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# Introduction

## Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

### WHAT WOULD YOU DO? THREE SCENARIOS

- You are a first-year student in a course that requires you to write a paper. It's a course you enjoy, and you've participated consistently in the discussions. However, the paper for the course is due the same week as two other papers, and you've caught a cold. At the last minute, you decide to check the Internet for sources that might help you think about the topic for your paper. But when you get to the Internet, you discover whole sentences and paragraphs that you decide to use as the foundation for your paper—without citation. As a result, your three-page paper gets turned in on time, although you understand that two-thirds of it is composed of the words of others.

*Your professor finds out. What should your professor do?*

- You have two friends who don't like each other. You like them both, and in an effort to make yourself look good to friend number one, you write an e-mail that criticizes friend number two. You don't entirely mean what you've written. You've exaggerated for effect. Later that day, for reasons of her own, friend number one decides to forward your e-mail to friend number two, with a brief note. The friend you've criticized is understandably upset.

*What should you do? If you write another e-mail, to whom do you send it and what do you say? If you don't write an e-mail, what do you decide to do or not do?*

- In your student newspaper, you read the following letter from a student: "Last week was Gay Pride Week on campus and I was outraged and disgusted. How dare this misguided minority force its own values onto us—especially since homosexuality is always wrong? There can be no debate about this. There are simply moral absolutes in this life, and if you don't know what they are, you're ignorant. Public displays such as Gay Pride Week ought to be banned. Like it or not, some things are wrong, regardless of anyone's ability to explain why, and whether we admit it or not, we all understand this in some way or another."

*How do you respond? Would you respond?*

*Suppose someone over lunch at the commons reads this letter aloud. Do you join the discussion? What would you say?*

**ETHICAL THINKING IS CRITICAL THINKING**

Every day, in our personal lives, we face questions and formulate answers. When we do this—consciously or not—we are engaged in ethical thinking. *Ethics* can be defined as an effort to study the reasons why we decide to take the actions we do. This effort moves us beyond what we take for granted and pushes us to inquire into the source of these values: Where do they come from? How are they articulated? Who articulates and teaches these values? What other possible values might make sense to us? How can we persuade others and how can we search for common ground in the midst of disagreement?

And these are not just personal questions. Ethics is a matter of community and national concern as well. Every day, when we open the paper or turn on the television, we confront still another scandal.

- An athlete is suspected of taking illegal, performance-enhancing drugs.
- A health-care worker ends the life of a terminally ill patient in severe pain.
- A doctor's office is picketed because the doctor offers legal abortions.
- A CEO is shown to have fudged the books.
- A professor harasses a student.
- A coach is fired after partying at a strip club and then allegedly paying a prostitute to visit his room.
- A woman's husband sues to have her feeding tube removed following more than a decade of her life in what he regards as a vegetative state, and the court agrees. The state legislature then disagrees and intervenes by passing a new law.
- A business executive goes on trial for allegedly having cheated stockholders of billions of dollars.

How should we think about these stories? How can we respond? What can we do? *Civic rhetoric* is the language we use to articulate our views about scandals like these and the questions they provoke—difficult questions, open questions. What it requires exactly is the ability to keep the questions open, to ask them and to keep asking them.

**ACTIVITY.** Focus on one of the three "What would you do?" scenarios mentioned in the introduction and write at least two paragraphs of response. Write these paragraphs even if you're undecided. Write one paragraph that gives an answer, even if you're not sure how strongly you believe in it. Take a stand. Write another paragraph in which you reflect on the assumptions and values behind your response. What are you assuming is true? What are you assuming is valuable? Where do these assumptions originate in your own experience or education—from parents, from a religious tradition, from encountering similar situations in the past?

In writing the second paragraph in this activity, you have begun the effort to think ethically—that is, to think clearly and with self-awareness, providing reasons for your answers.

### A CASE STUDY: DOWNLOADING MUSIC FROM THE INTERNET

Let's look at an example of how ethical thinking is critical thinking.

Randy Cohen is the writer of a weekly column in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine and author of *The Good, the Bad, & the Difference*, a book that collects many of his newspaper pieces. Here is a letter written by a college student seeking advice about a personal choice, a letter that Cohen uses to raise a larger issue about technology and society.

I am a college student who listens to music I download from the Internet. This is probably illegal and in a sense it is stealing. However, I do not want to buy CDs just to listen to one or two songs. Can I continue to do it, just as many ethical people jaywalk? Or is this akin to walking into a store and stealing something?

—ANONYMOUS, New Jersey

**ACTIVITY.** Before reading Cohen's response, play the ethicist yourself. Take the questions seriously and write your own brief reply. Now, as you did before, step back from your reply and ask yourself what in your own experience and education led you to answer as you did. Write at least one paragraph about the origin of your beliefs. We realize that you might not have thought about your ethical and moral premises in this conscious way very often. You might not be entirely clear about what you think yet. Or certain ideas may seem self-evident to you. You may discover conflicting ideas and positions. Good. The goal here isn't to establish one right answer but to think ethically, exploring the complications and half-hidden assumptions that prompted your answer.

Though developments in technology and recent legal decisions have already somewhat dated Cohen's reply, the underlying issue that he addresses is still very much to the point. Here's what he says:

To download music from the Net illegally is theft, depriving songwriters, performers, and record companies of payment for their work. It is not so iniquitous as tossing a canvas sack over Elton John's head and swatting him with a stick until he sings "Candle in the Wind" (or stops singing it, depending on your taste), but it is dishonest, and you should not do it.

Your temptation is understandable. In a perverse kind of social progress, the Internet makes it easy to steal songs right in your own home while you're still in your pajamas. You might almost make a case that it is unethical of Napster, say, to tantalize honest music lovers beyond human endurance. This is a ticklish line of reasoning, however; perilously close to blaming the victim. That is, even if I sashay around town in a sport coat made of hundred-dollar bills, your robbing me is unethical. Unethical, but understandable.

Yours is an intriguing sort of mischief, less likely to be deterred by calls for individual rectitude than by technological innovation. What stops many people from photocopying a book and giving it to a pal is not integrity but logistics; it's easier and inexpensive to buy your friend a paperback copy. Similarly, technologies will soon be in place to encrypt music so it can't easily be stolen and that make it convenient to pay for just the songs you want.

This is a cogent and reasonable response, it seems to us, but what's more important is that Cohen doesn't stop there. Rather, as a good ethicist, he invites another person to offer his own responses, creating in the process the sort of dialogue—the kind of civic rhetoric—that allows various principles and beliefs to surface. The counterargument comes from Siva Vaidhyanthan, a professor in the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University:

Contrary to conventional wisdom (and the efforts of media companies), copyright is not property. It's the result of a complex series of deals that publishers have made with the American people over the past 210 years. We allow them to set monopoly prices and create false scarcity for a product for limited purposes and limited times. This creates an economic incentive to publish that might not exist under perfect competition. This is very different from property. Copyright is a state-granted limited monopoly.

When I was fourteen years old, a friend played for me his copy of the Clash's album *London Calling*. I loved it. I put a tape in his deck and recorded it. I listened to it for about a year. When I turned fifteen, I earned a bit more money. So I bought the album and recorded over my tape. Is this theft? Is it unethical?

This is also a reasonable and cogent argument, we think, and by including it Cohen is doing the work of ethical thinking. He is opening the question. And he keeps opening it, recording the rest of a very interesting conversation, a back-and-forth discussion. Perhaps most admirable is that Cohen even gives his dialogue partner the last word in the discussion.

COHEN'S REPLY: If you phrase your argument as impoverished young hipster versus bloated parasitical record company weasel, well, it's hard for me to type with my eyes so clouded with tears. But if you acknowledge that the music you're downloading is by the very



emerging and cutting-edge artist you champion, it looks a little different. It may indeed be in their interest to have you do so, but that's their decision, not yours.

VAIDHYANTHAN SAYS: When Sheryl Crow released her second album, many of the cuts received substantial airplay on FM radio and VH1. I liked all the songs I heard and enjoyed hearing them for free. But I never bought the CD. I enjoyed the music enough for free, and felt no urge to pay eighteen dollars for them. This is private, noncommercial use. I paid nothing. Is this theft? Is it unethical?...

COHEN REPLIES: Here's the difference: the band gives its permission for the airplay...but they've not given you permission for the download. I'm a big, big fan of the artist having control over his work. If he wants to give it away, fine. Quibble all you want about the word, but when you take someone's work without his permission, stealing seems a serviceable term....

VAIDHYANTHAN SAYS: I do not mean to glorify or even encourage the further exploitation of artists by anyone—consumer or corporation. What I meant to do with my examples was to complicate your analysis....It is a mistake to see the rise of tech and its use by young people as exclusively exploitative. It depends on the use, the extent, and the context.

"What I meant to do with my examples," Vaidhyanthan says, "is to complicate your analysis." Yes. This is the point.

## ETHICAL SYSTEMS: FIVE EXAMPLES

Over the centuries, various philosophers have reflected on ethical problems, inquiring into the nature of their own experience just as this book asks you to do. They've then gone on to organize their reflections into different schools, or systems, of ethical thought; systems that may have influenced your own thinking, whether you're aware of them or not.

- In *divine command* or *biblical ethics*, moral behavior is seen as dictated by God. We know what is right and we know what is wrong because sacred scripture or some other vehicle of revelation has told us so. For example, murder is wrong because the Bible says it is wrong.
- In the *natural law ethics* of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) and the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1125?–1274 C.E.), the human person is understood to be endowed with certain "virtues," certain natural qualities and tendencies. An action is moral or ethical if it advances or supports such tendencies, wrong if it interferes with them—if it is somehow "unnatural." For example, it is the nature of the human person to live and grow. It is therefore wrong to kill.

- The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) formulated a principle of right action that he called the *categorical imperative*. In this theory, something is simply right or wrong, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences. The idea can be summarized in two related propositions:

Always act so as to treat humanity, whether in yourself or in another, as an end and never merely as a means.

Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.

As the first proposition implies, for Kant human beings have certain basic rights that must be respected. Thus, killing is wrong because it fails to respect the intrinsic dignity of the human person. The second proposition expands the notion to encompass universally ethical behavior: killing is wrong because the world would be a terrible place if everyone felt free to take a life.

- *Utilitarianism* is an approach to ethics developed by two English thinkers, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Its premise is that action is moral or ethical if it achieves the greatest good for the greatest number. If something will help eight people and hurt two, it's more moral than something that will help two people and hurt eight. What follows from this, too, is the idea that the ends can justify the means—that something “bad” in itself may be necessary and right if in the end it serves to advance the common good. For example, killing one person could be justifiable if such an act saved the lives of others.
- In the *land ethics* of ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887–1941), right action depends on relationship, in human behavior as in ecosystems. Just as a forest depends on the complex relationships of various species and forces, society depends on the relationships among people and between people and their environment. An action is right if it contributes to the ecology of those relationships, wrong if it causes those relationships to break down. “All ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise,” Leopold says, “that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (ch. 6, p. 531). In this notion of ethics, furthermore, human beings are not the only beings regarded as having rights. The idea of rights must be extended to nature as well. Rocks and birds and trees and other things are valuable in and of themselves, apart from their human uses.

Of concern in all of these systems of thought is the central question of whether moral values are *subjective* or *objective*, something we've made up and can change or something outside of us and so always true. Many modern philosophers think morality is subjective. The anthropologist Ruth Benedict

(1887–1948), for example, claims that moral values change from culture to culture and so can't be considered universally true (see "The Case for Moral Relativism," ch. 7, p. 619). Political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) builds on an idea called "social contract theory" to argue that moral behavior is simply a set of rules that we all agree to follow. One group can follow one set of rules and another a second, as long as everybody in each group understands those rules and freely accepts them.

This is complicated and tricky stuff, and we don't pretend to have mastered it. We don't think you need to have mastered it either. Our purpose is to help you think critically and write ethically in first-year writing classes and beyond, not to give you a systematic introduction to ethics. But at their heart, each of these philosophical systems is doing what we're asking you to do: think about thinking, inquire into the nature and premises of actions in the world. Knowing a little about these theories in a general way can deepen and complicate your own intellectual process.

**ACTIVITY.** *Think about your reactions to the exercises and scenarios presented in light of the five ethical systems we've summarized. Where does your thinking fit? Which premises match up with your premises? Does your thinking fit into more than one system? Are there contradictions in your reasons for saying what you've said and writing what you've written?*

## AN ETHICS OF LEARNING

"I understand truth," Parker Palmer says in "The Community of Truth" (see ch. 7, p. 627), "as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones."

Think of a sport or an activity or a subject that has held your attention for some time—something you're interested in to the extent that you can tell the difference between novice and professional performance or between simple understanding and sophisticated awareness. This could be anything from swimming to chess to football to photography, meteorology, cooking, a foreign language, a video game—you get the idea. Chances are you've acquired a solid understanding about this field or interest, and in the process you've no doubt done a good bit of research, study, and reflecting on what you've learned. Research, study, and reflection are the basis of ethical thinking.

Here's how we'd explain the traits of mind that make this kind of thinking possible and allow it to flourish:

- a fundamental eagerness to ask questions,
- a routine willingness to try,

- an open curiosity about the responses of others whether they are agreeable or contrary, and
- an unshakable understanding that the process is always incomplete.

You've no doubt already experienced those moments when you suddenly realize how little you know and how much more there is to investigate and practice. We all have. And it's this awareness of partial knowledge and partial understanding, this humility, that makes education possible. The ethics of learning requires from all of us the routine acknowledgment that our certainties are always subject to revision as prompted by new experience and new understandings.

In practical terms, we see an ethics of learning as broadly divided according to the two most common tasks college students face: reading and writing.

### CRITICAL READING AS LISTENING AND ANALYZING: LOGOS, ETHOS, AND PATHOS

Let's start with reading, though it may seem a little crazy for us to start at such a basic level. We do so because virtually every course and subject you study in college depends to some extent on the ability to read and understand material new to you and sometimes unsettling, challenging what you already think or believe.

Think of it this way: reading is a kind of conversation you construct in your head. What you're reading amounts to a voice talking to you. Your task as a good reader is first to hear that voice in your head and then to listen in an effort to understand it thoroughly. Consider these opening paragraphs to Lindsay Van Gelder's 1984 *Ms.* magazine essay, "Marriage as a Restricted Club." This issue has hardly gone away.

Several years ago, I stopped going to weddings. In fact, I no longer celebrate the wedding anniversaries or engagements of friends, relatives, or anyone else, although I might wish them lifelong joy in their relationships. My explanation is that the next wedding I attend will be my own—to the woman I've loved and lived with for nearly six years.

Although I've been legally married to a man myself (and come close to marrying two others), I've come in these last six years with Pamela, to see heterosexual marriage as very much a restricted club.... Regardless of the *reason* people marry—whether to save on real estate taxes or qualify for married student housing or simply to express love—lesbians and gay men can't obtain the same results should they desire to do so. It seems apparent to me that few friends of Pamela's and mine would even join a club that excluded blacks, Jews, or women, much less assume that they could expect their black,

Jewish, or female friends to toast their new status with champagne. But probably no other stand of principle we've ever made in our lives has been so misunderstood, or caused so much bad feeling on both sides. . . .

One example of inequity is our inability to file joint tax returns, although many couples, both gay and straight, go through periods when one partner in the relationship is unemployed or makes considerably less money than the other. At one time in our relationship, Pamela—who is a musician—was between bands and earning next to nothing. I was making a little over \$37,000 a year as a newspaper reporter, a salary that put me in the 42 percent tax bracket—about \$300 a week taken out of my paycheck. If we had been married, we could have filed a joint tax return and each paid taxes on half my salary, in the 25 or 30 percent bracket. The difference would have been nearly \$100-a-week in our pockets.

Around the same time, Pamela suffered a months'-long illness which would have been covered by my health insurance if she were my spouse. We were luckier than many; we could afford it. But on top of the worry and expense involved (and despite the fact that intellectually we believe in the ideal of free medical care for everyone), we found it almost impossible to avoid internalizing a sense of personal failure—the knowledge that *because of who we are, we can't take care of each other*.

**ACTIVITY.** While reading these paragraphs, you might have had a visceral response to agree or disagree. But we want you to set that aside for the moment and ask yourself some questions instead.

- So far as you can tell in these paragraphs, who is Lindsay Van Gelder and what seems surest about her perspective?
- What is she saying exactly? Where in the excerpt can you most clearly understand that message?
- What values or shared understandings does she assume readers will also have?

In short, the first element of ethical reading requires you to listen carefully and to reread, ponder, and interrogate what you're hearing. This resolve may not always be easy, but the postponing of judgment—so that you can inquire first—makes understanding possible.

Aristotle's terms *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* can be helpful tools as you try to analyze any reading or any argument. Some speakers or writers try to make their case by logical argument, or *logos*. Van Gelder does this when she draws the comparison between a ban on homosexual marriage and a ban on blacks or Jews. Her effort here is to make a logical comparison. She's also appealing to reason when she notes the inequity of the tax situation. Some speakers or writers also call attention to their own character and trustworthiness, or *ethos*; sometimes they try to persuade readers by evoking strong emotions (*pathos*).

Van Gelder establishes herself as someone who has been married before (to a man) and as someone who is now, as a lesbian, denied that possibility. By identifying herself in these ways, she establishes some of her own credentials; she's pointing to her own *ethos*. She does some of the same thing when she includes in parentheses the information that she and Pamela believe in free health care for all. And at the end of the excerpt, she begins to invoke emotions (*pathos*)—those “misunderstandings” and “bad feelings” as well as that internalized sense of failure, which she emphasizes by putting it in italics.

Here are some additional questions that you can apply to almost any text. If you keep a reading journal, any of these questions might serve as a useful prompt for an entry.

- What is this writer's subject, interest, objection, or ideal? Where in the text can you find this most clearly stated?
- What evidence, examples, or explanations seem essential to what this text says?
- Can you see clear use of logic (*logos*)?
- Can you see where the writer aims to establish his or her own credentials and qualifications (*ethos*)?
- Can you see where the text appeals to your emotions (*pathos*) in an effort to deepen your understanding or agreement?
- How would you explain this evidence or these examples in your own words?
- What words, sentences, or paragraphs simply stump you now?
- What questions, if answered, would make this text clearer to you?
- What parts of this reading seem clear and well understood?
- What response would partially agree with this text or this author and partially disagree?
- How does this text connect to other texts you've read?
- What personal experience, if any, can you bring to the set of questions that this text discusses?
- What aspect or complication does this text leave out or treat as unimportant?

#### **ANNOTATING YOUR TEXTS AND KEEPING A READING JOURNAL**

Given the complexities of college courses, you'll rarely understand a reading assignment the first time through. Your first impulse, then, might be to skip over what you don't get, and that's a good first impulse so long as you

remember to circle back, identify, and phrase the questions that come to mind at particular points as you read.

Writing in the margins of your own book is one quick, effective way to keep track of what's clear and what's not. If you have a system for making such notes, use it. If not, consider this one: use underlining or double lines in the margin to indicate material you know is important or central to what an author wants you to understand; use a squiggly line to mark those places that seem unclear. (We don't find simple highlighting very useful, unless you decide on one color for the clear, important parts and another color for those you don't quite follow.) Here's an annotated version of the Van Gelder excerpt:

Several years ago, I stopped going to weddings. In fact, I no longer celebrate the wedding anniversaries or engagements of friends, relatives, or anyone else, although I might wish them lifelong joy in their relationships. My explanation is that the next wedding I attend will be my own—to the woman I've loved and lived with for nearly six years.

Why not?

Although I've been legally married to a man myself (and come close to marrying two others), I've come in these last six years with Pamela, to see heterosexual marriage as very much a restricted club.... Regardless of the *reason* people marry—whether to save on real estate taxes or qualify for married student housing or simply to express love—lesbians and gay men can't obtain the same results should they desire to do so. It seems apparent to me that few friends of Pamela's and mine would even join a club that excluded blacks, Jews, or women, much less assume that they could expect their black, Jewish, or female friends to toast their new status with champagne. But probably no other stand of principle we've ever made in our lives has been so misunderstood, or caused so much bad feeling on both sides....

Why do people marry?

Are these the only reasons?

Sounds reasonable.

One example of inequity is our inability to file joint tax returns, although many couples, both gay and straight, go through periods when one partner in the relationship is unemployed or makes considerably less money than the other. At one time in our relationship, Pamela—who is a musician—was between bands and earning next to nothing. I was making a little over \$37,000 a year as a newspaper reporter, a salary that put me in the 42 percent tax bracket—about \$300 a week taken out of my paycheck. If we had been married, we could have filed a joint tax return and each paid taxes on half my salary, in the 25 or 30 percent bracket. The

difference would have been nearly a \$100-a-week in our pockets.

Around the same time, Pamela suffered a months'-long illness which would have been covered by my health insurance if she were my spouse. We were luckier than many; we could afford it. But on top of the worry and expense involved (and despite the fact that intellectually we believe in the ideal of free medical care for everyone), we found it almost impossible to avoid internalizing a sense of personal failure—the knowledge that *because of who we are, we can't take care of each other.*

2nd example

appeal to emotion

Keeping reading notes in a reading journal is another very effective method. To do this, read with your journal open. Copy phrases or sentences that will help you remember what you've clearly understood in your reading and what still stands out as puzzling.

Notice that we've not yet said anything about your opinions—your agreements or disagreements with what you presume is an author's argument. We're asking you to postpone such reactions and to focus first on listening to and paying close attention to what you read.

## PARTICIPATING IN THE CONVERSATION

Once you've started to read something, you've begun a conversation with that author and an investigation of what that author says. That's important but incomplete. In fact, you will find that many courses meet in classrooms (or online) precisely in order to give students the chance to talk seriously about their understandings and questions as a result of their private reading, their individual listening to a text.

Class discussion becomes a way to learn from and with each other. It seeks to take advantage of every intelligence in the room (when classes are small enough to let this happen). We believe that class discussion ought to focus first on understanding what a text says, on how we might summarize it or say it in our own words, and on where the text seems unclear or our understanding shaky. Here, annotations or journal notes become useful: they indicate the contributions you can make and the questions you can raise.

Here, too, the ethics of reading become also an ethics of discussion. That is, good discussion involves the same kind of careful listening we've suggested earlier and the same identification of what's clear and unclear. Class discussion means not just asking questions of the text itself; it also means asking questions when some part of the discussion becomes unclear to you. The aim in class discussion is not to dominate or silence others. This is not a game



of winning or losing. The aim, especially early in the discussion, is to open up the inquiry in order to find out what other people understand a text to say and what questions other people have. Sometimes, you might have answers to their questions and vice versa. Thus, a class discussion builds a community of individuals who share a common effort.

### CONTRIBUTING TO CIVIC RHETORIC: MAKING CLAIMS

Education begins with questions about facts and then proceeds to advocacy based on those facts. To advocate means to declare oneself, to say "I think \_\_\_\_ is true" or "I think \_\_\_\_ ought to be done" or "I think \_\_\_\_ ought to be investigated further." That is, careful listening, questioning, and discussion about texts and about what they mean or try to say is all meant to help us find our own relationship to those texts and their arguments. The ultimate point of study is not merely to understand complexities but also to declare ourselves in response to them. And, of course, we make such declarations in every choice we make: from what we say, to what we wear, to where we work or go to school, and so on. Each choice says, "this is who I am, this is what I understand, and this is what I affirm as worthy or true."

College essay assignments will often ask you not merely to summarize but also to analyze critically. Such assignments essentially ask you to talk back, to formulate a response that shows you have understood some text or position or argument: you've heard it thoroughly, understood it, and have this to say in response. Thus, you make your contribution to the conversation and to the community of people who have also thought hard about the same questions and come to their own understandings.

The key to making such claims in a persuasive and ethical way, in life and in the university, is providing the reasons for these claims. It's not enough to assert. It's not enough to generalize. When Van Gelder makes the *claim* that lesbians should be allowed to marry, she goes on to explain her reasons: the unfair application of the tax system and the unfair granting of health benefits. But notice that there's one more logical assertion being made in Van Gelder's argument: she's arguing that we ought to be fair. This assertion—that we ought to be fair—is a *warrant*. We could summarize Van Gelder's logical argument this way:

- *Claim*: Marriage and its benefits ought to be extended to all committed couples.
- *Reason*: Right now, health-care benefits and tax rules grant benefits to heterosexual couples that are not granted to gay or lesbian couples.
- *Warrant*: The law ought to be fair and equal in its treatment of committed couples, be they straight or gay.

Evidence is often in dispute, as are the conclusions we draw from it. For example, some people might challenge the warrant above, namely, that the law ought to be fair in its treatment of committed couples. They would view the warrant as a claim that itself needs reasons and warrants. As you see, complicated questions can provoke much discussion, and that is our point. The world is a complex place, and people of good will can disagree. But much unethical thinking and unethical writing proceeds from claims offered without reason or warrant. Egregious examples include statements like "women are inferior to men" or "people of color are inferior to white people." We may think such things out of ignorance, in which case the challenge is to learn. Or we may think such things out of a willed ignorance—a reluctance to admit the faultiness of our reasons and warrants—or perhaps even a conscious dishonesty. In either case, we would be thinking and writing and acting unethically. The "great enemy" in our public discussions, George Orwell says in "Politics and the English Language" (ch. 5, p. 461), is "insincerity." The great enemy is abstraction without concreteness, cliché without thought, claim without reason or warrant.

### COMMUNITY, INTEGRITY, AND COMPROMISE: AN APPROACH TO ARGUMENT

Facts are questions with single or dependably repeatable answers. At sea level, what is the boiling point of water, as expressed on the Fahrenheit scale? 212 degrees. Education deals relatively easily with facts, and often we absolutely require knowledge of facts in order to stay safe and make good decisions. It's useful to know how to recognize which mushrooms you could pick and eat and which ones would kill you. But many of our understandings remain partial, just as our human experience is always limited. So an ethics of reading asks us to remember that there is always another text to consider, always another voice waiting on a page or a computer screen. The paradox of education is that it seeks, on the one hand, to make self-knowledge and self-declaration possible, while, on the other hand, it also cautions us against closing off the process.

This notion of education leads us, finally, to the characteristics of what can be called an ethics of argument. Too often the term *argument* becomes synonymous with *battle*—or some other notion based more on war as a guiding analogy—rather than conversation, negotiation, or discussion. If education genuinely is a sort of large, multifaceted, various, and ever-evolving conversation, then its values are not the values of war or conquest. War always assumes the utter rightness of one's cause; to go to war is to assert that someone else is so powerfully wrong that only killing them can successfully stop their actions or blunt their ideas. If we think of argument as warlike, then to silence someone else would be to win, to succeed. Education and argument do go together, but the result should not be silence but rather new

conviction and a willingness to discuss your change of mind. Studs Terkel's interview of former Ku Klux Klan member C. P. Ellis (ch. 7, p. 568) is a prime example. "The whole world was opening up," Ellis says, "and I was learnin' new truths that I had never learned before."

In the same way, we admire the civility of Cohen's exchange with Vaidhyanthan on the subject of downloading. Cohen writes with vividness and wit—"it's hard for me to type with my eyes so clouded with tears"—but also with respect for his colleague and what he has to say. If he didn't respect his colleague, he wouldn't have included his arguments at all. Vaidhyanthan follows suit, acknowledging the validity of Cohen's logic even as he disagrees.

The conversation that is education always benefits from passionate belief, but it never benefits from willful ignorance, intolerance, or an effort to merely silence those with whom we disagree. Our ethics of argument tells us that in order to safeguard our own integrity, we must work to recognize and safeguard the integrity of those with whom we dispute or whom we believe to be in error. Parker Palmer's image is of all of us sitting around a banquet table, each in his or her own chair, seeing from our point of view the great truths in the middle ("The Community of Truth," ch. 7, p. 627). At such a banquet "ultimate certainty" is never possible, he says, not because the conversation is flawed or inadequate "but because certainty is beyond the grasp of finite hearts and minds."

On this basis of mutually acknowledged integrity, communities can be made and successfully sustained. On the basis of such integrity, communities can welcome disagreement in the knowledge that the resulting discussions will teach all involved. Compromise is no enemy of conviction, no enemy of anyone's closely held values or beliefs.

As you read the pieces in this book, as you discuss them, and as you write about them, we do not ask you to compromise your values or beliefs. We do ask you to consider them anew, in light of what you read and given what you hear in discussion. You will likely not agree with everything you read—in this course or any number of others. But education asks you to choose between absolute conviction on the one hand and the acknowledged possibility that you might learn something on the other. If an inflexible, unquestionable certainty is your choice, then you have said *no* to education. In this book, we hope and presume that you will say *yes*.

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*Where Are You Coming From?*

### WHAT WOULD YOU DO? SPEAKING UP FOR A FRIEND

One of the three scenarios we discussed in the introduction involved a student letter to the campus paper protesting Gay Pride Week. "There are simply moral absolutes in this life," the student had written, "and if you don't know what they are, you're ignorant." For this student, homosexuality is wrong. End of discussion.

Let's say that the writer of this letter is a high-school friend of yours, someone you grew up with and like and still see a lot at college. Let's say, too, that one day in your favorite class (a first-year writing class, of course), your favorite teacher uses the letter your friend has written as an example of close-minded thinking and badly argued writing.

*What would your reaction be? What would you do?*

*Would you speak to the teacher? Why or why not? What would you say and how would say it?*

*Would you speak to your friend? Why or why not? What would you say and how would say it?*

Each of the pieces in this section tells the story of where the writer is coming from: the writer's family background, the color of the writer's skin, the writer's landscape and culture and place. Each invites us to look beyond the surface to the complicated reality underneath, the real flesh and blood human being. The point is that our moral values come from somewhere, too. Moral values are never simply out there, for all to see. We are born into them, we are taught them, they are rooted in our gender and ethnicity, our cultural heritage and economic class, and so they can vary widely from person to person. What is true for Maxine Hong Kingston, as a second generation Chinese American woman, may not be true in the same way, or true at all, for Benjamin Saenz, a Hispanic American man, or Sarah Vowell, a white woman who grew up in Montana.

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And so the readings in this section invite you to complicate your thinking—not to abandon your values necessarily but to see that they are not self-evident or beyond discussion. You're already aware of this, of course, as an intelligent human being, but we hope that thinking about the question of origins in more detail will begin to change both the way you approach ethical problems and the way you talk about these problems with others.

#### Opening the Question

*After reading and discussing several of the selections in this chapter, return to the situation above. Now what would you do? Write an essay answering this question, drawing on at least two of the selections. You don't need to have changed your mind, but you do need to demonstrate how the reading has complicated your thinking.*

## BENJAMIN SAENZ

### *Exile: El Paso, Texas*

*WE START THE BOOK with a piece that frames the chapter's question in terms at once ethnic, political, and personal. Benjamin Saenz (b. 1955) was a graduate student studying in El Paso when he was stopped and asked "Where are you from?" by the U.S. Border Patrol, an incident that informs the selection reprinted here.*

*Now teaching English at the University of Texas at El Paso, where he is a member of the Chicano Studies Research Program, Saenz has written two collections of poetry, two novels (including *The House of Forgetting*, 1998), a short-story collection, and two children's books. "Exile: El Paso, Texas" is an excerpt from *Flowers for the Broken* (1992).*

That morning—when the day was new, when the sun slowly touched the sky, almost afraid to break it—that morning I looked out my window and stared at the Juárez Mountains. Mexican purples—burning. I had always thought of them as sacraments of belonging. That was the first time it happened. It had happened to others, but it had never happened to me. And when it happened, it started a fire, a fire that will burn for a long time.

As I walked to school, I remember thinking what a perfect place Sunset Heights was: turn of the century houses intact; remodeled houses painted pink and turquoise; old homes tastefully gentrified by the aspiring young; the rundown Sunset Grocery store decorated with the protest art of graffiti on one end and a plastic-signed "Circle K" on the other.

This was the edge of the piece of paper that was America, the border that bordered the University—its buildings, its libraries; the border that bordered the freeway—its cars coming and going, coming and going endlessly; the border that bordered downtown—its banks and businesses and bars; the border that bordered the border between two countries.

The unemployed poor from Juárez knocking on doors and asking for jobs—or money—or food. Small parks filled with people whose English did not exist. The upwardly mobile living next to families whose only concern was getting enough money to pay next month's rent. Some had lived here for generations, would continue living here into the next century; others would live here a few days. All this color, all this color, all this color beneath the shadow of the Juárez Mountains. Sunset Heights: a perfect place with a perfect name, and a perfect view of the river.

After class, I went by my office and drank a cup of coffee, sat and read, and did some writing. It was a quiet day on campus, nothing but me and my

work—the kind of day the mind needs to catch up with itself, the kind of uneventful day so necessary for living. I started walking home at about three o'clock, after I had put my things together in my torn backpack. I made a mental note to sew the damn thing. *One day everything's gonna come tumbling out—better sew it.* I'd made that mental note before.

Walking down Prospect, I thought maybe I'd go for a jog. I hoped the spring would not bring too much wind this year. The wind, common desert rain; the wind blew too hard and harsh sometimes; the wind unsettled the desert—upset things, ruined the calmness of the spring. My mind wandered, searched the black asphalt littered with torn papers; the chained dogs in the yards who couldn't hurt me; the even bricks of all the houses I passed. I belonged here, yes. I belonged. Thoughts entered like children running through a park. This year, maybe the winds would not come.

I didn't notice the green car drive up and stop right next to me as I walked. The border patrol interrupted my daydreaming: "Where are you from?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure who the agent, a woman, was addressing.

She repeated the question in Spanish, "*¿De dónde eres?*"

Without thinking, I almost answered her question—in Spanish. A reflex. I caught myself in midsentence and stuttered in a nonlanguage.

"*¿Dónde naciste?*" she asked again.

By then my mind had cleared, and quietly I said: "I'm a U.S. citizen."

"Were you born in the United States?"

She was browner than I was. I might have asked her the same question. I looked at her for awhile—searching for something I recognized.

"Yes," I answered.

"Where in the United States were you born?"

"In New Mexico."

"Where in New Mexico?"

"Las Cruces."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a student."

"And are you employed?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?" She didn't like my answer. Her tone bordered on anger. I looked at her expression and decided it wasn't hurting anyone to answer her questions. It was all very innocent, just a game we were playing.

"I work at the University as a teaching assistant."

She didn't respond. She looked at me as if I were a blank. Her eyes were filling in the empty spaces as she looked at my face. I looked at her for a second and decided she was finished with me. I started walking away. "Are you sure you were born in Las Cruces?" she asked again.

I turned around and smiled, "Yes, I'm sure." She didn't smile back. She and the driver sat there for awhile and watched me as I continued walking. They drove past me slowly and then proceeded down the street.



I didn't much care for the color of their cars.

"Sons of bitches," I whispered, "pretty soon I'll have to carry a passport in my own neighborhood." I said it to be flippant; something in me rebelled against people dressed in uniforms. I wasn't angry—not then, not at first, not really angry. In less than ten minutes I was back in my apartment playing the scene again and again in my mind. It was like a video I played over and over—memorizing the images. Something was wrong. I was embarrassed, ashamed because I'd been so damned compliant like a piece of tin foil in the uniformed woman's hand. Just like a child in the principal's office, in trouble for speaking Spanish. "I should have told that witch exactly what I thought of her and her green car and her green uniform."

I lit a cigarette and told myself I was overreacting. "Breathe in—breathe 30 out—breathe in—breathe out—no big deal—you live on a border. These things happen—just one of those things. Just a game..." I changed into my jogging clothes and went for a run. At the top of the hill on Sunbowl Drive, I stopped to stare at the Juárez Mountains. I felt the sweat run down my face. I kept running until I could no longer hear *Are you sure you were born in Las Cruces?* ringing in my ears.

School let out in early May. I spent the last two weeks of that month relaxing and working on some paintings. In June I got back to working on my stories. I had a working title, which I hated, but I hated it less than the actual stories I was writing. It would come to nothing; I knew it would come to nothing.

From my window I could see the freeway. It was then I realized that not a day went by when I didn't see someone running across the freeway or walking down the street looking out for someone. They were people who looked not so different from me—except that they lived their lives looking over their shoulders.

One Thursday, I saw the border patrol throw some men into their van—throw them—as if they were born to be thrown like baseballs, like rings in a carnival ringtoss, easy inanimate objects, dead bucks after a deer hunt. The illegals didn't even put up a fight. They were aliens, from somewhere else, somewhere foreign, and it did not matter that the "somewhere else" was as close as an eyelash to an eye. What mattered was that someone had once drawn a line, and once drawn, that line became indelible and hard and could not be crossed.

The men hung their heads so low that they almost scraped the littered asphalt. Whatever they felt, they did not show; whatever burned did not burn for an audience. I sat at my typewriter and tried to pretend I saw nothing. *What do you think happens when you peer out windows? Buy curtains.*

I didn't write the rest of the day. I kept seeing the border patrol 35 woman against a blue sky turning green. I thought of rearranging my desk so I wouldn't be next to the window, but I thought of the mountains. No, I would keep my desk near the window, but I would look only at the mountains.

Two weeks later, I went for a walk. The stories weren't going well that day; my writing was getting worse instead of better; my characters were getting on my nerves—I didn't like them—no one else would like them either. They did not burn with anything. I hadn't showered, hadn't shaved, hadn't combed my hair. I threw some water on my face and walked out the door. It was summer; it was hot; it was afternoon, the time of day when everything felt as if it were on fire. The worst time of the day to take a walk. I wiped the sweat from my eyelids; it instantly reappeared. I wiped it off again, but the sweat came pouring out—a leak in the dam. Let it leak. I laughed. A hundred degrees in the middle of a desert afternoon. Laughter poured out of me as fast as my sweat. I turned the corner and headed back home. I saw the green van. It was parked right ahead of me.

A man about my height got out of the van and approached me. Another man, taller, followed him. “¿Tienes tus papeles?” he asked. His gringo accent was as thick as the sweat on my skin.

“I can speak English,” I said. I started to add: *I can probably speak it better than you*, but I stopped myself. No need to be aggressive, no need to get any hotter.

“Do you live in this neighborhood?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Down the street.”

“Where down the street?”

“Are you planning on making a social visit?”

He gave me a hard look—cold and blue—then looked at his partner. He didn't like me. I didn't care. I liked that he hated me. It made it easier.

I watched them drive away and felt as hot as the air, felt as hot as the heat that was burning away the blue in the sky.

There were other times when I felt watched. Sometimes, when I jogged, the green vans would slow down, eye me. I felt like prey, like a rabbit who smelled the hunter. I pretended not to notice them. I stopped pretending. I started noting their presence in our neighborhood more and more. I started growing suspicious of my own observations. Of course, they weren't everywhere. But they *were* everywhere. I had just been oblivious to their presence, had been oblivious because they had nothing to do with me; their presence had something to do with someone else. I was not a part of this. I wanted no part of it. The green cars and the green vans clashed with the purples of the Juárez Mountains. Nothing looked the same. I never talked about their presence to other people. Sometimes the topic of the *Migra* would come up in conversations. I felt the burning; I felt the anger, would control it. I casually referred to them as the Gestapo, the traces of rage carefully hidden from the expression on my face—and everyone would laugh. I hated them.

When school started in the fall, I was stopped again. Again I had been walking home from the University. I heard the familiar question: "Where are you from?"

"Leave me alone."

"Are you a citizen of the United States?"

"Yes."

"Can you prove it?"

"No. No, I can't."

He looked at my clothes: jeans, tennis shoes, and a casual California shirt. He noticed my backpack full of books.

"You a student?"

I nodded and stared at him.

"There isn't any need to be unfriendly—"

"I'd like you to leave me alone."

"Just doing my job," he laughed. I didn't smile back. *Terrorists. Nazis did their jobs. Death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala did their jobs, too.* An unfair analogy. An unfair analogy? Yes, unfair. I thought it; I felt it; it was no longer my job to excuse—someone else would have to do that, someone else. The Juárez Mountains did not seem purple that fall. They no longer burned with color.

In early January I went with Michael to Juárez. Michael was from New York, 60 and he had come to work in a home for the homeless in South El Paso. We weren't in Juárez very long—just looking around and getting gas. Gas was cheap in Juárez. On the way back, the customs officer asked us to declare our citizenship. "U.S. citizen," I said. "U.S. citizen," Michael followed. The customs officer lowered his head and poked it in the car. "What are you bringing over?"

"Nothing."

He looked at me. "Where in the United States were you born?"

"In Las Cruces, New Mexico."

He looked at me awhile longer. "Go ahead," he signaled.

I noticed that he didn't ask Michael where he was from. But Michael 65 had blue eyes; Michael had white skin. Michael didn't have to tell the man in the uniform where he was from.

That winter, Sunset Heights seemed deserted to me. The streets were empty like the river. One morning, I was driving down Upson Street toward the University, the wind shaking the limbs of the bare trees. Nothing to shield them—unprotected by green leaves. The sun burned a dull yellow. In front of me, I noticed two border patrol officers chasing someone, though that someone was not visible. One of them put his hand out, signaling me to slow down as they ran across the street in front of my car. They were running with their billy clubs in hand. The wind blew at their backs as if to urge them on, as if to carry them.

In late January, Michael and I went to Juárez again. A friend of his was in town, and he wanted to see Juárez. We walked across the bridge across the river, across the line into another country. It was easy. No one there to stop us. We walked the streets of Juárez, streets that had seen better years, that were tired now from the tired feet that walked them. Michael's friend wanted to know how it was that there were so many beggars. "Were there always so many? Has it always been this way?" He didn't know how it had always been. We sat in the Cathedral and in an old chapel next to it and watched people rubbing the feet of statues; when I touched a statue it was warmer than my own hand. We walked in the marketplace and inhaled the smells. Grocery stores in the country I knew did not have such smells. On the way back we stopped in a small bar and had a beer. The beer was cold and cheap. Walking back over the bridge, we stopped at the top and looked out at the city of El Paso. "It actually looks pretty from here, doesn't it?" I said. Michael nodded. It did look pretty. We looked off to the side—down the river—and for a long time watched the people trying to get across. Michael's friend said it was like watching *The CBS Evening News*.

As we reached the customs building, we noticed that a border patrol van pulled up behind the building where the other green cars were parked. The officers jumped out of the van and threw a handcuffed man against one of the parked cars. It looked like they were going to beat him. Two more border patrol officers pulled up in a car and jumped out to join them. One of the officers noticed we were watching. They straightened the man out and walked him inside—like gentlemen. They would have beat him. They would have beat him. But we were watching.

My fingers wanted to reach through the wire fence, not to touch it, not to feel it, but to break it down, to melt it down with what I did not understand. The burning was not there to be understood. Something was burning, the side of me that knew I was treated different, would always be treated different because I was born on a particular side of a fence, a fence that separated me from others, that separated me from the past, that separated me from the country of my genesis and glued me to the country I did not love because it demanded something of me I could not give. Something was burning now, and if I could have grasped the source of that rage and held it in my fist, I would have melted that fence. Someone built that fence; someone could tear it down. Maybe I could tear it down; maybe I was the one. Maybe then I would no longer be separated.

The first day in February, I was walking to a downtown Chevron station to pick up my car. On the corner of Prospect and Upson, a green car was parked—just sitting there. A part of my landscape. I was walking on the opposite side of the street. For some reason, I knew they were going to stop me. My heart clenched like a fist; the muscles in my back knotted up. *Maybe they'll leave me alone. I should have taken a shower this morning. I should have worn a nicer sweater.*

*I should have put on a pair of socks, worn a nicer pair of shoes. I should have cut my hair; I should have shaved...*

The driver rolled down his window. I saw him from the corner of my eye. He called me over to him—*whistled me over*—much like he'd call a dog. I kept walking. He whistled me over again. *Here, boy.* I stopped for a second. Only a second. I kept walking. The border patrol officer and a policeman rushed out of the car and ran toward me. I was sure they were going to tackle me, drag me to the ground, handcuff me. They stopped in front of me.

"Can I see your driver's license?" the policeman asked.

"Since when do you need a driver's license to walk down the street?" Our eyes met. "Did I do something against the law?"

The policeman was annoyed. He wanted me to be passive, to say: "Yes, sir." He wanted me to approve of his job.

"Don't you know what we do?"

"Yes, I know what you do."

"Don't give me a hard time. I don't want trouble. I just want to see some identification."

I looked at him—looked, and saw what would not go away: neither him, nor his car, nor his job, nor what I knew, nor what I felt. He stared back. He hated me as much as I hated him. He saw the bulge of my cigarettes under my sweater and crumpled them.

I backed away from his touch. "I smoke. It's not good for me, but it's not against the law. Not yet, anyway. Don't touch me. I don't like that. Read me my rights, throw me in the can, or leave me alone." I smiled.

"No one's charging you with anything."

My eyes followed them as they walked back to their car. Now it was war, and *I had won this battle*. Had I won this battle? Had I won?

This spring morning, I sit at my desk, wait for the coffee to brew, and look out my window. This day, like every day, I look out my window. Across the street, a border patrol van stops and an officer gets out. So close I could touch him. On the freeway—this side of the river—a man is running. I put on my glasses. I am afraid he will be run over by the cars. I cheer for him. *Be careful. Don't get run over.* So close to the other side he can touch it. The border patrol officer gets out his walkie-talkie and runs toward the man who has disappeared from my view. I go and get my cup of coffee. I take a drink—slowly, it mixes with yesterday's tastes in my mouth. The officer in the green uniform comes back into view. He has the man with him. He puts him in the van. I can't see the color in their eyes. I see only the green. They drive away. There is no trace that says they've been there. The mountains watch the scene and say nothing. The mountains, ablaze in the spring light, have been watching—and guarding—and keeping silent longer than I have been alive. They will continue their vigil long after I am dead.

The green vans. They are taking someone away. They are taking. Green vans. This is my home, I tell myself. But I am not sure if I want this to be my home anymore. The thought crosses my mind to walk out of my apartment without my wallet. The thought crosses my mind that maybe the *Migra* will stop me again. I will let them arrest me. I will let them warehouse me. I will let them push me in front of a judge who will look at me like he has looked at the millions before me. I will be sent back to Mexico. I will let them treat me like I am illegal. But the thoughts pass. I am not brave enough to let them do that to me.

Today, the spring winds blow outside my window. The reflections in the pane, graffiti burning questions into the glass: *Sure you were born... Identification... Do you live?...* The winds will unsettle the desert—cover Sunset Heights with green dust. The vans will stay in my mind forever. I cannot banish them. I cannot banish their questions: *Where are you from?* I no longer know.

This is a true story.

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#### WHAT DOES HE SAY?

1. Benjamin Saenz's essay begins as a narrative: it tells a story. What are the bare bones of his story, as you understand them? Make a list of the crucial facts.
2. What's the significance of the questions the border patrol asks Saenz as he walks down Prospect Street, and why do these questions shake him?
3. Of course, the border patrol officers in this essay are merely doing their job. What is that job? Why do they so frequently ask Saenz "Where are you from?"
4. The base of the Statue of Liberty carries an inscription that reads, in part, "Give me.../Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Discuss the extent to which immigration is the best thing that has happened to America or one of the worst. Think about this first in terms of your own family's history.
5. Explain how you, too, have been understood or judged merely on the basis of where you're from or how you appear. Were the judgments accurate? Positive or negative? How much did those who judged you actually know about you as a person?

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

6. What assertions about freedom and citizenship do you think that Benjamin Saenz would make? Would he agree that people born across the river in Juárez ought to be treated differently than people born on the U.S. side? Whatever assertions you believe he would make, explain them carefully and back them by citing evidence from Saenz's essay. End by discussing the reasons that you would agree or disagree

with them. Include in your discussion some explanation of how your own experiences matter (or do not matter) in your analysis.

7. Discuss your own idea of home—what it is, how it's identified in terms of family, culture, community, government, and so on. Include whatever seems important. Use Saenz's essay and your own experience to explain how and why your idea of home makes sense to you.
8. Write about your experience crossing a border and finding yourself on the other side, in unfamiliar territory. Did you change simply because you had crossed that border? Did people's opinions of you change once you were on the other side? Compare your experiences and reactions to those you see in the Saenz essay. Then explain how the Saenz essay helps you better understand the effects that borders have on those who cross them or live on the "wrong side" and those who benefit by living on the "right side."

#### WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?

9. After completing Benjamin Saenz's essay, read Sarah Vowell's "Shooting Dad" (p. 29) and Winona LaDuke's "Voices from White Earth" (p. 72). Assume that all three essays are responses to the question, "Where do you come from?" How do LaDuke's and Vowell's answers overlap with or seem different from the responses and answers you see in Saenz's essay?
10. Read Bernard Cooper's "A Clack of Tiny Sparks" (p. 314) together with Saenz's essay. Clearly, both Saenz and Cooper feel uncomfortable in settings they wished were more welcoming. How do their experiences significantly differ? What dilemmas or choices do they face as each author seeks to be at home where he is?



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SARAH VOWELL

## *Shooting Dad*

*MUST WE AFFIRM EVERYTHING* about where we've come from? Sarah Vowell (b. 1969) doesn't. Witty in tone but serious in subject, this essay addresses the possibility that one might substantially disagree with one or both parents. Thus, where one is coming from might not be the same as what one chooses to affirm.

Vowell's essays have appeared in *Esquire*, *GQ*, and the *Village Voice*. A contributing editor for National Public Radio's *This American Life*, she has published two essay collections, *Radio On: A Listener's Diary* (1998) and *Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World* (2001), from which "Shooting Dad" is excerpted.

If you were passing by the house where I grew up during my teenage years and it happened to be before Election Day, you wouldn't have needed to come inside to see that it was a house divided. You could have looked at the Democratic campaign poster in the upstairs window and the Republican one in the downstairs window and seen our home for the Civil War battleground it was. I'm not saying who was the Democrat or who was the Republican—my father or I—but I will tell you that I have never subscribed to *Guns & Ammo*, that I did not plaster the family vehicle with National Rifle Association stickers, and that hunter's orange was never my color.

About the only thing my father and I agree on is the Constitution, though I'm partial to the First Amendment, while he's always favored the Second.

I am a gunsmith's daughter. I like to call my parents' house, located on a quiet residential street in Bozeman, Montana, the United States of Firearms. Guns were everywhere: the so-called pretty ones like the circa 1850 walnut muzzleloader hanging on the wall, Dad's clients' fixer-uppers leaning into corners, an entire rack right next to the TV. I had to move revolvers out of my way to make room for a bowl of Rice Krispies on the kitchen table.

I was eleven when we moved into that Bozeman house. We had never lived in town before, and this was a college town at that. We came from Oklahoma—a dusty little Muskogee County nowhere called Braggs. My parents' property there included an orchard, a horse pasture, and a couple of acres of woods. I knew our lives had changed one morning not long after we moved to Montana when, during breakfast, my father heard a noise and jumped out of his chair. Grabbing a BB gun, he rushed out the front door. Standing in the yard, he started shooting at crows. My mother sprinted after him screaming, "Pat, you might ought to check, but I don't think they do that up here!" From the look on his face, she might as well have told him that his American citizenship had been



revoked. He shook his head, mumbling, "Why, shooting crows is a national pastime, like baseball and apple pie." Personally, I preferred baseball and apple pie. I looked up at those crows flying away and thought, I'm going to like it here.

Dad and I started bickering in earnest when I was fourteen, after the 1984 Democratic National Convention. I was so excited when Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate that I taped the front page of the newspaper with her picture on it to the refrigerator door. But there was some sort of mysterious gravity surge in the kitchen. Somehow, that picture ended up in the trash all the way across the room.

Nowadays, I giggle when Dad calls me on Election Day to cheerfully inform me that he has once again canceled out my vote, but I was not always so mature. There were times when I found the fact that he was a gunsmith horrifying. And just *weird*. All he ever cared about were guns. All I ever cared about was art. There were years and years when he hid out by himself in the garage making rifle barrels and I holed up in my room reading Allen Ginsberg poems, and we were incapable of having a conversation that didn't end in an argument.

Our house was partitioned off into territories. While the kitchen and the living room were well within the DMZ, the respective work spaces governed by my father and me were jealously guarded totalitarian states in which each of us declared ourselves dictator. Dad's shop was a messy disaster area, a labyrinth of lathes. Its walls were hung with the mounted antlers of deer he'd bagged, forming a makeshift museum of death. The available flat surfaces were buried under a million scraps of paper on which he sketched his mechanical inventions in blue ball-point pen. And the floor, carpeted with spiky metal shavings, was a tetanus shot waiting to happen. My domain was the cramped, cold space known as the music room. It was also a messy disaster area, an obstacle course of musical instruments—piano, trumpet, baritone horn, valve trombone, various percussion doodads (bells!), and recorders. A framed portrait of the French composer Claude Debussy was nailed to the wall. The available flat surfaces were buried under piles of staff paper, on which I penciled in the pompous orchestra music given titles like "Prelude to the Green Door" (named after an O. Henry short story by the way, not the watershed porn flick *Behind the Green Door*) I starting writing in junior high.

It has been my experience that in order to impress potential suitors, skip the teen Debussy anecdotes and stick with the always attention-getting line "My dad makes guns." Though it won't cause the guy to like me any better, it will make him handle the inevitable breakup with diplomacy—just in case I happen to have any loaded family heirlooms lying around the house.

But the fact is, I have only shot a gun once and once was plenty. My twin sister, Amy, and I were six years old—six—when Dad decided that it was high time we learned how to shoot. Amy remembers the day he handed us the gun for the first time differently. She liked it.

Amy shared our father's enthusiasm for firearms and the quick-draw cowboy mythology surrounding them. I tended to daydream through Dad's

activities—the car trip to Dodge City's Boot Hill, his beloved John Wayne Westerns on TV. My sister, on the other hand, turned into Rooster Cogburn Jr., devouring Duke movies with Dad. In fact, she named her teddy bear Duke, hung a colossal John Wayne portrait next to her bed, and took to wearing one of those John Wayne shirts that button on the side. So when Dad led us out to the backyard when we were six and, to Amy's delight, put the gun in her hand, she says she felt it meant that Daddy trusted us and that he thought of us as "big girls."

But I remember holding the pistol only made me feel small. It was so heavy in my hand. I stretched out my arm and pointed it away and winced. It was a very long time before I had the nerve to pull the trigger and I was so scared I had to close my eyes. It felt like it just went off by itself, as if I had no say in the matter, as if the gun just had this *need*. The sound it made was as big as God. It kicked little me back to the ground like a bully, like a foe. It hurt. I don't know if I dropped it or just handed it back over to my dad, but I do know that I never wanted to touch another one again. And, because I believed in the devil, I did what my mother told me to do every time I felt an evil presence. I looked at the smoke and whispered under my breath, "Satan, I rebuke thee."

It's not like I'm saying I was traumatized. It's more like I was decided. Guns: Not For Me. Luckily, both my parents grew up in exasperating households where children were considered puppets and/or slaves. My mom and dad were hell-bent on letting my sister and me make our own choices. So if I decided that I didn't want my father's little death sticks to kick me to the ground again, that was fine with him. He would go hunting with my sister, who started calling herself "the loneliest twin in history" because of my reluctance to engage in family activities.

Of course, the fact that I was allowed to voice my opinions did not mean that my father would silence his own. Some things were said during the Reagan administration that cannot be taken back. Let's just say that I blamed Dad for nuclear proliferation and Contra aid. He believed that if I had my way, all the guns would be confiscated and it would take the commies about fifteen minutes to parachute in and assume control.

We're older now, my dad and I. The older I get, the more I'm interested in becoming a better daughter. First on my list: figure out the whole gun thing.

Not long ago, my dad finished his most elaborate tool of death yet. A 15 cannon. He built a nineteenth-century cannon. From scratch. It took two years.

My father's cannon is a smaller replica of a cannon called the Big Horn Gun in front of Bozeman's Pioneer Museum. The barrel of the original has been filled with concrete ever since some high school kids in the '50s pointed it at the school across the street and shot out its windows one night as a prank. According to Dad's historical source, a man known to scholars as A Guy at the Museum, the cannon was brought to Bozeman around 1870, and was used by local white merchants to fire at the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians who blocked their trade access to the East in 1874.

"Bozeman was founded on greed," Dad says. The courthouse cannon, he continues, "definitely killed Indians. The merchants filled it full of nuts, bolts, and chopped-up horseshoes. Sitting Bull could have been part of these engagements. They definitely ticked off the Indians, because a couple of years later, Custer wanders into them at Little Bighorn. The Bozeman merchants were out to cause trouble. They left fresh baked bread with cyanide in it on the trail to poison a few Indians."

Because my father's sarcastic American history yarns rarely go on for long before he trots out some nefarious ancestor of ours—I come from a long line of moonshiners, Confederate soldiers, murderers, even Democrats—he cracks that the merchants hired some "community-minded Southern soldiers from North Texas." These soldiers had, like my great-great-grandfather John Vowell, fought under proslavery guerrilla William C. Quantrill. Quantrill is most famous for riding into Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863 flying a black flag and commanding his men pharaohlike to "kill every male and burn down every house."

"John Vowell," Dad says, "had a little rep for killing people." And since he abandoned my great-grandfather Charles, whose mother died giving birth to him in 1870, and wasn't seen again until 1912, Dad doesn't rule out the possibility that John Vowell could have been one of the hired guns on the Bozeman Trail. So the cannon isn't just another gun to my dad. It's a map of all his obsessions—firearms, certainly, but also American history and family history, subjects he's never bothered separating from each other.

After tooling a million guns, after inventing and building a rifle barrel boring machine, after setting up that complicated shop filled with lathes and blueing tanks and outmoded blacksmithing tools, the cannon is his most ambitious project ever. I thought that if I was ever going to understand the ballistic bee in his bonnet, this was my chance. It was the biggest gun he ever made and I could experience it and spend time with it with the added bonus of not having to actually pull a trigger myself.

I called Dad and said that I wanted to come to Montana and watch him shoot off the cannon. He was immediately suspicious. But I had never taken much interest in his work before and he would take what he could get. He loaded the cannon into the back of his truck and we drove up into the Bridger Mountains. I was a little worried that the National Forest Service would object to us lobbing fiery balls of metal onto its property. Dad laughed, assuring me that "you cannot shoot fireworks, but this is considered a *firearm*."

It is a small cannon, about as long as a baseball bat and as wide as a coffee can. But it's heavy—110 pounds. We park near the side of the hill. Dad takes his gunpowder and other tools out of this adorable wooden box on which he has stenciled "PAT G. VOWELL CANNONWORKS." Cannonworks: So that's what NRA members call a metal-strewn garage.

Dad plunges his homemade bullets into the barrel, points it at an embankment just to be safe, and lights the fuse. When the fuse is lit, it resembles a

cartoon. So does the sound, which warrants Ben Day<sup>o</sup> dot words along the lines of *ker-pow!* There's so much Fourth of July smoke everywhere I feel compelled to sing the national anthem.

I've given this a lot of thought—how to convey the giddiness I felt when the cannon shot off. But there isn't a sophisticated way to say this. It's just really, really cool. My dad thought so, too.

Sometimes, I put together stories about the more eccentric corners of the American experience for public radio. So I happen to have my tape recorder with me, and I've never seen levels like these. Every time the cannon goes off, the delicate needles which keep track of the sound quality lurch into the bad, red zone so fast and so hard I'm surprised they don't break.

The cannon was so loud and so painful, I had to touch my head to make sure my skull hadn't cracked open. One thing that my dad and I share is that we're both a little hard of hearing—me from Aerosmith, him from gunsmith.

He lights the fuse again. The bullet knocks over the log he was aiming at. I instantly utter a sentence I never in my entire life thought I would say. I tell him, "Good shot, Dad."

Just as I'm wondering what's coming over me, two hikers walk by. Apparently, they have never seen a man set off a homemade cannon in the middle of the wilderness while his daughter holds a foot-long microphone up into the air recording its terrorist boom. One hiker gives me a puzzled look and asks, "So you work for the radio and that's your dad?"

Dad shoots the cannon again so that they can see how it works. The other hiker says, "That's quite the machine you got there." But he isn't talking about the cannon. He's talking about my tape recorder and my microphone—which is called a *shotgun* mike. I stare back at him, then I look over at my father's cannon, then down at my microphone, and I think, Oh. My. God. My dad and I are the same person. We're both smart-alecky loners with goofy projects and weird equipment. And since this whole target practice outing was my idea, I was no longer his adversary. I was his accomplice. What's worse, I was liking it.

I haven't changed my mind about guns. I can get behind the cannon because it is a completely ceremonial object. It's unwieldy and impractical, just like everything else I care about. Try to rob a convenience store with this 110-pound Saturday night special, you'd still be dragging it in the door Sunday afternoon.

I love noise. As a music fan, I'm always waiting for that moment in a song when something just flies out of it and explodes in the air. My dad is a one-man garage band, the kind of rock 'n' roller who slaves away at his art for no reason other than to make his own sound. My dad is an artist—a pretty

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*Ben Day:* A system of color printing devised by printer Benjamin Day (1838–1916); the colored dots or patterns are especially obvious in comic books if the images are looked at under a magnifying glass. [All gloss notes are the Editors'.]

driven, idiosyncratic one, too. He's got his last *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>o</sup> all planned out. It's a performance piece. We're all in it—my mom, the loneliest twin in history, and me.

When my father dies, take a wild guess what he wants done with his ashes. Here's a hint: it requires a cannon.

"You guys are going to love this," he smirks, eyeballing the cannon. "You get to drag this thing up on top of the Gravelles on opening day of hunting season. And looking off at Sphinx Mountain, you get to put me in little paper bags. I can take my last hunting trip on opening morning."

I'll do it, too. I will have my father's body burned into ashes. I will pack these ashes into paper bags. I will go to the mountains with my mother, my sister, and the cannon. I will plunge his remains into the barrel and point it into a hill so that he doesn't take anyone with him. I will light the fuse. But I will not cover my ears. Because when I blow what used to be my dad into the earth, I want it to hurt.

#### WHAT DOES SHE SAY?

1. Sarah Vowell says her home was a "Civil War battleground." Why does she say so? Make a list of the issues and preferences about which she and her father argue.
2. Clearly Vowell and her father disagree. Do they also hate each other? How can you tell? (One idea: consider this essay's title and explain how we should understand it.)
3. Vowell says at one point that she's "interested in becoming a better daughter." What does that mean to her? How does she go about it? Where can you most clearly understand this in her essay?
4. What do Vowell and her father have in common that keeps them from simply fighting all of the time? Find two places in the essay where you can see these things clearly.
5. Discuss a time when you've had a serious disagreement with a family member about some issue of policy or morality. What were the reasons for your disagreement (assuming that you could understand them)? How does reading Vowell's essay help clarify your experience?

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

6. Using Sarah Vowell's essay and some of your own experience, discuss the ways that you think children ought to respect their parents and the extent to which children should agree with their parents' views. Look at it from the parents' perspective too: should parents expect that their children agree with them? Finally, end by explaining

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<sup>o</sup> *Gesamtkunstwerk*: German for "total work of art."

to what extent—or not—you are happy, troubled, or confused about your own disagreements across generational lines.

7. The opening scenario to this chapter (*What Would You Do? Speaking Up for a Friend*, p. 18) quotes a letter that says, in part, "There are simply moral absolutes in this life." Would Vowell agree? Would her father agree? If they disagree, on what grounds do they do so?
8. Use the following question as the basis for an essay. How has your race or ethnicity mattered to other people and to you as you've thought about "where you've come from"?

#### WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?

9. Consider Sarah Vowell's essay together with Benjamin Saenz's "Exile: El Paso, Texas" (p. 20). How do questions of race, ethnicity, or family cultural heritage affect each writer as she or he tries to tackle questions about home and belonging? Do the differences and similarities you see seem significant? Why or why not?
10. Discuss the ways that Vowell and Judith Ortiz Cofer ("The Story of My Body," p. 323) differ in terms of what their essays indicate as significant in their childhoods. Do you see any important similarities? Using these two essays as examples, explain how you would answer the question, "Where are you coming from?"

## ELMAZ ABINADER

### *Profile of an Arab Daughter*

*THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, produced grief and fear in many people. And they raised questions about how one's country of origin can become important. In spare, imagistic prose, this piece gives us a snapshot of a dutiful and fearful Arab daughter after September 11.*

*Elmaz Abinader (b. 1954) is a memoirist, poet, and performance artist. Her collection of poems, *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999), won the 2000 Oakland PEN Josephine Miles Award, and she has been awarded a Fulbright Senior Service Scholarship for study in Egypt. "Profile of an Arab Daughter" was first published in the Fall 2001 issue of *Al Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts*.*

Mother has fallen and fractured her pelvis. She was reaching for a jar in her kitchen and lost her balance. This is not her first fall. She has two artificial hips and was just recovering from the last time her foot gave way—that time, her toe caught on the edge of the carpet. Every tumble, slip, slide, and collapse, we are called. Each one of my mother's six children tenses a little, not because she has fallen, again, but because we cannot turn back the clock, we cannot avoid these repetitive reminders that my mother is getting older and that one cannot recover from old age; reminders, too, that we are getting older.

This time, when she stretched her arm up to the cabinet over the refrigerator, this time, when she tried to reach the peanut butter, it was September 11, 2001. It was just after two jets crashed into the World Trade Center, about the time the towers collapsed and thousands and thousands of people died and thousands went missing, and the nation's and the world's faces knotted from fear or opened in shock or closed in sorrow.

So in the midst of this tragedy, we did not know of my mother's fall until later. The silence of the phone gave no hint; no one knew my mother was in the hospital. Instead, my older sister, Selma, and I were desperately trying to reach our youngest sister, Geralyn, in New York, shaking our phones like rattles, hoping for something other than the sound of empty air. We recited her route to work as best we could remember and tried to judge where her husband would be: tower, tunnel, train, bus....

My mother is curled in a ball, my father says, on the downstairs couch, unable to move. The sadness courses in his voice like a slow river. He has driven her again and again to Montgomery County Hospital, fall after fall: up the stairs, over the threshold, losing her balance standing or sitting. At eighty-seven years old, my mother is worn out by her own fragility. Her body sinks in on



itself, drying up. Now at ninety pounds, this tiny fortress endured childhood hunger, escape, field labor, emigration, three businesses, five relocations, fifteen pregnancies, nine births, six children. She does not recite these events, as her own mother did, sucked into a tunnel of memory. Her old age confuses her; she did not predict her own feebleness.

My mother's voice rattles hollow when she speaks to me. What can we do? People fall. Things fall. My mother tumbled at the same time another jet burst into the Pentagon, dangerously close to where she lives in Maryland. She lay on her side, my father running frantically toward her. She wept into the carpet, scared that she would never get up again. My ninety-one-year-old father pulled her by her armpits, leaned her body against his, and took her to the car. He drove, his vision foggy, to the emergency room.

The day of my mother's fall, my parents' grandchildren were sent home to Chevy Chase from their school in Washington, D.C. Alone in the house, my nephew and niece were transfixed by the television. Slow-motion footage of the second tower falling suspended their breathing for a minute.

As the children flipped through the news coverage, they spotted their father, my brother Jean, who works for an Arab advocacy institute. He sat at a table with a newscaster and other experts, speaking, calming, trying to make sense of the devastation in discussions laced with words like "backlash," "retaliation," "revenge."

My nephew and niece did not hear their father's words. They saw his name below his face, the title of his job, the organization he worked for, all printed clearly against his blue shirt and brown jacket. We aunts and uncles tried to reach them: land lines, cell phones, Internet. Finally the New York sister reaches them. My brother's son asks my sister, "Do you think someone will try to kill my dad?"

My mother doesn't know these things as her heels numb, her shoulder electrifies her with spasms, and she shifts and shifts again on the couch, trying to relieve the pain radiating in her hip and lower back. The television flashes at her but she can take the pictures only in small doses, the doses of horror much stronger than the painkillers that don't seem to reach the fire in her body. My father recites the rosary with her, sitting on the edge of the couch, watching her body ripple as she prays. My mother mumbles each decade until the drugs put her to sleep.

My mother gave me a picture of herself that she kept in the back of her diary. She is sixteen in the picture and has a closed-mouth smile. Her hair is in tight curls close to her head. Her face is open, her gray eyes bright, even in black and white; her nose is long and slightly hooked, and her cheeks are wide.

That is my face, the one I grew into. The one that causes all the trouble. They caution, when you travel, try not to look so...

Arab?

Yes, Arab.



My mother never considered herself an Arab. "We're Lebanese, descendants of the Phoenicians." Stories of our forefathers include their sailing ships to every continent carrying the wisdom of language, arts, and mathematics around the world. These were our ancestors.

### IN PROFILE

Six girls faced sideways, all our noses pointing to the right. Mrs. Smoothe, the Girl Scout leader for the junior troop, inspected our forms, adjusted our shoulders, and pushed our chins so we would be perfectly sideways. I stared at the back of Jeannie Ostich's dishwater-blond hair in front of me. It fell easily into a Miss America flip. Mrs. Smoothe stepped back and pulled a shade off a living room lamp, opening the light so that it sprayed around us. Suddenly, bathed in the glow of the bulb, we saw our faces appear on the white papers hanging beside us. "Oh," we glanced sideways, but quickly righted ourselves when Mrs. Smoothe cleared her throat.

"We are going to make silhouettes of your profile." Mrs. Smoothe walked toward us with her pencil raised.

I was the last in line, so I watched while Mrs. Smoothe drew the outline of the other Girl Scouts' faces. Everyone stood perfectly still, our green uniforms pressed, our badge sashes crossing our chests diagonally. The other girls had gentle lines of faces, silky hair, slender noses. Mrs. Smoothe's hand could quickly trace their images without pausing, rendering their beauty easily. Debbie's blond hair was pulled back with a white stretchy band, Renee removed her glasses from her green eyes, Marcia pulled a spit curl around into a big C. My knees softened watching them, my body slumped, and I wanted to bolt, out of the cafeteria of All Saints School in Masontown, Pennsylvania, down Main Street where my father sold shoes, to our house not far from the auto parts store.

When Mrs. Smoothe approached me, I straightened and stared out be- 15 yond the other girls who were already cutting out their profiles to paste on black paper. "Hmm," Mrs. Smoothe paused, her pencil raised. "Those braids are a bit difficult." I could feel the weight of my mother's hands as she pulled my bushy hair into three sections and crossed the tresses over and under, over and under—first on the right, then on the left. After every row, she pulled tighter and tighter, tearing my hair away from the perfectly drawn part down the middle of my head. Her hand scooped a wad of Vaseline, and she slathered the stray curls that insisted on popping up around my face.

Mrs. Smoothe lifted my braids and threw them behind my shoulders. I quivered briefly. I imagined the profile she would draw—the only one with a hook nose, a sharp chin. It couldn't disguise the chaos of my thick curly mop, it couldn't hide my "large bottom" or cover my dark hairy arms. When everyone saw the portrait, they would say "sand nigger," like Dave Lupinsky on the playground. My mouth will pout like Darlene Pardy's mouth did when she

pulled down her lip into a swell imitating full African lips. Somewhere in the construction-paper portrait, my dark eyes would be revealed and my life would be uncovered. A door would open on the chaos of my home life with nine family members shouting in two languages, eating raw lamb, and trilling their tongues when the excitement rose into a frenzy.

### PROFILED

The first time I was ever stopped at an airport in the United States was on a layover in Denver before a flight to New York. My husband was carrying a laptop, a CD player, a bag of food, and a briefcase. People waited behind us as he unstrapped and untwisted his cases and placed them on the belt. After he walked through the security gate, his belongings tumbled from the scanner onto the little ramp.

Every trip we took together through airports, I sucked in my breath as he fumbled with all his equipment. Always highly conscious of the people behind me, always afraid of missing the plane, always aware of how big I was at any given moment, I believed in traveling light. One purse with a book, a notebook and pen, a bottle of water, and some cosmetics. As I followed my husband through the gate, a security guard raised her hand. "Go over there." She pointed to an empty low table against the wall staffed by another security guard. His uniform hung just a little too large on him. Without speaking, he motioned for me to place my purse down and then raised his hand in a halt. He waved, and I obediently took one step back. Two women joined him and proceeded to take my purse apart. As they poured my checkbook, lipstick, pick, wallet, tissues, sunglasses, and makeup case onto the table, I felt a burning in my legs. I have traveled all over the world; I've been inspected, searched, frisked, and scanned—but here I am in Denver, an airport with pizza stands and coffee shops, the standard newsstands and shoeshine chairs.

They turned my purse inside out and x-rayed it. One guard picked every credit card out of my wallet and held it to the light. They flipped through my notebook, shook out my magazines. I stayed in my position, staring with fury. No one else is being asked to stop. What is this about? What could I be transporting from Oakland to New York that should cause all this scrutiny? The man finally asked me for my coat.

I handed it over, speechless. Behind me, others beeped through the gates and headed to their flights unchecked. Finally, the man poured my water into the garbage can. He replaced the cap and offered me the empty bottle. Soon they shoved everything toward me and left the table. I glanced down at the contents of my purse lying scattered on the brown Formica. "Is this crazy or what?" I asked my husband. "What the hell was that about?"

Later I learned about *profiling*, the new system that was installed at airport security to stop terrorists. I read about security guards being trained in

what a terrorist is likely to *look like* as they pass through security. But not any kind of terrorists: ones with dark hair, aquiline features, deep eyes. By the end of the article, my entire family was indicted.

My mother, whose face I inherited, would never believe I have been profiled over and over. She talks about Arabs as *them*, the other population in Lebanon, her home country. They are Muhammadans, not Catholic, like us. *Them*—despite our common looks, language, music, politics, food, customs. Our sympathy with Palestinians.

And on September 11, 2001, when the country grieved the losses in New York and Washington, my mother and father prayed extra rosaries, my mother's lips dry from painkillers, her body limp against the brushed velvet of her sofa. The television reminded her again and again that the world she traveled through so doggedly to make a home for her family was not safe.

#### BRANDED

A week after the destruction and devastation in New York and Washington, D.C., one news station took a poll and discovered that most Americans think that Americans of Arab origin should carry identification cards. They think that capturing our faces, pasting them flat on a card with our names and addresses, will somehow lessen the dangers.

I do not want to believe this poll. I do not want to believe that suddenly 25 we are all suspects and apart from everyone else, people who need to be feared and named. History is a poor teacher—tattooed numbers flash across my arm, and internment camps grow in the desert of my imagination. My eyes darken.

I try to picture how I would lead my mother and father from their suburban town house to some government office to have their picture taken. "Why are we doing this?" my mother would ask. She has told the story of her mother entering Ellis Island in 1921 and having her name changed by some unschooled clerk.

When I take my parents for their Arab IDs, we will have to decide if my mother needs her walker or a cane. They have been in the United States for sixty-three years, they have attended Catholic church every week of their lives, but they speak Arabic and originate from a troubled region. My mother's legs will wobble under her. She will complain to my nearly deaf father that they are Christian. Doesn't anyone understand? Because they don't realize how poor their hearing is, their Arabic will echo all around them. It will echo off the marble pillars of the government building, float through the air, and crash into the walls.

"We are Phoenicians," my mother will plead. And she will still say rosaries for the dead, for the missing, for her son whose children worry for his life. In her mind, she, like me, will sail away, following the Phoenicians, carrying wisdom with her, tucked inside the fractures in her pelvis, where she will ache and ache.

**WHAT DOES SHE SAY?**

1. Even before you begin to read this essay, react to the title. Write a paragraph or two that discusses what comes to mind as you see "Profile of an Arab Daughter" rather than "Profile of a Daughter" or "Profile of an American Daughter."
2. As you read, note any fact or detail that somehow runs counter to any stereotype of "Arab" and any that seems to confirm the stereotype. Then write a paragraph explaining why you think we have stereotypes, how they persist, and when and how they fall away.
3. Underline two places where you can clearly see this essay's most important points. Then write a few sentences explaining why you've underlined these two places in particular and what seems most important about them.
4. Discuss the ways that your own experience of September 11, 2001, affects your reading of this essay.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

5. When have you been profiled—that is, judged solely on some exterior characteristics (your age, your gender, your clothing or appearance)? What does it feel like? What responses does it provoke in you later on as you think about it? What convinces you—or doesn't yet convince you—about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of profiling in order to anticipate or prevent unwanted behavior?
6. If you were to write a letter to Elmaz Abinader about her essay, what would you want to say to her? What do you think it would be important for her to understand about your thinking in response to what she has written?

**WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?**

7. Obviously, we are not all equal. Some of us are taller, others shorter. Some are born to wealthy families, others to poverty. Consider Elmaz Abinader's essay together with Brent Staples's "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space" (p. 289) or with Benjamin Saenz's "Exile: El Paso, Texas" (p. 20). How do these essays help you understand the complexities of what the Declaration of Independence terms "created equal"?
8. Read Andrew Sullivan's "The Pursuit of Happiness: Four Revolutionary Words" (p. 217). How does it combine with Abinader's essay to help you understand the complexities of responding to the events of September 11, 2001?

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## MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

### *No Name Woman*

IN THIS ESSAY, Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940) asks a series of probing questions as she works to understand her own origins, both cultural and familial. This piece is also concerned with the uses of the story—especially the one told to her in order to make a strong point about what constitutes right behavior.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), from which "No Name Woman" is taken, won the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has also received the American Book Award and the 1997 National Medal for the Humanities. She is currently a senior lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley.

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.

"In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went 'out on the road' would responsibly come home—your father and his brothers and your grandfather and his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain. It was your grandfather's last trip. Those lucky enough to get contracts waved good-bye from the decks. They fed and guarded the stowaways and helped them off in Cuba, New York, Bali, Hawaii. 'We'll meet in California next year,' they said. All of them sent money home.

"I remember looking at your aunt one day when she and I were dressing; I had not noticed before that she had such a protruding melon of a stomach. But I did not think, 'She's pregnant,' until she began to look like other pregnant women, her shirt pulling and the white tops of her black pants showing. She could not have been pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years. No one said anything. We did not discuss it. In early summer she was ready to have the child, long after the time when it could have been possible.

"The village had also been counting. On the night the baby was to be born the villagers raided our house. Some were crying. Like a great saw, teeth strung with lights, files of people walked zigzag across our land, tearing the rice. Their lanterns doubled in the disturbed black water, which drained away through the broken bunds. As the villagers closed in, we could see that some of them, probably men and women we knew well, wore white masks. The people with long hair hung it over their faces. Women with short hair made it stand up on end. Some had tied white bands around their foreheads, arms, and legs.

"At first they threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs 5 and began slaughtering our stock. We could hear the animals scream their deaths—the roosters, the pigs, a last great roar from the ox. Familiar wild heads flared in our night windows; the villagers encircled us. Some of the faces stopped to peer at us, their eyes rushing like searchlights. The hands flattened against the panes, framed heads, and left red prints.

"The villagers broke in the front and the back doors at the same time, even though we had not locked the doors against them. Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. We stood together in the middle of our house, in the family hall with the pictures and tables of the ancestors around us, and looked straight ahead.

"At that time the house had only two wings. When the men came back, we would build two more to enclose our courtyard and a third one to begin a second courtyard. The villagers pushed through both wings, even your grandparents' rooms, to find your aunt's, which was also mine until the men returned. From this room a new wing for one of the younger families would grow. They ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot. They tore her work from the loom. They scattered the cooking fire and rolled the new weaving in it. We could hear them in the kitchen breaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruits, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. The old woman from the next field swept a broom through the air and loosed the spirits-of-the-broom over our heads. 'Pig.' 'Ghost.' 'Pig,' they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house.

"When they left, they took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. They cut pieces from the dead animals. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn. Afterward we swept up the rice and sewed it back up into sacks. But the smells from the spilled preserves lasted. Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well.

"Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful."

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran 10 like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their

offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways — always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence.

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?

If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, "Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?" I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life. She plants vegetable gardens rather than lawns; she carries the odd-shaped tomatoes home from the fields and eats food left for the gods.

Whenever we did frivolous things, we used up energy; we flew high kites. We children came up off the ground over the melting cones our parents brought home from work and the American movie on New Year's Day — *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* with Betty Grable one year, and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* with John Wayne another year. After the one carnival ride each, we paid in guilt; our tired father counted his change on the dark walk home.

Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining — could such people engender a prodigal aunt? To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family.

Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or perhaps he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. Perhaps he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told.

When the family found a young man in the next village to be her husband, she had stood tractably beside the best rooster, his proxy, and promised before they met that she would be his forever. She was lucky that he was her age and she would be the first wife, an advantage secure now. The night she first saw him, he had sex with her. Then he left for America. She had almost forgotten what he looked like. When she tried to envision him, she only saw the black and white face in the group photograph the men had had taken before leaving.

The other man was not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed. "If you tell your family, I'll beat you.



I'll kill you. Be here again next week." No one talked sex, ever. And she might have separated the rapes from the rest of living if only she did not have to buy her oil from him or gather wood in the same forest. I want her fear to have lasted just as long as rape lasted so that the fear could have been contained. No drawn-out fear. But women at sex hazarded birth and hence lifetimes. The fear did not stop but permeated everywhere. She told the man, "I think I'm pregnant." He organized the raid against her.

On nights when my mother and father talked about their life back home, sometimes they mentioned an "outcast table" whose business they still seemed to be settling, their voices tight. In a commensal tradition, where food is precious, the powerful older people made wrongdoers eat alone. Instead of letting them start separate new lives like the Japanese, who could become samurais and geishas, the Chinese family, faces averted but eyes glowering sideways, hung on to the offenders and fed them leftovers. My aunt must have lived in the same house as my parents and eaten at an outcast table. My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all. Daughters-in-law lived with their husbands' parents, not their own; a synonym for marriage in Chinese is "taking a daughter-in-law." Her husband's parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her. But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me. Perhaps they had thrown her out to deflect the avengers.

She was the only daughter; her four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles "out on the road" and for some years became Western men. When the goods were divided among the family, three of the brothers took land, and the youngest, my father, chose an education. After my grandparents gave their daughter away to her husband's family, they had dispensed all the adventure and all the property. They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.

The work of preservation demands that the feelings playing about in one's guts not be turned into action. Just watch their passing like cherry blossoms. But perhaps my aunt, my forerunner, caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted. Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that's all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family. She offered us up for a charm that vanished with tiredness, a pigtail that didn't toss when the wind died. Why, the wrong lighting could erase the dearest thing about him.



It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company. Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either. Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.

To sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him, changing them frequently in order to hit on the right combination. She wanted him to look back.

On a farm near the sea, a woman who tended her appearance reaped a reputation for eccentricity. All the married women blunt-cut their hair in flaps about their ears or pulled it back in tight buns. No nonsense. Neither style blew easily into heart-catching tangles. And at their weddings they displayed themselves in their long hair for the last time. "It brushed the backs of my knees," my mother tells me. "It was braided, and even so, it brushed the backs of my knees."

At the mirror my aunt combined individuality into her bob. A bun <sup>25</sup> could have been contrived to escape into black streamers blowing in the wind or in quiet wisps about her face, but only the older women in our picture album wear buns. She brushed her hair back from her forehead, tucking the flaps behind her ears. She looped a piece of thread, knotted into a circle between her index fingers and thumbs, and ran the double strand across her forehead. When she closed her fingers as if she were making a pair of shadow geese bite, the string twisted together catching the little hairs. Then she pulled the thread away from her skin, ripping the hairs out neatly, her eyes watering from the needles of pain. Opening her fingers, she cleaned the thread, then rolled it along her hairline and the tops of her eyebrows. My mother did the same to me and my sisters and herself. I used to believe that the expression "caught by the short hairs" meant a captive held with a depilatory string. It especially hurt at the temples, but my mother said we were lucky we didn't have to have our feet bound when we were seven. Sisters used to sit on their beds and cry together, she said, as their mothers or their slave removed the bandages for a few minutes each night and let the blood gush back into their veins. I hope that the man my aunt loved appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn't just a tits-and-ass man.

Once my aunt found a freckle on her chin, at a spot that the almanac said predestined her for unhappiness. She dug it out with a hot needle and washed the wound with peroxide.

More attention to her looks than these pullings of hairs and pickings at spots would have caused gossip among the villagers. They owned work clothes and good clothes, and they wore good clothes for feasting the new seasons. But since a woman combing her hair hexes beginnings, my aunt rarely found an occasion to look her best. Women looked like great sea snails—the corded wood, babies, and laundry they carried were the whorls on their backs. The Chinese did not admire a bent back; goddesses and warriors stood straight. Still there

must have been a marvelous freeing of beauty when a worker laid down her burden and stretched and arched.

Such commonplace loveliness, however, was not enough for my aunt. She dreamed of a lover for the fifteen days of New Year's, the time for families to exchange visits, money, and food. She plied her secret comb. And sure enough she cursed the year, the family, the village, and herself.

Even as her hair lured her imminent lover, many other men looked at her. Uncles, cousins, nephews, brothers would have looked, too, had they been home between journeys. Perhaps they had already been restraining their curiosity, and they left, fearful that their glances, like a field of nesting birds, might be startled and caught. Poverty hurt, and that was their first reason for leaving. But another, final reason for leaving the crowded house was the never-said.

She may have been unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, 30 spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection the family lavished on her. When her husband left, they welcomed the chance to take her back from the in-laws; she could live like the little daughter for just a while longer. There are stories that my grandfather was different from other people, "crazy ever since the little Jap bayoneted him in the head." He used to put his naked penis on the dinner table, laughing. And one day he brought home a baby girl, wrapped up inside his brown Western-style greatcoat. He had traded one of his sons, probably my father, the youngest, for her. My grandmother made him trade back. When he finally got a daughter of his own, he doted on her. They must have all loved her, except perhaps my father, the only brother who never went back to China, having once been traded for a girl.

Brothers and sisters, newly men and women, had to efface their sexual color and present plain miens. Disturbing hair and eyes, a smile like no other, threatened the ideal of five generations living under one roof. To focus blurs, people shouted face to face and yelled from room to room. The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones. Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine. Chinese communication was loud, public. Only sick people had to whisper. But at the dinner table, where the family members came nearest one another, no one could talk, not the outcasts nor any eaters. Every word that falls from the mouth is a coin lost. Silently they gave and accepted food with both hands. A preoccupied child who took his bowl with one hand got a sideways glare. A complete moment of total attention is due everyone alike. Children and lovers have no singularity here, but my aunt used a secret voice, a separate attentiveness.

She kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator's name she gave silent birth.

He may have been somebody in her own household, but intercourse with a man outside the family would have been no less abhorrent. All the village were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten. Any man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover—"brother," "younger brother," "older brother"—one hundred and fifteen relationship titles. Parents researched birth charts probably not so much to assure good fortune as to circumvent incest in a population that has but one hundred surnames. Everybody has eight million relatives. How useless then sexual mannerisms, how dangerous.

As if it came from an atavism deeper than fear, I used to add "brother" silently to boys' names. It hexed the boys, who would or would not ask me to dance, and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as girls.

But, of course, I hexed myself also—no dates. I should have stood up, 35 both arms waving, and shouted out across libraries, "Hey, you! Love me back." I had no idea, though, how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude. If I made myself American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone else—the Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese boys—would too. Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense.

Attraction eludes control so stubbornly that whole societies designed to organize relationships among people cannot keep order, not even when they bind people to one another from childhood and raise them together. Among the very poor and the wealthy, brothers married their adopted sisters, like doves. Our family allowed some romance, paying adult brides' prices and providing dowries so that their sons and daughters could marry strangers. Marriage promises to turn strangers into friendly relatives—a nation of siblings.

In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the "roundness." Misallying couples snapped off the future, which was to be embodied in true offspring. The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them.

If my aunt had betrayed the family at a time of large grain yields and peace, when many boys were born, and wings were being built on many houses, perhaps she might have escaped such severe punishment. But the men—hungry, greedy, tired of planting in dry soil—had been forced to leave the village in order to send food-money home. There were ghost plagues, bandit plagues, wars with the Japanese, floods. My Chinese brother and sister had died of an unknown sickness. Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food.

The round moon cakes and round doorways, the round tables of graduated size that fit one roundness inside another, round windows and rice bowls—these talismans had lost their power to warn this family of the law: a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family. The villagers came to show my aunt and her lover-in-hiding a broken house. The villagers were speeding up the circling of events because she was too shortsighted to see that her infidelity had already harmed the village, that waves of consequences would return unpredictably, sometimes in disguise, as now, to hurt her. This roundness had to be made coin-sized so that she would see its circumference: punish her at the birth of her baby. Awaken her to the inexorable. People who refused fatalism because they could invent small resources insisted on culpability. Deny accidents and wrest fault from the stars.

After the villagers left, their lanterns now scattering in various directions 40 toward home, the family broke their silence and cursed her. "Aiaa, we're going to die. Death is coming. Death is coming. Look what you've done. You've killed us. Ghost! Dead ghost! Ghost! You've never been born." She ran out into the fields, far enough from the house so that she could no longer hear their voices, and pressed herself against the earth, her own land no more. When she felt the birth coming, she thought that she had been hurt. Her body seized together. "They've hurt me too much," she thought. "This is gall, and it will kill me." With forehead and knees against the earth, her body convulsed and then relaxed. She turned on her back, lay on the ground. The black well of sky and stars went out and out and out forever; her body and her complexity seemed to disappear. She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence. An agoraphobia rose in her, speeding higher and higher, bigger and bigger; she would not be able to contain it; there would be no end to fear.

Flayed, unprotected against space, she felt pain return, focusing her body. This pain chilled her—a cold, steady kind of surface pain. Inside, spasmodically, the other pain, the pain of the child, heated her. For hours she lay on the ground, alternately body and space. Sometimes a vision of normal comfort obliterated reality: she saw the family in the evening gambling at the dinner table, the young people massaging their elders' backs. She saw them congratulating one another, high joy on the mornings the rice shoots came up. When these pictures burst, the stars drew yet further apart. Black space opened.

She got to her feet to fight better and remembered that old-fashioned women gave birth in their pigsties to fool the jealous, pain-dealing gods, who do not snatch piglets. Before the next spasms could stop her, she ran to the pigsty, each step a rushing out into emptiness. She climbed over the fence and knelt in the dirt. It was good to have a fence enclosing her, a tribal person alone.

Laboring, this woman who had carried her child as a foreign growth that sickened her every day, expelled it at last. She reached down to touch the hot, wet, moving mass, surely smaller than anything human, and could

feel that it was human after all—fingers, toes, nails, nose. She pulled it up on to her belly, and it lay curled there, butt in the air, feet precisely tucked one under the other. She opened her loose shirt and buttoned the child inside. After resting, it squirmed and thrashed and she pushed it up to her breast. It turned its head this way and that until it found her nipple. There, it made little snuffling noises. She clenched her teeth at its preciousness, lovely as a young calf, a piglet, a little dog.

She may have gone to the pigsty as a last act of responsibility: she would protect this child as she had protected its father. It would look after her soul, leaving supplies on her grave. But how would this tiny child without family find her grave when there would be no marker for her anywhere, neither in the earth nor the family hall? No one would give her a family hall name. She had taken the child with her into the wastes. At its birth the two of them had felt the same raw pain of separation, a wound that only the family pressing tight could close. A child with no descent line would not soften her life but only trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose. At dawn the villagers on their way to the fields would stand around the fence and look.

Full of milk, the little ghost slept. When it awoke, she hardened her 45 breasts against the milk that crying loosens. Toward morning she picked up the baby and walked to the well.

Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys.

"Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born." I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that "aunt" would do my father mysterious harm. I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.

In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it. People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further—a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts. She would have to fight the ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns a few thoughtful citizens leave to decoy her away from village and home so that the ancestral spirits could feast unharassed. At peace, they could act like gods, not ghosts, their descent lines providing them with paper suits and dresses, spirit money, paper houses, paper

automobiles, chicken, meat, and rice into eternity—essences delivered up in smoke and flames, steam and incense rising from each rice bowl. In an attempt to make the Chinese care for people outside the family, Chairman Mao encourages us now to give our paper replicas to the spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be. My aunt remains forever hungry. Goods are not distributed evenly among the dead.

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute.

#### WHAT DOES SHE SAY?

1. This essay begins by relating a story that the author was admonished she “must not tell anyone.” What are the main events of this story? If you’re not sure, where do you lose track? Try making a quick timeline of the story (first this happened, then this, and so on).
2. Why does the narrator’s mother tell this story to her daughter?
3. Make a list of facts that you know about this narrator and her family’s history. Also make a second list of the questions that the narrator struggles with.
4. Locate two important sections in this essay where you see the narrator imagining what her aunt’s life might have been like. Write a paragraph about why these two places seem important.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

5. Is this essay the narrator’s story or is it her aunt’s story? Why does the narrator work so hard to understand what might have happened to her aunt?
6. How important are family expectations and cultural ties in this story? How do they work? In the case of the aunt’s life, how and why would such cultural expectations and the actions they produce be seen as praiseworthy?
7. What is the narrator’s attitude toward the traditional Chinese culture of her aunt’s time? How can you be sure?
8. Explain how you know that family and cultural expectations can be hard to confront. Then discuss how this knowledge helps you understand what Maxine Hong Kingston is trying to do in this essay.
9. Ask your mother or father or other older family member to tell you a story about someone in the previous generation—some story that was embarrassing or

suppressed. Why was it suppressed? In hearing the story, what do you learn about that family member, about that time, about anything else?

#### WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?

10. Much in this essay circles around the issue of what can and cannot be said or acknowledged. Read James Frey's memoir, "How Do You Think It Makes Your Mother Feel?" (p. 378). In what ways does Frey echo or remind you of the narrator of "No Name Woman"? How do they differ?
11. Read "No Name Woman" together with Elmaz Abinader's "Profile of an Arab Daughter" (p. 36). Discuss the ways that these essays deal with how our actions can be influenced by the ways others judge us or expect us to act. What differences and similarities do you see in the conclusions or implications of these two essays?



*"You can be anything you want to be—no limits."*

P. Steiner

*"You can be anything you want to be—no limits."*

1. Write a paragraph that discusses what's funny about this cartoon.
2. What experience or time of your life do you recall hearing something close to the same sentiments the cartoon parent says here? Write a brief description of the incident.



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

3. How would you make the translation between the cartoon setting of a parent fish speaking to a child fish and a human parent speaking to a human child? That is, to what extent (or not) is the cartoon's fishbowl an accurate metaphor for the human experience of limits?
4. Can you recall a time in your own life when some authority figure essentially told you the opposite of "you can be anything you want to be"? Discuss this. Was it a difficult situation? Did you hear what you wanted to hear? Did you hear what you needed to hear?
5. What should parents tell their children about what to hope for or what to strive for? Why?
6. Do you believe your own future is unlimited? Explain your position, making sure to do justice to its complexity.

**WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?**

7. Compare the sentiments of this cartoon with those of "The Earth Charter" (p. 158). Do you find any overlap? Or are these two things so disparate that they really have nothing to say to each other? Explain your reasons.
8. Consider this cartoon together with William Stafford's poem "Traveling through the Dark" (p. 172) or John Daniels's "The Authentic Trail" (p. 87). How do they contrast with or complement each other?

ROBERT COLES

*I Listen to My Parents and I Wonder  
What They Believe*

A RESEARCHER WHO HAS long worked with children, Robert Coles (b. 1929) here writes an essay that comments on the personal narratives that precede it and reports the moral and ethical questions that children ask. This essay also reasserts the ways that childhood is partly a time of stories received (from parents, from one's culture) and partly a time during which we ponder large questions.

Coles received the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998. The author of more than sixty books, his work has been recognized with the Pulitzer Prize, and he is a past recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Award. A research psychiatrist for Harvard University Health Systems, he is a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities and Agee Professor of Social Ethics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "I Listen to My Parents and I Wonder What They Believe" was first published in the February 1980 issue of *Redbook*.

Not so long ago children were looked upon in a sentimental fashion as "angels" or as "innocents." Today, thanks to Freud and his followers, boys and girls are understood to have complicated inner lives; to feel love, hate, envy, and rivalry in various and subtle mixtures; to be eager participants in the sexual and emotional politics of the home, neighborhood, and school. Yet some of us parents still cling to the notion of childhood innocence in another way. We do not see that our children also make ethical decisions every day in their own lives, or realize how attuned they may be to moral currents and issues in the larger society.

In Appalachia I heard a girl of eight whose father owns coal fields (and gas stations, a department store, and much timberland) wonder about "life" one day: "I'll be walking to the school bus, and I'll ask myself why there's some who are poor and their daddies can't find a job, and there's some who are lucky like me. Last month there was an explosion in a mine my daddy owns, and everyone became upset. Two miners got killed. My daddy said it was their own fault, because they'll be working and they get careless. When my mother asked if there was anything wrong with the safety down in the mine, he told her no and she shouldn't ask questions like that. Then the Government people came and they said it was the owner's fault—Daddy's. But he has a lawyer and the lawyer is fighting the Government and the union. In school, kids ask me what I think, and I sure do feel sorry for the two miners and so does my mother—I know that. She told me it's just not a fair world and you have to remember that. Of course, there's no one who can be sure

there won't be trouble; like my daddy says, the rain falls on the just and the unjust. My brother is only six and he asked Daddy awhile back who are the 'just' and the 'unjust,' and Daddy said there are people who work hard and they live good lives, and there are lazy people and they're always trying to sponge off others. But I guess you have to feel sorry for anyone who has a lot of trouble, because it's poured-down, heavy rain."

Listening, one begins to realize that an elementary-school child is no stranger to moral reflection—and to ethical conflict. This girl was torn between her loyalty to her particular background, its values and assumptions, and to a larger affiliation—her membership in the nation, the world. As a human being whose parents were kind and decent to her, she was inclined to be thoughtful and sensitive with respect to others, no matter what their work or position in society. But her father was among other things a mineowner, and she had already learned to shape her concerns to suit that fact of life. The result: a moral oscillation of sorts, first toward nameless others all over the world and then toward her own family. As the girl put it later, when she was a year older: "You should try to have 'good thoughts' about everyone, the minister says, and our teacher says that too. But you should honor your father and mother most of all; that's why you should find out what they think and then sort of copy them. But sometimes you're not sure if you're on the right track."

*Sort of copy them.* There could be worse descriptions of how children acquire moral values. In fact, the girl understood how girls and boys all over the world "sort of" develop attitudes of what is right and wrong, ideas of who the just and the unjust are. And they also struggle hard and long, and not always with success, to find out where the "right track" starts and ends. Children need encouragement or assistance as they wage that struggle.

In home after home that I have visited, and in many classrooms, I have met children who not only are growing emotionally and intellectually but also are trying to make sense of the world morally. That is to say, they are asking themselves and others about issues of fair play, justice, liberty, equality. Those last words are abstractions, of course—the stuff of college term papers. And there are, one has to repeat, those in psychology and psychiatry who would deny elementary-school children access to that "higher level" of moral reflection. But any parent who has listened closely to his or her child knows that girls and boys are capable of wondering about matters of morality, and knows too that often it is their grown-up protectors (parents, relatives, teachers, neighbors) who are made uncomfortable by the so-called "innocent" nature of the questions children may ask or the statements they may make. Often enough the issue is not the moral capacity of the children but the default of us parents who fail to respond to inquiries put to us by our daughters and sons—and fail to set moral standards for both ourselves and our children.

Do's and don'ts are, of course, pressed upon many of our girls and boys. But a moral education is something more than a series of rules handed down, and in our time one cannot assume that every parent feels able—sure

enough of her own or his own actual beliefs and values—to make even an initial explanatory and disciplinary effort toward a moral education. Furthermore, for many of us parents these days it is a child's emotional life that preoccupies us.

In 1963, when I was studying school desegregation in the South, I had extended conversations with black and white elementary-school children caught up in a dramatic moment of historical change. For longer than I care to remember, I concentrated on possible psychiatric troubles, on how a given child was managing under circumstances of extreme stress, on how I could be of help—with “support,” with reassurance, with a helpful psychological observation or interpretation. In many instances I was off the mark. These children weren't “patients”; they weren't even complaining. They were worried, all right, and often enough they had things to say that were substantive—that had to do not so much with troubled emotions as with questions of right and wrong in the real-life dramas taking place in their worlds.

Here is a nine-year-old white boy, the son of ardent segregationists, telling me about his sense of what desegregation meant to Louisiana in the 1960s: “They told us it wouldn't happen—never. My daddy said none of us white people would go into schools with the colored. But then it did happen, and when I went to school the first day I didn't know what would go on. Would the school stay open or would it close up? We didn't know what to do; the teacher kept telling us that we should be good and obey the law, but my daddy said the law was wrong. Then my mother said she wanted me in school even if there were some colored kids there. She said if we all stayed home she'd be a ‘nervous wreck.’ So I went.

“After a while I saw that the colored weren't so bad. I saw that there are different kinds of colored people, just like with us whites. There was one of the colored who was nice, a boy who smiled, and he played real good. There was another one, a boy, who wouldn't talk with anyone. I don't know if it's right that we all be in the same school. Maybe it isn't right. My sister is starting school next year, and she says she doesn't care if there's ‘mixing of the races.’ She says they told her in Sunday school that everyone is a child of God, and then a kid asked if that goes for the colored too and the teacher said yes, she thought so. My daddy said that it's true, God made everyone—but that doesn't mean we all have to be living together under the same roof in the home or the school. But my mother said we'll never know what God wants of us but we have to try to read His mind, and that's why we pray. So when I say my prayers I ask God to tell me what's the right thing to do. In school I try to say hello to the colored, because they're kids, and you can't be mean or you'll be ‘doing wrong,’ like my grandmother says.”

Children aren't usually long-winded in the moral discussions they have with one another or with adults, and in quoting this boy I have pulled together comments he made to me in the course of several days. But everything he said was of interest to me. I was interested in the boy's changing racial attitudes. It

was clear he was trying to find a coherent, sensible moral position too. It was also borne in on me that if one spends days, weeks in a given home, it is hard to escape a particular moral climate just as significant as the psychological one.

In many homes parents establish moral assumptions, mandates, priorities. They teach children what to believe in, what not to believe in. They teach children what is permissible or not permissible—and why. They may summon up the Bible, the flag, history, novels, aphorisms, philosophical or political sayings, personal memories—all in an effort to teach children how to behave, what and whom to respect and for which reasons. Or they may neglect to do so, and in so doing teach their children *that*—a moral abdication, of sorts—and in this way fail their children. Children need and long for words of moral advice, instruction, warning, as much as they need words of affirmation or criticism from their parents about other matters. They must learn how to dress and what to wear, how to eat and what to eat; and they must also learn how to behave under X or Y or Z conditions, and why.

All the time, in 20 years of working with poor children and rich children, Black children and white children, children from rural areas and urban areas and in every region of this country, I have heard questions—thoroughly intelligent and discerning questions—about social and historical matters, about personal behavior, and so on. But most striking is the fact that almost all those questions, in one way or another, are moral in nature: Why did the Pilgrims leave England? Why didn't they just stay and agree to do what the king wanted them to do?... Should you try to share all you've got or should you save a lot for yourself?... What do you do when you see others fighting—do you try to break up the fight, do you stand by and watch or do you leave as fast as you can?... Is it right that some people haven't got enough to eat?... I see other kids cheating and I wish I could copy the answers too; but I won't cheat, though sometimes I feel I'd like to and I get all mixed up. I go home and talk with my parents, and I ask them what should you do if you see kids cheating—pay no attention, or report the kids or do the same thing they are doing?

Those are examples of children's concerns—and surely millions of American parents have heard versions of them. Have the various "experts" on childhood stressed strongly enough the importance of such questions—and the importance of the hunger we all have, no matter what our age or background, to examine what we believe in, are willing to stand up for, and what we are determined to ask, likewise, of our children?

Children not only need our understanding of their complicated emotional lives; they also need a constant regard for the moral issues that come their way as soon as they are old enough to play with others and take part in the politics of the nursery, the back yard and the schoolroom. They need to be told what they must do and what they must not do. They need control over themselves and a sense of what others are entitled to from them—cooperation, thoughtfulness, an attentive ear and eye. They need discipline not only to tame their excesses of emotion but discipline also connected to stated and clarified moral

values. They need, in other words, something to believe in that is larger than their own appetites and urges and, yes, bigger than their "psychological drives." They need a larger view of the world, a moral context, as it were—a faith that addresses itself to the meaning of this life we all live and, soon enough, let go of.

Yes, it is time for us parents to begin to look more closely at what ideas our children have about the world; and it would be well to do so before they become teen-agers and young adults and begin to remind us, as often happens, of how little attention we did pay to their moral development. Perhaps a nine-year-old girl from a well-off suburban home in Texas put it better than anyone else I've met:

"I listen to my parents, and I wonder what they believe in more than anything else. I asked my mom and my daddy once: What's the thing that means most to you? They said they didn't know but I shouldn't worry my head too hard with questions like that. So I asked my best friend, and she said she wonders if there's a God and how do you know Him and what does He want you to do—I mean, when you're in school or out playing with your friends. They talk about God in church, but is it only in church that He's there and keeping an eye on you? I saw a kid steal in a store, and I know her father has a lot of money—because I hear my daddy talk. But stealing's wrong. My mother said she's a 'sick girl,' but it's still wrong what she did. Don't you think?"

There was more—much more—in the course of the months I came to know that child and her parents and their neighbors. But those observations and questions—a "mere child's"—reminded me unforgettably of the aching hunger for firm ethical principles that so many of us feel. Ought we not begin thinking about this need? Ought we not all be asking ourselves more intently what standards we live by—and how we can satisfy our children's hunger for moral values?

#### WHAT DOES HE SAY?

1. As you're reading, make a list of each new moral or ethical question that a child raises.
2. According to Robert Coles, how do children develop moral understanding and moral values? Do his views and examples ring true to your experience? Do they seem representative of children other than the ones that Coles quotes? Write a paragraph discussing this.
3. Go back to the introduction to this book and review the section titled Contributing to Civic Rhetoric: Making Claims (p. 13). Identify a claim, a reason, and a warrant that combine to make one part of Coles's argument and write them down.
4. Copy two sentences from this essay that come close to summarizing Coles's argument as you understand it. Then write a paragraph about what you think of this argument.

5. What personal experience does this essay call to mind about when you had similar questions as a child? What adults made a difference or had an influence on you then? Write for ten minutes about this.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

6. Coles argues that parents have an obligation to give their children moral guidance. Should schools also be teaching moral and ethical values? Do they do so?
7. Coles's essay does not cite data. Rather, it offers examples that he has chosen to make his points. Is this an effective strategy? How does it work to make you think?
8. Explain how Coles's essay uses children's words to criticize their parents. What kinds of lives are the parents living in these children's examples? Are there differences between the moral outlook and understandings of the children and the moral outlook and understandings of the adults?
9. In the opening scenario to this chapter (*What Would You Do? Speaking Up for a Friend*, p. 18), the letter writer claims that there are "moral absolutes" which are simply and always right. Sometimes children are believed to think in similar absolute terms. Does the evidence that Coles presents in this essay support the assumption that children think of ethics in terms of absolute right and wrong, or does that evidence support the assertion that children see ambiguities and nuances as they try to understand moral choices and the actions they see others—especially their parents—take?

#### WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?

10. Based on what this essay helps you understand of Coles, how would he react to Maxine Hong Kingston's essay "No Name Woman" (p. 45)? What would he recognize and understand? What would he say about the moral or ethical world of the old China as it is presented in "No Name Woman"?
11. Read Coles's essay and then read the Studs Terkel interview with C. P. Ellis (p. 568). How does the Ellis interview complicate Coles's call for parents to help their children develop moral awareness? What new questions are raised by it?



## BARBARA KINGSOLVER

### *Stone Soup*

*WHAT CONSTITUTES GENUINE SUCCESS* must surely be an ethical question. But this essay asks readers to consider what constitutes familial success, especially when it comes to families that do not fit our cultural stereotype.

An essayist and short-story writer, Barbara Kingsolver (b. 1955) is best known as the author of the novels: *The Poisonwood Bible* (1999), which was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, *Animal Dreams* (1991), *The Bean Trees* (1998), and *Prodigal Summer* (2001). She has recently collaborated with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt on *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands* (2002). "*Stone Soup*" is taken from *High Tide in Tucson: Essays for Now or Never* (1995).

In the catalog of family values, where do we rank an occasion like this? A curly-haired boy who wanted to run before he walked, age seven now, a soccer player scoring a winning goal. He turns to the bleachers with his fists in the air and a smile wide as a gap-toothed galaxy. His own cheering section of grown-ups and kids all leap to their feet and hug each other, delirious with love for this boy. He's Andy, my best friend's son. The cheering section includes his mother and her friends, his brother, his father and stepmother, a stepbrother and stepsister, and a grandparent. Lucky is the child with this many relatives on hand to hail a proud accomplishment. I'm there too, witnessing a family fortune. But in spite of myself, defensive words take shape in my head. I am thinking: I dare *anybody* to call this a broken home.

Families change, and remain the same. Why are our names for home so slow to catch up to the truth of where we live?

When I was a child, I had two parents who loved me without cease. One of them attended every excuse for attention I ever contrived, and the other made it to the ones with higher production values, like piano recitals and appendicitis. So I was a lucky child too, I played with a set of paper dolls called "The Family of Dolls," four in number, who came with the factory-assigned names of Dad, Mom, Sis, and Junior. I think you know what they looked like, at least before I loved them to death and their heads fell off.

Now I've replaced the dolls with a life. I knit my days around my daughter's survival and happiness, and am proud to say her head is still on. But we aren't the Family of Dolls. Maybe you're not, either. And if not, even though you are statistically no oddity, it's probably been suggested to you in a hundred ways that yours isn't exactly a real family, but an impostor family, a harbinger of cultural ruin, a slapdash substitute—something like counterfeit



money. Here at the tail end of our century, most of us are up to our ears in the noisy business of trying to support and love a thing called family. But there's a current in the air with ferocious moral force that finds its way even into political campaigns, claiming there is only one right way to do it, the Way It Has Always Been.

In the face of a thriving, particolored world, this narrow view is so pickled and absurd I'm astonished that it gets airplay. And I'm astonished that it still stings.

Every parent has endured the arrogance of a child-unfriendly grump sitting in judgment, explaining what those kids of ours really need (for example, "a good licking"). If we're polite, we move our crew to another bench in the park. If we're forthright (as I am in my mind, only, for the rest of the day), we fix them with a sweet imperious stare and say, "Come back and let's talk about it after you've changed a thousand diapers."

But it's harder somehow to shrug off the Family-of-Dolls Family Values crew when they judge (from their safe distance) that divorced people, blended families, gay families, and single parents are failures. That our children are at risk, and the whole arrangement is messy and embarrassing. A marriage that ends is not called "finished," it's called *failed*. The children of this family may have been born to a happy union, but now they are called *the children of divorce*.

I had no idea how thoroughly these assumptions overlaid my culture until I went through divorce myself. I wrote to a friend: "This might be worse than being widowed. Overnight I've suffered the same losses—companionship, financial and practical support, my identity as a wife and partner, the future I'd taken for granted. I am lonely, grieving, and hard-pressed to take care of my household alone. But instead of bringing casseroles, people are acting like I had a fit and broke up the family china."

Once upon a time I held these beliefs about divorce: that everyone who does it could have chosen not to do it. That it's a lazy way out of marital problems. That it selfishly puts personal happiness ahead of family integrity. Now I tremble for my ignorance. It's easy, in fortunate times, to forget about the ambush that could leave your head reeling: serious mental or physical illness, death in the family, abandonment, financial calamity, humiliation, violence, despair.

I started out like any child, intent on being the Family of Dolls. I set upon young womanhood believing in most of the doctrines of my generation: I wore my skirts four inches above the knee. I had that Barbie with her zebra-striped swimsuit and a figure unlike anything found in nature. And I understood the Prince Charming Theory of Marriage, a quest for Mr. Right that ends smack dab where you find him. I did not completely understand that another whole story *begins* there, and no fairy tale prepared me for the combination of bad luck and persistent hope that would interrupt my dream and lead me to other arrangements. Like a cancer diagnosis, a dying marriage is a thing to fight, to deny, and finally, when there's no choice left, to dig in

and survive. Casseroles would help. Likewise, I imagine it must be a painful reckoning in adolescence (or later on) to realize one's own true love will never look like the soft-focus fragrance ads because Prince Charming (surprise!) is a princess. Or vice versa. Or has skin the color your parents didn't want you messing with, except in the Crayola box.

It's awfully easy to hold in contempt the straw broken home, and that mythical category of persons who toss away nuclear family for the sheer fun of it. Even the legal terms we use have a suggestion of caprice. I resent the phrase "irreconcilable differences," which suggest a stubborn refusal to accept a spouse's little quirks. This is specious. Every happily married couple I know has loads of irreconcilable differences. Negotiating where to set the thermostat is not the point. A nonfunctioning marriage is a slow asphyxiation. It is waking up despised each morning, listening to the pulse of your own loneliness before the radio begins to blare its raucous gospel that you're nothing if you aren't loved. It is sharing your airless house with the threat of suicide or other kinds of violence, while the ghost that whispers, "Leave here and destroy your children," has passed over every door and nailed it shut. Disassembling a marriage in these circumstances is as much *fun* as amputating your own gangrenous leg. You do it, if you can, to save a life—or two, or more.

I know of no one who really went looking to hoe the harder row, especially the daunting one of single parenthood. Yet it seems to be the most American of customs to blame the burdened for their destiny. We'd like so desperately to believe in freedom and justice for all, we can hardly name that rogue bad luck, even when he's a close enough snake to bite us. In the wake of my divorce, some friends (even a few close ones) chose to vanish, rather than linger within striking distance of misfortune.

But most stuck around, bless their hearts, and if I'm any the wiser for my trials, it's from having learned the worth of steadfast friendship. And also, what not to say. The least helpful question is: "Did you want the divorce, or didn't you?" Did I want to keep that gangrenous leg, or not? How to explain, in a culture that venerates choice: two terrifying options are much worse than none at all. Give me any day the quick hand of cruel fate that will leave me scarred but blameless. As it was, I kept thinking of that wicked third-grade joke in which some boy comes up behind you and grabs your ear, starts in with a prolonged tug, and asks, "Do you want this ear any longer?"

Still, the friend who holds your hand and says the wrong thing is made of dearer stuff than the one who stays away. And generally, through all of it, you live. My favorite fictional character, Kate Vaiden (in the novel by Reynolds Price), advises: "Strength just comes in one brand—you stand up at sunrise and meet what they send you and keep your hair combed."

Once you've weathered the straits, you get to cross the tricky juncture from casualty to survivor. If you're on your feet at the end of a year or two, and have begun putting together a happy new existence, those friends who were kind enough to feel sorry for you when you needed it must now

accept you back to the ranks of the living. If you're truly blessed, they will dance at your second wedding. Everybody else, for heaven's sake, should stop throwing stones.

Arguing about whether nontraditional families deserve pity or tolerance is a little like the medieval debate about left-handedness as a mark of the devil. Divorce, remarriage, single parenthood, gay parents, and blended families simply are. They're facts of our time. Some of the reasons listed by sociologists for these family reconstructions are: the idea of marriage as a romantic partnership rather than a pragmatic one; a shift in women's expectations, from servility to self-respect and independence; and longevity (prior to antibiotics no marriage was expected to last many decades—in colonial days the average couple lived to be married less than twelve years). Add to all this, our growing sense of entitlement to happiness and safety from abuse. Most would agree these are all good things. Yet their result—a culture in which serial monogamy and the consequent reshaping of families are the norm—gets diagnosed as “failing.”

For many of us, once we have put ourselves Humpty-Dumpty-wise back together again, the main problem with our reorganized family is that other people think we have a problem. My daughter tells me the only time she's uncomfortable about being the child of divorced parents is when her friends say they feel sorry for her. It's a bizarre sympathy, given that half the kids in her school and nation are in the same boat, pursuing childish happiness with the same energy as their married-parent peers. When anyone asks how *she* feels about it, she spontaneously lists the benefits: our house is in the country and we have a dog, but she can go to her dad's neighborhood for the urban thrills of a pool and sidewalks for roller-skating. What's more, she has three sets of grandparents!

Why is it surprising that a child would revel in a widened family and the right to feel at home in more than one house? Isn't it the opposite that should worry us—a child with no home at all, or too few resources to feel safe? The child at risk is the one whose parents are too immature themselves to guide wisely; too diminished by poverty to nurture; too far from opportunity to offer hope. The number of children in the United States living in poverty at this moment is almost unfathomably large: 20 percent. There are families among us that need help all right, and by no means are they new on the landscape. The rate at which teenage girls had babies in 1957 (ninety-six per thousand) was twice what it is now. That remarkable statistic is ignored by the religious right—probably because the teen birthrate was cut in half mainly by legalized abortion. In fact, the policy gatekeepers who coined the phrase “family values” have steadfastly ignored the desperation of too-small families, and since 1979 have steadily reduced the amount of financial support available to a single parent. But, this camp's most outspoken attacks seem aimed at the notion of families getting too complex, with add-ons and extras such as a gay parent's partner, or a remarried mother's new husband and his children.

To judge a family's value by its tidy symmetry is to purchase a book for its cover. There's no moral authority there. The famous family comprised of Dad, Mom, Sis, and Junior living as an isolated economic unit is not built on historical bedrock. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes, "Whenever people propose that we go back to the traditional family, I always suggest that they pick a ballpark date for the family they have in mind." Colonial families were tidily disciplined, but their members (meaning everyone but infants) labored incessantly and died young. Then the Victorian family adopted a new division of labor, in which women's role was domestic and children were allowed time for study and play, but this was an upper-class construct supported by myriad slaves. Coontz writes, "For every nineteenth-century middle-class family that protected its wife and child within the family circle, there was an Irish or German girl scrubbing floors... a Welsh boy mining coal to keep the home-baked goodies warm, a black girl doing the family laundry, a black mother and child picking cotton to be made into clothes for the family, and a Jewish or an Italian daughter in a sweatshop making 'ladies' dresses or artificial flowers for the family to purchase."

The abolition of slavery brought slightly more democratic arrangements, <sup>20</sup> in which extended families were harnessed together in cottage industries; at the turn of the century came a steep rise in child labor in mines and sweatshops. Twenty percent of American children lived in orphanages at the time; their parents were not necessarily dead, but couldn't afford to-keep them.

During the Depression and up to the end of World War II, many millions of U.S. households were more multigenerational than nuclear. Women my grandmother's age were likely to live with a fluid assortment of elderly relatives, in-laws, siblings, and children. In many cases they spent virtually every waking hour working in the company of other women—a companionable scenario in which it would be easier, I imagine, to tolerate an estranged or difficult spouse. I'm reluctant to idealize a life of so much hard work and so little spousal intimacy, but its advantage may have been resilience. A family so large and varied would not easily be brought down by a single blow: it could absorb a death, long illness, an abandonment here or there, and any number of irreconcilable differences.

The Family of Dolls came along midcentury as a great American experiment. A booming economy required a mobile labor force and demanded that women surrender jobs to returning soldiers. Families came to be defined by a single breadwinner. They struck out for single-family homes at an earlier age than ever before, and in unprecedented numbers they raised children in suburban isolation. The nuclear family was launched to sink or swim.

More than a few sank. Social historians corroborate that the suburban family of the postwar economic boom, which we have recently selected as our definition of "traditional," was no panacea. Twenty-five percent of Americans were poor in the mid-1950s, and as yet there were no food stamps.

Sixty percent of the elderly lived on less than \$1,000 a year, and most had no medical insurance. In the sequestered suburbs, alcoholism and sexual abuse of children were far more widespread than anyone imagined.

Expectations soared, and the economy sagged. It's hard to depend on one other adult for everything, come what may. In the last three decades, that amorphous, adaptable structure we call "family" has been reshaped once more by economic tides. Compared with fifties families, mothers are far more likely now to be employed. We are statistically more likely to divorce, and to live in blended families or other extra-nuclear arrangements. We are also more likely to plan and space our children, and to rate our marriages as "happy." We are less likely to suffer abuse without recourse, or to stare out at our lives through a glaze of prescription tranquilizers. Our aged parents are less likely to become destitute, and we're half as likely to have a teenage daughter turn up a mother herself. All in all, I would say that if "intact" in modern family-values jargon means living quietly desperate in the bell jar, then hip-hip-hooray for "broken." A neat family model constructed to service the baby boom economy seems to be returning gradually to a grand, lumpy shape that human families apparently have tended toward since they first took root in the Olduvai Gorge. We're social animals, deeply fond of companionship, and children love best to run in packs. If there is a *normal* for humans, at all, I expect it looks like two or three Families of Dolls, connected variously by kinship and passion, shuffled like cards and strewn over several shoeboxes.

The sooner we can let go the fairy tale of families functioning perfectly in isolation, the better we might embrace the relief of community. Even the admirable parents who've stayed married through thick and thin are very likely, at present, to incorporate other adults into their families—household help and babysitters if they can afford them, or neighbors and grandparents if they can't. For single parents, this support is the rock-bottom definition of family. And most parents who have split apart, however painfully, still manage to maintain family continuity for their children, creating in many cases a boisterous phenomenon that Constance Ahrons in her book *The Good Divorce* calls the "binuclear family." Call it what you will—when ex-spouses beat swords into plowshares and jump up and down at a soccer game together, it makes for happy kids.

Cinderella, look, who needs her? All those evil stepsisters? That story always seemed like too much cotton-picking fuss over clothes. A childhood tale that fascinated me more was the one called "Stone Soup," and the gist of it is this: once upon a time, a pair of beleaguered soldiers straggled home to a village empty-handed, in a land ruined by war. They were famished, but the villagers had so little they shouted evil words and slammed their doors. So the soldiers dragged out a big kettle, filled it with water, and put it on a fire to boil. They

rolled a clean round stone into the pot, while the villagers peered through their curtains in amazement.

"What kind of soup is that?" they hooted.

"Stone soup," the soldiers replied. "Everybody can have some when it's done."

"Well, thanks," one matron grumbled, coming out with a shriveled carrot. "But it'd be better if you threw this in."

And so on, of course, a vegetable at a time, until the whole suspicious village managed to feed itself grandly. 30

Any family is a big empty pot, save for what gets thrown in. Each stew turns out different. Generosity, a resolve to turn bad luck into good, and respect for variety—these things will nourish a nation of children. Name-calling and suspicion will not. My soup contains a rock or two of hard times, and maybe yours does too. I expect it's a heck of a bouillabaisse.

#### WHAT DOES SHE SAY?

1. Before you begin reading this essay, write at least five sentences that occur to you as you think of these two phrases: "broken home" and "children of divorce."
2. Kingsolver's essay was written in the mid-1990s. Does it still seem accurate that if you're in a blended family or living with a divorced parent, "it's probably been suggested to you in a hundred ways that yours isn't exactly a real family"? Do you think parents who divorce are selfishly putting "personal happiness ahead of family integrity"? Whatever your family situation, do you think our views have shifted much in ten years? Write a paragraph about this.
3. Part of this essay details some of the historic conceptions of family. What surprises you about this information? Does any of it help you understand your own family experience?

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

4. Kingsolver quotes Constance Ahrons's book *The Good Divorce*. Locate and look through at least two other authoritative sources that discuss what happens to children whose parents divorce. What do you learn as a result of this additional reading, and how does it help you understand what has happened in your own family? (Side question: what would constitute "authoritative sources" given this subject?)
5. Many children are now raised in settings that do not resemble what Kingsolver calls "The Family of Dolls." And Kingsolver says toward the end of her essay, "The sooner we can let go the fairy tale of families functioning perfectly in isolation, the better we might embrace the relief of community." That suggests that communities have some role in raising children. What's your sense of the ideal

way that children might be raised? Who would be involved? What would be essential?

### WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?

6. Assume that Robert Coles, author of "I Listen to My Parents and I Wonder What They Believe" (p. 58), has read Barbara Kingsolver's essay and that she has read his. Then assume that Coles asks Kingsolver if she has thought about the message that her divorce has sent to her daughter. Based on what you understand from her essay, what would Kingsolver say in response?
7. Both Kingsolver's essay and Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" (p. 45) deal with the notion of marriage as an institution designed to offer the best setting in which to raise children. Yet both essays seem to challenge this assumption. Based on their essays, on what points would Kingsolver and Kingston agree? Would they also disagree? If so, about what?