



***From Alienation to  
Exploration:  
Breaking Free From the Iron  
Cages of My Life***

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The social experience of **alienation** has affected most of my life. I grew alienated from my core self when I attended Catholic schools and I've been working on changing that ever since. Those rules were hard to live by and they took their toll on my life, leaving me with social scars. I went from living what amounted to a child's **utopian** life to one like prison, where I attended school and met **bureaucracy**, discipline and repression. My imagination was stifled, my creativity crushed, and my expectations became nil.

Alienated and demoralized, I became a factory worker. I smoked pot, worked and drank. I abandoned free thinking for years, repressing memories and drinking and drugging to keep away pain and fear. My social worldview narrowed to tunnel vision—with only a bottle in sight before me.

It is only now that I am facing my demons in this paper. I'm allowing my **sociological imagination** a free rein: I'm finally putting my personal troubles into broader perspective in reference to family, society and my place in the world.

My early years were happy and free, basically unrestrained by societal restrictions. We had the benefit of a summer home where I happily played and swam daily with my siblings and many cousins. We jumped into the water when the tide came in and didn't leave the water until the tide went out. We ran barefoot and in bathing suits. We had no hot running water: we hosed off the salt under the outside hose and our parents heated water in the kettle for our Saturday night weekly shampoos. We were a captive audience on Sunday mornings. We had to put on shoes (!) and wear dresses for Catholic Sunday Mass. We sat chafed and bored for the hour or so and then it was back to our freedom.

The patriarchy of the Catholic Church kept the laws for our adult relatives, but we knew who ruled us—our grandmother was our matriarch. The women in our lives were the **dominant authorities** but my grandmother's **gender role** resembled more of a **patriarchy** than a **matriarchy**. She ruled the roost. Everyone knew her as Ma and her authority was well respected. She kept a watchful eye on us all, seeming to know just what every child was up to. Hers was a gentle benevolence: we respected more than feared her. This was the life I knew.

Then came kindergarten. My family was Catholic, bringing us up that way too. One year, when summer had come to an end and we were back in the city, I was sent to kindergarten in a parochial school run by Lithuanian nuns. I believe that I just drifted along with absolutely no idea that my life was about to change drastically. I was just sent there, I didn't get much preparation: I just got a uniform, a white blouse, and a navy blue skirt with matching navy blue knee socks, and navy blue lace up shoes. I went from basically living in a bathing suit with no shoes to being encased in a uniform, my feet being choked in orthopedic style shoes. I went from belonging to one group, family, to instant **domination** by the

**authoritarian figures**, the larger than life nuns. The worlds in my life changed from one **socially constructed** through my interactions with family, to one constructed by the nuns and the church: my new **subjective reality** was fraught with terror and confusion. My social reality was turned up side down. As Berger and Luckmann put it when defining alienation, I experienced “A loss of meaning: ... a disintegration of the socially constructed knowledge system” (Berger and Luckmann, in Wallace and Wolf, 277).

I vaguely remember some things like enforced nap times, naps on blankets on the floor and saltine crackers for snack time. I mostly remember being shut up in the coat closet for talking. The coat closet was a press where the wooden doors pulled down from the ceiling. I stood in there for I don't know how long with the smell of wool in my nose and surrounded by coats. I stood in that “iron cage” cloakroom experiencing **double consciousness**, a concept which I learned recently from the readings of W.E.B. DuBois; I had to now think of myself in terms of a duality. I knew I was not bad, I really had no idea what had just transpired yet someone in authority was telling me that I was so bad that I needed to be shut away from the other children, shut away from society. I had to separate my child self and the self dictated by society, wondering which one was true. This new society was fraught with confusion: my world had turned upside down. My real “I” was lost in that cloakroom. This was my first lesson in discipline from the nuns and it set the pace for the next eleven years.

The nuns introduced a new order to me; despite being women themselves, they showed none of the love I had previously received from the women in my family. I was trapped in a world where the “I” had no shelter in which to run. Dorothy Smith says it well, “We [as women] began to discover that we lived in a world put together in ways in which we had very little say.”

(Smith, in Wallace and Wolf, 285). The dominant patriarchal order of the Catholic Church as embodied in the nuns was the antithesis of **feminism**. We were made to study religious **dogma**; the catechism by rote, to not dare question any religious tenets or question authority. they acted like “shortsighted petty bureaucrats.” (Weber, in Ritzer and Goodman, 213). **Domination**, a form of authority as described by **Max Weber**, consists of, “The probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a specific group of persons” (ibid., 213). The nuns ruled us, and indeed our parents, through both **traditional and charismatic authority**. Traditional authority is that “based on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them” (ibid., 213). This, coupled with **charismatic authority** or “authority legitimized by charisma [which] rests on the devotion of followers to the exceptional sanctity, exemplary character, heroism, or special powers of leaders, as well as on the **normative order** sanctioned by them.” (ibid., 213) was what our parents, our authority figures, believed. We were, in effect, given over to the authority of the Catholic Church. “The nuns are always right,” is what we heard at home: “If the nun says you did wrong, then you did.”

**Phenomenologically** speaking, my whole structure of reality and authority was turned upside-down; the transition from home to school was a terrifying **shock** in my **reality par excellence**. Gone forever was the feeling of safety in that my parents and my grandmother could protect me from everything. I had to believe in the nuns completely in order to survive. In my elementary years I swallowed the Catholic **ideology** whole—hook, line, and sinker. I believed in it to such a degree that I remember wanting to die when I was about seven years old. I wished to die so I could go straight to heaven before I committed one

of the many sins that would send me immediately to hell.

My parents knew nothing of my feelings. They believed that they had done their duty and handed us over to the Catholic Church for the rest of our moral education. The ideology of my parents was based on the notion that religion made and kept a person good. I couldn't turn to them with whatever the nuns were doing to me. They, like the priests and nuns, had faith in God and left any intellectual contradictions alone. They believed that faith was all that was necessary. It gave them comfort: that was enough. **Karl Marx** was right, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Ritzer and Goodman 66). It was for my parents, anyway. Catholic religion, to them, was good, holy and sanctified by God. There was no opiate for this individual, though. I was confused and in pain and had no one to turn to for relief. I did not find my opiates until my later years, and then it sure as hell wasn't religion.

The **dualism** of the nun's behavior was stunning. Their use of the catechism flew in the face of all the wrong and mean things that the nuns did to us at school. There we were told, "What happens in this classroom stays in this classroom." I left kindergarten each day with the fear that I could be locked in the cloakroom at any moment. There was no one to whom I could turn for help. I never told my parents or my grandmother of the absolute shame of being locked into that cloakroom. The combined influence of the Catholic nun's behavior and my parent's behavior, who only saw the nuns as living saints, kept alive my alienated "**selves**" for a very long time.

The next summer I ran gleefully again with my siblings and my cousins, putting the past school year behind me, as only a child could. I never gave a thought to the following school year: I knew I would be going to a different school and I thought

that when I got to that school, things would be different, and better. I still hated to see the end of summer and the beginning of another school year. I entered first grade and a different school, named The Gate of Heaven, but I was surrounded by more nuns. They were to become the demagogues who ruled my life. I was filled with anxiety when I saw them. My daily defense was to daydream of my summer home, my cousins and the ocean that I loved so much. This only kept me in constant trouble.

I was a creative child, I liked to draw and paint. That first day of first grade, the nun handed each of us a lined piece of paper and told us to print our names. I turned the paper sideways because I liked the lines vertical, and I did as I was told. When the nun saw my work, she yelled at me very loudly, handed me a new piece of paper and told me to do it again. So I did. I had no idea what I had done wrong. She saw the second paper and became furious: her face got red and looked like it was going to burst out of her wimple. She screamed at me and told me to take my paper to the principal and show her what I did. Crushed and still bewildered as to what I'd done wrong, I took the long walk down the hall to the principal's office. "Sister told me to show you what I did," I said, giving her my best smile. I was terrified but I was smiling. I was learning at a very young age how to kowtow to the persons in power. Looking back now, I see that this was an early experience in Goffman's **dramaturgical theory** in action. I certainly was acting one way and feeling another, splitting the inner **back stage** and the public **front stage**. Seeing my big smile, the principal looked at my paper and said, "very good" and sent me on my way. When I returned to class the nun asked me what the principal had said. I related, "She said 'very good.'" I thought the nun was going to literally explode. I can't recall any more after that; I blanked out. I was too frightened to hear her. Later, my older sister explained to me that you were

not supposed to write on a paper with the lines vertical. I never told my parents, I had already learned my lesson well from the nuns: You don't tell what goes on in here.

After the lined paper incident, that nun hated me. My first grade experiences were miserable, setting up the rest of my parochial school years. I blanked them out, never remembering the names of any of my nuns, except to hear their names from my sisters and brother when their times came. We all shared that fear and loathing for the nuns. The nuns typified and **stereotyped** us. I had a sister one year older than I who had to do battle with the nuns first. They remembered your family name and treated you as they did the one before. I felt really bad for my younger sisters and brother: we were all **co-conspirators**. None of us told our parents about the cruelty of the nuns. Indeed, my brother only recently told me that one nun dangled him by the ankles, bouncing his head on the floor. It was the first time he talked about it. Such was the shame they instilled on us. My siblings, like me, would cry and beg not to go to school. We became sick a lot.

I suppose that we also stereotyped the nuns. All of them were not bad: I had a nice one once. Unfortunately, their uniforms were a horrible **symbolic** representation of their punitive actions, so they all looked alike to us. I really believe that once you were shoved down severely by one, you shut down and saw all the others as the same. I know I was deathly afraid to show myself, my real "**I**," to any nun for fear of more shattering of my self into alienated fragments. With them, I was only "**me's**" to use a distinction highlighted and explored by George Mead. The very symbol of the black and white habit, the nun's uniform instilled in me a very real fear. Fear translated into physical illnesses, real or wished for.

I had a ritual on Sunday night, falling into what Talcott Parsons calls the **sick role** pattern. I would very dramatically take my

role as the sick one, the only role that I learned to play that actually worked to keep me away from the nuns. I utilized what amounted to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, becoming a very active self, capable of changing my own social drama. Back-stage, I would work up my fears of the next day, until I would feel pretty sick with apprehension. The front stage performance was easy. Complaining of not feeling well, my mother, the other star of my play, would break out her **prop**, the thermometer. We both kept to our assigned roles as both actors and audience. She would play nurse and I, the "sickie." I would sit with the thermometer in my mouth willing my temperature to go up so that I wouldn't have to go to school on Monday. I would drink hot cocoa and try to jack up my temperature with it, sitting next to the radiator in the dire hopes that the heat would raise my temperature level. My mother played her role very well and she was a most appreciative audience. I think my mother would relent sometimes because of the fervor in which I used trying to stay home. We would become co-conspirators. That would only work sometimes; she either got wise or sick of me. My sick role had to become more dramatic to work. In a later grade, a girl taught me a simple trick. "Chew some saltine crackers then spit them into the toilet," she told me, "It really looks like throw-up." It worked for me, though I actually did become really sick a lot. I was the one who would bring home the measles, mumps, scarlet fever, whooping cough, etc. The bug or whatever would pass from me to my siblings around the house and then I would get it again.

I hated school so much I blanked out half of my school years. Every year I would beg to not be sent to Catholic school, but to no avail. "Catholic school is good for you," our parents would say. The nuns intruded on all aspects of our lives. We couldn't even play freely. The nuns would warn us to stay away from public school children, saying

they were bad children, who would go to hell. There seemed to be no way out.

According to G. I. Gurdjieff's theory of "three-brained" human beings, the development of the fully completed "I" hinges on the development of the other three parts of the self; the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual centers. Gurdjieff states, "The fundamental evil among contemporary people is that, owing to the rooted and widespread abnormal methods of education of the rising generation, this fourth personality, which should be present in everybody on reaching responsible age, is entirely lacking in them" (Gurdjieff, 1092-1093). I could not reconcile my own intellectual perceptions with my emotional ones. I quote a juror in the film *Twelve Angry Men*, "Facts, you can twist them anyway you want to." I saw this twisting of my self-identity throughout my education and I couldn't integrate my symbolic self. As Gurdjieff explains, we are constituted of three parts, struggling to achieve the harmonious four part person, the completed "I." He likens this disjointed self to a carriage in which the "coachman" is the intellectual self, the "horse" the emotional self, the "box" the physical self, and the "passenger" the master self representing the complete "I." My "coachman" kept taking free breaks from school, my "horse" plodded in every distracted direction, my "box" was soaked in drinking, and my "passenger" was simply not there. The master self had checked out of the body already—the **symbolic self-interaction** was simply not happening.

I finally escaped from the hell of Catholic School and in my eleventh year of school, went to South Boston High School. That was the freedom that broke me. For the first time in my life I was changing classes. There were boys in my class (my first two years of high school had been segregated by sex), and I felt both acutely shy yet free. I fell in with the misfits like myself, and began to learn all the wrong things. I

had years to catch up on. South Boston High School was like the film, *The Blackboard Jungle*. It was a wild school. The students sometimes ruled the classrooms. Kids cut classes and hung out in the halls and the locker rooms. There wasn't any direction given to students, especially the girls. The vocational counselor was the football coach, so if you weren't a football player he advised either shop for the boys or typing for the girls. This was before feminism and the women's liberation movement came into vogue and ensured the stock of my everyday **commonsense knowledge**. I was told that you needed secretarial courses to succeed in life. The idea was that you would fall into and reproduce accepted social **typifications**. You were expected to work briefly as a secretary until you married and had children.

The students I fell in with were just like me; we had no futures awaiting us and we found better outlets with which to vent our collective alienation. I was afraid of the sudden freedom, confused about my feelings and feeling really lost. I learned to drink in school. As Neo Morpheus (a pen-name) stated in his article, "The Drinking Matrix: a Symbolic Self Interaction," "I now feel that the unhealthy urges are weights holding me down from getting to know the real 'I' within." (Morpheus, 12). My new school actually had unofficial holiday drinking days the day before each holiday. The boys would drink up on Dorchester Heights, which was a park behind the school, and the girls, segregated, would drink in the locker room. On those days, the primary thing learned was how to cut class to go and drink some more. The teachers specialized in crowd control and practiced "not in my back yard" principles in those days. They turned a blind eye to the goings on. So did my parents. I would come home from school, go upstairs and read until dinner. We kids ate separately from the adults; it was a matter of space. There were six children and four adults living at home. We

had an **extended family**: my grandmother and my mother's best friend, who had polio, also resided with us. After dinner I would slide on upstairs, do my homework, and then fall into bed.

This was my life for the last two years of high school. I lived for the summers and hated the (school) winters. By now I was in a state of **anomie**, in the midst of fast-changing social environment characterized by lack of regulating influences. I had drifted into a bad crowd. They became my extended family: They felt more like family to me than did my own. We were all lost souls, jaded and **blasé**. I had found the friends that resembled and reinforced my own **looking glass self**; they were as alienated as I. Bored with the trappings of our **bourgeoisified** industrial blue-collar families, we suffered from **affluenza**. We were not happy with all the toys, the symbols of urban success. We had all learned the coping mechanisms of drinking and using drugs, some more than others. There were a lot of us outcasts and **deviants** and we found comfort and strength in each other.

I moved away from home as soon as I turned eighteen, getting an apartment with my older sister and cousin. I never did go to college: it seemed pointless. What did I want to be when I grew up? Who cared? I became, not a secretary, but an envelope stuffer at a stamp company. I worked my way up to stamp appraiser, but was then laid off. I collected unemployment benefits. Well, that was the life! I collected my unemployment checks, got to read books all day and partied at night. We all partied at night after work. Friends came over and we drank and smoked pot half the night, only to get up the next day and do it all over again.

I worked for the federal government by then, working for the Department of Labor and then the Coast Guard. These **bureaucracies**, especially the Coast Guard, were enmeshed in paperwork. The "Coasties" had to have all their documents in order,

before I could help them. This is a classic example of Robert Merton's **dysfunctional consequences** in bureaucracies. "When adherence to bureaucratic rules becomes an end in itself, a situation Merton calls 'ritualism.'" (Ritzer and Goodman 49). My boss would sweep in and search through the pile of forms, those of the men and women yet to be processed. She would then pull out her friends or the officer's forms and put them on the top of the list, to be done first. "All men are created equal, but some are more equal than others." (*Animal Farm*, George Orwell). The hypocrisy sickened me. I saw the false class of people being put ahead of the real "Coasties" and I, as a lowly peon, had no say or power to effect change or to make things right. My friends and I were all suffering from the same alienations. We labeled ourselves as hippies and our carefree dramaturgies kept us smugly entertained. I loved the trappings of our lives; our hippie clothes; our props were water pipes, and we would consume anything that would alter our conscious states. I drifted from boyfriend to boyfriend, never quite being able to form the deep love and connection that I so needed. The **symbolic interactions** of our group as hippies ironically never allowed us the freedom to explore ourselves as individuals or as a couple. The **group** was our social reality. Everything else, like work and love took up the back stage. We were clueless and stoned. Back then, we thought we had everything, and knew everything. I realize now that I had a **false consciousness**. As hippies, we thought we were no longer a part of the mainstream **bourgeoisie**, but we were. What we thought was counterculture, in retrospect, was just a middle class phase of growing up in society in the 80's.

I left the Coast Guard to go and work for the Post Office. I found out that there were more money and no responsibility working for the P.O. I felt another burst of freedom working there. Compared to the rigidity of the Coast Guard, I felt like I was

back at Southie High. It seemed easy at first—then the insidiousness of the bureaucracy crept in. There was an upper echelon in work; it was you versus the bosses. We were stepped on and ground down every night; it was a lot like Catholic school, but even more **hierarchical**, stranger, and with more crazy rules. Talk about a dramaturgy; they literally had an “acting supervisor.” The “acting” supervisor had to answer to the supervisor, who had to answer to the manager, who had to answer to the district manager, who had to answer to the postmaster. The acting supervisor’s job was to oversee us as we manually “threw” mail into metal slots at a work station. The boss would sit and stare at us all night as we threw the mail, calling breaks with a bell. It became oppressive very quickly. You could be “written up” for any number of infractions, such as remaining in the bathroom too long.

How do the theories of Marx, Simmel, Durkheim and Weber shed light on my life back then? I not only could see, but I very deeply felt alienation and the exploitation of myself, at the hands of the **capitalist boss**, or its **state bureaucracy**. As a postal worker, I was constrained and constricted, stuck in a manual job and experiencing the ever-increasing industrialization with its rapid technological changes. I lived the “the iron cage” experience daily. The Post Office was the mother of all bureaucracies. I “**rationalized**” my situation as the most economically beneficent, but the job gave me no room for personal development, restricted my personality and reducing it to that of an **automaton**, draining my personality and imagination. I was not alone. It was an “us” versus “them” mentality. These fellow workers became my **agencies of socialization** and we did become cohesive to a degree. We were all powerless, unable to express an idea or show a personality. The **division of labor** ruled that out. The bosses kowtowed to the bureaucracy. We all hated work; we were

unanimous and stood together in that respect. The workers of this world were united here. According to Georges Simmel, “Opposition gives us inner satisfaction, distraction, relief.” (Ritzer and Goodman 131).

“We are part of someone’s constructed world.” (Morpheus, in *The Matrix*). I worked nights and drank days with my fellow workers. We worked from 10:30 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. When we got out of work at 7:00 a.m., we went directly to the Am Vets Post. We would go to the bar where there would be about one hundred fellow postal workers, all drinking and partying. There, we drank and partied from seven a.m. till one p.m., went home, slept and did the same thing all over again the next night. The only freedom was what we could take for ourselves. It consisted of getting messed up after work every morning. We became our own “**gated community**,” sitting around bars; we knew that we were an organization unto ourselves. We had our own social order, our own distinct lifestyle. Outside of work we formed our own **social identity**.

Once at work, we, the workers, eventually became like machines. As in the film *The Matrix*, we “evolved.” Only we actually devolved into the drudges who worked for the giant bureaucracy. Once upon a time, the postal worker was a heroic lone man on horseback delivering mail: we were now human **automatons**, forced to feed the massive machines, which voraciously sucked up the mail and our energies. I, as the machine, became increasingly alienated. I chose the “red pill” of that matrix and got out, though from a nightmare, not a dream. I do not agree with Emile Durkheim that the individual is free to develop his talents and imagination through the **specialization of labor**. At least not in my case.

I do see that the loss and isolation caused by industrialized life (anomie) can and sometimes does lead to people “going postal.” Going postal is a common enough

**phenomenon** in the **stratified society** of the Post Office. Some people, already alienated from social life, find their last vestiges of self-dignity and self-worth shredded to pieces by the management. Their lives go downhill until hopeless; they go postal. They become either homicidal or suicidal or both. It happened to a postal custodian in Boston not too long ago. He shot his wife, stole an airplane and strafed the postal facility with bullets from the airplane. Of course, the management did not tell the workers inside the building what was going on outside. They would have lost production time. Such is the institutionalized madness of the post office. It infects the workers. The release of getting drunk was a survival technique brought on by the daily insanity of the post office. My life went on like this for a while. I worked and drank until the bottle owned me and I became nothing more than a **slave** to my addictions.

In class we recently saw two films, *Erin Brockovich* and *Billy Eliot*. These two characters, one real and one fiction, are both post-modernists in my view. The true character, Erin Brockovich, had a really strong personality and her own ideas in dressing and other behavior. She made her social reality work for her by creating her own job, turning situations to fit her personality instead of vice versa. Her input in her lawyer's company changed and improved many people's lives, including her own. She saw no reason to abide by established rules and "meta-narratives" (as critiqued by the post-modernist Jean Francois Lyotard) of "proper behavior," broke patterns of behavior and argued for change. The fictional Billy Eliot also saw beyond the established patterns of life in a small Welsh town. He found inner strength and changed his social reality. He went from having a future as an out of work miner's son to becoming a ballet dancer. Both questioned and challenged their social existences and their supposed roles in life. I identified with these

people, as they, like I, were square pegs in round holes. They had to find their own ways to fit into their social worlds, finding strength in their own uniqueness. I formerly thought that the only way for me to fit into my social world was to stay with the underclass, the so-called "free-riders." I believed that we had our own world and there, I had found my place. I went to a bar where, like the bar in the television show Cheers, "everybody knows your name." Like Erin Brockovich and Billy Eliot, I had to evolve.

One fine Fall afternoon, my friend and I were driving along and we were hit head-on in a horrible car accident. The world as I knew it came crashing to an abrupt halt. My friend suffered many injuries, including a massive concussion. I fractured my sternum and broke five ribs, also damaging my neck and shoulder. I ended up bedridden and on painkillers. The pain medication helped me physically, but I needed to drink in order to cope mentally. This realization about my life was stunning; it jarred me to the core. I also had all the time in the world to think, realizing very clearly for the first time in years that this was not the life I was supposed to be living. I was out of work and all the social rules that had held my life together in a **structured world** were gone in the blink of an eye.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I knew that "I" was in big trouble. My façade crumbled. As Megan Murray wrote in her paper, "Treading Water: Self Reflections on Generalized Anxiety Disorder," "I acted confidently and in control at all times, never allowing my true emotions to emerge. I felt that my identity was missing. I was never confident of myself and who I was." (Murray 51). Now I had all the time in the world to figure out who I was, where I had been, and where I was going. I was going nowhere and I wasn't anyone. This 'reality check' showed me the person that I was—a deeply unhappy person. I was alone with no one to guide me, including myself. M.

Goltry quotes George Herbert Mead in her journal article, "Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments," "Our actions are always engaged with the actions of others, whose response to what we do send us signals as to their approval or disapproval" (Goltry 159). I was bouncing my actions off my loved ones, people whom I had worn out. They were no longer interacting with me. The only approval I met with was to be found in barrooms, approval by people who really didn't care about me at all. I was through. And I knew it. Goltry focuses on society as a major influence in our self-development. We need society to form our opinions of ourselves, but we can choose which part of society that should be, including ourselves. I had been without society to bounce my need for approval on. I learned to find approval in myself. I made a **rational decision** that day.

I went to my doctor and told him that I had to quit drinking. I knew that this was long overdue, and as Gurdjieff would recommend, it was time to reconnect my intellectual driver, with my emotional horse and carriage body. I went in for treatment, both physical and emotional. The results were that one-day I emerged clean and sober, feeling like a spring chick. I had cleaned up the body but also needed to replenish a strong mind and the energy that I once had. I needed to get back to basics and rekindle my sense of creativity. I knew that if I wasted any more of my life then I would be committing emotional suicide. I decided to go to college, something that had been a dream of mine before I had drifted away from life with drinking and drugging. My mother had graduated from Boston State College when she was fifty four years old. It was time for me to follow her lead. Deciding that it was time for me to find my life's path, I enrolled into UMass Boston and felt hopeful for the first time in a long while. I no longer felt alone and hopeless. I was in charge of myself—or the first time in years.

Now that I've been sober for a few

years, my quest for self is beginning in earnest. I am changing myself and others. I still don't know where I'm going, but I have a much better sense of who I am. I still have a basic distrust of relationships, but I'm working on that. School causes a constant shift in my feelings, from euphoria at a discovery or a job well done, to the sudden and deep anxiety that I will fail. It's overwhelming at times and I have to keep reminding myself that it is just a moment and that moment will pass. My inner voice can sometimes be extremely negative and I have to be constantly aware of that fact. I work hard to keep depression from keeping me down and sometimes have to really fight to keep going. I think that I have moved on from being alienated to being a connected knower. While I know that my inner voice is pretty much on target, I know I have to plumb deeper to use my **critical thinking** and to further develop my integrated "**I**."

Growing is both a joy and a frightening adventure. I just wish that my mother was alive to see me today. I know that she had the same struggles in developing her personal life and that she had succeeded in finding herself. I take her strength as mine and pray to her that somehow she is with me on my journey. I still fear my feelings and writing a paper like this helps me face and express those fears. Marge Piercy has a poem entitled, "Unlearning To Not Speak." In it she states, "She must learn again to speak. Starting with I." This is I: I have found my own way to live. I have to be true to myself. In order to truly grow, I must keep myself in perspective with my own world, with myself, and my sojourn as my priority. I've sprung myself from all the iron cages that had once imprisoned me. I'm flying now. And I can't wait to find out where I will land.

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