Chapter 4. A Perfect Story: Writing, Text, and Truth

> To speak a true word is to transform the world.
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> – *Paulo Freire,* Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Sometime in late 2021, Madeline's niece Kim told me that Madeline had written her own obituary. I had not seen it when she died in 2016, but when I first read it some five years after her funeral, I was surprised by how short and even perfunctory it seemed. It contains very little of the big facts of her extraordinary life that I have shared in this book. Nor does it convey a sense of the impact she had, aside from a brief reference to her teaching career and the alumni association she helped establish. In fact, the obituary makes her life sound almost ordinary. Here's the entire text, published on Nov. 30, 2016, in her hometown newspaper, *The Scranton Times-Tribune*:

> Madeline Szerafinski White died Thursday, Nov. 17.
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> She was born on Sept. 13, 1932, in the Greenwood section of Moosic, Pa. She was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Earle; her parents, Stanley and Sophia (Kobeski) Szerafinski; and her younger sister, Marion Cavalari.
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> She leaves to mourn sisters, Dolores (Henry) Zurek, Sylvia (Emil) Conte; brother-in-law, William Cavalari, nieces, great-nieces and nephews.
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> She received her early education in St. Mary's Catholic School. Madeline graduated from Mount Alvernia High School in Reading, Pa., in 1949. She spent 53 years teaching in various areas, including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Madeline spent two years teaching at Our Lady Fatima High School and College in Liberia, West Africa. In 1990, she was influential in the establishment of the OLF/SF Alumni Association. The association is instrumental in assisting the present-day students at these high schools.
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> Madeline received her teaching degree from Villanova University, a master's from the University of the District of Columbia. She also matriculated from Misericordia University, Dallas, Pa., Dayton University, Boston College, the University of Scranton and University of Maryland.

> Madeline was a die-hard Washington Redskins and Boston Red Sox fan.
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> The Mass of Christian Burial will be held at St. Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church in Lanham, Md. Burial will take place in Ft. Lincoln Cemetery in Maryland.

Reading this obituary left me wondering why Madeline left such a brief—and, to my mind, incomplete—sketch of her eventful life. Why did she leave out, even in this brief text, some of what seem to be the most significant facts of her life, most notably her many years of service as a Catholic nun and her activism on behalf of people of color? Why are some of the most compelling events of her life, the ones that are central to the memories her loved ones have of her, missing from this account? Every sentence in that obituary is, as far as I know, true. Yet the story of her life that Madeline tells in her obituary seems to be different in significant ways from the story I am writing right now. At the same time, it seems to me now, in this moment as I am writing, that despite the questions it raises, the story Madeline herself tells in her obituary might be exactly the right story for her to tell.

That story excludes perhaps the biggest chapters of her life, but it includes what seemed to matter most to her: her loved ones, especially her husband Earle and her sisters and nieces. And its spare details create a basic record of her long career in teaching, which was at the center of her life, and her own education, of which she was understandably proud. It even mentions her love of two professional sports teams, which would have brought knowing smiles to those closest to her and which reflected the obsession with sports (especially football) in the region in Pennsylvania where she grew up. The story her obituary tells is the story of a dedicated lifelong teacher whose career included sustained efforts to support students from Africa, where she had taught for two years. It tells the story of a woman who loved her family and who served her students. It is a bare-bones story that nevertheless seems fundamentally true, a Hemingway-esque story composed of true sentences.

In an important sense, Madeline's obituary is exactly the kind of writing that I once aspired to do. It is writing based on the idea of the text as container of meaning—and, potentially, of truth. My own writing during much of my career was driven by this idea in pursuit of Hemingway's ideal of a true story. I embraced that ideal, and I strove to produce texts, like Madeline's obituary, that contained truth. Her seemingly pro forma yet (I am sure) carefully worded obituary was intended, I believe, to convey a certain truth, a truth that she believed about herself and about life in general.

At the same time, Madeline's obituary seems to skirt the truth. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it conveys a certain truth about her life that seems partial and incomplete, if strategically so. It ignores what might be the most significant and complicated parts of her life. And, on the surface at least, it seems to

avoid mentioning any details of those significant parts that might raise the kinds of big questions about her life that I have been trying to answer by writing this story. Most important among those questions is why she left the convent. Admittedly, an obituary might be the wrong venue for addressing such questions, but the absence in that text of even a passing mention of her two decades of service as a Bernardine nun raises its own intriguing questions. What did her many years of service to the convent mean to her? Does the lack of any mention of her time in the convent say something significant about how Madeline felt, at the end of her life, about having been a nun? What does it suggest about how she felt about her decision to leave the convent? Did she consider that decision so final that she repudiated her former identity as a nun and no longer felt any need to acknowledge that period of her life—a period that, to me, seems to have been so impactful, so formative? Should we, readers of this text that was released after her death, ignore the absence of any mention of her two decades of service as a Catholic nun? Or did Madeline intend to call attention to that period of her life by not even acknowledging it—knowing, as she would have, that most of the readers of that text would be intimately familiar with the story of her time as a nun and her decision to leave the convent?

In the end, what story did Madeline wish to tell about herself in the obituary she left us?

When I spoke to Madeline's good friend Father Gamrot in 2022, I initially asked him about the funeral service, which he helped officiate, but our conversation quickly expanded to a discussion of Madeline's life. Madeline, he told me, had introduced herself to him in 2003, shortly after he became pastor-in-residence at St. Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church in Lanham, Maryland, where she was a parishioner. She was deeply proud of her Polish heritage, and she was excited to have in her parish someone who was actually from Poland. During his time as pastor-in-residence at St. Matthias, he and Madeline became close friends, and they talked often. She was intensely interested in what he had to say about Poland: its current politics, its culture, its people, its history. "She was Polish through and through," Father Gamrot told me. His favorite memory of her, he said, was a trip they made to Poland with some other St. Matthias parishioners in 2005. Madeline organized the trip, on which Father Gamrot served as a kind of local guide. "It was laughter. It was joy. It was curiosity," he said as he recalled that trip. And everything he said about his time with Madeline rang true to me. He was describing the confident, interesting, joyful, curious, devout person I had known, and his sense of her impact on others matched mine as well.

The highlight of that trip to Poland, Father Gamrot told me, was a visit to the Jasna Góra Monastery in the Polish city of Częstochowa. The monastery, which was founded by Catholic monks of the Pauline order in the early 19th century, is the site of the shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa and the so-called Black Madonna, a painting depicting the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in her arms, both of them resplendent in bejeweled robes and gold crowns. Scholars debate the

origin of the painting, but it is believed to have arrived in Częstochowa sometime after the Pauline monastery was established in the 1830s. The shrine is one of the most revered in Catholicism, especially for Polish Catholics, given the painting's connection to several important events in Polish history, including key military battles against Poland's enemies. The painting of the Madonna is also associated with a number of miracles that are said to have occurred over the many decades of its residence in Częstochowa.

The most striking thing about the painting is the dark color of the skin of the Madonna and the Christ Child, which historians explain in various ways, including that the image was discolored by fire, that it was altered by later artists, or that "the skin pigmentation is characteristic of this stylized portraiture" of that era (Duricy). At least one interpretation is that the skin color of Mary and Jesus in the painting is "a more realistic depiction than the icons typically presented by the Church" (Freus), an interpretation with significant implications, it seems, for how we might think of the racial identity of Mary and Jesus. This interpretation resonates with me. Or perhaps what I should say is that this is the interpretation I wish to endorse. For Father Gamrot's memory of his visit to Częstochowa with Madeline in 2005 includes the moment when he and Madeline were viewing the actual painting, and Madeline, who was then in her seventies and seeing the painting for the first time, turned to him and said, "I can die now."

That poignant memory of Father Gamrot's fits my story of Madeline's life perfectly. Given her devotion to the Catholic faith, her experience as the White wife of a Black man, her service as a teacher at a Catholic mission school in Liberia, where all of her students were African, and her lifelong advocacy for racial equality, it makes sense that she would experience that moment so powerfully as she was standing before the Black Madonna for the first time. And her emotions at that moment, as Father Gamrot described them, which grew out of her own life experiences, might also have been wrapped up in the stories about the Black Madonna that make it a venerated shrine for Polish Catholics. Madeline's own story seems to mean more in the context of those shared Catholic stories about the Black Madonna and in view of her own role in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. That moment in Poland in 2005 has greater significance because of the significance of those shared cultural and religious stories about the Black Madonna as well as the ongoing struggle for racial equality in the U.S. and elsewhere today.

Father Gamrot's memories of Madeline reinforced my sense of who she was—or at least who I think she was, who she was to me. Who she *is* to me. Early in our conversation, when I first asked him about Madeline's funeral, he had to pause for several long moments to compose himself. I apologized for bringing up memories that provoked his tears, but he dismissed my apology, saying that he had not thought about her recently and my questions made him realize at that moment how much he missed her. And loved her. At that moment, it seemed to me that he and I were remembering and missing the same Madeline. His memories of her so

thoroughly overlapped with my own, even though our respective memories were of distinct events that the two of us experienced separately.

As we shared our memories, however, it became clear to me that Father Gamrot was unaware of so much of what I took to be central to Madeline's life—so much of what was missing from the obituary she wrote. When we began to talk about her marriage to Earle, Father Gamrot told me that he never knew about Madeline's estrangement from her mother or about the fact that members of her family initially rejected her marriage. To my mind, that period of her life, which encompassed her wedding and the early years of her marriage as well as her ongoing work with students of color in Washington, D.C., is crucial to understanding who she was and the struggles she faced in pursuing a principled life of service to others—to say nothing of the deep personal pain she must have experienced to be effectively shunned by some members of the family she loved. Yet she had never mentioned any of that to Father Gamrot, despite their many long hours of conversation about matters of faith and family, despite their close friendship, despite their trip to Poland together. Madeline apparently felt no need to share those memories with this man with whom she had shared so many other memories, a man she seems to have loved and trusted to such an extent that she discussed his role in her own funeral more than a decade before it actually took place. Why? She never seemed to me to be in the least bit secretive about her past or embarrassed about any aspect of her life. What does it say about her that she would not have shared with him such important details about one of the most significant—and, presumably, painful—chapters of her life? The story of her life as she shared it with Father Gamrot seemed to be missing important parts of her life, important truths, just as her obituary does.

When my conversation with Father Gamrot drifted to Madeline's decision to leave the convent, he suggested that she left the convent because of a conflict she had with her Mother Superior at the time. Madeline had never wanted to leave the Catholic school in Liberia where she had taught for two years, and she resisted her superior's decision to bring her back to the U.S. That conflict, Father Gamrot said, was a sign to her that it was time to leave the convent. Being recalled from the school in Liberia, where she felt such a deep sense of purpose, did not square with her belief in her life's mission. As a result, according to Father Gamrot, she had to leave the convent in order to continue what she believed was the work she was called to do.

I shared with Father Gamrot my own version of the story of Madeline's decision to leave the convent. My story included the fact that Madeline, while still a nun, tutored, on her own time, academically struggling Black children and advocated for incorporating Black history into the curriculum of the Catholic parish school in Washington D. C. where she was assigned to teach in the years following her return from Liberia in 1965. Those efforts ran counter to the more conservative views of her superiors, who, as I knew the story, disapproved of her activism on behalf of racial justice and her support of the Civil Rights Movement.

In their view, it seems, the Catholic Church's missionary work in Africa, with all its historical racist baggage, was appropriate service to people of color, whereas teaching Black history or supporting the struggles of Black people for equal rights in the U.S. was not. In other words, it's OK to teach poor African children in a foreign country but not to advocate for people of color in the U.S. Is this how Madeline saw the situation at the time? Is that why she made no mention in her obituary of her time in the convent? Whatever the case, in order to manage the problems they saw in Madeline's activism, her superiors apparently reassigned her from the parish school in Washington D. C. to a retirement home for nuns somewhere in rural Connecticut, where, presumably, she would be out of the way and would no longer constitute any sort of threat to their established order. Madeline, however, refused to accept that assignment and, after two decades of service and devotion as a Catholic nun, she left the convent. She took a train or bus north from Washington D. C. to her sister's home in Connecticut but never reported to her assigned post at the nun's retirement home. And she never returned to the convent.

Father Gamrot listened keenly as I shared this story with him, but he confided that he did not know the story I was telling him. "I cannot confirm those details," he said, "but that makes sense. It's a perfect story about her."

A perfect story.

It is. But is it true?

The story I shared with Father Gamrot is not the story he knew about why Madeline left the convent, perhaps the single most important decision of her life. If the story I knew *is* true, why would she not have shared it with him, such a close friend and a person who, like her, had devoted his life to the Church? And given the importance of her service as a nun in her own life and the impact of her experiences as a nun on her career as a teacher who was devoted to serving students of color, why did she make no mention in her obituary that she had even been a Bernardine sister? If her obituary tells a true story about her life, it does not seem to be the whole truth. Or at least it is not the truth I am realizing as I write this story.

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In the introduction to this book, I referred to the distinction between a text and the subject of that text. They are not the same. A text is always a representation, a rendering of experience. In that sense, a text, no matter how true it is, can contain only a partial truth constructed from the experience being written about—constructed, significantly, in the act of writing itself. Madeline's obituary might be true, but the truth it might convey about her life is inevitably incomplete. It does not convey the truths about Madeline's life that Father Gamrot and I believed or experienced—or constructed—ourselves. In that sense, the text of her obituary might tell a perfect story that isn't entirely true. Or it might tell a perfect
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story the conveys several truths—several different, potentially divergent truths. And those truths will emerge from the reader's interaction with the text. In other words, truth, such as it is, does not reside in the text. And whatever truth Madeline might have intended to convey through that text might not be consistent with the truths that emerge as readers interpret her text.

This idea that truth does not reside in a text arose, for me, from scholarly efforts in the 1980s to theorize meaning-making in writing, such as Martin Nystrand's social-interactive model of writing. Drawing on structural linguistics and discourse analysis, Nystrand proposes a model of written communication as "a fiduciary act for both writers and readers in which they continuously seek to orient themselves to a projected state of convergence between them" (75). The goal in any act of writing, as Nystrand sees it, is shared meaning between writer and reader: "when the respective purposes of the writer and the reader intersect as they must when the reader comprehends the writer's text, the meaning that the reader gives to the text is a unique result—a distinctive convergence or interaction—of writer and reader purpose" (74). In this model, "Text is not just the result of composing, it is also the medium of communication" (75). According to Nystrand, the skilled writer works with a "sense of reciprocity with her readers" such that "the skilled writer senses, in typically tacit manner, when her purpose is likely either to mesh with or to run against the grain of her reader's expectations and purposes" (78). In other words, the writer anticipates readers' "expectations and purposes" in order to produce a text that readers will interpret more or less as the writer intended. In this framework, meaning doesn't exactly reside in the text, but the text constrains and guides the reader's engagement with it in a way that makes it more likely that the writer's intended meaning is pretty much the same meaning that the reader constructs from the text.

So-called social theories of writing, such as Nystrand's, challenged my received ways of thinking about writing, meaning-making, and texts. As a college student in the late 1970s, I was trained in a version of the New Criticism that embraced the idea of the intentional fallacy (based on the influential work of Wimsatt and Beardsley) and emphasized the goal of a true or accurate interpretation of the text. As an English major, I learned to read texts (primarily literary texts) accordingly: applying rigorous methods of analysis to a text, I could (in theory) identify that text's valid meaning. That meaning was not necessarily what the author intended, but a particular interpretation of a text's meaning could be acceptable or not, according to this school of thought.

The social theories of writing, such as Nystrand's, that I began studying a decade or so later complicated the understanding of meaning-making that I developed as a result of my undergraduate training, and eventually I rejected New Criticism and embraced a view of writing as inherently social, situated, and culturally mediated. Models like Nystrand's made sense to me as I struggled to grasp the complexities of writing and learned to produce—and teach my students to produce—"effective" texts that conveyed the writer's intended meaning. Meaning

is not truth, of course, and even if we might be able to determine with any confidence the meaning a writer intended in a particular text, the truth of that text remains to be determined and perhaps is inevitably contested. Both—meaning and truth—remain questions for me with respect to Madeline's obituary.

It is difficult for me to accept the idea that Madeline might intentionally have excluded from her obituary something as significant to her life as her two decades as a Catholic nun because she felt that it was somehow a blemish on what mattered most to her—which is one way to interpret the absence in that text of any mention of her life as Bernardine sister. I would like to believe that she excluded that part of her life's story because doing so would result in a text that is actually closer to the truth of her life as she saw it. If the text can convey only a partial truth about a life, then perhaps there are some partial truths that are "truer" than others, more important than others. Or less painful. Or perhaps the truth, whatever that might mean (a problem I will take up in the next chapter), lay elsewhere.

In the introduction to this book, I suggest that truth might reside not in the text of the story we write but in the experience of writing that story. I suggest that this text you are reading right now—this story I have been writing about Madeline's life—might contain truth, but it cannot contain the truth of this experience I am having as I write it. If that is so, then we might ask about the truths Madeline might have found in her own experience of writing her own obituary. What truths did she realize in the experience of writing her obituary—truths that the text of her obituary do not and cannot contain or convey?

The answers to such questions might be utterly unavailable to me—to us—but the questions themselves point to the limitations of the text as a vehicle for truth. And these questions underscore the significance of the experience of writing as a potential locus of truth, a means of truth *finding*. A text might be a way to "fix" the truth of an experience. In writing a story about our experience, we attempt to stabilize that experience, construct meaning of it, and communicate that meaning intact. But rendering experience in this way—that is, transforming it into a text—can be risky, and not only because memory is such a fraught basis for writing about our experience, as I noted in Chapter 3. To some extent, *every* true story will be inherently untrue, because the truth of our experience can never be static and can never be fully captured by a single telling. Thus, it can never be completely fixed in a text. That truth inevitably is shaped by our evolving perspective on our life and our identity, which in turn are shaped by our ongoing experience of ourselves in the world. So how I make sense at this moment of something that happened yesterday will not necessarily be the same as how I make sense of it tomorrow or next week or next year, because I will not be exactly the same person who sees the world in exactly this same way tomorrow or next week or next year, nor will the world be the same. The truth or truths that emerge from those efforts to make sense of experience must also evolve.

That, I have come to believe, is one reason why the experience of writing a story—of *writing* itself—is so important. In the moment of writing one can inhabit a

memory without fixing it, and the truth of that memory, such as it is, can emerge in that moment of writing. But although some part of that truth might be encoded in the text, the text cannot contain the truth of the experience of realizing whatever the truth that was encoded in the text might be. And it is possible that the truth that matters is fleeting, momentary. The text might contain a truth that is realized at that moment of writing, but in the next moment or the next, a different truth might emerge. Or the truth realized in that moment is altered or amended as we continue to seek it or try to grasp it in the next moment. Thus, the text can become a record only of a momentary truth, a truth that is true at a specific point in time and perhaps only then.

What momentary truth about Madeline's life might be contained in her obituary? I suspect that Madeline was keenly aware of her audience as she was writing her obituary, in the way that Nystrand describes the skilled writer, and whatever truth about her life she wished to convey was genuine and heartfelt and real yet at the same time carefully constructed for the audience she knew would likely read that text. As I knew her—and as others have known her—she did not have an ego that needed to be proclaimed or protected, so it seems unlikely that she would have tried to craft a self-serving story in her obituary. Rather, she would have tried to convey the truth of her life as she understood it—at least in that moment. If that's the case, the decision to leave out of that text any reference to her two decades of service as a Bernardine sister was neither an oversight nor an effort to manipulate the truth in a way that was self-serving or self-aggrandizing. It must have been a decision that reflected her belief about what mattered most in her life. Exactly what that might have been isn't entirely clear to me. For if that decision suggests that her dedicated service as a nun for more than two decades wasn't what mattered most as she took stock of her life, then the absence of any direct reference to her many years of advocacy for racial equality seems also to suggest that that advocacy, which seems to have led to her departure from the convent, wasn't what mattered most. We might interpret the brief references in her obituary to her many years of teaching, her two years of teaching in Africa, and her role in helping to establish the alumni association for students from Our Lady of Fatima High School in Liberia as significant, given the brevity of the text and the lack of any reference to the many other seemingly significant components of her life. In other words, the text of her obituary seems to suggest that what mattered most to Madeline was her work as a teacher, most of whose students were young people of color. That seems plausible—and consistent with this story I am writing.

And yet.

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Much of what I have written thus far in this chapter about Madeline's obituary might be described as conventional textual analysis, the kind of analysis scholars
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might conduct of a Hemingway story or a letter he wrote—or any kind of text. As I suggested earlier, the nature and value of this kind of analysis have long been the subject of scholarly debate, evident in the arguments surrounding key intellectual movements in the past century such as the New Criticism, reader response theory, deconstruction, vitalism, postcolonial theory, and other theoretical schools that have attempted to answer the basic questions of how a text—or an utterance or a sign—"means" and who gets to decide. Whatever else the debates about these questions might have to teach us, the fact that such debates are always happening and never quite resolve these basic questions underscores the contingency of truth and meaning when it comes to language and texts. In other words, whatever a text like Madeline's obituary might mean or whatever truth it might "contain" is contingent, depending on a variety of complex factors, including, importantly, who is interpreting it and why. The key point here is that a text, by itself, does not enable us to answer the kinds of questions I have pursued here, such as why Madeline left the convent and, more important, what that decision might have meant to her and what it might reveal about the truth of her life. Even if Madeline had directly discussed such matters in her obituary—or in some other text, such as a journal or a letter—whatever answers the text might "contain" would still be partial and contingent. In the end, making meaning of a text is a complicated business, and such an analysis won't provide the answers I seek to the complicated questions I am posing here. We must seek those answers elsewhere.

Or not.

It might well be that the expectation that we can find answers at all is itself the problem. Maybe it is the questioning, not the expectation of "true" answers, that matters.

Indeed, my own development as a writer might fairly be characterized as a process of coming to terms with the need to answer seemingly unanswerable questions, a process of accommodating doubt and living with uncertainty. In that regard, I think, I am in good company, especially among teachers and scholars of writing and perhaps educators more generally. For the more we come to know, the more we realize how little we know about what matters most to us. Writing, I have learned, can be a powerful vehicle for this kind of learning.

In a thought-provoking essay called "Shadow Living: Toward Spiritual Exercises for Teaching," writing scholar Paul Lynch examines what he sees as the inevitable moments in every experienced teacher's practice when self-doubt overwhelms the teacher's sense of mastery and gives rise to an unsettling question: What am I doing here? Lynch sees such moments not as failure but as a function of mastery. In other words, the greater a teacher's mastery and experience, the greater their understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning, and thus the more likely they are to have these moments of almost paralyzing self-doubt. Lynch wants to explore what the teacher should do about such doubt: How should the teacher confront the question, What am I doing here?

It is not a trivial matter. On a purely practical level, it is not in the interests of the students or the education system more broadly for an experienced, dedicated, and (presumably) successful teacher to become less pedagogically effective as a result of such self-doubt or, worse, give up teaching altogether, which, alas, is all too common.[4] At the same time, the kind of thoughtful and critical reflection on one's teaching practice that can give rise to difficult questions that in turn lead to self-doubt is, paradoxically, a mark of an expert and effective teacher and necessary for that teacher to continue to grow and improve as a professional (see Schon; Yancey). It is a tricky line for the dedicated expert teacher to walk between reflection that is necessary to enhance teaching practice and reflection that can lead to crippling self-doubt.

Education theorist Paulo Freire (whose ideas I discussed at length in Chapter 2) is illustrative in this regard. In his effort to define a truly liberatory pedagogy, Freire devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the role of the teacher and the teacher's relationship to the students. In doing so, Freire walked this same tricky line—sometimes stumbling on it—as he tried to describe the often vexed position of the thoughtful, dedicated teacher in pursuit of the goals of education as the practice of freedom. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he explains the complicated and fraught means by which the liberatory educator—whom Freire refers to as the "teacher-student"—can design instruction that will avoid the pitfalls of mainstream education, which, in his analysis, reproduces an oppressive and inequitable status quo. For Freire, the truly liberatory teacher is always also a student who is always also learning, not only about the subject being taught but also—and more importantly—about the students themselves and what Freire calls their "limit-situations"—that is, the social, political, historical, and material circumstances that circumscribe the students' learning and prevent their liberation (*Oppressed* 99). Freire warns that the revolutionary teacher must take pains in order not to fall into the false dichotomies that characterize the worldview of mainstream "banking" education—in particular, the fundamental Cartesian binaries of subject vs. object and mind vs. body as well as the problematic binary of teacher and student; he cautions the teacher not to succumb to the false sense of superiority that can accompany the teacher's greater knowledge and experience as compared to their students.

In seeking to help students overcome their passivity and their acquiescence to an unjust reality and thus enable them to change that reality—to make it just and

4. It has become a kind of truism among education researchers and policymakers that new teachers suffer high rates of teacher attrition. One widely cited study from 2003 indicates that 40% to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Ingersol). Some studies report lower rates, but others report even higher rates, especially when the figures are broken down by category of school—i.e., urban, rural, etc. See Papay et al. Data on attrition among experienced teachers are more difficult to pin down, given the many different factors affecting individual decisions to leave the profession and given the challenge of defining "experienced." But the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 seems to have exacerbated the problem for all categories of teachers. See Steiner and Woo; Walker.

therefore to liberate themselves—the liberatory educator cannot simply bring "a message of salvation" (95):

> It is not our role to speak to people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world. Education and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of "banking" or of preaching in the desert. (96)

Instead of bringing "salvation," the teacher must "understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed" (96) and, on the basis of that understanding, teach in a way that helps students also understand those structural conditions and recognize them as obstacles to their liberation. That is, the teacher must learn from the students about their limit-situations in order to design instruction that enables the students to overcome those limit-situations. This is not a straightforward process, for as the quotation above suggests, Freire risks falling into the trap of paternalism in his efforts to explain how the enlightened revolutionary teacher can enlighten their students without imposing on those students the teacher's ideology in a way that trades one form of oppression and domination for another. Freire recognizes this problem, of course, and he works hard to avoid infantilizing the students, going into great detail about specific pedagogical methods that can help oppressed students perceive their status quo as oppressive—to recognize the limit-situations in their lived reality—and to "introduce [them] to a critical form of thinking about their world" (104) without denying them the agency to think on their own. Indeed, his whole project is intended to help students re-imagine themselves as human beings in a way that enables them to claim agency. In this regard, his liberatory problem-posing pedagogy is intended to empower students even as he acknowledges their lack of power within the broader context of their lives (see esp. pp. 104-16).

Yet, ultimately, Freire cannot avoid the fact that even the most well-intentioned liberatory teacher does possess an inherent authority, a power, that the students do not (yet) enjoy. Even within his liberatory framework, the very roles of *teacher* and *student* suggest a hierarchy, at least in terms of the extent to which each one has acquired that "critical form of thinking" that is necessary for genuine liberation. In trying to resolve what he calls this "teacher-student contradiction" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (75), Freire asserts that his problem-posing method "can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught

also teach" (80). Yet even in this dialogue, each remains distinct from the other. The very act of dialogue inevitably—and perhaps paradoxically—reifies their respective identities as teacher and student.

Freire seems to have wrestled with this contradiction throughout his career. In *A Pedagogy of Hope*, which he wrote some thirty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he addresses the criticism that his problem-posing approach is elitist, and he tries to clarify the relationship between the liberatory teacher and the students, whom he refers to in this later work as "educands." In one poignant passage, he describes an experience he had while living and teaching in Chile in the late 1960s. At the time, he was visiting a "culture circle" that was part of what he refers to as an "agrarian reform project," and he recounts a conversation he initiated with the "peasants" who were participating in that project. The conversation, according to Freire, was "a lively dialogue," but it was "promptly followed … by a disconcerting silence" (*Hope* 44). In that moment, Freire intentionally resisted the urge to break the silence, concerned that doing so would be tantamount to claiming authority as the teacher. But one of the peasants urged Freire to speak: "Excuse us, sir … excuse us for talking. You're the one who should have been talking, sir. You know things, sir. We don't" (45). Freire tried to undercut his own position of authority as the teacher, but the students insisted that he embrace it. Presumably, only by acting in his role as teacher and embracing his authority could Freire make his knowledge accessible to the students.

Freire presents this anecdote to underscore the crucial need for the teacher to learn from the students, to reflect carefully on his position as teacher so that the social and cultural authority inherent in that position does not impede the students' learning and reinforce their subordinate positions as students:

> My experience has taught me that educands need to be addressed as such; but to address them as educands implies a recognition of oneself, the educator, as one of two agents here, each capable of knowing and each wishing to know, and each working with the other for an understanding of the object of cognition. (*Hope* 45-6)

His problem-posing method is intended to help his "educands" come to "an understanding of the social relations of production, … of class interests, and so on and so on" (48-9) without imposing on them his ideology; it is intended to enable them to claim agency and reject the passivity that he believes they are trained to accept in mainstream education. But even these vivid accounts of his experiences with various students inevitably cast him as the enlightened one, well-intentioned and earnest though he might have been in his desire to help students overcome their oppression but nevertheless possessing knowledge and a critical perspective that they lack.

Later in this account of his encounter with the Chilean students, Freire claims that he does "not deny the political and directive nature of education"; rather, he

claims to "accept that this is its nature," to accept that his "ethical duty, as one of the subjects, one of the agents, of a practice that can never be neutral—and educational—is to express my respect for differences in ideas and positions" (*Hope* 79). Moreover, he acknowledges that his method, based on dialogue between teacher and students, "does not place them on the same footing professionally. … Teachers and students are not identical, and this for countless reasons. After all, it is a *difference* between them that makes them precisely students and teachers" (117). He goes on to argue that "dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity but actively defend it, and grow together."

I do not wish to criticize Freire here but rather to point out that even a visionary who devoted his impactful career to the project of fighting oppression through education—at genuine risk to his own life—struggled to resolve the "teacher-student contradiction," to find an answer to this question of how to teach for liberation when the very act of teaching can be a form of oppression. Freire returns to this problem time and again. In the end, he seems to reach a kind of acceptance that the paradox must be acknowledged and confronted but will never really be resolved. Indeed, *Pedagogy of Hope*, which Freire presents as an extended clarification and updating of the ideas he laid out in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sometimes feels to me like an effort to work out the limitations of those ideas, a recognition that his quest for understanding is both never-ending and uncertain, despite his own certainty about his principles and about his overarching goal of liberation. At the end of the book, in describing a meeting with some revolutionaries who were fighting the military dictatorship in El Salvador in the 1990s, Freire writes of them, "As far as was possible, they were avoiding both the illusions of an idealism that ascribes a power to education that it does not have, and the mechanistic objectivism that denies any value to education until after there is a revolution" (*Hope* 200). In that statement I hear echoes of Freire's recognition of his own struggle to live with the teacher-student contradiction as an unavoidable challenge in his ongoing project of promoting a certain kind of literacy education as a means of achieving "a less-wicked, less-unjust society, little by little more decent, more human and humane" (200). In his words I sense a kind of self-doubt and an acceptance that such doubt might be inevitable but also ethical and, ultimately, useful.

To revisit Freire's struggle with such contradiction and doubt in 2025, in the midst of a global resurgence of fascism and the overt political oppression and violence it brings, is to appreciate both the importance of his ideas about education as a practice of freedom and the daunting challenge of realizing his vision. To my mind, the political developments in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world in the past few years underscore the relevance of Freire's ideas and the desperate need to continue his struggle.

Paul Lynch takes a similar tack to Freire—albeit in less lofty terms—in exploring the problem of how an experienced teacher might navigate the kind of

self-doubt that is reflected in the question, What am I doing here? While acknowledging the distress that such a question causes for a dedicated teacher, Lynch proposes that the teacher nevertheless "live with" the question. Drawing on the work of another writing scholar, Paul Kameen, Lynch invokes the idea of "living in the shadow of [the question's] imperative" (501) rather than seeking "simple fixes" for what is ultimately a complex and daunting problem. In other words, rather than trying to find a concrete and workable answer to the question "What am I doing here?," Lynch, following Kameen, proposes embracing the question as a way to inhabit the experience of self-doubt, a self-doubt driven both by the teacher's desire to teach effectively and by the teacher's expertise and extensive knowledge, which, paradoxically, enables the teacher to understand more clearly how difficult it is to truly teach effectively. By living in the shadow of the question, Lynch suggests, the teacher should proceed in a way that isn't intended to ignore or eliminate the doubt but rather to acknowledge the doubt and incorporate it into his teaching practice itself. This, I take it, is a way to accept the reality that a thoughtful, dedicated teacher will always confront doubt: about the effectiveness of a particular teaching technique, about the wisdom of a specific pedagogical decision, about the impact of an assessment on a student, about what the students are (or aren't) learning, about the larger purposes of education. As Lynch sees it, eliminating that doubt is neither possible nor desirable. For doubt, which arises from a genuine desire to serve students and an appreciation for the complexities of teaching and learning, is a means by which the teacher can avoid the hubris of believing that they already know what and how to teach and what is best for the students. Genuine self-doubt about one's effectiveness as a teacher is necessary for accepting one's limitations with humility. It is a version of Socrates' famous dictum that true wisdom lies in recognizing how little one knows. To my mind, in advocating that the teacher who questions live in the shadow of the question, Lynch is not only acknowledging a fundamental truth about teaching but also displaying the very same attitude of humility that he aspires to as a teacher who is genuinely dedicated to his students' learning rather than his own success or status as a professional.

That in itself is laudable, for teaching is hard, and teachers, understandably, sometimes use their knowledge and professional authority as a defense against this very same kind of self-doubt that Lynch describes, the kind of doubt in whose shadow he proposes teachers must live.

As I am writing this, I am thinking about the confidence that I observed in my cousin Madeline, whose 53-year career as a teacher is a testament to her own dedication to her students and their learning. I am thinking now about that long career in many different classrooms, and I wonder whether she ever confronted the question, What am I doing here? I never observed Madeline teaching, nor did I discuss teaching with her in any depth, but I have to believe that the calm certainty I saw in how she lived her life must have been accompanied at times by self-doubt as she faced crises and challenges of a kind that I can barely imagine

facing. Her belief in herself and her mission were driven, it seems obvious to me, by her Catholic faith and her principled view of Christ's message of love. But her many years of experience as a teacher and her earnest desire to serve her students, many of whom faced frightening challenges of their own, must have given rise to moments of self-reflection and doubt of the kind Lynch describes: doubt in her own effectiveness as a teacher, doubt in the education system itself as a vehicle for social and individual improvement. And if she did experience such moments, did she, as Lynch proposes, live in the shadow of that question, that doubt?

For Lynch, living with this kind of doubt is more than a way for the dedicated teacher to avoid pedagogical paralysis and to continue to teach effectively. It is also an opportunity to deepen one's self-understanding more broadly as a human being. "This idea of shadow living," he writes, "is an implicit invitation to spiritual exercise" (501), and he goes on to propose "a habit of written exercise that seeks neither to make arguments nor provide answers, but instead to occasion a kind of openness crucial for inhabiting a network of obligations." In other words, Lynch suggests that writing itself can be a way for the teacher to live in the shadow of doubt as a professional, but it can also be an integral component of living, both as a professional and outside of one's professional practice.

Significantly, the kind of writing Lynch is advocating for this purpose is without rhetorical exigency, a kind of spiritual practice that does not result in the production of a text to be shared but rather enables the writer/teacher to inhabit the moment and experience the truth of the doubt that the writer/teacher is confronting. In other words, to engage in writing as a practice of living. Lynch reviews what he identifies as a long tradition of writing as a spiritual practice, noting that "the history of spirituality reveals that writing (writing-as-experience rather than writing-as-notation-system) was a common part of spiritual practice" (508). He invokes Michel Foucault, whose philosophical writings about the role of language in subjectivity—how the self is constituted through language—profoundly influenced thinkers in the latter half of the 20th Century. According to Lynch, in his later work Foucault "turned his attention away from the larger discursive formations that shaped subjectivity and toward those practices through which subjects might shape themselves" (Lynch 508). Foucault was concerned not only with understanding what he called "the technologies of the self"—that is, the language practices by which the self is constituted—but also with *care* of the self, the spiritual practices whereby "individuals might 'transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' ("Technologies" 18)" (Lynch 509). This process of transformation "involved training and regular practice" (508) and, significantly, writing.

It might seem odd that Foucault, whose theories helped lead to a fundamental reconceptualizing of the idea of the self not as the Cartesian intellectual entity of modernist thought but as a function of discourse—a notion that is foundational to poststructuralist theory—was also concerned with "care" of that self. But as Lynch points out, Foucault drew on classical texts to illuminate the ways in

which these same spiritual practices by which one would care for the self were ultimately about accessing truth. In his famous treatise "Technologies of the Self," Foucault elaborates on the nature and purpose of this kind of practice: "One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (Foucault, "Technologies," qtd. in Lynch 509).

The truths one needed. Writing itself, as a spiritual practice that was an essential part of caring for the self, was also a means to truth.

This, to me, is a radical view of the potentially transformative power of writing, and it is a view that is at odds with the prevailing conception of writing as textual production that deeply informed my own perspective on and practice of writing for most of my career—and continues to characterize mainstream writing instruction. For most of my career as a writer, it would never have occurred to me to write without the explicit goal of producing a text to be read (and, ideally, for which the writer is paid). I wrote about the power of this idea that writing is textual production in an article called "A Thousand Writers Writing," in which I described my initial resistance to the practice of writing for its own sake at meetings of the National Writing Project, with which I was involved from 2004 through 2017. Why, I wondered, would anyone write without intending that text to be published and read? Lynch's discussion of writing as a practice of care of the self is one answer to that question, and he draws on Foucault to show how that practice of care of the self is also a form of truth-seeking.

In that same passage that Lynch quotes, Foucault describes the impact of this practice of writing that is intended to find those "truths one needed": "A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent" (Foucault, qtd. in Lynch 509). In other words, this practice of writing transformed the writer's experience of self in the world. Lynch emphasizes that "this practice of writing does not simply record experience but rather reveals a hitherto hidden field of experience" (509). It is through the regular act of writing-in-the-moment, then, that the writer is able to realize a way of being, a "hidden field of experience," that previously was inaccessible. In this kind of writing practice, the production of a text to be shared is neither the goal nor a necessity.

This is what Lynch means when he describes writing as a spiritual exercise. He explains that spirituality is "a set of practices that allows the subject to engage that business [of living] more fully," practices that Foucault argued "are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth" (Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, qtd. in Lynch 509). As Lynch emphasizes, these practices "are designed to reshape subjects themselves. This formation, Foucault argues, was required *in order to access truth*" (509; emphasis added). To put it somewhat differently, writing, when engaged in as a spiritual

practice that is part of one's effort to care for the self in the act of living fully and mindfully, can be a way to access truth.

Lynch goes on to trace the history of this kind of writing practice in thinkers like Marcus Aurelius, showing that there is a long tradition in which writing becomes a means to transform the self in the pursuit of truth and in the conduct of an ethical life. Lynch is primarily concerned with how "these historical practices of writing might provide resources for addressing the underlife—or at least the inner life—of teaching" and how "writing as a spiritual exercise may address the kind of serious problems that we bring to our late afternoon classes and those that follow us home" (512). But in pursuing that goal, Lynch has also illuminated the potential power of writing as a spiritual practice for living our lives more fully and ethically outside the enterprise of teaching. He proposes that for the scholar and teacher "writing can offer both an ecology and an exercise through which the writer prepares for the real thing, including the network of obligations to which we submit as teachers of rhetoric and writing" (513-14)—the very same network of obligations that can lead to those daunting questions about why we are here, questions that give rise to sometimes crippling self-doubt. Writing as a spiritual practice, Lynch believes, enables us to live in the shadow of those questions as part of the ongoing effort to seek truth in our lives, truth that, I think, resides in that very shadow, truth emerging from our struggle to confront questions that are paradoxical and perhaps without ultimate resolution. And the practice of writing—a practice focused on the experience of writing-in-the-moment rather than the production of text—might be both a *means* for seeking truth and a *locus* of truth.

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Madeline was a dedicated teacher for more than half a century. She studied education, received advanced formal training as a teacher, and taught in at least fourteen different parochial and public schools in four U.S. states and in Africa. Her commitment to her students and to the broader project of education as a means of both self-improvement and social progress seems beyond question. In view of her experience and commitment, it seems reasonable to assume that she must have confronted the kind of self-doubt as an educator that Paul Lynch describes. But did she? I have no way of knowing. I like to think that she did, and I like to think that she might also have lived in the shadow of the question—What am I doing here?—as Lynch advocates. Maybe she even came to understand the need to care for the self that Foucault describes. For if she did, it would make for a perfect story. It would fit perfectly this story I am trying to write about her as a woman who devoted her life to her students' well-being and whose career as a teacher was inextricable from her lifelong mission of advocacy for social justice and racial equality. If Madeline did indeed experience those moments of doubt, it would help explain the confidence that I observed in her, her unshakeable conviction
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that her mission was right and good, no matter how difficult or fraught it might be. For confronting and working through such self-doubt can strengthen the educator's resolve and deepen her commitment. Knowing that she experienced this kind of doubt would also enrich my sense of her as an intelligent, empathetic, and complicated person whose dedication to teaching was not simplistic, not driven by a dogmatic certainty, but rather characterized by a more nuanced, genuine, complex commitment that inevitably would have given rise to troubling questions and self-doubt of the kind Lynch examines. It would mean that there must be some truth in my sense that she was indeed the dedicated educator and extraordinary person I have always believed she was.

In this version of the story I am writing, then, this perfect story, it seems reasonable to expect that Madeline might have confronted some version of this doubt in writing her obituary, which might have prompted her to avoid mention of her two decades of service as a Catholic nun as well as her activism for civil rights during that time. Is it possible that she had doubts about those years, about serving the Church as a nun, about the Church itself, despite her faith? Doubts about emphasizing that significant period of her life in her obituary?

In my efforts to determine the facts of her service as a Bernardine sister, I reviewed articles in several Catholic newspapers from the 1960s, when she was assigned to the mission school in Liberia. Skimming through those newspapers brings into stark relief how stridently anti-communist the American Catholic Church was in those days. For example, the April 20, 1961 issue of *The Advocate*, which described itself as the "Official Publication of the Archdiocese of Newark, NJ and Diocese of Paterson, NJ," and which contains a brief report about Catholic schools in Liberia that mentions the school where Madeline taught, includes a column by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen titled "Communist Tactics." Bishop Sheen was something of a celebrity among American Catholics at that time, and I have vivid memories of my grandmother, a devout Catholic, listening to his radio broadcasts and reading his columns. In "Communist Tactics," Sheen warns about "communist persecutions in Congo" and describes violent abuse suffered by Catholic nuns at the hands of perpetrators whom Sheen does not explicitly identify but evidently assumes were communist police officials. The same issue of *The Advocate* features an editorial cartoon depicting two dictators, one of whom is a figure resembling Fidel Castro, the communist leader of Cuba, trying to chop down a giant wooden cross labeled "The Church in Latin America"; the cartoon's text reads, "Good Heavens, it's like a rock!" ("Good Heavens"). The September 11, 1959 issue of the *Catholic Standard and Times* of Philadelphia reports on the impending visit to the U.S. by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev; in its lead editorial, the newspaper warns that, on the eve of Khrushchev's controversial visit, Americans "are being propagandized on Khrushchev's plans for 'coexistence' and his 'plans for peace,'" and the editors remind readers that they "should recall Khrushchev's long record of broken pacts and his brutal tactics of murder and oppression" ("America's Need"). Elsewhere on the same editorial page columnists

question President Truman's judgment for inviting the Soviet leader to visit the U.S. There seems to be little doubt that this anti-communist fervor energized the Church's efforts in the mid-20th century to establish missions in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America, where the Soviets were trying to establish their own political influence. I don't know what Madeline's views were in this regard, but as a young nun assigned to teach in a newly established Catholic school for girls in Cape Palmas, Liberia, she was, wittingly or not, a soldier in her Church's campaign against the godless communists.

Liberia seems to have played a special role in the Catholic Church's long-standing efforts to establish missions throughout Africa. The nation emerged as a state from a colony founded in 1821 by Black people who were formerly enslaved in the U.S. It became an independent nation in 1847, nearly a decade before the start of the American Civil War. *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes Liberia as "the only Black state in Africa never subjected to colonial rule and … Africa's oldest republic" (Petterson). I could imagine that such a history would have made Liberia a special place for Madeline, a place uniquely associated with freedom and racial equality. And hope. But even if Liberia never suffered directly at the hands of European colonial powers, as so many African nations did, it was nevertheless a place subjected to religious colonialism. The first Catholic mission was established there in the 1840s—just before Liberia became an independent nation—and the Catholic missionaries encountered great hardship and resistance, including, according to one scholar, "an environment that was predominantly Protestant and anti-Catholic" (Creary 28). The Catholic Church did not give up, however. In 1927, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with Liberia, and over time various Catholic orders founded churches and schools throughout the nation. Sacred Heart Boarding School for Girls at Cape Palmas (which today is the city of Harper) was founded by the Bernardine Sisters only a few years before Madeline taught there from 1963 to 1965. One year before she arrived there, Cape Palmas was granted status as a Vicariate Apostolic, a designation that precedes the establishment of a formal Catholic diocese, with its own bishop as its Vatican-appointed leader. In this sense, one might see Sacred Heart School not only as the Bernardine Order's effort to establish its own mission in Liberia but also as part of the Vatican's greater designs to spread Catholicism throughout Africa.

I cannot help but wonder whether Madeline, who was the thirty-something Sister Mary Marlene at that time, was aware of these circumstances and, if so, how she felt about the whole matter. Did she embrace the mainstream Catholic Church's anti-communist stance and see herself as a soldier of Christ against the atheist communist threat? Or was she focused on serving young girls of color in Liberia who might not otherwise have had access to the schooling she helped provide them? Given her political views in her later years, it seems unlikely that she would have been oblivious to the larger historical and geopolitical context within which Sacred Heart School was founded and operated. But even if she was blind to that larger context, the paternalism of the Church's efforts should at least have

caused her some uneasiness and doubt—and the more so because that paternalism was infected with an implicit and insidious racism that she must surely have noticed. In the same 1961 newspaper column by Bishop Fulton Sheen that I mentioned earlier, Sheen cautions his readers not to ignore or rationalize the communist persecution of Catholics in Congo: "Do not say: 'Oh! these Africans are only one stage removed from barbarism.' That has nothing to do with the persecution. Were the communist soldiers of Spain one generation removed from barbarism? Or the Chinese? Or the Polish or Hungarian governments? It is not a primitive civilization but communism which accounts for modern savagery" (Sheen 7). It isn't clear to me whether Sheen himself espoused the insulting racist notions that Congo represented "a primitive civilization" and that "Africans are only one stage removed from barbarism" or was simply acknowledging such views, which would have been widespread among his Catholic readers (as they were among the nuns in the Catholic primary school in Pennsylvania where I was a student and, alas, among my family, friends, and neighbors in my community in those days). Sheen leaves these views unchallenged in his column, but his statement is a disturbing reminder that such racism was part of the conversation about communism, even as many Catholic leaders and organizations officially supported the desegregation of American schools and other efforts to promote racial equality in the U.S. In 1963, the year Madeline was sent to Liberia, the American bishops issued a pastoral letter urging the nation's Catholics to embrace racial harmony and to become involved directly in efforts to eliminate racial conflict in the U.S. ("U.S. Bishops"). At the same time, those same church leaders were pursuing efforts to establish missions in Africa and elsewhere around the world, efforts tinged with racist paternalism.

If Madeline was not mindful of these complexities when she was sent to Liberia to teach in the Bernardine school there, I have little doubt that she eventually became aware of the extent to which her own church perpetuated racist views and was implicated in racial oppression. Maybe that is ultimately why she left the convent: not so much because her superiors refused to allow her to continue to engage in advocacy for civil rights and racial justice but rather because she came to view the institution of the Church itself as part of the problem of racism that she was fighting against. Maybe her experiences as a teacher in Liberia and elsewhere helped her realize that her work as a teacher, a White American Catholic nun, was not a simple matter of doing good but was more complicated than that.

If so, that would also be a perfect fit for this story that I am writing about Madeline. Knowing her as I did in her later years, I find it difficult to believe that she would not have had some doubts, even a crisis of conscience, about her role as a foreign teacher in a Catholic mission school in Africa. She must at least have had some second thoughts. Perhaps she shared Freire's concerns about "bringing salvation" to students whom she so sincerely wished to help and empower. Or perhaps she fell into the very trap that Freire warns the liberatory educator about: viewing herself as the enlightened (White) one sent to save less fortunate

Africans. And maybe her growing realization about such a trap, after so many years of teaching in Bernardine schools, gave rise to the kinds of doubt that Lynch wrestles with in his essay. Maybe Madeline asked herself that same question, "What am I doing here?" And then realized that she had to leave the convent.

I hope she did. And I hope that she revisited that question when it came time to write her own obituary, some ten or twelve years after she retired from full-time teaching and five decades after she taught in Liberia. And if she did confront such doubts as she was writing her obituary, she might well have also experienced some profound truth about her life in that moment of writing. Perhaps we can glimpse that truth not so much in what the text of her obituary includes but what it leaves out. Maybe she felt no need to try to capture that truth in that text; maybe realizing that truth in the moment of writing was enough. We cannot know either way. But I suspect the experience of writing her obituary was a profound one for her—in ways that we can only speculate about. And if she went to her grave having grasped some truth about her life—about life—it might well have been a truth she was able to realize in that moment of writing.