

Essay Review

To Make the Spirit Whole

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BALM IN GILEAD: JOURNEY OF A HEALER

by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot.

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"I was nine years old when I had the dream. . . . The year was 1923 . . . I was laid out in the middle of the living room as was the custom of the time when a family member died. On the wall of the living room facing the casket was a life-sized picture of my brother. . . .

Then I was walking along the fence that bordered my front yard. I seemed to be an early adolescent. I . . . rang the bell. My mother opened the door. . . . 'Mrs. Morgan,' I said . . . 'I heard that Margaret died. . . .' Intently I searched my mother's face. The dream ended. . . ." (p. 312)

The speaker mourning Margaret is Margaret herself. Dr. Margaret Morgan Lawrence is a distinguished Black psychiatrist who has done pioneering work in children's therapy. She is telling her own story at the 1987 meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysts. By sharing her childhood dream of her own death, she is arguing that in order to survive deep injury, a child must open old wounds, feel the pain, endure numbness, cry and speak, and emerge to live with the scars. This faith in children's capacity to survive such wounds and prevail is the bedrock of her theory and her practice.

Like teachers and poets, therapists can turn their own wounds to professional use. Dr. Lawrence's life is a story of collective pain and strength, as well as personal joy and grief. She kept searching her mother's face, though in fact her family gave her strong support for every step of her determined march. They allowed her, for example, to leave Mississippi for New York City at the age of fourteen to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. Margaret's older brother in the dream, whose life-sized portrait hangs on the wall, died in infancy. Her parents had nicknamed him Candy Man (for his fair skin and smooth hair). They loved him with a bottomless love, and his death left them in bottomless grief. The darker-skinned sister wondered if she would ever measure up, ever be as loved, fearing that in the end, love might depend on the shade of one's skin. Her father, dark-skinned

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like Margaret, had hoped Candy Man would follow in his footsteps and become an Episcopal priest, ministering to lost souls. Margaret's mother, a teacher dedicated to the education of Black children, was struck down time after time with a huge sadness that immobilized her for days at a time. From these many-colored threads of pain and love, Dr. Lawrence wove a life of teaching, healing and raising children, and ministering to wounded souls.

Balm in Gilead: Journey of a Healer is a loving memoir of a remarkable woman. The author, her daughter Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, is a professor of sociology and education at Harvard University, who has written highly praised books about families, schools, and teaching. Dr. Lightfoot is also a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Prize Fellowship. As a text for her mother's life, the daughter takes the powerful words of Jeremiah:

How can I bear my sorrow?
I am sick at heart . . .
I am wounded at the sight of my people's wound,
I go like a mourner, overcome with horror.
Is there no balm in Gilead,
no physician there?
Why has no skin grown over their wound?

Jeremiah 8:18-22

The physician in the story, Dr. Margaret Morgan Lawrence, earned her medical degree from Columbia University in 1940. She became the first Black trainee at the Columbia Psychoanalytic Clinic in 1946, and in 1963, director of Developmental Psychiatry Services at Harlem Hospital, where she practiced for many years. Against the odds, she became a physician in Gilead, able to give a notable measure of balm to children. But no skin has grown over the deepest wounds of racism. She remembers, for example, each detail of her rejection by the Cornell Medical School:

. . . in Margaret's senior year at Cornell. . . . As she moved closer to medical school, the momentum and energy of her academic pursuits increased, her grades soared, and she knew with increasing certainty that her dream [of becoming a doctor] would be realized. . . . When the dean of the medical school told her she had done "very well" on the examination, she was overjoyed and newly confident. . . .

When the same dean called Margaret into his office . . . she assumed that this would be the ritualized visit offered to all incoming medical students. . . . Her pleasant reveries were interrupted by the dean's voice, which seemed to be cautious and apologetic even before Margaret could hear the words. Then the message—with all its horror—began to penetrate, and Margaret grew blank and silent. . . .

"You know," he said, without a hint of emotion in his voice, "twenty-five years ago there was a Negro man admitted to Cornell Medical School and it didn't work out. . . . He got tuberculosis." Each of the dean's words was like a knife. There was nothing to say. (pp. 174-175)

Fifty years later, Dr. Lawrence weeps as she recounts this incident to her daughter.

Balm in Gilead is an important addition to the story of Black lives in American history, especially in the field of medicine. It helps set straight another small portion of the neglected record of achievement, as well as illustrate the institutional

racism that Black doctors face and fight. It is a narrative of a thoughtful daughter's quest to understand herself and her mother and their common roots in the Black middle class—another group that historians have sorely ignored. It is a study of how individuals mirror and embody society, and a romantic love story that spans decades. It is a fine portrait of the evolution of a healer and the growth of two unique and powerful Black women who journey together. Here are the materials for a meditation on class, race, generation, and gender—where they intertwine and how they separate.

Many rich stories emerge from one. There is a joint family heritage of spiritual ministry and teaching, as well as a blend and balance of social responsibility and professional ambition, in the lives of Black professionals. There are also wellsprings of spirituality that nourish Dr. Lawrence and enable her to pick selectively from Freudian tradition and medical science, while adding her own empathic healing “spirit” to the enterprise. The study illustrates a sturdy sense of privilege and earned status within the Black middle class which supports children who forge new paths, and it also shows the challenge of making a harmonious marriage in a society where relations between men and women are often twisted into bad shapes. And, throughout it all, there is a nub of determined independence at the core of this extraordinary woman.

Cultural and personal themes are set in a North-South panorama, and we travel with Margaret Lawrence from the deep South, north to Harlem in the 1930s. She moves from all-Black Magnolia High School in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to an integrated girls' high school in New York City. We see the Black middle class of Vicksburg, where “White folks were totally irrelevant,” and the all-White professional circles of psychiatry in New York City, southern “Jim Crow” racism and more subtle northern varieties. In personal terms, Margaret moves from a deeply religious family to secular social circles and exchanges an old Black middle-class political caution for 1930s activism and a new sense of identification with the poor. She leaves a family dominated by powerful women who were “merciless” to men, for a marriage of loving equals with a notable Black sociologist and peace activist, Charles Lawrence.

So rich a portrait requires many levels of reading. Lightfoot gives us a description of middle-class life in Black communities many decades before the *Cosby* Show—the preachers and the teachers and Pullman car porters, morticians, and pharmacists. The Morgans and the Lawrences were people of modest means, but with enough of a margin to engage in an essential kind of collective practice—the elaboration of community itself. Their enclave flourished in the areas of education, religion, culture, and politics. Dr. Lawrence's people were those who built the churches, served as ministers, priests, and deacons, founded the schools and linked them to colleges, philanthropy, and institutions like the YMCA.

W. E. B. DuBois spoke of a nearly impenetrable wall, or “veil,” between Black and White cultures, an American one-way mirror. This veil separates White people from the rich Black religious, cultural, political, and social life that has always existed. DuBois noted how the veil becomes part of the inner self, and a cultural affirmation of separate worlds.¹ Lightfoot lifts the veil from an epoch. She shows the central role of religion as a living faith, the focus on family life, and how the community serves as a ladder for professional career attainment. She presents the circle of well-dressed figures at the concert, the grand trips North to relatives every

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 127.

other year, the elaborate weddings and the subscriptions to magazines, the teachers whom students revered, the family letters, and the intimate family dramas of sickness and celebration. In dramatizing Margaret's success, she illustrates the significance of teaching in the old Black community and the tradition of gifted Black teachers who nurture the rising generation and open its eyes to possibilities.

"Somehow, if you were a good student, you managed to meet these Negro teachers. . . . They *looked* for promising Negro girls . . . there was a strong feeling like that in Harlem. . . ." Once chosen by them, a girl felt a heavy responsibility.
(p. 88)

Lightfoot points to the wounds of racism and color consciousness within genteel Black families, and shows how such matters often played into the battles between the sexes and the systematic denigration of men that scarred her mother's family. (The Lawrence family, on the other hand, had a tradition of strong men, bucking the odds.) Lightfoot speaks of family tragedies — not only the death of Candy Man, but also the plight of a schizophrenic uncle who was the focus of one grandmother's energy and sorrow. She tells us about the love and pride of family and community that sustained Margaret Lawrence's ambition, and the extraordinary assumption of entitlement that encouraged her dream of becoming a doctor. No success is ever truly an individual achievement, despite the American legend. The interplay between Margaret Morgan Lawrence's fierce determination and the care of a widening circle of admirers, eventually including White people, but beginning and ending with family, makes for a fascinating study.

Her portrait is useful for filling in important figures missing from past historical accounts. These were Black people who, through unyielding effort and good luck, were able to prosper in Vicksburg and other places. Lightfoot has rescued them from what E. P. Thompson has called the enormous condescension of history. Knowledge of this group of Americans is invaluable for understanding the different ways that Blacks have made homes for themselves between the horns of the American dilemma: the contradiction between racism and the American creed. Lightfoot's figures wielded important influence in the Black community. They created institutions and built bridges that reached out to the larger world.

Many readers will be amazed at the degree to which this cozy world of Black families existed relatively clear of the menace of Jim Crow southern society in the 1920s — an Ice Age of atrocious lynchings and systematic violence against Black people. In the North, too, where the 1920s were not an era of racial harmony, middle-class Harlem was enjoying something like a Golden Age. When Margaret Lawrence said that Whites were irrelevant to her life in Vicksburg, she made an important point. Here was a group of Black people who lived by their own lights and values, even when the demon of skin color preoccupied them and a racist society reached in from time to time to remind them of their vulnerabilities. Here is where the threads of class and race need to be untangled. We need to know more about these worlds where Black Americans developed protected and productive lives.

Such lives were not representative. Most Black Americans of this era were poor; most were not subscribers to magazines or fitted by dressmakers. Yet the many comfortable, elegant middle-class figures looking out proudly from Lightfoot's photographs remind us of the banal and racist quality of many of our images of Black life, even now when more is being done to resurrect that past. The destruc-

tion of a stereotypical Black—"the Negro"—is one of the major achievements of works like *Balm in Gilead*. In its place emerges a world of many realities. Compare, for instance, the cramped, lily-White intellectual ghetto of Cornell University college life in the 1930s where no Black students were allowed in a dormitory, with the culturally rich and world-tuned community of learning that Charles Lawrence was simultaneously taking part in at all-Black Morehouse College. At Morehouse, gifted peers and teachers, and distinguished and committed visitors gave Black students a glimpse of the wide world and their own power to change it, educating minds to play a positive role in history. By contrast, Cornell offered Margaret Morgan scientific training and her first bitter taste of northern racism.

Drawing the veil aside is also a way of educating the moral imagination. DuBois explains:

. . . The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. . . .²

Two intertwined lessons to learn are simple—and hard. There is only a little difference between one human and another, William James said; but that difference is supremely important. James's two half-truths combine to form the great, whole truth that ought to energize understanding and fellowship. James's double-barrelled truth and DuBois's account of the veil should form the basis for democratic scholarship, good teaching practice, and progressive politics in a multiracial society. A bitter national fate has made it especially hard for Americans to combine James's two truths in the area of race. The old traps are baited and springing again. Racist incidents are multiplying in our cities and on our college campuses. The trickle of Black people into higher education is drying up. The assault on Black families is mounting. It's time, once again, for Americans to learn an old lesson: we can ignore issues of race only by abandoning our hope for democracy. The history is so ancient and powerful. It often warps our actions and our words, even when our intentions are good. Lightfoot describes a "mixture of racism, benevolence, and innocence, veiled in polite talk" that Margaret experienced during her years at Cornell:

One Sunday a White woman from one of the local churches invited Margaret to come and speak about her experiences in Mississippi. . . . Her smile was sugary sweet as she took Margaret's hand. "I am so pleased you came," she gushed thankfully. Then, without skipping a beat: "You remind me so much of a maid I had. The only problem she had was that she would steal." Margaret tells the story with lightness and humor, as if these White "ladies" had done her no injury. . . . "That was *her* problem, she relates. . . . it was *her* responsibility, it wasn't me . . . but I checked it in my head and it stayed there." (pp. 177-178)

This book helps to remind us that we are all iron filings pulled into patterns by

² DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 45.

the immense magnet of a tragic past.

We can end up replaying old rituals. The *New York Times* review of this book describes it as “full of interior pain, denial and rage repressed so deeply that it is never felt.”³ It questions a Black child’s ability to grow up in the South without a sense of exclusion and is skeptical of a world so distanced from Whites that it is free to create its own standards. It insists on the important half-truth of the wounds of racism, without the other piece of truth: the strength of the vital struggle for wholeness. It does not combine the Jamesian half-truths into the complex whole truth. The *Times* review is, alas, a symptom of DuBois’s veil in its failure to see that the story of the Drs. Lawrence is a triumph over racist wounds, even though, without the wounds, the triumph would lack its meaning.

Certainly there is still mourning to do in Gilead. Revisiting Columbia Presbyterian Hospital nearly fifty years after graduating from medical school, Dr. Lawrence steps back in time:

“. . . I feel especially self-conscious about my hands. . . . I think, if only I had on my white coat, I could put them in my pockets. . . . [Holding out her trembling hands] Here I am, Black as you see me. . . . Here are my hands, *exposed*. . . . Maybe if I put my Black hands in my pockets, they won’t notice the difference! . . . You can recognize the difference between the level at which I lived happily ever after, and the deeper level. When you dig more deeply, the difference makes a difference.” (p. 204)

Balm in Gilead is more than a conventional success story. It is both a version of the American dream and a spiritual success story of one woman’s inner triumph over the empire of racism. It is also the story of a group that makes a good collective life in spite of that empire. That story is news too.

The relative balance of vulnerability and tenacity in Black life raises perennial questions which cannot be settled by sentimental idealizations of Black life or dismissals of the corrosive power of racism. Apparently it is still hard for some Whites to accept the variety of the Black experience, and blaming the victim is a recurrent folk practice that often takes scholarly form. Even before Thomas Jefferson speculated that Blacks lack a sense of shame because they don’t blush in a visible way, White Americans were treating Blacks as an invisible people. The refusal to honor the richness of life beyond the veil and James’s complex truths have made the Black-White discussion a dialogue of those who cannot hear. The old racist patterns do have a way of reasserting themselves.

How do we break out of the ancient patterns? Rare, liberating moments in history and powerful works of conscience and imagination help enormously, echoing down the years to disturb and trouble more complacent times and minds. The civil rights movement of the 1960s was such a moment, as were the peace and civil rights movements of the 1930s—a seedtime of later activism glimpsed at briefly in this book. I wish that *Balm in Gilead* had placed more emphasis on the importance of long-term political vision and activism and the ways in which ideals of justice and peace helped sustain a life’s work through good times and bad. What, for example, did Margaret and Charles Lawrence make of the civil rights revolution? A younger generation may benefit from knowing that political commitment is one way to make it through the long haul. Teachers in our schools also need

³ H. Jack Geiger, review of *Balm in Gilead*, *The New York Times Book Review*, January 1, 1989, pp. 7-8.

to know that, fundamentally, the work is moral and political, and that it goes on for a lifetime. Such a perspective nourishes the mind and keeps the spirit alive. Three essential paths can begin to lead us away from our ancient racial fates. They are insight, friendship, and action. Friendship and action are hard to talk about in a general way, although they may matter the most. They form the substance and promise of democracy itself, which is shared experience. The seeds of a better future lie in the successful creation of different kinds of communities—the places where we learn the proper meaning of words like “I” and “you” and “we.” As for insight, we need whatever helps us to lift the veil and merge the two Jamesian truths. For this, too, *Balm in Gilead* is helpful.

By exploring the education of a gifted young Black woman through race, gender, and history, Lightfoot adopts a classic form taken by American autobiographies. The genre reflects a typically American earnestness and faith in development. In these texts children confront life on very different terms from their parents, revealing an odd kind of American existentialism, believing that it is always possible to grow in the present, despite the wounds of the past. This narrative straddles a number of traditions. It is in part a narrative in the “up from” tradition of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. Yet it is also the biography of a *woman*—a heroic model. It is like many women’s biographies seen in recent years (see, for example, Joseph Lash’s wonderful biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt, or James Comer’s poignant biography of his mother, Maggie Comer.)⁴ Dr. Lawrence faced the obstacles to women, as well as to Blacks. At Columbia Medical School, Lightfoot writes, she was not a token woman (there was a small circle of close women friends), she was a token Black. In contrast, she was the only woman on the faculty at Meharry Medical College, a Black medical school, where she was underpaid, overworked, and cut off from her male colleagues. The portrait of Meharry in these pages is an etching in acid of an institution deeply corroded by cynicism and sexism. Four decades following this story, Lightfoot is today the lone tenured Black female professor at Harvard University, the second in the institution’s long history.

Balm in Gilead is also an admiring daughter’s portrait of her strong mother, a family memoir. Lightfoot ends the book just as she and her brother and sister emerge on the scene. (Charles Lawrence III is a law professor at Stanford; Paula Lawrence Wehmuller is a gifted teacher.) The older “up from” and the newer women’s traditions tend toward an iconography of heroic images, although recently there have been more complex and frank accounts of successful women and their families (see, for example, Joyce Antler’s splendid biography of Lucy Sprague Mitchell).⁵ The family memoir is the more intimate genre. Lightfoot’s touch is sure in the early stories of strong women who dominate households—admirable, but also cruel in their response to men. Indeed, one of the great issues in Margaret Lawrence’s growing up, triggering a kind of mental crisis on her wedding day, was whether this family pattern was fate, or something she could break away from. Different families, classes, and cultures play these stories differently. Lightfoot’s account of her mother’s family reminds me of the history of my White, Irish Catholic family from Pennsylvania’s coal country. There was also the pattern of strong women at the center and men at the margins. My father’s mother ruled

⁴ James Comer, *Maggie’s American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family* (New York: New American Library, 1988); Joseph Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: Norton, 1971) and *Eleanor, The Years Alone* (New York: Norton, 1972).

⁵ Joyce Antler, *Lucy Sprague Mitchell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

her seven children with a rod of iron when her husband died in the coal mines. Most of her adult sons gave her their paychecks to keep her in the genteel style to which she aspired. My mother's mother was a school principal, and a political activist for unions and child labor causes. She was also ruler of her large family and was feared as much as she was loved. In such contexts, the struggle for mutual love and respect among men and women faced even steeper odds than usual. The old family stories have the bite of a time more bare-knuckled and vivid than the present. Distance brings a certain degree of candor. When people are safely buried, there's little need for the diplomacy necessary to maintain loving connections. Lightfoot's account of the gender and color wars of earlier generations has the piss and vinegar that we have come to expect in treatments of the family. This is less true of her accounts of her own parents.

The warm goodness of the portrait of Sara Lightfoot's mother and father shows that the writer admires them deeply, and so do we. However, she is clearly making a choice, stepping back from intimacy and moving toward the exemplary. She ends the story at about the time that she and her brother and sister are born, as a way of emphasizing the public and professional side of the portrait. This is at the expense of the inevitably mixed feelings involved in family entanglements. Yet the loss is offset by a real gain. In fact the virtues of the Lawrences illuminate that fascinating line where private troubles cross over into public and political significance. Friendship and action are linked to insight. Lightfoot is to be commended for presenting to the public the exemplary character of her parents' performance, though the reader feels a certain sacrifice of intimacy. These are, after all, more than personal matters. In finding the strength to reject her family's acceptance of society's pale demon of skin color and the ritualized contempt for "bad" Black males, Dr. Lawrence was breaking out of prisons that remain contemporary. To make a good lifelong marriage, to wear regal African colors, to fashion a career where few men of color, let alone women, have trod, and to raise children free to make fun of old demons, has become part of this family's collective history in a way that resonates with public significance. This is the stuff that a potentially democratic culture could nourish, yielding more expansive lives and visionary politics, something bigger and better than the cruel and narrow old fates lying in wait for us. We know far too little about how ordinary people launch themselves into history or about the links between psychology and politics. What if this kind of achievement happened in lots of Black families? What if, as in the Lawrence family, achievement was linked to a wider vision of politics and world peace? Democratic possibilities hinge on our reflections as we look into the mirror.

Many readers, especially those of us who teach, will share a desire to hear more about Dr. Lawrence's work with children. Lightfoot gives us powerful fragments of case material and descriptions that suggest a healer of great insight and authority.

For Margaret, the "play" . . . is not bound by social class or privilege. In all her patients—of many colors, origins, and classes—she sees the universal themes of humankind. The rich, she points out, do not necessarily have a "richer" interior life or a greater capacity for identifying and expressing feelings. The poor do not necessarily have "impoverished" emotional lives, although such is often the assumption in her field. . . .

When therapy is successful [Margaret points out] there will be social and cultural ripples, if not waves. Individual health inspires a changed view of old, unproductive conditions. There is a strong, if complicated, relationship between psychotherapy and social change. (pp. 3-4)

Dr. Lawrence knows that it is essential for teachers and therapists to know how to listen and how to help. Like good teachers, Dr. Lawrence is a performer. The reader wants to see more of how her practice shaped her childrearing, and how her life seasoned the performance.

Dr. Lawrence took aspects of herself and fused them into an imposing professional persona. She adopted her father's priestly example and her mother's passion for teaching children. She made use of a tradition of Black spirituality, which included listening to the spirit. A seminar conducted by Benjamin Spock, which she took part in while in medical school, inspired her practice. An only child's hunger to hear others in a way she had not been heard, the successful blend of listening and acting that evolved as she mothered her own children, the vigorous interest in doing things—baking bread, for example—carried over into her pioneering work in play therapy. The importance, to a quiet woman, of music and of the voice itself as an instrument of healing; the political convictions that emerged from her life with a social activist; her own growing courage at possessing a mind given over to insight and hunches; all add up to a professional whole greater than the sum of the parts. Dr. Lawrence's eye for troubled children's strengths is an inspiration for all who work with young people.

Balm in Gilead is a reflection of Lightfoot's growing interest in breaking away from conventional scholarship in the social sciences, at a time when many scholars are clearing certain decks and rethinking the style of "objective" scholarly writing that has reigned for some time. Lightfoot reminds us of the arbitrary pegs on which much objective scholarship hangs and the false airs of impartiality that tend to mask politics in another form. This, without abandoning the ideals of truth and fairness or the need to get beyond bias. As the moral imperative to honor the truth, objectivity still stands as our ideal, but we know that a story claiming to be impartial is only one among many competing versions of a tale. By itself, impartiality is not enough. Many of us are also looking for a way to speak of important matters in a human voice and to deal in a thoughtful and scholarly way with our commitments. Scholarship with a human face and a living voice is not exactly new. It has been with us in small glorious bursts all along—but there is a new sense of revulsion against the reigning style of what I call imperial social science. *Balm in Gilead* tells a story in vivid human terms. It leaves no question that the author is a vital presence in the story.

For as long as I can remember, my mother had been an idealized figure in our community, put on a pedestal, spoken of with awe and envy. Parents of my friends, neighbors, teachers, shopkeepers in town, would speak about my mother's serenity and quiet intelligence, about the way her very presence seemed to ease their pain. Sometimes their veneration made me wonder.

. . . The worshipful praise always seemed genuine, but even as a child I recognized that it came at some cost. . . . For some, the image of her goodness led to resentment. . . . Each word of praise bore an edge of cynicism, and I could hear both, having learned early to catch these double-edged inflections. (pp. 11–12)

There is much more to this business of creating portraits and telling stories. It is a quest for something missing from a good deal of popular scholarship in education and other realms. Listen to the layers of Lightfoot's research: we hear the sound of a human voice making sense of other voices, especially those not often heard; voices of women and of people of color. We trace the line of a story set in a historical context, placing the actors in a long-running moral and political

drama. The text itself enacts the writer's deepest moral and political values, the eclecticism of method and material. What if this kind of work were to become more prevalent? What are the implications of a kind of scholarship in education that combines the distancing power of analysis with another kind of power—the deep gesture of solidarity that *Balm in Gilead* represents? Surely analysis and solidarity could stand as two poles of scholarship. Much research has neglected the second, studying teachers, for example, as though they were fruit flies. I like to think that Lightfoot might be working in a buried tradition of American scholarly writing whose founders I've already invoked in the course of this essay—W.E.B. DuBois and William James. This buried tradition values voice, portraiture and storytelling, and the intertwined truths of analysis and solidarity. It is in quest of the power that comes from looking beyond the isolation at the little difference there is between humans, and the supreme importance of that difference. It searches for the energizing shock of sympathy and of human community.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois was at work on the problem of human blindness. He linked the public existence of the Negro to the inner world behind the veil. He offered the example of a new kind of scholarship in which scientific facts gathered in the field give voice to a people's experience. Everything was grist for the DuBois mill, from autobiography—sketching himself as a teacher in a rural Black school—to history, politics, psychology, fiction, and spirituality. In constructing a rich text of objectivity and solidarity, DuBois analyzed the negative White image of the lives of Black people. He developed a kind of scholarly poem that was a dawning for Blacks, as well as the potential vantage point for a different American culture, perhaps even an escape hatch from the national fate. DuBois was trying to write what democratic visionaries like Walt Whitman and Louis Sullivan dreamed of—a people's scholarship.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James told stories about religious life. He included himself as an example of a sick soul recovered from despair. James used literature and history to cross the boundary between the intimate psychology of religion and its public meaning. He was working toward a method that would be scientific, but that would accommodate the soul, and the values by which men and women live and die, a way of thinking and writing about being. He wanted us to overcome our blindness to the meaning of other people's lives.⁶

Lightfoot sees the task of scholarship in the way that James and DuBois did, as a portrait; a kind of storytelling, close to ethnography, lively in its speech and capable of dealing with issues of quality and value. It is a conscious process of nesting stories in the dimensions of time and history and culture. Dr. Lawrence apparently sees scholarship as a kind of spiritual ministry, and an exercise in the creation of community as well. DuBois created the unforgettable portrait of himself as a teacher-intellectual. As he wrote the story he also developed a cultural model, an ideal of the teacher as a populist intellectual reaching out to the people. DuBois's model teacher helps people build culture through knowing the best that has been said and thought, thus becoming conscious of the rich meanings in lives and traditions. In such a cultural transaction, the teacher learns, for building a learning community has to be a mutual enterprise. James told the story of himself as a sick soul (though not admitting that it was himself), hoping that his readers would be able to use it in their fight against despair. James and DuBois wanted to tell truths that mattered and served people in the same gesture. It is their in-

⁶William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The American Library, 1960), and *Talks to Teachers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

tellectual ideal of solidarity; the responsibility of intellectuals and teachers for the welfare of people, that we are missing today.

In the spirit of James and DuBois, Lightfoot insists that the telling of stories can be a profound form of scholarship moving serious study close to the frontiers of art in the capacity to express complex truth and moral context in intelligible ways. The third of Lightfoot's four books, *The Good High School*, utilizes portraiture to argue against today's top-down reformers. It reminds us that the creation of a learning community is an essential feature of successful schools.⁷ Community, in this context, suggests the power of the local actors on the scene to create conversations and find shared meanings, the significance of the voices of teachers, and the crucial importance of local context, as well as the commitment of a scholar to truth and solidarity. The values that *The Good High School* stresses are part of the same vision that animates *Balm in Gilead*. The methodologies are inseparable from the vision. Historians have used narrative as a way in which to make sense of lives and institutions over time, but over the years they have grown abashed about its lack of scientific rigor. Now, as we look for ways to explore context and describe the thick textures of lives over time in institutions with a history, we want to reckon with the author's own stance and commitment to the people being written about. Storytelling takes on a fresh importance.

How do you best describe such complex and value-laden practices as teaching and therapy? With stories, perhaps. Stories have a special significance in the lives of those whose work is helping others. This is, after all, what the great teachers have always done. Few analyses of parenting will match the parable of the prodigal son. Now, after several generations of objective scholarship written about the practice of teaching from the outside-in (the fruit-fly approach), it may be time to pay attention to the significant fact that teachers, like other clinicians, get at the important stuff in their practice—the moral and practical heart of the matter—by telling stories. We need more teachers' stories, and we need to cast more teacher education in the form of stories.⁸ We might get beyond the narrow technical definition of education if we begin approaching teaching as a collective autobiography, the sum of many individual voices telling the story of practice together.

The truths about teaching and similar work are, I believe, essentially narrations.⁹ Not that teaching is the same as fiction writing. Teachers are artists of intentionality and will, as well as subject matter. They create communities of learning, constantly regrouping the circle for the next story, hoping to find the phrase that will speak to the despairing child in the third row.

Not only is narrative suitable for describing teachers' work, teaching itself is a kind of storytelling. Good teachers are the storytellers of the culture. Teachers convey broad truths and complex meanings in narrative fashion. All teachers are storytellers in that they are artists of human intentionality, trying to form a learning community around a subject, winning their students over to be themselves

⁷ Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). See also TheodoreSizer, *Horace's Compromise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) and John Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984) for the minority report on schools as communities.

⁸ See Robert Coles, *Learning by Example: Stories and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), on the role of literature in a professional education. See also Joseph P. McDonald, "The Teacher's Voice in Collaborative School Improvement Projects," Diss., Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1986; and Marue Walizer, "Watch with Both Eyes: Narratives and Social Science: Insight into Teachers' Thinking," Diss., Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1987.

⁹ See my argument in "A Note on Liberal Learning," *Colloquy*, 2 (Fall, 1988), 1-3.

tellers of better stories and makers of new meanings. Storytelling, by its nature is equipped with a certain modesty, in that people including our students, take stories on their own terms. It suits the practical and moral character of the educational enterprise, where, after all, intention is key.

There is, of course, a political and cultural dimension to this business of portraiture and stories. *Balm in Gilead* makes a powerful case for listening to each other's stories at a time in American politics when schools are seldom encouraged to listen. Scholarship rooted in stories raises important political questions, and questions of vision. Storytelling itself invites plural meanings in a way that is ultimately hostile to the imperial. *Balm in Gilead* underscores the importance of voice in these matters. Those pushed to the margins need to find the voice with which to tell their stories. We need the stories of the hitherto excluded, and the stories of the teachers like Margaret Lawrence's mother and my grandmother, and their spiritual descendants in the classroom today. We need to follow the path Lightfoot takes here; scholarship in the spirit of James and DuBois, a blend of certain of the values we associate with literature and social science. We need writing that explores, for example, how what looks like a mere anecdote can reveal a teacher's search for the threads of meaning and value through the uncertainties of learning and the mazes of human intention. We need a scholarship that can take voice and voices seriously.

Our increasingly polyglot and multiracial society is sorely in need of teachers who know how to honor the stories of their students and to join them to wider narratives and larger meaning. We need to learn better how to build on these stories, and, when they clash with mainstream stories, how to explore the discrepancies, rather than assume pathology. In this enterprise, Margaret Lawrence's complex and unsentimental faith in children's strengths and Sara Lightfoot's belief in the power of storytelling can stand us in good stead. Much educational discourse in recent years has been an expression of fear. Lightfoot's story of her mother's life, on the other hand, is a sustained expression of hope. We need to stand the oldest and the youngest together as this book does, to remind us of the beauty that is always old and young.

Balm in Gilead implicitly makes a strong case for a scholarship of voice, solidarity, and remembrance. It offers educators an example of how to go about making truth with students. If we listen, such work can help us hear the stories of our students and our fellow teachers, a music of being missing from many of our schools and most of our discussions of teaching. Such work may also offer clues to democratic politics, and a different national fate.

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