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# An Order of Worlds

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An Order of Worlds

Rachel Mast

## Family Relations

The minute he came out howling, they knew who his *Dat* was, but no one said anything like “you can tell who he belongs to.” They just plowed hard and hung out wash and went to church on Sunday morning and talked about the weather.

No one said anything until the word *bastard* came out of the mouths of his sons years later, which ended in fist fights on the dank kitchen floor. After that *Dat* stayed outside with the fields and we girls scrubbed floors furiously and *Mem* led slow German songs around the kitchen table. Every night at bedtime the dull thud of a cheese knife rose from the root cellar where the cold food was kept.

Some nights he would carry his Bible out to the woods and not come back for hours. The next day we milked the cows, threw hay from the loft, and stayed away from the smell of tobacco. Went to the neighbors for supper and talked about new babies, upcoming weddings, and the price of pigs.

## Essay I

December 5, 2014

## Puzzle Pieces of Home

Autumn evening casts golden gleams through the spotless second-story windows of the *daudy haus* where inside, in a small nook off the kitchen, a stocky, white-haired man bends over a card table spread with small white papers and a half-finished puzzle. Stout fingers move slowly across the tiny pieces, sorting them by color and shape and laying them neatly on the papers. Hour by hour, the elderly man works, methodically piecing together a scene reflected in the cardboard puzzle box top setting on the counter in front of him. Occasionally he glances up at the scene—a field of golden corn shocks, a red barn in the distance, large purple snowballs in the foreground. It's a life he has left long ago—the fields, the corn shocks, the barn. But the farming instinct has never left his blood, not even in 93 years. Now his hands work puzzle pieces instead of the reins behind a four-horse team. Sagging and slightly drooped eyes search patiently for the right pieces and the right places to put them.

Although Grandpa has slowed considerably since his farming days, his steps are still heavy and firm. His full head of hair trimmed roundly just below the tips of his ears has thinned only slightly in the last years. So has the beard that hangs untrimmed several inches below his chin. His daughters judge his bad days by the times he looks *kuslich*, when he lets his upper lip go to a black stubble, and crumbs lie on his shirt and homemade pants buttoned loosely around his protruding stomach. His eyes grow a bit more sagging and red rimmed every year, but they still catch life's details. Naughty great-grandchildren romping on round bales across the lane, a neighbor riding by on a tractor far off across the field, the way someone leaves their pen in the guestbook and ruins the spine.

Grandpa was born into an Amish home on April 26, 1921, somewhere near Charm, Ohio. Back then being Amish didn't mean being all that different from your neighbors. Most people in the rolling hills of eastern Holmes County farmed with horses in the 1920s and 30s and took a buckboard to town to grind their wheat and corn. For most Americans, life changed drastically since then. For Grandpa, the biggest changes were balers, cornhuskers, and milkers.

He watches out the window as his grandson Duane jumps onto a loader at the edge of the field. "They don't even need the pitch fork anymore," he says, chuckling. His voice is nostalgic but not critical. Grandpa, always more progressive-minded, was usually the first in his Amish community to get a new-fangled piece of farm equipment. It got him into trouble more than once, as the church shunned him from partaking in communion until the new equipment was allowed. In spite of his occasional nonconformity, Grandpa managed to stay in good standing with his community. A successful farmer and shrewd businessman, he knew what he wanted and stood by it, true to the Raber grit and stubbornness. Add good common sense on top of that, and even a bench full of deacons couldn't argue with him.

The sound of the loader coincides strangely with the clinking of chains as Grandpa's son-in-law Levi guides a team of horses up the lane, dragging a baler in from the field. There's enough of the old for life to stay simple but enough of the modern for life to be easier. Forced progression one might call it. Old machinery wearing out, and new ones no longer being made. "They don't make those machines anymore, so you have to do something else." It's Grandpa's thesis statement to why Amish use some modern farm machinery but don't change their dress or have electricity and telephones brought into the house. No one bothers to discuss why milking cows has gone from fingers to milkers. The only time disappointment shows in Grandpa's voice

is when he talks about butchering days being over at the home farm, replaced by local butchers who've left their farms for a more profitable business.

Just opposite a row of skewed mailboxes, the lane to Grandpa's house turns off a long County Road 19 curve. It stretches between an alfalfa field on the right and a closely-trimmed strip of grass and white board fence on the left. Several hundred feet in, the *daudy haus* stands on the left in a small well-edged lawn. A little gravel pull for vehicles and buggies and a hitching post on a cracked cement slab stands just in front of it. Its upper white siding, lower tan bricks, and windows without shutters match the 1970s-style Amish houses scattered along the fields and roads that wind from Saltillo to Clark.

The lane continues past the house and a narrow, trickling ditch that about every ten years when the summer rains come too long and too fast becomes a rushing monster along with every other gully and creek in the Clark bottoms. Behind the fence sets a low shed made with the yellow, glazed bricks that came from great-Grandpa and then Grandpa's brick business in the 1970s and 80s. Once a pig stall and then a chicken house, the shed now houses a few young heifers. Hens meander freely in and out, pecking furtively at the ground and cackling at the grass. A few hundred feet more, the lane reaches Levi's big white barn and then curves away past a buggy shop and behind two giant maple trees that cast the entire yard in shadows before it disappears behind a white, three-story farmhouse nestled into a slope that starts high above.

Before the Rabers came to this place in 1954, it was nothing more than a sagging early twentieth century farmstead. Grandpa worked nearly day and night, remodeling and adding on to get the place ready for himself, his wife, and six children to move into it. He even missed his own neighborhood farewell to work on the house. One might wonder whether that was out of necessity or avoiding a rift of some kind. Grandpa's father did not take kindly to him moving his

family 12 miles away from the Charm homeland, and a brother-in-law had chased him off the farm, resulting in this move. Amends were later made, but the older children say Grandpa wanted to leave the Amish after moving to Clark, but Grandma was too traditional and refused. If things would have gone Grandpa's way, they say, we would all be out in the world.

Six more children were born to Grandpa and Grandma after they moved to the home place. Providing for a family of twelve came by frugality and hard work. There was never any want in the home, and the girls picked nightgowns and socks out of a JCPenny catalog, but no one took advantage of the prosperity. On a rare occasion, Grandpa returned from the Becks Mills general store with a half-gallon of ice-cream that was carefully sliced and divided among the children. Clothes were changed and hung up carefully after church or school and old ones donned for the many chores around the farm. Cold soups of bread, milk, and fruit made up many a summer supper on the farm---a supper that Amish homes continue to serve and speak fondly of. The less one spent, the more was in the bank to buy what was needed, to invest, to loan out, to help others, to pass on an inheritance, to be well thought of. Grandpa made it all work by walking behind a plow until the evening sun blended into oranges and pinks and then starting again when the morning sky glittered above the black and white line of cows making their way slowly toward the barn.

Working hard and taking responsibility started early in life for Grandpa. At five years old, his mother handed him a grocery list, put him on the buggy, and sent him off to Charm, two miles away. He tied the horse to the stone wall along Main Street, walked across the street into the store, and handed his paper to Mrs. Hummel who gathered the groceries for him and sent him back home. "In those days, there was no traffic," he shrugs when his daughters exclaim over the

safety issue. Working hard was the way he loved his family. It was the way many an Amish man loved his family. No words of affirmation, no kisses or hugs, no help with homework. It wasn't done by his father or his father before him. Only the providing from sunup to sundown.

It was also the way he hurt his family. Curses and kicks and scolding when the cow stall wasn't bedded correctly or the hay not pitched down soon enough. Red hot anger, seething beneath the surface, soothed only slightly by draws of a pipe. No one knew back then about self-esteem, anger management, or letting God heal the pain of your past.

Grandpa never knew his real father, or so the rumors go. The Jacob Raber genealogy book on the shelves of every Holmes County Amish home does not lie. *Roy Raber born April 26, 1921; John and Lydia Raber married July 19, 1923* in plain sight for all to see. Some say his real father was Simon Stutzman. The missing pieces bear testament to the fact that such things were simply not talked about. "Don't ask him about that," says his third daughter Lizzie, shaking her well-covered head. "I did that once, and . . ." her voice trails off but her sisters give each other a knowing look. They remember Grandpa's fist fights with his sons when the word *bastard* came up during heated arguments. Memories they tell in passing, eyes looking away, as if repeating the stories might be saying it mattered. Silence was the breeding ground for the passive-aggression, the terrible monster that threatened to destroy Grandpa and his family.

Grandpa's father guided his horses with shouts of *gee* and *haw* and guided his family in much the same way. Rough, some people called him. Others said he worked his family hard. Grandpa held his first reins at nine years old. "*Dat* wanted me to use a single rein to make sure I wouldn't get left behind," he says, chuckling self-consciously. Perhaps his father had cared enough to look out for him, even if those fierce dark eyebrows and tall overpowering stature were so unlike his own.

Over the years Grandpa watched his three sons leave the Amish faith, paid for and hosted the weddings of his nine daughters, and milked decades of cows by hand. And then in 1975, he handed the farm over to Levi and built a *daudy haus* toward the end of the lane, not tight against the main house like most elderly Amish do.

Away from crowds and noise and bustle, the puzzles and the daily papers pile up. On the good days Grandpa makes his way slowly out the lane to fetch the paper. He fries potatoes for lunch or heats up the plate of chicken and noodles a neighbor dropped off with a bouquet of zinnias. The orange, fuchsia, and yellow arrangement now sets on the white and blue plastic tablecloth. Outside a great-granddaughter mows the last of the autumn grass while Grandpa pores over the national edition of *The Budget*, a newspaper full of news from plain communities around the world. At the sound of horse and buggy wheels digging into the fine gravel on their way up the lane, he gets up so quickly to see who is coming or going that he sways on his feet. He participates in the community largely from inside his windows, but he looks forward to a Thursday wedding, a Saturday communion service, or the next time a grandchild drops in to say hello. But after too much time around people, he needs more days alone with the papers, the windows, the puzzle pieces.

To this old man, called *daudy* by 42 grandchildren and *grossdaudy* by 170 great-grandchildren, relationships never came easy. He gazes out the window across the narrow alfalfa field that lies tight against the crackling rows of corn. It's the one thing he knows intimately – this land in the Clark bottoms. For thirty years he farmed it and for thirty he gazed at it from the windows of his second-story enclosed porch. In the autumn evening, he watches until the golden fields, the porch furniture, and the passing neighbors grow fainter and fainter. When darkness

has all but completely fallen, Grandpa wheels a battery operated floor lamp from the living room to the kitchen as the faint silhouette of a granddaughter starts to take her leave.

Grandpa hesitates. “*Maumie* used to say that when you turn on the light, you can’t see anything outside anymore,” he says. It’s the wisdom of the simple, the quiet, the community, the land. It’s what leaves Grandpa falling into bed and sleeping all night. He bids his visitor stay longer, but everyone knows turning on the light takes precious battery life, and when it’s time to turn on the light, it’s time to go home.

**Book of Genealogy**

Our forefather Jacob Raber planted us here generations ago,  
laying the seed for 1,118 pages of stubbornness, thrift,  
hard work, and pride rooted between these dark green, hardback covers.  
Rising from the earthy pages are those who work the land,  
cover the dark secrets, and sleep with the hope of a better tomorrow.  
We've carried the book inside for two hundred years.  
I am of the 56 and the 690 clans. Our blood is running thinner,  
with the parting of summer reunion softball, white apron weddings,  
hay wagons and meadow tea. We've scrubbed the dirt from our fingernails  
at *Daudy's* little kitchen sink, the scent of new soap mingling in the air.  
We'll always come back to drink from the little yellow cup  
with grooves like a field and scallops like a lily—cold and dead.  
We'll plant a new field and lay new seed and start a new line  
of numbers for those who wish to follow.

Honors Project – Essay II

November 20, 2015

### An Order of Worlds

The waxing gibbous moon illuminates my 1999 Honda Accord, parked in the little gravel pull-off in front of the two-story *daudy haus*. I give the sticking basement door a final jerk into place, making sure it is securely locked before stepping into the 17-degree darkness toward my car. To my left, the line of Holsteins I had seen earlier at the feed trough outside the big white barn has disappeared into shadows, and the only light is the glow of lamplight coming from Cousin Duane's living room down the lane. I had promised Grandpa I would lock up, since he had already exerted his energy plodding the steep, wooden staircase an hour and a half earlier to unlock for me when I arrived. Usually I give a short knock, walk into the basement, and up the stairs to where Grandpa is sitting in the kitchen or the enclosed porch just off of it. It's the Amish custom—walk in without being greeted, climb the stairs, and shake hands with the host before settling down to visit. But Grandpa had already locked up for the evening, not expecting visitors at 6:30 on a Saturday night, when he had come downstairs to put more wood in the furnace. As healthy and heavysset as Grandpa still is, going basement steps isn't easy for any 92-year-old man. If it would have been summer, he would have been sitting on his front porch swing, but tonight we had visited in the toasty upstairs.

I wonder if Grandpa is watching me leave, as he often does, and I turn to look up at the second story window where I just see the top of Grandpa's gray head beneath the white glare of an LED battery-operated floor lamp. It's the only light coming from the shadowed house, like most Amish houses without electricity. Grandpa's head is still bent over the 2014 Amish Church Directory we had been looking at before I left. He had pushed the thick, heavy book toward me

with all of Ohio's 262 Amish church districts and members listed between its burnt orange, clothbound covers. Licking his dry thumbs impatiently to get ahold of the pages, he turned to his own church district, and I notice that his wide nails and stubby fingers are just like my mother's and not unlike my own. He moves his finger shakily along the squiggly map lines and little black boxes that represent his world—the households of the 42 families in the Clark Southwest district. A new young couple has just moved in, and he presses me with family names until, relieved, I recognize one I have heard from my mother. It seems imperative that we find common ground in this world my mother left more 30 years ago. But, although I live only nine miles away, my world feels far away from the blood lines and interconnectedness in these Clark Bottoms.

My parents had left the Old Order Amish when I was two years old to join the New Order, a less strict order of Amish. To any outsider, the differences are slight, but within the Amish circles, the differences were enough to cause a rift between my parents and my Old Order relatives. We now drove rubber tire buggies while our cousins drove steel-wheeled ones. My mother now sewed a cape into the waist of her dress instead of having to pin it in like her sisters. My parents, who had decided to put their trust in Jesus Christ, could now talk freely about their faith and study the Bible. In those days, the Old Order church believed salvation came by good works alone—not a modern day conversion experience—and studying the Bible was a sign of mental instability. The chasm between my world and my Grandpa's world expanded even farther when I was eight, when my parents decided to join a Mennonite church, exchanging a buggy for a car and gas lights for electricity. Although we still dressed plain, we now sported cameras, tape players, zippers in our dresses, and advanced thinking that included revelations of the Holy Spirit and using the rod to keep children like olive plants around the table. My parents had now also committed the ultimate sin—leaving the Amish church they had been baptized into it as young

adults. This was comparable to breaking a marriage vow, and neither divorce nor breaking one's baptismal vows was tolerated. The aunts stopped inviting us to family events and wouldn't be seen in a vehicle with my parents. Although the church allowed the Amish to hire non-Amish drivers to take them places, they forbade the church members to drive with someone who had broken their baptismal vows. I now saw my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins mostly at Christmas, a summer reunion, or brief visits in between.

After our family moved away from the community, we returned occasionally for an evening visit at Grandpa's house. We children sat rigid and quiet on the stiff blue couch or played quietly on the floor with an old doll, a tractor, or wooden farm animals from the toy drawer as the adults visited. As I got older, I would muster up courage to quietly reach for *Girl in the Mirror* or one of the few other story books my grandparents had lined perfectly on the end table, and while the adults visited, I got lost in the world of an insecure Amish girl who struggled with having a disabled father. In spite of the differences in our worlds, I felt a keen sense of interest from my grandparents in a distant sort of way. Maybe it was their smiles and the way they directed at least one question toward me or my siblings during the course of the evening, such as "what grade are you in now?" or the waves they gave from the porch swing as they watched my father turn our green station wagon around in the little gravel pull-off and start us all down the quarter-mile lane away from their world and into ours. It was on that porch swing that I last saw my grandmother alive, waving from her spot next to Grandpa. She had been the traditional one, refusing to drive in a vehicle with my parents as a way to shun them for leaving the Amish faith, more to please God than to punish my parents. After her death, Grandpa grew more lenient and entered our world in ways he hadn't before, such as allowing my mother to take him to the local restaurant or to visit his relatives, but it would be years before I would enter his.

I had been afraid of Grandpa well into my adult years and visited his house on the skirts of my mother, always allowing others to carry on the conversations. I had heard the stories of fist fights on the kitchen floor and heard the firmness in his voice. Mostly though, I didn't know if Grandpa and I had anything in common. I was going to college, writing news stories, curious about politics, and binge watching Office on Netflix. But then Grandpa's second wife died, and he was alone, and the duty of a granddaughter to visit an elderly grandparent felt strong. I also knew Grandpa wouldn't be here forever, and my days to visit the farm were numbered. Grandpa and the farm had been a constant in my life, a place that was always in my memories . . . taking fat, old Patsy on a slow walk down the long lane, swinging high between the giant maple trees, drinking cold water out of a silver tin cup in the little spring house, wiping dishes for Grandma, visiting in the blue themed living room. And so, one summer evening, whether out of duty or nostalgia I'll never know, I pushed past the fears to face Grandpa alone.

He was just pulling a rhubarb dessert out of the oven when I walked up the enclosed basement steps into the kitchen. A big smile spread above the strands of his long white beard when he saw me. He had just started eating supper, and I offered to go outside to look around at the rose bushes and the rest of the landscape while he finished his bread and cheese and milk with strawberries. When I came back inside, he had just finished washing up his plate, spoon, and coffee cup. We sat down in the enclosed porch behind the big picture windows and launched into a conversation about the weather and who just had a baby and how my parents are doing. We gazed out across the alfalfa and corn fields, sharing binoculars when two deer ran crazily along the distant tree line in the golden evening sun and when someone went by far off down the road in a green box wagon that Grandpa didn't recognize. Before I knew it, Grandpa was talking about the old days, and I sat fascinated to hear that he remembered hand crank phones, five-cent

loaves of bread, and when the mailman delivered mail in a horse and buggy. That night on my Xanga blog, I wrote: *Somehow my heart rests when I'm in the quiet little world down at Daudy's. Life seems simpler, calmer, and quieter. Things don't change much there. Maybe that's why I like to go. Someday things will change. Grandpa won't be there anymore. And I'll wish I had soaked it all in more.*

After that I went to see Grandpa about every season—once a spring, summer, fall, and winter, and we never ran out of things to say. Tonight I had felt unusually calm sitting next to the the white and blue checkered tablecloth with Grandpa on one side and the brand new Amish directory, the daily paper, a Michel Yoder genealogy book strewn in front of us. Our visits have become familiar, though not intimate. “Up at college, I meet a lot of people who didn’t grow up like we did,” I say. It’s passive aggressive I know. I’m trying to get past the weather, the neighbors, the farming. I’ve learned to ask questions in my world, and I need answers for a college paper. *Grandpa, what makes the Amish community survive? What are the good things in this world and what are the things that can be improved? What do you think about the outside world?* I want to hear it from him, but I know that such straightforward questions could put us on a precipice of awkwardness. He stares into space and slowly scratches his thick arm for so long that I pretend to be interested in the newspaper in front of me like the headlines are to blame for edging us toward the uncomfortable subject. Finally he stirs. “How are the *eltern* (parents)?”

Grandpa doesn’t want to leave his world. I accept the change of subject and vow to never ask the questions again. Because Grandpa has given me the answer, the answer the Jewish community of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof* gave—*Why should we worry about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head.* It’s not nonchalant or cruel. It just *is*—our world and theirs. It’s my world against Grandpa’s world, and Grandpa’s world always wins. I

look around at the kitchen, most of it in shadows. The two wall calendars, the homemade lace-trimmed bulletin board that now has a photo and wedding invitation of my non-Amish cousin, the simple pine cabinets and the white countertop with the gold flecks. A drainer on the sink with a clean cup, spoon, and plate. The card table with puzzle pieces spread out over them.

“*Es war devat* (it was worth it),” Grandpa says as I stand up to leave, “to come open the door for you.” Reaching my car, I wonder what Grandpa would say about the to-go cups and strewn papers and the week’s worth of dishes still stacked in my kitchen sink at home. Grandpa’s few supper dishes had been washed and stacked neatly in the drainer as they always were. His floors were shiny, and the windows shone even in the darkness. Aunt Lizzie who lived two miles down the road had come to do cleaning the day before like she did every Friday. The place looked clean and tidy. So unlike mine, I sigh, pulling out the snow-lined lane that turns into County Road 19 toward home. It had been a heavy semester at the university with mostly upper level courses, and I had started my freelance writing and editing business. But I know this has only highlighted the fact that housekeeping had always taken a back seat, much to the chagrin of my mother who never understood my collection of papers and my hours of writing. I knew Grandpa wouldn’t understand either. There are rules to live by in the Amish life, and going to college and becoming a writer certainly wasn’t one of them.

But flesh and blood is always stronger than differences, and I know I’ll be back in the spring, if Grandpa is still here. When the first crop of bright green alfalfa rises softly beside the clods of overturned soil in the field next to it. When Cousin Duane perches on the metal plow seat behind a four-horse team heaving in the air scented with moist dirt and gurgling streams. Where the giant scream of a Red hawk and the chirping of the robins usher in another season at Grandpa’s place. It’s the place I’ve been coming to as a little girl, and one day I’ll miss hearing

Grandpa tell me how Cousin Duane and Uncle Levi milked cows for the neighbors when the whole family was down with the flu, how the women from his church district bring him something cheerful every week—a meal that lasts two days, a diary of their week, a scrapbook page, where no one is distracted by Netflix or school papers. Where I feel the pressures and demands melt away as I sit in the warmth of the kitchen until I feel sleepy and lethargic. In Grandpa's world, as in any world, there is pain and loss and rejection and abuse and fear. I've heard it from my mother, and I've felt it myself. But there is also the peace and quietness and rest and faith, and when I'm in Grandpa's kitchen, all the demands of my life roll away and for a few moments, I wish I could stay.

## **We are the quiet**

I am the quiet in the classroom  
with the hills and the fields on my back,  
the *be quiet!* slap always nearby.  
We are the quiet in the land,  
dirt and tradition sliding around plow blades  
every spring, mothers raising babies  
to belong to each other and God.  
We talk of things already decided for us.  
Long ago in the other land,  
our words burned away at the stake,  
taken from us like property, and chained  
to dungeon walls. We took the vow of silence,  
sailing across the ocean to live  
humble, quiet, hidden, courageous.  
My voice feels too loud in this university,  
next to tattoos and opinions that count.  
I am Esau exchanging his birthright  
for a pot of stew. Survival is sometimes  
breaking the vow of silence.

Honors Project – Essay III

September 30, 2015

Who in the world is Jennifer Lawrence?

The first twenty-five miles of my weekly drives to Akron wind around sprawling farms past bulk food stores and furniture shops. Simple handwritten signs with “fresh maple syrup” and “eggs for sale” hang at the ends of long gravel lanes that lead to large, shutterless houses and white bank barns. Girls in bright dresses and boys in black suspenders run around bases outside one-room schoolhouses during recess time, and horse-drawn buggies clip-clop down the winding roads. In the springtime, farmers on plow seats bump over clods of overturned dirt behind draft horses heaving into their harnesses. It’s here in the rolling hills of Holmes County where I was born and here is where I spent much of my life. My parents left the Amish church when I was eight years old to join an Amish-Mennonite church, an order that dresses plain but allows cars, electricity, and telephones. Living in the world’s largest settlement of Amish, I am part of a subculture all its own, and while we are strange to the rest of the world, we are never strange to each other. Most of my adult life, I worked at Mennonite organization, went to a Mennonite church, and lived in a Mennonite home. There was never any reason to interact with outsiders, and the thought of it frightened me.

“How about taking some classes at your local junior college?” Elaine suggested. It was the final day of a two-week summer intensive group at Life Ministries, a Mennonite counseling center in Pennsylvania. Guided by two facilitators, I and five other Amish and Mennonite women from various states had sat around the table in the counseling center’s library and worked our way through *The Wounded Heart*, a book for people who struggled with a history of abuse

and shame. We had told each other snippets of our stories and listened to feedback, trying to reintegrate back into the world of trust, relationships, and self-confidence. It took me a week and a half to say the things I wanted to forget. Memories of feeling alone and bullied, violated by an older man behind a cow shed, feeling ashamed that I had given wrong answers in workshop class that morning. I listened to my facilitators and classmates respond with delight, because I had finally opened up, and felt like a little girl starting on a new journey.

That evening the group members sat together in the library, working on creations that represented what we were feeling and what we had learned at group. One woman was making a montage of words and pictures cut out from magazines. Another woman, who had recently left her husband and cried a lot, was decorating a clay lily pot and writing calligraphic words to attach to it. I took a small paper bowl and colored the inside black and pasted on words like shame, no tears, closed heart, and don't trust. On the outside, I kept the bowl white, and pasted words like trust, tears, relationship, and joy, and then cut out the top to represent the hole I had climbed out of. I pasted on a picture of my happy place—a couch with a lamp nearby and a journal and books. Then I found some words in a magazine “Now your dreams can take flight,” which I attached to a toothpick and stuck on the rim of the paper bowl.

Elaine and I sat in her office surrounded by plants, a bookshelf, a desk, and a picture of Jesus holding a little girl to His shoulder. We talked about how I was feeling and where I would go from here. A licensed counselor, and a registered nurse who had worked in a psychiatric ward, Elaine firmly believed in exercising your mind as a way to combat depression.

“Depression is a waste of time,” she had said during one of our phone conversations earlier that year. I agreed. I hated weekends when I couldn't get off the couch. “What are some things you've dreamed of doing?” she asked, prodding me toward some purpose in life. I couldn't think

of much, other than recording an album of lullabies and spending more time with my nieces and nephews.

When she suggested junior college, something triggered inside me. I had watched longingly out the back window whenever our family passed a university with tall brick buildings and backpacked students walking confidently down the sidewalks. But college was an elusive dream, far outside my Amish-Mennonite world. Most Amish and Mennonite girls marry young and become stay-at-home moms, and most young men get jobs at 16 and learn from apprentices. Women who don't marry find jobs within the community that don't require college educations, including teaching in private school, working at a bakery, or even working as PR specialists and designers at local organizations as I had. It's enough for the simple, traditional lifestyle we choose to live, and we learn from those who have learned from those before them. Attending college was reserved for those who became nurses, and even that was rare.

None of my family or relatives had attended college—or even high school—although I have my father to thank for the urge. “I wanted to go to college and become a nurse,” he would say regretfully, and I would know my father was different from other fathers in my culture. I saw it when he read John Grisham books on the living floor, stroked Bob Ross scenes across canvases in a back room of our house, and doodled cartoon characters on restaurant napkins. I remembered the night classes he took to get his GED, and I always felt disappointed that he had dropped other forms of higher education for work at a cabinet shop, succumbing to the normal Amish way to provide for his eight children. As a single woman, I was already exploring new worlds in my personal life, and attending college seemed the path to expand my world even farther.

“Just start with a class or two, and see where it goes,” Elaine encouraged me. Her eyes always looked bright, like she had found light in her life. That day mine did too.

My second semester at the University of Akron, I enrolled in an Introduction to Poetry class and found myself at a long narrow table with about 12 other students every Tuesday and Thursday morning. Across from me sits a short, heavyset girl with her hair swept up in gelled spikes. She hugs her tattooed arms over her chest and stares down at the table. Beside her a pimpled young man shuffles nervously and plays with the corner of his notebook. At the end of the table, a hulky upper 20s guy lifts his head from a nap and shakes the hair from his eyes. He has a 7:30 a.m. class and rarely lifts his eyes to the rest of us. He reads his poems nervously, and I envy his gift, and wonder if he knew?

Beside me, a girl in peach shirt and khaki polo shorts talks about her bipolar father and how you never know how he will be. She writes short poems of intense love and intense hate and hisses to me before class that we don't “get it” . . . those of us who annotate her poems and provide both praise and critique like we are required to do for a class grade. She may be right, as far as it concerns my own poetic expertise. Personification and symbolism and line breaks are butterfly wings I am just learning to fly. What did I know about choppy line breaks and ambiguous imagery? In my world, the lines always rhymed in traditional rhyme and meter, like the rhythm of our lives—always concrete and predictable. But I understand being angry at the world, and I know that I am her scapegoat.

I fumble for my phone, feeling alone. I want to send a text to my sister, but my community feels far away, and I don't know how to explain the one I'm in. How did I get to be the Mennonite woman who left her community for this? My world, while disrupted by church

disputes and family problems, had been for the most part quiet, conservative, modest, and peace-loving. Before college, most of my exposure to the outside world had been the stares from passersby and occasional questions that I never quite knew how to answer. *Why do you dress that way? What's that thing on your head?* It was always difficult to explain what I saw to be normal life, especially when I wrestled with the questions myself. Now I was elbow-to-elbow with classmates who weren't a part of my Pennsylvania Dutch, God-fearing world. I didn't know what to do with people who wore tattoos and spiked hair and took God's name in vain. One might call it sheer exposure—like the times I got my tongue stuck to a frozen ice-tray as a child, just because I was curious. Though it left my tongue raw and burning, I would always go back and do it again.

Surprisingly, no one laughs at my poetry. The first one I read is about a dream, piled high with imagery, and I shrink low as copies are passed around the table from spiked hair girl to pimpled guy and the rest of the students to take home. I had never written poetry except in the traditional meter, like the poems in *The Calvary Messenger* and other Mennonite church publications. On the day it is my turn for my poem to be read aloud and discussed in class, I wait for words that will crush me, but they never come, and even the girl in the peach shirt manages to keep her critique in check. I'll never know whether my poems were good, or whether we were all abiding by Dr. Biddinger's rule to lavish praise and share only a critique or two "in terms of suggestions." I guess it created a safe environment, conducive to creativity, because that semester we all wrote free of dreams and spilt chocolate milk and scenes that were told backward. We wrote in couplets and lines and prose and metaphors. Pimpled guy read pages of poetry about Greek mythology and the symbolism of the Wild West, while spiked hair girl and I caught each other's eye knowingly. By the third week, she combed her hair down flat and wrote

five-line poems about being yelled at by dysfunctional family members. We were letting our dreams take flight.

I bumble through the classes, like I don't know what I'm saying or doing. My thoughts on mythology or the role of a lover on a rainy street aren't to be trusted in this setting where Jennifer Lawrence and hit songs from the 80s seemed to be connecting points. I don't know who Jennifer Lawrence is—a movie star, perhaps, and I don't know songs from the 80s except for the ones that were allowed in my Mennonite home—a cappella ones sung by Mennonite singing groups. I want to run away to my world where nothing is required of me except writing about food parcels in Romania, babysitting nieces and nephews, and canning chicken. The fine arts always get lost in a world where raising families and gardens take up 14-hour days. I want someone to tell me exactly how to write, but no one does. Poetry, like American Literature and Shakespeare papers, I decide has few rules and many interpretations. It is so unlike my world, where we always thought as a community and never as individuals, and always, always played by the rules.

It would be my biggest hurdle and my biggest triumph in a university classroom—the expectation to form my opinions and share them with the world. Although I had recently changed to a more liberal branch of Mennonites that encouraged questions and a college education, the marks of a stricter upbringing were still upon me. I had grown up in a home and a church with a specific set of rules and regulations, and there was little room for questions and opinions. Class participation grades were both my fiend and my savior. With them, I was pushed into awkwardness; without them, I never would have pushed past the awkwardness to find the thoughts that would come to ground me.

Spiked hair girl and I look at each other and giggle—she in her infectious outburst and I in my quiet one. A pale-faced, very blonde student on the other side of her is reading another poem about waffles, to the amusement of all of us except Dr. Biddinger who takes poetry seriously. He uses purple cat folders and wears blue plastic earrings in the shape of a tiny bow. The following semester, walking down the sidewalk between Bierce Library and Olin Hall, I meet up with him. His hair is now lavender, and he keeps his back stiff and his gaze straight ahead as we pass. I am an outsider once again. But then I realize that so is he, with his pale face and purple pants, and I wonder how many more of us there are. Perhaps we are all looking for community and a place to belong, like the kind that might be found in Poetry workshop class or around a counseling center library table.

Students throng around me in Bierce Library and pass me on the bricked path to Olin Hall. My head is full of papers and projects, and I barely notice the stares and my own flowing skirt among the yoga pants. Strange how a world so different than my own can feel like home. My writing has gone from shaky sentences to alternative leads and theme-structured essays, and somehow I've learned to organize my thoughts and push past the expectations and fear. It isn't about right and wrong answers anymore but bringing a piece to the puzzle of life we are all trying to figure out. My voice still feels too loud against classroom walls, and I shrink from being bold. My mother worries how I will make money, deal with the stress of life, and interact with the outside world without her or a husband to care for me. To her, it all seems so unnecessary. I know she won't be talking with Grandpa about it anytime soon—her daughter going to college instead of marrying, helping her parents, and building a bank account, like the only other single woman in my line of 43 Raber cousins. We might have left the Amish culture years ago, but the culture has never left us.

I drive away from the university, dodging brake lights in the driving rain as I merge onto Interstate 77, past tall steel buildings, shopping malls, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Leaving a 3:15-4:30 class always gets me stuck in traffic. I wind onto the less crowded 30 West and finally onto State Route 241 toward home. In the darkness, I watch for dim lamps on buggies that could be just over the next hill. Lights blink from large farmhouses where families eat supper together and take care of babies and go to bed early. This is my home, the place where I belong, the place where I will come back to. I now know that community can also be found in places where we never thought to look.

Critical Essay – Honors Project

November 30, 2015

### Writers That Influenced Me

William Zinsser changed the way I view and write the personal essay through his book *Writing About Your Life*. In the chapter “Recovering the Past,” Zinsser writes about a mechanical baseball game he received as a child one Christmas. Over the years, the game disappeared from his life and apparently from society, as he had never seen one in antique shows or shops. After writing an article about the game in the *New York Times*, letters started trickling in of others who had also received this game as a child. Zinsser’s story of how he had gotten together with the neighborhood boys, created teams, and played World Series on the mechanical game struck a chord with readers. One man who contacted him had one of the few remaining games and brought it to Zinsser. Other readers wrote how the story caused them to recollect other childhood toys and go on a search to find them. Although the mechanical game was made long before my time, the story Zinsser wrote triggered in me the nostalgia of childhood and the memory of games that had been special to me. Zinsser taught me “that universal themes often come cloaked in unlikely garb” and if writers want to connect with their readers they must look for those universal themes that will be connecting points (202).

After reading this book, the next essay I wrote for my *Writers on Writing* class was about a small town library my dad took me and my siblings to on winter evenings, the role of books in my Mennonite home, and the relationship with my father. All of these subjects struck a chord with my classmates who remembered their childhood experiences of visiting libraries and reading their favorite books, and they chose the essay to be read aloud in class. If there is anything I have learned from Zinsser it is to create stories out of small snippets of memories and

events in my life rather than looking for things I think are big and important enough to read.

Zinsser, who began his career writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* and wrote regularly for leading magazines, says that when you are writing about your life, you should look for those “small, self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory” (7). If you remember those incidents, it means they “contain a larger truth” that readers will “recognize in their own lives” (7). Zinsser exemplifies this by intertwining dramatic, amusing, and inspiring stories from his life with the helpful writing topics. His book I will return to time and again as I continue my writing career.

As a fledgling essayist, writing the personal essay can feel vulnerable to me—like I’m exposing too much about myself or others--and perhaps taking myself too seriously. Using the letter *I* in a personal essay, however, is nothing to be ashamed of, says Phillip Lopate in his essay “The Personal Essay and the First-Person Character (78). Usually we as writers have not conveyed as much as we thought we have, he argues. How then can we write the personal essay without a sense of complaining, marring the essay with the self-disgust that we all seem to live with, or taking ourselves so seriously as to bog down the reader? Look at yourself with curiosity, Lopate says, and “maneuver” the character of yourself in a way “that will best amuse the reader” (80). This takes practice and usually happens as we start narrating situations in our lives, enlarging on those quirks and mannerisms that makes us different from others. No one wants to read about the “regular Joe,” so it’s important that we “dramatize ourselves” and forget about being “likeable and nice, to fit in” (79). Reading such authors as Amy Tan and Isabella Allende has been a guiding light for me in how to accomplish this. They show that even the most difficult circumstances can be told with humor, dignity, and warmth that leaves the reader feeling inspired. It is in writing, Tan says, that we process life.

Amy Tan grew up with an emotionally unstable mother, moved to a new house and school every six to twelve months, and watched her brother and father die of brain tumors in one year. She writes of all this in a life-giving and humorous way, not by denying that she hated the loneliness her childhood brought, but that her life made for good writing and good training to be a writer. In her book, "The Opposite of Fate," she zeroes in on her mother's idiosyncrasies, such as using a Chinese accent when recording her mother's verbal abuse and absurd threats, which keeps the reader captivated and amused instead of pulling him or her under a mire of despair. Her life has been anything but ordinary and Tan capitalizes on that to develop her distinct voice and vivid storytelling. Tan teaches me that all of us have those unique things in our lives that we can transform into story. It's up to us as writers to find them and write about them, not as victims but as overcomers, which we become as we write in a life-giving way.

Besides being able to write so elegantly about her past, I'm also impressed with the sophisticated and intelligent way in which Tan writes. Every sentence and paragraph holds deep meaning and weight. I think this is in part to Tan's attitude in life. She is constantly looking to "dissect" life and asking questions, such as "What makes things happen?" and "Who am I?" even though she believes life is "mysterious and not dissectible" (322). She writes in hopes that she will "discover something remarkable about ordinary life, about myself" (323). In essence, Tan believes writing is a way to process life and if she is successful in it, it will help her readers to process their lives as well. It's the "magic" that happens between writer and reader (323). She also chooses her words carefully, "with much anguish" when she writes, paying attention to tone, meaning, sound and rhythm and how it connects with things "deeply personal" and "secretly ironic" in her life (302). It's this distinct voice that sets her apart from the average writer. Her writing is so easy to read that the reader doesn't see the anguish that goes on behind her work.

Every sentence and paragraph flows like it rolled off of her tongue (or her pen). But I now know from Tan that writing is also hard work.

Another thing Tan does well is creating images, and I especially enjoy her paragraph of lists, something I would like to experiment with. In her essay, “The Best Stories,” which begins with Tan as a six-year-old, she counts on her fingers the worries she accumulated that year. It takes up an entire paragraph and begins with “One was for the new home we had moved to . . . Two was for the dead rat crushed in a trap that my father had showed me . . . Three was for my playmate Rachel, whom I saw lying in a coffin” (335). It’s an invitation to the reader to envision a little girl counting on her fingers, one of those images Tan does so well in creating. Or consider this image: “At least with a fairy tale, I could immerse my imagination like my big toe in a tub of hot water and then retract it if the story didn’t agree with me at the moment” (340). Tan says her vivid imagination began as a child, when she played around with memory and metaphor, thinking of them as “secret passageways that took me to hidden rooms in my heart” (322). Again, Tan looks back on her difficult life as a child, not with self-pity, but with appreciation for her ability to develop imagination necessary for her life later as a writer. Today she sees memory as “the dreamy part of myself that lived in another world,” not avoiding those difficult moments of the past, but dreaming how they can be used as vivid creations in story (322). In essence, she is creating warmth and beauty and bringing order out of the chaos of the past. It’s something I learn from reading Tan that I must do if I want to be a person who writes with hope and redemption—delving into the past and adding memory to imagination (Tan 250). This, says Tan, is the muse.

Zinsser calls it “inventing the truth” (158). Writing the mere facts about your life and history are not enough to hold the attention of readers, states Zinsser who taught writing courses

at Yale University and the New School in New York. If you want to write a memoir, you must arrange the details into a narrative and “manufacture a text” (Zinsser 163). In his essay, “How to Write a Memoir,” Zinsser instructs new writers that the way to do this is simply to start writing every day, calling up events that are vivid in your memory and writing about those. Eventually you will see themes and patterns emerge and it will become clear what parts are relevant and what parts are not. That means, you won’t include every detail of your life in memoir writing. As a new writer, I find it particularly helpful to know that I do not have to have the perfect plot before I begin writing, but to discover the plot along the way as I write. That will mean not including every detail of my life in memoir writing.

It will mean, though, that I must include myself in the writing, not simply the mere facts of my life. Writing memoir is to “look for your own humanity and the humanity” of the people that have been in your life, “however much pain they caused you” (Zinsser 173). But I must deal with my anger and self-pity somewhere else if I want to write in a hopeful, life-giving, and humorous way. This is exemplified by Amy Tan and William Zinsser in their personal essays and memoir writing and emphasized by Phillip Lopate in his tips to those who write the personal essay. That’s why I see all three of these writers as impactful to any writer, but especially those who are new in the field and interested in writing memoir and personal essays. I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to read all three of these authors in my classes at the University of Akron, the place where I wrote my first personal essay.

## Honors Project — Reflective Essay

November 14, 2015

## Permission to Write: A Reflective Essay

On the long dark evenings of the fall 2014 semester, I sat at the kitchen table and typed about Grandpa and his world. I described the sights and sounds I had seen and heard when visiting him earlier in the semester to get a feel for the essays and poems I would write for my Honor's Project. The project would be a three-part creative writing piece, the first about my Amish grandpa, the second about my relationship with him, and the third about myself—an Amish Mennonite woman on a university campus. My first step had been to visit Grandpa to ask questions and to give myself a fresh sense of nostalgia to write about.

On my first visit to Grandpa, I took along a little tablet and pencil and, as we sat in the enclosed porch, I told Grandpa I had to write an essay for school about the Amish and things from the old days. I didn't tell him the essays would also be about him and our relationship—a subject I knew would push us to the edge of awkwardness. Even now I could see him looking down at his hands, staring out the window, or making a comment to bring us back to practical things. Talking about feelings was not something Grandpa did. He did, however, rarely turn down an offer to talk about the old days, although he seemed untrusting of my little tablet and pencil that evening. He gazed out the picture windows and rocked slowly in his hickory rocker, cocking his ear slightly to my questions. When I asked the questions about Amish life and his view of things, our conversation kept hitting potholes. Although I had tried to ask my questions as casually and unassumingly as possible, the conversation wasn't going anywhere. Finally, as the evening light faded, I put aside my pen and paper and let the conversation flow naturally about the weather and the neighbors and how Uncle Levi is doing with his brain tumor. I even

got a few tidbits of Grandpa's life on the farm as a boy, but it wasn't enough, and I knew I had to come again. Grandpa agreed that I could visit again in two weeks, after he had rested from an all-day Thursday wedding and an all-day communion church service that would tire him out for days.

Although I hadn't gotten all the details I wanted from Grandpa, I had enough to provide a sense of place and who he was to write my essay "Puzzle Pieces of Home." I also pulled from memory the snippets my mother had told me over the years about life with Grandpa, including the time she took me to a park for lunch when I was well into my twenties to tell me that Grandpa had been born an illegitimate child and we weren't true Rabers after all. Up until then, we had blamed all of our stubbornness, obsession with cleanliness, and slow decision making on being a Raber. At the time, I had felt devastated and lost, but now I cherish this piece of the puzzle of my grandpa's life. It is these pieces that make my Grandpa who he is and what makes his story unique. At the same time, including this piece in the essay made me feel vulnerable, like I was breaking the family rule by exposing him and breaking family code. Among the Rabers, as in any "aristocratic" setting, family secrets ran thicker than ladybugs in a farmhouse kitchen. The Rabers were rich, admired, and insecure. Reputation was everything. I was relieved to hear Professor Giffels, my honors project sponsor, say it was pieces like my grandpa's anger that made him seem human. Although we are often judged by how well we hide our flaws, showing the flaws of my characters and myself can make an important connecting point with readers. I only pray my mother never finds my essay, which will be hidden in a green plastic storage box under my bed.

Surprisingly, between the descriptions of Grandpa's home and his history came an analysis of his life and an exploration into the culture and background of my family. These are

things that floated around in my mind before, but writing them into cohesive thoughts and sentences was a way to start making sense of them in my mind. I am thankful I got to experiment with finding the narrative of my life and to give myself permission to write it.

In the second essay, “An Order of Worlds,” I attempted to think and write about my relationship with Grandpa and the gaps between him as an Amish man and me as his Mennonite granddaughter. This was harder, as I dug into my feelings and thoughts about something that felt important to me but that I had never put into words before. What really was our relationship like? Why do I enjoy visiting Grandpa, and why does he welcome me? How are our worlds different and does it matter? What do I want from Grandpa, and what does he want from me? The question I wish I would have asked myself earlier on is one I learned from Amy Tan in “Five Writing Tips,” an essay we read in my *Writers on Writing* class. Tan says to “Ask the important questions,” one of which includes the question, “What is love?” As I wrote about my visits to my grandpa and how I had perceived him as a child and later as an adult, I groped for how to express the sentiments of why my visits to Grandpa meant so much to me and why they filled me with warm feelings in spite of our differences and a rather distant relationship over the years. To me, love is being able to visit my Grandpa in spite of differences and to go to a place that has always been there—a warm kitchen on winter nights, the fields and the long lane on autumn evenings, the conversations about the weather and the cousins that have always been there in the Clark Bottoms. It is a constant that brings stability and comfort in my life and most of all, it is a place where I am welcomed. Of course, my saving grace has been that I can speak the language Grandpa expresses himself best in—Pennsylvania Dutch, a German dialect spoken by Amish and Amish Mennonites. Without it, our conversations would be difficult instead of free-flowing like they are now.

The third essay in this Honor's Project creative non-fiction piece was the most intimate of all and the most vulnerable. I had to remember what it was like to transfer from my rural farming community to a large university with several thousand students milling about the campus at any given time. The transition had at first felt painful, not only because I dressed differently from most of the other students, but that I didn't know how to express my thoughts, opinions, and voice. While my family and community had not given me these gifts growing up, they did give me the gifts of hard work and diligence, which served to help me persist semester after semester. The most important thing I learned by writing this essay is that I have been able to find community in a place and from people so unlike the community where I come from. Reading books by Amy Tan and William Zinsser, writing creative writing assignments, having the direction and affirmation from professors who were experts in the writing field was something helped me realize my dreams.

There are things I could have done better in my essays. I realize this now that I am taking *Writers on Writing* class, which has turned out to more of a creative non-fiction writing class, and I have been experimenting with various non-fiction pieces. If I could start over, I would use more humor, more feeling, and more honesty. I would be more theme-structured and specific. However, I am privileged to have had this opportunity to explore my background, myself as a person, and a world outside of the one I've always known growing up. When I was insecure about writing these essays, I have been blessed with a sponsor, Professor Giffels, who called my writing vivid and assured and gave me the courage to continue going. I am also aware that writing about my experiences as an Amish Mennonite woman on a university campus is perhaps different from what someone else's in my culture would be. I came here insecure, not knowing my voice, and with a whole lot of baggage, while others may not have realized or thought about

these things. William Zinsser in his book “Writing About Your Life” gives me permission to write my story anyway and to “have the courage to tell your story as only you can tell it.” This includes writing about my life in the way I experienced it, even though someone from my background or even family may have experienced the same places and people differently.

It was Saturday when I next visited Grandpa to get more material for my paper, scribbling in my little tablet when he wasn't looking. Our conversation flowed more freely, as we sat at the kitchen table talking about the days when Grandpa remembered corn huskings, butchering for the neighbors, and when the Amish had first allowed hay balers. Grandpa didn't talk about the hard stuff though—being shunned from the church for being the first one to own a piece of modern farm equipment, being raised by a man who wasn't his real father, being the one to start over from scratch because of an unfair arrangement on the home farm. Those were the things my mother told me in short snippets over the years. She never stayed long on the subject, but I have learned that even brief answers can be pieced together to tell a story that is yours and yours alone.

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