

Eagles Perched on Cactus*

Marta Frías Morales

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1778 Bird Avenue

San José, CA 95125

martafm@pacbell.net

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* Family passport picture taken at San Isidro in 1951. Shown in the center is my mother, Ernestina Ramirez de Frías. In clockwise position beginning at the top is Graciela, Marta, Ricardo, Alfonso, Guillermo, Cándido, and Manuel.

Introduction

Queridos Hijos:

It is important that you understand my involvement with literacy. After all, it is my major preoccupation, and it's important to reflect on one's past to understand who we are today. As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco with a focus on literacy development. The paths I have taken to achieve this level of education is a story of faith, perseverance, and hard work. A person's existential status is not incidental, rather, is influenced by surrounding factors.

You might wonder why I insist on writing about my education. Frankly, it's been the focus of my life. Even while I was raising you, I always managed to enroll in a class or two. Education seemed to calm my curiosity and my restlessness. Being curious about the world stems from acknowledging that I am part of the world. Are we not all citizens of this world, and are we not part of the universal family? It seems like a contradiction, but the more I study, the more I am inclined to continue my education. Formal education provides me the structure and discipline I need to explore new knowledge. Freire claims this thirst for more comes from a realization of our incompleteness. I am not satisfied with the knowledge I possess about literacy. Yet, through the teachings of Freire and other educators, I am constructing a fuller understanding about the concept.

Everything that exists in this world has an origin because it is the nature of our existence and our world. Everything that *is* has a historical beginning and ending, and so it is with me, with you, *mis hijos*, and with my community. Who we are today is the result of all that has existed before us. So we should view life in a global context. We are to a great extent a product of the reality in which we exist.

I invite you to listen attentively to my story and challenge you to explore your own encounters with literacy. I am sure you will make some surprising discoveries, and you will have a greater appreciation of the word. How I got from my native Barranca de Santa Clara to the doctoral program is my story, and I would like to share it with you.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a thought-provoking question, one planted by Pia Moriarty. If you explore it fully, you will discover among other things that literacy and education are inseparable. The provocative question: What is more important, the person or the word? Don't be satisfied with a superficial response.

Your mother, Marta

Early Literacy

I was born in a small village in Jalisco, México. When my family and I left la Barranca de Santa Clara in 1950, it simulated a medieval European community. There were no modern conveniences in the village. Candles and kerosene lamps lit the evenings. Families drew water from wells, and women and young girls washed the family laundry in the *río*. *Gorditas de horno* were baked in earth ovens. Family dwellings were small, and adobe homes lined both sides of the narrow river. A cobble stone road paved the entrance to the village extending its path to an exit. Good weather conditions brought prosperity to the village. Drought brought poverty, despair, and patterns of migrations to California. To this day, la Barranca de Santa Clara is a small agricultural community.

There has always been a strong sense of community in Santa Clara. During one era, the people built a colonial Catholic church with a large bell tower. In another, it constructed an elementary school. In still another era, it constructed a community plaza for its festive celebrations. Cultural traditions were important and contributed to the solidarity of the community. Santa Clara shows a hint of a Judeo past. The village's most important celebration is the feast of the "Candelaria," known as the feast of the "Presentation," an important Jewish celebration. This religious celebration seems to have stronger implications for the village than does Easter or the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In accordance with Jewish tradition, every first-born male is presented at the temple. While Catholics believe the Savior was reincarnated in Jesus, religious Jewish families believe their first-born male to be the potential "promised Messiah." Religious customs

and traditions continue to be the heart and soul of the village. Religious celebrations have provided moral and spiritual strength.

Not even the village elders know for certain how Santa Clara was founded. Tío Julian, your Tía Teresa's husband, believed it was a place of refuge for families during the 1810 War of Independence from Spain. Tío Julian, who died at the mature age of ninety two, knew the history of village better than most. He had a remarkable memory, and he was a great storyteller.

Barranca literally means steep canyon. The hidden canyon and the continuous flow of water from the Télcome through the village, possibly attracted our great-great grandparents to this secluded site. Flatten boulders washed down over the years by heavy rains provided a natural bridge for families on both sides of the river.

Santa Clara with a population of about 2,000 inhabitants, has many of the same conveniences that Mexican towns enjoy today. The village has been wired for electricity. some families have butane stoves, and some use wringer washers for laundry. Many families have televisions, radios, and it is rumored that there are a couple of computers. For many families, the day still begins with a trip to the *molino* that is the corn mill where the *nixtamal* is finely grounded into *masa* for tortillas. The *molino* provides still another important purpose. Women and young girls exchange village news. The daily events of village life are discreetly exchanged at the *molino*. It has been said in amusement that if you wanted the village to be informed about a matter, simply announce the message at the *molino*.

Daily chores were patterned to the rhythm of the village life. At sunrise, mothers and daughters swiftly patted the *masa* awakening other

family members. Village women could be heard singing as they washed their laundry in the *río*. Young girls dressed in heavily starched white aprons, drew water from the family well carrying the heavy buckets over cobble-stone paths. Meals were simple, sometimes meager, but naturally cultivated.

Several summers ago, your *abuelita* Ernestina, your *tías* Graciela and Irma, your sister Marisol and I returned to Santa Clara. Your great aunts welcomed us with the warm hospitality that is accustomed in la Barranca. We also had the opportunity to visit the grave sites of my maternal *bisabuelitos* Hilario Olmedo and Juliana Meza de Olmedo and Timotea and Basilio Beas. We spent some moments of silence in spiritual communion with my maternal grandparents, María Meza Olmedo de Ramírez and Trinidad Beas Ramírez. My *abuelita* Rosa's parents were singled out to me, Máximo Castro and Hipólita Castro. My *abuelito* Daniel's parents were Faustino Frías and Antonia López de Frías. Antonia was originally from Guanajuato.

Petra Barragán a midwife from the Barranca de los Magallanes brought me into the world on December 4, 1946. Shortly after, I was baptized with the Christian name, Marta. My family lived in la Barranca de Santa Clara until 1948 when my father moved the family to Zacoalco de Torres. We left Zacoalco in 1950, and at which time my father arranged for temporary housing for us in a border town. In Tijuana he applied for a temporary visa for us, and later permanent residence. My mother watched over the family during our brief stay in Tijuana while my father worked in San Francisco. In November, my brothers and sisters, Manuel, Graciela, Cándido, Ricardo, Guillermo, Alfonso, and I accompanied my mother

through the port of entry at San Ysidro. My father Miguel made arrangements with your Tío Juan Castro of San José to drive the family from the border to San Francisco. Your Tío Juan and your Tía Irene helped our family make the social transition in those early years. They cared for our well being and were patient with us. Your *tíos* have my respect and admiration.

As you can see, my early literacy experiences were acquired in la Barranca de Santa Clara. In the comfort of our adobe home, along the river banks, I uttered my first words. I acquired my early vocabulary from my parents and the village community who loved and cared for me.

My Parents' Literacy

Lack of rainfall imposed despair and hardships on the farming community of Santa Clara. Over the years, family providers were forced to migrate to California in search of a better existence. Some families followed the path of a father, or a family member. The farewells were painful for some realized it could be their last embrace. Family stories tell that my *mamá* María's brother, Domitilio Olmedo, resettled in Sacramento at the age of 15. Because Domitilio and family members could neither read nor write, family contact was lost for fifteen to twenty years. Domitilio returned to Santa Clara for a family visit as a grown man. Unfortunately, some village families lost contact with their relatives because they were unable to correspond with them.

Grandpa's sister, María Concepción, or Concha as we know her, had been living in San Francisco for several years before our family arrived. She was an astute woman with a strong character. She arranged for Mamá Rosa to live with her soon after she purchased the apartment flats on Alabama Street. She worked long hours for several years in canneries of the Bay area before she saved enough money to purchase the flats. Our large family moved into the smaller downstairs flat upon our arrival from San Ysidro. Our family lived in my Tía Concha's flat until my father had enough money for a down payment on a home. We resettled in the Mission district. Actually, we were in walking distance from my Tía Concha's house. Our first home was on Potrero Avenue between 18th and 19th streets. I attended Bryant Elementary, Horace Mann Junior High and graduated from Mission High School. The Potrero house was my home until I married

your father and moved to San José.

My parents, Ernestina Ramírez de Frías and Miguel Castro Frías are extraordinary people. My mother was born to a large family of thirteen children. At the age of 17, she eloped with my father because my *papá* Trini didn't approve of my father. *Papá* Trini didn't approve of half of his daughters' spouses. He wanted exceptional men for his daughters. The rough countryside only offered hardworking men of courage. My father was born into a smaller family. His brother Cándido died of a congenital disease. His only living brother, José, lives in Reno with his family, and his sisters Concha and Licha still live in San Francisco.

Both my parents had limited formal schooling. My father only attended the first grade and my mother completed the second year. My father advanced his literacy skills due to his interest in current events. As a child, I remember seeing him read the Spanish newspaper, *La Opinión*. The Los Angeles newspaper often occupied the kitchen table and our living room. My poor mother didn't have the luxury of sitting for long periods to read the paper. She worked eight-hour shifts at the factory and came home to a large family of hungry children. Of course, now that her children are grown, she has time for recreational reading. Thanks to your sister Olga, *abuelita* Ernestina has subscriptions to Spanish periodicals and magazines. I am convinced that people with limited literacy skills can improve their skills if they read a few minutes a day. That was the case with my mother and especially my father.

A couple of years after we arrived in San Francisco, my older brothers got jobs as newspaper carriers so that we often had the *San Francisco Chronicle* or the *Examiner* in the home. The older children liked

to read the comics and often fought over who would read them first. I believe that having newspapers in our home provided the family opportunities to read. When your uncles were in junior high and high school, they brought MAD magazines and comic books to the house. Your Aunt Graciela liked the Archie comics and celebrity magazines. I enjoyed reading all of them. During my childhood years, we didn't have a family library, no classics, only comics. I believe that my father learned to read English because of his curious nature and because he had access to the newspaper in the home. Today, he reads current events in either language. He's a regular subscriber of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *St. Helena Star*. When I asked your grandfather how he learned to read English his response was, "*No sé, pero entiendo todo lo que leo.*" For my father, the newspaper was his idea of an education. He said, "*Me gustaba enterarme de lo que pasaba. Era el único medio de aprender.*" My father enrolled in Adult Education classes but found the routine too difficult. He claimed, "*En ocasiones fui a la escuela de noche. Trabajábamos duro en el trabajo y luego aprenderlo (inglés) se me hizo duro. Si me hubiera dedicado, hubiera aprendido.*"

The newspaper is a valuable resource in the home. it provides an opportunity to develop literacy and informs readers about local, regional and world events. The media is the education of the poor. In San José, publishers offer several free Spanish newspapers: *La Oferta Review*, *El Mensajero*, *Alianza*, *La Voz*, *El Observador* and *Nuevo Mundo*. I would like to see our community take full advantage of this valuable offer. One of my priorities in the fall, will be to put newspapers in the students' home.

I learned valuable lessons about literacy from observing my father.

He only had one year of formal instruction, yet his curiosity and active participation with the world motivated him to take a genuine interest in reading. He developed the mechanical attributes of print by reading the newspaper and through the articles became educated about the world. My father was a self-educated man. Whenever he wanted to learn something, he inquired from others who were more knowledgeable and experienced. When he purchased the first family station wagon, he investigated the process. Today, he and my mother own a 55-acre ranch house in St. Helena, California. Dewey, a leading educator of the progressive movement in the late 1800s, claimed that real learning takes place in one's environment and that the classroom is but an artificial structure for acquiring knowledge. It was certainly the case with my father.

My father learned to read and write English by pooling his resources. He learned to speak English primarily from his work where he interacted with his co-workers on a daily basis. His work environment was his "English classroom" and his co-workers, his "teachers." The method of instruction was conducted in cooperative learning. The conversations at work were often about regional and national current events. The newspapers he read, whether English or Spanish, mirrored what he discussed at work.

Grandpa Miguel indicated to me that the Barranca de Santa Clara has always valued education. The two-room school he attended as a child was built prior to the 1900s. Many years later, the community constructed a new school. Today it even has a preschool! The community still does not have a library and during my last visit, the village stores didn't supply newspapers or books for its customers. For the most part, young village children who

emigrate to the United States don't have much exposure to printed material. Their parents like mine, came to this country without a library experience. The most important literacy event for families in the Barranca is correspondence. The post office continues to play a significant role in the village community because the majority of families have relatives in the United States. The villagers look forward to hearing from their loved ones. Receiving mail is a family event.

Your Uncle Manuel and Aunt Graciela were fortunate because they attended a Catholic school in Zacoalco. My father proudly told me that your Uncle Manuel was a good student and was admired by his teachers. Grandpa Miguel moved the family to Zacoalco to provide a better education for the children. Grandpa Miguel is almost 86 years, but he still recalls his first-grade teacher, Alfonso Veronica. Besides teaching grandpa the fundamentals of reading and writing, he taught him sign language. Many years later, professor Veronica would be your Uncle Manuel's teacher. Grandpa regrets that he didn't continue with school. He says, "I wasn't interested and there was no one to motivate me." Had his father been consistently present in the home, he might have obtained more schooling. Great grandpa Daniel spent long periods in Utah and Colorado tending sheep. At times he was absent from his family for periods of three to four years at a time. It was rumored that he had a family in el Norte. Your Tia Concha knows the details, but she doesn't discuss the family's past.

My father made two visits to California while we were living in La Barranca. The first time he came as a *bracero* or manual laborer with three other *barranqueños*. They settled in Fresno, and stayed in housing provided by farmers. He worked the fields for nearly two years before he returned to

Zacoalco. He saved what he could and sent small amounts to my mother. Upon his return to Mexico, he purchased a pick-up truck. He experienced a couple of successful harvests. But, eventually, the harvests didn't produce. Family needs were increasing and money became scarce. He planned a second trip. On his journey to California, he had privately decided he would not return to Mexico, instead, he made plans to bring the family to San Francisco.

My father's first job in San Francisco was with a large tobacco company. He worked for Chesterfield Tobacco Company for two years before the company relocated outside of California. Through word of mouth, he learned that Schlage Lock Company was hiring laborers. The family rejoiced when he was hired because it lifted the tension we were all experiencing. My mother was hired with the same company shortly after. My father gave 30 years to the company before retirement, and my mother slightly over 26 years. My father was a responsible and hardworking man. I noticed that in him. He valued his job, and he valued his family.

Whenever I see the company's name on door handles, I think of *abuelito* Miguel, *abuelita* Ernestina and life in the Mission. Grandpa Miguel, is the rock on which I built my literacy foundation. I realize today, he was my literacy instructor. I unconsciously adopted his literacy behaviors and his curiosity about the world. Like my father, I learned to read the world.

My parents' jobs were rarely the topic of conversations at home. However, a few incidents are deeply embedded in my memory.

A Knock at the Door

My parents were strong loyal union members. They belonged to the AFL-CIO Machinist Union and were very proud of their membership. My father attended meetings whenever he could. He was especially attentive to meetings that discussed a factory strike. Strikes presented difficult times for our family because by now, we were a large family of twelve and had to pay utility bills and a monthly mortgage. The weeks that followed the strike were actually the most difficult. The few labor strikes that my family experienced, I want to remember forever. While they were difficult for my parents, I want to preserve the memory of the factory workers' solidarity and friendship. At no other time in the history of our family did I feel the excitement and solidarity of community like I felt it then. Workers of diverse ethnic backgrounds came to our house to bring us food because they knew my father had a large family. People called the house offering assistance. I felt the strength and support of my father's friends. My father had a large station wagon, he transported lunches to the workers on the picket lines. They all had family obligations, but they encouraged my father to bring the left-over food to his children. What impressed me deeply, was their fellowship and unity, the confidence and trust in each other. Their convictions were strong, they were invincible.

One season, our family had just experienced a strike and we were hurting economically. We were making it on beans, rice and tortillas. My mother had announced that we were going to have a humble Thanksgiving meal. She had learned about American traditions through her co-workers. She thought it was just that we devote a family day to thank God for our

blessings. In spite of the difficulties we were experiencing, we were better off than most families in our neighborhood. This Thanksgiving was going to be humble because the strike had forced us to limit our grocery supplies. I felt sad. Not because I wouldn't have a big fancy meal, but because I felt my mother's anguish, she meant so much to me.

On the eve of Thanksgiving the family was gathered in the kitchen when someone knocked at the door. We stared at each other and wondered who might be calling so late in the evening. We knew it had to be a stranger because family members didn't knock, they just walked in. Finally, my father opened the door, but saw no one. What he found instead was a large cardboard box with a frozen turkey, fresh vegetables, and canned goods. We were thrilled. My mother had glossy eyes from the sight of so much food. Somebody had given our family name to our local parish. A note tucked inside the box indicated it was from the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

I wish I could forget the next incident but I can't seem to erase it from my memory. My parents came home from work at the usual time, 5:30 p.m. They had been arguing over what seemed like a serious matter. My father went to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. This was unlike my father, he rarely drank during the week. On weekends he had several beers, even then, he rarely drank in excess. After dinner when the house had regained calm, the conversation resurfaced in the living room. My father had been promoted to forklift driver at the plant. An envious coworker reacted to his promotion with insults and anger. She retorted, "Go back home you Mexican wetback. You don't belong here." Nobody in the family knew how to respond to the situation. I felt my father's pain, anger, and frustration. I always felt my father was a respectable and fair person. My

heart felt deeply wounded. I felt shame for the woman who spoke to my father with disrespect. My father later said that in cases such as the one he experienced, the best thing to do is to keep your distance from unreasonable people. The factory where my parents worked for over two decades offered the best and worst of two worlds.

I learned about my parents' world through the events that transpired over the years. I had experienced discrimination at school, but it didn't occur to me that my parents might have had the same experiences.

Emergent Reader

The Mission district was my terrain, and I rarely traveled outside the community. My father's family settled in the Mission and newcomers from the Barranca found a family to stay with until the family found its own place, usually within the Mission. In spite of major adaptations, we recreated our own community in the Mission.

The *tortillerias* and *panaderias* are busier today than when I was living there. They're especially busy during the Christmas holidays when many Latino families buy large orders of *masa* for *tamales*. The produce stands have bigger displays of tropical fruits: mangoes, papayas, plantain bananas, and guayabas. There are more varieties of chiles, vegetables, and fresh herbs. The lovely murals along 24th street were painted after I left the Mission in 1967. Beyond the Mission on Valencia Street is the public library I liked to visit as a high school student, and which I still have fond memories.

I am reluctant to write about my public school education because I don't want to distress my grandchildren and their children, but I can't deny those experiences nor conceal them from you either. Were my case an isolated incident, I would be able to hide the facts. The fact of the matter is thousands of school-age children my age, younger and older experienced academic tracking. Tracking was a form of institutionalized racism and discrimination against people of color. Permanent tracking was cruel and dehumanizing, and children who experienced it were led to believe that they were incompetent learners. I felt inadequate for many years because the messages I got from my teachers were usually negative and demeaning.

Junior high and high school students were tracked into academic routes based on standardized tests. Once tracked in “y,” you remained in the “y” track. It was a perpetual cycle of failure. Public institutions literally manufactured failures. How can you explain this abuse? I ask myself, was it ignorance, or intentional? Students in lower tracks were assigned grammar work sheets and exercises that required fill-in responses. As a tracked student, you never had a chance to be regrouped. We were not reassessed. If we were, the work we were assigned couldn’t possibly prepare us for the upper tracks which required reading world classics, participating in analytical discussions, and creative writing activities. Some colleagues find it difficult to believe that I never once read a novel in my English classes during my junior high or high school years. Frankly, I don’t know who was more surprised, I at their ignorance or they at my statement. Regardless, their experiences were different than mine and thousands of Latinos of my generation.

I noticed the distinctions because I had a friend who lived down the street from my house and whose experiences contrasted mine. Judy and I were close friends. She loved my mother’s food. Even though she was Protestant, we attended mass on Sundays, walked to school, and talked about everything. Judy was tracked in the highest track, and I envied her for the opportunities she had at school. She read Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Cervantes in her English class, an opportunity I never had. The closest experience to reading literature was in my senior year. One instructor gave us condensed stories from *The Reader’s Digest*. The teacher literally never conducted discussions on the readings to see if we understood the selections. Instead, he gave us comprehension worksheets with long lists of

words to match a long list of meanings. He supplied the answers to the vocabulary when we corrected our papers, but that was the extent of our interaction with the readings. I can't recall even one story out of the numerous stories "we read." The class was so damn boring, I hated it! I literally had to struggle to keep from falling asleep. I believe teachers should listen to their students when they complain about boredom. I dreaded going to class. The assignments discouraged me from reading and the assignments were counter productive.

Judy and I were in the same grade, every year at the beginning of the semester we checked our schedules hoping to be in one of the same classes. it was always a disappointment. With permanent tracking, we could never be in the same class.

One day Judy and I were walking home discussing a social studies assignment. Judy took her book out and I mine and both realized we were holding books with different titles. Mine was old and worn out and her book was brand new. When I confronted my social studies teacher about the differences in our books, he casually admitted that our class got last year's books and the higher tracks got the new ones. He raised his shoulders and explained that's how it was. Those of us who were tracked in lower routes knew we were treated differently and that the teachers had low expectations for us.

I was bothered by the book incident because now it was obvious to me that there were repeated patterns of discrimination. I knew an injustice had been committed. I had no one to turn to, nobody that I could speak to regarding my feelings about what I was observing. My parents were detached from my classroom experiences, they couldn't possibly

understand. I felt helpless and defeated.

I was without a doubt, the shyest person in my classroom. At one point, I could no longer bear to be treated like an imbecile. I asked my social studies teacher if I could be placed in his higher tracked classroom. He signed a consent form and I was reassigned to his advanced social studies class. The attitude of students in the two levels were as different as day and night. The lower track students demonstrated behaviors of students who had given up on the system. The higher track students were orderly, and engaged in learning. Without a doubt, teachers' expectations influence student behavior. Having experienced both classroom environments, I can testify that the same teacher had different expectations for each group of students. I did extremely well in the new social studies class, and at no time did I find the work difficult or incomprehensible.

Minority children were and perhaps still are at a disadvantage in school environments. We were vulnerable and often defenseless. Our teachers didn't advocate for us, and our parents didn't understand the implications of lower tracks. The confrontation I had with my social studies teacher was the first incident in which I asserted myself. I felt empowered because my academic needs were met. The incident served another purpose, I learned that I could craft my own destiny. Having the advantage of hind sight, I realize today, that I was learning to read my world with a critical eye and gaining the confidence to act upon it. I was emerging as a critical reader of my social surroundings.

My Brother and Teacher

While I did not have meaningful experiences with literature during my junior high and high school years, I had a memorable experience at home. My oldest brother Manuel was a Spanish major at the University of San Francisco. He was totally fascinated with the classic novel, Don Quixote de la Mancha by Miguel Cervantes. In the evenings he would sit at the kitchen table and discuss the book with my cousin Eucario. I was drawn to their conversations. My brother described the characters with lively animation and such vivid details that he brought the characters alive. My cousin who was living with us at the time, saw my interest and encouraged me to read the book. I shyly told him I could not read in Spanish. Bilingual education was unheard of during those years. What is more, we were punished for speaking our home language in school. Eucario insisted I try to read. He opened the book and asked me to attempt to read a few words. To my surprise, I read the passage before me, and I understood it. I read slowly and cautiously at first, but before I finished the unabridged version, I was reading fluently. I read the book from cover to cover and loved it. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, made me laugh and at times brought tears to my eyes. I felt as though I had stepped into another world, a world of wonder and adventure. To this day, I have not enjoyed a book as much as I enjoyed Don Quixote de la mancha, it was fabulous. I was able to relate to the story because my Barranca simulated a medieval setting and chivalry is closely associated with *machismo*. The language, the imagery, and the vivid expressions made it almost real. Some books are two dimensional, flat. Cervantes created Don Quixote de la mancha in three dimensions. I never

imagined that books could be so wonderful, I didn't want the story to end. Don Quixote . . . was the first book of classic literature that I read, and I experienced it in my own home. Like my father, I pooled my linguistic resources and applied my knowledge about reading to access the word in Spanish. Spanish reading led to writing. I recall writing a sympathy letter to a relative in Mexico. I later learned that my letter was appreciated and that it brought tears of comfort to the family to whom it was addressed because it was rich and extensive. The letter and the classic novel motivated me to enroll in Spanish courses.

It took an extraordinary piece of literature to hook me onto books. When I finished Don Quixote . . ., I began to take an interest in literature, autobiographies and biographies. After several trips to the library, it occurred to me that it would be an ideal place to study since our house was crowded and busy. The library offered silence and fewer distractions. I was able to focus and concentrate on my studies. Prior to the library visits I was an average student. As a library user I improved my grades and made the honor roll in my junior and senior years in high school. Because I had sufficient credits, my counselor promoted me, and I finished school a semester earlier.

The Mission Public Library played an important role in my academic performance. I can still envision the old wooden stairs to the adult collection. I enjoyed the solace, the comfort, and the tranquility that the library offered me. I learned to value the library because it provided a structure for learning. I associated it with learning, studying and reading.

I rediscovered the public library in my search for good literature. Literature became a new form of recreation for me, but it also led to other

types of reading. By the time I graduated from high school, I had experienced the beauty and power of the written word. Without a doubt, quality literature is one of the best motivators for reading. Grammar dittos are counter productive because they suck the life, the history and the energy of the living word. Why do teachers prefer to set students up for failure?

Should I Teach My Children Spanish or English?

Shortly after I graduated from high school, my mother sent me to Mexico to spend time with my *abuelita*, *mamá* María. I enjoyed my visit in la Barranca, I was treated with warmth, love and respect. The three-month visit was one of the most beautiful episodes in my life. I renewed my love for México, my people, my traditions. My culture had new meaning for me. I wrote my mother to express my happiness.

She wrote me her first letter. I'll never forget the impact it had on me. I felt her every word, and I know that she had written it with great difficulty. It reminded me of the tremendous efforts she made when she sat down to write her parents. I had seen her many times bent over her paper, her eyes fixed on the print with a tight grip on the pencil. Occasionally she would lift her head and stare into space as if in deep thought. Yet, it struck me that my writing was more developed than my own mother's writing. I questioned, "Is it suppose to be this way?" Life is a paradox, filled with so many contradictions.

The trip to Mexico was a life-saving experience. Even though I had experienced academic success in my junior and senior years, I never felt accepted by my teachers. I believed that the rejection was due to my ethnicity. My high school counselor discouraged me and several of my friends from pursuing a college degree. Rather, he suggested I enroll in clerical classes. My self-esteem was terribly damaged by the time I graduated from high school. I painfully recall wanting to erase any trace of my Mexican heritage. I claimed I was "Spanish" rather than Mexican. At one point, I refused to speak Spanish, and I didn't want to associate with

Spanish-speaking people. The projections my grade school teachers and the media gave of Latinos were negative. The textbooks I read did not include pictures or illustrations of Latinos. The stories were irrelevant and detached from my family lifestyle, my village life and my *barrio* experiences. Our historical contributions were never mentioned. From first grade through the twelfth grade, I received subtle and negative messages about my community. I didn't want to acknowledge my Mexican heritage. I was young and vulnerable. Frankly, the rejection at school was too painful. Teachers treated Latinos like second class citizens. I often experienced tension from the two cultures. At school I was rejected if I claimed I was Mexican. At home, I was reminded that my Anglo ways were a denial of my Mexican ancestry.

Never the less, the summer visit to Mexico will remain as one of the finest memories in my life. The visit was an affirmation of my Mexican lineage and culture. At the end of the summer visit, I was feeling positive about myself. The visit restored my integrity. I gained a renewed interest in my culture. As a result, I joined a Mexican folkdance group. My Spanish had improved with daily practice. I returned to the Mexican theater, learned Mexican songs, and attended Mexican dances with my Spanish-speaking friends and relatives. I returned from Mexico with a new sense of self.

My testimony is the experience of many in my generation. A child whose language and culture is not appreciated and valued in school, experiences varying degrees of annihilation, rejection, and begins to engage in self-destructive behaviors. I was naïve and vulnerable. I felt that I had to deny my cultural identity to be accepted as a valued human being. I was obligated to deny my heritage because it was the only way that I felt I could

survive.

Shortly after I returned from Mexico, I met your father Daniel Gonzales Morales. In the early 1960s, we were both involved in the Young Christian Movement. The youth group was founded in Belgium by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. The international group was considered a radical organization within the Catholic church because of the emphasis on social justice and community involvement. It emphasized the Jesuit plan of action which is the observe, judge and act. I belonged to the San Francisco chapter and your father, the Gilroy group. He was chairperson of the west coast YCM convention, and I represented the San Francisco chapter.

Our family backgrounds contrasted. Your father's family lived in the country and were migrant farm workers, and my family lived in the city and my parents were factory workers. There was an underlying common bond that brought us together. That bond was our heritage, our values, and our love for family.

During our *noviazgo*, we wrote to each other at least once a week. Our letters are scattered now, some were lost. I believe John has the bulk of them. Letter correspondence took a new meaning for me. I learned that deep emotions and feelings could sometimes be better expressed in writing. Even though the words were not new, the language we spoke was, it was profound and poetic. There's no doubt in my mind that familiar words acquired new meaning under different circumstances. I suppose this is what Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher meant when he implied that words acquire their own history. The word love had a new meaning for me. At that time, I was working for Bank of America as a utility clerk in the Stock Transfer Department. After a long tedious week at work, your father's letters came

as a wonderful reward.

When your father and I married, we decided to settle in San José. Danny was born in 1968 and John in 1969. Olga arrived two years later followed by Javier, Gabriel, and Marisol. John was still in diapers when we purchased our home on Bird Avenue. As young parents, we discussed how we should educate our children. I had hoped to teach you Spanish, but over the years English became the dominant language. I love the Spanish language, but I had trouble applying it consistently.

I painfully recall how Spanish was prohibited in my childhood years. I felt humiliated and rejected when I was excluded from a school play because the teacher claimed that I spoke with a strong accent. The most stressful part for me was telling my mother I was no longer in the play. I had shared with her how excited I felt about participating in the drama. For a brief period, I had felt included in the social ambiance of the classroom. With the rejection, I felt deficient so I retrieved into my shell. Your father experienced similar incidents, but his punishments were more severe. If he spoke Spanish in school, he was sent to the coat closet. Some of the teachers used corporal punishment when students spoke Spanish. He was a recent immigrant and knew no other form of communicating with his classmates. To this day, my parents do not understand the complexities of our early school experiences. They thought our teachers were faultless and understanding. I am a firm believer of respect for all people. However, I can't forget how some of the teachers lacked respect for immigrant children. They never saw our talents nor did they believe that we possessed superior capabilities. Instead, subtle messages were communicated to us implying our inferiority and worthlessness. We were often stereotyped.

Your father and I attempted to speak Spanish to you, my children, but English had dominated our patterns of communication. I felt that if I couldn't teach you Spanish, I would teach you about your history and heritage. To my dismay and surprise, I found I had little knowledge about my own historical past. My father was well informed and knowledgeable, but I tuned out when he spoke about the political events of Mexico. I wanted to know about Mexico's contributions to the world, and its ancient history. I embarked on an ambitious investigation. I went to libraries, new and used book stores to satisfy my need to know. Learning about Mexico reaffirmed my identity. I was eager to learn about my ancestors. I purchased several used books, three are still preserved in the family library as a reminder of my search for self; Men of Mexico by James A. Magnet published in 1942 and Las antiguas culturas mexicanas by Walter Krickeberg published in 1956; but the book I valued most was a recent publication by Miguel León Portilla, Aztec Thought and Culture published in 1963. Bernardo Alaniz, a visiting student from Mexico gave our family a five-volume collection of the history of Mexico, Mexico a través de los siglos. I recall reading late into the evenings. I was hungry for knowledge about my past so I indulged in reading.

The search for my heritage taught me new lessons about the printed word. I discovered something valuable and important about my background through books. I never imagined, not even in my wildest dream, that I possessed such a magnificent heritage. The ancient culture of my Mexican ancestors was truly fascinating! Rediscovering my heritage contributed to my self esteem. I had lived in ignorance of my past, but found myself in the written word. I felt grounded and deeply rooted in my Mexican culture.

The accumulated experiences with the written word, and certainly the revelation of my ancient past had a strong impact on me. I kept repeating in my mind, "How could I not have known about this before?" One revelation led to another, and still another. I questioned a lot of things, such as: Why had I been denied my heritage in school? Why didn't I have books in my home? Why weren't books made available in Spanish? Why couldn't we have Spanish language arts? Why weren't our children exposed to their ancestors' history? Why was history always taught from the same perspective? Why wasn't my language valued in school? Why did we have to give up our home language? Why did so many Hispanic children drop out from school? This phase of my life was a difficult one. I questioned many things out of frustration. I was angry and bitter. I became actively involved in the Chicano movement, volunteered in the farmworkers struggle for justice, and viewed women's issues with new insights. I experienced, for lack of a better word, a spiritual rebirth. I rose to a new level of awareness. I now looked at my world with a very critical eye. I realized that the discrimination and injustices I had experienced were not mine alone. I observed repeated patterns of discrimination. I felt cheated because my community and I had not experienced the same privileges others had enjoyed in school. I experienced an awakening that caused the aggressive nature within me to come out. I flew out of my cocoon.

After serious reflection, I conceived in my mind that the only way I was going to make a difference in my community was by creating change. I became an American citizen to exercise my right to vote, I enrolled in a women's reentry program at City College of San José, and I became actively involved in my children's education.

At City College I was fortunate to have an outstanding English instructor. Her support was sincere and authentic. For the first time in my life, a teacher valued my experiences, my thoughts, and my writings. The compositions we wrote in class were meaningful and relevant. I was beginning to feel good about my ability as a writer. The instructor shared my writings with my classmates. At the end of the course, I established in my mind that I would survive college, and that I would be successful in my studies. I continued school as I raised you, my children. I've always loved the challenge of studying and learning about my world. It gave me great satisfaction, a strong sense of freedom, and inner strength.

Yes, raising a family, working as an instructional aide, and attending school was a challenge. However, even in the most difficult times, I never lost sight of my goal to earn a college degree. Gabriel and Javier, you suffered severe asthma as young children. As you know, you were constantly in and out of emergency rooms for respiratory treatments. At times your illnesses required hospitalization. In one occasion, you were both hospitalized and shared the same room, both recovering from pneumonia. I provided you as much comfort as I could during those critical episodes.

I recall too well those difficult visits in the emergency room. With one hand I stroked my child's arm, with the other, I held a textbook. In spite of home conditions, I always managed to read the assignments for the following school day. It is through my perseverance and the grace of God that I survived those difficult years. My ability to transcend obstacles was strong, a trait I learned from my parents.

Returning to school and experiencing success enabled me to

experience the effect education has on a person. I felt I was utilizing an important attribute, my mind. I felt enlightened, and with greater capacity to make informed choices. I felt liberated and alive with a fresh view of the world. I was an eagle soaring in the sky. Taking care of the family, working part time, and carrying a school load was bearable. I was fulfilled.

Indeed, life is a paradox. Inconsistencies surround us all the time. The more formal education I received, the more I became aware that life held an infinite capacity for knowledge; greater and deeper than the deep seas and beyond the limits of the earth. By this time, I wanted formal education for others. I wanted it to have the same effect on others that it had for me.

Literacy in the Home

Religion has always played an important role in my personal development as well as my literacy development. My father experienced a faith renewal while I was in junior high school. He and my mother later became involved in the *Cursillos de Cristiandad*, a Catholic movement from Spain. My parents became actively involved in the Church, and their activities contributed to the family's socialization. They attended many meetings, conferences and retreats. The children attended church events and we often had guests over the house. My parents began to read the Bible regularly and even held Bible discussion groups in our home. With the onset of the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, the faithful were encouraged to read scripture. This practice was definitely a radical twist from traditional trends when only the hierarchy could read and preach the Good News. Unfortunately, the Church delayed many centuries to do what the Protestants initiated during the Reformation of the 16th century.

My father's faith experience caused me to be curious about my own faith. I decided to read the Bible to get a historical view of my faith. I started with the book of Genesis but became disinterested when I came to the long list of tribes and the numerous descendants of Abraham. The book of Psalms and the New Testament were comforting. Aside from the environmental print, the comic books, magazines, newspapers, the Bible was the only serious book I had access to in English and Spanish as a child. The scriptures spoke to me with a voice that no other book projected. The readings generally provoked a reflection. The concept "Word made flesh" added a new dimension to my understanding of the word. In my mind,

thought, word and action were merging as one. It occurred to me that the word is merely a sound until it is lived or acted upon by an individual. I read the Bible regularly and became familiar with the documents of Vatican II. Pope John XXIII was a household name. My mother cried at the announcement of his death. Your father and I named John after the dynamic Church leader.

When your father and I settled in San José, we decided that Sacred Heart Church would be our adopted parish. We became actively involved with youth groups, marriage encounters, faith sharing groups, the *Cursillo* Movement, Club Latino, the Farmworkers Movement, the Sacred Heart Credit Union, social justice committees, and civic events. All of these groups and organizations required authentic use of literacy skills. Minutes, summaries, announcements, translations, presentations, letter writing, proposals, petitions are a few of the many activities that required my literacy skills. During those years, I learned to write for different purposes. Whereas in school my writings had been merely personal reflections, my writings were now intended for a larger audience. It's ironic, I disliked writing in grade school, it seemed like such a difficult task. Now I was enjoying it immensely, and when I wrote, there was a definite purpose for writing.

I credit my understanding and sense of community to my parents. Through their example, I learned to understand relationships outside our family. I learned that it was important to work and collaborate with others for the common good, for community building, and for social change. The love they had for community is the love I feel when I engage in community activities.

Biblioteca Los Pequeños del Sagrado Corazón

One summer day in 1972 while I was reading the San José Mercury News, I came across an article that reported on a government research on Hispanics and their education. I requested the research and within a few days I was reading the document. It is difficult to express the pain and anguish I experienced as I read and reflected on the issues the document investigated. The incident is permanently engraved in my memory. The research confirmed the discrimination and prejudice I had experienced in my grade school years. It spoke about the inequalities of academic tracking. I cried bitter tears and I felt the pain inflicted upon the innocent children of my community. That day, I made a personal commitment to change the oppressive conditions that prevented our community from progressing.

Shortly after I read the report, I went to our parish priest, the late Father Moriarty. I explained to him that I wanted to start a library for the children of our parish. Without hesitation, he gave me the key to a church closet to store books and encouraged me to develop the project. Your father and you, my children, helped with the project. At that time, I was directing a Bible discussion group with young mothers of the parish. We talked about our children and their education and I shared the report with them. Some of the mothers collaborated with the library project. Other members from the community gradually joined our efforts. After the Spanish masses, the congregation was invited to have coffee and *pan dulce* in the church hall. Every Sunday after mass, for more than a year, we took the books out of the closet and displayed them in the church hall for check out. We had hoped to have a large collection of children's books in Spanish. Books in Spanish

were difficult to find. I translated a few children's classics and held story time some afternoons. We named our small project, "La Biblioteca los Pequeños del Sagrado Corazón." Those of us who participated in the development of the library were determined to help the children of our community. We held bake sales, burrito sales, raffle sales to raise money for more books. Our family and our church community planted the seed that would sprout into a marvelous and incredible collaboration of literacy development for the Latino community.

In 1974, Enrique Angulo, a San Jose State University student, happened to be in the church hall. He was impressed with the small project. He indicated that there were people in the community who wanted to start a bilingual library for the community. My response to him was, "There are many people who want a bilingual library. We're the only ones doing anything about it." Enrique helped us organize a governing board with non-profit status. Enrique and Jerry Amaro with the support of Father Moriarty submitted a library proposal to the State Department for Library Services. The Department granted the community \$127,000 in seed money. This project was the foundation for the Biblioteca Latinoamericana which today is a branch of the main library system. Today, the Biblioteca Latinoamericana contains the largest collection of Spanish materials for children and adults in northern California. In addition to the check-out materials, it provides a wide range of services for the community: children's story hour, reading clubs, summer youth services, homework club, hosts Latino guest authors, cultural and traditional events. When the new Biblioteca building was inaugurated in November of 1999, a time capsule was placed in the patio of the library explaining the history of the Biblioteca. The capsule is

to be officially unburied in 25 years. The Biblioteca was originally housed at Sacred Heart Church. Its second home was at the corner of Edwards and Vine Streets which was an abandoned convent. The third home was a portable building once used as a cafeteria by the old Woodrow Wilson School and which was later purchased by the Center for Employment Training building.

The Biblioteca Board and the San Jose Public Library System had signed a 20 year lease contract with the City of San José. It took Los Amigos de la Biblioteca Latinoamericana ten years to obtain a permanent building for the Biblioteca. I served as Relocation Chair on behalf of the non-profit organization. The committee met on a monthly basis until it secured the new site. I never realized the impact politics had on my life until I became involved with the relocation and construction of the three bibliotecas. On the other hand, community support was strong. Los Amigos de la Biblioteca Latinoamericana experienced some setbacks from the City and the Public Library System. Never the less, we successfully obtained City Council and community support.

The current Biblioteca is four times the size of the former library, and it is located on a main street. Materials circulation jumped from 5,500 a month in the former building to 22,000 in the current Biblioteca branch. What makes the Biblioteca branch unique is that it has been a grassroots efforts. It is a library by the community for the community.

I do not take credit for the numerous and wonderful services the branch offers our community. That is the genius of Linda Mendez-Ortiz, her staff, and all of the personnel that worked in the past to make it successful. My contribution has been the promotion and construction of the

Biblioteca. I have collaborated with community members for the past 28 years to make the Biblioteca dream a reality. I have conducted countless presentations and workshops to inform the community about the library and the services it provides families. I have written literacy proposals and delivered literacy programs for parents and their children. I have seized opportunities to get free books for the children of our community.

Yes, the past 28 years has been a labor of love. My passion for literacy development for my community has intensified over the years. I've been involved with the Biblioteca under different capacities. I've served as vice-president of the Biblioteca board of directors, as grant writer, relocation chairperson, and most recently literacy chairperson. As the Biblioteca has grown so has my formation and my education. I returned to school at about the time that I the "Biblioteca Los Pequeños" was begun. Each time the Biblioteca advanced, I also advanced. My education was linked with the development of the library. Every time that I decided to further my education, it was with the intent to deepen my understanding about literacy and to apply my knowledge in the classroom and in the community. My Master's degree has a literacy emphasis. Now I am a doctoral student at one of the finest Universities. Paulo Freire's teachings are welcomed here so you can imagine that I am experiencing *la gloria*. I never had the privileged of meeting Freire. Yet, I feel as though I have known the educator through his works and writings. Dr. Alma Flor Ada and Dr. Denis Collins keep his teachings and spirit alive at the University and in the community through their writings and their involvement. They are true disciples of Freire.

All of the literacy experiences behind me have been enlightened by

the teachings of Freire. His philosophy of education is suited for all learners. Yet, the poor and oppressed benefit greatly from his teachings. What other educator claims that our mission in life is to move along the process of humanization? Freire believed that learners have the capacity to reach fulfillment through active involvement with the world.

I've recently discovered that the greatest challenge in teaching literacy is not teaching the alphabetic principle and the mechanics of encoding and decoding. Rather these are only a small fraction of authentic literacy development. There is no question that acquiring the mechanics is a hallmark, an achievement for the learner. Inserting meaning and life into a symbolic image is one of mankind's greatest achievements. It requires a great deal of practice to decode the printed word. Keep in mind, my children, that the printed word is simply the encasement for the living word. The greatest challenge in teaching literacy is impressing upon the learner the significance of the word in his or her world.

Words were created to communicate, and communication is the most dynamic attribute of mankind. Language experts claim that communication is social, cognitive and linguistic. I agree, but Freire takes literacy and communication to a higher level. Literacy is the human instrument men, women and children use to bring about human understanding, to establish communion, and to address human needs. In Freire's view, literacy development implies learning to read the world and acting upon the world to create a better place for humanity.

I have accepted a new position at Washington Elementary School. I love working in this poor immigrant community; it is a mutual gain. My new part-time position is entitled, Parent/Community Development

Resource Teacher. I will be responsible for organizing and implementing parent education classes. I have no predecessor to follow or guide me, but I have the teachings of Freire and his followers. I must construct a literacy model, a literacy center that produces positive results. I will continue directing *Familias con Libros*, a Spanish adult literacy program, I coordinated as Literacy Chair of Los Amigos. I will continue to collaborate with Los Amigos to promote and advance literacy in the Hispanic/Latino community.

There is tremendous need to upgrade the literacy skills of adults in our community. Whenever I come across opportunities to put books or print in the home, I seize the opportunity. I wrote three literacy grants this summer. Two of the grants will allow adults and children to own their first books. My first task as Parent/Community Development Resource Teacher was to request complimentary copies of bilingual newspapers to send home with our students. As of this writing, it appears that *El Observador*, *La Oferta Review*, and *Nuevo Mundo* are going to provide us 700 newspapers for weekly distribution. Teachers are going to insert the papers in the students' weekly envelopes. Some teachers are going to use the papers for current events. Putting print in the home does not solve the literacy crisis. We must address literacy at different levels and at many fronts. Whenever we work in a underdeveloped community, we must act fast to create an environment and a culture of literacy. Putting print in the home is a beginning. This initial activity will create new opportunities for developing family literacy.

I urge you to reflect on your own literacy experiences. You will be enriched by the recollections. Drawing from my past has helped me

understand my development and formation. I understand why I have certain beliefs and tendencies. We are as you know, a product of our upbringing and our environment. I enjoyed recreating my past for you, I hope you have a better understanding of my work in the community.

As my literacy work advances, I will have more to share with you. I have an intuition that my real work in literacy development has just begun. You, my children, will be the judges of this statement.