

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE STORY DOES NOT END

“I can easily believe, that there are more invisible than visible Beings in the universe. But who shall describe for us their families? and their ranks and relationships and distinguishing features and functions? What they do? where they live? The human mind has always circled around a knowledge of these things, never attaining it. I do not doubt, however, that it is sometimes beneficial to contemplate, in thought, as in a Picture, the image of a greater and better world; lest the intellect, habituated to the trivia of daily life, may contract itself too much, and wholly sink into trifles. But at the same time we must be vigilant for truth, and maintain proportion, that we may distinguish certain from uncertain, day from night.”

T. Burnet (1692) Archaeological Philosophy, p. 68. [Qtd. by Samuel Taylor Coleridge “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”]

Perhaps, I thought, women’s lives were being carried out as quiet experiments, each discovery in a separate room, each setback and triumph unknown by the experimenters next door.... Silence murders possibilities. But even a whisper can awaken them, breathe company into what seems an isolated existence.

Anndee Hockman

Memory

Memory is the treasury and guardian of all things. Cicero, 80 B.C.

The memory process is problematic in oral history. The stories I have heard and recorded are the individuals’ memories of their pasts, and as memories, influenced by the passage of time and by the changing perceptions of the individuals. Honig (1997) also suggests that an oral history is a reflection of the narrator’s and of the interviewer’s present. Although speakers tell the stories of their pasts, they also have lives today, and each chooses to notice or to remember some aspects of past and present and to overlook or to forget others (Frisch, 1999). It may also be that narrators told the story they felt I wanted to hear, and certainly the questions I asked influenced the way the narrators presented themselves. While the feminist viewpoint privileges experience, to view oral history as a purer and more direct form of history can be problematic in its own way. It is important to realize that any retelling we do involves a screening, reordering, and reinterpreting of the events of our lives in light of our present understandings (Frisch, 1999).

The women whom I interviewed are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, and I asked them to recall events that occurred at least forty-five years ago. It is natural that there might be some inaccuracy in their recollection of time (Frisch, 1999; Larsen, Thompson, & Hansen, 1998). Sometimes my narrators contradicted their own stories; sometimes they contradicted the stories of others or contradicted other sources. In spite of my own beliefs in the value of oral history research, I heard my old positivist self, sitting on my shoulder, telling me to look for objective facts. Initially, I was troubled by what I felt were “inaccuracies” in the stories and was concerned about how I could report the “truth” when I was hearing different versions. My concerns with this agenda influenced some of the questions I asked my narrators. I endeavored during my interviews to keep my focus not on the exactness of the participants’ memories, but on how they were remembering events that were significant in their own lives (Frisch, 1990; Polishuk, 1998). Even when memories of time are inexact, they embody the individual’s “consciousness...[of] a chronologically ordered, continuous past reality”(Larsen et al., 1998, p. 129). The inconsistencies of oral history are not motive for discounting the narrator’s story because the oral historian is primarily drawn to the sense the individual is making out of his or her own life (Hoberman, 2001; Frisch, 1990). “Ultimately, oral history, like autobiography, is less about history and experience than about their retelling” (Honig, 1997, ¶58). As I began my work, I wondered in my journal about how the connections among the narrators might affect the stories I heard.

Will intersubjectivity be problematic in my research? Because of the research questions I am considering, I will be actively looking for intersubjectivity, drawing it out, but one person’s narrative can affect that of the other participants in positive or negative ways. I may be able to use what I learn in one interview to stimulate memory and conversation in another, but I may steer the interview away from the story the participant needs to tell. And what if the memories are contradictory? How will I handle information that may reflect negatively on another of my participants? These stories will not be one person’s story in isolation, but a confluence of events, culture, place, and other individuals.

The responsibility of the oral historian is primarily to the narrator and her vision of her life as she has made sense of it. Alessandro Portelli (1991) believes that it is the divergent tellings that are the power of oral history, that what the individual's own oral representation of the past discloses about the narrator is more important than historic fact. There is, Portelli feels, a class bias in favor of written documents. Simply writing something down gives it the impression of "truth." Oral tellings frequently have less authority in the eyes of historians.

Perhaps this is why oral historians feel the need to transcribe and write the histories. Perhaps this is why the narrators in this study feel the story of KTS needs to be in black and white. Writing may give legitimacy to the story, not to those who lived it, but to those who "hear" it.

Oh, you ask hard questions, honey. Well, [talking about KTS has] really brought back a lot of memories that I'd kind of forgotten, really think about things more. And I'm really glad that somebody's putting this stuff down for future generations to read about and know how things were back then. (Geneva Shepherd)

Talking to you has brought up a lot of people, a lot of events, a lot of things I've heard about which are really very interesting. I guess they had to have interested me to have remembered some of them this long. But it's—we can't live in the past, but there's nothing wrong with thinking about the past sometimes, and this has — most of my life has been centered for one reason or another here, the things I've heard about from the earlier years and the things I've experienced for myself for the last fifty years. And I'm glad for anything that can be preserved along this line. (Emily Umbarger)

Another aspect of memory is the possibility of the narrators romanticizing their past. Frisch (1990) believes that "memory ...functions as a creator of distance" and that the greater the gap between events and their telling, "the greater the tendency to present the past experience in a variety of romanticized modes" (p. 12). Although my mother had always spoken with such fondness of her experiences at KTS, when I heard only praise of the school, I began to wonder again if I were hearing truth or memories filtered and

colored by nostalgia, or both. As I continued my work, I began to believe there was no difference; I became less and less concerned with matching facts and finding the Truth. I still sought to triangulate my data, but not so much to find exact dates, times, and names as to find more about the ways in which KTS fulfilled its mission, to seek additional resources that revealed the distinctive nature of this institution. As narrators told me of health outreach into the community and of the specific incidents they remembered, I was finding nurses' reports of home visits, vaccinations, health clinics, and nutrition training. Narrators told about the summer visitors who came from all over the United States to visit the Training School, and I unearthed record books with visitors' names and places of residence and amounts they had given to the school in return for a room and meals. After I learned of the clothing sent to the area in "mission barrels," I discovered tiny scraps of paper sent to the school with scrawled, penciled messages from mountain parents asking for shoes or winter coats for their children. There was no doubt the women were relating truth about the essence of KTS, and it no longer seemed important whether every detail of their stories was independently verifiable. Again, my journal recorded my thoughts.

I can't sleep tonight. I must be more positivistic than I thought. The discrepancies in some of the details in Dora's story are really bothering me. If she was five when she came to KTS, she couldn't have been born in 1916. The school didn't open until 1924. But she would know her date of birth, wouldn't she? Then I think, what does it really matter. Are the exact dates that important? Isn't the feeling Dora had for KTS what is truly significant? I know she isn't "lying" to me; she is telling me what is true to her....

...I finished reading Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros today—something for pleasure, not just for research. As so many times before, however, I have found threads that knot together; what I read or hear speaks to my research. The novel's narrator writes of going home, of her body remembering when the mind had forgotten. When I talk to the narrators for this work, they seem to be carried back also, to memories their minds have forgotten, but the tilt of a head, the far -

away look in their eyes, the way they hold their hands, these tell me their bodies remember; they are sometimes in that other place and time.

If the narrators romanticized their experiences at KTS, perhaps there was sufficient reason for them to do so. Perhaps, I too am romanticizing the KTS story, since my respect for the institution has grown with each interview and each discovery of data. Yet taken together, these stories of individual experiences at KTS have become for me a part of a broader discourse about education, about theology, and about feminism. In addition,

by showing people trying to make sense of their lives at a variety of points in time and in a variety of way, by opening this individual process to view, the oral history reveals patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience (Frisch, 1990).

Michael Hoberman (2001) calls the tendency to romanticize the past “nostalgic utopianism;” looking with fondness and longing on the good old days while being thankful for present conditions and while fully realizing one’s life is in the present. Hoberman (2001) also says, “What made the good old days good was the fact that they challenged us, and we outlasted them” (p.18). The stories of the past instruct us in both how we should and should not behave (Hoberman, 2001, Frisch 1990). Barbara Shirliffe (2001) also feels nostalgia is instructive in oral history inquiry, helping researchers to recognize how “historical consciousness” operates as an individual tries to understand her past (p. 60). In Shirliffe’s (2001) study of school segregation, she says her narrators turned “to what they remember as making a difference in their lives during the era of segregation: the black community, its teachers, and its schools” (p.60). While the circumstances of my narrators were very different from those of Shirliffe’s, they were nonetheless difficult. It is understandable that these women, too, might focus on similar positive aspects of their lives, particularly since both Shirliffe (2001) and I were interested in school experiences.

Weiss (1995) cautions researchers about two faulty courses they might take in their analysis of feminist community. One is the temptation to “applaud” the achievements of the community, “born out of the excitement of recovering a history of female communities,” of learning how women in different circumstances were able to “survive with and through each other,” and of the desire to show that women have not always accepted patriarchal oppression (Weiss, 1995, p. 4). The second temptation facing the researcher is to be critical of the communities because they found ways to adapt to that same oppression (Weiss, 1995). Although in some ways KTS was a separate society, it was also a part of the larger society, interacting with that society and with men in power. Since the school was ultimately under the auspices of the traditional church, it could have easily been a tool to validate patriarchy. In spite of my admiration for the institution, Konnarock Training School was not a utopia. I realize that I have been seeking the good and have “absorbed a different reality” than I might have were I looking for the institution’s shortcomings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Through this project, I have tried to listen carefully to what I have learned about the “practices, structures, and values” that allowed KTS “to be sustaining, empowering, and respectful of individuality” (Weiss, 1995, p. 4-5). This does not mean that I am oblivious to criticism that might be leveled at the community. KTS did not develop with a specific feminist agenda; it is only in retrospect that I can see the work of the school and feminism mesh.

I play with my mind’s drawings like architectural overlays. First I look at feminist research theory; then I see another sketch of the school and its women, then a third of Christian doctrine, then feminist social theory. More and more, with the right light on the drawing board, I see how these plots dovetail, how one informs and is informed by another. Finally, the corners begin to stack up; the lines come together so that I can no longer see clearly where one ends and another begins. The overlays become one image.

The Image of a Greater and a Better World

After all, it was a different time, a different place--what is the value of looking back to this time and place that cannot come again? Oral history research has flourished in the past decades, and for different purposes. Much of this work has been archival, with large collections of tapes and transcripts rapidly developing. There is definite value in preserving the words and stories of individuals; after all, each of us is only here for a short time. I am especially pleased that I have been able to record part of my own mother's story for the sake of her children and grandchildren. During the past years, as I have raised my own family and pursued my own career, I have made little enough time to simply talk to her. The closeness and understanding that have been a result of this work have alone made the project personally worthwhile. In addition, the other participants have been grateful for my preservation of their stories and of the story of KTS. While I also hope to archive the tapes and transcripts for possible use by future historians, I cannot say that I feel this is the single greatest use of oral history research. As archival collections are developing at astonishing rates, we should ask if producing oral history documents and tapes for the sake of producing more history is enough. Is this all we want? I could, and do, feel some sense of pride in the fact that I have gathered the stories of eight participants in a unique event, that I have gathered twenty-three tapes and almost five-hundred pages of transcripts. And even if that is all I have done, the work has value and is truthfully probably what I had in mind as I began my research. However---

Research leads us to places never envisioned when the project began and unsettles preconceptions with which we have become complacent. What have I learned from my journey back to another time with women who have shared their lives with me? How can I hope to capture in black and white the inexpressible? I entered an unfamiliar time and place, and my ideas about that place and even about myself were transformed. My research questions are answered in one possible way, but many other stories remain unheard, and the legacy of Konnarock Training School has not ended. The women who came to KTS were in many ways entering new territory. They were sometimes far from the homes and families they knew, and they had to learn new ways of life with new people. They were faced with the monumental tasks of learning how to become part of a

new life, of teaching the children and the community, of building a family within the school, and of finding ways to share the family's blessings with others. Would these women have described themselves as feminists? Even the earliest would probably not have openly done so nor have used *feminism* with its present meanings. Yet neither could they have named the sexual harassment, sex discrimination, sexism, and patriarchy that were pervasive in their existence as women in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet if one accepts the premise that feminism, in its many manifestations, embodies two basic principles: the empowerment of women and the desire to bring about change (Jones, 2000), KTS was then indeed a feminist institution.

In my analysis, I speak not for the foremothers of KTS, but for myself from a twenty-first century, White, Appalachian, Euro-centric perspective, a view whose limitations and advantages I acknowledge. I have gathered and analyzed data with my own biases, and my conclusions may not be those another would have reached; yet in acknowledging my standpoint, I hope my readers may also come to understand something of what I believe. As I have worked, I have also found myself weighing the mythology of Appalachia, a mythology that is a part of my heritage but that privileges the image of the mountaineer--the hardy, independent, xenophobic man of the mountains--against my own question: where were the women? The history of my beloved Appalachia has been highly gendered and highly repressive for women, at least as much as other history has been. What then was the role of women? How did my Appalachian foremothers carve a place for themselves out of the mountain wilderness? I cannot answer these questions within the confines of a study focusing on such a small part of the story of the mountains, but I can provide a picture of how this one group of women, many of them "foreigners," found and nurtured possibilities for themselves and for their extended families.

One can interpret history, but she cannot change it. I do not look at Konnarock Training School as the ideal community, but only as a step toward bringing about a more just world. Today one might ask: Why was there no racial diversity in the institution? Were there not Black girls in need of an education? Why was KTS an all White

institution? Undeniably, the educational opportunities for Black children during the years KTS existed were extremely poor. I must ask if a Christian institution excluded any children. I do not know whether or not a Black girl would have been able to attend KTS. I discovered no evidence of an invitation or of a denied request for a Black child. The school was founded with a mission to serve mountain girls who did not have access to educational opportunities because they lived in remote areas served by few roads. While it in no way implies that segregation was acceptable, the fact is that in this extremely rural mountainous area, the number of Blacks was small and most lived in towns (Kephart, 1923). The 1920 census reveals that in the counties surrounding Konnarock Training School—Grayson, Smyth, and Washington—only 4.8% of the total population was Black (University of Virginia, 1998). By 1930, both the total number and the percentage of Blacks in the counties had decreased, probably as a result of Blacks migrating northward in search of jobs. Between 1920 and 1930, races other than White owned only about 1.5 percent of the farms in these counties. (University of Virginia, 1998). I would suspect that the areas in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee had much the same demographics. My mother said she had never seen a Black person until she was a “grown girl” and traveled to Tennessee to work in the fields picking beans. Whether it was the laws of the time or an oversight or slight on the part of the women who founded the school, I do not know, but KTS did not admit any Black children. Yet the Women’s Missionary Society supported a variety of educational, health and vocational missions throughout the world, most of these for women and children of color. It is my belief that the isolated and insulated nature of the area is the reason for the particular mission of Konnarock Training School, and this meant that Black children were probably not going to be a part of the school, largely because they did not live in the targeted mountains.

This study, as any research, is limited and is not intended to represent anything beyond one example of how feminist theology might help to bring about significant change. I have used the oral history interviews in relation to the mission and effects of Konnarock Training School on its alumnae and the community. It was not the purpose of the study to do a narrative analysis of the individual narrators, although there is much

possibility for that work within the stories. Neither does the study encompass all of the work done by the church in this small area of Appalachia alone. There is, for instance, little discussion here of the efforts of the medical center under the direction of Dr. and Mrs. Meyer or the health center staffed by Sister Sophia Moeller. Neither have I dealt with the Training School's companion institution, the Iron Mountain School for Boys, in any but a superficial way. My choice of subject was made because any research must have a limited focus to be effective, not because these aspects of the Konnarock mission are any less interesting or less worthy of study.

If *Women's Ways of Knowing* is correct is asserting that "for many women, the 'real' and valued lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvements," Konnarock Training School certainly provided the basis for the life lessons learned by its faculty and students (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 4). This was a community that cultivated "complex and integrated patterns of affiliation" among those who were involved and that offered "wide-ranging prospects for human fulfillment" (Wiess & Friedman, 1995, p. xi). The story of KTS is not a single episode; it is a never-ending story. The school changed lives during its existence and continues to influence lives today. Each generation of children born to a KTS student or to a child of a student reaps the benefits of the KTS experience.

It is both unrealistic and thought provoking to use KTS as an example for today's public schools. KTS was first of all a church school, free to emphasize religious beliefs. The students at Konnarock were there twenty-four hours a day, giving the faculty many more opportunities to affect change than in today's public schools where students attend for only about seven hours a day. The setting of Konnarock was isolated; today, most students in the United States are exposed to a broader society than their own community through technology if not through personal experience. KTS students were also insulated from many of the dangers that face adolescents in the twenty-first century. It is, therefore, unrealistic to lift up everything about KTS as a model for modern education. However, we might ask what would happen in our schools if we placed the emphasis on knowing

and nurturing our individual students; if we saw our students as family, not as products; if we de-emphasized competition, including sports; if we worked diligently to establish relationships and community within and without the school; if standards of living became as important as standards of learning; if we truly cared about children and helped them grow to their fullest potential, and if we used a feminist paradigm for school management? Would we then see, forty or fifty or sixty years later, people who carried those values in their hearts and whose ethics of care nurtured others to see themselves as part of the human family? Would our society understand that the fate of one is tied to the fate of all? Or would we still be a nation of violence, self-gratification, materialism, intolerance, and aggression? History professor Howard Zinn said, “History cannot provide confirmation that something better is inevitable; but it can uncover evidence that it is conceivable.” Perhaps the history of KTS reveals that a different focus for society is possible, that when we view moral responsibility in terms of nurturing others, another way of life comes into being. Perhaps the dream is conceivable.

One of the attractions I find in qualitative research is the importance placed on context in the development of understanding. The social atmosphere, the nature of the geographic region, the culture of the time, all made Konnarock Training School the phenomenon it was. Today is not that time; I am not in that place, and I realize the questionability of placing a twenty-first century overlay on the portrait of the school. An overlay can bring images and ideas into perspective, or it can distort. Yet one of the goals of feminist research from the beginning has been to re-vision and re-write the history that has neglected women for so long. The narrators in this study and I share many commonalities, yet “when an interpreter emphasizes only the interests and purpose she shares with a narrator of a life history, she obscures complex ethical, practical, and political issues” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 13). It is my hope that the overlay of feminist theology I have placed on the work of KTS has not blurred the vision but has given it a new significance, not merely as a historical institution, but as one that still reaches into the future.

Considering the opposition by traditional institutions and practices to feminist ideals, the survival of any feminist community for any length of time is a

successful experiment and a welcome opportunity to learn how better to forge ideal communities of feminist aspiration. (Weiss & Friedman, 1995, xiii)

More than seventy-five years after Konnarock Training School opened its doors, the world is still broken, still filled with poverty, inequality, and oppression. We face the possibilities of greater destruction of the environment and of human life than at any time in history. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from the tiny, secluded school is that a better world is possible, that it is not too late to transform ourselves if we learn to value all people, to work toward justice, and to live in community, in short, to practice a feminist transformational theology. Because in the end, a woman's work is really also the Christian's work: to be a peacemaker, to feed the hungry, to be a steward of creation, and to ensure a safe environment for children. It should also be man's work.

AFTERWORD

As I listen to stories of women's small subversions, everyday acts, I can hear these ancestors whispering encouragement. I take a breath and add my voice to the on-going collection.

Anndee Hochman, 1994, p. 243

It may be that I am left with many more questions than answers. I am fully conscious of the unresolved ambiguities in this work. I have written about feminists who would not call themselves feminists in the midst of the highly androcentric atmosphere of the Appalachia of the first half of the twentieth century. I have said these are women who brought change and opportunity--by instruction in homemaking, teaching, and nursing. I saw Christian feminists challenging the patriarchal position *and* holding up a model of women as nurturers. I have sung praises for pioneering women who both adopted and challenged traditional roles, and combined that with the notion that our society does not encourage the development of an ethics of care. Have I spread myself and my analysis too thin, tried to cover too much? But then what would I leave out of a story that is still far from complete? Sometimes I make sense to myself, and sometimes I think I must be crazy....sometimes I accept that living means to be surrounded by contradictions.

Personally and professionally I have changed. I no longer recognize myself, yet feel I have found myself. I did not know when I began this work that I had “embarked on a path of personal redefinition” (Freidman, 1995, p. 204). Andee Hochman (1994) quotes a poet friend, Judith Barrington, about her search for identification with women who had gone before.

It was important to me to find feminist women who had unusual lives and lived them in the landscape I knew when I was growing up. It was important to me to find women's history in the culture in which I became who I am, to know that it had always been there, even though I hadn't come across it during my formative years. (p.252)

The past months have been for me a wild ride on a roller coaster of emotions, and I have at times turned sharply from pure feeling to reasoned analysis. There have been moments when I have cried, when I have been humbled, when I have laughed heartily,

when I have been amazed, when I been touched by my narrators' trust and friendship, and when I have felt like an intruder into their lives. At other junctures during this process, the investigator in me has thrust emotions aside to analyze data and present findings. My thoughts at times have echoed those of Barbara Ellen Smith (1999) who speaks of the child of Appalachia whose "often unarticulated images of the region are deeply comforting, maternal, female," our "mountain mama" calling us home (p. 3). Throughout, whatever stance I found myself taking, underlying the experience has been a conversation leading me to new understandings between the mountains and me.

The creed reprinted here was written by Mary Phlegar Smith, who laid the groundwork for Konnarock Training School and became its first principal. I can think of no better way to close my work.

The Mountains Speak to Me

I believe in the mountains—the high places created by God the Father almighty.
 I believe in their solitudes and quietness, giving me time and opportunity to dwell
 with my own thoughts.

I believe in the great spaces "where earth meets the sky," linking my earthly
 existence with the divine and drawing my soul to a closer communion with
 God.

I believe in the ruggedness and strength of the mountains, teaching me, with their
 ever-present example, to gain strength of character.

I believe in the loneliness of the mountains, making me thoughtful of others and
 encouraging in me the feeling of friendliness for all who cross my pathway.

I believe in the hardships of the mountains, teaching me that I must work for
 whatever things I obtain.

I believe that I have received a priceless heritage from the mountains—my native homeland; and that it is my duty to do my share in perpetuating the usefulness and beauty of the mountains, so that the future blessings they may bestow will be even greater than those they have given me. I dare not fail in my task—for I am a true child of the mountains “from whence cometh my help.”

(Mary Phlegar Smith, 1926)