Chapter Eight

Who Am I If I’m Not My Father’s Daughter?
A Southerner Confronts Racism and Anti-Semitism

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As a white woman raised small town middle-class, Christian, in the Deep South, I was taught to be a judge, of moral responsibility and punishment only in relation to my ethical system; was taught to be a preacher, to point out wrongs and tell others what to do; was taught to be a martyr, to take all the responsibility for change and the glory, to expect others to do nothing; was taught to be a peacemaker, to mediate, negotiate between opposing sides because I knew the right way. When I speak, or speak up, about Anti-Semitism and racism, I struggle not to speak with intonations, the gestures, the assumption of these roles, and not to speak out of any role of ought to; I ask that you try not to place me in that role, I am trying to speak today to women like myself, out of need: as a woman who loves other women passionately and wants us to be able to be together as friends in this unjust world.

But where does the need come from, if by skin color, ethnicity, birth culture, we are women who are in a position of material advantage, where we gain at the expense of others, of other women? A place where we can have a degree of safety, comfort, familiarity, just by staying put. Where is our need to change what we were born into? What do we have to gain?

When I try to think of this, I think of my father, of how, when I was about eight years old, he took me up the front marble steps of the courthouse in my town. He took me inside, up the worn wooden steps, stooped under the feet of the folks who had gone up and down to be judged, or to gawk at the others being judged, up past the courtroom where my grandfather had leaned back his chair and judged for more than 40 years, up to the attic, to some narrow steps that went to the roof, to the clock tower with a walled ledge.

What I would have seen at the top: on the streets around the courthouse square; the Methodist church, the limestone building with the county health department, board of education, welfare department (my mother worked there), the yellow brick Baptist church, the Gulf station, the pool hall (no women allowed), Cleveland's...
grocery, Ward's shoe store; then all in a line, connected: the bank, the post office, Dr. Nicholson's office, one door for whites, one for blacks, then separate: the Presbyterian church, the newspaper office, the yellow brick jail, same brick as the Baptist church, and as the courthouse.

What I could not have seen from the top: the sawmill, or Four Points where the white mill folks lived, or the houses of blacks in Veneer Mill quarters.

This is what I would and would not have seen, or so I think, for I never got to the top: When he told me to go up the steps in front of him, I tried to, crawling on hands and knees, but I was terribly afraid. I couldn't—or wouldn't—do it. He let me crawl down: he was disgusted with me, I thought. I think now that he wanted to show me a place he had climbed to as a boy, a view that had been his father's, and his, and would be mine. But I was not him. I had not learned to take the height, that being set apart as my own: a white girl not a boy.

And yet I know I have been shaped by my relation to those buildings, and to the people in the buildings, by the ideas of who should be working in the board of education, of who should be in the bank handling money, of who should have the guns and the keys to the jail, of who should be in the jail; I have been shaped by what I didn't see, or didn't notice, on those streets.

Each of us carries around with us those growing up places, the institutions, a sort of backdrop, a stage-set. So often we act out the present against a backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe that it is terrifying to risk changing it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constricted by that old view.

So this one gain for me as I change: I learn a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multilayered, multidimensioned, more truthful; to see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the millpond after a fish had jumped, instead of the courthouse square with me in the middle. I feel the need to look differently because I've learned that what is presented to me as an accurate view of the world is frequently a lie: so that to look through an anthology of women's studies that has little or no work by women of color is to be up on the ledge above the town and be thinking that I see the town, without realizing how many lives have been pushed out of sight, beside unpaved roads. I'm learning that what I think that I know is an accurate view of the world is frequently a lie: as when I was in a discussion about the Women's Pentagon Action with several women, four of us Christian-raised, one Jewish, in describing the march through Arlington Cemetery, one of the four mentioned the rows of crosses I had marched for a long time through that cemetery; I nodded to myself, visualized rows of crosses. No, said the Jewish women, they were head stones, with crosses or Stars of David engraved above the names. We four objected; we had all seen crosses. The Jewish women had some photographs of the march through the cemetery, laid them on the table. We saw rows and rows of rectangular gravestones and in the foreground, clearly visible, one inscribed with a name and a Star of David.

So I gain truth, when I expand my constricted eye, an eye that has only let in what I have been taught to see. But there have been other constrictions: the fear around my heart when I must deal with the fact of folk who exist, with their own lives, in other places.

lives, in other places.

my fear of these folk that have wronged others is the terror that in for blood, sly Arab who rise in rebellion, has caused the shaggy hair and his stack of John J. spicery. It is the duty to end fear by attack.

I get afraid when I look at the people among women. Do I feel about race and class and skin has something to do with my friend that there was. Do I hear people breathe, the tightening circle, I try to say new things I will have to make a place for to say to myself: that to say my own. I try to say like me, have done to be sorry for the need to loosen the grip.

To be caught in the loneliness of the lonely thing. When we knew on some level want this view of the my coming out as the ways in which my abruptly one day I to me casually in our accent, so much like history and mine: lynching, the year I stood in the hallway how divided our lives.

It is a pain I carry: I think of my cub
lives, in other places besides the narrow circle I was raised in. I have learned that my fear of these folks is kin to a terror that has been in my birth culture for years, for centuries, the terror of people who have set themselves apart and 

above, who have wronged others, and feel that they are about to be found out and punished. It is the terror that in my culture has been expressed in lies about dirty Jews who kill for blood, sly Arab hordes who murder, brutal Indians who massacre, animal blacks who rise in rebellion in the middle of the night and slaughter. It is the terror that has caused the slaughter of all these peoples. It is the terror that was my father's with his stack of John Birch newspapers, his belief in a Communist-Jewish-Black conspiracy. It is the desperate terror, the knowledge that something is wrong, and tries to end fear by attack.

I get afraid when I am trying to understand myself in relation to folks different from me, when there are discussions, conflicts about anti-Semitism and racism among women, criticisms, criticisms of me, for instance, in a group discussion about race and class, I say I feel we have talked too much about race, not enough about class and a woman of color asks me in anger and pain if I don't think her skin has something to do with class; when for instance, I say carelessly to a Jewish friend that there were no Jews where I grew up, she begins to ask me: How do I know? Do I hear what I'm saying? and I get afraid; when I feel my racing heart, breath, the tightening of my skin around me, literally defenses to protect my narrow circle, I try to say to myself, yes, that fear is there, but I will try to be at the edge between my fear and the outside, on the edge at my skin, listening, asking what new things I will hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear. I try to say to myself, that to acknowledge the complexity of another's existence is not to deny my own. I try to say, when I acknowledge what my people, what those who are like me, have done to people with less power and less safety in the world, I can make a place for things to be different, a place where I can feel grief, sorrow, not to be sorry for the others, but to mourn, to expand my circle of self, follow my need to loosen the constrictions of fear, be a break in the cycle of fear and attack.

To be caught within the narrow circle of the self is not just a fearful thing, it is a lonely thing. When I could not climb the steps that day with my father, maybe I knew on some level that my place was with women, not with men, that I did not want this view of the world. Certainly, I have felt this more and more strongly since my coming out as a lesbian. Yet so much has separated me from other women, ways in which my culture set me apart by race, by ethnicity, by class. I understood abruptly one day how lonely this made me when a friend, a black woman, spoke to me casually in our shared office: and I heard how she said my name, the lingering accent, so much like how my name is said at home. Yet I knew enough of her history and mine to know how much separated us: the chains of murders, rapes, lynchings, the years of daily humiliation done by my people to hers. I went and stood in the hallway and cried, thinking of how she said my name like home, and how divided our lives were.

It is a pain I come over and over again when for instance, I realize how habitually I think of my culture, my ethics, my morality, as the culmination of history, as the logical extension of what has gone before; the kind of thinking represented by
my use, in the past, of the word Judeo-Christian, as if Jewish history and lives have existed only to culminate in Christian culture, the kind of thinking that the US government is using to promote Armageddon in the Middle East; the kind of thinking that I did until recently about Indian lives and the culture in my region, as if Indian peoples have existed only in museums since the white folks came in the 1800's; the kind of thinking that separates me from other women in cultures different from mine, makes their experience less central, less important than mine. It is painful to keep understanding this separation, within myself and in the world. Yet I have felt that the need to be with other women can be the breaking through the shell around me, painful, but coming through into a new place, where with understanding and change, the loneliness won't be necessary.

If we have these things to gain, and more, by struggling against racism and anti-Semitism in ourselves, what keeps us from doing so, at any one moment, what keeps us from action? In part, I know I hesitate because I have struggled painfully, for years, to make this new place for myself with other women, and I hesitate to disrupt it.

In part I hesitate because the process of uncovering my complicity is so painful: it is the stripping down, layer after layer, of my identity skin, blood, heart; to find out how much of what I am has been shaped by my skin and family, to find out which of my thoughts and actions I need to change, which I should keep as my own. Sometimes I fear that stripping away the layers will bring me to nothing, that the only values that I and my culture have are based on negativity, exclusion, fear.

Often I have thought: what of who I am is worth saving? worth taking into the future? But I have learned that as the process of shaping identity was long, so the process of change is long. I know that change speeds up the more able I am to put into material shape what I have learned from struggling with anti-Semitism and racism, to begin to act for change can widen perception, loosen fear, ease loneliness. I know that we can choose to act in ways that get us closer to the longed-for but unrealized world, a world where we each are able to live, but not by trying to make someone less than us, not by someone else's blood or pain.