

Moments in Flight: A Memoir

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Brings the immigrant story full circle; recovers
lost history; shares hard-earned practical wisdom

JO-ANN VEGA

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Dedication

With profound gratitude to Nicola and Antoinette Di Franza and Antonio and Sofia Vega, who risked everything for their future familias. What courage it took to undertake the arduous journey across the Atlantic on ships, in cramped quarters, below deck, as human cargo, to move past the Statue of Liberty to inspections at Ellis Island, and then into the cauldron of New York City! Thank you for the possibilities for my life. *Your story is my story, our story; part of the tapestry that is America.*

Introduction

Dear Reader:

Thank you for picking up *Moments in Flight*.

I am living proof, testimony to the courage and sacrifices of immigrants. Looking in the mirror, I feel genuine pride and recognize the distance my famiglia has traveled in a century from mostly illiterate peasants. I invite you to share my forebears' journey, my journey, our journey. Let the stories help you tap into your memories and introduce or reacquaint you with you, your cultural inheritances, and the larger canvas of life. *Moments in Flight* brings the immigrant story full circle, recovers lost history, and shares hard-earned practical wisdom.

Why me? An eyewitness, participant, and informed observer of the last half century of transformative change, I bring an independent voice and perspective. I've been at the business of writing and reflection for a long time. A memory-keeper, I started writing before I knew what writing was. I began penning free verse poetry during my senior year in high school; came of age during the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1970s. At twenty-four I received a blank journal for a Christmas present. For more than three decades I've designed and delivered educational programs for business, academic, and community groups.

While most of us crave information about our past, few take the

time to document their personal journey in real time. *Moments in Flight* includes personal journal entries, poems, eulogies, letters, interesting web sites, and historical information to provide context. Somehow, I've managed to keep a journal for 40 years in which I mapped my interior journey.

Everyone's path to self is theirs, unique yet not completely so. There is much to learn from the experience of others and not enough time to learn everything. Capturing moments in flight, seeing how they pile and line up reveals possibilities and detours, love and heartache, joy and disappointment, warts and all. I have the time, inclination, and appetite to put the pieces of my life together, know myself more fully, and use the interests, experience, and capacity I have nurtured the past decades to leave a trail for others to experience, learn from, and build on.

I admit to being an odd duck. I'm more cerebral than tactile and enjoy periods of solitude and study. I have always tried to help ease the way of others. I know my mind and am not afraid to express myself. It's taken a lifetime to learn how to tame and marshal my strong personality. I've encountered success and hostility for being smart, expressive, different, not a well-behaved woman. I describe my awareness as a writer in chapter 1: *Meant to be a chronicler*.

Giving birth to *Moments in Flight* forced me to go deeper into the story of my ancestors and the history of the United States. It's been a fascinating and rewarding journey that's not over. My future grandparents were among millions, part of the largest documented voluntary migration in history, who sought passage to America in the first decades of the 20th century to escape intolerable oppression, poverty, and violence. It was a time that parallels today.

One out of five immigrants to the US from 1880 to 1920 were from Italy. The Italians were not welcomed with open arms, were viewed as ill-tempered, stupid, and criminal. One need only mention the word Mafia to appreciate that negative stereotypes of

Italians still persist even as their cuisine is beloved. Despite everything, they hung on, endured, as they had learned to in Italy. Over time, they found their way into the mainstream of America. Today, Italians are the seventh largest ancestry group in the US and number more than 17 million individuals.

This resilience, the ability to endure, is part of my cultural inheritance. The southern Italians called it *la via vecchia*, meaning the old ways. Centuries of subjugation spent eking out a marginal existence while living in the backyard of active volcanoes fostered a culture that mistrusted others outside family, *la famiglia*. I hale from these sturdy, earthy, self-sufficient, fatalistic, and sometimes explosive people concerned with survival and blood relations.

After seven years of working on the memoir, I better understand myself, my *famiglia*, and the forces that shaped the US over the last century. The work hasn't been easy or without pain and anguish, but it has been worth it. I was heartened by the number of times I wrote about being grateful in my journals. My cultural heritage is a reservoir I draw on for guidance, support, affirmation, and safety.

For each of us, the journey of our forebears is our story and part of the larger story of America. To whom, where and when we are born, our early years, and upbringing, affects us deeply. Our ancestors, bloodline, endow us with more than genes, unknown relatives, or possible material gain. Finding out about your ancestry connects you to you by illuminating the past, your heritage and cultural traditions.

I'm a proud Italian American filled with gratitude to Nicola and Antoinette Di Franza and Antonio and Sofia Vega. Desperation fueled their courage to endure the relentless hardships of traveling across the Atlantic Ocean below deck as human cargo before inspections at Ellis Island and the start of their new lives. The sacrifices of my forebears, who expected hardship, created possibilities for my life not possible in the homelands they fled. Chapter 2: *Escape*

from the Mezzogiorno details the reasons millions of Italians emigrated to the US, the inspection process, and their treatment in America.

Chapters 2-7 are an extended eulogy to my kin, especially the six Pepper Sisters and the south Bronx in the late 1950s. Recollections of an active childhood, memories worth saving and sharing include: Johnny pumps, stickball, horse drawn vegetable and fruit wagons, and malocchio; ordering macaroni from numbered boxes on a wall; my uncle the bookie; and walking to Yankee Stadium to watch Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra play baseball.

Chapters 8-11 find me uprooted from all that had been familiar reference points on my journey towards adulthood and self. Leaving the cocoon of extended famiglia, followed by the addition of two siblings altered the trajectory of my life. Finding my voice, discovering my core self, talents, skills, and love are covered in these pages. During these difficult years, as I struggled to find my way, the country seemed on the verge of rupture and dissolution, like today. It was a scary time to be young and alive.

Ten days before my tenth birthday, John Fitzgerald Kennedy [JFK] took the oath of office as President. Three years later he was assassinated. It was a Friday afternoon just after lunch. Classes went on as scheduled. There were no counselors or safe spaces.

Less than five years later and within months of each other, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon shortly after I graduated from high school. Four student protesters were killed by the National Guard at Kent State University during an antiwar protest. The unofficial war in South Vietnam raged on. President Nixon resigned from office rather than face certain removal.

I graduated from college, the first female in la famiglia to achieve that distinction and started working when the push for affirmative action became a national priority. Impossible to believe

today, classified employment ads were divided into male and female jobs. In the 1970s it was scandalous to cross racial, ethnic, gender, or religious barriers. I did.

Toward the end of my twenties the outline of who I am today was set. How was I influenced by the disruptive changes happening in the US? Did I become suspicious of government authority, all authority and desensitized to the violence on the streets? Was I in-tune with my generation's belief that if you stood up for yourself and declared yourself a person with ideals, big brother would find and silence you? Did my cultural inheritances help or hinder my life? Was I able to moderate the seductions of sex, drugs, and rock and roll?

Chapter 12, *Fast-forward* is a bridge to today and life after work and parents. The tidal waves of change and loss I've experienced over the last decade threatened to permanently unmoor me. The continuous disruptive change unleashed a torrent of words; I'd guesstimate more than 500,000, collected in notebooks, journals, and manuscripts. My movement towards facing reality as it is rather than as I hoped it would be led to forgiveness and increased compassion.

Understanding the roots of southern Italians and my inheritances began soon after I graduated from college when I chanced to find or it found me, a chapter in a book on southern Italian culture. It was a revelation! Now I understood why Grandma Sofia could not be told I went to college or that I moved out without benefit of marriage. This level of knowledge satisfied me for a long time, until my parents died within fifteen months of each other and I became a virtual ghost in my family of origin.

The main elements of my ethnic heritage (la via vecchia), suspicion of others, self-sacrifice, thrift, caution, loyalty to loved ones, and endurance, have, in the main, served me well. I miss the large and raucous la famiglia gatherings. Like the Pepper Sisters, I still

love fried red peppers with lots of olive oil left from the frying poured on top of thinly sliced Genoa salami, ham, and provolone cheese wrapped within the confines of freshly baked loafs of crust-ed Italian bread. I salivate as I anticipate using both hands to grip the overstuffed sandwiches and the infusion of tastes and textures.

I remain grateful for the hand I was dealt, even though it hasn't been the easiest to learn how to play. I'm more like a cup of espresso than a weak cup of tea. My favorite expression as a toddler was to simultaneously push away while gleefully declaring "I do."

Still a work-in-progress, I'm not sure I have returned to my life trajectory. I know I was meant to be a chronicler. Pushing the boundaries, strictures, of ethnicity, gender, race, or culture are not for the faint of heart. Being an adult is not easy; it's not supposed to be. As Mom would say, "You have to put in the time." Life is transformed by endurance, inner strength, hope, and belief in one's core strengths.

Warm regards,
Jo-Ann Vega

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CHAPTER 1

Meant to Be a Chronicler

*To be a poet at twenty is to be twenty; to
be a poet at forty is to be a poet.*

—Eugène Delacroix

“I didn’t love him until I had my fourth or fifth child.”

It was one of those times when the message arrives as a blow. I unconsciously tensed to lessen the impact of my beloved grandmother’s frank admission, and felt the air forcibly expelled from me. For a few moments, I could not breathe or hear. Even now, decades later, my hands tremble as I type the words.

My grandmother, in essence, was a mail-order bride.

I know, in ways I cannot express, how fortunate I am for how far my clan has come in a century. As a woman, I have lived an independent life the immigrants could have neither conceived nor comprehended, that was made possible by their courage, sacrifices, and gene pools.

Conceived in the optimism after the successful conclusion of the WWII, I grew up in the 1950s in New York City; the ninth grandchild of immigrants from southern Europe who arrived in America in the first decades of the 20th century. I came of age during the birth of

the social justice and antiwar movements of the early 1970s that presaged today's world. I started writing then, to make sense of my world.

My intrepid maternal grandmother endured the privations of more than a week of third-class travel on a passenger ship from Naples, Italy, across the Atlantic Ocean, and inspections at the Port of New York and Ellis Island to meet the man who had booked her passage after viewing her photograph. What would have induced Antoinette to take such risks, to leave everything and everyone behind, and to marry a stranger? Hope; that as scary and uncertain as a future in America might be, remaining in Italy guaranteed a life of destitution. Antoinette wanted more; she believed she could succeed in America! I penned a eulogy for Antoinette, who passed from this earthly plane one month before her 101st birthday!

The Last Immigrant

Words are inadequate to describe
the feelings of the heart.

Grandma, you were a risk-taker
long before the words became fashionable.
What courage it took to leave your home
and your family
and travel to a faraway land
to start a new life!

Who could have foretold,
on the journey that started with an ocean voyage,
that one day, Grandma,
you'd be the last immigrant and
your big heart,
full of hope and courage and love,

would touch the lives of many,
 born and unborn,
 and would carry you
 through a century of monumental changes?

Grandma, you looked beautiful
 with the blue dress, rosary and
 your well-worn prayer book;
 every detail carefully and skillfully
 attended to by your daughters.
 You would be proud: The last immigrant,
 proud, vain, and defiant.

As you begin your final journey,
 know that you leave a wonderful
 and rich legacy of a big heart,
 big enough to take you through
 all the travails of life with
 determination, strength, courage,
 and love of family.
 You passed this on to each and
 every one of us.

You are much loved.
 [1992]

Each of my grandparents left their ancestral country and immigrated to the US. They grew beyond their immediate upbringings. Even though none of their lives were easy in America—the land of opportunity—they had prospects not available to them in southern Italy and legitimate expectations that they, and their progeny, would do more than just survive, in America.

My formative years were spent in the south Bronx, among immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and the Caribbean, primarily Puerto Rico. The south Bronx in the late 1950s was teeming with change. I had a front row seat during a time and place that made a deep and lasting impression on the country, and on me.

My parents, hoping for a better life, moved us to suburbia after President John F. Kennedy's inauguration and before his assassination. When I was almost twelve, moving from the Bronx to the northern suburbs of New York City altered the trajectory of my life. A half century later, the homestead remains in *la famiglia*. My younger siblings did not experience the south Bronx or the founding generation of working-class, southern Italian peasants, *la famiglia*; establishing roots, passing on traditions; within walking distance and ever present. They did not know me as a child who adored our talented father and wondered why our capable mother gave up so much to be married. By the time they came along, I was almost thirteen and then fifteen, to them; already old, bossy, moody, and defiant.

Now I am the keeper of the memories; the history of us.

Who owns memory? How accurate are memories? An interesting book titled *Pieces of Light* by Charles Fernyhough, a neuroscientist, indicates memories accompanied by strong emotion are more durable as are those from youth and coming-of-age years. This makes sense even without research to back it up.

I've been a chronicler of my times and personal development for four decades. I gasp, temporarily unable to exhale, at the significance of the passage of time. How can this be? I vividly recall being by myself in the attic, furiously typing on Underwood® typewriters—with and without ribbon—before I could read or write.

I come by chronicling naturally. You could say it's in my blood. Dad compiled a scrapbook of photographs and news clippings of WWII airplanes he kept for the balance of his life. At the start of

the war, Dad was fourteen. As a child, I sat with him on many occasions and looked with him as he turned the pages; I knew the book was important to him. I was fascinated by it and coveted it. I started journaling years before my father began recording the daily temperature and his farming activities in a journal or notebook of sorts, propped conspicuously on the counter between the dining and living rooms of our house in Sloatsburg. His journals are some of the few items I removed from the homestead after my father's death. I have not been able to read them. I am safeguarding Dad's chronicles until I can find a proper place for them.

As a child, I fell in love with the movie *A Christmas Carol* because of Scrooge's redemption; his second chance. Curiously, I saw myself in Bob Cratchit, the scribe toiling away; a childhood fantasy? Why would I relate to the scribe if it wasn't in me? Why would I relate to the serene drudgery Cratchit lives? He is clearly overworked, neglected, and highly responsible. Cratchit does his job dutifully, takes Scrooge's abuse and neglect, and then goes home to a large family-in-need he can never quite provide for, and is loved—happy. Cratchit accepts his lot in life. After Scrooge's epiphany, the financial burdens are removed from Cratchit's life. He can exhale; remain a scribe and no longer toil in the shadows. The record, the account, the proof is there.

Chronicling provides a sharper view of current events and self, including internal struggles with a particular and evolving worldview. Writing takes time and requires exposure. Not everyone has the appetite, the inclination, or the courage to plumb the depths and journal over an extended period of time. A journal that reflects the maturation of an individual in the pursuit of self in real time with current events is useful.

How useful? For the nineteenth century writer, philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who kept a journal for fifty-five years, it was essential. Emerson used his journal to work out ideas, discern

relationships between ideas, and prepare his many public talks and writings, all which he ultimately indexed! Dedicated diarists from the arts and culture include Anaïs Nin, who kept a journal for sixty-three years; from age eleven until she died at seventy-four, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Susan Sontag, and Sylvia Plath.

Picture any scene from Ken Burns' breakthrough American Civil War miniseries that revolutionized the making of historical documentaries. Notice the exquisite use of the photographic record from various motion picture camera angles. The pictures come alive and the scene appears to move as narration and sound are effortlessly blended into the production; history made accessible and enjoyable by the extensive use of found diaries of ordinary Americans who took the time to record.

Why make the effort? Not many would, and less would keep at it for decades or have some method for preserving their efforts. At some point, the chroniclers had to know or believe, that their progeny; their creation, would live on to provide nourishment to others. The famous of each age have the resources to create personal libraries or to donate their papers to a university; preferably one they attended. Their papers are deemed historical artifacts.

That's how I feel about my journals, notebooks, manuscripts, my body of work, oeuvre. During a conversation with my generally laconic mother about her final wishes, she was very clear and firm about wanting a headstone. After all, she and my dad had purchased their burial plot thirty years before their deaths and used to visit the site periodically.

Turning to me, Mom asked "What do you have in mind?"

I faced Mom and replied, "I'm not sure I want a headstone or to be buried."

Mom spoke with an urgency she rarely used. "Don't you want them to know you were here?!"

Yes, but not in the usual and expected way. I'm still in denial

about my final arrangements, but not about my legacy. I don't have to become famous, write a best seller, or earn a lot of money. I admit I wanted to get further. I've crossed the threshold into late-middle age, dealt with successive waves of major life changes, and have the luxury of time to reflect, read, write, and chronicle. I recognize I no longer have the same drive. I have wisdom laced with humility to impart; something to say.

Having spent most of my life around many different types of people, I've been drawn toward studying demographic shifts for more than three decades. I have useful experience, and knowledge; some of which was extracted from searing life experiences. I'm more aware of the influence my ethnicity had; the south Bronx in the 1950s; living within walking distance of Yankee Stadium. I watched a pantheon of greats play: Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, Elston Howard, Bobbie Richardson, and Roger Maris. Every year, it seemed the Yankees were in the World Series and Whitey Ford was on the mound, pitching. Walking past the storefronts on Morris Avenue, 148th Street; you could keep up with the progress of the game by the score board the barber kept updated on the large storefront window.

I've lived through consequential times. The anthem of my generation, "Hell No, I Won't Go!" —to Vietnam, was chanted by baby boomers participating in civil disobedience during the Vietnam conflict, especially from 1969 until the final combat units were withdrawn in 1973. I didn't actively participate in antiwar demonstrations or believe many who did held deep convictions. Rather, they were looking for an excuse to cut class, get high, and get laid; college rites of passage to this day.

I've witnessed and participated in all the major upheavals since that magical year, 1968, enshrined as the year the US changed. I was a teenager; reticent, awkward, and sheltered. Snapshots from 1968 to 1978, seared into my memory, my coming-of-age years,

were followed by decades of turbulence the country has yet to fully digest. These are key years that set the boundary of the memoir.

- On March 31, 1968—a Sunday evening—President Johnson took himself out of the running for a second term; a casualty of the Vietnam conflict and unrest at home. Sitting in the living room, watching the presidential broadcast from the Oval Office, hearing the words “If nominated, I will not run. If elected, I will not serve” was shocking and surreal. The end of the newscast was not followed by hours of partisan talking heads. The immediate beneficiary of the unprecedented announcement was Bobby Kennedy, who now had a clearer path toward the presidency, or so it was thought. Less than a week later, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., the indispensable black leader who emulated Gandhi’s peaceful civil disobedience, was assassinated. I easily visualize Bobby on a campaign stop in the south that evening; head down, a nervous tick of pushing his hair back from his brow, speaking to a gathering of blacks. Trying to provide comfort and stem violence, Bobby spoke about his brother, Jack. Two months later, after a victory speech in the California primary on June 6, 1968, Robert Kennedy was felled by an assassin’s bullet. The seemingly endless display of the photograph of Bobby on the floor of the hotel, a pool of blood growing around his head, the blank stare in his eyes; he was already gone. Although it wasn’t announced until the following morning.

It was too much to bear in such a short period of time. The country seemed ready to blow apart. As it happened, my high school’s senior pictures, scheduled

to be taken the day after Bobby's murder, were cancelled and rescheduled for the following day. I walked into the photographer's office in a fog. My photo looks very somber. What kind of future lay ahead for young people and the country?

- The Woodstock music festival was held in upstate New York, shortly after I graduated high school in the top 10 percent of my class with the belief I had limited prospects for my future. I turned down an invitation to attend, not wanting to spend hours getting there, camping out with tens of thousands of strangers, and engaging in casual drug use and sex. Woodstock and other huge music festivals like Monterey showcased a new genre of music, the normalization of sex outside marriage, and drug use.
- Student demonstrations against the Vietnam conflict; it was never called a "war". The 1970 killing of four students; Americans, at Kent State University, by the National Guard; also, Americans. The iconic photo of the young woman, reaching up from beside one of the fallen students as she screamed for help with a look of utter fear on her face, in incomprehensible disbelief that Americans would kill Americans during a protest. Was anything off limits? No wonder I, along with others of my generation, believed if you stood up for your beliefs, you would be killed; you could not trust the government or law enforcement!
- The awful job market for college graduates in the 1970s. Unprecedented numbers of youth were attending and graduating from four-year colleges and seeking employment. The problem was an insufficient supply of jobs. Many boomers who graduated from 1970 on, faced

unemployment or underemployment. This affected their earning ability throughout their working lives. Employment advertisements were still divided into male and female jobs, with few good jobs in the female category!

When I graduated from college with a major in psychology, the best job I could qualify for was as a therapy aide—formerly attendant—at a state hospital for physical and mental disabilities, at the salary of \$7,000 per year, the buying power of \$38,406¹ today. The job did not require a college degree. While taking a New York State examination for the position, I silently laughed at how easy it was. When I was interviewed by a representative from Personnel, before the days of Human Resources, who informed me I passed the exam, I was not surprised. When asked if I wanted the position, I replied with bravado born of ignorance. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want the job.” A simple ‘Yes’ would have sufficed. It was SOP (standard operating procedure) to conduct hiring in this manner.

I wasn’t poor but had little discretionary income. It wasn’t easy to bathe, dress, feed, and otherwise tend to individuals with serious physical and emotional impairments, little or no verbal communication ability, and the mental capacities of five-year-olds in bodies of thirty- or forty-year-olds. I was part of the direct care staff and one of the first to possess a college degree. I knew I could do more. I felt resentful; entitled to more after making the investment in my education.

- The resignation of President Nixon. I see him in my mind’s eye, before his resignation; on television, sweating,

1 Visit www.bls.gov/cpi and enter the year and dollar amount to calculate the value today.

shaking his head, his pallor, gray. “Your president is not a crook or a liar!” On August 9, 1974, I was standing in the dayroom of Kappa Cottage in Letchworth Village when I heard—over the din of fifty or so profoundly physically and mentally disabled adult women for whom I was responsible, arrayed around the perimeter of the large room and from the omnipresent television mounted high on the wall—President Nixon starting to speak. There had been exhaustive television and print coverage of the Watergate scandal; the finding of Oval Office tape recordings, the missing minutes, and talk of impeachment. The brutally detailed congressional testimony of one of the president’s key men, John Dean, confirmed the self-inflicted fall of President Nixon. He avoided jail when the appointed President Gerald Ford, announced clemency for Nixon, which was not well-received by the American public. Trust in government deteriorated following the resignation of President Nixon and has never rebounded to levels recorded before Watergate. Forty-plus-years later, Gallup² and Pew Research surveys of the American public record consistently low levels of support for government regardless of which political party is in power.

I started writing free verse poetry at eighteen to make sense of what I was feeling and to practice interacting. I consider myself an artist with words. According to the late Anthony Storr—an internationally respected psychoanalyst—*Solitude: A Return to the Self*, “the artist or philosopher is able to mature primarily on his own.” The work and expressions of maturity in the artist’s work define the artist, not relationships with others.

2 See www.gallup.com and www.pew.org for more detailed information.

I read this book, a classic published in 1988, more than a quarter of a century after its publication. Although I was irritated by the constant use of the male “he” pronoun as the frame of reference, the book resonated within me. When I realized Storr was acknowledging the legitimacy of introspection, of solitude, as a means to personal development, as adaptive for some and not solely as a sign of maladjustment, I was taken aback. To me, it is self-evident that my periodic forays into solitude, my learning and growth, always precede—not follow—my reemergence into interpersonal relations and the public square. It is troubling that as recently as the late 1980s, the psychological profession was solidly behind interpersonal relationships as the true source of individual adjustment.

*The Secret Life of the Grown-up Brain*³ heralds middle age as adaptive, not the final steps before decrepitude. Strauch writes of the wisdom of the middle-aged brain, between the mid-forties to late-sixties, as a time for bi-lateralization of the hemispheres; using both sides of the brain together results in more depth. Surviving and learning from life’s challenges showcases resilience. What is maturity but depth, insight, the learned ability to be more naturally deliberative and temperate, that is, have a slower reaction time? Time provides the possibility of perspective, options, informed judgment. While there are no shortages of adolescents on the scene masquerading as adults, age and experience are generally linked with wisdom.

It’s encouraging to know that the scar tissue gained from three or more decades of sometimes searing life experiences, is useful. Jung thought that the achievement of optimum development of the personality was a lifetime task which was never completed; a

3 Authored by Barbara Strauch, the deputy science editor and health and medical science editor at the *New York Times*, published by Penguin in 2010.

journey toward a destination at which one never arrives. The poet, T.S. Eliot, wrote movingly of it:

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

I am aware of being aware since I can remember.

My earliest memory is of my second birthday, captured on 8mm film; then, a new technology. I especially remember a gift I received from an uncle; a dish set that, upon immediately ripping open, I carried to my older brother’s room, with him in tow, and started to play with. Of course, I was in charge. I have always been more of a leader than a follower, although I will follow a good leader.

Then there is the memory made familiar by the film: my dad, not quite twenty-six, bending down and trying to help me open a gift. There is no sound, but I can hear myself saying “I do,” and emphatically jerking away from him. The film captures the expression of disappointment on my father’s face; his hands, reaching out in frustration, to slap open air. I was always independent. My father confirmed this in the months before his passing when he told me I was difficult to parent, as I always had my own mind.

I have a clear memory of being a young child, under eight years old, and attending the reading program at the public library. I was alone, scared, anxious. I cannot recall what the reading was about. I do remember being there, picking up books about famous people, leaving, and not returning for a while. It was though this was enough for me; the trip opened a window of opportunity.

It is also maybe my first conscious recollection of what would become a lifelong pattern. I would, mostly alone, put myself in situations of risk that terrified me, retreat, then regroup, and return. It

would not all be linear; it was and is punctuated equilibrium; nothing stays the same. With time and penchants for study and reflection, I've come to see what seems natural by looking back through the rearview window. I was meant to be a chronicler; a participant observer.

The first female on either side of the family to complete a four-year college degree—in spite of resistance from my grandparents and parents—I later obtained a master's degree. I have pursued and chronicled my times, my personal development, and sought to understand myself and other people. Living through tumultuous social and political change exposed me to diversity before it had a name. I've spent my professional life developing employees at all levels and teaching. In my small part of the world, I have studied and written about the changing workplace and my personal development for more than three decades. My interests have remained the same; my understanding is deeper.

Earlier I noted that Jung's theory of psychological type was essential to my growth and understanding of self. I have always known I was different, independent, able to learn quickly, see things others don't, shy and socially immature. I studied workplace dynamics and changing demographics for my graduate degree in Human Resource Management & Development from the New School in NYC. My undergraduate interests included psychology and cultural anthropology. When I received a brochure from the New School describing a one-day, team-building program that used a personality/temperament sorter based on Jung's work, I was interested. I did some research and concluded the training might be useful to me. I attended and found that my hunch was correct: I am a fish swimming upstream! While most fish swim with the currents and find fellowship there, some do swim upstream and may find fellowship. Being a fish swimming upstream can be a good thing when you accept reality.

Something deep inside of me stirred with the knowledge and validation, so much so that I chose to underwrite a week of training held at the University of Richmond, VA, to become certified in administering and interpreting the instrument,⁴ which has been instrumental in enhancing the quality of my life.

A concise way to break down personalities is to look at temperaments. A seminal book is *Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types*, by David Kiersey and Marilyn Bates.

Here are the highlights of my temperament: A Promethean temperament.

Prometheus, in Greek myth, is punished severely and without end by the gods for stealing fire and bringing knowledge to the people. Individuals with a Promethean temperament represent approximately 12 percent of the US population, the overwhelming majority of which, are male. Prometheans love intelligence, acquiring knowledge, and as a result, develop competence. Prometheans tend to live in their work, miss direct experience, and are drawn to fields in science, management, and higher education. As a result, these “strong personality types” can be perfectionists and may appear to others as individualistic, arrogant, and demanding.

How I describe myself: loyal, dependable, informed, big-hearted, forthright, lifelong learner, serious, and chubby. A former colleague once offered his reflection: “You have a powerful intellect you’re not afraid to use!” Knowing he could not understand how long and how painful it had been to find my voice and way in life, I looked him straight in the eye, held his gaze, and then continued our conversation without addressing his remark.

There is so much about direct experience that is challenging for someone with my temperament. I tend to miss the obvious, trip over my feet, and find it almost impossible to follow step-by-step

⁴ Called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and used for team building, career, and individual development.

directions. I'm more into my thoughts than I am into my body. It's the difference in how you would respond to someone asking you how you experience sunbathing. Most would look askance; "I feel the heat of the sun." In other words: The answer is obvious, why ask?

Staying in the moment and perceiving direct experience through one or more of the five senses makes sense, doesn't it? Some of us experience sunbathing as a catalyst toward thoughts, meaning, and possibilities. Gee, I remember another day when I was sunbathing and this happened, or this preceded it, or this is what's on my mind now. Direct experience is not given the same attention or value. Here's how I described it.

I want to record
 so I won't be able to forget
 the sounds of music filtering
 through the air,
 laden with words.
 So I won't be able to forget
 the warmth I feel coursing through my body.
 I want to record
 so I won't be able to forget,
 but the mere process of recording
 sacrifices totally experiencing.
 [circa 1978]

Here's another way to look at it: Are you left-handed or right-handed? How strongly are you right or left-handed? How did you get to be this way? Are most people right or left-handed? Are there truly ambidextrous people? These are simple and deceptively complex questions. What does this have to do with temperaments or personality development? How does this translate into basic

personality theory?

In the US,⁵ most people are temperamentally right-handed: gregarious, practical, realistic, use their five senses to experience the world and make decisions. More men than women tend to make decisions that emphasize reasoning, while more women than men tend to make decisions that emphasize the needs of others. We prefer people who are share our tendencies. There are far fewer temperamentally left-handed people. As a result, left-handed women and men likely experience greater angst developing their talents, finding kindred souls, and fitting into the larger culture. This is not an excuse for any inappropriate or maladaptive behavior. As one of my heroes, John Adams, opined “Facts are stubborn things,” meaning; deal with them.

I admit to being temperamentally left-handed. I am drawn to children, human frailty, to people in need who I instinctively try to protect, help, or advocate for. I value intelligence and competence.

Years ago, I asked a trusted colleague and friend what it was about me that put others off. As she looked at me, she stepped back, gathered herself, stretched her neck to straighten her spine, and with a quizzical look replied, “You don’t know?”

I smiled and shrugged, “I wouldn’t ask if I knew the answer.”

“They know they have to perform, be able.”

I expect people to be capable. I ask no less from myself. People either take to me, or they don’t, fairly quickly. No one doubts my sincerity, passion, or honesty.

It has always taken time for me to warm up in social situations. I am more comfortable in situations that require educated talk than in purely social situations that reward small talk or traditional roles and expectations. I enjoy discussing ideas, books, politics, and current events. As full-time work has receded from view, it has been

5 See Association for Applications of Psychological Type for detailed information about different types, frequencies, and descriptions.

more challenging to find social environments that match my interests, skills, and temperament. To counter the disappointment and isolation, I have nourished my soul with books and writing. It is time to emerge from my solitude and share some of what I have learned.

Although I have tried to undermine myself in many ways, I have made it through the tipping point. I hope and plan to stay around and be active for many years to come. I know in my bones what is hard to describe: my lasting feelings of gratitude for the immigrants and for my life. Even as I complain about my angst and waste money gambling, I know I am fortunate. My maternal famiglia's medical history provokes a fatalistic attitude about life and rationalizes my smoking. Technically, it's called cognitive dissonance. I've been on a creative burst so it's easier to stay in denial about my addictions.

I bring these perspectives and more, to this chronicle.