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The Birth of the Marred Psyche

“...With each successive blow from the seemingly endless barrage of the 2 x 4, the pain grew more intense. Finally, I would feel the pain no more as darkness corralled my mind, and I lost consciousness...”

I have replayed that scene in my mind a thousand times over. A great deal of time would pass before the intensity of that Moment would begin to wane. That incident would turn out to be one of many unpleasant experiences that would shape me as a person, shape my view of you, and shape my view of my purpose for being on this earth.

A midwife delivered me in the late afternoon of November 24, 1954 in a large wooden frame house. The house was complete with *all sides air conditioned*, as the air pockets between the boards were numerous and wide in various places. Large window fans would otherwise complete the task of cooling us during the summer months. I was described by relatives as being a pretty baby during those infant times. Years later, that perception was to change dramatically. I would apparently lose that once angelic glow and innocence. It would be turned in and exchanged for an internalized view of physical unattractiveness to include a near constant facial expression of combined pain, anger, fear and sadness.

The extended family concept was definitely in effect in our

house at that time – being populated with grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, and, of course, my Mom, Ruth. Mom had returned to Morven, North Carolina to give birth to me. This appears to have been a pattern. Mom would live and work in Camden, New Jersey, with my father, Vick; get pregnant, and then return home shortly before the baby was due. Mom, Paul, and I would rejoin Vick several months later in New Jersey.

That five-room house in Morven, North Carolina, had a tin roof that leaked off and on in various places during rainy weather. There were two beds in every room except the kitchen, excluding the guest room which contained only one bed. We lived rent free because everybody who was old enough to work made themselves available to the landlord on a year-round basis. We were basically sharecroppers. Mr. Ratliff, a white man, was one of the area's major cotton producers. Everybody that I knew referred to him as Mister Ratliff. He was a pleasant enough man who would always speak. At the same time, an air of superiority was a constant. During the early days I remember the house had open fireplaces in two of the rooms, a wood-burning heater in the guest room, and a wood-burning stove in the kitchen. We would later upgrade to wood-burning heaters in all the rooms, and eventually replace one of those with a coal-burning heater. The day the coal-burner arrived, I remember thinking how uptown we had become.

The house had no running water or inside plumbing. We got water from a pump that was in the back yard approximately 20 yards from the kitchen porch. Every night about dusk, two water buckets would be filled and brought into the house for overnight usage. Baths were taken in the same tin washtub, that our clothes would be washed in once a week. At one point we ironed our clothes using a non-electric iron that we heated up via the open fireplace. The venerable outhouse where bathroom privileges were exercised was situated about 150 yards from the house. At night time we would bring in the white ceramic pot, or the piss pot as Mister Ratliff referred to it, that was about a foot and a half deep – for urination purposes. We called it simply the night pot. The nearby

field, which was closer than the outhouse, oftentimes served as the more preferable location for exercising the other bodily function.

My family would not vacate that house for one with inside plumbing until 1976. Another family would move in almost immediately, this house being considered a step up for them. While we were there, the tin had to be replaced every three or four years. The tin would be a shiny metallic sort that especially stood out from a distance. The kids we rode the bus to school with would snicker among themselves for a week or two after the new tin had been put on. I was embarrassed and I think my brothers were also. I took the laughter personally, allowing it to feed into my always poor image of myself. The laughter at our house that came from the young girls seemed to bother me more so than the guys' laughter.

We raised a lot of our own food. We had one cow for milk and butter and a horse named "Tom" for plowing and pulling the flat bed wagon. We would occasionally mount Tom's back for a brief jaunt in the pasture area near the barn. I fell off the horse one day during my early attempts to ride him. While the tears came, I recall being put back onto Tom almost immediately by someone. Riding the wagon being pulled by Tom one lazy afternoon down a dirt road continues to be a vivid and fond image.

The men folk would hunt rabbits and squirrels for additional meats; the younger folk would fish, (bull) frog and turtle hunt. I learned the art of skinning and cleaning the rabbits and squirrels from watching the older males. Hogs and chickens were our primary sources of meat. In fact, killing a hog was a semi- major event in that country hood I was growing up in at that time. The hog meat we would eat-on year round. We would breed, feed, kill and cure (dry and salt) the meat, storing most of it in the smoke house that sat about 15 yards diagonal to the back porch. I detested having to feed the pigs morning and evening. The smell of the slop definitely turned me off to the entire process. The pigs usually met their demise by a 12 gauge shotgun blast or an axe blade to the center of the forehead. Very little, if any of it, ever went to waste. It was a tradition to share some of the meat with family, friends and neighbors.

The hog brains served as a morning delicacy for mostly the

old folks. The brains were oftentimes mixed with an egg. I remember trying the dish once and not being very impressed. I think I had more difficulty getting past the “hog brain” distasteful image in my mind than anything else. Fatback, from the hog also, was cooked nearly every morning as well. To eat fatback was considered by us younger folks to be a definite clue of being poor. You can imagine how my brother and I must have felt being forced to carry fatback biscuit sandwiches to school for lunch. We would often consume the biscuit prior to getting on the school bus or simply toss it after reaching the designated bus stop area. We would oftentimes suffer through the lesser humiliation of not having anything to eat at lunch rather than deal with the teasing brought on by actually being seen eating a fatback sandwich. At no time do I recall any kid admitting to consuming fatback, even though I knew there were several of them worse off financially than my family was.

On special occasions, usually when the preacher came for Sunday dinner or out of town relatives visited, we would chase down one of the chickens, grab the head and neck and wring it off in one quick motion. I remember being fascinated watching the chicken’s body continue to jump spastically for a few Moments after its body hit the ground. They tended to be much tastier than those we bought from the store. Still, at least five chickens would be purchased from the grocery store on a weekly basis. We had to purchase very few eggs as the hens in the barnyard were bred primarily for egg production. Paul would refuse to eat chicken, raised or bought, claiming an allergy to them (until he became an adult). I have oftentimes wondered if his watching one of those withering chickens – in pain and confusion – early on had somehow played psychological havoc with him in some way – that in combination with his own physical and emotional abuse.

Uncle *TC* generally was the one who milked the cow each morning, though I drew that duty a couple of times, in his presence of course. I had to have been around five or six years old at that time. Churning the milk into butter seemed to be a task that befell me more often than I wanted it to. I ate a great deal of cornbread and buttermilk during those times, almost on a daily basis. I consumed

so much then, that I have more than a slight problem with both cornbread and buttermilk today. I just got worn out on them. Back then I ate it out of necessity because of the scarcity of the snack food supply, but I actually liked the combination in the beginning. It was like one of those always available in-between meal snacks.

Everybody basically worked in the fields, picking cotton for \$2.50 - \$3.00 per hundred pounds and chopping cotton for three dollars per day. We younger males would pull weeds for 75 cents per 4-6 hours a day. We also would pick boll weevils from cotton for one cent each, along with any odd jobs that came along. We would commence duty with the field tasks around 6:00 a.m. and conclude near dusk. Rarely were new clothes purchased for us, other than our one pair of shoes per year. More often than not they were bought used, sometimes too small, sometimes too big. Hand-me-downs were our reality for the most part. We were taught, however, to be grateful for what we had, which was difficult for me a lot of the time. The truth of the matter was, there were other people, other kids in the area, as with the fatback, that actually had it much worse than we did. Most folks would pretend to have more than what they really had.

My first official memory in life is apparently not a legitimate memory at all. In fact, according to confirmed reports, it would have to be an impossible one. I have pictured, me as a small child finding Grandpa Moses lying unconscious next to a small stream in a wooded area near our house. I remember he was stretched-out on his back with a most peaceful look about his face. I thought it was explained to me not long afterwards that Grandpa Moses had an apparent heart attack that day down by the stream and one of my adult relatives and I were the ones to discover him.

My grandfather actually died in 1947, seven years before I was born. I would have to have been told of the circumstances surrounding my grandfather's death and somehow to have mentally affixed the death scenario as described above. Right?

A huge canvas picture of him hung in the den. Even when direct questions were asked, the most popular response was generally, “He was a good man,” regardless of what the specific question might have been.

My second official memory in life is me again as a small boy; around the age of four. The image of me standing and looking out the den window in a white T-shirt and turned-up blue jeans is still vividly clear. I recall asking myself while standing there peering out at what seemed like a tremendous volume of cars and trucks in our backyard: “Why are all these people at our house?” That scene turned out to be a wake for my mother who had just died. She was 33 years old. There is a vague picture in my mind also of one of the female adults gathering un children into a room and telling us, “Ruth’s dead.” I honestly do not recall my specific reaction to the news. I am sure it was a normal one of sadness, disbelief, and abandonment. The abandonment theme would hand around for almost a lifetime with me. As we will talk about later, much healing had to occur around the issue of “Mom leaving me.”

To this day, I do not consciously recall what my Mom looked like. There are no photographs of her or of us as a family. The one picture I do recall seeing had been taken outside, with the sun casting a glare over Mom’s face, making it unrecognizable. Even that photo has long since disappeared. I have been told that

I favor her, as opposed to my father. Throughout the years, I have heard basically the same things about my Mom said repeatedly by the people who knew her: “She was a good person, but she was a bit of a rebel.” In fact, the old folks used to say that her dying at such a relatively young age was God’s way of punishing Mom for her rebellious ways, which had, perhaps, included the occasional use of alcohol and her taking little flack from anyone - other than my father.

Shortly after my birth, Mom, Paul and I, did, indeed, join father in Camden. It was there that Mom became pregnant again, this time with my younger brother

Emmanuel. I have no recall of this period of time in my life. I have been told by older relatives that all three of us (Mom, Paul and

myself) were routinely physically, emotionally and mentally abused by “daddy-dearest”. It was relayed to me (at age 39) that I was the victim of sexual abuse as well, of which I have no recollection. After numerous threats from Grandma Wincy and Co., my father eventually dropped all of us back off in Morven shortly before Emmanuel’s birth.

Per the already established pattern, the drop-off would have probably occurred anyway, without the threats.

I would be 39 years old before I was emotionally forced to search out the truth about Mom’s death. She died February 6, 1959, from hypertension complications the day after giving birth to my youngest brother, Emmanuel. Per the talk again, my father was in New Jersey at the time of her death “shacking up” with another woman. Yes, some of the anger still lingers. Mom had consciously made the choice not to abort the baby; she had been warned by her doctor that severe health complications would likely result during the birth procedure. The issue of poor pre-natal care was present also; as word has it, my father refused to take Mom to a physician on any type of routine basis. It was common for the women folk back in those days not to drive or even have a driver’s license. I assume that Mom had to rely on my father (or some other male) to take her places not within walking distance. Without expressed permission, no other man would dare transport another man’s wife anywhere. I can visualize Mom “sucking it up” and hoping things would turn out okay in spite of the lack of appropriate medical care. In addition, Mom had chronic high blood pressure and a diabetic condition.

A feeling of dread still occasionally rises in me when I think about my father returning (actually, he sent Mrs. May and her husband – his duplex neighbors in New Jersey) - to pick up Paul and me two years later, following Mom’s death. I will never forget the words that came from Mrs. May’s mouth as she stepped out of the “55 Studebaker, “Vick wants his boys,” meaning Paul and me.

It is unclear if Larry and Emmanuel were a part of that request. Aunt Marie immediately said no to Larry (her favorite) being taken; and she refused to back down. Larry had been born 14 months prior to Emmanuel. His birth had been complicated as well, most likely due to Mom's increasingly deteriorating physical health and the lack of proper pre-natal care. Larry would be born a "blue baby" (lack of sufficient oxygen). He would live with a fear of dying prematurely for 21 years. He did not share those thoughts and feelings with me until after he had beaten the odds. At the time of his revelation, I remember his voice filling with anger more than anything else. Babies born in such a condition generally died prior to the age of 21, so said the old folks.

Emmanuel had already been taken of by Mom's brother after her death. This was a done deal also. Realizing what was happening and coming to the understanding that no one was going to fight to keep Paul and me, I made a beeline to and underneath the crawl space of our house, banging my head as I scampered away from Mrs. May on my hands and knees, while crying and screaming at the same time. "No, I don't want to go back!" would come out of my mouth over and over again. I can see myself bug-eyed and weeping traveling underneath the crawl space at near lightning speed in my attempt to escape. My heart pounded with ever increasing rapidity as I made it a little more than midway toward the rear of the house. I could not go any further in that direction without getting down on my stomach. I simply stopped, sat up on my behind, placed my head down on top of the back of my hands and bawled. When I was eventually coaxed from underneath the house I was still wailing. The tears would finally stop after several more minutes. I had accepted my lot.

Even though Grandma hated allowing this to happen, she felt she did not have a choice. They couldn't keep all of Vick's kids from him. Additionally, my father had instructed Mrs. May to tell Grandma that he was going to treat us better this time. The knifing feelings of, "Nobody loves me; nobody wants me," vibrated throughout my entire being. Somehow, because Larry and Emmanuel were saved by other family members, this edition of "Life with

father in New Jersey,” I internalized to mean that they were loved, but Paul and I were not. I felt betrayed. Fear gripped me with a stranglehold. Even though I could not consciously remember at that particular Moment why I dreaded so badly going back to live with my father, I just knew that I did not want to! Paul and I would both lose out. We were packed up and taken back to Camden that same evening.

The only part of the journey back to Camden that I can remember is our going through the New Jersey Turnpike, and my wondering if the water above us would come crashing down on us before we reached the other side. Looking back I can now see the analogy – of the water overhead and me in the “tunnel” – experiencing fear and distrust of man’s physical construction; having fear and distrust of man’s ability and inclination to de-construct (destroy) a human soul. I sat motionless, nearly paralyzed, that evening for that stretch of our journey in the back of the ’55 Studebaker. Paul’s demeanor was nearly identical to mine. The little boys, the already lost children, were headed back to hell. At the ages of six and seven, we would be nearly helpless, not able to protect ourselves, either physically, mentally or emotionally. But somehow we had to survive; somehow, we would survive.

Vividly, clear in my mind still is the sight of Paul climbing up on top of a woodpile our first evening back with our father and sitting down and commencing to cry – for what seemed like hours. That scene became an almost daily ritual for Paul, always around dusk. He would cry and I would stand below the woodpile and watch him, with me hurting like hell at the same time. I would not allow my tears to come though. Sometimes my chest would swell with painful emotions to the point where I felt as if it was going to explode. Still, I would not let the tears come. I was well on my way to becoming the “Iceman,” a nickname I would pick up during my undergraduate college days, so said because of my penchant for rarely displaying outward emotion.

On our second or third day back, Paul and I were introduced to the woman whom our father was involved with – at that time. She would ask me to come over and give her a kiss on the cheek. I refused. My father would join in with the encouraging of me to kiss the lady: “Come on boy,” he would say. Though I feared my father, I still refused to move toward her. The lady would then offer me a dime for a peck on the cheek; my father would simultaneously advise me in a much stronger tone of voice to do what the lady was requesting. This time I did.

It seems like it took me forever to walk the few feet across the floor to her and kiss her on the cheek. I thought about Mom as I made the journey. And I was filled with much sadness... and anger. The dime meant nothing in terms of motivation to comply; it was the change in my father’s tone of voice that spurred me into the desired action. The reasons for dreading returning to him was becoming clearer with each passing Moment. I have no recollection of seeing the woman again after that day, even though I am sure she continued to come around.

Sometimes I wonder if my subconscious, in an effort to protect me from the pain of Mom not being there with me, blocked further memories of this lady from my mind.

We would eat a basically apple and rice diet over the next one and a half year period; the apples would come from four trees in the back of the complex. I don’t recall who actually cooked the rice, but it showed up nearly every day along with the apples. In hindsight, such a diet was nutritional, but it was the lack of serious effort on the part of our father to provide more of a variety that was hurtful. It would appear that the food had to be either cheap or free. He was not so financially strapped that he could not have done better. During the summer months when school was out, Paul and I would work alongside the grown-ups eight to ten hours a day cutting asparagus, and picking tomatoes and cucumbers.

Even after school would resume, we were expected to help out if the vegetable fields were within walking distance of the complex. I am sure that those work experiences contributed greatly to my lifelong attitude of having no problem engaging in difficult

labor. When we were not in the fields, Paul and I basically supervised ourselves. There was no baby-sitter. I'm sure that at the ages of six and seven we were expected to fend for ourselves and we did.

Both Paul's and my school records were supposedly lost when sent from Morven, North Carolina to Camden, and I strongly believe that they probably were not ever requested. Instead of being placed in grade one, which was my placement prior to leaving North Carolina, I was placed back in kindergarten.

Paul was placed in the second grade rather than the third. That was not so much of a problem then, but it would become another thing for others to talk about once we returned to North Carolina approximately a year and a half later. I would be more than a year older than most of my peers throughout the remainder of my grade school years in North Carolina. Again, that should not have been such a major deal, yet it always seemed to be. No matter how clear the explanation for the age/grade discrepancy was, I was viewed with negative eyes by my peers. Such a perception by others would only serve to strengthen my already well-developed sense of being different and out of sorts.

In that kindergarten class in Camden, I remember our class visiting an apple orchard one day on a field trip. We were all lined up and given an apple at the end of the tour. While we were standing there in the orchard waiting to load up and return to school, I spotted a larger apple on the ground next to me. I dropped the one I had in my hand and picked up the more desirable one off the ground.

The boy behind peered around at me and said, "I'm gonna tell the teacher; you dropped that one and picked up another." I can see myself establishing firm eye contact with him and, without saying a word to him, making it clear to him that I really did not care. I was going to keep the second apple! I have often wondered why that incident with the student and the apple has remained so strongly with me.

Even though I was well indoctrinated into the abuse by then, there was still a part of me that was confident and secure within myself. Although I would lose the majority of that sense of self

later, it's good to be able to look back and not see total darkness within and about me.

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Meanwhile, back on the “Ponderosa,” the landlord’s big white house sat approximately 400 yards from where we stayed. He had a son named Johnny who treated us fairly nice – when it was just him. In fact, we often played together, primarily swinging Tarzan style on a rope attached to a big oak tree. Otherwise, Johnny would often hurl racial insults at us whenever his friends were around. I remember thinking that was an awfully strange and cruel way to treat people. I can recall Johnny and company chasing Paul and me through some woods one day. Somehow Paul and I became separated. Johnny and two of his friends caught up with me shortly after I made it back to the complex area. They showed me a knife with what appeared to be blood on it, and commented, “We’ve killed Paul.” My heart sank and tears actually began to form as I stood staring at the knife.

Paul would round the corner about that time, though, sweating and breathing heavily from the chase. Johnny and his friends would roar with laughter as they turned and began making their way back toward the big white house.

Several years later, back in North Carolina, something similar would happen to me. This time six or seven of us had gone fishing several miles from our countryhood and had ended up getting lost because we chose not to backtrack when leaving. We caught very little, if anything, in the way of fish. We would end up walking seven or eight miles through a wooded area before finally coming onto the dirt road that was supposed to have been just a hop, skip, and a jump from the fishing location. But the two older guys, Donnie and Leroy immediately recognized where we were at that point and how far we had to travel to get home. While we made our way in the direction of the homestead, a black mustang would round the curve and pull up beside us. There were four white guys in the car. While hurling the standard racial slurs, nigger this and nigger that,

one of them in the back seat flashed a small hand gun for us to see as anger flashed across our faces. We all froze when the gun appeared. No one said a word. We shot quick glances at one another. The pompous-ass grin on the white boy's face with the gun will probably be a permanent fixture with me.

Following the quick glances, we almost simultaneously bolted back into the woods. I could hear the white boys shut the engine off and get out of the car, they would begin to give chase, shouting at us at the same time. We quickly put distance between us and them. After having run approximately a mile or so, one of our guys, Willie P., nearly fell into a partially covered abandoned well, coming within inches of dropping down into the pit. Witnessing this near catastrophe, Donnie and Leroy stopped dead in their tracks and looked at each other. "Shi-i-t, the hell with this!" they would say nearly in chorus. Anger quickly replaced the fear. They each ripped separate limbs from a nearby tree and told the rest of us to "grab something." We would run no more!

The rest of us, including Willie P., armed ourselves with whatever piece of nature we could get our hands on. We then turned and headed back toward the road – and the white boys. Our nemeses spotted us from a distance approaching through the woods. Seeing that there was a new attitude about us, they would hurriedly scamper, gun and all, back to the black mustang. We would continue to carry our weapons for a few hundred yards after returning to the dirt road as we watched the black mustang disappear from view. When we were relatively sure that it would not return, we discarded the pieces of wood. Strangely enough, with assurance that we were safe, our old horse, Tom, long since deceased, popped into my mind. The flat bed wagon worked its way to memory consciousness as well. This was the same stretch of dirt road we had been on that Sunday afternoon with Tom.

While in New Jersey, the physical abuse at the hands of our father took the form of being beaten with belts, switches, light-

weight apple limbs, etc., seemingly at the drop of a hat. Being whipped into that state of unconsciousness by him with that infamous 2 x 4 came about because I had made fun of the size of his penis. I had observed it while he slept one hot summer afternoon. The heat was smothering. The window was raised, the curtains drawn, and a gentle hot breeze filtered in and throughout the room. I don't remember why I even went into the room. I made the mistake of going over and mentioning how small it was to our duplex neighbor, who in turn went back to my father, laughing at him. I will never forget the question my father asked every time he struck my backside with the 2 x 4, as I was positioned on a bunk bed on my hands and knees: "How big is yours; how big is yours, boy?" his booming James Earl Jones,, Darth Vader baritone voice sounded out, over and over and over again. I would cry and scream for a while, but the board only seemed to contact my rear that much harder. After a while I just quit the vocalizations and took the pain. I would eventually pass out with him still swinging the 2 x 4. I do not remember waking up.

To my recollection, he never called me by name; it was always boy. "Boy, go get me a glass of water; boy, go bring that wood in: boy, sit you ass down over there and shut up". It is a good bet that this is partly the reason for the current fascination with my name: Curtis D. Wall. Our neighbors would make it a point after that not to tell my father anything that might bring his ire down upon either Paul or me. Even though they had probably seen my father lay hands on us before, the exhibition with the 2 x 4 stunned them also. As many times as I had been whipped, that time had been the worst. I never bothered asking if someone had encouraged him to stop, or if he had just worn himself out and then stopped.

I would steal a half dollar piece from that same duplex neighbor some time after that and return it to him when he confronted me about it. My father would step through the front door shortly after the incident and ask the question, "What's going on?" I would freeze immediately. My neighbor shot a quick glance my way, noticing the sheer terror that had arisen within me. My neighbor would mention nothing about me having taken the coin, for he knew what was in

store for me if he did. My father would commence small talk conversation with our neighbor after he responded with, "Nothing, he's (me) just hanging out here." I slowly turned my back to them and sat motionless until my father exited by the doorway. Even now, I continue to intermittently jump or flinch when unexpectedly touched in some way. As a side note, it is clear to me now that I was told "no" so often during those times that today I tend to preface any response during mostly informal conversations (unless I made a conscious effort not to do so), with "no."

There was another neighbor at that time who often interceded or tried to indirectly protect Paul and me from our father's wrath. We came to affectionately call him Uncle V. In addition to saving us from the whippings, he made the effort to teach us things he believed growing boys needed to know. We knew that he was very aware of our father falling short in that department. I admired the man and was grateful for him being in our world at that time. I owe him a great deal for taking time with us and for looking out for us. This would be the same gentleman that years later would introduce me to my first taste of alcohol (a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, of which I could only drink a couple of swallows before becoming full and passing it back to Uncle V).

In between the episodes of abuse and the effort of trying to be a normal kid otherwise, I would be introduced, to some degree to my first sexual experience.

For the lower income, non-urban black community in those days, this was not that unusual an occurrence: the experimentation of sex based on what has been observed by the adults in our world; our 'child-interpretation' of normal, expected behavior. This particular experience is definitely more accurately assessed as 'pseudo sex' versus a true intercourse situation. Neither the girl, also around the age of seven, nor I knew what we were doing as we rolled around on top of one another in the '55 Studebaker one evening shortly after dusk. I don't remember who she was, the daughter of one of our neighbors perhaps? I simply don't remember. I do remember looking up from the young passionate session and thinking, "Why are the car windows so fogged up?" Of course, I

have long since learned the answer to the question. I don't recall how or when the encounter ended; I don't recall ever seeing her again, though I am reasonably sure that I did.

The news of our being abused would again make it back to Grandma Wincy in North Carolina. But it would take more than a year of her threatening our father, I assumed with legal action, before he finally agreed to send us back to her. I suspect that my father grew tired of the responsibility of taking care of us.

I am sure that we cramped his lifestyle more than just a bit. Working with and for him in the fields gradually took a back seat. Also, back in North Carolina, my older brother and sister, Tom (actually James Thomas) and Emmie Lee, helped our cause by their persistent crying and pleading for Grandma to put pressure on our father to return us. Tom and Emmie Lee had a different father from Paul, Larry, Emmanuel, and me, but I remember that never making a difference to any of us. Though the words were never emotionally verbalized, we were brothers and sister.

In any event, major damage had already been forged upon our psyches. For Paul, the social part of life appeared on the surface, at least, to be easier. He tended to be more accepted by folks than I was when we returned to Morven, though his mental and emotional anguish would later destroy him. I would watch from a distance the obvious ease with which he seemed to become a part of those around him. I do not recall anyone ridiculing or making fun of him during those times. He did not stutter, nor did his physical appearance lend itself to being laughed at. He had a healthy set of teeth. I envied him.

The verbal abuse and occasional unprovoked physical attacks at the hands of peers and older guys became institutions throughout my (late) elementary and high school years. My head must have had a sign on it that said, "Smack me, please." It happened far too many times; there was seldom retaliation or defense on my part, especially after the age of 10. Between the pain and anger of what loomed large in my mind as being continually rejected by others, I would from time to time attempt to figure out why I was apparently so unlikable. Never was I able to come to any legitimate conclusion.

Michael E's comment my first day at school upon my return to Morven: "That boy sure has an ugly head," still lingers. Things and comments of that nature continued from that point on in terms of the schoolyard scene. For whatever reason, Michael E., backed off from the negative commentary about me shortly after that, and he and I eventually came to have mutual respect for one another throughout the remainder of our association.

I began to realize more and more a growing presence within me of feelings of fear and hatred for God, people and myself. I came to the point of resenting others I perceived as being more liked, more accepted and more appreciated than I was. Even now as an adult, this demon continues to rear its head from time to time, though in a much softer light. Almost always, this feeling comes during those times when I am depressed and doubting myself. I came to understand from others that I almost always had a mean, angry look on my face. I even got to the point where I would consciously make the effort to smile (without opening my mouth, of course) to not appear angry. Oftentimes, my perceived demeanor provided an avenue for others to expel their sickness. My Aunt Naomi would explain to a group of our relatives at a family function on one occasion that I was not angry, rather I was "just hurtin' inside." More accurate though, it was the hurt that had turned into anger. Aunt Naomi always seemed to have a special insight, a special awareness of what was happening with me emotionally and mentally. I grew to appreciate that ability about her more and more over the course of time.

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My mind would eventually take on the traits of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" fantasies. I fantasized about being the knight in shining armor, about my being the ultimate defender of those done unjustly. I was their hero. How desperately I wanted someone, anyone, to be my hero, to be my protector. Those folks who saved me from probable abuse encounters with my father were seemingly not enough. My inner child was constantly afraid, insecure, and

uncertain of what the world around him held. My fantasies about saving others were simply a subconscious reaction to my own developed feelings of being unloved, exposed and left out in the cold. Today, in my adult state, I will do unrelenting battle for those I feel have been unjustly wronged. I legitimately yearn to make such a difference. I truly have a difficult time sitting back idly watching another human being be abused and/or taken advantage of. Today, I have to reassure my inner child on a daily basis that I will be there for him. I may temporarily falter in my efforts to protect him, but I will never abandon him!

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Between the rages thrashing within me, there were some peaceful Moments and good times growing up. Those times usually came when I hung out with a small circle of folks, including my brother Larry, my cousin Tony, and friends of ours, Willie P., and Ray Charles. We would teach ourselves to swim in one of the local creeks minus any adult supervision, as well as hunt, catch, and eventually cook crawfish and bullfrogs. We'd batter and fry the legs. We'd search out and destroy (eat) wild berries such as blackberries, huckleberries, cherries, bullits (grapes), blueberries and raspberries. We'd pick wild plums and steal watermelons from distant neighbors; we enjoyed hanging out with one another.

There would be times also when we stole bicycles from the local trading post, because our folks could not afford to buy them. We couldn't wait until March of every year when the weather turned warm, to discard our shoes and go barefoot through the Spring, Summer, and part of the Fall, when not in school or church. Play time also included our racing one another 40 to 50 yards on our hands and engaging in rousing games of full contact football – without pads.

Good times for me, for there was rarely any of the regular abuse when I hung out with just that select group. I actually engaged in normal teasing and checking with those guys.

We would just sit around and rap sometimes – about the future,

about how things were one day going to be different for us. Such comments usually revolved around having the monies to do whatever we wanted to – one day. I fantasized out loud about the many wonderful things I was going to do; I would fantasize about this great and famous person I would at some point in my adult future be recognized as. The boys would glance at one another whenever my time came to share. One of them would invariably make the comment, “uh-oh, here goes Curtis off on this tangent, again.” Tony would occasionally try to bring a little reality back to my visions. Sometimes even now I get confused about what is pure grandiosity versus what is me just having high expectations of myself. In any event, I am grateful for those times. Amidst the storms I was otherwise being confronted with, they were much needed distractions.

I would become acutely aware of the apparent ease with which Larry and Tony fit in socially with everyone. Much of my time around other people was spent with them in a variety of settings. Both commanded the respect of our peers and most of the older folks in our world at that time. I would stand back at times and watch their interaction with others and the way that they were accepted and be impressed and envious at the same time. What I didn't consciously acknowledge during those times was that Larry and Tony were relatively happy people and that is what they presented people with. They were real; they were genuine. I, on the other hand, was miserable through and through, and that is what I presented people with. It was obvious that I had no confidence in myself, and many folk chose to take advantage of that, perhaps to make themselves feel better about who they were.

I can feel good about the fact that rarely did I allow my feelings of jealousy for either Larry or Tony, to have me unfairly treat them or have me not go out of my way to help them obtain something they wanted that was within my limited power to assist them in achieving. I would even, at one point in high school, help Tony get together with a young lady who I was madly in love with myself. I wanted (BJ) badly, but it was evident that her thoughts of an intimate relationship were for Tony and not me. She was a cheerleader and

one of the most popular folk in our senior class. BJ had an awesome spirit about her that was totally captivating. As painful as it was, I chose to accept the handwriting on the wall rather than to engage in useless attempts to secure BJ's affection for myself. I was proud of myself for being so reality-based. I did good.

I am sure that if Tony had not been such a good person, my jealousy would have been more severe. He was and is a straight dude, treating other people squarely. My feelings toward him would have been more slanted simply since I often got tired of seeing him treated as the golden boy by the other fellows. He was the unofficial leader of the neighborhood clique and shined in just about every athletic sport he attempted. He also came from a home that had a mother and father. His family was not quite as bad as mine in terms of letting each other know they cared about one another. His family appeared to be more respected in the community. His last name was McRae; mine was Wall. There always seemed to be a majority who were less impressed with the latter. The view I had of myself did not help matters and was, perhaps the most critical agent in that equation.