treasured learning so much about the suffering human condition and myself. My relationship with Marcia helped shape how I would later on become as a teacher. She comes to mind when I meet my students for the first time. I carefully screen their behaviours and personalities. I am also more astute in regards to those rebellious children who seem unreachable and that no one wants in their classroom. In a sense I became like Statius in chant (canto) twenty-two of Purgatory who just wanted to attain God’s grace. He followed Virgil’s suggestions so as to be closer to Christ despite fooling the authorities about his conversion to Christianity.

I’ve felt goodwill for thee of such a sort as ne’er to one unseen held heart enchained. so that this stair will now seem all too short. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXII. v. 16 – 21. p. 240)
Chapter 14

Reverence for the Righteous

The remaining years of my elementary school life were better than when I began my education. The challenges that were met were of a social nature. Entering the junior grades meant finding a clique that would accept me, but I never had the opportunity to belong anywhere because I did not seem to fit with only one group. My eclectic nature still exists today where my friendships are very diverse. Limiting oneself to a specific group meant not learning about another. It was important for me to be well liked by everyone and so I made it my goal to belong only to myself. Of course, this meant my relationships with others were on a superficial level because the groups did not commit themselves to me knowing that I respected everyone. After all, the cliques were in competition with one another and valuable information could not be divulged.

Vulgarity abounded amongst the groups as it did in Dante’s twenty-fifth chant (canto) of Hell. It is in this chant (canto) that Vanni Fucci represents all things that are degrading in society by placing his thumb between his middle finger and ring finger to make a blatant statement of obscenity towards God’s way. This spirit has lost his identity due to his sins. It no longer mattered to be communal.

This said, the thief lifted his hands on high, making the figs with both his thumbs, and shrieking: “The fico for Thee. God! Take that, say I!” (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXV. v. 1 – 3. p. 227)

My grade five-year marked many changes to my life. One particular change was my sudden awareness of peer pressure and the necessity of belonging to a prescribed group. I chose to distance myself from the growing trend of fitting into the
Another challenge that would plague me that year was having a male role model other than my father for the first time. There was a great deal of speculation about this man’s sexual orientation among my classmates because it was such a rarity to have a male teacher in the entire school. Of course they never questioned the fact that our principal was a man, but I guess his position of responsibility did not lead them astray. There was nothing abnormal about males being in a leadership role. The silent whispers and long stares surely must have made Filippo Argenti nervous. He tried very hard to be accepted but he could not fool the students. Filippo was one of Dante’s wrathful characters in the Divine Comedy condemned to Hell. He was a Florentine knight with a very violent temper. It was as though Dante’s protagonist of the eighth chant (canto) of Hell was reincarnated before my eyes on the first day of my grade five-year. There was an immediate disliking to the man who acted proud and contemptuous.

My teacher’s attempt to regain control of the class was to implement a system of bribery using the 1976 McDonald’s Olympic cards. Every time we obtained a good test result score or behaved exceptionally well in class, a student would receive an Olympic card featuring an athlete on the cover and their vital statistics on the back. The top three individuals of the class who would have accumulated the most cards by the end of the year would be the grand prize winners entitled to select a bigger prize from a variety of games or toys.

Considering the class of delinquents my teacher had, his system worked fairly well: however, the chaos of competition that was created was quite disruptive to the learning environment. The interested students no longer cared about the true value of understanding the curriculum taught for it just became a means of obtaining a new card
if they achieved high scores on tests. I became caught up in this frenzy too. My worth was reduced to needing to win one more card so my teacher would respect me and the students would be impressed by me. Those feelings were short-lived when I did win along with two other classmates. Somehow it was no longer important to fight for a card. I wanted to do well because I liked learning not because I was persuaded to do so.

It became an overwhelming concept to accumulate the Olympic cards. The students began to bicker for extra marks and there were incidents of stealing them from out of desks too. It was a matter of time before gender differences became an issue because the boys felt that the girls were always winning. The chaos that ensued resembled that of chant (canto) twelve of Hell whereby the Minotaur and the Centaurs guarded the circle of violence. The images that Dante and Virgil see are barbarous and human reasoning is dismissed for animalistic behaviour.

Whereby, as some believe, the world’s been brought oft-times to chaos: in that moment, here and elsewhere, was these old rocks’ ruin wrought. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XII. v. 43 – 45. p. 143)

My teacher treated us with fierce passion. It resembled the bestiality that Dante depicted in the seventh circle of Hell. The lack of classroom control was very apparent to our eyes. In fact, some students worked cooperatively to try and defeat the teacher by pushing his limits. They laughed every time he would reach for the metre stick and slam it down hard on a student’s desktop to acquire our attention. It was a frightening ordeal for the students who sat in the front rows. I was fortunate that I spent my time in the back groups because all the bad students were strategically placed in the front of the class where the teacher could keep an eye on them. It all changed one day when he decided to rearrange the class.
The classroom had undergone a major transformation. The teacher was now sitting at the back of the portable along with the "problem" students and the more academically inclined found him or herself at the front. We were placed in rows of two or three depending on the individuals who were in close proximity to one another. To my dismay, I was in the first row near the blackboard in the middle group. This is a good spot if you are at a concert, but not with a teacher who had a fast hand at metre stick slashing. My fear was overwhelming, but nothing could be done about it for he warned us from the outdoor portable entry/exit line-up that there would be serious ramifications for those who complained. He further stated that this was a trial situation, but that if he liked it and we did not then he would keep us in our same spot for the remainder of the year. With the law cast in stone, we shuffled our feet and hung our weary heads low as we trudged into the mouldy smelling room. I believed he had me mistaken for those disobedient students in the class. Once again the collective is punished rather than the few culprits. Dante experienced mistaken identity too in chant (canto) nineteen of Hell. Pope Nicholas III confuses Dante for Pope Boniface VIII and begins a dramatic conversation with his fellow sinner. The two were involved in the buying and selling of church pardons and offices. Dante uses this encounter to explain that church authority figures should be committed to God and not to materialism. He further explains that their actions are an offence towards the Holy Spirit and so they will forever be submerged headfirst into the rocky crevices of the mountain and only the flames of God’s vengeance will caress their feet.
My teacher's deceptive behaviour was representative of the popes' inappropriate objectives for their leadership role. As a teacher he had a responsibility to respect his students and guide them civilly towards better behaviour.

Then I became like those who stand agape, hearing remarks, which seem to make no sense, blank of retort for what seems jeer and jape. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (cantus) XIX. v. 58 – 63. p. 189)

Days passed and the noise level did not swagger at all. It was apparent that the new arrangement was not working. His need for silence was not to deter the students' need for socialization. His sarcasm and mean-spirited talk grew with each new day and with every strike of the meter stick on a student's desk to seize our attention. Despite knowing that the odds were in my favour to be the next victim of terror. I still ignored the classroom environment and concentrated on reading during those moments between subjects. Choosing to be oblivious to my surroundings did not help me the day the metre stick marked its presence on my desk, skimming my hands by millimetres. The thunderous wallop overwhelmingly affected me, causing a surge of adrenaline to release itself throughout my body. My classmates thought I was convulsing after the initial scream of terror was relinquished. The silent stares of hatred lay heavily upon the loathsome leader. Although he would not admit it, he knew this time that his disciplinary tactics had gone too far. My gasping for a breath and the fear induced tears were a shocking sight for everyone. My unawareness caused me great stress that day. To this day. it is typical for me to avoid the vulnerable position of being in front of a class. Throughout my secondary and post-secondary studies. I always found myself at the back of the classroom where I could hide away from the possibility of becoming a victim similar to my grade five-year.
I was looking for solace and absolution like Guido da Montefeltro from chant (canto) twenty-seven of Hell. He was a Ghibelline general who later in life became a Franciscan monk. He took the drastic step in order to find absolution for his crimes waged upon the Roman enemies that Pope Boniface VIII was eager to destroy. Guido could not hide from his lifetime of violence without a sincere reprieve similar to my desire of hiding away from the world and any wrongdoing I may have initiated. I began to question my behaviour wondering if I had provoked such vehemence. I just knew that I needed to hide.

"O what a waking! When with fierce derision he seized on wretched me, saying: I'll be bound thou didest not think that I was a logician. He haled me off to Minos: eight times round his scaly back the monster twined his tail. and in his rage he bit it; then he found against me, saying: "Here's a criminal for the thievish fire." So was I lost, so borne where. as thou seest, thus clothed I walk and wail". (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXVII. v.121 – 129. p. 294)

Another difficult year would have been experienced if it were not for the fact that I was going to become a big sister in the very near future. The sense of hope and wonder of what my life would be like caring and loving for a sibling provided me with the strength to overcome the obstacles I faced at school. The day of redemption would come one bitterly cold winter’s day when nothing in the world would matter. not even Filippo Argenti’s fierce temper. In chant (canto) three of Paradise. Dante states that every soul that is in Heaven receives the happiness that it is capable of accepting. I was willing to receive this novel expression of hope in my life and no one: not even Filippo’s impetuous disposition was going to impair my yearning for happiness.

Brother, our love has laid our wills to rest. making us long only for what is ours. and by no other thirst to be possessed. Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) III. v. 70 – 72. p. 75)
January 16, 1976 was a day of reckoning for me. As my friend and I walked home from school after another incident of punishing the class with a detention for a few behaviourally challenged students. I noticed a surprisingly similar car to the one my parents owned. It could not be the stark navy Oldsmobile that never reached more than 100 kilometres per hour. The speeding car rushed past us only to come to an abrupt halt. Slushy road conditions made it difficult for the wheels to grip the road as the crazed driver attempted to reverse the car. My companion and I witnessed another sudden halt that caused the car's wheels to screech. Shockingly, I discovered that the crazed driver was my father desperately trying to find me along the bus route. He rolled down the window and commanded me to quickly get in the car for our journey to the hospital awaited us. His face was lit up with pride and glory that the miracle child was born. I had a baby brother waiting for me to formally greet him into my life.

Since my mother's fourth month of pregnancy, she had been bed-ridden under the doctor's warning that she was at risk of losing the baby. There was a looming sadness in our family that even if the baby came to term, he or she would more than likely have a birth defect. All I had was hope and patience like the excommunicated that Dante wrote about in chant (canto) three of Purgatory. Those souls are fated to live in banishment for not having received sacraments of any kind from the Church. Without formal reconciliation, the souls would not be eligible to bask in the delights of Paradise. Yet, the situation did not deter them from longing to find the ultimate sense of heavenly peace.

"Be not afraid, for not without the might, believe you well. of grace from heaven shed does he come here and seek to scale this height". (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) III. v. 97 – 99. p. 90)
With faith, prayer and determination my parents decided not to terminate the pregnancy, rather they nursed the baby to the very end. The end, however, came two weeks prematurely and some concern was raised about the baby's health. The fear and preoccupation of losing my yet to be born sibling was traumatic for me, as a young child. My responsibilities grew dramatically with every passing day. It appeared that I skipped childhood after being a toddler and became a practising adult. I nurtured those around me and organized our household. I wanted to ensure that all would be right when this gift entered the world. It was strange to give a yet unborn child such importance, but the loneliness that prevailed in my life despite the love and companionship my parents gave me was a phenomenal condition that plagued me at home and I was reminded of at school.

With delight I jumped into the car, waved frantically to my friend and shouted that I had a baby brother as my father accelerated the pedal with his forceful foot. The excitement in the car ride home was overwhelming. My soft spoken father was rambling about how we needed to rush home to call our extended families around the world, then rush back to the hospital, get me dinner and make arrangements for taking time off work. I stared at the strange man who was bubbling with joy and agitation. Happiness finally found its way to our home after years of loneliness.

Another incident would foster my fear of losing my brother thirteen months later when an expired booster shot serum was negligently administered into his tiny body. The allergic reaction caused such serious damage that hospitalization was required and the only promise given was that of an uncertain prognosis.
The days passed and the memorable shrieks of crying filled the hospital corridors when the bid farewell to a night of restless sleep crept indignantly into our souls. The heedlessness and lack of compassion from the supposed “professionals” was nothing less than merciless. The silence that prevailed stirred the need for justice and retribution for the damage had been caused, but my parents’ faithful approach never lent it to combat carelessness with loathing. Their main interest was to save my brother and take him home. Anger brewed in me, which later turned into possessiveness. No one was ever to hurt us again. My sense of determination for the advocacy of our rights grew and my overwhelming need to nurture those that needed protection became my philosophy of life at the time. I did not know that those feelings would secure their way into my essence of self and teaching. I became the advocate for those students who were wronged by the system or worse, by their significant family members. Due to the significant age discrepancy between my brother and me, the role of surrogate parent became one that I adopted willingly. It was to become the training ground for my role as a teacher to the hundreds of students’ lives I would come to touch.

The year came to a close with many significant changes, but the one I was hoping for did not present itself. I had longed that reparation would have prevailed, but my teacher never did apologize to me for his uncouth behaviour. It hurt me deeply that he ignored the fact that I was one of the better-behaved students in the class. I always did my work and when I had spare time. I read. How could he have been so insensitive to one of his helpers and supporters? A small group of us would do his marking, tidy the classroom, and assist him with other teacher-related chores. And this is how he showed his appreciation?
The incident was left unspoken of for the rest of the year and the belligerent blows subsided slightly after my unexpected and shocking response. I recovered physically from the day’s event, but the emotional scar remains. There was no vindication for the terror with which he afflicted his students. The year drew to a close ever so slowly, but that was to be expected given the conditions we complied with. My path with this man would not end with the last bell of the 1975-76 school year. I would have to call him my teacher again in grade seven.

My feelings and respect towards him changed that day, but I was able to forge ahead and complete the year without much participation. Perhaps he did know the extent of his damaging conduct. He rarely acknowledged my presence and he did not ask for assistance any more. My perspective changed a great deal that day because I was let down by a teacher, someone I believed would take care of me like my parents told me he or she could. Unbeknownst to me, losing faith with the school community and teacher would become recurring themes for me throughout my lifetime.

I managed to handle the problem without any parental involvement. My family was preparing itself for the arrival of either a baby boy or girl so the added pressure seemed unnecessary. I dealt with it independently and my attitude of compliance changed forever. A more offensive and assertive approach towards life had inhabited my soul. For some reason, the anticipated birth of my sibling gave me the strength to ignore the abhorrent conditions I was surrounded by and concentrate on the fact that I was not going to be alone any more. My genetic prints would be shared with a loved one and a spiritual connection would keep us forever in harmony.
My renewed strength and lack of fear gave me the courage to stand up to the perpetrators who surrounded me. My energy was directed elsewhere because I had so much love to give to my brother or sister. With the added sense of security, I was capable of confronting the arduous task of being in his class. Eventually he moved the desks back and I could hide from him again. The daily class routines were simple to follow and it did not require many interactions. I went up to the blackboard when I was called upon to do so, but giving of myself in more than a dutiful student was no longer my preoccupation. The disillusionment was still very much part of my reality and to my dismay it would restructure my belief of teachers. They were all part of the political litany that mistrusted students and categorized them under one heading: delinquents.

I followed Dante’s message found in chant (canto) six of Purgatory in which the shameful political governing factors conducted by pertinent historical figures was prevalent then and will always continue to exist. I had given up hope that there would be someone nice in my future to teach me. I believed that like the politicians that Dante describes in the chant (canto) that are all the same, the teachers I was subjected to were also cast from the same mould.

How often, in the days thou canst remember, have customs, coinage, codes been redesigned, each office changed, and changed thy every member! Bethink thee then, and if thou are not blind thou’lt see thyself a woman sick with pain, who on the softest down no rest can find, tossing and turning weary limbs in vain. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) VI. v. 145 – 151. p. 114)

It seemed that teachers were not caring people who promoted the positive development of a child. The adults had their own agendas and often they did not coincide with those of being an impressionable child who was eager to experience all that the world has to offer. I had lost the faith to be safe from the violence and
brashness of people's behaviour and cutting words. I longed for justice and hoped that everyone would lend a hand to another in peace and love. It was my desire that school would be a place of kindness after the difficult introduction to a world where the Utopian idealism should abound. I no longer wanted to be immobile like the souls Dante meets in chant (canto) nineteen of Purgatory. They are located there because of their avarice and lack of toil. Their torment is to view their skewed devotion. I feared that I would also be condemned to view school as a place void of spiritual progression.

For as our eyes would never seek the height, being bent on earthly matters. earthward thus justice here bends them in their own despite. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XIX. v. 118 -120. p. 219)

At ten years of age. I had to find a safe place where my heart could wander in fantasies and my mind did not have to struggle with the bewitching boldness of cynicism. That serene place came to me with the birth of my brother. I was able to displace the torment of schooling and develop my nurturing qualities that would be fundamental to my role as teacher.
Chapter 15

The River of Light

The period that followed my brother’s birth was a time of self-discovery for me. I learned who I was simply by being around him. He brought out the best in me. The sound of laughter filled our home. Inasmuch as it was a time of hard work and dedication, it was also a time of bonding and nurturing. The big sister role was one that gave me such a feeling of pride and accomplishment, but soon it became all encompassing. The amount of responsibility I assumed hindered my ability to be a carefree child. Having a great sense of responsibility had always been a characteristic that I possessed, but it accumulated in excessive amounts with the arrival of my brother. My mother was still not well and she needed assistance for herself and the baby. My father had to go to work and there was no paternity leave available with his company. Everyday that he missed was deducted from our much-needed income. Nevertheless, he spent some time with us and assured his family that it would work out in the end.

After several weeks, it was time for him to go back to work and it was my job to help my mother after school. During the day, our very good friend and neighbour, Ruth, would care for my mother and brother. She was the grandmother I did not have close by. The love that was shared between Ruth and our family will always be treasured. That was my first introduction to understanding that biology is but a small fragment in determining what constitutes a family. Like Jesus’ cry to God when he felt forsaken during his crucifixion, my family and I felt desolate during our time of hardship. Our isolation was pronounced especially with my mother’s ailing health. Our need during that special time created a longing for salvation as Dante describes in chant
(canto) twenty-three of Purgatory when he reminds his readers of Jesus’ plea for redemption from the pain and suffering he was enduring. The chant’s (canto)’s main message serves to show how the gluttonous lived their life on earth and how they were tormented in Purgatory by being exposed to all that was bountiful. They needed to find deliverance by turning towards the Divine and not to be overwhelmed by pleasure-seeking devices. We were grateful that we did receive the ample blessing in the form of an elderly woman that needed us just as much as we needed her. Our prayers were answered and we never forgot to be appreciative for all that we received from her.

For that which draws us to the tree’s green wood is that desire which gladdened Christ to cry “Eli” when He redeemed us with His blood. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XXIII. v. 73-75. p. 249)

My family was always on my mind. I was constantly worried and I wondered if we were going to be all right. I was especially concerned for my mother who fell into a depressed state. She was alone without any support from her family because they lived in Italy. We were her only source of comfort, but even knowing this had its limitations. There was only so much I could do. My father did his best to give of himself when he was home, but her thoughts always turned to moving back home. Memories from the past would resurface especially after one failed attempt to return to her birthplace. My father was reluctant about the idea of uprooting his young family to begin a life of uncertainty. The economic conditions were not as optimistic as they were in Canada and the availability of pursuing an education for the children were his constant reminders to my mother that such a drastic move would have serious ramifications that we might never recover from. The years passed and the notion never left. It would be the only point of contention between my parents, but with time the wounds healed enough to accept their fate from Italy.
Like Dante’s realization in chant (canto) twenty-six of Hell whereby he recalls how fortunate he is for his intellect and other blessings. My parents needed to stop wallowing in their own self-pity and rejoice in the fact that they lived in a land destined for great potential. Although they knew that Canada had more to offer them in terms of security and growth prospects, the void created by not having significant family members close by took its toll on my family.

I sorrowed then: I sorrow now again, pondering the things I saw. and curb my hot spirit with an unwontedly strong rein for fear it run where virtue guide it not. lest. if kind star or greater grace have blest me with good gifts. I mar my own fair lot. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XXVI. v. 19 –24. p. 233)

Being exposed to the uncertainty and loneliness was unbearable for me. My escapism consisted of playing with my brother, reading, and acquainting myself further with the passion I had for art.

The love of colouring and drawing were maintained throughout my childhood, but brought to a higher level with Matilda, my grade six teacher’s compliments and a prehistoric people project. Dante’s Matilda is introduced to readers in chant (canto) thirty-three of Purgatory as Beatrice’s maiden. She assists her by welcoming the souls to Paradise and instructing them on how to prepare for God’s divine grace. My sixth grade teacher nurtured her students morally, emotionally, and intellectually. She embodied the essence of a truly remarkable teacher who inspired learning and contemplation. She was like the sun shining brightly upon our faces. Like Dante’s use of the sun’s image to portray intellectual illumination that ultimately leads to God’s love as described in chant (canto) ten of Paradise. I felt fortunate that Matilda was leading me upon the path that rendered my heart with artistic soulful enlightenment. I
was excited to go to school for the first time in my elementary career and the newfound surge of energy radiated from me like the warm glow of a setting sun.

Call on experience. genius. art. I might. but paint imaginable picture. non: yet trust we may. and long to see that sight; and if imagination cannot run to heights like these. no wonder: no eye yet e’er braved a brilliance that outshone the sun. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) X. v. 43 – 48. p. 136)

Matilda was a great artist and a good teacher. She knew how to make us laugh and at the same time motivate us to work diligently. My teacher thought of us as her children since she did not have any of her own. Her grey hair and elderly disposition made us wonder if she could have been a grandmother. We were also curious as to why she was not married. Grade six students can be nosy and insensitive for all that matters is getting the information.

Matilda was always trying to make us learn new and interesting things. She also travelled extensively and would share her delightful stories with the class. Her interest in archaeology inspired me too. The day she announced that we were going to study the lifestyles of prehistoric societies. I quickly ran to the library to gather as much material as possible to make this the best project she had ever seen.

It was fascinating to discover how these people lived in harsh climates and their struggles to survive. Our lives were relevantly easy in comparison to theirs. I recall being impressed with their form of communication. They drew pictorial images to convey messages to each other. which I found appealing. It gave me an idea to fashion my project in a similar manner. I would create a legend so the teacher would know which symbols represented which words and I would transcribe a small portion of my assignment so she could solve the mysterious message. It was a fun and creative way
for me to apply what I had learned but it would not prepare me for the delight I received the day I presented my project to my class.

I clenched my poster board tightly as I made my way to the front of the class. No matter how many hours I would have spent memorizing the information to present, it would not have prepared me for the overwhelming feeling experienced when speaking to an audience. The weight of their stares penetrated through my skin causing the pulsing veins to expand and allow more blood to flow through them. My ardently burning cheeks glowed a cherry red colour for all to notice, and my shaky hand held the board tightly as it was my only source of comfort. If it were not for the blackboard ledge and bookshelf attached to the wall of the small and drab portable classroom. I would have lost my balance. The room appeared to be spinning out of control and every pore of my body was sweating profusely. It was unfortunate that the project had to be completed individually because standing with companions would have diminished the monumental responsibility.

As I proceeded to utter words that I could not recall minutes after the presentation, my teacher interrupted me and asked if I had drawn the portrait of the prehistoric man that graced the centre position of my board. Momentarily relieved to end the rehearsed speech, I stated that I completed the portrait and she proceeded to compliment my efforts and artistic talents. Artistic talents were words that were unfamiliar to me since she was the first teacher who ever uttered them sincerely to me. She was genuinely impressed and made a point of it to share her delight with the entire class. The confidence she promoted gave me the strength to proceed with determination and a newfound belief that I could overcome any obstacle.
Dante describes God’s overwhelming glory in chant (*canto*) thirty-one of Paradise and how nothing can extinguish it. Even those blessed by his glory will forever bask in his light. I truly felt to be among the blessed at that moment in my life. The overwhelming sense of accomplishment and respect that I longed for culminated in that fateful moment because of Matilda’s positive comments. A teacher had recognized something of value in me as a person. What a gift she gave me that day!

For God’s rays penetrate with shafts so keen through all the universe, in due degree, ther’s naught can parry them or intervene. (Sayers, 1962. *Paradise*, chant (*canto*) XXXI. v. 22 – 24. p. 328)

I ended my project with a smile and it was followed with a respectful sound of applause. Walking back to my desk, my thoughts ran towards the possibility of delving further into art. Perhaps one day my artistic renderings would be put on display at a famous gallery. Matilda undoubtedly became my favourite teacher because she believed in my abilities. She was everyone’s most respected teacher for she had a way of finding something positive about everyone in the class. By the end of the year, we all knew everyone’s attributes and we maximized upon them whenever the time rendered it permissible to do so. It was with great sadness that the school year came to a close that year for the inevitable was looming over our heads. The end of our elementary education soon arrived and a junior high school with new faces awaited our arrival. No one could ever replace the kindness that Matilda exhibited to her students. She was remembered with fondness because of the lives she touched. Often in our comparative conversations about the new teachers, her name would be mentioned with kind reverence.

By contrast, Dante describes a situation whereby the late repentant souls must wait for deliverance by scaling the rocky mountain in chant (*canto*) four of Purgatory.
The souls found on the terrace delayed their repentance and now they must spend their
time thinking about their over-indulgences and laziness. My teacher always took the
time to praise our efforts and abilities. I hoped the journey with her would never end.
but as we are victims of time, that good phase of my life did come to an end.

That will be journey’s end, and then in sooth after long toil look thou for
ease at last: more I can’t say, but his I know for truth. (Sayers. 1955.
Purgatory, chant (canto) IV. v. 94 – 96. p. 97)
Chapter 16
Twisted Nature, Twisted Sight

After the comfort I felt with my sixth grade teacher I was about to become reacquainted with an all too familiar perversity. My elementary school could accommodate students up to and including students in grade six. Upon graduation, we were faced with the inevitable move into a junior high school that would house us until grade ten. Most students were excited about the move to a bigger school, but I was afraid. I did not want to travel further away from home nor did I take comfort in knowing I would have to meet new teachers and students.

Eventually the summer passed and my new beginning was imminent. It was a terrifying experience for me when I realized that my grade seven teacher was Filippo Argenti (also my grade five teacher), again. How could the horror continue? Perhaps, the trauma suppressed my memories throughout my intermediate years. I have tried to remember specific events, curriculum, classmates, and my daily occurrences in school and to my dismay, I keep drawing blanks. There are only a handful of memories that I can recall because, I believe, they had the most impact on my life. For years I walked blindly amidst people in the forsaken institution. My movements were slower than most that encircled me. Like Dante’s countless shades in chant (canto) twenty of Hell that marched slowly as if they were in a procession. I, too, walked in silence and with my head turned backwards. The distorted figures walked forwards while their heads were turned backwards. They look towards the future with blinders on.

And presently, when I had dropped my gaze lower than the head. I saw them strangely wried twixt collar-bone and chin. so that the face of each was turned towards his own backside. and backwards must they needs
creep with their feet, all power of looking forward being denied. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XX. v. 10 – 15. p. 195)

Dante feels compassion for the lost souls and even sheds tears for them, but Virgil hastily reprimands him for losing sight of their perversion. The shades that Dante sees are guilty of trying to predict the future because only God is privy to such knowledge. According to Virgil, Dante had a moment of weakness that needed to be restored by reason.

 Truly I wept, leaned on the pinnacles of the hard rock' until my guide said, "Why! And art thou too like all the other fools?" (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XX. v. 25 – 27. p. 195)

Symbolically, I was living by the same standard whereby everything that lay before me was challenging and so it was easier to delve into the past and stare back at the sad images rather than confront the problems. I believe that my interest in astrology began at the same time as my re-acquaintance with Filippo Argenti. I would faithfully read the horoscope of the day hoping for a message of good things to come. Foolishly, the messages hardly applied to my situation and at times they were difficult to understand due to their universal appeal.

I decided to make something of myself at this school and I was voted class representative for Student Council. I enjoyed my title and responsibilities. I also enjoyed being excused from class to attend meetings. It was a unique situation whereby the council met during the day and reported immediately to the class to keep them up to date with the junior high school's agenda. A teacher representative was always present and the executive led the meetings. I was accepted and asked to volunteer my points of view. The weekly morning meetings were inviting because they were always held in the library and scrumptious treats were sometimes served. I felt important and
respected when an opinion was praised. The added responsibility made me thrive socially and academically. I went into what was to be my last year of junior high a new person despite the negative teacher.

The fall of my grade eight-year was a memorable one for me. Justice had finally prevailed. My homeroom teacher had invited the three top students to her cottage for a weekend getaway and I was one of them. The criterion was based on academic achievement and school spirit involvement from the previous year. Filippo Argenti had selected my two friends and me.

The bright colours of autumn accented the highway towards Huntsville. I still could not believe all the trouble my teacher was going to just to reward us for loving to learn and making our school a better place. My friends and I felt very special that Friday afternoon as we travelled up North. My parents were very proud of me and reminded me that there were caring teachers out there so I need not lose faith anymore.

It was a weekend of independence for me. I had only been away from home once before and I was nervous without my parents. I was also shocked to hear that the Angel of Generosity had invited Filippo Argenti to join us for the weekend. An awkward silence filled the kitchen as her last words were uttered. She told us that it was only right to have him over since we were all from his class. I could not make the connection because I was still angry with him. Inasmuch as I moved on and tried to regain some form of dignity, I never completely forgave him. My breath stopped short when she said he was arriving shortly and was bringing perogies. I had never tasted them before and I was certain I did not want to because of him. Whatever he did could never be good enough for me after his indignant behaviour. I was hurting and silently
crying at the prospect of him spending the weekend with us. Yet, the next hours would be healing for me.

I got to see Filippo Argenti as a human being capable of mistakes and who had a high regard for his former students. He spoke of his experience being a child of Polish immigrants and how it was challenging to fit into a new society. I was overwhelmed by disbelief. Here was someone that I loathed and yet respected at the same time. I have never crossed paths with him again since that weekend and I often wondered what became of him. I learned valuable lessons about becoming an effective teacher because of my experiences with Filippo Argenti and the Angel of Generosity. One created obstacles for his students and the other lifted them out of the way, but each one was an inspiration in his and her own right. I became stronger and I could see the possibilities that lay ahead of me.

Armed with a newfound destiny, I marched out of grade eight into a new community and high school. My intermediate years shaped me and yet I do not recall all that happened to me. Years later I became, for a good part of my teaching career, an intermediate teacher. I believe it is a unique position given the sensitive nature of the students at that age and how their development shapes their identities. My self-awareness grew as much during those years as it did during my adolescence. My life was set to a new tune as it is noted in Dante’s Purgatory.

Dante distinguishes between what has happened and what will happen in the new tone he presents for the readers of Purgatory. The movement of life is still a forward motion using a boat in calmer waters as opposed to finding oneself in a tempestuous sea.
For better waters heading with the wind my ship of genius now shakes out her sail and leaves that ocean of despair behind. (Sayers. 1955. *Purgatory*, chant (*canto*) I. v. 1-3. p. 73)

Dante’s *Purgatory* is a new beginning and a time of cleansing the disposition towards sins. Souls spend their time reflecting. My time had come to determine what meaning I was going to make of the infamous high school years. I wanted to avoid persecution of any kind, be it from the teachers or the students. My enthusiasm quickly dwindled after my first day of school. My family and I had not yet moved into our new home so everyday my father would drive me approximately twenty minutes to his brother’s house and when it was time, I would leave for school since it was a five minute walk away. The same ritual would take place at night. This went on for a month. I missed out on getting involved in some activities and mingling with friends. Just as I thought the smears of Hell’s soot were washed away from my face as in the baptismal ritual symbolically present in Dante’s first chant (*canto*) of *Purgatory*. I realized that I had a great deal of work still ahead of me. It was not enough to have a cheerful disposition if I were hurting on the inside. Yet, wallowing in self-pity was not going to make my transition a better one either. Therefore, I too found myself on a deserted shore awaiting redemption.

*Held up to him my face begrimed with tears: and so he brought my native hue once more to light, washed clean of Hell’s disfiguring smears.* (Sayers. 1955. *Purgatory*, chant (*canto*) I. v. 127 - 130. p. 76)

Just as I had found some solace in belonging, I was presented with the challenge of uprooting my childhood and beginning a new life in an isolated community. Despite the fact that for many years I lived in solitude at school and to some extent at home, it did not frighten me as much as the instability of new environment and all that it represents. My mother would talk to me as though the
challenge would give me a stronger disposition. She acted as though the silent poetry would re-awaken. Poetry can only exist if there is a union between the language of choice, in order to expose the concerns of the words, and their syntax. Moreover, one must have the rhetoric and lyrical undertones in order to create inspirational poetry. In Dante’s “Inferno” there was no music, but only harsh rhythms. It was a pseudo poetic environment void of harmony since all there was were sounds.

"Now from the grave wake poetry again. O sacred Muses I have served so long! Now let Calliope uplift her strain and lift my voice up on the mighty song that smote the miserable Magpies nine out of all hope of pardon for their wrong!” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) I. v. 7 – 12. 73)

My mother’s comforting words simplisticly explained that there was no music in the souls of the people who tried to hurt me. She related a great deal of life’s triumphs and tribulations to music since it was her spiritual companion when all else was taken away from her. It was with great sorrow that she recounted the tragic story of her young life and the meaning of the silver harmonica when the German soldiers ransacked her tiny two-bedroom home in the agricultural Mecca of Molise. There were few families that lived abundantly off the land and as the troops made their way through the region to find them, they stopped to threaten, rob, and impose their evil will upon the humble farmers along the way.

The small silver harmonica that my grandfather had bought selling dozens of eggs lay on the mantle of the roaring fireplace that held the black kettle with boiling water. Her mother was about to place the pasta into the pot when the aged wooden two-part door swung open with a mighty force. Her father was pushed into the common room followed by fierce looking soldiers who uttered profanities and held the rifle aimed in the middle of his back. The mission was a simple one. My grandparents had
to give all of their prized possessions to the soldiers if there was to be no bloodshed.

Shrieks of terror reigned throughout the small valley and the family members all scurried to hide behind my grandmother's long woollen skirt. My mother's brother was hiding in the loft and her eldest sister went into the bedroom to escape beneath the lumpy straw mattress resting on a makeshift wooden box spring.

My mother recalled vividly her father's strong voice commanding his wife to stop resisting the soldier who was tugging on her swollen ring finger attempting to take ownership of the gold band that symbolized their union of love. Parting with the ring was devastating for her parents. My grandparents' life that boasted various miserable events could now add a new headliner. After all the gold jewellery and some livestock had been taken, all that remained were the years of hardship that lay ahead and the forgotten harmonica on the mantle that must have been overlooked. That harmonica would dull the pain of the dreary long winter nights and comfort the soul when the clenches of oppression set in. Her father would play and he would entice my mother to sing old folk songs passed down from previous generations. The nights passed by quickly when the jovial gatherings around the fireplace were hosted by the silver harmonica and the family's spirit of song that were capable of surviving turbulent times.

My mother's stories of how her ability to sing arose helped inspire my own song. Her love of music and participation in folklore groups to this day gives me the courage to face the obstacles that find their way amidst my path. When she recounted the story for the first time it was to help me understand that a new experience is essential for our growth. My conversion towards a life of fulfilment could not occur if my search for
meaning was not sincere. She helped me to see that I had to make life authentic and
significant and not just go through the motions.

"Beseech thee. sing: and comfortably move my spirit. which in this dull
body taking the long road here. faints with the toil thereof. Love in my
mind his conversation making. thus he began so sweetly that I find
within me still the dulcet echoes waking". (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory.
chant (canto) II. v. 106 – 114. p. 84)

Armed with a renewed sense of faith. I began my secondary school education.
but just as rebirth is a continuation of nature. so too was my resurgence of doubt and
fear. Beginning the new school year without knowing anyone and walking the hallways
brimming with cackling voices and huddled bodies was a surrealistic experience for me.
Never had loneliness become such a companion. At a time in life when peers are the
focal point of one’s socialization. I retreated into the void of my mind. I hid in my
imagined reality.

I still clung closely to my faithful guide: how had I sped without his
comradeship? Who would have brought me up the mountain-side?
(Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) III. v. 4 – 6. p. 88)
Chapter 17

Blackbird Days

My journey with the *Divine Comedy* was far from over. The more I read, the more memories flooded my mind and heart. Dante's words stirred the silent images that I thought had been buried forever. Travelling with my companion was fulfilling the expectations of life and when they fail to meet the objectives of breathing a faithful existence. I was peering my head from behind the walls of sorrow. I could hear the hymns of humanity but I could not join the choir for fear beat loudly in my heart. Going beyond the boundaries meant that limitations would have been imposed upon me. Where these limitations came from bothered me because I wanted to escape from the madness. I wanted to be cherished like everyone else around me. My secondary school years were riddled with contradictions because I acted out the roles of the dejected and the accepted. Dante's imagery of the tongues of fire dominated my recollection of a time when my soul was engulfed by the flames that robbed it of life.

I sorrowed then: I sorrow now again. pondering the things I saw, and curb my hot spirit with an unwontedly strong rein for fear it run where virtue guide it not. lest, if kind star or greater grace have blest me with good gifts. I mar my own fair lot. (Sayers. 1949. *Hell*, chant (canto) XXVI. v. 19 – 24. p. 233)

Like Guido di Montelfredo who made deals all his life. I wanted to strike a deal with God, too. I wanted to be spared the abandonment I felt in the institution I was housed in for five years. I wore two different uniforms like Guido who took off his general's outfit for a Franciscan frock. It was not a sincere act to clothe him in religious attire. Guido wanted to portray a saintly image and also one of poverty to absolve him of a life filled with violence and betrayal during the war with the Guelphs and the
Ghibellines. His failed conversion and deception echoed my life of negotiations. The yearning to be accepted was similar to Guido’s request for eternal salvation. but we both wanted something without enduring the challenge of change or continuity of positive actions. We needed to transform the quality of our lives.

Later, I died, and Francis came for me: but one of the Black Cherubs cried. “Beware thou wrong me not! He’s not for thee: he must go join my servitors down there: he counselled fraud – that was his contribution. the contradiction bars the false conclusion. O what a waking! When the fierce derision he seized on wretched me. saying: “I’ll be bound thou didst not think that I was a logician”. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XXVII. v. 112 – 123. p. 243)

I did not want to decide which group I had to slot myself into. My clothing would determine my identity as would my school grades or love of learning for that matter. I tried like Guido to fool my panel of judges. but they could read right through me. My attitude was transparent. Those who pursued beauty had no need for me. Those who frightened the weak knew I was one of the people they could intimidate. The scholarly group that hid within the glory of knowledge and the disturbances it caused for their lives thought they were too good for me. I could not see myself within the law of natural order. I imprisoned myself from the rest of society occasionally looking in from the small space between the bars that immobilized me from cruelty. It was unacceptable to devote yourself to everyone. although I tried. I wanted to be friends with everyone because they all had a value that I appreciated. It was my many experiences and involvement with the student body that I believe temporarily eliminated some of the barriers. I could not foresee the intentions of others. but I knew that I had to stop fooling myself and live according to the doctrine that mattered to me.

Eventually. I found my niche. adopting the role of the wayfarer. Not belonging to anyone or anything was lonely. but I was respected for who I was. I was happy
because I had the diversity of the acquaintances that I socialized with. The active
lifestyle that I adopted helped me cope with the alienation. Perhaps the busy way of life
was also keeping me away from the decision to approach others and initiate a friendship
with them? The speculations were short-lived because I forged ahead with my life
exactly the way it was. I was involved in clubs, part-time jobs, and scholastic
endeavours. I still feared my teachers and my environment, but I continued living as
though it was a beautiful spring day in the middle of winter. I took what I could and the
rest of the time I lived with the denial.

I was like the blackbird in Dante's chant (canto) thirteen of Purgatory that cried
when spring had arrived in winter and it no longer lived in fear. Unassumingly, the bird
did not know that it was against nature's patterns to have a warm day in winter and it
spitefully stated to God that it was no longer afraid.

So that I lifted up my impudent face, shrilling to God: "I fear Thee now
no more as doth the blackbird for a few fine days. Right on the brink of
death, and not before. I made my peace with God; nor could have won
me penance as yet for paying off my score". (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory.
chant (canto) XIII. v. 121 - 126. p. 169)

I thought that my secondary school years would have brought me a great deal of
happiness, but they were no different than my time spent in elementary education. My
teachers were diverse individuals with their own agenda. Some of them did not even
know their students or want the pleasure of knowing them unlike my elementary school
teachers who did involve themselves in my life. I longed for rapport, but there never
seemed to be the time to form a relationship with some teachers. Personally, I did not
think that they wanted to do so. Their style of teaching was similar because they each
stood by a podium and lectured from their notes. Needless to say I enjoyed all the
classes that deviated from the aforementioned teaching style. My favourite classes were Family Studies, Italian, and English.

Our Family Studies teacher was a pleasant woman, who would have rather taught sewing and cooking than teach the theoretical component of the course. When I was enrolled in her grade eleven class, we studied the child in society and in grade thirteen the focus expanded to include other members of society and the socialization process. It was that course that really inspired me to learn more about humanity and how I see myself fitting into the grand scheme of things. My English teachers were strange, but kind in their own way. It was their eccentricity that appealed to me. I believe it was my grade thirteen English teacher who made an impression upon me with his passion for existentialist writers and their novels. Finally, my Italian teacher was perhaps the most influential of them all. She treated her students with respect and made the language come alive. I was glad she accepted me into her class even though I was not in the appropriate grade to start taking a language course other than French.

It is really a twist of fate that led me to her course for I originally was not to be allowed in the school, let alone her class. When my family and I moved into the community, the only school that was relatively close to my home was the one I eventually attended; however, because of the growing population of the subdivisions growing north of Toronto, the school board created an imaginary boundary that would divide the number the students attending my school and an alternate. It just so happened that I was on the wrong side of town. I was to go to the very distant school approximately 25 minutes by car, which really meant 45 minutes by school bus. My parents and I protested but to no avail. If I were to attend the distant school, it meant
not being able to participate in extracurricular activities for the school bus left promptly
ten minutes after the last dismissal bell. This simply would not work for me. After
spending the last couple of years being actively engaged in school teams and clubs, I
could not turn my back on not becoming involved at the high school level. My parents
also frowned upon the lack of facilitation for students who did not belong to the area
according to some school board officials. when in reality my address indicated that I
was indeed a resident of the community that housed the high school I wanted to attend.

With some assistance from a good family friend, we were able to determine that
I could stay at my school if there was not a subject available to me that I wanted to take
at the other school. Well, the only subject the distant high school did not offer was
Italian. It offered many other languages for credits except my ethnic tongue. Making
that discovery consolidated my placement at the high school that would later come to
alter the course of my life.

It was not a secret to my teacher why I was in her class one year earlier than
expected. I was to enrol in her grade ten class despite the fact that I was in grade nine if
I wanted to stay. It did not matter to me that I did not know anyone in grade ten for I
did not know anyone in my grade either. I was just pleased that I could stay close by
and take part in activities that went beyond the academics.

My Italian teacher was young and enthusiastic. She was also a child of
immigrant parents and I developed an instant respect of her. She also endured stories of
hardship and recounted them with her students. She was proud of her heritage and it
was always demonstrated. My teacher brought in pictures, videos, and magnificently
illustrated books. She would dialogue with us in Italian and encourage us to respond to
her in the same manner. Bit by bit, the room was converted into a cultural phenomenon that we relished. There was a feeling of importance and pride that resurrected in my soul after years of feeling embarrassed by my Italian descent. She awoke me from a bad dream of oppression. Her strength is like Dante’s eagle in the dream he has in chant (canto) nine of Purgatory that lifts him up and carries him to the Gate of Purgatory.

I thought: perhaps this eagle strikes his prey always just here: his proud feet would think shame elsewhere to seize and carry it away. Then, in my dream, he wheeled awhile and came down like the lightning, terrible and fast, and caught me up into the sphere of flame, where he and I burned in one furnace-blast; the visionary fire so seared me through, it broke my sleep perforce, and the dream passed. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) IX, v. 25 – 33, p. 135)

I had been asleep in the garden of gross entanglements where the vegetation grows wild amidst some fragrantly sweet flowers.

Now I found myself in this New Kingdom. I saw a door and steps to enter this New World of acknowledgement. It was no longer shameful for me to be of Italian descent. My teacher positively glowed with pride whenever she recounted historical truths or interesting facts about an ancient country rich in artistic artefacts and cultural confidence. Eventually, I would come to feel that familiar and dignified delight that my teacher so pleasingly displayed. so much so that I made a decision to pursue my language studies beyond high school.

My teacher was instrumental in encouraging me to pursue my goal of teaching Italian to students just as she did. She knew that I had been considering the idea of possibly becoming a teacher so she aided me in obtaining my first teaching assignment. One day she announced that a family was seeking an Italian tutor for their son in order to facilitate his ability to communicate when they travelled to Italy the following
summer. She suggested that students who were interested apply for the position immediately and she would be willing to give a reference to the parents of the young lad. I wasted no time in calling and the job was confirmed shortly after her glowing report about me as a student. I was overcome with joy because after all that I had been through wanting to hide my identity as much as possible, it was liberating to be me. I no longer felt that I needed to alter the notion that I was indeed Canadian, but of Italian ancestry. She gave me, in a sense, the gift of hope. She helped open the door to potentiality unlike my art teacher who forever damned me to dance into the depths of dejection.
Chapter 18

The Boiling Pitch of Auspicious Art

The love or hate of a teacher stays forever in one’s heart. In as much as the gentleness shapes the student, so too does the malice. Belzecue, my grade thirteen teacher, shattered all that was promoted from Matilda seven years earlier. The callous manner in which she tried to present a realistic portrayal of an artist’s life was heart wrenching. She did not consider the critical evaluation of one’s talents or lack thereof as a life sentence, be it a good or bad one. She was the expert after all and her opinion mattered to many of her students.

It was especially difficult for me to dismiss her analysis since I naively still trusted teachers to have their students’ best interest at heart. It was preposterous to believe that this individual would boldly render her opinion after years of secondary school and the dream was within grasping distance. The terrible and unexpected condemnation silenced the artist’s journey and it would be years later as a teacher that the passion would be rekindled; however, the damage ensued would never allow the artist to freely separate herself from the inner critic regardless of the attempts made by others to introduce her again to the world of passion and creativity.

The numbness I felt was transcribed in the form of an unsent letter to Belzecue to inform her of the disappointment she produced by giving me her unfair verdict that condemned me to a life void of artistic endeavours. When Dante introduces his readers to Belzecue, the chief demon that is found in chant (canto) twenty-one of Hell. I somehow felt as though I knew the creature being described. I, too, experienced the
theme of violation except in my case it was from my teacher’s profiteering of the trust she was freely given.

    Dante places the evil spirit in what is known as the Boiling Pitch. The demons that are found there are said to resemble Florentine officials who were Dante’s enemies. Belzecue had found her home amongst the tyrants of Dante’s life because of false statements and aspirations that she imposed upon me.

    Out dashed the demons lurking under the ramp, each flourishing in his face a hideous hook: But he: “Hands off! Ere grappling iron or cramp...this checked them: and they cried: “Send Belzecue!” And one moved forward, snarling as he went: “What good does he imagine this will do?” (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XXI. v. 70-78, p. 203)

    My letter to Belzecue was inspired by my research and inquiry course when a doctoral thesis made its way around the classroom. In it, I saw a collection of creative approaches to healing and a letter writing activity was amongst them. I did not feel secure in my ability to relinquish some of the frustration I had kept deep in my heart for so many years, but I did not dismiss the letter exercise entirely.

    With each forceful pen stroke, I began to write the words that I had longed to say for years, but which would have fallen on deaf ears. At this moment it seemed like a natural thing to do; after all, she went on with her life, while I fought the rejection without a suitable cause. The letter flowed through my mind just like the tears that coursed my cheeks many years ago.

    The message was simple. I was in search of redemption for the wrong she subjected me to, but also for myself because I allowed her criticism to live in me to the point where I abandoned my own voice. She told me that I should not pursue a career in art because there was too much competition out there and that I did not have what it
took to make it. Her profound insensitivity in telling me such distressing news shortly after I had successfully assisted her in co-ordinating the amateur art show. "Focus on Art" was an incredible indignity. The art show took many hours of preparation and organization to exhibit her students' best works? In addition to facilitating the show. I had to contribute extra pieces because some students' works were "not suitable" for her abstract concept. The dose of reality she had given me was very difficult to digest. Even if there were an element of truth behind her opinion, her method of delivering such crushing news was unpleasant. During those few weeks of preparation. I had enthusiastically explored the option of seriously attending the Ontario College of Art.

On the day the class went to visit the Ontario College of Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario. I had picked up an application and submitted it shortly thereafter. During that time. Belzecue encouraged anyone who was interested to apply and. if we had difficulty selecting the artwork to include in our portfolios. she would have been more than pleased to help us out or so she said. I could not believe why she would not have told me sooner that I did not have what it took to be an accomplished artist. It was however. her lack of empathy towards me that affected me greatly. She was callous and abrupt in the manner in which she stated her facts and not her opinions about the matter. I wondered why she was so vehemently upset by the situation. Could it be that I triggered a bad memory for her. one whereby one of her teachers pulled her aside and gave her the same life-altering sentence? I wondered if that was one of the reasons why she had "resorted" to teaching art. When she had used the word "resorted" we knew that something was wrong with the picture. but we dared not question the authority figure.
As I recalled, Belzecue did not really teach art because she always hid from behind the aged wooden desk. There were times, however, when she did occasionally get up when one of her favourite students summoned her to ask for her judgement. I do not ever remember her teaching us any techniques that we could apply to our work. She gave us an assignment and we completed it independently. I have always regretted not knowing more about art or art history. Anything I know I have learned through my own experiences and books. She was supposed to be our guide, yet she chose to silence herself and her students. Belzecue had no right telling me what she did. I was foolish to succumb to my teacher's perceptions. I had faith in my teachers and so I did not question their wisdom. I was wrong to believe so wholeheartedly in her when I should have listened to my own inner voice. It was that experience that made me perceptive of the impressionable minds before me in my role as teacher. I would never do to them what she did to me.

Among the many subjects I teach, I still love art the best. When I prepare an art lesson it inspires me, but it also serves as a reminder for what could have been. Belzecue crushed my dream, but most of all my spirit. I hope one day I can find my way to take an art course or go back to a gallery and not feel so inadequate. I might not have been successful and perhaps I would have joined the ranks of other starving artists, but it was not for her to decide. As a teacher, she should have served as a guide of aspirations, not a crusher of dreams. I feel shame for having given her such importance, to the point of ignoring my own voice.

It took many years to reach the point where I recognized that I needed to heal from the inner critical voice that was enhanced by the memories that plagued me from
Belzecue. That journey began with my graduate studies under the direction of an influential professor who profoundly shaped my postgraduate studies and myself as an individual. She allowed her students to keep a journal and respond to the daily occurrences that affected our spirituality. From one fateful decision to enrol in her course I then made another decision to pursue this road towards recovery.

The course title *Creativity & Wellness: Learning to Thrive* captured my heart. I knew that my soul would rejoice in this course and so I took the plunge and decided to probe what my heart had been aching for all this time. The professor allowed her students to search for a meaningful muse to help us foster the creativity and wellness that seemed to be missing or at the very least hindered our lives. I felt like Statius in chant (*canto*) twenty-one of Purgatory who has just risen after 500 years to the next level of penance. The poet is elated by the turning point in his journey.

Thus I, who’ve languished in this torment dire five hundred years and more, felt only now the enfranchised will urge me to thresholds higher. (Sayers. 1955. *Purgatory*. chant (*canto*) XXI. v. 67 – 69. p. 236)

It was important for me to embark on a journey towards healing. I believed that I was always creative as a child and yet there was this one individual who felt that my artistic side was faulty. Her pragmatic and realistic comments did not consider who I was as an individual. She tried to separate the artist from the person. I saw myself as one. I had been taught to respect authority; the teacher’s voice led me to ignore my own voice. I believed that since she was a teacher she had to be right. My identity changed the day she took me aside and gave me a private lesson I would never forget.

Receiving the invitation to study in order to promote spiritual healing was a revelation for me. I was very excited to become reacquainted with my artistic side. It
certainly needed strengthening. The real dilemma was overcoming the critical inhibitions I had created for an in myself.

I was beginning to take comfort in meditative prayer. It was my hope that I could eventually overcome some of those debilitating feelings of worthlessness that were poignantly drawn to my attention at the end of my high school education. I wanted to attempt some artistic rendering just to feel alive again. I found solace in the fact that I was about to make a change for the better. It did not matter to me which vehicle I would use to reawaken the creative soul that lay dormant for so long. The course gave me the courage to look beyond the inner critic.

Just as Dante explores the importance of prayer in chant (canto) eleven of Purgatory, I too turned to the comfort of the spiritual word to prepare me for the humble journey of analyzing the stories of my life.

Our daily manna gives to us this day, without which he that through this desert wild toils most to speed goes backward on his way. As we, with all our debtors reconciled, forgive. do Thou forgive us, nor regard our merits. but upon our sins look mild, put not our strength, too easily ensnared and overcome, to proof with the old foe: but save us from him. for he tries it hard. This last prayer is not made for us – we know. Dear Lord, that it is needless – but for those who still remain behind us we pray so. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XI. v. 13 – 24. p. 150)

In the spirit of self-analysis, I knew that however painful or challenging the quest, I needed to be determined to make the effort to attain spiritual healing. I was ready to reacquaint myself with the exchange between my inner and outer selves. I was about to abandon my lost hope and sealed eyes like the sinners in chant (canto) thirteen of Purgatory who long to flee from the fear that hardens their hearts.

"Blest fire." said he. "in whom my feet confide entering on this new way untrodden quite, as we would fain be guided. do thou guide. 'Tis thou dost warm the earth and give it light; if reason good dissuade not. let us
still trust to thy beams to lead our steps aright”. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XIII. v. 16 – 21, p. 166)

Listening to everyone’s stories in the class inspired me to recount my own tales. Suddenly there appeared to be validity and importance in doing so. I used personal narratives to promote my own understanding of who I was and how interconnected we all are. It was an incredible revelation for me to determine how intertwined our lives really are.

The carefully selected course assignments were set before me and I was ready to immerse myself into the mercy of their will. I did feel as though my ailing creative soul was beginning to heal. As Dante finds reassurance in knowing that Beatrice would guide him out from the torment of Purgatory so I knew that it would be a matter of time before I began to feel better about who I was.

“Now, should my words thy hunger not remove. Beatrice shalt thou see, and she’Il speak plain, this and all cravings else to rid thee of.” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XV. v. 76 – 78, p. 183)

Creating an expression of a personal narrative is the validation of a human spirit. Writing about my soulful journey engaged me in a process of creative energy that I thought I had lost forever after my negative experience with my grade thirteen-art teacher.

Learning to live creatively as though it were the simple act of breathing was starting to enhance the quality of my life. Instead of living my days in a reign of terror, I felt that I could begin to take some necessary risks and experience a meaningful existence. Embracing a creative way of life be it through reading the Divine Comedy or writing journal entries, influenced my process of self-discovery.
The best part of the course experience was the opportunity I had to reacquaint myself with my intuitive side. I had lost touch with the inner voice that guided my creative existence. The road to remove all the barriers had been a laborious one, but I was attempting to dismantle the rigid foundations of fear and criticism. For too long, I was reacting to stimuli instead of learning about the world and myself. Rationally I knew that we all have the ability to be successful, but in order to achieve this I needed to let go of the negativity that inhabited my spirit.

Somewhere along the early part of my journey, I realized that I had the power to not be a victim. I decided I wanted to heal my creative spirit and play a more active role in the world. It was necessary to find the courage to proceed with a process that would lead to self-renewal. The spiritual healing would enable me to become better aware of the importance between the unity and connection of all living things and myself.

Dante expresses his satisfaction in chant (canto) thirty-three of Purgatory when he has left the forest and will now ascend into the heavenly Paradise with his beloved Beatrice. This sense of accomplishment is what I desired of my journey. I had to give myself permission to pursue the voyages into the hurtful, but also the joyful, with the aspiration of attaining some form of enlightenment. The same kind that Dante professes he attained when he drinks from the Eunoe River.

But since I’ve filled the pages set apart for this my second cantique, I’ll pursue no further, bridled by the curb of art. From those most holy waters, born anew I came, like trees by change of calendars renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through, pure and prepared to leap up to the stars. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 139 – 145. p. 335)
The creative experience gave me the chance to convert my tears into calmness. I was given an opportunity to look at my soul and teachings in a different light and determine why I was so exhausted. Life was following me instead of me following a life that I wanted for myself. I did not know how deeply affected I was by the reprimands and neglect. Somehow I knew that my youth was a sign of hope, but it quickly vanished after I left the institution for higher learning.

Choosing to survive the desertion and denial from a life in school, I immersed myself into university. I wanted to take the goodness I had come to appreciate through languages and sociology and trudge along so I could bury the burdens of my past. I was revelling in the anticipation of a new life. Hastening my desire towards enlightenment appeared to make things move slowly. My admission letter to university was an agonizing feat of patience. Yet when the ivory envelope arrived with the university logo on the left-hand corner, I forgot all about the nervousness that ruled my life for months. Instead my body quivered with delight because I was looking forward to the pursuit of knowledge that would give my life meaning. I was a frightened and weak soul who longed to be strong. In that moment of acceptance, I was among the spirits walking around the first circle of Purgatory reciting the Lord’s Prayer in humiliation for their sins of pride. I was very proud of myself and to some extent my arrogance and vanity of achievement gave me an addictive sense of power that I had never experienced before. Just like the sinners I would come to know the weight of that burden years later. I too would be sentenced to repent for the excessive pride I displayed because I would come to trade humility for narcissism.

“For pride like that we here must pay the fine; nor yet should I be here, but that contrition turned me to God while power to sin was mine. O
empty glory of man’s frail ambition. how soon its topmost boughs their green must yield: if no Dark Age succeed. what short fruition!” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XI. v. 88–93. p. 152)
Chapter 19

The Crooked Path Seemed Straight

My father’s words on the day I was accepted to attend university still ring in my ears. The bright sunny day of June 16, 1984 will forever be treasured because of his words: “La schiavitù e finita!” (“Slavery has ended!”). My father’s lack of education was like a life sentence that bound him to lead an existence of humiliation. He was not proud to be denied what my birth country has given its children as a right.

The frozen image of my father walking into the house with his dusty and soiled work clothes and a dented lunch pail to hear the news of his daughter’s admission to university is still vivid in my mind. The silent tear that flowed down his weather beaten face and his only statement at that moment was the most connected I have ever felt with my father. We embraced for a long time as though to secure that moment from ever leaving our hearts. The cruel and demanding life he led would be rectified through his daughter’s opportunities. His long journey across the Atlantic Ocean on a ship to a foreign land was worth the seasickness and indignities suffered as an immigrant.

The voice of knowledge and the pride of wisdom were mine to have and give back to my parents for their sacrifices made in an overseas country. My family and I were overjoyed. We leapt. cried. hugged. and kissed within the richness of the spring breeze that caressed the whirlwind in which we were caught up. The contentment was for the long overdue mercy my parents had prayed for. My father vowed to support me in any capacity. He would work two jobs to financially sustain my education if need be. In that moment he would reiterate the scar of his life when the death of his father at the transitional age of 13 would determine the painful course of his life. He continued by
confirming that he did not want his children to suffer in the same manner he did. My father wanted to shelter us from the struggles and hardships he had had to endure as a youngster during a tumultuous time in history when strokes of bad luck plagued his family. I would have done anything to erase the sorrow he carried in his heart, but all I could do was live my life through his eyes.

My eyes turned promptly toward him. for a strong desire possessed them (it’s the way I’m made) to see what’er new thing might come along. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory. chant (canto) X. v. 103 – 105. p. 146)

My father is a good man who taught me how to love. His actions speak louder than his words for he is a simple man who does not articulate in words as well as he demonstrates. I knew by his comment of “Slavery has ended” that his sorrow ran deep into his soul. He had never talked about the difficulties he encountered in the life he led because it was not his habit to burden others. I was almost relieved that for the first time I was aware of his hardships and how significant they were to him. Strangely, I felt empowered to be his hero. Pursuing post-secondary education meant I could rectify all the interrupted dreams he had.

My father did not care what I studied so long as I was happy and I wanted to continue learning. Learning was equated with dignity for him. That same evening many stories were told of how he felt not being able to pursue an education beyond elementary school. The richness of his voice and the powerful words that he enunciated enraptured me for I had never heard such meaningful talk from him before.

His stories came to life for me because of the emotionally charged memories that had disfigured him for years. I could see him running with his family towards the mountains near his two-bedroom house for shelter from the World War II airplane bombers. The family waited throughout the night until the bombing stopped and then
they walked back home to begin another day of uncertainty. I could almost taste the devastation when they had to soak stale bread in a water and wine broth to give it some flavour. I could feel the love of a family that shared one chicken amongst twelve people. It was as though I were sitting beside him and his brother when they had to do their homework using one pencil that required a knife blade to sharpen it. They would bicker over who had the pencil longer and it was time to give it up. But most of all, I internalized his defeat when his parents had to refuse the teacher's pleas to let him continue his education. I empathized with his parents being financially destitute and knowing that they made a life altering decision for him that they did not want to do. I cried with my father when he told me that extended family members robbed them of their livestock and grain overnight. No tribunal could ever determine their guilt because the witnesses would never attest to such news. The small mountainous townspeople kept secrets from the law enforcers, but gossiped about the truth. With nothing to sell, tuition would be impossible to afford especially since they had to mortgage their property to buy new livestock. My father had to join his brothers and sisters in cultivating the land and could not accept his teacher's offer of paying for his education until the family was back on its feet. I understood her compassion, my father's overwhelming sadness, and the gratitude he had for his teacher that believed in his potential. He praised her kindness and generosity when she came to the house after a rugged struggle up the mountain just to be turned down.

The stories of hardships and regrets just kept rolling off his tongue as though there were not enough time left for me to know my father's life. He wanted a better life for my brother and me and the acceptance letter to attend university represented just
that. Going to university took on an important meaning for me now. Not only did it fulfill my needs for learning, but it also could give my father the chance that he never had. He would come to take part in my learning process too. I would show him my lecture notes and study aloud for him to hear what I was learning. Furthermore, we would debate philosophical issues and sometimes review the books I had to read for my Italian language and literature courses.

The day of reckoning like no other was June 15, 1988 when I received my Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree. My father’s excitement began at 5:00 a.m. when he awoke the entire household to begin the preparations for the glorious day ahead of us. After the two hours it finally took to be ready, we now had to wait seven hours before the convocation ceremony began. That day will forever live in our hearts not only for the elation, but also for the gratification. As I walked towards the steps to receive my inauguration, I turned my eyes to the balcony and there was my father overcome with emotion. I saw him wiping the tears that streamed down his face. I waved and he threw me loving kisses from afar.

In that precious moment I realized that it was my parents’ faith in me that sustained the tribulations I encountered pursuing my degree. My parents were like the saintly images Dante portrays in chant (canto) thirty-two of Paradise who were destined to hold sacred places in the rose amphitheatre of Heaven. Among the revered characters of St. Bernard, Mary, and St. Lucy, there are also the souls of those who seek salvation based on their own merits but often based upon those of others. The parents of children who kept the faith so that they could seek redemption are also found in chant (canto) thirty-two. Dante’s images speak loudly to me because had it not been for my
parents’ belief in me. I might not have succeeded. Their extraordinary confidence in my abilities carried the weight of my burdens. Whenever I felt insecure about a paper or a presentation, they knew exactly what to say to make me feel better. They would set me on the right path whenever I deviated from it.

I really did not comprehend the magnitude of my decisions and how the learning environment was very challenging from my secondary school years. I just had the will to succeed but I did not fully appreciate the “universal” appeal and expectations that would be placed upon me. I loved to learn, but I did not understand the methodology or tactics used by the instructors to validate their work.

I remember my excitement the day I received the invitation to attend an undergraduate orientation session led by a notorious priest on campus. His direct words lingered in my mind when he encouraged us all to take whatever we felt passionate about in school for it would be a long haul before commencement. His argument was to select something that would maintain our motivation and interest long enough in order to graduate. He also encouraged us to not choose subjects just for the purpose of getting a job after leaving the university because most employers were interested in the skills and not courses of study. Armed with that reassurance, I set off to study what I felt connected with, but I would come to feel that too much weight was placed on the idealism and not the realistic aspects facing a student upon graduation. I met stumbling blocks because I had selected courses that were not “marketable” enough. Even in teaching, the number of students entering the Faculty of Education with a Bachelor of Arts degree was astonishing and I was among the masses who hoped to find their niche in teaching.
The twist in the road came just after a few short months of school. I could relate to the Justinian emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire during the 6th century in chant (canto) six of Paradise who for the most part lived his life performing good deeds, but at times felt tainted by the desire for worldly possessions and by ambition. I wanted to believe in the sacredness of learning, but I, too, was concerned with the desire for reward associated with my hard work.

Learning for the love of it began to take a secondary role to my idea of success and achievement. I dropped my language bound course of direction for Sociology because I thought that I had a greater scope of careers I could pursue upon graduation. I did not actually consider Sociology as being one of the more marketable subjects, but I did not see myself spending the next years taking the romance languages just to limit myself to translation. I was also not certain that I would want to teach languages.

The great triumph that I had hoped for did not arrive. I toiled to obtain my grade point average. It seemed that the more I applied myself the more devastating my results would be. I liked my subjects, but they did not agree with me. Every paper was another test of patience and endurance. My opinions seemed to lack consensus amongst the academics. Every effort made to validate my points of view was met with opposition during countless meetings with teaching assistants. It took me two years to figure out and accept the notion that I was there for them. They were not there for me. When I began to write as they expected, my grades began to reflect the transition from independence to conformity. I finally obtained respectable marks that would facilitate my admission to the Faculty of Education.
I was somewhat disillusioned with the majority of my classes, but I trudged along hoping to find someone inspiring and who knew that learning was a process and not a prescription for advancement. I did find those individuals in my third and fourth years of university. It felt like a new beginning. Even the landscape around the university seemed greener and more enchanting. Dante describes this feeling in chant (canto) two of Purgatory when he rediscovers the importance and beauty of creation. His journey forward now had a new meaning.

“Even so – God send I see that sight once more! – I saw a light come speeding o’er the sea, so swift, flight knows no simile therefor. For a brief space I turned inquiringly back to my guide, then looked again, and lo! Bigger and brighter far it seemed to me. Then, from each side of it, there seemed to grow a white I-knew-not-what; and there appeared another whiteness, bit by bit, below”. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) II. v. 16 – 24, p. 81)

The courses were interesting and so were the individuals who passionately believed in their work. Their poetry was like a ship setting sail on a journey across the sea, inviting all travellers to jump aboard. I was finally listening to melodic music instead of harsh rhythms. I longed to feel that passion for years. It was the main reason why I wanted to attend university in the first place. What a revelation to experience the potential of a rising song just as Dante further describes in the chant (canto) when he is reunited with Casella a musician who set some of Dante’s poetry to music.

“Love in my mind his conversation making.” Thus he began, so sweetly that I find within me still the dulcet echoes waking. My master and I and all that spirit-kind that came to him, hung on those notes of his entranced, as bearing nothing else in mind”. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) II. v. 112 – 117. p. 84)

The mundane music had ended and I was beginning to hear the music that existed in the human soul. Going to school became inspirational because I felt connected with the professors. I recall the influential course The Sociology of
Education led by a newly appointed instructor. He introduced us to Leo Buscaglia’s book entitled Living, Loving and Learning. It was more than a book for me: it was a doctrine to live by. The author created a collection of reflective thoughts and speeches that he had given on the seminar circuit where he spoke to millions including myself. I was grateful for the introduction to such a poignant paperback that reminds its readers of how wonderful life is and that it should be embraced even in the face of adversity.

The author further outlines the issues of change, the joy of living, and the importance of learning to trust humanity. We discussed the book for several weeks and after that the large seminar class that resembled a theatre suddenly became an intimate environment where respect for others and oneself abounded. Our professor was responsible for our introduction to such powerful philosophies and engaging words.

“Down, down!” he cried. “Fold hands and bow thy knees: behold the angel of the Lord! Henceforth thou shalt see many of these great emissaries. See how he scorns all instruments of earth, needing no oar: no sail but his own wings. ‘twixt shores that span so vast an ocean’s girth. See how each soaring pinion heavenward springs, beating the air with pens imperishable that are not mewed like mortal coverings”.
(Sayers, 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) II. v. 28 – 36. p. 82)
Chapter 20

Mercy Rising

The song of fortune continued throughout the two years to include a wonderful teacher who invited his students to scrutinize life on the micro and macro levels. His passion for urban sociology and its affect on society was a life-altering experience for me. An unassuming man with dark rimmed glasses and a fashion sense resembling the 1960's, he held a modern view of how society should structure itself in an efficient manner.

The professor spoke honestly and passionately. Every theory was substantiated with facts and opinions that made sense. He did not create panic, but he did instil concern in his students for our global village. He would speak of responsibility for environmental and urban concerns that were already causing havoc on our lives of which most people were not even aware.

When truth looks like a lie, a man's to blame not to sit still. If he can, and hold his tongue, or he'll only cover his innocent head with shame. But here I can't be silent; and by the song of this my comedy, reader, hear me swear. So may my work find favour and live long. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XVI. v. 124 – 129. p. 171)

His classes were very meaningful for me. I began to delve beyond the readings to learn more about the negativity associated with urban sprawl and life when it hit me. I worked with environmental hazards and it never dawned on me until that moment the danger I was exposing myself.

Working in a dental office, I was exposed to the radiation that was given in measured quantities to patients requiring x-rays. After eagerly obtaining my certification, I began taking radiographs as part of my daily duties. It concerned me that
I did not have my own radiation badge to wear in order to monitor the monthly intake of the substance. Two people shared one badge but my employer always convinced me that if a negative statement were sent to the office with an alarming rate for radiation poisoning, then the appropriate action would be implemented. I was very naïve to believe that nothing could go wrong. It was in the course that I came to realize that there was so much that was unknown about the long-term effects of a harmful substance.

The situation was further complicated by the use of silver amalgams. I worked in the dental practice during the time when the mercury was directly mixed with the amalgam to form a paste like matter. To complicate matters further, surgical gloves were only worn during oral surgery. I think back now and I shudder in disbelief that such unsafe practices were allowed. My professor was supportive in permitting me the chance to explore the dental office as a hazardous place in our urban environment. He liked the unconventional theme and let me feel like an eagle with expanded wings soaring through the sky with a mighty force. I took the research project personally and produced a meaningful document that assisted me to change my ways. Not only did I improve my handling of hazardous material, but also I promoted the need to change silver fillings to resin ones among my family and friends. My fellow classmates took my proposal seriously with a few of them coming back to me showing the changes they had made.

My professor had this extraordinary gift of teaching that I was able to identify with. He genuinely cared about his discipline and the message that was to be shared amongst all people.
It cannot be that any nature, found at odds with its environment, should survive: no seed does well in uncongenial ground. If men on earth would bear in mind, and strive to build on the foundation laid by nature, they'd have fine folk, with virtues all alive. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) VIII. v. 139 - 144. 119)

His message resembled that of Charles Martel in who was Dante's friend in chant (canto) eight Paradise.

Charles' family was heavily involved in politics since they governed Naples. Hungary, and the county of Provence. Charles had been crowned King of Hungary shortly thereafter he contracted cholera, dying at a young age. Like Dante he experienced disappointments and that was their link in the chant (canto). Charles provided the narrative voice between Dante in Florence and Dante in Paradise for the readers to help them understand the extent of the sorrow these two men felt in wanting to surrender themselves to a life of love, but having it cut off from early on in their lives. In a symbolic sense Charles represents humanity surrendering to earthly temptations, but at the same time repenting for any misdemeanour.

"Having rejoiced me, teach me: for in sad earnest thy words have set me wondering how from sweet seed sour harvest can be had. Thus I to him: and he to me: "I'll bring. canst thou but learn one truth. this crux before thine eyes: thou hast thy back turned to the thing." (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) VIII. v. 91 – 96. p. 117)

My professor never preached but he cleverly gave us the opportunity for enlightened insight about matters that affected everyone on a large and small scale. His care, compassion, and dedication to the learning process and the subject matter influenced me as a person. I wanted to be like him as a teacher and I was more than ever determined to do my best to have a spot reserved for me in my teacher-training program. He motivated me to look at the world as a precious jewel. I did not grow up with the "reduce. reuse. recycle" motto, but he influenced us to change our bad habits of
environmental consumption. During the seventies there was a growing trend to make life expedient at whatever cost. It carried through the eighties for a significant amount of time too. I was a child when the media hype launch of the Big Mac from McDonald's was being packaged in new Styrofoam containers that appeared on the market.

That last year of university was instrumental in affecting who I wanted to become. The books, human knowledge, and passionate spirit were gifts my teacher gave to me. I do not recollect individual lessons, but I do remember the farewell class whereby we were encouraged to breathe our compassionate souls into the air. His will and message still sustains me to this day.

The closest I ever came to becoming better acquainted with our environment and respecting nature for its strength and beauty was when I was a grade seven student. It was during a camping trip to Albion Hills Conservation Area that I first felt connected to nature. My science teacher was a "hippie" (or so he looked). He was the "coolest" teacher in the school for he wore his suede jacket with long fringes everywhere even during the warm spring months. His long unkempt hair flowed loosely when he walked swiftly in the hallway. His classroom had an old bird's nest perched on a suspended tree branch that hung from the ceiling. Native art adorned the walls and snakeskins were placed strategically around the classroom tables to capture our interest. I do not remember seeing standardized textbooks in the room. There were many books, but they were from my teacher's private collection. He had the most fascinating picture books with bright photographs and little print. He also had an amazing photo album that held artefacts from his adventures around the world. He travelled extensively to exotic
destinations. I would look forward to his classes just so I could hear one of his adventure stories about Costa Rica or his African Safari. He was a wild man to me. I had never known anyone like him and his liberated spirit intrigued me. He talked passionately about his studies and commitment to taking care of nature. He knew how much we wanted to experience the uninhabited terrain and so a trip to the conservation area was arranged. It paled in comparison to his voyages to the mysterious lands, but to me it felt as though I was a million miles away from home surviving in the wild.

Most parents appeared concerned during the orientation night that he held requesting what to bring and what not to bring on the trip. Our mouths dropped when he emphatically stated that no food was allowed on the trip because we were going to survive off of nature. Reluctantly the parents agreed to send their children off with this strange man and obliged his requests. I was somewhat hesitant about eating berries and crab apples. I wanted to be a free spirit, but I was not sure I had the courage to see this adventure all the way through.

The day of reckoning arrived and a cloud of nervousness filled the classroom as we awaited our coach to whisk us off to become a resilient adolescent. With camping gear and backpacks on our backs we headed for the escapade of a lifetime. I felt secure with my novel and flashlight. It was a rebellious act to have brought illumination when we were not permitted to do so, but I just could not abide by that rule. How would I ever see my way to the facilities in the dark? What if a creature came to our tent? The fear was becoming pronounced so I decided to break the rule and hide my torch in an inconspicuous spot among my things.
The long trip was exhausting and all of us were famished when we arrived. Our teacher instructed us to pitch our tents before dusk and as soon as we were done we could scour around for our food. The bright autumn colours and the glorious Indian Summer day were not enough to appease my mind for I knew at that moment that the trip was going to be a very long one. With positive attitudes and determination we set up camp in a relatively short period of time. All was well until our scavenger hunt began for food. With limited choices and uncertainty about eating many bitter tasting crab apples, we all complained endlessly to our teacher. Surely he must have realized that the city dwellers would not have fared well in nature?

The teacher was disappointed, but not shocked by our responses two hours into the trip so he relented and headed to town with his car to shop for food. Luckily, he was told by the principal to bring his car.

Off to town he went and returned with two big brown shopping bags filled with canned food and bread. He also had an aluminium pot resting on top of the food. This was looking interesting as we gathered around the fire pit. Cans of spaghetti were opened and plopped forcefully into the pot which was held with a branch over the flames. Our mouths salivated voraciously as can after can was poured in and stirred.

It must have been the excitement of the rough plays during the football game some students were playing or the heaviness of the pot, but in a brief moment our mouths hung with disbelief. Our worse fears were realized when the pot fell into the smouldering fire pit of ashes. The teacher scrambled to salvage as much of the food as possible but it was not going to be a culinary delight that evening. If we were hungry we were going to eat the spaghetti and that was his final statement.
My stomach could not fathom the idea of eating something that looked so wretched. Furthermore, the crab apple I had eaten previously was not sitting well in my stomach so I decided to pass on the offer of eating “pasta à la ashes”. The evening came upon us quickly and it brought with us songs under the moonlight. That too came to an abrupt end when the drops of rain began to fall at first softly and then angrily over our campsite.

The day was called to an end and we were instructed to head for our tents and not to come out before dawn. His request was short lived since most of the girls were already congregating towards the outhouses. I was amongst them and soon my popularity soared when my toilet paper roll surfaced among the group of girls. I will never forget their look of desperation when the realization set in that toilet paper was one of the few luxuries we were permitted to bring and they had forgotten theirs. For the first time I felt accepted by the girls and not just for the toilet paper, but also for looking out for one another. We held the door shut and watched for lurking boys ready to pull a prank on us. That feeling of camaraderie became the priceless gift I took with me from that trip. It consolidated our friendship for the next year too. With the rain continuing to pour down on our faces and the ground becoming muddy, we slipped and screamed our way towards the campsite and quickly made our way inside the tents, everyone except me. The teacher awaited my return but he was not alone. He was standing with the new student from the Philippines who was shivering from standing in the rain.

My teacher requested that I take in our new student since I spoke Italian and no one else did. My face must have been very transparent because the teacher answered
my thoughts before I had the opportunity to express my confusion. Clearly he must have known that the two countries were miles apart and not even part of the same continent! He proceeded to justify his decision by stating that she understood Spanish and it was relatively close to Italian therefore, we would be a perfect match. He opened the tent, threw in her knapsack, followed by her sleeping bag, and bid us farewell. My simple “Hi!” and her nod of disbelief made us friends for the entire three days.

I did not know what to say or how to say it, but I could not stand the silence any longer. Playing charades was also getting frustrating, so I hunted through my knapsack for a deck of cards. Surely, she could play cards? I was not too worried after all numbers were international symbols. As I rummaged around I felt several plastic bags that were twist tied. When I turned on my flashlight to see what occupied my bag, to my delight I saw two scrumptious buns, chocolate chip cookies, soft drink cans, and a bag of fruit.

There was no language barrier in the tent that evening. My new friend and I giggled and savagely tore bite after bite into our sandwiches. After several mouthfuls, we did play cards. She taught me a game and I taught her a game. What a grand time we had that evening. We had to remember to whisper so our teacher would not suspect the party we were having. That of course produced further outbursts of giggles. Eventually we fell asleep with cards in hand and wrappings around our sleeping bags. Our first night was surely a memorable one that would forever live in our hearts.

The next morning we tried to disguise the evidence of our satiation. Everyone tore into the cereal bars and fruit, but my friend and I waited patiently for the food to come around. I am often reminded of what my life would be like without my mom.
She had the foresight that something might have gone wrong and did not want me to go hungry. She always had that vision of experience and as much as I protested against it at times. that evening I was pleased she was insightful and strong-willed.

The camp activities were educational and tested the limits of our characters. Our teacher wanted his students to be independent and resilient so every task held those objectives. Starting with the shooting exercises at the rifle range. which was not my idea of building strength. The .22 calibre rifles appeared intrusive and frightening. We were instructed by the operators of the range to hit the target with accuracy. Some of us could not even prop the weapon under our arms to take aim. The forceful blow sent my shoulder back as the first shot was fired. It was not a pleasant experience for me since I had never been exposed to guns before. I also felt that the teacher’s judgement was poor for many students glorified the experience of shooting at the target and hoping it would have been a living creature as opposed to a piece of paper with circles around it. The teacher’s objective teaching his students how settlers used the tool as a means of survival and hunting was lost on the majority of children who felt powerful with the rifle. It was the activity that received the most praise. but not for its original intent as selected by my science teacher.

The archery and orientation activities were more to my liking although I could have also done without both. The teacher trusted his students immensely to use authentic materials without realizing that young students let their emotions run rampant over their sense of logic. My teacher realized that when one student was pierced because his friend wanted to see if “it really worked.” Finally, being lost in the woods
with a compass and three frantic classmates was too much for me and I longed for the yellow school bus to take me back home.

Surviving the three days away from home and making the small sacrifices did indeed build the character my teacher hoped we would experience upon our return to school. Aside from learning to tough it out, many of us became kindred with the beauty of nature that surrounded us. Looking at the fluffy clouds over the horizon during our nature trail walks inspired me. They looked like animated figures acting out in a film. The fields and valleys were like embellished gardens that beckoned our company. The hills held our laughter and games. The trees stood at attention like messengers waiting to be summoned to deliver the news in distant lands. I loved the earthy life I was able to live with those few days. I felt the need to raise my wings and fly off into the heart of the breeze that cradled my body. This welcoming feeling emerged from my heart and mind. I could hear nature pleading for me to stay and enjoy its rapture, but I had to take the colourfulness and memories with me back to existence I knew as my life.

I can now recall that experience to be like the one that Dante endured as he entered the Sacred Wood in chant (canto) twenty-eight of Purgatory. He comes to a brook where a woman is singing and gathering flowers. She is there to answer his questions of Paradise. He is overwhelmed by the image of natural perfection and needs to prepare himself for the ultimate moment when he is faced with the Divine.

I said: "The water, and the forest stirred to music, seem to contradict what I had come to think, from what I lately heard." She therefore: "I will tell the reason why these things are so, which cause perplexities, and thus I'll make the offending mists to fly. The most high Good that His sole self doth please, making man good, and for good, set him in this place as earnest of eternal peace." (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXVIII. v. 85 – 93, p. 291)
That overnight trip was my first attempt to travel back to a home of heavenly delights. Being surrounded by nature gave me a feeling of overwhelming happiness. My teacher did have the insight to have the children return to a natural state of being and I praised him for giving us the opportunity to bask in the loveliness that I had not had the privilege of knowing until that moment in time.
Chapter 21

The Spring Equinox

After my undergraduate studies commencement, I embarked on the one of the most important missions of my life and that was to become a teacher. For my father it was my admission to university that gave him a sense of elation, but for me it was the realization that I would be able to improve the educational system by becoming a teacher. Becoming a teacher meant that I would be invincible. Students would not need to learn in oppressive situations and, therefore, they would come to embrace the power of knowledge as a life altering gift and privilege. I would be able to facilitate their learning unlike many of my teachers who did not understand the impact of their being upon their students.

My philosophy of education was essentially what I lived by as a human being. I wanted to assume responsibility for enhancing their quality of life in a complex world with uncertain prospects. I believed that teachers were instrumental in effecting change and overall school improvement and I wanted to be that very professional. It was my goal to be the caring individual who would promote students’ personal growth and survival in a world grappling with genetic engineering, environmental concerns, and new-life threatening diseases for which pre-existing medications might or might not be helpful. It was important for me to know that students would have the opportunity to learn the values that would help guide them through the difficult choices that they would some day need to make.

Furthermore, I decided that I would provide them with joyous ongoing experiences whereby they could develop their imaginations. I yearned to be part of a
profession that is supposed to foster a student’s sense of awareness, tolerance, and respect for individual differences. I wanted to believe that I could provide an environment where students felt secure and liked because after all, I had experienced the opposite and I knew what not to do. This was a tall order for any individual, but I was ready for the challenge. My arrogance and commitment to affect change would become my demise, but on that serene sunny day in mid springtime, when I received the large brown envelope securing my placement at the Faculty of Education, reality did not seem to matter.

September came quickly like the whirlwind of a torrential tornado. My enthusiasm was apparent to everyone, and like a schoolgirl who excitedly buys new supplies at the store, I too looked forward to the placards advertising that a new academic school year was not far off in the future. Walking to my new home was a realization of my hard work over the years preparing for the life of a teacher. My countless summers teaching camp programs, tutoring students, teaching E.S.L and Heritage Language classes significantly facilitated my admission to the program and I was proud of my devotion to something that I believed was my calling in life. Making my way to my first class and the anticipation of what the year would bring me created a stirring feeling in the pit of my stomach. The creaking hardwood flooring strips and the musty smell of an antiquated building surprisingly felt like a cozy environment to me. Antique white walls with rust stains streaming from exposed pipes surrounded me as I sat nervously in my Primary/Junior option two classroom. One by one as the students began to assemble themselves in our new home, I scrutinized their appearance and motives for being here. Did we all share something in common? Were we going to
become life long friends because of the special connection that brought us together? A few pleasantries were exchanged with the people who sat close by and nervously we waited for the professor who would help us become the best teachers ever.

Within that heaven which most receives His light was I, and saw such things as man nor knows nor skills to tell. returning from that height: for when our intellect is drawing close to its desire, its path are so profound that memory cannot follow where it goes. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) I. v. 4 – 9. p. 53)

I was like Dante in the Garden of Eden who had just quenched his insatiable thirst from the river of Good Remembrance back in Purgatory.

"Look. flowing yonder. there is Eunoe: conduct him there. and in it. as thy use is. restore his fainting powers’ vitality. With that good breeding which makes no excuses. but to another’s will adapts its own at the first sign of what that other chooses. that beauteous lady took my hand anon. saying in tones of womanly sweet grace to Statius. “Come with him”: and so led on." (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 127 – 135. p. 334-335)

I was hoping that my new surroundings and vocation to become a teacher would abolish any memory of former faults and injustices that I had experienced. The reality of being encircled by thirty students and a knowledgeable teacher foolishly gave me that false sense of security I had been longing for my entire life as a student. Somehow I felt connected with our commonality. I chose to understand the realities that lay beyond the four walls that embraced only the ideal. Like a poet who invents his/her own verses of reality. I too chose to embellish the fiction as a means of escaping the real search for my identity.

I felt welcomed in this sanctuary of higher learning. I would be instructed and. therefore. cleansed into being the teacher I thought would enable the truth to prevail. which was a necessity for a life of contemplation. How I loved the brilliance of that
brief moment in my life! After all, one year is but a droplet of rain in the storm I had come to believe was my existence.

That year at the Faculty of Education was like the sun that Dante turned to when he finally arrived in Paradise. Every sphere he encountered was a turning point for him that would lead him closer to enlightenment, which was God in the palm of the celestial rose. Every class I went to and every professor who provided another framework for my unfolding story was like the spring equinox for me. A perfect season! Just as the sun was in the same constellation at the time of Creation, I too believed that everything was in accordance with my mission to become the perfect teacher. My environment, classmates, professors, lessons, student-teacher placements, all had a special meaning for me and nothing was going to deter the beginning of a new stage in my journey. Finally God’s grace was shining on me and I no longer feared being the submissive student that longed for shelter from the perils of school.

I felt secure and liked in my new surroundings. My classrooms were the exploration grounds that helped me grow into the educator I longed to have had. Every new lesson or project would give me one more strategy that I could implement in my own classroom. I did not spend time thinking about my own personal awareness. I was exploring uncharted terrain without having attained the knowledge of the true desire for my longing. It was a superficial voyage through the heavenly delight of pre-service teaching. My soul was in a state of betrayal, but I did not know it at the time. It would not take too long for me to determine that my optimistic beginning was about to withstand a deep coercive plight into the vastness of dejection. I was not prepared to face the awesome task before me in a grade six portable classroom with 29 students.
My light-mind, filled with idealist notions professed by individuals too far removed from the forum of reality, had indeed provided me with the irreversible contract-binding statements that I believed were true. Like Dante who was fed the bread of angels. I, too, conceded to the reality that attaining knowledge was sufficient enough to welcome impressionable students into the parlour of perception.

"But you rare souls, that have reached up to seize betimes the bread of angels, food for men to live on here, whereof no surfeit is, you may commit your bark unto the main, hard on my keel, where ridge and furrow file ere the next waters level out again. The heroes that to Colchis fared might see. amazed. great Jason at the plough-tail ply. but greater far shall your amazement be". (Sayers, 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) II. v. 10 – 18. p. 63)

I suddenly felt overwhelmed as I stood before the peering eyes of children anticipating my first words that would create the discernment I would later have to work hard to sway. I knew at that very moment I was not prepared for the tumultuous voyage ahead of me. Another year at the Faculty of Education would not have sufficed to prepare for the meaning of what the role of a teacher really is. The pre-service work I completed imparted the knowledge curriculum and programming that would expedite the delivery of information necessary to cover the components of the curriculum. Our time was not spent on defining who we were as teachers and/or individuals. I do not know why it resonated with me at that particular moment, but suddenly I felt that the curriculum strategies that were skillfully taught to us were no longer important. I needed something else. something indescribable. to get me through this moment of truth.

Overcome with responsibility and the formidable task of imparting the love of learning. I took a deep breath and introduced myself to the class. The work for the day rested on my desk in neatly arranged piles. for what I was about to do would be more
important than any carefully compiled lesson that targeted all learning styles. The students were as eager to know me as was I to know them. They wanted to settle into their new environment as the knapsacks overflowed with pristine binders free of graffiti and decals, unsharpened pencils, pens of every colour, and sheets of three-holed paper. I felt like a pioneer setting camp in a rural area unknowingly surrounded by danger or by the beauty of the land. My course of challenges lay before me like an intricate patchwork of mosaic tiles and I needed to let go of the notion that I was prepared for the adventure, but the truth was I would never come to feel ready as a teacher.

As I journeyed through the pages of Dante’s poem, I stopped at the third chant (canto) of Paradise where the souls found in the stark white atmosphere created by the moon are there for their the changeable vows they made on earth. Dante introduces his readers to Piccarda dei Donati who, as a young woman, entered a life of celibacy as a nun, but whose brother later on made her break her vow to God in order to marry a man with whom he was seeking political alliance.

On earth I was a nun: my present need of greater beauty should not cloud thy view: if though but search they memory with good heed. Surely my name will come to thee anew - Piccarda that with all this blessed host jointed in the slowest sphere am blessed too. The sole good-pleasure of the Holy Ghost kindles our hearts, which joyously espouse, informed by Him, whatever delights Him most. This lot, which seems but a lowly house, is given to use because we did withal neglect and partly disavow our vows. (Sayers, 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) III. v. 46–57, p. 74)

Piccarda gave up her reality because of the pressures she faced from others and did not remain steadfast to her own will. In many ways I identified with this young woman because I, too, had lost my mission statement. I did not let the passion rule my decisions or interests; instead I prescribed to a formulaic methodology that I thought would make me a better teacher. I did it for my professors and for my future students. I
was influenced by the pressures placed upon new teachers to understand all the pertinent components of the educational system and how to impart knowledge to their students. I believed that the more I knew, the better teacher I would become. I subscribed to professional literature, looked for curriculum documents and corresponding activities to make the learning significant, but never questioned my role as a teacher and what it meant to stand before the students and form a relationship with them. I broke my vow to be the teacher I did not ever want to be. I did not want a depersonalized image of a teacher who was armed with the latest trends or philosophical perspectives on education. I wanted a loving and caring individual who would make school a fun place to be and learning an intrinsic and inconspicuous part of our day. And so this is how I began my first day of teaching September 5, 1989.

I let go of all that I was taught and survived by using my intuition. The monsters that haunted me were staring directly at me, positioned upright with folded arms on desktops waiting for my future failings. As the stark images changed into the innocently curious eyes of the children who waited for my opening statement, I knew that my search for validity was just beginning. My teaching career was the beginning of an opportunity to explore my imagination, uniqueness and story. I was a learner just as much as my students were. My first lesson was the realization that I had a choice to not be that someone I had always feared in school.
Chapter 22
Sins of the Wolf

Butterflies danced nervously in my stomach as the early morning hours passed quickly. After the long and uneventful drive to work, I was relieved to be among the first few teachers to arrive early. Being able to put the last minute touches on my grade six portable classroom was of the utmost importance: after all, this was the initiating experience of many years of teaching that lay ahead of me. I wanted everything to be perfect for my class.

Every neatly arranged desk in five groups received tokens of a new scholastic year. All the students were given a pencil, an eraser, a ruler, and a pen. Notebooks were also given, but they had to supply their own paper. "The days when we supplied children with many of the finer school supplies are gone," my administrator told me as I questioned the limited choices I could give to the class. Piles of textbooks awaited their distribution, but for now they sat idly on a long table. Every check was made to ensure that a smooth day lay ahead of us. There seemed to be something missing, however. something intangible that I could not pinpoint until the bell rang and the moment of truth undeniably arrived. There were no good wishes from my colleagues or administrators. The rookie teacher would face the momentous occasion alone, as though this would be a precursor for experiences to come.

The isolation I experienced in that drawn out moment when the realization of being alone set into my mind will forever be the memory I recall on my first day of teaching. The bright smiles and curious eyes quickly dissipated the uncomfortable feeling that haunted my heart. I welcomed the class with open arms and invited them to
feel that our classroom was their second home. Their bewildered expressions signalled something inside of me indicating that perhaps the students were not accustomed to this introductory speech. The extroverts quickly raised their hands to ask when they would be able to put away their school supplies and knapsacks. They were not interested in tending to administrative matters and the teacher’s babble. As far as they were concerned this was another year and they were familiar with the routine, so why prolong the inevitable. They knew it was about meaningless work and that they would look forward to gym. art. recess. and field trips. in that order. The class representatives asked the pertinent questions.

My philosophical approach died a sudden death! The cynicism that inherently belonged to the students was a powerful force of which I was ignorant. How could children so young and impressionable already have such negative attitudes? Standing in front of the class with the awe-inspiring power of respect being transmitted from the students to me was the vision I had believed I would experience. Writing the date and lessons in meticulously neat cursive writing, walking around each desk, and standing from afar observing the well-behaved class working diligently on the activities prepared during countless after school hours. resuscitated a rush of inspiration in me. Experiencing the sense of purpose that I could effect change in the lives of the young people before me was my mission. Filled with optimism, vigour, and enthusiasm. I wanted my students to learn wonderful things and experience a love for learning. I wanted to be that special individual who would make them all love coming to school if they did not already. Regaining my composure. I forged ahead with the plans of the
day, ignoring the negativity that resonated throughout many of the students. After all, once they would experience my lessons, they would have a change of heart.

I was a fraud in the making. Consolidating my role as a betrayer was an unconscious act. In my heart, I believed that being a teacher was a simple role to adopt if you simply showed the students how much you cared for them. It did not take long for me to realize that that was the first step. There were many years of baggage I had to acknowledge. I was also alone in a system that was much stronger than my will to do what is morally right. My ideal world experienced a thunderous bolt of lightning as it collided with reality. That time in my life was reminiscent of Dante’s eighth circle of Hell, which contains trenches holding the fraudulent who await their punishment.

As one may see the girding fosses deep dug to defend a stronghold from the foe, trench within trench about the castle-keep, such was the image here; and as men throw their bridges outward from the fortress-wall, crossing each moat to the far bank, just so. (Sayers, 1949. Hell, chant (canto) XVIII. v. 10 – 15. p. 181)

As the words from the poem was carefully read to understand their meaning, I could not help but experience the feelings of inadequacy that were prominent in my first teaching practices. Brought back in time I became the ‘Wolf’ that frightened Dante and his guide into the enchanted forest. Inadvertently, I was an impostor too, for if I were truly connected with my experiences I would have known what the children were saying. My superficiality was like the grossness and vile language that Dante expresses in his chant (canto). Seducers and other ministers of deceit also make this trench their final resting-place. Embodied in my own appetite for the ideal, the students were exposed to my exploitation of passion. The wolf’s sin was to entice the travellers into the unknown and, like the animal, I invited my students to experience something that
was not theirs to behold. I was being self-serving by driving myself towards personal
betterment under the guise of doing it for my students.

And there the young Hypsipyle received tokens and the fair false words,
till, snared and shaken, she who deceived her fellows was deceived: and
there he left her, childling and forsaken: for those deceits he's sentenced
to these woes. and for Medea too revenge is taken. And with him every
like deceiver goes. Suffice thee so much knowledge of this ditch and
those whom its devouring jaws enclose. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant
(canto) XVIII. v. 91 - 99. p. 183)

As much as I loved students and teaching, it suddenly hit me, before the wide-
eyed children that I had adopted a role that I hoped would rectify the hidden pains I
endured as an impressionable student many years before my momentous acting debut in
the theatre of education. After all, I kept repeating how teaching would be an
experience in changing the wrongful past. I decided at that moment to listen to my
heart and began to share a little of myself with the class. I was not going to continue the
rest of my teaching life harbouring the sentiments of desires and fears that would only
lead to further corruption. In a brief moment of reflection I decided to communicate
with students using my mind and my heart.

Stories of the students' summer vacations, favourite things, their families, and
desires for the future filled the period just before recess. The free-flowing discussion
brought out smiles and chuckles throughout the room. Even their interest in me as a
human being inspired a love of learning that could not be found in any textbook.
Throwing caution to the wind saved my soul.

Listening to my students with all my senses was the beginning of a lasting
relationship between us. Letting go of the constricting barriers of proper protocol and
trusting my inner voice was the final chasm of faith and belief I had to cross among the
filth and vile of torment that plagued my saddened childhood heart.
That year I was a traveller into a voyage of uncertainty. Ironically, each subsequent year, my journey in education seemed to grow more complex. There would be new challenges and triumphs that would require some kind of analysis. As Dante finds himself at the foot of Mount Purgatory before a steep incline, so I too felt the weight of the predicaments I immersed myself in just by being a teacher. Each day that passed was an achievement in survival as my vice-principal confirmed. He encouraged his staff by targeting specific dates on the calendar. His therapeutic approach was confined to six week periods starting with Labour Day to Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving to Christmas, Christmas to March Break, March Break to Easter, Easter to Victoria Day, and finally Victoria Day until the end of June. It was a system that worked well for him and he shared his professional development secret with me who was seeking refuge from the harsh realities of the teaching world.

Excommunicated from the doctrine many teachers subscribed to, my ultimate fate rested on the moment of my soul’s death. Puzzled by my new landscape of hypocrisy, denial, disrespect, and cultural adversity, the heavens had now disappeared for me. Like a vacuum I was sucked into the air pocket that twirls the debris around depositing it into its ultimate resting spot among the layers of refuse. The staff room was a gathering place of complaints, the office was a separate entity, and the classrooms were self-contained units of survival. The long corridors and white concrete blocked walls elicited a negative feeling that could not be ignored. With each sarcastic and prejudicial comment, I further distanced myself from what I had come to view as the norm. I felt that I did not belong in this place and I wanted out. After several months I began to believe that perhaps it was my perspective that created the inner tension I was
experiencing so I decided to further my education. after all this many people could not be wrong, or could they? I persisted in wanting to discover more about this disheartening milieu that I had engrossed myself in. Perhaps if I studied current trends in education. I would know how to create the perfect environment for my students and me. The violent storm would end just as soon as the tides would make their way to the shore.

I sought refuge in the notion that learning more would eliminate the feelings of inadequacy I experienced in my new cultural setting. I was like Dante’s Sordello, a poet from Mantua, who became famous for his critical portrayal of Italy’s fraudulent and inept government.

That noble soul was swift: he did not fail, for the sweet name. his city’s name- no more – to bid his fellow countrymen all hail. But in they borders is no rest from war for living men: those whom one moat doth bound, one wall, destroy each other and devour. Search, wretched! Search thy seas and coasts around: then search thy bosom: see if thou canst hit on any nook where pleasant peace is found. (Sayers. 1952. Purgatory, chant (canto) VI. v. 79 – 87. p. 112)

Being an expatriate of the system I had desperately wanted to improve provided me with the courage to renounce my language of deception and pursue the truth. Like Sordello, who had fought against his own country. I had become a warrior in search of freedom from adversaries who did not conform to my notion of the idyllic. Solitary and self-absorbed. I ventured to OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) in pursuit of my Master’s degree in Education.
Chapter 23

Recovering from the Swoon

The large brown envelope of admission finally arrived and not a moment too soon for the anticipation to start a renewed life was a great deal to contend with. Longing to select the courses that would enlighten me in this system I did not understand was of the utmost importance. My goal was to be the best teacher ever for my students and becoming specialized would secure that belief. Furthermore, I would gain the respect I wanted from my colleagues and administrators. There would no longer be feelings of inadequacy. I would learn to adapt to the real educational system and not some built up fantasy I had in my mind.

A heavy peal of thunder came to waken me out of the stunning slumber that had bound me, startling me up as though rude hands had shaken me. I rose, and cast my rested eyes around me, gazing intent to satisfy my wonder concerning the strange place wherein I found me. (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto), IV. v. 1 – 6. p. 91)

I longed to escape from the similar circle of Hell that forged Dante and his guide deeper into the actual fiery pit, but it was too late for I had chosen a mission that was not real. All that I had done and was about to do was for someone/something else, not for the "true" me. Living a life in Limbo had become so ingrained into my daily rituals that reality had disappeared into virtual fantasy. Like Dante's condemned souls in chant (canto) four of Hell, I did not know anguish but I also did not know progressive harmony. The Pagans' punishment is in the after-life they imagined for themselves. They could not envision a better existence with God and so their lost hope became their faith.
I embarked on the educational journey with the understanding that I would find a resting-place where the sun shines brilliantly and there exists a balanced happiness. Choosing a course of study was easy for me since I knew that I always wanted to assist children. What better way than to become a counsellor? I would be able to really effect change and leave the oppressive environment I found myself adhered to. In my mind obtaining a Master’s degree in Education would be a further validation of my commitment to professional development. It was empowering for me to know that if I had to go back into a school I would be prepared this time with the necessary knowledge to sustain myself in a setting where curriculum concerns abound and updated teaching strategies determine your worth as a human being. There had to be answers to the questions that floated constantly throughout my mind. I must have missed something in class that would be the solution to the many queries that manifested themselves in my first year of teaching. I became determined to find the explanation.

There were many reasons for the continuation of my educational journey, but not one of them examined the underlying reason for the importance of learning. I could justify my pursuit if it were for the students and for becoming an effective teacher to serve others, but not to serve myself. The blue handbook with lists of available courses became my obsession. Deciding upon the most effective class to attend was no small task. Lists of possibilities were created and amended over the span of several months. Finally, selecting the guidance and counselling specialization became the determining realization that I was to pursue. It was not long before entire days and several evenings
a week were times I spent giving of myself just to fulfill a void of which I was not aware.

Each walk along the brown tiled archway leading to the institution for higher learning secured my beliefs that my sacrifices at the end of a long day of teaching were not done in vain. I would be able to rejoice one day and it was this comforting thought that accompanied me to the OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) building for two years. Each noble professor ardently discussed passionate topics pertinent to their own research and beliefs. Assignment after assignment, lecture after lecture. I felt no more validated than I did from the onset of the program. It was not happening for me. When was the learning process about to take place? When would I feel competent and ready to accept my role as a teacher? How could it be that, after all this knowledge, I still did not know very much? The answers were few and the questions were many. Each class produced more anxiety and frustration for I felt that I was wasting my valuable time. Yet, I continued trudging along with patience and desperation that the momentous occasion would eventually reveal itself to me.

Well, one night it finally did happen! Sitting in the unassuming classroom with minimal décor and the bare essentials, a euphoric moment invaded my being. In a solitary moment on the brink of dejection, I had found a guide. Her words were unlike any others I had heard before. Like Dante’s conversation with Virgil among the counsellors of fraud in the thievish fire of Hell’s 8th circle. I relived the moment of realization when it became clear that all this time I was avenging the torments of wrath from years gone by.

I craned so tiptoe from the bridge, that if I had not clutched a rock I’d have gone over, needing no push to send me down the cliff. Seeing me
thrust intently lean and hover. my guide said: “In those flames the spirits go shrouded, with their own torment for their cover.” “Now thou hast told me, sir,” said I. “I know the truth for sure: but I’d already guessed. and meant to ask – thinking it must be so. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XXVI. v. 43 – 51. p. 234)

After all these years of righteousness the time had come when I would have the opportunity to probe deeply. Pride and envy would be scorned away by making room for reason and truth amidst the hope for divine intervention. My assistance came in the form of an empathetic teacher, one who could relate to the misery that plagued her students’ lives before leaving the world’s educational battlements. 

The stars shone brightly that night and the moon lit the dark path with extra illumination. Her invitation to venture into the confines of my mind breathed new life into the dejected souls who listened attentively to adopt journal writing as a form of learning and obtaining a university credit. Her speech inspired everyone to enthusiastically start a new life. It was one that would be enriched by new experiences, uninhabited questions, and the pursuit of truth. Our guide had the foresight to make the learning experience relevant to our situations through the assistance of reason.

Five times we had seen the light kindle and grow beneath the moon, and five times wane away, since to the deep we had set course to go, when at long last hove up a mountain, grey with distance, and so lofty and so steep. I never had seen the like on any day. Then we rejoiced; but soon we had to weep. for out of the unknown land there blew foul weather, and a whirlwind struck the forepart of the ship. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XXVI. v. 130 - 138)

The excitement associated with redemption filled the hallways and cafeteria during the break that evening. The comments and utterances from the voyagers all seemed to state the obvious to look back on our lives and contemplate its meaning. The term life had no restrictions such as timing, gender, or monetary value. Her criterion
was simple in that we could search for anything we sought in the last minute. hour. day. week. month. and year.

The end of my Master’s program marked the beginning of a lasting relationship with my guide. At the end of my rope and program I met my salvation. Lucia’s endearing smile and empathetic eyes invited her students to relinquish their ailments at the classroom door and step into the realm of revelatory insights. She was a writer of the contemplative spirit pertaining to teaching, but not exclusively about the profession either. Her endless comments and writings were tributes to life prompted by her love of learning. She evoked a sense of universal peace as she prepared the way for the coming of my rebirth. Unknowingly, she inspired my passage away from critical prophecies and towards the enlightenment of reason. She came from nowhere to divert destiny’s path and help me build the mysterious life I was carving out for myself. Lucia would not only be a professor for one of the last courses I required for my program, but also my doctoral thesis supervisor who would mentor me through each painstaking and triumphant achievement.

Lucia symbolically represents what Virgil was to Dante during his flight from Hell to Purgatory. Like Virgil, she was the dramatic lead during my play of pathos because she held the understanding that clarification of wisdom would prevail in the end. She gave me the strength to pursue the course work with a newfound sense of renewal. The experience was not limited to producing words on a piece of paper: rather, it was a general approach she had to invite new perspectives to surface in teaching and learning. Up until that moment I did not know what it was like to receive this gift of respect for the way individuals learn. I liked her way! It was an epiphany to
finally stumble upon a positive learning experience that allows the teacher to be like the
strength of a structurally sound bridge that invites her students to take the opportunity to
grab on and cross over it carefully to see what is on the other side. I learned a great deal
about myself in her course. The trials set before me were instrumental in bringing me
to understand the meaning of what it meant to be a person and a teacher. Permitting the
students to make reflections to be part of the evaluation process paved the way for the
journey towards self-discovery. Lucia challenged us to ask the deepest "why" of our
lives. I began to validate the importance of my existence and to understand what I
sensed, felt, and imagined.

Keeping the journal that was initiated in her class served me well and it still
does. She made us look for common words and examine their relativity in our lives.
All that was done that year encouraged hope and risk-taking as that positive truth that
humanity gravitates towards. Surprisingly my fears and insecurities seemed to slowly
vanish when I stepped into the realm of higher learning, specifically her classroom. I
regretted having spent so much time pursuing what I deemed important before meeting
Lucia. I could not let the course be my last voyage with this incredible guide. so with
courage in heart I asked her to be my research project supervisor as the last
responsibility I had towards the completion of my Master's degree.

As life conditions constantly evolve and present difficulties that affect our goals.
I, too, experienced a life-altering situation when I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I lost touch with my guide during the most acute stage of my illness and it
would be two years later when I would pick up the pieces from the wreckage of my
body and spirit. During that time I faced obstacles that broke my heart and made my
healing virtually impossible with the all-consuming stress that had already ravaged my body. My colleagues feared that my illness was contrived and thus anonymously placed a call to the insurance carrier that sustained part of my livelihood when I could not provide for my family. The spewing venom that pulsated through their veins was forcefully injected into my debilitated body when I discovered their vengeance towards my quest for life long learning. They feared I was taking advantage of the system by simultaneously going to school and collecting disability funds. Dante best portrays individuals of this calibre in chant (canto) twenty-four located on the seventh circle of Hell. They are among the monstrous reptiles that frightened Dante and Virgil along their path towards salvation.

And the most loathsome welter filled the sink of it – a mass of serpents, so diverse and daunting, my blood still turns to water when I think of it. Their hands were held behind their backs and tied with snakes, whose head and tail transfixed the loin, writhing in knots convolved on the hither side. And lo! As one came running near our coign of vantage on the bank, a snake in a flash leapt up and stung him where neck and shoulder join. (Sayers. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) XXIV. v. 82 – 84. 94 – 99. p. 222)

I could no longer face the possible torment of my impending return to such a horrid place void of compassion and humanity that I requested a transfer to another school. I began to consider my final task to obtain my degree after my submersion into another school community. I had selected a topic discussing the importance of teacher development in an ailing system. The manifestation began with my re-acquaintance with Lucia, my guide. It was her manifestation of benevolence that made it possible for me, who was weak of sight and soul, to graduate studying an issue that in the future would become my quest.

"If I have grasped what thou dost seem to say." the shade of greatness answered. "these doubts breed for sheer black cowardice. which day by
day lays ambushes for men, checking the speed of honourable purpose in mid-flight, as shapes half-seen startle a shying steed. Well then, to rid thee of this foolish fright, hear why I came, and learn whose eloquence urged me to take compassion on thy plight.” (Sayers. 1949. Hell, chant (canto) II. v. 43 – 51. p. 79)

Graduating on a cold windy November evening seemed fitting, after all the degree represented a tempestuous time in my life, but I had an opportunity to forge ahead. Lucia’s call in early January opened the door to a new life. My guide knew that my voyage was just beginning and the truth still needed to be sought. Excitedly she announced the beginning of a new doctoral program that would concentrate on issues pertaining to teaching and learning. Exploring the topic of teacher development was one that gestated silently within my soul: I just did not have the opportunity to realize it until Lucia entered my life. I was ready to accept the teacher’s invitation because I do not ever recall such a feeling of hope warming my soul. Lucia gave me a choice to pursue the quest for gracious truth and the promise of a new life.
Chapter 24
The Dance of Divine Essence

With joyous recognition Lucia and I met to discuss my interests and redirection from the darkened wood. She recognized my plight and wanted to help me out of my desperation. I could not help but contemplate which higher order would love me so much as to send me this graceful teacher to give me life-sustaining hospitality during my pilgrimage towards self-improvement? Unaccustomed to the dynamics of mentorship, I felt insecure and inept for I did not want to disappoint the brilliant poet before me with the enchanting blue eyes that spoke volumes of verse and rhyme.

With only a feeling in my heart and bountiful stories, I began my explanation of why I thought I was involved in the quest to understand order in our educational universe. Unveiling question after question, my guide began to help me unravel what my soul had not had the opportunity to conceive yet. I wanted to be like the poet before me. Her graceful words and patient breaks of contemplation after each utterance imparted courageous perceptions that I did not want to lose. I believed that I would get through whatever unidentifiable misery was plaguing my heart. She bestowed upon me the gift that together we would get through the enchanted forest of entanglement. The labour of love did not frighten me; instead it fuelled my spirit with determination to heal the char that grotesquely adhered to my velveteen skin.

Class after class and assignment after assignment I felt that I was getting closer to my passion, but the voices of criticism leeringly hovered my mind making the escape from fear an impossible and insurmountable task. Selecting the root of my pursuit became a blinding jaunt towards self-amelioration because I was still muffled by the
voices of ill will. My lack of focus was not for the lack of trying, but for the notion I had that my study had to be for others first and foremost and not for myself. I could not seem to separate myself from the responsibility I felt that I was obliged to give the shadows of darkness that had inhabited my life up until the point Lucia came dancing around me forming a circle of light and everlasting brightness. My guide did everything possible to inspire me to let go of the world that I had created in my mind that perpetuated the fogginess of fear.

Lucia’s invitation to her home was the first step towards understanding what an arduous task it is to break down the stone-faced walls of self-deprecation. All her students and special guests were invited to attend a creative dance presentation on a recent study she designed. Gathering in my teacher’s home was spiritual awakening for me because she obviously trusted her students to enter her sanctuary of privacy. I saw the gesture as a vehicle towards the participation in divinity, for God also welcomes us with open arms in his home without reservations. The images of art that hung with intense strength and protective propensity seductively whispered enthralling optimism. The airiness of grand open spaces and lack of enclosing walls provided dignity in a modern world where privacy abounds as a requirement for self-preservation. The environment of celebration and contemplation provided this spiritual thrill-seeker with the necessary renewal and refinement that she longed for. The sunset and the stars enclosed our evening in such a luminous form that wisdom was imminent from the shades of beauty.

The performance was about to begin into the plummeting depths of elegance and reflection. The discipline of dance and drama unfolded before my eyes as the creative
souls made their way into my heart. Lucia’s prancing steps pre-figured the joy of entering Paradise. This memory characterized by the gift of spiritual wisdom was like Dante and Beatrice’s ascent towards the heavenly warmth of the Sun. The spirits inhabiting the sphere of brightness forming a circle of twelve lights greeted the travellers. They heard sweet music inspiring indescribable feelings for mortals.

How bright in its own right must that have been, which light, not colour, outlined on the light of the sun’s self, when there I entered in! Call on experience, genius, art, I might, but paint imaginable picture, none, yet trust we may, and long to see that sight: and if imagination cannot run to heights like these, no wonder: no eye yet e’er braved a brilliance that outshone the sun. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) X. v. 40 – 51. p. 136)

The love of intellectual illumination is what I experienced that night in my teacher’s home. The possibility of expressing myself in a creative manner and be respected for doing so gave me hope that I could delve into the realm of original essence. I longed to write the stories that were constantly being narrated in my mind. The innovative venue gave me the courage to complete the first stage of my rise towards higher learning. Lucia’s dance represented the story of the twelve wise men that Dante described as doctors of knowledge, philosophers, and theologians. They were people who meditated with God’s words and shared their wisdom with the world. The beautiful manifestation using garlands of light and musical harmony emphasized the prominence of the spirit embracing Dante and Beatrice.

Lo, many surpassing lights in a bright device, we at the centre, they as a wreath, were shown, and sweeter of voice they were than bright of guise. So girdled round we now and again have known Latona’s daughter, when the teeming air catches and holds the threads that weave her zone. Those heavenly courts I’ve stood in, treasure there many rich gems, too precious, being unique, to be removed out of the kingdom’s care. Such were those fiery carols – they who seek to hear them must find wings to reach that goal, or wait for tidings till the dumb shall speak. (Sayers. 1962, Paradise, chant (canto) X. v. 64 – 75. p. 137)
Lucia and her partner danced and spoke alerting their audience to the voice of passion and art. In a humble moment I gave thanks to God for giving me the privilege of having witnessed creativity in the making and the possibility of being able to form my own testimonial of truth. For the first time I was able to see myself in the presence of the heavenly creatures as a worthy member of arts-based contemplatives. I too was a flower in the garland of enlightenment.

Unbeknownst to Lucia, her invitation to her poetic recital was a revolutionary moment for me. Her movements and monologue dissolved some doubts that revolved around my mind. She made me feel capable of contemplation: something I had always had, but lay silently distanced from any possibility of becoming an identifiable truth, worthy of reflective journeying into the abyss of forlorn thoughts.

My studies took a turn for the better as I began to seriously explore the depths of thesis writing. My topic changed focus just as the lens of life readjusted itself to provide a clearer image of internal intensity. I embraced the idea of searching for my soul as Dante did when he became excommunicated from the life he had come to be challenged by. The anticipation of communal living with my thesis was a missionary act I desired and needed to fundamentally assume. Living a life at work in an environment I found stagnant created chaos and fragmentation. The dual existence that I was immersed in became my next challenge and I found solace in the idea of moral gravitation towards betterment and in the personal unification with souls who were also moved by love.
Chapter 25

Discourses, Desires, and Dignity for the Damned

During my studies I found myself living multiple existences. Finding elation in studying and heartache in the work environment became the constants in my life. I began having difficulty differentiating between positives and negatives. Everything began to seem futile. I knew that there was something better to be had, but I was not privy to such joy. It was my fate to continue trudging through a system that hindered my prospect for happiness. I began to feel that I was alone in my search for unity. This illusion quickly dissipated when I turned my focus on my ability to find strength in those individuals who were also repelled from the issues that contradicted our true natures. The love and truth I longed for was around me. I just did not know it yet. The people around me were like the souls Dante met in the afterlife through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. He found enlightenment among all the spirits be they forlorn from divinity or illuminated by God’s grace.

The feelings of unification and belonging to a greater entity came in the movement I desired in meeting with them in the hope to understand what it meant to feel complete. I sought that intangible something in the people around me. The desire to share stories of misery and elation made me feel whole. When we engaged ourselves in philosophical discourses be they accurate or debatable, I saw development not only among the teachers but also in humanity grasping the unattainable.

It became apparent after all my poetic reading of Dante’s work that his metaphor of celestial movement was my invitation towards self-recovery. As the poetic images revealed themselves to me one by one, like Dante I realized that I experienced feelings
of unity in the conversations and admissions of hidden desires with the people I met along the journey of life. This transforming realization led me to ponder the significant individuals in my life to whom I felt connected.

During the time I was contemplating a valid thesis project, I grew more restless with each passing day. I had a yearning to return to the root of the poem and poet that were making such an incredible impact upon my learning and being. I decided to pay homage to this great influence by taking a voyage into his past. With profound anticipation I placed myself in the hands of destiny and took the leap into the unknown with my beloved family members. We co-ordinated our schedules so that we could all experience this marvel that impacted my life so immensely. My uncle, whose pseudonym is St. Bernard, just like Dante’s character in chant (canto) thirty-one of Paradise, was going to be my final guide in the quest to make meaning of the engrossing experience I found myself enraptured by. As Lucia’s mission was one of reason, St. Bernard’s was of intuition. He taught me to follow my heart and have faith in humanity, but above all else, myself.

The relatively short flight from London to Rome frazzled my nerves for I was not certain what to expect of this exceptional pilgrimage to pay homage to a poet who lived over 700 years ago. My family, who had already spent the greater portion of their vacation in Italy, came to greet me at the airport along with St. Bernard. It had been several years since our reunion and the endless embrace attested to the time wedged between our worlds. St. Bernard, who had just celebrated his retirement from being an educator and a principal, was looking forward to being part of my learning experiences and according to him: this trip was just what he needed. His love for people and his
family have been his trademark and this reunion was going to special for us on many levels.

As we pulled away from the busy airport parking lot. I felt at home glancing out into the horizon of golden wheat fields and white stucco villages. Old folklore tunes blared from a static-producing tape deck, but the harmonies sung in the car from St. Bernard and my mother were clearly filled with loving nostalgia from their hopefulness of youth. The memory will forever be preserved in my mind like the mind-numbing accordion that screeched in unison with the singing voices of yesteryear-musical artists they admired.

Coming thousands of miles away living in a stranger's heart. I suddenly realized that, along with the summer songs that echoed in the 30-year old Mercedes lowered near to the ground with numerous pieces of luggage, I was experiencing a euphoric moment. The blazing sun and earth's shadows that were cast along the consumed asphalt road were my companions in that moment when heavenly love entered my heart. The triumphant dance of words exchanged by my family and me subdued the fearful voices that had inhabited my body and ravaged it of hope. Little by little a tear streamed down my face as the ghastly sight of the unidentifiable creature surrendered to the jubilee of hymns being sung by the angels around me. Beauty and knowledge were displayed to me and overcome by the joy of the moment when I experienced transcending love. I felt like Dante in Paradise because I, too, discovered that I did indeed have the ability to also pursue praise, love, and the truth.

Now in her beauty's wake my song can thrust its following flight no farther: I give o'er, as at his art's end, every artist must. Being such, then, as I here relinquish for a mightier trump to blazon than mine own (Of whose hard theme remains but little more). She, with achievement
in her journey in her mien and tone. resumed: “We have won beyond the worlds. and move within that heaven which pure light alone: Pure intellectual light. fulfilled with love. love of the true Good. filled with all delight. transcending sweet delight. all sweets above. (Sayers. 1962. *Paradise*, chant *(canto)* XXX. v. 31 – 42. p. 319)

Dante experiences a preliminary vision of God in the chant *(canto)* because of the overwhelming bright light that appears before him. This is a significant time for Dante because he no longer requires Beatrice’s love to guide him towards enlightenment. His voyage with his beloved through the end of Purgatory and up to chant *(canto)* thirty of Paradise was what he required to understand the complexities of the reason and love. He has matured spiritually and no longer needs to seek the truth for it manifests itself all the time.

Each winding curve through the Apennine Mountains secured my place in my newfound home. Their majestic appearance and the warmth of the sun kissing my face through of the moving vehicle fashioned more than a radiant glow. but an authentic vitality I could call my own. The dried up grass and meadow flowers that were scattered in the vast landscape outlined the immensity of nature and reminded me of how small I am in the midst of God’s creation. Living in my mind, fearful of the shadowy masses that appeared from time to time reliving past experiences. was like a blanket of thick fog that crept into the distance and captured its victims to surrender to its vision-impairing power. I was finally able to spin around my world. The three-hour drive cast a new light on my life. Such a revolutionary moment came out of nowhere. I could not comprehend how such a momentous occasion would happen to me. What was the defining factor? Could it be that I was happy to be surrounded by family? Was I experiencing feelings of completeness? As I pondered my many questions I was
transfixed by St. Bernard’s smile and his captivating eyes that were the portholes to the immense sea of love his soul exudes.

St. Bernard was a great man. His love for any living creature was apparent from his gentle mannered personality and the love he gave to others. His reputation was well known throughout professional circles, but he prided himself on the way humble individuals respected him. Aside from being a special education teacher for most of his career, he was a principal dedicated to his staff and students, but he was most proud of his involvement in being the president of a disabled peoples association for his region of Italy. This volunteer position meant the world for this man of simple beginnings but of high stature from his many years of devotion to education and wellness for others. Of his own money he built a country retreat home for physically, mentally, or emotionally challenged individuals. This refuge is a place these individuals can call home if they do not have a place where they can find love, protection, and dignity. In addition to a place they can call home, he organizes outings for anyone interested in learning about another country/culture. That summer I would come to understand the meaning of my uncle’s work when I joined him on a special trip to Switzerland dedicated to the special individuals he knows and who would benefit from such an important learning experience. There is no end to his ingenuity for he manages to get his friends and/or relatives to become his helpers in giving those whom cannot a taste of freedom.

Upon our return from the picturesque beauty of Switzerland, we stopped at Mont Blanc in France and rode the cable car to reach the ultimate point of the majestic mountain. I wondered how he was going to get the frail little lady in the wheelchair to see the glorious panorama, but it did not take long for him to find the solution. He
carried her in his arms for the 45-minute cable car ride and the 15 minutes it took to observe the scenic marvel. The other guests of this magnificent trip were not bewildered by his action because it was customary for St. Bernard to dedicate himself entirely to anyone in need. This was just another response to give someone a moment of happiness. The tears shed by the little lady confined to the wheelchair was a testimonial to the act of kindness my uncle gave her that day.

I knew how wonderful St. Bernard was from the stories I was told and the times I had spent with him. but bearing witness to his role as a teacher, friend, and compassionate individual was a momentous learning opportunity for me. He inspired me to reach beyond my role as a classroom teacher and become a guiding friend to everyone around and those I would yet encounter.

I believed that my uncle was completely fulfilled and nothing could deter his positive outlook on life. but once again reality was obscured with the fiction unravelling in my mind. Emulating this man would bring me closer to happiness. or so I convinced myself without realizing that as much as he gave to others he was frail from his own sorrows too. On several occasions I saw him frantically search for the instant gratification experienced indulging into the powerful force of the intoxicating nicotine of the cigarettes he received as compensatory gifts from people he had helped in the past. I would catch him hiding his sadness behind the clouds of poisonous smoke to alleviate the pain of solitude. His work was his pride but the people who mattered the most to him did not appreciate it.

Sitting on the terrace of his unfinished home near the Brotherhood & Sisterhood Alliance for Disabled People. we talked about the disappointing situation he had to
reckon with. Family politics and land inheritances were the obstacles he had had to overcome for my relatives did not share the same vision he had to create a small village for those less fortunate. He solemnly declared his sadness because those around him created the tension he wanted to escape from and those who lived thousands of miles away. Inasmuch as I felt inspired by him, he admitted how inspired he was by me. Our long embrace was broken by the gift he gave me of his old and weathered copy of the Divine Comedy and a promise to take me to Dante’s birthplace and sepulchre.

After wiping a few tears we resumed our work in the country home. Donning his light woollen grey trousers and a short-sleeved blue dress shirt with black dress shoes he picked up the hoe to till the dried soil around the home dedicated to the disabled. As I gathered a few dried up leaves and weeds, I stared in awe at the man who lives every day of his life remembering his humble roots of poverty and humiliation. He filled my heart with hope for anything is possible when there is love.

We walked the grounds that afternoon observing the grape vines, wheat fields in the horizon, and the clear blue sky that only seemed an arm’s reach away. We shared our stories of how we got to the point where we were in our lives. We discussed everything from his selling eggs to local merchants in order to afford schoolbooks to sharing what he learned in school with his sisters who were not given the same privilege. I told him my story of discrimination for being a child of immigrants and the struggles I had in school. In that precious moment we felt that we beat the odds and we were grateful for the bounty around us and in our hearts for in the end we had each other.
The voyage to Florence and Ravenna cities, which housed Dante during his terrestrial life, was a pilgrimage of unification for a disheartened soul. I had a yearning to understand how a masterpiece of Italian literature became so influential in my life. The poet who wrote such moving words that carried universal messages enthralled me. In my mind having the opportunity to visit his birth and resting places meant getting to know this philosophical genius. I wanted to gain a better understanding of what Dante was trying to say by how he lived. Finding Dante meant finding myself.

The early morning trip accompanied us with a impenetrable fog rising from the dense vegetation around the car and house. The ten-hour voyage was becoming a reality before my eyes. I felt as though I was awakening from a heavy slumber characterized by restless nightmares. Among the twilight images of the early morning something peculiar happened to me. It was as though they spoke to me saying that everything was going to make sense to me, but I should exercise patience and caution. This was the dark wood that inhabited my mind always fearing something or doubting any harm would occur thereby extracting any possibility of happiness for me.

As we approached the Mosaic City of Ravenna I could feel a surge of hope radiating from the passing green mounds of land that lay peacefully along the horizon. Beyond the hills, in the ancient Byzantine City, was a new life for me. My sleepless and aching body suddenly had strength. The long drive did not deter me from leaping out of the car and racing towards the magnificent grave that held Dante’s body and spirit. My quickened pace took each cobblestone step with grace and agility. My family followed behind with less ease, but with an undeterred love for the momentous occasion I was living. The sun’s brilliance accompanied each corner in my slight climb uphill
towards the marvellous stone structure with artistically carved cornices and words. Upon the realization that I was standing face to face with Dante’s tomb, a surge of tears flowed ceaselessly reminding me of how blessed I was to have reached my destination. I had come full circle with the spirit that inspired hope in me through his poetic rhyme.

I was living Dante’s moment in the Divine Comedy’s chant (canto) thirty of Purgatory when he meets Beatrice, his spiritual beloved, for the first time since his childhood.

In a white veil beneath an olive-crown appeared to me a lady cloaked in green, and living flame the colour of her gown; and instantly, for all the years between since her mere presence with a kind of fright could awe me and make my spirit faint within. There came on me, needing no further sight, just by that strange, overflowing power of hers, the old, old love in all its mastering might. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXX. v. 31 – 39. p. 308)

As in a fading dream, I was experiencing strange feelings and crying for no apparent reason. Yet, the reason was gradually beginning to make sense to me for I had not gone through the voyage into the dark wood by accident. Just as Dante realizes the importance of his journey through the afterlife and he seeks reassurance and advice from Virgil upon seeing Beatrice. I felt the longing void of not having my guide help me make sense of what I was experiencing. Inasmuch as I was with loved ones, I felt alone while exploring the indescribable feelings I experienced finding myself face to face with a defining moment in my life.

I turned leftward – full of confidence as any little boy who ever came running to mother with his fears and pains – to say to Virgil: “There is scarce a dram that does not hammer and throb in all my blood; I know the embers of the ancient flame. But Virgil – O he had left us. and we stood orphaned of him; Virgil. dear father. most kind Virgil I gave me to for my soul’s good. And not for all that our first mother lost could I forbid the smutching tears to steep my cheeks, once washed with dew from all their dust. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXX. v. 43 – 54. p. 308)
In a split second I could hear myself chuckling and crying at the same time as I embraced St. Bernard. His comforting words resonated with Beatrice’s towards Dante. “Dante. weep not for Virgil’s going – keep as yet from weeping. weep not yet, for soon another sword shall give thee cause to weep.” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) XXX. v. 55 – 57. p. 308)

The marking instant of salvation was just the beginning for me because I had to undergo self-examination of repentance for the neglect I had injured upon my soul. I had to change my self-deprecating ways for I was the one solely responsible for my pride. my futility. and my happiness. For too long I had allowed myself to wallow in self-pity for the injustices I had experienced in school. at work. and in life. In short. I was my own source of adversity. As this admission of truth came to fruition. I had another euphoric occasion whereby I realized that I needed to work on replacing indignity for the appreciation of what life has to offer. A lifelong. insurmountable task lay before me.
Chapter 26

Unveiling the Needle's Eye

Just as my eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness that clouded my life, I now found myself trying to focus the beams of light that were attempting to peer through the twisted matter that modulated the mural of my mind. Right before Dante's grave in a small park with minimal distractions, I sat quietly contemplating the new vision that authenticated my identity at that time. My thoughts were scattered, but in the midst of all the entanglements that required clarification, a favourite childhood ritual became the focal point of the moment as my family visited the nearby bookshop.

Alone, I drifted aimlessly back to a time when I assisted my mother on a regular basis to thread her sewing needle. My mother's lack of patience due to her deteriorating eyesight became my responsibility for it was up to me to help her overcome the grief of making ends meet. Sewing clothes was a necessity to avoid superfluous expenses since my parents were living a less than modest existence when I was a child. The threading of the sewing needle was at times very challenging for me too, but when I got it through I was elated. I used to have little contests with myself to see how fast I could accomplish the given task. I would peer through one end of the hole and attempt to thread the needle and, if it did not work, I would vary my position to hold the needle sideways so that I had a double view of the threading process. I was no expert, but I tried several techniques to thread the needle for my mother. When I accomplished the task quickly, my mother would shriek with delight and then say how blessed I was to be young. She would not readily accept the compliment that she was young too. She felt that if she were young and capable of seeing without corrective lenses due to age-
related vision loss, then I would not have been summoned to be her helper. My mother did not understand that I wanted to be a dedicated partner for her. After all, the dresses were for me. I longed to be needed because serving her meant more than bringing a smile of gratitude to her face, but a validation of my existence.

Standing before the Latin inscribed monument erected on the immaculately groomed grounds outside of Dante’s tomb enclosed in a shrine of hand-carved stone. I felt that ancient feeling of yesteryear when I longed for that same importance with the exception that the beasts of judgement no longer assailed my self-worth. Somehow I felt relaxed, more complete and compelled to further search for the clarity of being. Contemplation was a way of seeing through the mystery that filled life with love and hope. Renewed and charged with the desire to forge ahead and feed my spirit and mind with the hidden truths the world offers. I forced myself to look back on my life and become re-acquainted with myself. It was my hope that acquiring self-knowledge would eliminate the futile feelings of lost hope. I did not want to lead, rather I desired someone to take me by the hand and assist me in finding the way towards self-recovery. In essence that is what the Divine Comedy provided for me, but now the connections had to be broadened to include more than literature.

Looking for unity is not easy especially if your entire identity is based on fragmentation. I wanted to delve deeper into the gravitational pull towards completeness. Searching for objects and people who complemented my nature or provided that movement towards wholeness became my mission.

"Thou hast led me, a slave, to liberty, by every path, and using every means which to fulfil this task were granted thee. Keep turned towards me they munificence so that my soul which thou hast remedied may please the when it quits the bonds of sense. Such was my prayer and
she, so distant fled. it seemed. did d smile and look on me once more.
then to the eternal fountain turned her head. The holy elder spoke: “That
thou mayst draw they journey to a perfect close (and I by prayer and holy
love am sent therefore), over this garden with thy vision fly. for looking
on it will prepare they gaze to rise towards God’s luminance on high.
The Queen of Heaven. with love of whom I blaze. since I her faithful
servant Bernard am. will grant us on our mission every grace.” (Sayers.

The mystery was unravelling itself for me as it was for Dante when Beatrice left
him to find his way towards Divine truth and love. He was instructed to follow St.
Bernard for he is the mystical contemplative that could secure Dante’s journey onwards
towards the ultimate image of reflection.

In the Divine Comedy. St. Bernard replaces Beatrice in chant (canto) thirty-one
of Paradise because her influential powers that moved him in search of love are now
substituted for pure love and not that experienced by mortals on earth. St. Bernard’s
mission is to help Dante prepare himself for the final task of spiritual enlightenment by
viewing the Virgin Mary in all her bountiful glory. St. Bernard describes the structural
formation of Paradise to Dante. He helps Dante focus on the ultimate vision that he
must achieve. Blinded by the light. Dante tries to make out the assembly of characters
that St. Bernard points to in the realm of eternal bliss. There he indicates the
importance of positioning beginning with the Virgin Mary. followed by him and then
St. Lucy who helped Dante begin his mission. He had come full circle at that point in
time. He was finally ready to view the ultimate vision and essence of God. With St.
Bernard’s assistance and encouragement Dante was able to contemplate the importance
of eternal light in our lives. Dante realized that he could never renounce such a life-
altering experience because it is what defines humanity. Dante’s understanding that
love is the vehicle that drives movement on earth and in the heavens marks the end of
the poem, but not his final mission of life because the evolution of learning is just beginning with the sharing of his experiences.

Seemed in itself, and in its own self-hue, limned with our image: for which cause mine eyes were altogether drawn and held thereto. As the geometer his mind applies to square the circle, nor for all his with finds the right formula, howe’er he tries, so strove I with that wonder – how to fit the image to the sphere: so sought to see how it maintained the point of rest in it. Thither my own wings could not carry me, but that a flash my understanding clove, when its desire came to it suddenly. High phantasy lost power and here broke off; yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jar. my will and my desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and the other stars. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 130 – 145. p. 346-347)

My uncle, St. Bernard, became an integral part of my journey towards self-discovery. His purpose was to help me move forward from the realization that I wanted to find the way towards wholeness. He took me by the hand and together we explored the museum adjacent to Dante’s shrine. We marvelled at the paintings and three-dimensional sculptures that were inspired by the various chants (canti) in the Divine Comedy. He purchased memorabilia for me that would later serve as a reminder of my quintessential moment experienced in Ravenna. He would do more than interpret the sophisticated words and representations of the poem, he would guide me towards individual restoration by helping me make connections.

St. Bernard facilitated my personal recovery by showing me examples of love and trust throughout the life experiences that we shared. Every person he introduced me to had an uplifting affect on me. Our intellectually inspiring discussions helped thaw the fearful images of negativity that had been submerged deep in my soul like the icy level of Hell.

“And now. although. as from a calloused place. by reason of the cold that pinched me so. all felling had departed from my face. I felt as ‘twere a wind begin to blow. Wherefore I said: “Master. what makes it move? Is
not all heat extinguished here below?"  "Thine eyes."  said he.  "shall
answer soon enough: We're coming to the place from which the blast
pours down, and thou shalt see the cause thereof."  (Sayers. 1949. Hell,
chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 100 – 108. p. 280-281)

I was finally beginning to feel that it was okay to learn to trust, love and rely on
others again. My gentle guide made sure of that. I was too impressed with the notion
that, in order to avoid pain. I had to become self-reliant and independent. Without
realizing it. I had given up on myself because I did not feel that I was worthy of being
valued or loved. Finding someone like St. Bernard who loves me and inspires the
potentiality of valuing myself was a gift. I felt obligated to go the distance because of
his sacrifices to make my journey a reality. Going through the Divine Comedy as I did
was a way to remember times that I was loved and valued. I decided to submerge
myself in the re-awakening of the senses that I had long dismissed and allowed to
become entangled in the hopelessness of the ‘Dark Wood’. My uncle was also
instrumental in becoming the hope that could motivate a change of heart. I was
compelled to awaken from the lifeless slumber that crippled an authentic life.

My exploratory voyage began with the decision to no longer feel comfortable
with a less than satisfying existence. I did not want to be paralyzed by guilt, fear, or
hopelessness anymore. I finally realized that I had the power of choice. Throughout
my life I had focussed on the negativity around me choosing to blame the institutions I
was affiliated with or the people who affected my life. I never really understood the
power within me to not allow myself to become comfortable with the indulgences
associated with misery. The attention sought and given became an addictive cycle of
delight for the inability to have faith. Like Dante I needed to move from the shadows of
Hell and into the substance of Purgatory and Paradise.
Black on the ground – I whipped about in fear, abandoned, as I thought, beholding how I, and I only, made a darkness there. My Comfort turned and faced me: “Why wilt thou always mistrust? Believ’st thou not I come still at thy side and lead thee even now?” (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) III. v. 19 – 24. p. 88)

The next conscious decision I made was to relish the relationships, be they intimate or superficial, with everyone whose path I crossed. From observing my uncle, I discovered that movement amongst people and/or objects inspired hope. Watching and experiencing the living personalities touched my heart. It made me place myself amidst the circle of life and learn from others by participating and communicating with them.

That summer I took away a feeling of gratitude for the gift of communication and learning. It was that humbling experience that propelled me to probe deeper into the journey of hopefulness.
Chapter 27
Beatific Vision

Upon my return home from a personally rewarding experience, I now had to put into practice my realizations. Dismissing my negative thoughts was going to be a challenge. I was already condemning myself for not recognizing earlier where I had gone wrong in my life. Finding solutions to the controversies that surrounded me was going to be a heart-wrenching task. Despite the fact that I was a dedicated individual, I was afraid of going deeper into the abyss of abomination. I wanted to discover the abhorrence in me that led to the pessimistic feelings towards education and teaching. I did not know how to engage in such a monumental feat, so I just chose to delve into my work and studies hoping to experience divine intervention. Inspired by Dante’s examination by St. Peter on the characteristics of faith, I imposed my own qualifying test too.

If love and hope and faith he truly hath thou knowest, for thine eyes are fixed upon the centre, which all visions mirroreth. Yet since this realm its citizens have won by the true faith, "tis fitting he should seek to glorify it, answering thereon." As a Bachelor prepares and does not speak till the Master the question has propounded for argument, not for conclusion's sake. so I prepared, with reasonings well founded, while Beatrice spoke. that I in such profession. to such a questioner. might prove well grounded. "Speak, as thou art a Christian, make confession: What is faith?" To that light I looked which so breathed forth to me the first words of the session. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXIV. v. 40-54. p. 266)

I began to look backwards as to what brought me to this point in my life. As disturbing as it was I started to glimpse at all the possibilities of fault that created my sense of shame and inadequacy. Every experience at work, be it with teachers or students, provided different insights into the attempt to redefine the realm of my spirit.
Every school memory from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood had contributed to my development. My relationships have also been influential in determining my character. In essence, I realized that who I am as a person is also who I am as a teacher.

The desire to progress towards emotional and spiritual liberation was what I longed for as a person and as an influential teacher. Inspiring my students to yearn for the courage to be hopeful was my personal mission. I knew how difficult it was for me going through the school system without the consistent support I needed to view life with more optimism: I did not want that for them. The notion of failing enticed me to give up before attempting to render my stories as reality. I did not feel like Dante, who in the end, with all his tribulations, still manages to view life as a comedy. It was that belief that prompted him to write the Divine Comedy for the betterment of society in general. Conversely, I subscribed to the notion of life being a tragedy. By giving my assailants too much importance, my spirit withered away in dreadful disappointment. Dante uses life’s nuisances and disillusionments as a vehicle towards the divine because in facing the horrid one gains strength by finding the way towards wholeness. It is the desire for improvement that leads us to authenticate our existence.

I pined for the passion that I experienced when I started school, but had stripped away on the very first day of kindergarten. I also wanted to experience the importance associated with making a positive influence in a student’s life and being validated for the good job I did. Furthermore, I anticipated the ability to truly fall in love with life and all its ambiguity and oasis of splendours. It was necessary for me to distinguish the difference between lust and love. I could no longer find sporadic moments of happiness within political affairs, academic rigour, and dependent relationships.
Dismembering the soul. obscured by rigid contours of fear. required innovative insights. unpredictable challenges. and self-admiration. Up to that point I viewed my life as a summary of a long mathematical equation incapable of being solved. I believed that I was vulnerable and not worthy of being saved. But being saved from what? I did not know what was besetting my soul. Was it the people around me. my career. pursuing another degree or everything that mattered to me? I had forgotten what it was like to not be so dependent. Did I ever know what it was like to not live without the acknowledgement of love or acceptance? Where had the inner strength gone or did I ever have it? I was clamouring for answers to questions that upset nature as I had come to understand it. Why was my world being shaken up now with the conjuring of these new insights?

The answers lay within me for I had chosen an erratic life of disbelief and fear. Within my soul lived many voices each vying for importance. yet not one assuming responsibility. I lived in the past and amongst the realm of hindsight. As Dante describes in chant (canto) four of Hell. I lived in Limbo. just on the edge of Hell. but not quite amidst the squalor and torment. Yet. I was far from the entrances of Purgatory and Paradise where progress is gained and celebrated respectively. Like the unbaptized and virtuous Pagans. I lived impulsively fearing the consequences of the choices made. They sinned not: yet their merit lacked its chiefest fulfilment. lacking baptism. which is the gateway to the faith which thou believest: or. living before Christendom. their knees paid not aright those tributes that belong to God: and I myself am one of these. For such defects alone = no other wrong = we are lost: yet only by this grief offended that. without hope. we ever live. and long. (Sayer. 1949. Hell. chant (canto) IV. v. 34 – 42. p. 92)

Dante’s souls in this chant (canto) are in this state for their lack of faith in Christianity but also in the nature of things. Their pessimistic outlook on life secured
their dejected eternity. Forever, they swoon around the first circle of Hell void of hope. I understood their plight for I nervously lived that existence, self-absorbed in the wrongs, searching for instant gratification, and lacking the courage to make decisions. Subconsciously, I had unclad myself of dignity. My convictions at the time led me to believe that making choices meant having to find the perfect solution. After several disenchancing situations, I preferred to do everything and be everything to everyone for fear of missing out on an opportunity. I was a prisoner of my mind and soul. How could I possibly have known what the perfect life would be like? Yet, I demanded it of myself and when I could not realistically follow this dogma, I relented to the futility of hopelessness and set out to control everything around me. The protective cocoon spun around my soul with its binding ideologies oppressing my “true being”. Living in the shadows of fear meant I had divorced myself from the world so I would not have to tolerate any kind of pain.

Not what I did, but what I did not do, lost me the sight of that high Sun, the prize thou seekest, whom too late I learned to know. Below there in the deep, a region lies made sad by darkness only, not by pain, and where no shrieks resound, but only sighs; and there dwell I, with guiltless infants, taken by nipping fangs of death, untimely soon, ere they were washed from sinful human stain: and there dwell I, with those who never put on the three celestial virtues, yet, unsinning knew all the rest and practised every one. (Sayers. 1955. Purgatory, chant (canto) VII. v. 25 – 36. p. 119)

Armed with only a vague understanding hindered by emotional immaturity, I grasped the only tangible I felt good about and that was reading the Divine Comedy. I carried on from where I had last left off and the journey began to take shape in my mind as each verse was read. I experienced joy in connecting with the poet and his arduous literature. His messages were encouraging for someone who felt lost and stood alone on the road to soulful recovery. I longed to experience the bliss of Paradise where
recognition for the ability to see love’s empowerment is celebrated. The love Dante presents is disguised as the beatific visions of faith, hope, and charity. The search for divinity is really the search for the truth and that was all that I was after. I needed to find myself and then be placed amongst others so that I could belong to a greater entity. The readings became more enhanced with their interpretations and connectivity with my life. It was this connection that led me to incorporate the Divine Comedy into my thesis research at the time.

As the end of the poem came into view, a new perspective surfaced for me just as it did for Dante. Life appeared to be set in a wider frame and I was able to comprehend my exile from society. I unveiled my inhibitions and lack of participation in an existence that could render me harm. Being forced to partake in a less than meaningful way of life was a pertinent self-disclosure that prompted me to want to remove myself from a state of misery to a state of optimism. I took Dante’s literal journey and made it my own, but it was time to look for a deeper vision and try to attain spiritual satisfaction from it.

The only way I knew how to authenticate my experience was to use the poem as an educational tool, but at the same time voice my personal didactic and explicit moments as sacred metaphors. I decided to put my experiences in writing so others could experience the invitation I received through Dante’s literature to journey through life. Unfolding my story gave me hope that the adventure would end like Dante’s did in spiritual growth when he sees the circle of light representing God. The bright yellow light in the white celestial rose is an image of blessedness that goes beyond terrestrial time and physical space. It is also symbolic of God’s divine love for his people.
Dante’s transcendence to this heavenly sight gave me hope that I too could attain salvation.

If in its inmost petals can reside so vast a light, in such a rose as this what width immense must in the rim abide? My sight, being undismayed, never went amiss in all that amplitude and height, but knew the full extent and nature of such bliss. For “near” and “far” no reckoning is due. since nothing by the law of nature goes where God no agents needs His will to do. Amid the gold of the eternal rose, whose gradual leaves, unfolding, fragrantly extol that sun which spring for aye bestows. Longing to speak. I followed silently in Beatrice’s wake: and there she said: “Behold how great the white-robed company!” (Sayers. 1962, Paradise, chant (canto) XXX, v. 115 – 129, p. 321)

My excitement lay with the notion of using the doctoral thesis writing process as a way of revisiting my life and making note of my aspirations and downfalls. Like a rose I wanted to bloom and expose my fragrance, yet it could not happen without first nourishing the roots that are grounded in the soil. The work would begin like that of a gardener, whose meticulous care in seeing the fragile rose planted in good soil, feeding it, and keeping it protected from harmful elements, would create a beautiful representation of creation. I had to start with the realization that I am deserving of dignity and delight. Uncovering the love that moves me imbedded in the quest for enlightenment would help me become a contemplative. Longing for faith and hope would become possibilities if I could tell my story of aspiration.

I began to wonder if others felt the same way too. The only way I would know would be to recite my testimonials and hope that fellow readers would also engage in the journey of self-discovery if they so desired. With the loving support of family members, colleagues, students, and professors. I began the voyage using Dante’s poem as the vehicle to motivate my spirit. Like St. Bernard who addresses the Virgin Mary in chant (canto) thirty-three of Paradise to pray for Dante’s intercession so that he would
receive God’s grace and love. I too experienced the power of hopefulness to light the obscure path of the ‘Dark Wood’.

This man, who witnessed from the deepest pit of all the universe, up to this height, the souls’ lives one by one, doth now entreat that thou, by grace, may grant to him such might that higher yet in vision he may rise towards the final source of bliss and light. And I who never burned for my own eyes more than I burn for his, with all my prayers now pray to thee, and pray they may suffice, that of all mortal clouding which imparts, thine own prayers may possess the power to clean his sight, till the highest bliss it shares. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 22-33. p. 343)

Like Dante I stood alone before the immense task of gaining restored vision for the ultimate revelation of life. Dante views the mysteries of the universe in the last chant (canto) of Paradise and draws the conclusion that with faith one moves in co-ordination with love and truth. I longed for that same vision and climatic understanding that enlightenment was mine to be had.

Make strong my tongue that in its words may burn one single spark of all they glory’s light for future generations to discern. For if my memory but glimpse the sight whereof these lines would now a little say, men may the better estimate thy might. The piercing brightness of the living ray, which I endured, my vision had undone, I think, if I had turned my eyes away. And I recall this further led me on, wherefore my gaze more boldness yet assumed till the Infinite Good it last had won. O grace abounding, whereby I presumed so deep the eternal light to search and sound that my whole vision was therein consumed! In that abyss I saw how love hell bound into one volume all the leaves who flight is scattered through the universe around; how substance, accident, and mode unite fused, so to speak, together, in such wise that this I tell is one simple light. Yea, of this complex I believe mine eyes beheld the universal form – in me, even as I speak, I feel such joy arise. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 70 – 93. p. 345)

My eagerness and foolishness was in thinking that a revelation would come to me simply by willing it or reading an inspirational story. There was a sense of peace in knowing that I was at the stage where formulating questions was the first step towards self-awareness and, whether the complex answers came to light, had no bearing on the
potentiality for self-fulfilment. It helped me to also render my soul to the world and stop seeing everyone and everything as an adversary. I could not experience the detriments of life if optimism was part of my being. Redefining my challenges and philosophy of life would become my creative work of art. Furthermore, writing my grand narrative and trying to honour the lives of the individuals who aided me in telling the story would become my deliverance, as would the articulation of the universal journey as it unfolds for all of us.

As I continued to contemplate the final chant (canto) of Paradise when Dante achieves his last vision, I too rendered my spirit to the understanding that my desire to search for mindfulness and experience hopefulness was the beginning of a soulful journey exploring the realms of personal and professional development.

Not that the living light I looked on wore more semblances than one, which cannot be, for it is always what it was before: but as my sight by seeing learned to see, the transformation which in me took place transformed the single changeless form for me. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise. chant (canto) XXXIII. v. 109 – 114. p. 346)
Chapter 28

The Power of Hope

Spending a life in school is indeed a journey similar to the passages of Dante's travels in the afterlife. My experiences of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are not uncommon in today's educational system, at least from my conversations with colleagues, students, parents, and other members of the school community. Being an observer of and participant in the education institution, I have decided that I can effect the change from within in order to participate in a society that does not always offer compassion, creativity, or challenging curriculum for its citizens. This acceptance of reality is rooted in a message of hope for fellow educators, students, and those concerned about helping schools evolve into successful settings of self-discovery.

To achieve success there must be an understanding of where the school failure stems from. Since there are many key components that have the capability of influencing the negative, it remains a challenge to resolve the conflict that broods within the confines of the educational setting. If, however, a simplistic, but by no means insignificant, new perspective could be adopted by the individuals who operate schools to promote feelings of self-worth amongst the citizens of the school, then adversity would not be a phenomenon plaguing our children and our teachers. Glasser (1969, p.14) describes the importance of love and self-worth as fundamental needs that must be fulfilled in order to shape a person's identity. He contends that "love and self-worth may be considered the two pathways that mankind has discovered that lead to a successful identity. People able to develop a successful identity are those who have learned to find their way through the two pathways of love and self-worth, the latter
dependent upon knowledge and the ability to solve the problems of life successfully."

School is one place where the two pathways can flourish: the other is home. Yet, with
the growing demands of life and the evolution of the family unit, the school is becoming
increasingly important in the life of a child. Creating an environment where students
and teachers flourish is a responsibility society must accept and promote. Building a
community of hope, where respect is the foundation and success is maintained, is the
unique position our modern institutions find themselves contemplating.

Those who fail in schools lack the hope to see beyond the disadvantages life has
to offer. This notion is not limited specifically to students, but also for the teachers who
see no way out of the cynicism perpetuated by the government, school boards,
administrators, colleagues, parents, and students. Adopting a holistic approach to
enhance an individual's ability to become more thoughtful, creative, and hopeful is the
educational system's responsibility. Inasmuch as there will be pitfalls in the
restructuring of school communities, and most certainly, failures will prevail amidst the
successes, it is the understanding that accomplishments are indeed attainable and
possible that makes for a hopeful life. Empowering citizens of school that the
educational community is there to lend a hand but the rest is up to the individual is a
concept that requires some examination for there is power in ideas and the idea would
be to manifest school as a place of salvation not of adversity.

Meier (1995, p.184-185) concurs that persistence to avoid failure in public
education begins with the capability to re-invent the future with optimism: "What
makes me hopeful, no matter what bad news tomorrow brings, is our infinite capacity
for inventing the future, imagining things otherwise. It is what allows me to remain
optimistic even though there's presently more racism and meanness in my home town, and the nation. than I ever recall witnessing before and teenagers in our city bear the brunt of both.`` She concludes: ``That's what's so marvellous about living things, they're never entirely predictable. They can always confound the odds.``

The purpose of telling the story of my life in school is not to propose a plan for restructuring all aspects of the educational community. but to inform the countless of hopeless individuals. who find themselves in Dante's Dark Wood. that the possibility for change rests first and foremost. within their own soul. Examining positive models of change or listening to inspirational teachers can produce unimaginable benefits. greater than any new school policy could adhere to. The power of story and its message of hope can lift the spirit to new heights. as the potential for change becomes a reality. This is what Dante's quest was since the beginning of his journey out of the entangled forest of perpetual darkness.

In his travels through Hell. in a spiral descent into hopelessness. through Purgatory's state of renewal. and finally into the ascent of Heaven. basking in the state of freedom. Dante comes to believe that the soul is revealed through the telling of a story. The educational system is no different than the epic renaissance poem. School experiences that mimic Hell are really contexts where we are out of sync with the people who co-exist in that environment. It may be that there are philosophies or personalities that hinder one's development but, nevertheless. there is stagnation. Moments when school life is like Purgatory resemble the experiences when one is ready to reach out for another. This can be with a colleague. an administrator. perhaps a student. The heavenly experience is feeling comfortable with oneself and others. This
could be the experience of a collegial relationship within the school context or even
some form of personal and/or professional development.

For me *The Divine Comedy* metaphorically illustrates a life spent in school
because of its profound ability to help me see my wounded soul. It makes me reflect
upon my experiences of alienation, loss, and renewal. It is a script for my stories as a
teacher and a student because, as for Dante, there was also evidence of my frailty and
aspirations within the poetic images. The soulful journey in school appears as a long
but liberating tale. His universal message of the human condition can appear in any
context, making the *Divine Comedy* an accessible piece of literature capable of
directing even an educational journey.

Describing the failings of the school system was my initial goal of the self-study
research I wanted to explore but, as I ventured into the pilgrimage of the symbolic
world through the *Divine Comedy*, I stumbled upon a world of healing and
transformation. This exploratory analysis of life should be promoted within the public
education system.

The elements found in Dante’s Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are similar to the
stories told and retold in schools. Finding resolutions within the narrative enables
teachers and students to attain liberation. Getting to a spiritual path is the challenge
since many people do not adhere to such practices. Retrieving the lost or rejected self is
not a customary expectation of professional development or curriculum acquisition.
Appreciating the metaphor is a step towards self-recognition, which may appear too
self-indulgent or post-modern for the public to support.
In making sense of my school world I became sadly aware that my vision was limited and thus my development ended at a certain point in my career. I longed to grow spiritually and not just professionally. In due time, and with the facilitation of good teachers, I was able to resist the temptation of imprisonment from the contrite process of hopelessness. I needed to acknowledge that I was lost and it was time to find my way out by searching within. The school system that I believed in since I was an impressionable child held me bound to the adversities of life compounded with the despair of solitude.

As my soul slowly reawakened to the monumental task of interpreting the meaning of my life experiences as a student and a teacher, I wanted to write of the repressed feelings so my wrongful thoughts could be acknowledged and corrected. In search of discipline, I was becoming aware of who I truly was. Dante, whose soul was awakened by love, discovered he was lost in life and had the chance to retrace his steps and discover the path towards hopefulness. Similarly, I saw myself haunted by the same images. The sense of hopefulness for me began with the power of storytelling that Dante revealed within each poetic verse. It marked an invitation to break free from the confines of adversity and lend myself to the openness of my imagination and storytelling ability. I was empowered by the opportunity to rewrite history to get to the bottom of what happened to me earlier in my life and to examine the trends I was carrying forward in the present.

A conversion of the images I experienced could be examined in the way schools are structured. Since they are an important place of socialization, schools should be where students are taught the importance of understanding confusion and learn the skills
to achieve balance in life. Society is becoming increasingly content bound and destined mainly for measurable accountability charts or reports and in this there is a great injustice. A restoration of values needs to be promoted that includes the power of imagination through the arts, the skill of storytelling, and exercises in attentiveness.

Travelling through life in an apathetic state, where there are no meaningful stories, only an induction of repetition and boredom via the electronic village, and the abolishment of responsibility, is no way to continue defining the contemporary human condition. There must be a way to move from our current state of misery to one where everyone can be considered a hero for enduring vulnerability and emerging as a responsible citizen of society. Recovering the true self as someone who can act and think responsibly within the labyrinth of life, would lead us to a higher level of contemplation.

Schools should be places where teachers, students, and other personnel would be nurtured like Dante’s celestial rose in chant (canto) thirty-two of Paradise. The rose with all its intricately connected petals has the potential to bloom at various stages of its development and, as human beings, we should also come to respect our timely development.

Within this section of the Rose, where all the petals are mature, these saints mark well: Of faith in Christ-to-come they heard the call. On yonder side, in semi-circles, dwell, parted by empty spaces here and there, those who believed in Christ Emmanuel...Swift-sped to the true life, this child-folk, hence, not sine causa in this Rose reside in varying degrees of excellence. (Sayers. 1962. Paradise, chant (canto) XXXII. v. 22-27. 58 – 60. p. 334-335)

Like the rose, we need nourishment and care. At the core of the bloom is the defining element that composes the flower’s life and at our centre there is also the sustenance that would encourage life, which is faith. Without faith or hope the vision of
coherence would be obscured. Where would we be without compassion and a sense of community?

If schools are communities then we must make them places where there is adulation for everyone within the walls. A good place to begin is acceptance that schools should be institutions with a vision. The vision must be rooted in reality so those goals are attainable and clearly defined. Often there are expectations rooted in mandated school philosophies that no one really understands or believes to be valid. There should also be a sense of support provided for each member of the school community so that, when times of discouragement or of hopelessness abound, there is a system in place where healing can prevail.

The school is an agent of change that should promote the connection between the body, the mind, and the spirit. The entire school community should not be viewed as members of a production assembly line who work together to make a product. People are a product unto themselves who have a responsibility to transmit their persona to humanity. We are whole from the beginning and, as time passes, we find ourselves dissected into fragments that can be easily discarded if there is no measurable worth in our existence.

Redefining our thinking and actions will enhance the lives of those in schools. It is time to strike a balance by discerning between voice and silence. For all the talking that is done in schools, there appears to be a great deal of silence that is overwhelming the soul. The teacher’s and student’s voices must be proclaimed as important. If the voices are drowning in political agendas of turbulence, then there will be no potential for learning. Learning is the act of believing in one’s own potential. The future would
not exist if it were not for the power of learning. Learning requires faith in oneself and in others who will inspire and present the knowledge in such a way to make the sharing of wisdom possible. Finally, it takes passion and patience with each other to direct and sustain the efforts required to teach someone something new. Schools must always be places where possibilities can be nurtured, skills are practised, and the self is appreciated.
Chapter 29

The Irrevocable Intuition

I had already commenced the journey towards soulfulness, but I now had to find the way to express how I was going to record my plight and share it with others. For months I pondered effective strategies to render my story as an authentic one. When it suddenly became apparent that what I was good at was listening, reading and sharing stories. Because I love the written word, I decided to stay true to the form that speaks to me. Literature, stories, and discussions have inspired and challenged me over my lifetime, but now I was ready to have them assist me in finding the way towards personal and professional sustenance. I was hoping that, by better understanding my life, I could serve others and myself too. It was important for me to find the vehicle to share what I was learning and provide accessibility for others to develop their own epiphanies too. The immediate answer was to restructure my doctoral thesis so that it became a meaningful piece of work, perhaps a stepping-stone, for a book of small but significant wisdom. The self-study research began to take a life of its own because of the inspirational vision that had originally led me to read The Divine Comedy.

In this chapter I examine the soulful journey as a model for professional development. I use the following topics to delve into the research: the importance of self-study challenges associated with soulful inquiry, self-study research as professional development and its effectiveness.

The purpose of engaging in this form of self-study or reflexive inquiry was to authenticate a productive life and record the harmony and disharmony associated with trying to live a balanced life. I was in search of vitality, hopefulness, and a more
faithful approach towards life and teaching. I wanted to be able to comprehend the adversities, anxieties, and disenchantment without dwelling on them to the point where my journey became stagnant. In order to stay true to my personal requests I needed to find a research style that would permit my voice to be heard. It became a mission of sorts to find the methodology that would help me move forward in my quest for soulful inquiry and preservation.

Soulful inquiry would become the inspiration in helping to reveal my life story. It validated the search for the deepest truth of my existence and the willpower to authenticate my actions. Questioning hidden memories to reveal secret meanings and discover how they shaped my destiny would help define my spirit. I did not want to solely define spirituality, but recognize how the spirit subsists as the essence of our identity. If I acknowledged myself as a teacher, I felt the need to explore why. I had to find the approach that would best describe my process of change, creativity, and desire for new possibilities. It became a quest for me to find the best way to describe my journey towards soulful inquiry. Furthermore, I began to consider how others might be experiencing similar queries and that brought me to the point where I needed to expand my research. Cole and Knowles (2000, p.14-15), state the concept of teacher development in a concise manner that promotes understanding and wellness:

Who we are and come to be as teachers and teacher educators is a reflection of a complex, ongoing process of interaction and interpretation of elements, conditions, opportunities, and events that take place throughout our lives in all realms of our existence—the intellectual, physical, psychological, spiritual, political, and social. For us, making sense of prior and current life experiences in the context of the personal as it influences the “professional” is the essence of professional development. Thus we situate professional inquiry in the context of personal histories. (p. 14-15)
I began my pursuit to discover why it is important to identify soulful inquiry as a form of professional development. As part of my theoretical framework I started considering qualitative research as a vehicle to drive the words out of my soul. Within this broad context, the discovery of an epistemology for dispelling the silenced voice began. In McLaughlin & Tierney (Eds.) (1993. p. 10). Naming Silenced Lives they attempt to “give voice to people who have not been heard because their points of view are believed to be unimportant or difficult to access by those in power.” It is thought that the reason for the silence is because “their voices serve to critique the canon of existing social structure, relationships of production, aesthetics, an even scientific theories.” (p. 10)

Threatening the status quo can always prove to be disruptive for those seeking control. It is important to engage in soulful inquiry for fear of losing oneself amidst adversaries. My loss began with my kindergarten experience because my teacher was precisely that type of individual who is seated at the helm of control and dictates who shall speak and who should listen. My voice was silenced from the moment I entered the school system. As McLaughlin and Tierney (Eds.) (1993. p. 32) continue writing, they identify that “the silenced are silenced precisely because they share few if any mainstream characteristics.” (p. 32)

From childhood I felt that I was one of those marginalized people. My cultural background defined me in school. I learned quickly that it was best to keep quiet whenever adversity reared itself. This learned behaviour was upheld as I aged and the tradition continued throughout adulthood. As my life evolved, however, it became more challenging to grow spiritually if voice was not being given to the oppression that
plagued my soul. I became aware of the silence as my teaching career developed. I could feel the stillness mirrored in the eyes of my students. It was also in the walls of the institution that housed me for hours on end. No one could take away or even comprehend the alienation I experienced during my first years of teaching, and I realized that it was not limited to just the early part of my career, but it is a condition related specifically to teaching.

I spent a great deal of time wondering why it was important for me to have my voice be heard as a student and now as a teacher. The primary answer to my query was the need for validation. As a student, going through the perils of the 1970’s educational system where left-brained individuals thrived, I subscribed to the belief that school was a place that I could not be successful at if I did not change. As a child I figured out that I needed to change who I was or else face the arduous consequences of failure. As an adolescent and young adult I also learned that school was structured in such a manner that you abided by the rules in order to obtain the benefits. Individuality was not promoted nor was it accepted. As a mature adult. I believed that I could change this notion at least in the classroom where I would be teaching. I forged ahead with determination to inspire the changes that would enhance a student’s life in school, but soon I grew weary of the process. I grew tired of trying to defend my actions. I began to question my beliefs. I also felt incredibly alone in trying to promote goodness in an environment of cynicism. I fell into the trap of requiring the validation I thought I had achieved by not becoming the teacher most people feared in school.

The popular image of the teacher oscillates erratically between that of the dedicated public servant and that of the worker who gets off easy. Teachers are alternately glorified for their willingness to sacrifice their personal ambitions on behalf of the children and envied for their partial
escape from the rigors of the nine-to-five routine. Neither image does
teachers much good. The effect of both is to make them tenser: they are
always under pressure, either to live up to the unreal expectations or to
prove that they are not merely loafers. Yet both images have strong and
influential advocates in recent years, and teachers are becoming
increasingly trapped in the pinch between them. (Raphael, 1993, p. 9)

The pursuit of affirmation led me to explore who I really was behind the façade
of a teacher's identity. I characterized myself as a professional first and then a human
being. Living a life justified only by the work I did and the relationships that existed
within that community was taxing to my soul. I needed to work harder to earn the
respect that was lacking within the school context. I needed to render voice to my
practice and inform the misinformed about teachers. Like Raphael (1993), I wanted the
sharing of "personal accounts both for the benefit of other teachers, who will certainly
respond to the trials and tribulations of their peers, and for the illumination of
administrators and politicians who regulate our jobs, taxpayers who sign (or don't sign)
our paycheques, and parents who don't quite understand those other adults in the lives
of their children" (p. 9). More importantly, however, I wanted my story to inspire
someone to pursue his or her personal empowerment through a soulful approach rooted
in a reflexive inquiry framework.

Cole and Knowles (2000, p. 2). offer a distinct definition for reflexive inquiry
approach that is "rooted in the personal." This is further elaborated as "an expression of
who teachers are as people, that it is imbued with the beliefs, values, perspectives, and
experiences developed over the course of a teacher's lifetime." Cole and Knowles
further state that, "in order for teachers to understand their professional lives and work
and therefore continue to develop professionally, they need to understand the formative
as well as the continuing experiences and influences that have shaped and continue to
shape their perspectives and practices.” The soulful approach that I have characterized as an invaluable tool in professional development elucidates the personal relationship between self-expression and self-understanding. The creative self must be explored and articulated as a thoughtful and holistic form of teaching, researching and living.

Cole and Knowles (2000), also define a creative approach to teacher transformation that is arts-based in nature. It is essential to the promotion and development of teacher researchers. Delving deep into the experience of self and others is a remarkable state of progression that enhances teacher education and soulful inquiry.

“Our view of professional growth-teacher development- is this: By attending to and stimulating the creative potential of teachers, ourselves included, we can achieve (ongoing) professional development goals by alternative means. As teachers we are all highly educated about and refined in our observations of the world around us, of relationships, of processes, and of problems. We are not, however, formally “allowed to” or “given permission” (or have time and energy resources) to tap into those most indefinable dimensions, though, lies a wealth of untapped knowledge and resources that can play an important role in our ongoing growth. If nothing else, we are encouraging teachers to expand the dimensions of their expressed thinking by acknowledging the complexity, depth, and breadth of their experience through artistic articulation. (p. 79-80)

Teaching can be viewed as an artful practice because of the many creative means taken by educators to substantiate the concepts or skills being taught to a group of students. Teaching is a creative act primarily because of the teacher who engages in his/her practice and renders it spontaneous, flexible and unique. The teacher’s life is, at every moment, intersecting with the lives of the students. The mutuality of attendance to personal identities and their effect upon the other characterizes teaching as a multi-dimensional process: therefore, searching for diversity in research should also be a consideration. By linking education and art, researchers can represent the enjoyable or
disconcerting meaning of experience for themselves and others. Artistic researchers do their thinking and feeling in the very qualitative media they work in. Their research depends upon the expressive and intensely personal shaping of experience.

Furthermore Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) cited in Diamond & Mullen (Eds.) (1999). “the self is an aesthetic creation. and the means by which the self is planned and "built" are story telling and myth making". Even though our inquiring teacher self can only be glimpsed and never finally caught in all its shifting depths. we become more self-fashioning and responsible through practising reflexive. arts-based inquiry.” (p. 86)

Gaining an understanding through self-narrative inquiry can effectively promote professional development as the promise of shared stories make their way through the education practitioner’s research. “Through self-narrative. we can find our separate and shared voices and so devise ways to act more insightfully together. This is our ability to preserve and to extend the "we" within the "I". We learn what stories of teaching we are enacting and which ones are still possible. (Diamond. Borho. Petrasek cited in Diamond & Mullen (Eds.) (1999). p. 116)

Graham (1991. p. 11) believes in the importance of understanding the influential possibilities of presenting the written self. He launches an interpretation of what autobiographical writing is about. His presentation on “Dewey and the Social Construction of Knowledge” lends readers the intellectual insight of how revolutionary his thinking was and how influential it is for researchers today to embody an epistemology of belief that is conceptually profound. Dewey’s autobiographical essay entitled “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” which he wrote for his 70th birthday.
highlights the importance of a growing ideology that “the student’s self might be considered an object of inquiry or experiment, hence turning the writing of autobiography and autobiographical discourses into a way of thinking, a conceptual instrument of cognition. In this sense the view of knowledge implied in the effort to write the self is pragmatic in character. in that knowledge, like the self, comes to be seen as provisional, changing, and socially constructed.” Drawing on the self and being situated within the world gives a temporal dimension of evolution. Making predictions about the future based on previous experiences becomes an existential pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is that quest for connecting the unacquainted pieces of information that autobiographical research enhances. The attempt to re-create the past is an intimate process of coming to accept the relationship between self and society.

Selecting a narrative approach to conduct my self-study permitted me the opportunity to reflexively inquire about my conceptual framework regarding myself as a child in school, an adolescent in school and an adult in school. Furthermore, it also gave me the chance to view myself as a teacher and a researcher from what I have learned.

“Autobiographical writing is common in accounts of action research. Researchers make frequent use of diaries, logs and journals as part of the action research ‘tool kit’. The final report often contains references to the writers’ own lives: their professional development and personal experiences. Indeed, it would be odd if it were not so. One way of describing an action research report is that it is autobiography – writing about one’s own story. Action research is, inevitably, a narrative: it is research carried out into the researcher’s own situation. Finally, it is research in which the self of the researcher is itself at issue. Action research requires the researcher’s own attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and values to be brought into question.” (Griffiths cited in Thomas. 1997. p. 95)
Telling a story is an ancient ritual that humanity has always fostered. As teachers we promote the listening of stories in our classrooms be it alone or in a group. Most courses that are taught have a reading component to them requiring the student to examine the text to later be evaluated on it. The story can be learned in formal or informal contexts. Storytelling is fundamentally the form of communication that has been most observed and practised throughout life. Philip Jackson’s essay “On the Place of Narrative in Teaching” cited in Narrative in Teaching, Learning, and Research by McEwan and Egan (Eds.) (1995. p. 3-4), quote Jean-Paolo Sartre on the importance and prominence of storytelling:

“This state of affairs should not surprise us, given the prominence of stories in our lives. Indeed, it would be strange were it otherwise. ‘Man lives surrounded by his stories and stories of others,’ Sartre tells us, ‘he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it’ (Sartre. 1965. p. 61). What this means is that we rarely can get through a day, hardly even an hours, without either hearing or reading a story in whole or part or telling one to someone else.” (Jackson cited in McEwan & Egan (Eds.), 1995. p. 3-4)

Being able to tell my story became empowering for me because it was a vehicle towards understanding and educating. I wanted to educate myself as well as others who may have been caught in the crossfire of conflict. In school, be it as a teacher or a student, stories are equipped to provide knowledge in the pursuit of goals. As Jackson (1995) states in his essay, the deeper educational purpose of storytelling has to do with “what we want students to be like as human beings. These attributes would include the values we want them to hold, the characteristic traits we want them to exhibit, the views of the world and of themselves we want them to cultivate, and so forth.” I wanted my research exploration to be just as focused and so I selected the epistemological function of storytelling. Just as there is a place for stories and storytelling in a student’s
cumculum. there should also be a similar regard for a teacher’s professional
development through the use of shared storytelling. If stories have the power to affect
change in a student’s ability to learn then it has the same transformational powers for a
teacher’s capacity to develop in his or her profession.

“Stories are often credited with changing us in ways that have relatively
little to do with knowledge per se. They leave us with altered states of
consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks, and more. They
help to create new appetites and interests. They gladden and sadden,
inspire and instruct. They acquaint us with aspects of life that had been
previously unknown. In short, they transform us, alter us as
individuals.” (Jackson cited in McEwan and Egan (Eds.). 1995. p. 9)

As my story unfolded and I recorded my discoveries it became increasingly
clear how I could re-invent myself. All the adversities I faced and the injustices I may
have unwillingly given to others could now be consolidated and emerged into a new
entity. It would not be necessary to reformulate the events so as to make the story more
appealing, but to organize and extract the essentiality of each narrative so that personal
and professional development would ensue.

“Teachers’ voice imply a surrender by academic researchers of their
unchallenged autocratic discourse on teaching and opens up the
possibility of rejecting a common criticism of teachers: that is, their
understanding of their art and craft is concealed from themselves – their
knowledge is only ‘tacit’ (Diamond, 1992). It may be suggested that the
act of writing itself is a critical adjunct in clarifying experience. The
activity is a process, which helps to create a personal voice. The
possession of a voice is a source of potential empowerment” (Thomas.
1997. p.15)

Engaging in this reflexive practice of remembering stories and sharing them
with others would hopefully provide the understanding that the past is only important as
a testimonial of time, but not in determining the configuration of self. The importance
of self and one’s development is established by the significance of each story one
remembers. Reliving the narrative and revisiting the various perspectives placed upon each vignette can resolve and support development. Cole and Knowles. (2000. p. 27). state “becoming a teacher is a lifelong process of growth rooted in the personal. Making sense of prior and current life experiences and understanding personal-professional connections is the essence of professional development. We come to know our teaching selves through explorations of elements of our personal histories.” By soulfully reacquainting one to the past stories, it could facilitate the advancement of knowledge and acceptance that life is not stagnant. Letting go of past interpretations or vivid flashbacks of sorrow could free the soul to find solace in renewal and hope from past transgressions. It would mean the ability to live a life of darkness or a life of seeking hope and truth. Diamond and Mullen (1999. p. 275). subscribe to the notion that “contexts need to be found or established for encouraging movement from imprisonment to transformation.” Furthermore “teacher education and inquiry need to be refigured so that actual teaching and inquiring selves can be represented in authentic ways. Inquiry is developmental when it focuses on ‘the nature, formation and use of teachers’ knowledge – the construction, reconstruction and reorganization of experience which adds to its meaning (Day, Pospe. & Denicolo. 1990. p. 2). When these processes are exhibited, they become available for scrutiny and renewal. Bakhtin (1981) describes voice as the “speaking personality (or) speaking consciousness.” Britzman (1991) adds that voice also suggests relationships. The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to share meaning with someone else. including aspects of self. Voicing involves finding the words. speaking for oneself. and feeling heard” (Diamond & Mullen. 1999. p. 216). I was able to find my voice through the reading of The Divine
Comedy. The literature became the metaphor to describe my life as an educator, but it quickly dissipated to include much more than teaching. It profoundly influenced me as a person because I began to interact with the poetry and enabled it to influence my philosophical perspectives of life.

"Each of us has a particular canon of books and memories in which we find images of ourselves reflected for reconsideration: "The more we understand ourselves and can articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we haven, the more meaningful our life will be" (Connelly & Clandinin 1988, p. 11). To become the best teachers that we can be, we may need to rediscover our lost kingdoms and build our peace gardens. There are always other pieces to find and different parts to be sung" (Diamond, Borho, Petrasek. cited in Diamond & Mullen 1999, p. 117)

Feeling somewhat alienated with my deep connection and interest in the epic poem Divine Comedy, I soon discovered a sense of hopefulness and association with humanity that was respectfully portrayed in the medieval poet’s message. Dinsmore (1970) reveals a resurgence of modern interest in Dante’s literature. He states that the unique appeal is primarily due to his “splendid convictions, which quicken those moods that our minds, troubled with doubt, crave. We are living in a time of intense spiritual desire. We are stretching out hands toward the gloom and calling into the unknown. Our representative poets are struggling for a faith. and the strong tide of interest in our best literature is toward spiritual problems.” (Dinsmore. 1970. p.5) I found that awareness of faith that was lacking in my life through Dante’s work. His experiences inspired me to attempt to lead a more faithful life by shunning the insidious doubts that beleaguered my mind and soul. I found myself discerning the needs of my life through the fictional journey created by a man over seven hundred years ago. He was a modern individual for he did not "prophesize about socialism or of humanitarianism. To him
the noblest form of religious activity was the absorption of the mind in pondering the deep things of God.” (Dinmore. 1970 p.6) Dinmore claims that Dante is the greatest poet because he has given voice to the “largest aggregation of truth, in terms of universal experience, and in a form permanent through its exceeding beauty. That so many minds are turning to him of light and vigour is most significant and hopeful. (Dinmore. 1970. p. 7)

The voice that Dante promotes is inspiring because he situates himself as the wayfarer in the context of the afterlife journey. His role as a simple human being going through the tribulations and triumphs of life, delivers a powerful message to me. In his own literary way Dante’s aim is “to bring those who are living in this life out of a state of misery and to guide them to a state of happiness. How the soul of man, lost in the mazes of life and defeated by the fierceness of its own passion, can learn its peril, escape from the stain and power of sin, and enter into perfect blessedness.” (Dinmore. 1970. p. 50) is also a universal language.

My criticism of Dante is only in the wording of searching for happiness. My journey, unlike his, is not to find bliss at the end of the plight, but to attain well-being. His temporal poem, being linear in nature, evolves from a state of chaos to one of heavenly harmony. I personally believe that his expectation is unachievable and unrealistic. In Paradise, Dante writes of attaining the beatitudes in order to see God. His process of separating each event to receive the perfect blessedness enhances the theory that only through God’s intervention can salvation be attained. Unlike the poet’s pilgrimage. I believe that soulfulness can be received by one’s own determination for betterment. As Dinmore (1970. p. 127). concedes. “Divine wisdom is self-revealing to the prepared soul.” Perhaps the quest can have spiritual undertones too, but the educator’s teachings have impact only when the student is willing to learn.
Lacking the unity and integrity to make life harmonious, I set off on my own crusade to find fulfilment. Like Dante I wanted my soul to be revealed in my work and in my mission. As Barbi (1967, p. 102) maintains, “the soul of Dante has entirely pervaded his work. It has given life to every idea offered to it by history and tradition. It has given new and deeper meaning to the things that surround us, and we are continually carried along by the intimate relationship that exists between the poet and his ideas.” Luke (1975, p. 5) concurs that “every great artist, using the idiom of his own time but moved by his intuitive awareness of the unchanging realities of the psyche rising from the well of the unconscious, speaks in images which convey the truths of being to men of poetic vision in all ages, though their idiom may be completely alien to his.” Searching for a meaningful approach became a major undertaking because opening one’s inner eyes and ears to feel and hear the impact of lived images can be a heart-wrenching experience. Stirring a new life that has been dormant for a long time can reveal new truths that are frightening but necessary for a transformational movement towards personal and professional development.

My literary journey began first, followed by my pilgrimage towards understanding teaching and learning. The Divine Comedy was the inspiration behind searching for a significant methodology that would help me connect the pieces of my life history. As Helen Luke (1975, p. 7) eloquently states, “there are poets who bring alive for us the beauty and ugliness of this world, and there are those who penetrate the heights and depths of the emotions: in others clarity of intellect and penetrating thought shine through their verse into our minds; and yet others open to us through their intuitive vision the elusive country of the Spirit. But only the greatest of the great do all
four of these things. Dante’s journey is the bringing to consciousness of them all into one great patterned whole.” His functionality and beautiful poetry began to penetrate my soul. It started sympathetically as I recalled my vivid images of fear that marked my personality and how they resonated with Dante’s. The progression mounted as memories and narratives of feelings, thinking, and spirit manifested themselves with each read chant (canto).

The importance of using a poem as a means of explaining my world and the process of reformation is the same principle that Dante used in writing his autobiography disguised in the allegory and metaphor of the poetic journey. The arts-based approach spoke to me as a way to observe and comment on my life as a student and a teacher. My travels in both worlds would be brought into focus as a vision with no beginning and no end. I wanted to be able to demonstrate the possibility of manifesting my actions and thoughts as qualities of my character. The drama of being a student and a teacher would eventually show progression as the final episode observes the importance of creativity for understanding meaning.

Being inspired to recount my narrative would not be enough for me to inspire hope in others and myself. I needed to find the mode of artistic expression that would provide the intellectual framework and discipline to verse ideas that would be otherwise, difficult to explain. Furthermore, I wanted to acquaint myself with the contemplative practice of achieving balance. It seemed that I was always complaining about my professional life and unhappy about my personal decisions in selecting a career that only enhanced feelings of stress. I was in search of that special experience that would help me connect the loose pieces of my life. That special experience was
incorporating the Divine Comedy into my research and allowing it to merge with my life history.

"The Divine Comedy is a study of what man through the exercise of his free will can make of himself and of the society of which he is a part. Dante believes that man is a rational social animal who lives in ever widening circles of the temporal social order: as a member of a family, a community, a state, and a world-state, which he called empire. He believes, moreover, that these social groups are not mere aggregates of individuals like a heap of kernels of wheat but that among men there is organic unity because all men are actual or potential members of the Mystical Body of Christ and that therefore there can be no such thing as a private sin or a private virtue. Every act of every individual man has social repercussions. Dante believes that since justice is a virtue involving other persons, peace can exist only among disciplined persons dedicated to maintaining the harmony of the universe. Those in Hell are there because they have destroyed the peace: those in Purgatory, who have made mistakes are now learning how to correct them, are in quest of peace; those in Heaven have attained peace. In order to describe the fullness of life, Dante needs the canvas of eternity, for the ultimate answers to the solutions of the problems of this life are not - for a man of faith - to be found in time." (Fox, 1958, p. 348)

As Dante wrote in the vernacular language so that ordinary citizens with limited education would be able to read his poetry, so it was equally important for me to find a suitable method of addressing the issues of personal and professional development that fellow teachers and other interested parties could comprehend. In a way, the telling of stories was a method to encapsulate all the requirements I had set out for myself. Learning how to shake off the lethargy of self-defeat and articulate my emotional experiences would become my soulful journey and human responsibility. In the book Discussions of The Divine Comedy, by Irma Brandeis (Ed.), (1961, p. 117), T.S. Eliot is quoted saying that the poem "expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing. It is therefore a constant reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary
consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens. if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted."

In my opinion, making interested individuals comprehend my story could be illustrated effectively by engaging in a self-study inquiry. Being able to be the researcher and the protagonist provides the duality that can enhance the perspective of journey and learning. Learning to distinguish the importance of each role would heighten the awareness of how intricately woven each facet of our lives truly is.

Thompson (1974, p. 39), explains the nature and complexity of dual roles, that of author and person:

"But we have learned to distinguish carefully between Dante the pilgrim who faints in sympathy at the tale of Francesca and the poet who put her in Hell. In the case of Dante, this is more than a literary distinction between author and persona: for the Dante who writes the poem is quite literally a different man from the one who make the journey described init. Conversion has made Dante a new man: and from his new perspective he can look back upon his old self, just as Augustine had reviewed critically his pre-conversion existence."

Finally, in adopting the two roles necessary for the research to become a practical reality it is necessary to yield my contemplation in creating a literary piece dedicated the facilitation of others to see and experience the essence of humanity. I want the story to live on not as a philosophical rhetoric, but as a representation of all the strength, passion, and intellect that a fellow teacher has triumphantly demonstrated in the face of adversity.

A teacher faces many hardships in his/her professional development. The constant struggle between trying to achieve their ideals and inspiring the lives of the students they are responsible for while facing public scrutiny is no easy task. Teachers lead conflicted lives because of the pressures they face to sacrifice themselves in school
while trying to maintain some level of self-preservation. The role is constantly evolving as more features and responsibilities are added leaving little room for professional development without causing illnesses or syndromes directly caused by excessive stress.

Raphael (1985, p. 15) writes, "that a career in teaching does not adequately evolve with the passage of time. The profession seems ill equipped to counteract the cumulative fatigue caused by daily tensions and institutional pressures. "Teacher-burn-out". as it is popularly called, is a widespread phenomenon, and its causes are deeply rooted in our institutional structures. To counteract the tendency toward burnout, we need to develop ways in which a teacher's job can be flexibly structured to permit more professional growth and development. There is not an educational reform that takes precedence over teacher rejuvenation. A stimulating classroom environment is dependent upon teachers who still believe in themselves and in their work." Pendlebury (1995, 64) cited in McEwan and Egan states in her essay, 'Reason and Story in Wise Practice' that "in reflecting critically on his or her practice, the perceptive teacher has a story to tell – a story which relates obstacles overcome or still looming large: conflicts resolved, displaced, or deepened: turning points for better or worse: climaxes and culmination."

It is critical that inhibitions are limited when exploring one’s soulfulness. A teacher is especially prone to slander and ridicule for engaging in qualitative research practices as opposed to quantifiable approaches that are being promoted fervently by politicians.

"As a form of research (that is, a process aimed at the production and advancement of knowledge). however, self study is less well accepted in
the academy both because of its recent inception and more significant research and knowledge. Teacher educators who engage in self study of teacher education practices need to be aware of their vulnerable and marginal status within the academy.” (Cole, Knowles, Elijah (Eds.). 1998. p. 42)

Not only do teachers face the scrutiny of politicians, but also of the research community because it does not actively seek the publication of self-study works. Cole & Knowles & Elijah (Eds.). 1998. p. 43 in ‘Reforming Teacher Education through Self Study’ cited in The Heart of the Matter state. “getting self-study work published in most education journals is a challenge. Those who have had self-study work (or other reflexive accounts) reviewed for publication by unsympathetic peers can attest to the conserving nature of the review and publication process. Characterizations such as ‘narcissistic’. ‘self-indulgent’. ‘egocentric’. and ‘solipsistic’ are often used to describe self-study work.”

Self-study practices may indicate to the inexperienced practitioner or ill-informed critic a self-indulgent method of inquiry that promotes nothing more than self-fulfilling rewards. Yet this type of research enhanced by arts-based methods of inquiry could enhance the educator’s personal and professional development to the point where anyone who comes within their level of interaction would benefit from the feelings of wellness and knowledge.

“The story of teaching needs to change. We need more stories of successful teachers whose emphasis is not on textbooks and obedient children, isolated skills and performance on standardized tests. We need to hear stories of teachers who use their communities and the experiences of their students as an integral part of their curriculum. Their stories should be shared, not as prescriptions for lesson plans, but to fire the imaginations of teachers who are looking for other ways of teaching.” (Herzog cited in Thomas. 1995. p. 162)
The power of sharing stories provides us with immeasurable information. Yet the quality of the experience sustains adversity by fostering a deeper understanding of emotional matters. As Paley (1995), states in her essay, ‘Looking for Magpie: Another Voice in the Classroom’ cited in McEwan and Egan’s (Eds.), 1995, p. 98, that “fiction blends with fact, not to deceive us, but rather, to involve us in the emotional issues that underlie every event. Such is the role of storytelling: It helps us interpret and integrate new ideas into our store of unfamiliar images and feelings by dramatizing their meanings and relationships.” Paley further elaborates her point by providing a simple explanation of importance to share stories and their significance in downplaying adversities experienced in teaching or on a grander scale, life. She concedes that by sharing a story it will not be long before integration takes place with one’s own fiction according to the needs required at the time. Paley (1995. p. 98) concludes, “that your story becomes my story. With practice we can join the children in their never-ending sage of enticements, explanations, and entreaties, disguised as stories, that attempt to persuade others to listen to one voice above the competing chorus.” This idea is further enhanced by Thomas (1995, p. 19) in his book Teacher Stories that “if we regard all narratives as belonging to fiction rather than ‘data’ or ‘objective evidence’, then we can begin to apply to teacher texts the canons of literary criticism.”

In addition to facing the criticisms prevalent in the age of accountability, there are other impediments hindering professional development. Cole in Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, (1997, p. 7, vol. 3, no. 1), reveals that “many teachers who engage in systematic inquiry into their practice and profession must do so secretly, in the margins behind closed doors or away from their places of work; and second, that.
while the concepts of reflections and reflective practice have become mainstream in the academic and educational research community, professional contexts do not encourage or support, reflective practitioners or reflective practice.” Furthermore, Cole contends that there must be a connection between schools as places of employment and pre-service programs so that new teachers may continue to explore their professional development beyond the university environment. Not having personally experienced this reality has led me to restrain my knowledge and experiences of professional development and self-understanding because I felt inadequate. Enrolling in the doctoral program, in part, was a way to be able to expand my learning and be able to share it with others but not necessarily with my colleagues or administrators.

Cole (1997, p.22) also presents Jersild’s constructs as impediments to reflection in her paper. She maintains that the realities of a school’s unfavourable conditions such as “large class sizes, unreasonable curricular and other professional demands, lack of resources and supports, and numerous and persistent outside interference have created high levels of anxiety for teachers, forcing many into a ‘survival’ mode.” In addition to the lack of collegial support, there is a lack of respect for reflective practice amongst the academic community too. “The discrepancy between how the concept of reflective practice is understood and practiced in the academic community and how it is understood and practiced in the professional community represents perhaps the most poignantly illuminating example of what we have come to know in education as the theory-practice rift.” Cole contends that a new guide on teacher thinking and research may be the solution to promote greater advocacy for teachers. Personally, beginning with oneself is perhaps the greatest link between teacher-research and professional
practice. Promoting teacher development through reflective practice does not consistently work in a school context and will not work unless individual teachers leave their cynicism and experiences of negativity by the wayside.

“The current conditions defining teachers’ work militate against a conceptualization of teachers as leaders or even learners. It seems unfair to assign teachers a responsibility for which they are likely to garner little assistance and support, and for which there are associated numerous impediments. Perhaps it is time for researchers to take a more active role in working with and for teachers to prepare educational contexts more conducive to their learning and leading. Perhaps it’s time for researchers to redefine both the focus and agenda of their work.” (Cole. 1997 p.22)

Self-study research embodies professional development because it frees the inquiry process from being inhibited from a linear and sequential methodology. Researching the context of self delineates an understanding cyclical in nature. A person is constantly evolving therefore a stagnant quantifiable approach would not serve the individual well in trying to understand their practice and their personhood.

“Self-study for purposes of self understanding and professional development is essentially being thoughtful – in a Dweyan sense – about one’s work. It is reflective inquiry. similar to that widely advocated for teachers. As a form of professional development, self-study is inherently valid and defensible as a sound (pedagogical) professional practice. Its practice has obvious inherent benefits for learners as well as for teachers. and within academic contexts where progressive teaching is valued. so too are those who engage in self study.” (Cole & Knowles cited in Cole, Knowles, & Elijah. (1998. p. 42)

The narrative form of knowing and telling provide professional development in that the idea of retrieving knowledge and emotions from deep within is a way of selectively categorizing the life experiences and concisely re-ordering them to extract meaning and learning.

“Teacher narratives are vehicles for bringing out aspects of their accumulated experiential knowledge. Among the distinctive features of this knowledge is it’s anchoring in the concrete and the specific.
Teacher knowledge comes from within 'a particular school, school system and society' (Elbaz 1991, p.13); it is 'high-context knowledge' compared with researchers' 'low-context knowledge' or 'de-contextualized discourse'. (Thomas. 1995, p. 13)

Huberman's essay 'Working with Life-History Narratives' in McEwan and Egan's (Eds.) (1995) book elaborates the point further by making a case for the usefulness of the narrative in research on teaching: "Telling the story of one's life is often a vehicle for taking distance from that experience. and. thereby. of making it an object of reflection. Cognitive psychologists call this 'decentring.' and it allows. say. a teacher. to escape momentarily. simultaneity. and unpredictability - to explore his or her life and possibly to put it in meaningful order." Huberman elaborates his point of 'de-centring' as a method of changing one's perspective and adopting a new one. He continues by stating that some phenomenologists and other theorists concede that. "interactive interviewing around teachers' autobiographies is a royal road to attitude change and and. from there. to a sort of emancipation from the grooved ways of thinking about one's work." McEwan & Egan (Eds.) (1995). p. 180. confer with the practice of narratives to promote teacher development in that "the narrative language is not merely about practice. it is also a part of the practices it constitutes." This suggests. "that we should not just become more aware of our practices as partly constituted by narrative. but also. and because of this. begin to see our lives and practices as in some significant way changed by our narrative understanding. Where this makes a difference in teaching is that in addition to coming to understand teaching as a narrative. we must come to practice it as informed by narrative and so come to see our own pedagogic values and purposes as contingent and revisable."(p. 180)
Evaluating self-study as a respectable methodology can be measured by the success of the individual engaged in the research and in the readers of the literature. While it is a subjective venture, there is great insight that can be gathered from the personal experiences, narrative pieces, and action research implementation model. As Susan Jungck (1996, p. 175) states in her essay on 'Teacher inquiry in the traditions of social research: “Is it real?” “Collectively these methods address, through the data, questions and languages they highlight, multiple dimensions of knowing. Individually each method has particular strengths and teachers tend to draw on them selectively accordingly to their needs, interest, and personalities.”

Self-study is embedded in action research, which strives to address ways of improving the quality of teacher practice and knowledge. Jungck (1996, p.176) further enhances the reflective and interpretative value of action research as a “valued research strategy” because “it honours their (teachers) keen observational skills, their inclination (indeed obligation) to influence their own environment with an aim toward improving it, and their skill at developing, modifying, and observing simultaneously, on-the-spot! The model systematizes what good teachers tend to do naturally.” Since action-research is an integral part of a teacher’s professional identity it is becoming more accepted as universities include qualitative inquiry methods as suitable evaluative approaches to inform. The link between practice and knowledge is becoming increasingly re-defined. What seems like recent phenomena is actually an ancient practice. The devotion in telling stories, be they of a personal nature or of a case study involving others, represent a genre of knowledge seeking “to gain adherents, visibility, and legitimacy in the field” (Jungck. 1996 p.177). Furthermore, the narrative modes of
knowing also promote flexibility in the inquiry method. Re-interpretation and processing integrated thoughts promotes development and transformation. Jungck (1996, p.177) also maintains “personal construct of narrative or story, is the process through which individuals integrate a multidimensional way of knowing.” Diamond & Mullen (1998, p. 308), describe the multifaceted approach as an important way to learn about teacher practice through the creation of “centres” within the self:

“Educational perspectives can be wrenched from their imprisoning certainty by making new “centres” within ourselves, becoming artisan carousel-creators. We need flying stories that express the dynamic and the creative, as well as the static condition within our own institutions, research paradigms, and daily work. We need to take the risk, even if we become more at risk in the process, of transporting more of ourselves to places of work.” (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 308)

The self-study methodology along with its narrative accounts of experience and research has the potential to provide invaluable benefits for the entire school community. It may begin as a personal practice of validation and valour, but the amalgamation of understandings and processes provide integration and assessment for a diverse culture: the school environment and all its significant members. Raphael (1998, p.15). concurs that the uniqueness of telling the teacher’s story is a “quest for individual meaning within institutional settings” and Thomas (1995, p.14-15), adds that it is an invitation for teachers “to relate the rarely related.” It simultaneously provides “a window on their world and to solicit them to disclose that which has been guarded and privileged.” Cole and Knowles cited in Thomas (1995, p. 150), go beyond the individual benefits of narrative inquiry:

“We see narrative inquiry as a form of professional development at a broader level. Narrative accounts provide in-depth knowledge of teachers, teaching and educational contexts. To quote Witherell and Noddings (1991, p.8). ‘Understanding the narrative and contextual
dimensions of human actors can lead to new insights, compassionate judgement, and the creation of shared knowledge and meanings that can inform professional practice.” (Cole & Knowles cited in Thomas 1997, p. 150)

With every new day, behind a classroom door there lies a wealth of personal and professional knowledge enclosed within four walls. The teacher stands before his/her students fortified with the passion and experiences of a lived life. As each countless minute passes, authentic research is created in search of curriculum development, classroom management strategies, challenging students, and inner personal conflicts. There is no simplistic way of knowing what each educator’s thought is co-existing with. The diversity required to gather information, process it, and resolve original hypotheses is a cyclical procedure of research.

A teacher’s life is indeed research and to be better informed and implement positive changes, there must be an acceptance from all key players to promote this resourceful knowledge, affective reflection, and insightful experience. The acquiescence begins with oneself. David Hunt (1987, p. xiii) wrote extensively on this theme rooted in self-discovery based on George Kelly’s belief that “every person is a psychologist.” Hunt maintains, “Your common sense ideas and your unexpressed theories, growing out of your own personal experience, provide enormously rich sources of knowledge about human affairs. By beginning with yourself, therefore, you are taking advantage of this rich reservoir – tapping what you know about yourself and others to bring out your experienced knowledge on topics that psychologists would call interpersonal relations, self-awareness, individual differences, teaching and learning, and so on.” (p. xiii)
Once there is an acceptance from the teachers that their practice is an appropriate method of inquiry to enhance personal and professional development, and then the challenge is brought forth to the school community to promote teacher experience as a meaningful tool in the school reform movement. Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson (Eds.) (1996, p. 194) substantiate the importance of meaning making as a fundamental quest for knowledge seeking through dialogue:

"Meaning is messy; it transcends what we started out thinking we knew. It engages us with our colleagues – students, teachers, administrators, and university professors. It expands the possibilities of self-awareness. It holds the promise of reform that changes how and what children learn in schools." (p. 194)

The respect and validation of their voice as a meaningful conception and conduct of educational inquiry there would be effective change ensued. Receiving support in a collaborative community that values teacher’s stories transforms what is typical within the traditional confines of a classroom setting. Restructuring teacher practice should include a time to search for autobiographical contexts of knowledge. Making the connection to soulfully enhance the personal and professional experiences is fundamental to attain the liberating goal of living and learning.

As a final consideration of the evaluative discourse on writing the self, reflection must be given to acknowledge the teacher’s truth-seeking perspective on the impact of storytelling. In search of truth can be a misleading venture for it is encumbered with a variety of dimensions. What would serve as a possible assumption for validating autobiographical research as a constructive source of knowledge and teaching is to view the inclusion of the first person voice as a holistic means of communicating practical experience. Ayers (1992, p. 157), encapsulates the essence of teacher lore as a method of inquiry that is sanctioned as unravelling and innovative:
"In teacher lore, research is not didactic, intimidating, or oppressive, but is allowed to be interpreted, shared, and creative, and always in the service of teachers and students. All the pseudoscientific baggage—the authoritative third person voice, for example, the blizzard of propositions, scholarly citations, expert conclusions—can give way to some sort of autobiographical style, some honest accounting of how the researcher's head, this personal, close-in approach, is risky because it flaunts tradition, making the process public and the conclusions open to greater scrutiny. It can also be, for some, more satisfying because it gets at teaching in a way that is more holistic, perhaps more complete. It is no longer sanctified as 'real research,' so perhaps we can just call it search." (p. 157)

Ayers concedes that while there are benefits to engaging in this qualitative inquiry approach, there are also contentious aspects that should be considered. He describes the pitfalls as those of "reliability and validity." Ayers outlines the challenges pertinent to autobiographical methods as: "problems of self-knowledge, of personal biases and beliefs in both gathering information and making sense of findings; the problem of 'good faith' in creating rapport with another person in what is essentially an interactive, collaborative enterprise; the problem of subjective responsibility, of personal implication in the research report." (p. 157)

Ayers presents valid concerns in his portrayal of problems associated with autobiographical inquiry, yet it does not deter him from presenting this research as an integral part of life and something that should be attained:

"The fundamental problem common to this work is an interpretive (an not a scholarly) one: how to simultaneously convey a sense of individual life and collective design, how to move between local detail and universal structure, how to grasp both personal integrity and social dimension, how to balance being both within the research project and outside of it. The value in meeting these problems (apparent whenever successfully done) lies in the fact that autobiography—personal life as cultural window—is an act of self-definition. of self-creation. and is, then, potentially an act of transformation. Only human beings, after all, are capable of creating a public, conscious life history: only human beings, then, can sift through, shape and reshape that history and thereby create a purposeful tomorrow. Imagination—that distinctly human
capacity – allows us to reflect on our lives and to project a future different from today, to focus, not on an indelible past or an immutable present, but rather on something to live for." (p. 157)

Over the course of years a new paradigm has become widely accepted amongst the educational community to validate qualitative research as an invaluable method of knowledge seeking. The shift has classified quantitative pedagogy as one method of inquiry, but not as the sole contributor to radical change. Restructuring the role of research has contributed to the role of teacher. It is possible to search for answers in a more meaningful manner. The idea of 'expert' lies within the soul of the inquirer. An emergence in accepting self-knowledge as a valid source of information coupled with the traditional dispensers of research is beginning to pave the way for future studies. Bringing a teacher's personal and professional life into perspective is reformation unto itself for it challenges traditional preconceptions about teaching and learning. The teacher's role has always been an influential one in a student's life, but now with the testimonials provided by teacher-researchers, the evidence is mounting of their extensive influence on society.

My doctoral thesis on the influential role of self-study on professional development was meant to be a celebration of life. It is an account of my life as a learner and teacher, and how the two interact to provide invaluable insights as to what a life in school really means. The celebration is not in finding answers to debatable issues, but in the exploration of self. Broadening my observation skills, enlisting the assistance of past experiences, and reflecting on the two have enhanced the diversity of what it means to conduct research and to write about life as it evolves. As our intricately designed web of life continues to spin and fashion itself within our ideologies and practices, a growing awareness of life will emerge. I associate my life as a teacher
and learner to encompass this philosophy because my recollections are embedded in the universal order, which is circular in nature, with no beginning and no end. Freedom from adversity comes from understanding the actions and attitudes of the people we encounter and our interactions with them and our own individual idiosyncrasies. Interpreting our teacher and student roles determines a way of thinking. In that understanding of who we have become and how we will evolve lies the fundamental optimism that at the end our journey of thought and action lies the real protagonist and that is the self who embraces the possibility of change.
References


