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Q & A Interview with Terry Helwig, Author of *Moonlight on Linoleum*

1. *“Moonlight on Linoleum” reads almost like a novel in many sections. How did you reconstruct these long-ago scenes in such vivid detail? What steps did you take in recreating the dialogue?*

Millions of moments encompassed my childhood. I have wondered why I remember some things vividly and others not at all? What makes experience memorable? As I began to write, I noted that my memories were often attached to an emotional charge—love, abandonment, awe, disgust, fear, excitement, bewilderment.

Revisiting my childhood feelings helped open my memory bank, as did perusing old photographs, researching the different places we lived, interviewing family and friends, and re-reading old letters. As an exercise, I wrote my most vivid memories on sticky notes and arranged them in chronological order on the inside door of a closet. This exercise helped me discover the narrative arc connecting these memories.

Occasionally, I compressed time to spare the reader. Instead of delineating four separate driving trips through the Southwest, I forged several memories—taking pictures by a state sign, visiting a pueblo, discovering Durango, CO, and driving on the million-dollar highway—into a single section. Memoir writing demands that endless hours of experience be edited without altering the truth of those experiences.

Two things helped me with dialogue. For years, my sisters and I orally recounted many childhood stories, incorporating dialogue. Plus, I’m an auditory learner; I remember by hearing. A number of my yellow sticky notes included bits of dialogue, like my mother telling me she was going to Timbuktu every time she went to a bar; or I might recall one of her many adages: “You can’t squeeze blood from a turnip.” Sometimes I remembered a defining trait, like Daddy repeatedly saying “lookie” or “I’ll tell you what” when he spoke. Still, life is not accompanied by a set of transcripts. Conversations from the distant past were relayed from memory. The *imperative* of dialogue is to make sure it’s true, even if it isn’t verbatim.

2. *You mention that you had help from your sisters and other family members in piecing together your history. Can you talk a little more about this collaboration with your sisters and how you pulled all of their memories together?*

I am extremely grateful to my sisters for embarking on this journey with me. They helped me flesh out many events and scenes. We spent countless hours talking on the phone, writing emails, ferreting out old photographs, and debating differences of opinion. It became clear, as I pieced together our family puzzle, that, if given an opportunity, every sister would write a

different memoir. A happy memory for one might constitute a painful memory for another. Our perspective, our birth order, our emotional charge around an event—all impacted us uniquely.

I came to believe memory is more than a set of facts; it is also the interpretation of facts—even with something as concrete as a floor plan. When I drew up a floor plan of our trailer house from memory and e-mailed it to my sisters, a debate ensued about the existence of a wall in a small middle bedroom. Some vividly remembered a wall in place and others swore it was not there. Eventually, one of us remembered Daddy removed the wall. Both opposing memories turned out to be true.

However, even before the mystery was solved, I wasn't concerned—in fact—just the opposite. Whenever our discussions digressed into minutiae, it usually meant we agreed on the larger issues. Not one of us ever questioned that we had lived in a trailer with a tiny middle bedroom.

3. *There has been quite a bit of focus in the media lately on the issue of accuracy in memoirs. Was this on your mind as you wrote your book?*

I thought a lot about accuracy as I wrote. What events should I include? As a child, how could I accurately portray the complexity of the adults in my early life? What if I misunderstood personal motivations or the causality of events? How could my life and the life of my sisters be accurately distilled into two hundred plus pages? What if someone took exception to what I said?

These were the dragons I faced.

Memoir differs from autobiography in that it is a reflection upon one's memory. While the story must be true, emotional truth differs among individuals. Ultimately, I had to recognize the authority of *my own* emotional truth. Only I knew how it felt to grow up inside my skin, trying to interpret the world in which I lived. I tried not to impose my emotional truth on others, but memoir necessitates looking through the lens of the author.

4. *Was it difficult for you to re-live any of the tougher memories while writing this book? Were there a lot of emotional ups and downs?*

I remember telling several friends how hard it was, at times, to re-live some of the more painful moments of my childhood. I likened it to being in the basket of a hot-air balloon as it descended into an abyss. My friends offered to hold the tether lines as I descended. I liked picturing myself enclosed in a basket because it provided a sound boundary between the past and the present. I kept reminding myself that I could surface whenever I needed a break or a change of scenery, although I felt in close proximity to my mom and the early years of my life the entire time I was writing.

5. *Sue Monk Kidd (The Secret Life of Bees) is a great champion of your work and encouraged you to put your story on paper. How did you two become friends? Did she offer you any valuable writing advice?*

I met Sue twenty-seven years ago, through a mutual friend, when Sue was visiting Louisville, KY, where I lived at the time. On another visit, three and a half hours after ordering breakfast, Sue and I asked to see a lunch menu at the same restaurant. We knew then that we saw something special in the other. Over the years, we have formed a deep and abiding friendship that mirrors sisterhood.

The most valuable writing advice Sue has shared with me is that she allows herself to write badly. This stunned me because Sue's writing is so spectacular. Sue assured me that not all of her sentences flow out of her perfectly polished the first time.

I now give myself permission to write badly. It takes the pressure off. The key, of course, is to burnish, polish, edit and re-write until you have said precisely what you want to say in the best way possible; I call this process *word-smithing*.

6. *In Kidd's foreword she writes that you had thought about writing this story for a long time but that you weren't sure whether the world needed another memoir. Was there a particular event that cemented your decision to finally write the book? While visiting your mother's grave with your manuscript you tell her, "I wrote this book for both of us." Did her unfulfilled desire to write her own book influence you?*

I believe I inherited my love of writing from my mother. I remember reading a spiral notebook of her poetry when I was ten years old and feeling as if I had glimpsed through a window into her inner world. Fingering her notebook, I decided I wanted to write, too.

In my memoir, I mention the "novel" I wrote in fifth grade called *The Lost City of Enchantment*. Fifty years later, I still have those yellowed pages, along with one of my mother's spiral notebooks. When I began writing poetry in high school, Mama encouraged me. So, yes, standing over my mother's grave, I felt as if I had written *Moonlight on Linoleum* for both of us.

As far as the defining moment of my decision to write the book, I have to think about that. It may have happened during a family reunion with my sisters as we stood in the kitchen cooking together. Vicki teasingly asked if I wanted to taste the spaghetti sauce to make sure it wasn't poisoned. We all laughed because we knew the childhood story behind her question. Our children even knew that I used to taste-test my sister's malts to make sure they weren't poison just so I could have a few extra sips.

As I observed us in the kitchen that evening, working side-by-side, I was extremely proud of the women we had become—either in spite of our childhood or because of it. I thought about Mama, about how she had given me life and these sisters. Maybe it was time for me to tell exactly what Mama's gifts had meant to me.

7. *Do you think your degree in counseling psychology helped you assess your own past? Do you think it helped prepare you to write "Moonlight on Linoleum?"*

Certainly the central theme of my book—even if others abandon you, you must never abandon yourself—has psychological implications. Even as a child, I was aware of two worlds—the outside world of things and the inside world of thoughts. Psychology interested me because it explores motivations that underlie behavior in the outside world.

It was also important to me that I capture my mother's complexity. She was so much more than a two-dimensional, stick-figure that could be summed up as good or bad. My mother was many things—loving, tormented, depressed, hopeful, funny, creative—the list goes on.

Psychological exploration helped deepen my understanding of not only my mother and the other people in my early life, but of me as well. Much of my narrative focused on my desire line as a child. What did my heart most want? What motivated my actions? These are universal questions that resonate in most every life.

8. *Near the end of the book you write of your sisters, “[t]hey were so resilient and hopeful—despite all they had been through.” Clearly this passage applies to you too. In her forward Sue Monk Kidd writes that there is a “mysterious transaction in the human spirit that I marveled at where Terry was concerned...Well, there are no explanations for that, there are only stories.” What do you think? Is there any explanation for the “mysterious transaction” of how you and your sisters were (and are) so resilient?*

I believe young children are incredibly resilient. Think about the number of times a baby falls down before he or she finally learns to walk. It never occurs to them to give up. Unfortunately, as we mature, our resiliency may be compromised for one reason or another. It's hard to know why the same set of circumstances affects people differently. We are all so complex. Even though my sisters and I grew up in the same family, we have different reactions, different memories, and different beliefs. I can only speak for myself as to why I never gave up hope.

First, I always felt connected to something larger than myself. I didn't feel alone. Maybe I was a child mystic—whatever that means. I found solace in my world by petting a purring kitten, sitting quietly outside under the big sky, climbing onto the limbs of an ancient oak, or watching moonlight stream through my window.

Second, I always had my sisters. Taking care of them gave me a great sense of purpose. I knew they needed me, and I felt confident I could meet their needs. We were called “the girls” growing up. Our circle of sisters was a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Do these things account for resiliency? I don't know. But they come to mind when I'm asked about it. Maybe it goes back to the major theme of the memoir. No matter what happens to us, we should never abandon ourselves. That's a choice we can always make, to stand up for ourselves, no matter what.

9. *Despite your anger at your mother while growing up you always were able to forgive her and to appreciate her positive qualities over the negative ones. However, the memoir ends when you*

are very young. Were there times when you felt angrier or less forgiving toward her, before or after her death? Did any of your sisters have a harder or easier time forgiving her?

Again, it's hard for me to speak for my sisters. I think some have more anger than others. I'm not sure why I haven't carried more anger toward my mother. I'm certainly asked that question a lot. At first, I wondered if I had repressed my anger, but I've been poking around inside for a long time now. I just don't think it's there. It's almost as if I saw my mother's wounds and scars. It's harder to be mad and unforgiving of a person if you see that they're bleeding to death. My mother's love had sharp edges and she was sometimes oblivious as to how her behavior impacted her family, but I never thought my mother was evil or mean-spirited. I mostly saw her as a wounded and psychologically unconscious person.

10. *Daddy was an incredibly forgiving and generous—probably one of the more forgiving characters I've encountered in literature. You write that, "It wasn't until I began writing that I came to realize how much Daddy was the glue that kept all of us girls together under one roof for so many years. His devotion never wavered. I was Daddy's daughter every bit as much as I was Mama's. He helped shape me, too." Why do you think it took beginning your story to recognize the influence that Daddy had on your family? What are some of the most important aspects of his parenting that helped to shape you and your sisters?*

Mama's presence eclipsed almost everyone around her. I always loved Daddy, but he was not in our day-to-day lives. He spent so much time away that I always assumed his impact was less. It wasn't until I began writing that I realized he anchored all of us, Mama included. An anchor isn't always easy to see.

Despite his absences, Daddy stabilized our family by supporting us, forgiving Mama's indiscretions, and always coming home to us with open arms. Despite moving from oil town to oil town, Daddy saw to it that we had a roof over our heads, a paycheck for groceries and, when he was home, picnics, camping, card games, and home-made pancakes on Saturday mornings.

I have memory after memory of Daddy pointing out wonders in the natural world—tarantula's, constellations, sunsets, canyons, coyotes, arrow heads—and saying, "Lookie, there." He single-handedly taught me the art of amazement. He also taught me the value of acceptance. I never once felt like a step-child. Daddy's love didn't have sharp edges, and he treated me and my sisters with great tenderness, love and respect. As he told me once, every child deserves to be loved. Even now, if I have difficulty with a particular person, I try to picture that person coming into the world as a baby, deserving of love. It helps me be more compassionate.

11. *A major turning point in the book is when you overhear JoAnn telling your mother that she is perhaps being too hard on you. You write that "JoAnn's words tore open the smothering sac I had been struggling against...I could finally lay down the burden of trying to make Mama happy; it was no longer mine to carry." It takes some people a lifetime to realize what you learned as only a teenager. Did you really know with finality at this point that you could lay down this burden? Or was it something that took more time to fully register with you?*

I was thirteen when I overheard JoAnn tell my mom that she was perhaps being too hard on me. At that age, I recognized the dysfunction in our household, but not the cause. Like most children, I internalized the situation, assuming Mama's discontent had something to do with me. That's why I tried to do better at school and at home—almost to a breaking point.

JoAnn's comment suggested that my mother's behavior had over-stepped a boundary. Her comment affirmed my feeling that something was wrong, but it challenged my belief that I was somehow to blame. The relief I felt was similar to un-shouldering one of those heavy cotton sacks I drug behind me in the cotton fields one summer that I wrote about.

This realization did strike me with finality—not because I was wise and all-knowing—but because I was at a breaking point. The fact was: I *could not* carry the burden of making my mother happy any longer. My hope for her happiness didn't change, only my belief that it was my responsibility to make it happen.

12. *Despite being extremely troubled, your mother was obviously highly intelligent, charismatic, and oftentimes quite loving. When you think about her now what stands out the most?*

What stands out in my mind is my mother's soulfulness. That's the part I loved most about her. She felt deeply about things. She loved animals, nature, poetry and music.

When I once asked her why we had to endure winter, she didn't offer me a treatise on the seasons or the slant of the earth; rather she knew my question stemmed from my love of summers. Her answer was philosophical: Maybe so we can appreciate summer more.

When I asked her where people went after they died, she pointed to the steam rising from boiling potatoes to illustrate how spirit can separate from body.

When she was in the state hospital, she sent me her diary and wrote: *Read it if you want but put it in a good place. Don't be shocked and don't discuss it with everyone. Remember this is a mental hospital. A world entirely its own. Someday, I'll write a book.*

These moments stand out. Daddy was my guide in the outer world; and Mama gave me a glimpse into an inner world.

13. *After acting as an almost second mother to your sisters, how was raising your own daughter different? Was it easy in comparison? Or did it bring up issues that surprised you in light of your own history with your mother?*

I was thirty-two when my daughter Mandy was born. All those years of mothering my sisters helped me feel more comfortable mothering Mandy. However, she was an extremely easy child to rear. She and I have always been very close.

One thing did surprise me about parenting. When Mandy turned certain ages, I found myself revisiting those same ages in my childhood. For instance, when Mandy turned six, I wondered

how my mother was able to send me away for two years when I was six years old. The idea seemed unthinkable because I could never send Mandy away. When Mandy turned twelve, I realized just how young I had been to be left in charge of all my sisters and the household. When Mandy turned eighteen and we drove to numerous prospective colleges, I thought about me at that age, driving my mom to a state hospital.

Each of these milestones seemed to be an opportunity to gain insight. In an odd way, mothering Mandy enabled me to re-mother myself. I sometimes felt as if I were breaking the chains my mother inherited.

14. *Are there other writers you feel have influenced your own writing? Who are some of the other authors you most enjoy reading?*

I love the genre of memoir. Some that stand out are Mary Karr's *Liar's Club* and *Lit*; Jeannette Walls' *Glass Castle* and *Half Broke Horses*; Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*; Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Rick Bragg's *Prince of Frogtown*; James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Also, *Your Life as Story* by Tristine Rainer is a great sourcebook for those who want to write memoir.

15. *What did you find most rewarding about writing this book? What was most difficult? Do you want to write additional memoirs? Other genres?*

The most rewarding part of writing *Moonlight on Linoleum* was consolidating and recording my family's history. I felt as if I were assembling a family jig-saw puzzle that had never been pieced together before. It was edifying to see a bigger picture emerge.

The most difficult part of the process was searching for the missing pieces to that very puzzle. I spent a tremendous amount of time hunting down records and writing to town librarians--asking them to check old phone books, city directories and, in some cases, school annuals. Even with all of these efforts, some puzzle pieces are still missing—like where certain memories occur on my timeline or what happened to my mother the two and a half years she disappeared.

As to writing another memoir, I love the genre of memoir and would love to write another one. But this book took a long time to root and bloom. Maybe there's another seed inside of me taking root right now. I hope so. I have considered writing about the year I turned forty. That's when I started to poke around inside. I will have to wait and see.

As for other genres, I am open. I've always fancied playwriting.

16. *You have obviously always possessed a great zest and curiosity for life. What are some of the ways you spend your free time? If you had an extra hour every day what would you do with it?*

I'm somewhat adventurous. I have gone parasailing and scuba diving. Once, I jumped out of an airplane. I like to travel and hope to go to Machu Pichu in 2012. I work at my desk five to eight hours a day. But in my free time, I take long walks on the beach, ponder life over vanilla

lattes and like to exercise my mind with word games and puzzles. If I had an extra hour a day, I would likely spend it watching clouds—trying to identify the various shapes of animals passing overhead.

17. After 9/11, you founded *The Thread Project* <http://www.threadproject.com>. The resulting tapestries were exhibited at the United Nations and St. Paul's Chapel, across from Ground Zero. Can you tell us more about the project? Did your childhood have any bearing on this work?

As a young girl, I clung fiercely to the slimmest threads of hope, even in times of despair.

After 9/11, I felt the world hung by one of these slender threads. Having learned from moving around so much in childhood that people are really more alike than different, I invited people worldwide, via the web, to send me a single thread, representing hope. Those early threads were woven into *Hope Materializing*, the first of seven world tapestries.

I received tens of thousands of “threads”—guitar strings, cloth strips, fishing line, electrical wire, lace—the variety seemed endless. People identified their threads—a tattered fiber plucked from the Killing Fields in Cambodia, a strip cut from a marker flag in Antarctica, a ribbon sent by a 9/11 family, a lace pulled from the tennis shoe of a murdered son. I was both humbled and inspired.

Forty-nine weavers, in fourteen countries, set up looms in their communities to weave the collected threads into the tapestries that hung in the United Nations and St. Paul's Chapel. Now, ten years later, I hope to gift this *fabric of humanity* to an interested organization that promotes peace, tolerance and compassionate community. The cloths are currently on display in Independence, MO at the International Headquarters of the Community of Christ Temple, dedicated to the pursuit of peace.