

## PICA<sup>1</sup>

*Personal narratives, like friends and books, are a path to consciousness. If one is very lucky, as I have been, to write with friends about books, the journey is swifter. I wish to thank Carol Ganzer for helping me to make that discovery.*

By Suzanne England

---

Suzanne England, Ph.D.  
is Dean and Professor, School of  
Social Work, Tulane University.

### The difficulty of writing about myself

Most of us who write have had the experience of making any number of starts on a story, each one discarded because it wasn't what we wanted to say, or it seemed forced or somehow false. This is what happened to me as I tried to write this piece. I finally realized the source of the difficulty. By writing about what I do I am writing about who I am. Who I am now (at least one of the whos) is an administrator, the helping I do is indirect, and because so much of what I do is oriented toward a future that I will never see, I'm reluctant to claim that I'm helping. Occasionally I do help in a more direct way, using my position to shape behavior in ways that reduce harm or increase the likelihood of benefit, but my basic job is to organize talent to meet organizational goals. My work now seems to have very little plot. Where it is possible to discern a story, say a vignette about trying to solve a salary inequity problem, most of the action is in my head, eg., looking at policies, budgets, running down some figures, and thinking about how to justify an adjustment. Unless you're the

person with the salary problem, there's not much drama, and there may not even be an identifiable resolution or ending in the usual sense. Were someone asked to watch a film or read about what I do on a typical day, it would make only minimal sense, if any at all. It certainly wouldn't be interesting, except perhaps to a student of administrative behavior. If, however, I were providing a voice-over about what I was trying to accomplish by certain actions, and what I was thinking or feeling, then it would begin to have some interest as a narrative. If flash backs and flash forwards were added it might be more narrative-like but if it was supposed to be "about" something, it would still have to have a sequential structure and some amount of dramatic tension, e.g., helper meets problem, helper solves problem.

Now it is true that as I try to solve the salary problem I am interpreting my actions to make sense of what I am doing in relation to who I am as a self. This would also be true of a reminiscence but perhaps easier because there is the context of what came after to help me choose what to include and not

---

1. Pica, a size of letters in typewriting, a book of rules about church feasts, the eating of substances other than normal food. From the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Eighth Edition, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990.

include. But in both cases I am creating a narrative, and a character, someone who is comprehensible, who orders her behavior according to a set of rationalities, and who can be judged according to some recognizable and culturally supported moral standards. But ultimately this is a fictional character, created by me to make sense of myself to myself and others. Not all of the difficulty was with me. There are precious few examples of personal reflections on careers in the helping professions to draw upon (an impoverishment this journal should help to correct), so I had no models for writing this. It is also true that I have not learned to think about my life in heroic terms. That may be because I am a woman and our culture has few myths and meta-narratives that feature individual women as primary agents of positive social change. Paradoxically we are viewed as naturally suited to roles as helpers but because of the requirements of Western narrative structure, we find it difficult to tell our stories.

How then to start? I knew I wanted to explain myself somehow—to make sense of myself as a helping professional, yet not be too confined by conventional forms and expectations. Perhaps I could identify a thread in my career that would connect seemingly

disparate events, or somehow show the evolution of some self-organizing principle or perspective. What has been essential through the years? Were there seeds in the beginning that grew to maturity in my later practice? I decided to begin with a reminiscence and then to think about what the telling of that story means to me today.

Memory, then, isn't so much archival as it is a seeking of vitality, harmony, an evocation of a truer, more nearly complete present tense. (Wideman)

### Melba

My first experience on my own as a social worker was the summer between my first and second year of graduate school. I was hired by the Archdiocese of Chicago for a summer Head Start program the year the program began, and worked out of a little parish church on Chicago's near west side. The personal difficulties faced by people in those neighborhoods were staggering, and the social structural sources of their problems seemed nearly insurmountable. But it was a time of optimism, we had resources to apply to the problem, and the underlying philosophy of the program supported community action and the full participation of those

living in the communities. Much of the work I did was focused on parent participation and while I was constantly responding to individual needs, I was not doing casework in the classic sense. Occasionally, however, I would have the opportunity to perform a straightforward simple act and make a recognizable difference for an individual.

One story that stands out in my memory of those times was about Melba and her children.

I must caution you that there is no happy ending that I know of to Melba's own story. I left Head Start to have a baby, and lost touch with the program, but once a year or so later I had a dream about Melba in which she had been able to make a decent life for herself and her children. Given how little she had to begin with it's unlikely that any part of that dream came true.

The story really begins that first summer, a year before I met Melba. I was assigned to a center at Saint Jarlath's church in what was considered then to be the poorest part of Chicago. St. Jarlath's was in a pocket of mixed development just north of the major east-west highway.<sup>2</sup> There were blocks of fortress-like buildings that housed various union headquarters, interspersed with empty lots, apartment buildings occupied

2. When the highway was built in the late fifties it devastated the neighborhood. St. Jarlath's was no longer a viable parish but was being kept open at the time because its elderly pastor was due to retire. In the intervening years most of the housing was torn down. Some of the residents who owned homes stayed put because there were plans to develop the area and they stood to gain if they could hang on long enough. The new United Center where the Chicago Bulls play and where the Democratic convention will be held in 1996 is just a few blocks of where St. Jarlath's once stood.

barrio-style by Mexican-American or Puerto Rican families, and blocks of greystones, many of which were in disrepair and cut up into small overcrowded apartments. It was in the greystones where many of the Black people in the neighborhood lived. Even in this supposedly poorest of neighborhoods there were noticeable status differences among the residents. Depending on the block and the condition of the greystones, one could reliably predict whether the building would be occupied by long-time Chicago residents or recent immigrants from the rural south. The latter were by far the worst off, and predictably they were the hardest to recruit to the program. Many we approached were suspicious of us but I think also some were just too shamed by their living circumstances to want us involved with their children.

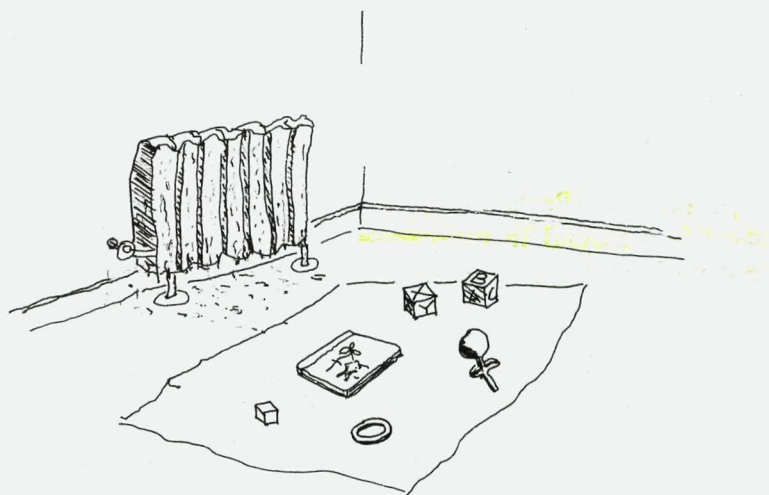
Part of it too was that the Archdiocese and the nuns who taught at our center were identified with the civil rights movement in Chicago. This was the summer that Martin Luther King had marched in Cicero, Illinois, and few of those I talked with in the neighborhood approved of him. I think they were frightened by what could happen to them if they got involved or even if they voiced support to their neighbors. For good reason too. The televised images of the march showed that there were people in Chicago, not far from the neighborhood, who were every bit as dangerous as those they had feared in the south. It could have been too

that those who spoke so disapprovingly of Dr. King wanted to go on record with me, a White woman, that they weren't agitators or "uppity". I remember how taken aback I was that they did not support the civil rights movement, and wondered then whether this was an example of the conservatism of those who are lowest in the power structure.

Recruiting families for the program that summer taught me several lessons that indirectly led to my meeting Melba. Although I understood intellectually that I had to set aside expectations based on my position of privilege, I didn't realize until I was there how easy it was to miss seeing places where people might live. That summer I found people living in (and paying rent for) back yard sheds and lean-to's with no visible plumbing, dank, windowless basements, and buildings with no glass in the windows. The more I learned to look, the more places I found inhabited. Another lesson I

learned, already alluded to, was that the poor are not homogeneous. They can be harsh judges of one another, often reflecting in their behavior and attitudes the hierarchies and prejudices of the larger society. Among the Black people in the neighborhood, it mattered where you were from, the shade of your skin color and texture of your hair, and where you went to church. That summer those on the lowest rung were recent immigrants from the south, mostly Mississippi. Those on the highest were the owners who occupied brownstones on several of the streets that were still tree-lined.

This stratification was reflected in our Head Start enrollment patterns and also seemed to affect the participation of parents. The families that were the least badly off were the first ones to fill up the program, and the families that looked and acted the most like middle America were the most likely to take full advantage of what the program offered. I had been



reading about "creaming" at the time and I could see some of the patterns and processes in the Head Start program. Taking the path of least resistance, we were most involved with the hardest and most able of the residents in the area. I became interested in whether this could be demonstrated in a more objective way and asked permission to use the records of several of the Archdiocese programs to collect and analyze data on the families and their participation. I found that families that were headed by two parents, were better off financially, and where the parents had a history of employment, a much higher rate of participation<sup>3</sup> in the program than those headed by women and on welfare. This meant that we were also probably recruiting from the better off end of the spectrum as well and that we could change our recruiting practices to counteract it. I decided to try a different approach the next year.

In addition to learning to think about the neighborhoods as social systems that could reproduce the status hierarchies of the larger society, I began to become aware of the extent and nature of the health problems and environmental risks that came with living in these neighborhoods. Some of what I saw I couldn't have imagined was possible in the United States

in 1965. A baby whose legs were terribly bowed from inadequate nutrition or an untreated hip dysplasia was the youngest of thirteen children. I remembering wondering if she might have learned to walk too early in order to get her basic needs met. Going door to door one day I knocked on one door and the children who answered were so infested with lice that I could see them flitting around their heads, and numerous times I saw living conditions that prohibited any washing up or food preparation. Children often had open sores where a minor wound had become infected for want of soap and water, or shoes to protect their feet from further injury. In August I encountered a family in which the young mother of two had been murdered in the street in front of their house three days before. In those days that was not so commonplace as it is today but I have never forgotten how terrible such knowledge must be for families.

When I finished my degree and went back to work for the Archdiocese I was assigned to Central Catholic School in Lawndale. The school was an elementary school and room was being made for the summer program to go year round starting in the fall. At that time the neighborhood had more going for it than did the St. Jarlath's parish. The neighborhood was bounded on the

north by the same highway that had strangled St. Jarlath's but here the highway acted as a buffer. Next to the highway was a small public housing development that was new and the apartments were the most sought after public housing units in the city. Across from the housing development was a new public elementary school, and Central Catholic itself was a going concern with an activist priest. The several blocks between the housing development and Central Catholic were streets of greystones that varied as to condition and crowding but few were in a state of advanced decay, and a number were owner-occupied. In this part of the neighborhood many of the families were two parent and multi-generational families, many of the adults had at least a junior high level education and someone in the family worked at least part time. By and large these families were eager to put their children in Head Start and the mothers became enthusiastic and competent volunteers and employees of the program. As expected these families began to fill up the program even before we had gone out recruiting.

As you walked south a few blocks south of Central Catholic however, the neighborhood changed dramatically. There was no question that this part of the

---

3. The participation differential had less to do with recruitment and was probably affected to some extent by the fact that the community action programs were mandated to hire most of their non-professional personnel from the neighborhood and to some extent we were reproducing the community's status hierarchy within the program. This was no doubt amplified by the program's sponsorship by the Catholic church because the elite in the neighborhood sent their school age children to the Catholic schools.

neighborhood was a slum. The apartment buildings were quite deteriorated and known as gang territory. Because of what I had learned the previous summer, I decided to find every possible eligible child in that section by going block by block looking for households. One day when I was combing the streets for children, I came upon a little girl who looked about five playing on the sidewalk, barefoot amidst broken glass and whiskey bottles. I remember the scene. There was a bar on the corner with the windows all boarded up, and a few men were hanging out sipping from their bottles in paper bags. I didn't think they were gang members because they were older and not dressed in the sharp, aggressive style of the gangs. Besides it was midday and gang members were not usually on the street that early. Although they had a proprietary attitude toward their corner they responded in a friendly way when I greeted them.<sup>4</sup>

I told the little girl, who said her name was Patty, that I was from a school program that I thought she would like, and she looked up at a younger child who was peering out of an open window on the fourth floor of the building. Patty said her mother was home and took me up to see her. The apartment had one old couch by the window, maybe two pans for cooking, and two beds each with fairly clean but ragged sheets. Patty's mother,

Melba, pulled up an old kitchen chair and I sat on the couch. Melba looked no more than 16, slight and dark complected. She was actually 19, and already had five children. The oldest was Patty, the youngest an infant, a two year old was in Mississippi with family. She had come to Chicago some two years before with the children's father who had recently returned with the one child to Mississippi. I liked Melba, partly because I had succeeded in finding her but mostly for her sweetness toward her children. She was still a child in many ways but someone in her life must have loved her and taught her about loving babies, if not about keeping a closer eye on them in the city. We talked about bringing the children (two were the right age) into the center the next day, and she told me she wanted to do something about not having any more babies. I told her I could help her with finding a doctor to talk with about that and we would have programs and services for her as well as the children.

Melba brought all four children the next day and we registered Patty who was five, and Sissy, who was four. She brought along the baby and Tilly, who was three, because there was no one to watch them at home. Over the next weeks she would often bring along all of the children and would usually stay for a while. She wanted to enroll Tilly too, and although she

wasn't eligible until fall we often included Tilly in field trips and I would let her stay and play with toys in my office when Melba needed to do an errand. Patty and Sissy enjoyed the program and the staff responded well to them. Patty would be going to kindergarten in the fall and she seemed to gain visibly from the program. Sissy did well too and would be continuing in Head Start when it went to a full year program in the fall. Tilly, however, was a little girl with troubles. At times she couldn't seem to manage herself, and careened around the room going from one thing to another. At other times she would be lethargic, hardly the same little girl. She didn't seem well physically either. Tilly was fairly light-skinned, but her skin was pale and splotchy, and some days she had a kind of misery about her that suggested a physical illness. All of this was not evident at first but became more so as the summer progressed, and I began to wonder if she might not be mildly retarded. We did include Tilly in the screenings whenever the health staff came around and nothing unusual was noted.

Melba amazed me that summer because most of the children we recruited from her part of the neighborhood had spotty attendance, and her girls never missed a day. When children didn't show up we would revisit the families to try to persuade them to continue.

4. My experience with the street corner men in the neighborhood was that they were protective. The day Martin Luther King was killed a group of men that I greeted every day stayed by my car until they saw I was safely on my way home.

They usually assured us that they still wanted their children in the program and promised to send them the next day. Sometimes the children came for a day or two then would drop out again. Few of the mothers from Melba's part of the neighborhood would participate in any parent activities or field trips but Melba always managed to come. I still remember a few of these other women. Some were literally ill, either suffering from depression, untreated hypertension or alcoholism, and some seemed simply defeated, preferring the comfort of TV in a dark room to the bright scrutiny of a social program. Thinking back on what I had seen in these homes, it no doubt was much easier to stay home with the kids, and often there was a disabled adult who also lived in the home, than to go to the trouble of getting one child out to school. When there was an older sibling, she (almost always a girl) would bring the child, and there was a better chance than that the child would have regular attendance. Melba had only a bare one room apartment and no family or friends, but somehow she was determined to make the most of whatever was at hand.

Whether the other women were also reacting to the social stratification of the neighborhood, I can't say, but it wouldn't have surprised me. Our program staff reflected the hierarchy of the neighborhood and some of them may not have wanted to be associated with people from the southern part of the neighborhood. The community-residing members

of the Head Start staff were the elites of the neighborhood. The assistant teacher, Paulette, and the nutrition assistant, Catherine, were long-time residents of the neighborhood and members of the elite. Both Paulette and Catherine were highly possessive of the program and did everything that they could to protect their positions of superiority to the parents and families in the program. Much of what they did, for they colluded with one another, made life harder for the head teacher, myself and some of the other staff. Paulette was a very handsome, fair skinned blonde woman of about 40 who could easily have been taken for White. Paulette's behavior was particularly destructive in the ways that she would use gossip and innuendo to try to undermine Savitri, the head teacher, a young Indian woman and perhaps not so incidentally, dark-complected. Paulette and Catherine were in their element however when they could see themselves as providing help to "these poor children" and much of their disapproval of the other staff was due to our apparent failure to be as truly dedicated to the cause as they were. In absolute contrast to Paulette and Catherine was Geraldine, the assistant parent coordinator, and the person from the community with whom I worked most closely. Geraldine was from the rural south, lived with her husband, who was much older, and their six children in an apartment building where her husband was a custodian. Geraldine was a kind woman

who carried herself with a quiet dignity. Her normally soft voice took on a more pronounced southern accent when she talked with the mothers from the rural south. Geraldine was also a very handsome woman, very dark complected, probably only in her mid to late thirties. She paid no heed to Paulette's and Catherine's machinations and helped soften their effect on the mothers who didn't come up to Paulette's standards or who weren't sufficiently grateful for her attention.

When Melba arrived at the center she was not the least deterred by Paulette's and Catherine's raised eyebrows and clucking tongues. She brought her barefoot and skimpily clad children into the children's room and talked eagerly to all the adults around. Melba's daughters Patty and Sissy were both bright and responsive, if not very well socialized, and because they met Paulette's and Catherine's needs—poor little (neglected) children—they were taken on by them as special projects. Paulette and Catherine decided to take a similar maternally protective role with Melba, and as the weeks went on she was adopted by the doyennes. Melba had nothing to lose and seemed to thrive on the extra attention. Paulette and Catherine went into our clothing supply and probably some private stock as well, and soon Patty and Sissy were relatively well-clothed. All of this helped Melba to get a better handle on things and soon she looked less raggedy herself.

One day toward the end

of the summer program Melba came to see me about something and brought Tilly with her (by this time she had found someone to watch the youngest two when she was away from home). Like the scene on the street when I first met Patty this one stands out vividly in my mind. Central Catholic was a traditional school building and my "office" was an unoccupied classroom. In the room were three desks, mine, one for the project secretary, and one that was available for the teacher if she needed it or for the health professionals who came every so often to provide preventive care and to refer children for additional care. We held parent groups in the room, and because the room was large, we had a mini-thrift shop in one quadrant. Once a month we would have a "sale" that was not a sale so much as a way to collect small donations to help support a pot luck dinner or a field trip for families. It was understood that whatever was there could be given to someone in need. In spite of its high ceilings and large size the room had a welcoming, familiar feel, and I felt as if the parents and I had taken possession of it and made it a comfortable place.

Melba sat next to my desk, holding Tilly on her lap while we talked, about the possibility of finding a better apartment. In those days I smoked, in fact I had gone from a pack-and-a-half week habit to a pack-and-a-half a day habit in the time I had been working there. While Melba and I were talking, Tilly reached over and

started eating the contents of my ashtray. She grabbed the cigarette butts and ashes with her fists and stuffed them into her mouth. She was not tentative or experimental about it the way an infant would be but quite deliberate; she wanted to eat it. An alarm went off somewhere in my mind as I searched for some explanation. Melba was obviously concerned when she sensed my reaction but not particularly alarmed. I asked her was this usual and she said, yes, she was always trying to keep her from eating dirt and other things that were bad for her. From somewhere came the thought, "Pica", that's what its called when you eat things that would normally be repellent, or that have no resemblance to food. I knew that among poor women of the south there was a practice of eating clay or food starch, particularly when they were pregnant or lactating, but I also knew that there were medical conditions that could compel someone to ingest things other than normal food. I remembered the open window in Melba's apartment and the possibility of lead poisoning came to me. Tilly's behavior, her obvious physical misery, then Pica. Melba and I agreed to go to the clinic to have Tilly checked for lead in the morning.



The next morning we left Melba's other children in Geraldine's care and I drove Melba and Tilly to the nearest public health clinic at Cook County Hospital. That day I learned what it was like to be poor and need a health service, we waited four hours to be seen, and when we were finally directed to bring Tilly in, it was an assembly line procedure. They took a blood sample, no other examination was done, and told us to go back and wait. I was reassured that they were taking our concern about lead poisoning seriously and we were told to wait there for the results. While Melba and Tilly waited I went out to get us something to eat, and we waited another three hours for the results. When they finally called us at four o'clock, we'd been there since nine, we were told that Tilly was indeed suffering from lead poisoning. They told us that although the lead was at a high level, she probably had not suffered permanent damage, and they set up the first appointment for treatment the next day.

Tilly's recovery was rapid. In a very short time, she was energetic, sociable, and when she started Head Start she responded well. None of Melba's other children tested positive for lead. Apparently Melba had only lived in that apartment when Tilly was going through the phase of putting things in her mouth. Melba and her children went on to gain strength and there is no question in my mind that Head Start, despite its flaws, was a lifeline for her and her children. It is also

true that because Melba's needs were so simple and so stark I learned a great deal by being part of her life for a short time. After the experience at Cook County I did what I could to get access for Melba and her children to Mile Square Health Clinic, a state-of-the-art community health clinic which was funded, as was Head Start, as part of the Great Society program. Our neighborhood was not included in their geographic cachement area but somehow I was able to get Melba in, maybe it was Tilly's lead poisoning, I don't remember. At her request I went with her the day she went for her family planning appointment. Mile Square was impressive, slick and efficient. But neither the physician or the nurses ever called Melba by her name. They kept calling her "little mother."

Six months later Martin Luther King was dead and the world changed forever.

### Concluding Thoughts

As this story unfolded I began to realize what I needed from it. Not what I had initially thought, some insight into myself that would make sense of my career or even explain who I am today. No, in telling this story I have been able give voice to perceptions of my experience that I feared were somehow secret, not acceptable. I realized through remembering Melba that much of my career I have feared being swallowed up by the enormity of what needs to be done to make this into a good world, but I am also aware that a great deal must be in place

before we have the privilege of being there to help someone. I was reminded once again of my grief about how our government abandoned the poor at the first excuse—Black power rhetoric, fear of crime, the high value we place on self reliance. It was difficult for me to write about the racial aspects of the experience, especially my feelings about Paulette and Catherine from whom I was finally glad to escape, not having any way of counteracting their manipulations, and not sure that I should. Since then I have had similar experiences and they have not been about race so much as differences in power within organizations. These experiences have informed my practice as an administrator. I have never forgotten how the people at Mile Square called Melba, "little mother" and as I think about it, that problem has been at the core of much of the research and writing I have done. The past and the present are indeed one. □

John Edgar Wideman,  
"Father Stories" in *The New Yorker*, August 1, 1994. p. 38.



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.