

“History is the story of them; heritage is the story of ‘us;’ the part of history we must know best are the stories of ourselves and our families.”

Dr. Robert Manley, Nebraska Historian

This quote, from the late Dr. Manley, appears in the syllabus of my sophomore English class, Nebraska Literature & Composition: A Sense of Place. I was fortunate to have Dr. Manley in this class for many years; he was a strong believer in preserving our personal and community heritages. To that end, each year my sophomores conduct oral heritage communities and write poetry and prose of place from those interviews; they also write their own stories of family and place.

This kind of writing is standard in Writing Project institutes and the following short essay is a piece of writing from one of those rural institutes, perhaps the first one, held in my school at Henderson in the summer of 1997. The person I’ve written about still holds a special place in my own personal heritage.

Grace

Sharon Bishop

There were two defining and driving forces in her life: her love for God and her love for her “chillen,” as she called us in her Southern accent. Through an unconditional and all embracing love for us, she demonstrated the unconditional and all embracing love of God. Granny. She was my first Sunday School teacher. Tiny, yet buxom and square, her short arms could enclose and hug a dozen children at once.

I do not recall a single Bible verse that she had us memorize nor a single parable or story that she told, but her unshakable faith in God – and in us – has stayed with me all of my life. As a little girl, I felt only this love and acceptance. I knew very little of her own life. I knew of course that she was not my “real” Granny; after all, everyone called her Granny, but it felt as if some bond other than blood connected us. As I grew older, my mom told me some of the harsh facts of her life. Her father had left the family and her mother was unable to cope and she had left Granny and her brother in a train station

somewhere. Foster homes followed and there was little opportunity for school – just plenty of hard work. Later, a failed marriage would leave her alone once again to raise two daughters. She cleaned houses and babysat to provide for them.

As a child, I was blissfully unaware of this previous turmoil in her life. I knew with certainty, however, that God and Granny were on very intimate terms. She spoke of conversations with Him that were as commonplace as her discussions with us – not formal prayers, but everyday speaking, in her Southern accent that mispronounced words and garbled her grammar.

One day I suddenly realized that she must have another name than Granny. I asked my mom. “Grace,” mom answered. The name washed over me like grace itself. Of course that would be her name! She was the living embodiment of it – still I never, ever once called her that. She was always Granny.

I was the recipient of Granny’s faith in my own life. Twice, during two illnesses that could have had some fairly serious outcomes, she assured me that God had “told” her that everything would be all right eventually, if I were just patient and held on. Although the patience was not always easy, how could I contradict one of Granny’s conversations with God!

As her “chillen” became teens we were occasionally embarrassed by her affection. We all towered over her and sometimes tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to escape her hugs.

Poor health forced her to stop teaching Sunday School. Time took her beloved grandchildren and the rest of us away to other places and new lives. Granny was often

lonely without her “chillen.” Once, when I was home and went to visit her, she spoke of this.

“I said to God, ‘God, why did you take all of my chillen away from me?’ And God answered me and said, ‘Why Granny, they’re not your chillen – they’re mine!’ And He was right – I had to let you all go.”

Eventually we had to let her go too. Heart trouble incapacitated her but somehow I always expected her to survive. Her death devastated me. I felt not only the loss of her presence but from a special connection with God as well. I had lost what seemed to be a direct pipeline to Him.

That first Memorial Day after her death, I sought out her grave, recalling only the area of the cemetery where she was buried. Scanning the rows of stones, I reminded myself that I would need to look for that unfamiliar, given name on her marker. Suddenly, my eyes focused on a simple slab of gray granite, and there, beneath the usual information, I read, through my tears, her real epitaph – “Beloved Granny.”