

A WALK IN THE WOODS

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By Nancy Staver

Nancy Staver was Chief Social Worker at the Judge Baker Clinic Guidance Center in Boston MA for many years. She is now retired.

Introduction by Ann Hartman, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, and former Dean, Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton MA.

The following reminiscence and reflection comes from Nancy Staver, much beloved and respected former chief social worker at Boston's Judge Baker Child Guidance Clinic. Nancy began her career at the Judge Baker as an MSW field student from Smith. She returned there upon graduation in 1942 and remained on the staff for over 40 years, with one year's absence which she spent at the Tavistock Clinic in London. She was an active member of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, a research advisor for Smith, and pursued a particular interest in children with learning disabilities. In retirement, she volunteered extensively, primarily at the Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham, Massachusetts.

She has sent us the autobiographical essay of a former client with whom she has been in regular contact for 35 years. She describes the seven year old she began to see in the early 60's. When the client was in her teens, and getting beyond the age range of the Judge Baker program, Nancy began to see her privately on a "non paying" basis. Their meetings finally evolved into an annual expedition with intervening phone calls. At Nancy's request, the client has written her story. They will both be delighted if their shared reflection is useful to others. "Obviously," said Nancy, "I put a lot into her and she put a lot into me." Thirty-five years! It does give one pause in these days of managed care!

Ann Hartman

Nearly thirty-five years ago, when I was a social worker in a renowned child guidance clinic, I was asked to take on for long-term psychotherapy the little girl about whom this former patient and I are writing today. We think the story of Margaret's development may bring hope and comfort to some parents of special needs children.

When I first became Margaret's therapist she was seven, and so tense that she seemed brittle. She was a compulsive hand washer, preoccupied with fantasies about her bodily functions, and fearful that she might hurt babies. She was so agitated by group talk and especially by group laughter that she could barely stay in the room. She did not make friends her age and seemed only to give quiet glances at the world around her. It was a red letter day for me when we were out for a walk and she noticed and commented on the scent of the flowering trees we were passing. In today's mental health world she would probably be treated as brain-damaged, but at that time we had little to offer her but psychotherapy and general supports. We met weekly for a good many years and her mother came faithfully to meet with a social worker, talking over such things as planning manageable schooling for Margaret and handling her difficulties at home.

Eventually, after some gaps in our contact, a plan evolved for Margaret and me to have an annual all-day outing, usually a picnic out in the country, an afternoon of leisurely walking and talking in the woods, and dinner at a nearby country restaurant. More recently we have gone to see the various places where Margaret lived when she was a child, and most recently to see her own attractive and well-kept apartment in a town a few miles away from her mother's. She respects my limitations as an octogenarian and has been able with her mother's help to shorten the outings. She continues to telephone me two or three times a year when she is worried about something, but is careful to check about whether she is asking for too much from me. She has other good professional help now and tells me a little about these services.

At my request and with great enthusiasm, Margaret wrote down the following account of her development and difficulties.

FROM MARTHA

In school once, everybody was having fun but me, of course. Laughter never really appealed to me because I really don't have that much humor and I always complained if the girls laughed and I felt so different from the others. Laughing aloud is just like little pricks sticking into me, it hurts my ears as well as feeling stressed. I'd be a phony if other people tried to make me have a sense of humor.

I complained about foolish things. One example is when



my sister's hair was curled or she was having a permanent. When she had her hair done I always thought she was a beautiful girl, much prettier than I was. I really thought that all the other girls were better. I used to be jealous of my sister because she knew more than I also, and she is seven years younger. A girl at my school was very pretty. A few times I was jealous a bit when she had her hair curled. I kept looking at her. She would say "How come you keep looking at me?" I don't know now what I said but it was because I was jealous. I probably didn't want to say that I was jealous.

This other time at school, well, I wouldn't do it today, but I would always go in front of the big door mirror in our homeroom to comb and try and fix my hair the way I wanted it to go. So this girl says "You are making your hair look worse." The teacher never liked me doing that either. It was because they thought I was stuck up doing this.

In school when I was making a smacking noise with my lips,

a girl told me "Don't be so silly." Just making that noise made me feel amused a bit if nothing else did. I'd be hurt if anyone thought I was a real oddball. If I lived in a retirement home, I'd hope some people would understand me and not say "Well, you got to laugh." If they see people like me, there sure aren't very many.

My real father was always a problem to me. He would always scold me for things I'd fuss about and do. He said "You don't have the problems we have" which didn't make me feel better within myself. As a teenager he used to put me up against the wall and just slap me across the face and say "What's the matter with you anyway, are you sick upstairs or what?" Which meant I was sick in the head. My real father thought that I didn't know as much as I should have at age twelve. He'd start quizzing me on a half a dozen questions and if I didn't know or made a mistake he'd say "You are Margaret Stupid Jones."

One Thanksgiving I was nerved up from the entertainment around and the laughter. My grandmother, as nice a person as she was, said to me, because I had tried to tell her how I felt, "Well, why don't you try to stay and enjoy the entertainment, you don't try." As nice as she was, I couldn't always do what she thought I should be doing. Sometimes I knew better. That just wasn't for me and I was smart enough to know that, even if I've done dumb things or said dumb things at those times. And sometimes still do. I was no angel. I did like my grandmother very much. My mom was in by the fireplace ly-

ing down, so I just went on in there, out from the crowd. I am glad to have my third floor apartment all for myself and I do not have to live at home. Although my rent goes up a little I still can afford it but I plan to go on to the Senior Citizen Housing later on. I need to be in a very nice area.

I like to go home to my mom's every other week because I think it is too much to go every week which is turning out well I help her clean house. I have flown by plane across the United States to Seattle, Washington to visit my parent's friends. I stayed a week. So, I can say that was one great thing I have done. No one else was with me. I love doing things on my own. I also traveled to Colorado Springs while my sister was out there visiting a friend. I stayed at a motel and I really did like that very much. I wish I could travel like that more often.

I don't like to travel with groups on tours for it's a lot of laughter. I went on a tour trip with someone once, I was miserable. I think I made a mistake then I'm a person that doesn't like groups of people for the laughing that I was bothered by, for I'm not the one for excitement. I'm very quiet, that's the way I like it. Years ago I tried to make myself laugh with the others at school plus other places, but it just made me feel even worse so I don't. I'm only doing what's right for me. I love to travel but not in groups. I go to Ogonquit, Maine for one week to a motel and that's a little different, I like that very much.

Several years back I found somebody's wallet on the side of the road. I was living in a Retirement Home working at that time,

In fact, just since I've lived here, I've found someone else's wallet at the end of the street I live on, near the grocery store. I picked it up and took it to the Courtesy Desk. I'd say that was a good thing I've done for I think it's right to do those things and I feel sorry for anyone losing something like that I do help other people by doing things for them, if I can and try to respect them too.

When I was in my teen years I was never interested in the news around the world but now I've learned to listen to the news on TV and it is important to do so. I am glad to be interested in the news. I believe in knowing what I want and can do later on in the future. I'm glad I'm able to support myself and to stay out of situations that stress me. I was smart enough to know when I was real young that I could never be a mother also. Well other things bother me as well as what I've already written but I'm not telling anymore now. Now I will end my story, but I could really make a book out all these things that happened and how they affected me. As a child I had some crazy kicks also, I wish I had never done them today. □

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