

SISTER IRENE HAS A PENIS: *CURRERE* LEADS TO FREEDOM

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“Sister Irene¹ has a penis.” My mother uttered these strange words while she barred my exit from my childhood home. It was important that she inform me about a religious sister at our local church. I barely knew Sr. Irene. Sometimes I sullenly attended religious education, but most often, I complained enough that I was permitted to stay home. I did not like missing the poorly crafted cartoon *Super Friends* (Barbera & Hanna, 1973–1985) to go sit in a stuffy Catholic school classroom on Saturday mornings. My parents, having had enough of Catholic school themselves, or maybe because the public school was only two doors away from my house, did not enroll me in Queen of Peace school run by the Sisters of Notre Dame. As such, I had little connection to the religious sisters at Church.

I was thwarted at the front door. I needed to leave the house. I was ten. I always needed to leave. But, for some reason on this day, my mother insisted that I know about Sr. Irene’s male genitalia. After the strange sentence was uttered, I felt the need to leave with greater urgency. Today people laugh when I say, in all seriousness, that I was completely unsupervised as a child. I was. I wandered alone at the school yard. I played hopscotch by myself. I visited friends at their homes for entire days.

My mother was still in front of the closed door. She grabbed at her crotch, despite wearing a skirt, to make sure that I understood exactly what she had said. Suddenly, I noticed my father’s presence. He was able to translate the schizophrenic mutterings of my mother. They had met in a mental institution in 1965 and run away together. On their escape, they conceived me. No one thought their marriage would work, but the years they were together added up to 47 by the time of my mother’s passing. They learned to live with each other. My father became accustomed to her bizarre ways. She was used to his equally strange ways. She seemed oblivious to his delusions as long as he was able to drive her to the store. They usually balanced each other out, even if the balance was achieved at the point of something akin to the moments before the Hindenburg exploded.

My mother was not going to let me pass until I acknowledged that I understood. I looked at my father with an explain-this-to-me-now look. My father said calmly, “I believe your mother is trying to say that she finds Sister Irene demonstrates many unfavorable characteristics, many of which reflect an inappropriate masculine quality.”

“Ooooh,” I said with one of those long O sounds that concludes in pursed lips. My eyes wandered back and forth between the two of them to see if this was going to be one of those “big moments” like the sudden explosion of a hydrogen fueled zeppelin. When the conflagration of mental illness occurs, when the tinder is lit, those who live with the mentally ill are called upon to do more, become bigger, and shoulder the burden of de-escalation. This episode was not going to become a big moment. My mother seemed satisfied. The tension noticeably left the air when my mother said something to bring the bizarre episode to a safe landing. She informed me,

“It is very important to get a certificate in this life; you can’t go around without credentials.” I took my leave.

BORDER CROSSING

Anzaldúa explains the exquisite sensitivity she experienced in childhood with these words: “When I was really little, I felt like the external reality was too much. I had a

very thin skin, and everything came in” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 103). As a young child, Anzaldúa struggled with early onset of hormones that made her look different on the outside from the other girls her age. Trying to navigate external judgments about her different physical appearance within the stifling atmosphere of secrecy, Anzaldúa’s mother intensified the shame by binding her daughter tightly with a corset to hide her prematurely developing chest (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 39). Anzaldúa’s defenses broke. The young girl internalized turmoil.

I too cultivated a “thin skin,” but in contrast to Anzaldúa, I did this as a way to detect the moods of my mentally unhealthy family. I developed a hyper sense of vigilance to those around me. I wanted to smell the earliest whiffs of the fire that led to the mighty explosions of big moments. I needed to be ready, with strength that I did not possess, to handle the call of a big moment. External reality was too much.

Anzaldúa laments that one of the ways that she did not fit in with her family was based on her physical appearance of dark skin and Indio markings (Anzaldúa, 2009). I was set apart from my family by my perception of reality. Although I looked exactly like my parents, especially my father, I was not as sensitive to the injustice and unfairness found in this world as my parents. My mentally ill parents felt and outwardly wrestled with the wrongs in this life. Their experience of the world and its wrongs came in through their senses as though they were a snort of cocaine.

I was different from them in other ways too. When I perceived the world, I did not have a mind that fled to safety in mental scenes created from neurons misfiring and tamped down emotions that had nowhere to rise. My mind stayed with the ugly, the nonsense, and the crazy. I watched brilliant parents who could not navigate the wrongs of this world, the feelings of their bodies, and the thoughts of their minds all at the same time. They were fragmented people who lived in their bodies, and their bodies were in the same house with me. We were all the same color. Yet, I watched and lived with an emotional flak jacket and night vision goggles to keep tabs on where their minds travelled, in case the border into big moments was crossed.

In remembering my past, I realize that I understand the writing of Anzaldúa (2009; 2012) through a lens crusted with the stigmas associated with mental illness. While Anzaldúa’s primary focus is bringing the suppressed culture of Americans who have their roots in Mexico into the spotlight, Anzaldúa also expresses a concern for uplifting those who fall outside the boundary of that which society deems acceptable. It is in the latter area where I strongly relate to her writing.

From my perspective, I recognize the border world she describes. “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe. ... A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25). For me, I experienced the narrow strip that existed between escalating psychic unrest and knowing when to hide from the fury. The border’s ledge was narrow and small and appeared abruptly. The ledge of big moments in my childhood erupted as a call to become bigger, do more than what an ordinary child could bear. It was a call to shoulder the burden of de-escalation—a call to be vigilant in against the dangers of physical harm, but not my harm—more commonly, my mentally ill family harmed themselves. In a big moment, I needed to remain in the reality of the encounter, quell any natural desire to scream in disbelief at the absurdity. I needed to hold my true inclinations in limbo while using superhuman curiosity in order to discover the meaning of the explosion. I needed to address the fomenting concern of my dysregulated parent in an authentic way. With disingenuous engagement, the cause for peace was lost. It is easy to fall off the border’s ledge and not bring the explosive moment to a satisfactory finale. The border’s edge, and a fall from it, appears as fast as the zeppelin’s demise.

Despite my growing up on Long Island, I can understand the importance of the mesquite in Anzaldúa's world. Anzaldúa (2009) describes the mesquite that is left alone to grow in the vast openness of the borderlands. Because of the lack of trees competing for land and sun, the mesquite possesses a freedom to grow and to take any shape it longs for.

The Mesquite looks like an ancient ballet dancer doing a one-legged swirl, arms and head appealing to the sky. The trunk oozes a black gummy secretion from a lipless vagina mouth. (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 53)

In contrast to Anzaldúa, I had little space to grow. Not only did I grow up 30 miles from the border of New York City, my needs at home were marked by a cultivated silence and an avoidance of psychic explosions. Not wanting to be seen or noticed during one of those moments, I kept low to the ground and purposefully uninteresting. I became surprisingly comfortable in unpredictable situations. I learned to thrive in untended ground with minimal care or water. I am at home in the desert. I perk up in beauty when conditions grow harsh. Like the desert rose, I do not need space or water. I bloom in glory when the punishing sun strikes.

When I left my childhood home to attend the local public school, I crossed a border. My parents were often hospitalized, usually one at a time. I had to dress myself for school but did not know how to conform to the expectations around fashion at school. I knew I failed when my peers began the bullying. I was often ostracized because of my unkempt hair, hand warts, and ill-fitting clothes. My mien was not one of beauty.

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

The regressive stage in *currere* was painful for me. I have social wounds. I must remember that I am not alone in these feelings. Pinar expresses the continuing discomfort of societal shame in a lecture on identity. Pinar (2020) says, "Almost any provocation scrapes off the scar of my social wound. My vision is refracted through the pain of the old ongoing injury" (n.p.). However, Pinar (1975a) also tells us that *currere* is worth the effort; it sheds light on our thought processes. Pinar writes:

We look, in Sartre's language, at what is not yet the case, what is not yet present. We have found that the future is present in the same sense that the past is present. It influences, in complicated ways, the present; it forms the present. (Pinar, 1975a, p. 4)

Pinar recognizes the importance of revisiting the past because of the past's influence on today. Professional counselling takes the same view. I value the therapeutic practice of counselling in my private life. The past is present is integral to understanding the therapeutic process (Young & Allain, 1999). Pinar's academic permission to journey on the emotional roads of my past for intellectual integrity and to benefit my career in teaching is a startling new discovery.

After I process my initial uneasiness in revisiting my past for academic reasons, I eventually eased into the process of *currere*. When the emotional storm settled and my mind quieted, some of my favorite books from childhood floated easily and joyfully to the surface of my recollections.

The regressive journey of *currere* became easier for me when I included the comforting presence of my favorite books as companions. As the pleasant memories of time spent with certain books filled my thoughts, I used Maxine Greene's (1995)

example of connecting meaning through literature. Greene conveys the depth of her educational philosophy through the use of main characters from her favorite readings. For example, when Greene remembers one of her favorite poems, “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” she uses the exact words from the poem as a way of addressing her thoughts on literacy to a new audience. Greene combines her personal history, her ideas on education, and literature to create a rich example of *currere*.

With whom did I spend the most important weekends in my late teens and early twenties? I remembered with fondness the summer of 1986, which I spent with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Hugo, 1831/1985). Shorter relationships occurred in high school. My main crush was *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850/1994). During my first year of teaching, I had no time for meaningful or deep commitments other than teaching, but I stole a few moments to be with *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky, 1866/2001). I flippantly knew that I gravitated to psychological thrillers. Until Pinar (1975b) and Greene (1975), I was like Madame Bovary (Flaubert, 1856/2013), ready to jump to another psychological thriller rather to delve into my personal biography to understand why I enjoyed time spent in company with main characters who engaged in interior struggles while the rest of the world laughed at them.

My ponderings with literary *currere* showed me that I identify with characters who struggle with beautiful hearts that are honest and sincere. My protagonist is one who struggles and resists the condemnation and shame thrust at them by the outside world. My heroes exist in heroic vulgarity sustaining the nobility of their core while exterior propriety holds the scepter.

Pinar’s process (1975a) revealed that I was secretly, with these intellectual and reading relationships, working through personal and societal shame. After following Pinar’s (1975a) lead, I can say with him:

But on the other level I see that my thoughts are like bubbles from the bottom of a pond, and I am on the surface; and they express, to use a psychological-analogue of Chomsky’s concept, the deep structure of my being. (p. 6)

PROGRESSIVE STAGE

I have discovered a long and twisted story of shame, both personal and societal. Anzaldúa sheds light on the *currere* experience when she explains, “writing opens the door to the old images that haunt” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 198). With my personal history of living with the mentally ill, I know very well the interior struggles, the haunting, the vergüenza (Anzaldúa, 2009), and the unjust, limiting-nature of stigmas.

During my progressive stage, I centered on the idea of freedom and beginnings that arose from my regressive stage. The exercise of *currere* allows for a new beginning. We return to our beginnings in order to recreate their meaning in the present (Pinar, 1975b). Greene (1995) tells us that beginnings are the font of freedom: “But then I think of how much beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility that has so much to do with teaching other human beings” (p. 109). Beginnings lead to freedom. Tackling our past and quieting its hidden, beating siren, leads to a disruption of the factors influencing our present. We are all moved by hidden motivators from our past that are present today. When we uncover the beginnings of these motivators and reveal them, a new freedom can emerge. The educational feminist author, Grumet (as cited by Pinar et al., 1995), calls noticing these sirens from the past noticing how we are “trapped in transference” (p. 378).

Crossing from the educational theory of Grumet to the psychologist's world, being trapped in transference is something a therapist indicates when they use the word "triggered" (Young & Allain, 1999). A person can be triggered when the memory of a past experience imbues and adds power to the current experience, possibly throwing off the balance of the event towards the past. Pinar's method of *currere* takes into account these hidden connections—the hidden kerosene tanks of energy that our past can supply to the present if we do not take the time to unpack the past.

This exercise of *currere*, although difficult, leads to a freeing disruption of the hidden messages from the past leading to a burgeoning of consciousness. Freire (1969/2008) reminds teachers that consciousness is an essential part of teaching others. To truly learn, we need beginnings (Pinar, 1975b). I ended my progressive stage yearning to embrace freedom and consciousness in a new way.

Mental illness is not beautiful to those who look upon the effects it creates. Mental illness is difficult to understand, and its effects create a screen that veils the individual from others. I cried with Quasimodo, the deformed man from *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, when he expressed out loud his realization of what is accepted as beautiful.

A profound sigh heaved his breast; he turned round; his heart was swollen with all the tears which he was swallowing; his convulsively-clenched fists struck against his head, and when he withdrew them there was a bunch of red hair in each hand.... "Damnation! That is what one should be like! 'Tis only necessary to be handsome on the outside!" (Hugo, 1850/1985, p. 316)

Hugo (1850/1985) describes the moment that Quasimodo understands that Esmerelda, the love of his life, will never be able to see past the ugly trappings in which Quasimodo's beautiful heart is enshrined. Quasimodo tells us that it only counts if you are beautiful on the outside. I connected to a character who knew that beauty runs profoundly deep. My childhood lived under the auspices of mental illness was not beautiful on the outside.

Currere leads me to notice today's society in relation to the belief system it embraces towards the mentally ill; not only does our society look upon the person who experiences mental illness as one with no beauty, our society is "afraid" of those who are dirty, unkempt, and struggle with voices in their heads (Borinstein, 1992; Dingfelder, 2009). *Currere* has pulled together on a cognitive level the similarities I experienced with Quasimodo.

Quasimodo cries out, "My misfortune is that I still resemble a man too much. I should like to be wholly a beast like that goat" (Hugo, 1850/1985, p. 342). The misshapen man, who the world sees as grotesque, has the interior of an angelic being. He cries out in frustration that, from miles away, he is judged and condemned as unworthy, and there is nothing that he can do to disprove the judgment and allow him the freedom to be.

Quasimodo's cry speaks to an in-between place. As the child of mentally ill parents, I know such an in-between place exists. Anzaldúa names the in-between place "Nepantla," a "Náhuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 180). Quasimodo longs to be accepted by one group in his totality, even if that requires his moving to the caste of the animals. I longed to be accepted as a learner, someone who was not biologically or through nurture doomed to be an outcast in society, even if that meant silence and hiding the mental illness and its effects that surrounded me.

THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD CREATED BY SHAME

My in between land, my *nepantla*, existed/exists entirely in the psyche. To contrast, Quasimodo's *nepantla* exists between two worlds defined by outward physical appearance. Anzaldúa explains that people who are considered outside of proper society are framed as mentally unhealthy, even if they do not have mental illness. With great conviction, Anzaldúa lets the rest of society know that "to be disoriented in space is the 'normal' way of being" for those whose identities stray from the 'acceptable' or that which is 'proper' (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 180). It is certainly *nepantla* to be considered insane merely because you are different. The one labelled is thrown into a crucible filled with shame.

Bradshaw (2005), the former Catholic priest who describes the hidden life of the inner child and the unshed tears of this child, tells us that, when human identity is not allowed to develop, toxic shame results. Anzaldúa speaks of shame on a broader, societal level when she describes "La negación sistemática de la cultura Mexicana-chicana en los Estados Unidos impide su desarrollo" (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 176). Anzaldúa, without the help of Bradshaw, recognized that the systematic negation of the Mexican-Chicana culture impeded its development. Anzaldúa takes Bradshaw's definition of toxic shame and scales it to a systemic level.

During my school days, I did not acknowledge the existence of the "red letter" I wore (Hawthorne, 1850/1994). My letter was a C for "child of crazy people." Even though I identified fully with Hester Prynne and understood deeply her courage to wear the label to protect the man she loved, who was not as strong as she, I never reflected on my close understanding of her plight. Hawthorne (1850/1994) describes Hester's mind:

Of native courage and activity, and for so long estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest. (p. 137)

Hester's mind, outlawed by New England society, existed in *nepantla*.

Just as Hester could not reveal the minister's deed, which resulted in her becoming labelled and outcast, I could not speak of the effects that my parents' mental illness had upon me. In addition to causing harm to me, revealing the secret would cause them harm. It was better to keep quiet. Consequently, when I went to school, I dropped the Scarlet Letter of identity as the conception of mentally ill parents at the threshold of my childhood home. Just as Quasimodo's disfigurement drew down society's harsh judgment from miles away, so too I would not be able to escape the stigma of society. Nor would I get a chance to explain that my parents possessed an internal goodness, honesty, and intellectual abilities that far surpassed those who sat in judgment. When I entered my high school, I left my markings at the door of my house. As long as I kept my secret and continued to dress and behave like everyone else, I was able to experience a day such as Hester Prynne did in the forest when she let her hair down, and for a brief moment felt:

The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom! (Hawthorne, 1850/1994, p. 139)

Freire (1969/2008) posits that the human person is inherently reflective and consequently critical. "They apprehend the objective data of their reality ... through

reflection—not by reflex, as do animals” (p. 3). The practice of teacher education has increasingly become aware of the importance of the use of reflection, especially critical reflection, and inquiry to develop highly effective teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; Nieto, 2000; Stronge, 2007; Zygmunt & Clark, 2016). *Currere* is one way to begin the process of asking, questioning, and reflecting, which is essential to teacher quality. *Currere* can be a beginning that leads to freedom.

The freedom I experienced in school was conditional. I was free in school **if** I kept silent about my parents’ struggles. To feel free in school despite familial differences, cultural differences, language differences, ability differences, gender differences, and the new differences to be discovered in the future would be true, societal progress. It would be the embodiment of one of the tenets of Dewey’s Pedagogic Creed. “The only true education comes through the simulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (Dewey, 1897/2017, p. 33).

CONCLUSION

In high school, I would not have had the reflective ability to discern my identification with my heroine, Hester Prynne, nor to my hero, Quasimodo. Although the connection was hidden to me at the time, the identification with Hester caused me to think deeply about *The Scarlet Letter*. I enjoyed the book and read it with great interest. The connection afforded me the opportunity to engage in the literary style of Hawthorne. My vocabulary was enriched. Unbeknownst to me, my learning experienced a richness because of connection.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame ends with Quasimodo giving up the remaining years of his life in order to hold the dead body of Esmeralda, until he too becomes a skeleton in the same potters’ grave. I thought I loved this book because of its soaring description of medieval architecture. Looking back, I see that I considered myself tethered to the fragile lives of my parents. I fully expected my schizophrenic, energetic mother to live to be 93 years old, as most of her relatives did. I expected to tie my life to hers and to expend myself in her (and my father’s) care; keeping them safe from the effects of their illness, until they passed away. In acquiescence, in unspoken consent, I planned to sacrifice myself to keep them safe in life.

This is not what happened. My mother suddenly died in 2012. She fell out of a window and died. My universe changed in one day. I was no longer chained to and orbiting around the life of my mother. I was catapulted free into a new orbit. My entire life view shifted and changed. My father passed away in 2017. My loyalty to them, as I expressed in remaining silent, could end. The exercise of *currere*, although difficult, leads to a freeing disruption of the hidden messages from the past and leads to a burgeoning of consciousness. I feel a new sense of freedom.

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Endnotes

¹The proper names in this regressive anecdote have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved.