

CHAPTER 1

NOURISHING CONNECTIONS

“We were not adrift from history but linked to a defiant chain that stretched back beyond our sight.” Anndee Hochman, 1994, p. 242

For the past two years, my mind and spirit have been attempting to absorb as much of the Konnarock Training School experience as is possible for one removed from it by time and circumstance. My appreciation for the school’s work has deepened as I have followed a course sometimes as winding as the mountain roads I physically traveled. Before I turn to the stories of the narrators, it is important to trace the route I followed, to present something of the process of my inquiry.

As I designed and progressed through the study, I was aware that for an investigation effort to be successful, every step, every aspect must be closely linked to every other aspect. Research is a jigsaw puzzle, and the first pieces—an epistemology, an ontological stance, a methodology, specific methods, intriguing questions--the edge pieces—must be aligned so all the little projections fit in their notches; otherwise, there will not be a complete framework ready for the challenging task of fitting tiny pieces into the emerging picture. When I established the general topic of my inquiry, I knew I wanted to learn about the Konnarock Training School experience from the viewpoint of those who had participated in that experience. Having by this point identified myself as a constructivist, feminist researcher, the possibility of qualitative research through oral histories emerged as the most rewarding means of achieving my goals. However, with qualitative research, the interior pieces of my research puzzle were not predetermined. I did not have a puzzle box top to supply knowledge of what the final picture within my frame would look like, because that picture would only form as my participants and I co-constructed the final product. In fact, I found myself reconstructing the frame itself as I looked at those pieces with new vision and understanding.

For example, the questions I chose to pursue were products of evolution. I began with the notion that I wanted to learn about the lives of the women as they were related to

their KTS experiences and through their own words. As I conducted interviews with eight participants, I used a constant comparative method of data analysis, so with each new interview and each new piece of data, I found myself also reevaluating my original questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Silverman, 2000)(See Appendix A for sample notes on analysis). By the time I was ready to write, I had established the following questions:

1. How did Konnarock Training School endeavor to fulfill its mission within the various communities of which it was a part?
2. How do the women who attended Konnarock Training School feel their identities and their life chances were shaped by the institution?
3. What relationships developed among the teachers, ministers, and other mission workers and the girls who attended the school?
4. In what ways did Konnarock Training School sustain and subvert traditional theological and gender assumptions?

In determining my research course, I have tried to interlock my topic, my research questions, my methods, and something of myself (Mason, 1996; Schaab, 2001). Determining there was a relationship between my research goal, methods, and questions led me to believe those questions could not be answered quantitatively (Gates & Lackey, 2000, Silverman, 2000). My choice of oral history research is informed by the belief that knowledge is related to our ability both to experience the world and to make our understanding known to others through narrative (Mason, 1996). Social scientists study experiences that are in some way almost always connected to the narratives of lives (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997).

Yet this topic did not appear magically. I began my graduate studies like many students with little or no idea of where they might lead; I was simply moving toward possibilities. Very quickly I realized that VA Tech focuses on quantitative research, numerical and statistical studies, and I could not envision anything I might wish to study quantitatively that would sustain my interest or seem of lasting value to me. Fortunately, I soon enrolled in a qualitative research class with Dr. Melanie Uttech that opened my eyes

to a new world of potential. This was where I belonged! In my journey to become a better educator, I had traveled to an understanding of knowledge not as a series of “objective” facts, numbers, and statistics to be imparted to my students but as a social construction in which I was not the only, or even the most significant, participant. Now it became clear to me that research could also be a shared partnership in a journey to understanding.

Implicit in my epistemological stance is the recognition of the worth of individuals with whom the researcher (or teacher) works, not as “subjects” to be studied, but as valuable collaborators. Since I have spent my educational career in an English classroom, I also have a long-standing interest in narrative, but here, too, my perception has evolved. I was taught that *story* meant *literature*: “material written by a stranger from another time and place, and presented, not as an event to be incorporated into one’s life experience, but as an icon to be revered and analyzed” (Wanner, 1994). After years in the classroom, I came to understand that teaching about story is not the same as encouraging the experience of story (Applebee, 1996). As both a teacher/facilitator and researcher/collaborator, I wanted to experience, not just learn about, narrative.

After taking another of Dr. Uttech’s classes, oral history, I knew I had found a home. Oral history gave me the opportunity to pursue my own interest in narrative while contributing something worthwhile to the body of knowledge. Certainly the value of oral history research has long been recognized. In the early twentieth century, following the manufacture of relatively inexpensive recording equipment, the collection of oral histories gained momentum. In the 1930s, the Federal Writers Project gave further impetus to the collections. Now, not only does the Library of Congress provide a storehouse for oral histories, and not only does every major university and research library archive oral histories, but state and local libraries, even in small communities, undertake the preservation of oral history narratives. In addition, national and international oral history associations and conferences flourish. I hope my work in oral history will be added to a long line of valuable narrative research.

Somewhere along the road to a graduate degree, I began to identify myself as a feminist researcher. Among other feminist considerations, I knew I had to care personally about whatever work I chose, and I had to seek some way to give back. Pursuing this project as a feminist researcher gave me the important opportunity for reciprocity. It is not enough, researchers have realized, that their work be about women, that it generate “new knowledge about women for the sake of knowledge;” it must also be *for* women (Langellier & Hall, 1981). There is no doubt I have benefited from what I have received from my participants, but ethical considerations demand that I ask myself if the participants might benefit as well. Oral history research frequently “has a powerful, potentially transforming, (re)organizational impact” on both the researcher and the narrator (Smith, 2000, p. 13). Other researchers have reported that both interviewer and narrator gain from the experience of life story inquiry (Honig, 1997; Josselson, 1996; Summerfield, 2000). “Oral history work [is] a way to empower women to revise the scripts of their lives” (Behar & Gordon, 1995, p. 15). From my limited practice in the collection and writing of oral history, I know the transforming power of story, and as a feminist, I recognize the experience of participants as a valid form of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Cosslett et al., 2000; Nielsen, 1990; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Pierson, 1991; Westcott, 1990). Even though women were the traditional “storytellers in many cultures, . . . their voices were not heard in the public sphere” (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994, p. xi). By valuing the experiences and knowledge of women, by documenting their lives, many of whom have been marginalized by traditional research, researchers can help women rediscover their voices (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Cosslett et al., 2000; Held, 1993; McRae, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; 1994; Zerwekh, 2000). Feminists hold that this experience “is not the constricted experience of mere empirical observation. It is the lived experience of feeling as well as thought, of acting as well as receiving impressions, and of connectedness to other persons as well as self” (Held, 1993, p. 24). Women need to feel their experiences have worth.

Another facet of my decision to choose qualitative research is my acceptance of the premise that researcher and the participants should be co-constructors of knowledge (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The act of storytelling is essentially a collaborative

activity; it presupposes both a narrator and an audience interconnected at least for the duration of the story (Riessman, 2000). In many cases, qualitative research rejects the idea that the researcher is an unbiased collector of information and assumes that the researcher's role is "active and reflexive in the process of data generation" (Mason, 1996, p. 41). Researchers bring their personal perspectives and biases to the process and often accept an important philosophical assumption of qualitative inquiry: "that reality is not an objective entity; rather there are multiple interpretations of reality" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). Qualitative research respects the knowledge of all participants and places their contributions on par with those of the researcher. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call this relationship and the resulting product *portraiture*.

Portraiture resists [the] tradition-laden effort to document failure. It is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections. The researcher who asks first "what is good here?" is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover sources of failure. But it is also important to say that portraits are not designed to be documents of idealization or celebration. In examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course, be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness. In fact, the counterpoint and contradiction of strength and vulnerability, virtue and evil . . . are central to the expression of goodness. . . . Portraits . . . are also concerned with documenting how the *subjects* or actors in the setting define goodness. The portraitist does not impose her definition of "good" on the inquiry, or assume that there is a singular definition shared by all. (p. 9, emphasis in original)

In part because of my own interest in narrative, I gathered data primarily through oral histories. Before entering the field, I made an effort to acquire what Anderson and Jack (1991) call "a specific kind of readiness," by having considered the "moral dimension of interviewing" and feminist research practice (p. 25). I wanted to prepare myself by having a greater understanding of the tradition of feminist oral history, not only of the theory and methods, but also of the ethical boundaries surrounding narrative research.

When I made the decision that a review of the feminist oral history tradition would be the route by which to best prepare myself for field experience, I was naïve about the vast amount that has been written on feminism and on oral history and which seems to be increasing exponentially every day. Both oral history and feminism are cross-disciplinary fields, and there is a complex web of relationships between the two and among the various related disciplines. Consequently, even after identifying the thread I wished to follow, unraveling its winding course was uncertain.

Life story research has a long history. Noted early anthropologist Ruth Benedict argued the importance of life history analysis, saying that to ignore the individual in cultural studies could actually be hurtful, and life histories present an opportunity to see the effects of culture on the individual (Babcock, 1995). Each person's story then becomes part of the broad picture not known before (Michielsens, 2000). It is my belief that the highly contextualized, concrete, and interpretive nature of qualitative narrative research gives it a truth that cannot be obtained through positivist inquiry. Using the individual life stories I gathered, I have endeavored to bring "into focus the relationship between [these] individuals and social structure" (Steedman 2000, p. 41).

Shulamit Reinharz (1992) suggests feminists have challenged the absence of specific oral history methodology, a lack that indicated the (non)value placed on subjective, individual oral history research within the dominant research paradigm. One way researchers began to challenge this paradigm was to advocate a different type of interview process, one that would move away from highly structured interchanges controlled by the interviewer to a more loosely structured conversation that allowed the participant's own voice to be heard (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Kirsch 1999; Reinharz, 1992; Summerfield, 2000). Penny Weiss (1995) says researchers learn about feminist communities "by listening to the voices of women who have lived in them....By listening we live out the feminist belief that women have something important and distinctive to say; by listening critically we practice the honesty and intellectual searching essential to establishing and maintaining relations of freedom and equality" (p. 4).

While I firmly believe in the merit of recording individual lived experience, a researcher cannot ignore available sources of knowledge that add other dimensions to the work (Frisch, 1990). The collection of oral histories formed the bulk of my research, but I also did extensive archival research. The records from Konnarock Training School are stored at the office of the Virginia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Salem, Virginia. Contained in a large filing cabinet and three file boxes of documents, the archives include students' permanent records, teachers' grade books, principals' reports to various agencies, and financial reports. These official documents, stored without any type of organization or cataloguing, were interesting and helpful in my understanding of the institution, but mining the wealth of unofficial material that somehow escaped destruction was what absorbed my time. I became a familiar face at the Synod office as I unearthed amazing bits and pieces of the total story of the institution.

Some of the information from the Synod archives helped me to elicit further memories from the narrators. For instance, Dora Testerman told me she was not aware of how her tuition was paid, which most small children would not know. In the archives, I found a list of chores the girls had been assigned and the amounts that were allotted toward tuition for those chores. One year, the list indicated, Dora had kept the monkey stove, a new term to me. Dora had not mentioned this chore in the first two interviews, but when I asked her about the monkey stove, she was able to recall what it was and what she was required to do. She had not known she had been given tuition credit for this activity. My mother, Geneva Shepherd, knew that her tuition was a small amount and knew that it was paid through the sale of a calf from a cow she owned, but did not remember the specifics. I was delighted to find within the files a contract signed by my grandfather agreeing to pay \$25.00 per year for her tuition and medical care. This was over fifty years ago, but was still quite a bargain—a year's room and board, education, and medical care for \$25.00. The contract indicated that my mother's work, including her two weeks in the summer, would earn \$130.00 of her tuition, and an additional \$150.00 would be covered by scholarships. I am sure that the full cost of \$300.00 charged the girls did not meet the actual cost of their being at the school, even in 1944. The remainder of

operating costs must have been supplied by funding from the church and the Women's Missionary Society.

When searching these archives, I was at times overcome with emotion. Especially where my mother and my aunt were concerned, I felt as if fate had stepped in to save those particular pieces of the past. For instance, I found Principal Mildred Deal's copy of the graduation program the year my aunt graduated. Among the notes of announcements she had scribbled on the program were the words "Geneva's sister" by my aunt's name. That was the only such program I found. Why were the programs from Mrs. Deal's other years as principal not in the files? There were times when I felt I had no right to be there, rifling through lives, touching memories that were not mine. Sometimes a frail piece of paper would bring tears to my eyes as I imagined the parent writing by lamplight to ask for shoes for her child. I smiled with recognition as I read messages from teachers and principals about discipline and attendance. Moments of joy, of pride in achievement, and of pain were all crowded together in the files, and I had no idea how or why certain bits survived all the years and others didn't. Merriam (1998) maintains that it is certain the researcher will be affected by her observations and interviews. What is important is how she gives an account of those effects in her work (Merriam, 1998). I have sought to give such an account throughout my work; however, the effects were sometimes too deep, impossible to express.

Another invaluable resource for me was the collection of *Lutheran Woman's Work* magazines housed at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina. Published by the agency that founded Konnarock Training School, the Woman's Missionary Society of the United Lutheran Church of America. The magazine contains everything from small mentions of the school, staff, and students, to issues devoted almost fully to what was happening at KTS. The publication covers the entire history of the school, from the introduction of the idea of a southern mountain mission at a national convention to the school's final graduation ceremony. The availability of this magazine was indeed propitious for me as I explored the work of women in this region of Appalachia. Historian Barbara Ellen Smith (1999) writes that little mention is made of women in most

primary records of the area. “To remember that [Appalachian] women even existed, much less that their presence and activities may have had any historical significance, requires a contrary and vigilant consciousness” (Smith, 1999). Philosopher Jane Duran (1991) encouraged feminists to continue to reexamine earlier works of both men and women with a new perspective, since many of these had been read only from an androcentric point of view. Readers who are willing to look again, Duran says, will find “the gynocentric perspective has been there all the way along. It is only now that it has been noticed, articulated and brought to the fore in a systematic and persistent manner” (1991, p. 260). June Purvis (1996) also emphasizes the importance of re-viewing the work of our foremothers both to help us understand the richness our own history and to recast those works which have previously been socially constructed from the male viewpoint. I was fortunate to be able to access a great deal writing for, by, and about the women involved with Konnarock Training School. Feminists frequently offer an alternative reading of history, but such a reading becomes difficult when there is little or no *herstory* to be found, when documents and records have omitted women.

During and after the interviews, as I continually analyzed the data I gathered, I turned to literature on the various themes that I saw. My process has been one of continued working back and forth between theory and experiences, experiences and theory. Therefore, the literature review for this study is interspersed throughout, rather than appearing in a single chapter (Merriam, 1998; Wolcott, 1995).

I conducted a total of twenty-three interviews with eight participants, seeking the relationship and trust that can develop through multiple interviews with one person (Seidman, 1998). There was only one interview with the eighth narrator because of difficulty in scheduling. The interviews generally lasted about ninety minutes. I transcribed the twenty-three interviews myself, and knowing how exact my transcriptions should be was problematic at times. Even as I endeavor to represent the voices of my narrators accurately, transcription involves choices that are not value-free (Frisch, 1990). If I interview with a goal of creating space for women’s voices to be heard, how can I then substitute my own speech patterns or the language of scholarly writing? Yet none of

us want to have all the false starts, hesitations, and grammatical errors we might exhibit in informal conversation seen in print. As I considered the approach I should take, I contemplated the uses I envisioned for these interviews. I hope to archive the tapes and their transcripts so that future historians may use them, and I have used parts of the women's stories in my work here for a different audience. With these two audiences in mind, I have endeavored to maintain a very high level of accuracy in the transcripts themselves, and to keep the flavor of the narrator's natural speech. But stallers such as *ah*, *um*, and *you know* do not generally add to the speaker's meaning; therefore, many words such as these have been omitted. The decisions as to their inclusion or exclusion were generally mine alone, based on my feeling for the interview, except in a few instances when the narrators asked me to leave such phrases out and we determined it could be done without affecting the impact of the transcript. There are also times when I typed the narrator's *goin'* as *going* and made other minor changes in her speech for smoother reading. These changes were my decisions as I tried to achieve a balance between strictest accuracy of speech and accuracy of meaning, trusting that I was familiar enough with the narrator and the interview to "sense how many 'you knows' are needed in print to give the feel of a speaker's rhythm and style without distorting how her voice 'reads'" (Frisch, 1990, p. 85).

After transcription of the interviews, each narrator received a copy before the succeeding interview was conducted. The narrator and I reviewed any inaccuracies, omissions, or explanations that needed to be corrected in that transcript, ensuring a high level of accuracy of meaning and voice in the transcripts. Although I explained that the transcripts would be edited before publication, most of the narrators were somewhat uncomfortable with the way they "sounded" in the transcripts. I assured them that I also felt as if I appeared less articulate than I would like to be in the transcripts and again assured them that they would have the opportunity to read their final portrait. Member checks of the transcripts and of tentative themes also help ensure the study's validity and are consistent with feminist research's premise that knowledge is and should be co-constructed (Merriam, 1998). Such checks are the primary way I can gauge whether or

not the story that is written is the story the woman wants to tell (Borland, 1991; Kirsch, 1999).

The second use for the transcripts is, of course, to make the stories known through this writing, my goal from the beginning of the research project. Although I have sought my narrators' stories and have endeavored to work collaboratively with them, the fact that I had already determined an end product for this study has influenced, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly, the course the research has taken, the questions I have asked, and the choices I have made. I have included brief and highly edited portraits of my participants gleaned from the transcripts and have quoted them throughout my work. In these cases, I have taken the liberty not only to combine information from the multiple interviews with an individual into one story, but also to edit the women's words for fluency and completeness. Words or phrases were sometimes added to the narrators' speech for clarity and are enclosed in brackets in the transcripts and in the portraits. Narrators have again been consulted and given the opportunity to read and comment on portions of the document concerning them or using their edited words. Michael Frisch (1990) believes such editing of interviews before they are disseminated in books, articles, or documentaries is not only desirable, but is the most responsible approach. Frisch writes:

In our society, every newspaper and magazine contains statements of people of position or power, statements routinely printed with correct syntax and spelling; interviews are selectively edited so that articles or reports always contain coherent statements; readers are similarly used to autobiographical prose in which the established or well-known talk about themselves and their lives in regular words, flowing sentences, and shaped paragraphs. In this context to encounter the narratives of common people or the working class only in the somewhat tortuous prose of "faithful" transcription ... is to magnify precisely the class distance it is one of the promises of oral history to narrow. Similarly, to be limited to the exact sequence and linkages with which such an informant's story emerges in an interview is to deny such speakers the privilege of communicating their fuller experience or understanding as they know it, and indeed as they spoke it, ... a

privilege enjoyed by the powerful who are almost never encountered in such rough form, even though they drop as many g's, utter as many uh's, and would seem as inarticulate as anyone else were their discursive interviews or rambling thoughts presented as literally expressed. (Frisch, 1990, p. 86).

Each participant was asked to review and sign informed consent forms (Appendix B). On these forms, individuals had the opportunity to choose to remain anonymous through the use of a pseudonym in all transcripts and documents produced from the interviews. None of the eight women chose this option. Each is proud of the time she spent at Konnarock Training School and wanted to share as much of its story as possible.

Always in oral history there are questions of authorship (Chase, 1996; Frisch, 1990). With whom does interpretive authority rest; whose story is being told, and who determines the way in which the story is presented? These are ethical questions that face the researcher as he or she prepares the final document based on the oral histories. Part of the problem rests in the ambiguity of the term *oral history* itself. Both a method and a product, oral history can vary greatly in its use and in its presentation.

I have been fortunate to have valuable peer responses to this work as well. The comments, questions, and encouragement I have been given by those who responded to my work have kept me focused and have helped to ensure that my analysis was consistent with my data.

As I have written about these women, I have been beset with the fear that I will not honor their words, their stories, and their lives. I expressed some of these fears in my journals:

...The poverty of words in black on white pages cannot hope to capture the fullness of the lives that I have entered in all their emotional, psychological, educational, and spiritual richness. Writing about these real lives is an attempt to force my form onto that which already has a form of its own. Can that be done? Should it be done?

The trust placed in me by the narrators has weighed heavily on me, as it does on many feminist oral historians. Dora Testerman said, *“I don’t think you’re going to write anything ugly. No, I think you’ll write what we’ve told you; stuff that you’re going to write, that will tell it all.”*

“I’m just thankful that you took up the challenge,” said Rose Kirby. *“You want to be fair to everyone. You are an intricate part of the story, and you want to reach out and include as many as you can.”*

“I’m glad somebody is going into this with enough, I don’t even know what word to choose, but it’s telling the story, and yet it’s—I think some of the questions that you have asked are things that never occurred to the people who wrote those couple of other books. That was pretty well just unvarnished history,” Emily Umbarger said, placing her faith in me to capture the experience of the school.

“I think you know what you’re doing,” Virginia Whittaker replied when I asked her what advice she had for me as I continued to interview and write about KTS.

“Just keep it up, and make sure it gets done. It will be great piece of history. I wish I could think better and tell you more,” my mother tells me. She is visiting me when I place the “document” of her life before her, encased in a large mailing envelope. I don’t trust myself to lay it directly in her hands. What if she doesn’t like it? Will I have hurt her or have honored her? Now, she can read it, or she can decide to wait. She picks it up, and I go into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. I don’t want to watch her face. The house is silent except for the turning of pages and the noise I make in the kitchen. I am tense and worried. How does it make her feel to have her life put in black and white, to know others will read it? She has never been one to talk openly about her feelings, and now I want to share her story with people she will never know. I delay breakfast and come upstairs to write, to let the noise of the computer keys drown out the sound of the pages of her life turning.

...Presenting the research worries me. I am in a way an “insider.” There are deep personal ties for me in this project; Pastor Killinger baptized, confirmed, and married me; Sister Sophie delivered two of my brothers and me. Mommy and Aunt Reva attended KTS. The narrators are individuals who know me or my family members. I cannot be scientifically objective about the work, am not a disinterested observer—I care about the story I will write, and I care about the reactions of the narrators to what they read. But how can one begin to tell this story and do it justice?

...When I interviewed Rose last week and was preparing to leave, she took me to her garden and gave me broccoli, lettuce, and cabbage. “That’s the fun of having a garden,” she said, “sharing it with your family and friends.” The next day I interviewed Miss Whittaker. She met me at my car and said I was to be her guest for lunch at Mountain Lake; she introduced me as her friend....

...Why am I having so much trouble beginning the actual writing? Perhaps because of the fear I will do this wrong, that I won’t honor the stories, that I can’t possibly capture the uniqueness, the magic of the women’s experiences, that my words won’t be good enough, that I will disappoint. Yet not telling the stories will be an even bigger disappointment and injustice....

...The final manuscript is near completion. My doubts are not erased. Have I written the story that needs to be told? Are my narrators pleased with what I have done? Do they feel they could tell me, or do I have the “power” of a degree and a university behind me that would make them hesitate to do so? And how can I take these stories and abandon the women who shared them?

The words of poet Anne Bradstreet in “The Author to Her Book,” come to mind as I complete my work: “Thou ill-form’d offspring of my feeble brain,/... In better dress to trim thee was my mind.” There is still much I would like to say, and I would like to say what is here better, but it is time “to send thee out the door” as you are.