Ponderings of the Provost August 30, 2013

My twin brother and I still have the scars from the beatings and the mental anguish of the abuse perpetrated on us and the other boys who resided in an orphanage in the early 1970s. Our perpetrator was "Pop" Varner, the sadistic and manipulative housefather of the Longfellow home, which was housed in the junior division of the orphanage. Unable to care for us after the death of my father, an ex-con who died as a consequence of his drinking and driving, my mother had placed us there shortly after we had turned eight years old.

Varner physically abused all of the boys under his care. Daily beatings with a canoe paddle following our showers were a part of our routine activities. Our nakedness was a prerequisite for his abuse. He enjoyed making us place our index fingers on the edge of the kitchen counter and stretch out our legs until we were on the tips of our big toes, then hit us with the paddle. We remained in that position until we could absorb a blow without moving a finger or toe. Varner usually selected his victims at random. Boys begged each evening to be spared this punishment, but their promises of righting any perceived wrong fell on Varner's deaf ears.

If Varner was in a playful mood, he would wrestle us to the ground, flip us on our backs, and place his large sized body on our chests and howl with laughter. I feared this more than the canoe paddle. With his heavy weight on my chest, I found it difficult to breathe. My heart would beat so fast that I thought it would burst. Too small to push him off, I would wiggle and kick in an attempt to gain my freedom, but there was no escape. I eventually came to believe that one day he would crush the life out of me. When Varner was not torturing us physically, he preyed on us sexually. In the showers, he would hold, caress, and otherwise molest us, often murmuring how much he loved us. A complicated individual whose behavior shifted swiftly from tenderness to viciousness, Varner would explode in an emotionally abusive rage if you displeased him.

At night, Varner raped boys. On those harrowing nights, when the cries and screams of a boy raced down the hall from the back bedroom, I would crawl quietly to my brother's bed and hold his hand. Although our world was dark, cold, and heavy, we drew light and warmth from the flesh of our intertwined fingers. We sat in silence until the whimpers of pain from the back bedroom ceased or until the light of day pushed the cold, heavy darkness away.

Varner's abuse took a toll on me emotionally. As a sickly, thirty five pound, eight year old, I was convinced I would not survive, and, as Varner repeatedly told me, "there wasn't anybody out there; there wasn't anybody listening."

Gradually, I filled my heart with an intense hate. This hate drove me to withstand his abuse. I would not cry, plea for mercy, or scream in pain. I disconnected from my surroundings, refusing to be a part of his world, and endured his abuse with a stoicism so fierce it frightened my brother and the other boys who lived with us.

When I turned ten, a five year old boy moved into Longfellow. Varner took an interest in him immediately, so one day just before the Christmas holiday another boy and I reported Varner to

the principal of our school, which was owned by the orphanage. We shared everything about our life at Longfellow. The principal promised to report it, and he did—to Varner, who sought vengeance swiftly and violently. His fit of rage that afternoon was horrifying and brutal.

I remember the light of that December afternoon. How it filtered through the blinds and danced across the hardwood floor. Even now I can smell the cocoa that hung heavy in the air and hear the Christmas carols that chimed from Founders Hall, the orphanage's most prominent landmark. But there was no peace in Longfellow that day. No angels came to sing.

All ye, beneath life's crushing load . . . O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!

Varner's crushing blows sent me stumbling halfway across the room. The skin of my knee ripped open as it sliced across the corner of a table—a memory carved into my body forever. My head slammed against the floor. Towering over me, he kicked me in the face with my nose absorbing most of the blow. As blood flowed from my nostrils, the room began to spin in a colorful display, as if a box of Crayola crayons had exploded and splattered across the paneled walls

O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!

As sweat glistened on his forehead, Varner turned his attention to the other boy, whose name is beyond the reach of my memory. Two years older than me, Varner considered him the leader of our betrayal. He pounded the boy's head into the doorjamb. I remember Varner screaming, "Did you think you could do this to me and just move on?" The noise, the blood, and the spinning triggered nausea and I began vomiting. By then, Varner had turned his attention to my brother, who he had found guilty by association.

The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

Then I heard the crack of bone. The colors inside my head turned gray. The room was still and the air ripe with blood and vomit and hate and fear. Varner had broken my brother's arm. I did not know it then, but I believe that is the moment my brother began to fade and his hand first slipped away. His arm was broken in two, but his spirit was broken in too many pieces.

From angels bending near the earth . . .

His fury spent, Varner rushed my brother to the orphanage's infirmary, which was located diagonally across the road. Mrs. Varner had the task of cleaning up the mess her husband had left behind. She pressed a wet towel against my nose and wrapped my knee with a bandage, softly telling me it was a just a playground accident and assuring me my brother would be fine.

After she wiped and mopped up the vomit and blood, she turned to me with tears in her eyes and whispered, "give in, just give in." In looking back, I think the most confusing aspect of Varner's abuse was his wife's acceptance. But, as she uttered those words of quiet resignation in the disappearing afternoon light, I only wished I could reach up to Heaven and pull the angels down.

My brother and I aged out of Longfellow when we turned eleven, moving to the Washington home in the intermediate division. Mr. Peterman, our new house father, was a quiet man. Handsome and square jawed, this World War II veteran appeared to have escaped from a Norman Rockwell cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. He always treated the Longfellow boys with a special kind of gentleness, as if he knew we came to him with broken bodies. I suppose he did know. How could he have not known? How could all of them have not known about Varner?

Mrs. Peterman was not as quiet or gentle. She was sarcastic, biting, and vicious toward anyone who crossed her. Though not as sadistic as Varner, she taunted us with her ugly words, reminding of us our unworthiness and whipping us with a leather belt for the slightest or perceived infraction.

One Sunday evening, after Mrs. Peterman disparaged my mother, I scolded her in front of my brother and the other boys, informing her it was not necessary to treat us without any regard for our feelings. She ordered all of us to her office and directed me to remove my clothes and bend over a piano bench. She took her leather belt, a black one with a silver buckle, from the back of a closet door. Lifting the belt above her head, she proceeded to whip me, repeatedly lashing at my back, buttocks, and legs. I did not make a sound, which angered her even more.

Her face now contorted in rage, she flipped the end of the belt and began to beat me with the buckle. Pain exploded across my body. When I reached to touch my leg, blood covered the tips of my fingers. Before I could pull my hand back, the buckle caught my wrist, leaving behind a bloody gash—I bear that scar as well today. I fell down on my knees. The blows kept coming. She hit me over and over and over and over until I lost count, until I cried out in pain, until tears streaked my cheeks, until I pleaded for her to stop, until my stoicism washed away, until I had given her everything she wanted.

Panting from exhaustion, Mrs. Peterman stomped triumphantly out of the office. The boys followed her. I lay on the carpeted floor, now stained with my blood, shaking. Then I sense the presence of my brother next to me. I looked up to see his hand reaching out to take my hand. His hand clasped my blood covered fingers and the warmth of his love moved up and down my arm and through my body and my shaking ceased. As he gently pulled me to my feet, I told him we should run away, go find our mom. I talked. He listened. Finally, I asked, “How did we get this broken?”

“Because,” he quietly responded, “we belong to a broken world.”

If I dig deep enough into those memories, I can still feel the blood flowing down my thighs and taste the mixture of tears and blood on my lips. But I did not just experience broken skin that evening of the Lord’s Day, a night I felt not only abandoned by my mother, but by God, the Father. Something inside of me had broken. I lost my will to fight back, my need to speak up. I became voiceless, literally. Silence now served as my defiance, speaking only to avoid punishment at home and school. In a sense, I was no longer present in my life.

During Varner’s reign of terror, I had created an imaginary place where I could sail above my life. Following Mrs. Peterman’s beating, I spent more time there. It was an empty, gray world,

but I was safe in this boundary-less nothingness. Soaring and gliding, I could look down and see myself drifting silently through each day. The words I could no longer say in the real world would circle and blur inside my head. When I found clarity in those words, I would return to the real world as voiceless as I had left it.

Sometimes I imagined my brother with me. With his hand slipped inside my hand, we sailed on energy of static hum. It carried us. It flowed through us. We drew happiness from it.

I often pretended this energy between us had healing powers. I was a miniature Ernest Angley with the ability to mend my brother's broken spirit. I would place a finger on each of his ears. Then, after taking a long, loud, deep breath and asking him in an Angley like cadence, "Can you say 'bay-bee," I would yank my hands away from his head. With the static hum in the palm of my hand, I would zap him in the forehead. Now, I knew I was no miracle worker, but imagining gave me a fresh faith and hope that calmed my fears and brought me peace and a sense of light in our dark world.

Shortly after turning thirteen, my mother appeared at the orphanage to reclaim us. She moved us into a rental house in a working class, impoverished neighborhood directly across from the University of Akron. With little education and no job skills, she struggled to provide for us. Our meals often consisted of bread, usually toasted, and instant iced tea. Sometimes my brother would go to the corner "mom and pop" store and steal a pack of bologna.

Stealing was not his only crime. He also started using drugs. He did not hide it from me. He said he tried drugs because he was curious and, when he used them, he felt fantastic. He told me the drugs kept the darkness from creeping in. He floundered academically, began telling lies, and ran the streets at night. His rare appearances at home usually ended in a loud outburst.

I knew he was deeply troubled. I knew as well that I was still undeniably attached to him.

I was as quiet as my brother was increasingly loud. My "elective mutism" evolved into "selective mutism." I developed social anxieties, making it difficult for me communicate effectively. I did not fit at school or at home. Like clothes that are too large or too small, I never felt comfortable. The limbo of my life left me feeling displaced, even useless, and excluded from the world. It seemed like I passed my days at home and school hardly visible, almost hidden from people.

I spent my first winter at home gazing quietly out the attic window. I directed my gaze toward the campus across the street, wondering how I could cross to the other side and escape my prison of silence. When it snowed, the campus was a bit like looking down on a miniature world contained within a snow globe. With its buildings and fields arranged under an imaginary dome of glass, the campus was magical, pretty, and sparkly, but always beyond my reach.

I usually stayed at the window until I became aware of the darkness and the faint glow of the yellow lights dotting the evening landscape. Like Edward Hopper's *Night Windows* or *Rooms for Tourists*, the yellow lights beckoned and drew me and exposed me to myself. They left me stranded and lost and painfully aware of the loneliness and isolation remaining in me.

Although it was a bitterly cold winter, I remember the afternoon hours in the attic as bright and warm. The snow covered landscape gave the falling down houses an appearance of newness and the campus glittered under a flurry of snow. A calm peace fell upon me. I felt taken care of and protected in the attic. I did not know what would become of my life, but I believed if I waited in the attic, if I waited like Hopper, if I waited to speak, I would discover some current use for it.

My snow globed world shattered with our sudden relocation to north-west Alabama, a move made by my mother to prevent the streets of Akron from claiming my brother. There, life grew harder and harsher. My mother worked in a nursing home mopping floors and bathing patients, but there just was not enough money to pay for all of our needs. There were days where food was hard to come by, and we never ate breakfast. Periodically, we lived without electricity, and did not have a vehicle or telephone, and I never had a bed.

The other aspect of those days I remember was the moving—the constant moving. We lived in six different places in four years. My mother moved for different reasons—hopes of a new beginning, the opportunity to purge and create a whole new life, to flee crushing disappointments or even her children, and out of fear and anxiety. She never seemed to realize no matter how much you move you still take yourself and your problems with you. Growing up, we lived in twenty-one different houses or apartments. We never belonged anywhere.

Meanwhile, my brother and I dropped out of high school before our sixteenth birthday. Beyond that, we took different paths in communicating our weariness with life, our sadness, and our sense of hopelessness. He continued to use drugs, letting them do his talking for him, and I could not talk at all, building around me a wall of silence that even my brother could no longer penetrate. It seemed a darkness had cast its shadow over us, and we were unable to see in the dark, unable to find a way out, unable to see a light.

Day-by-day I watched my brother self-destruct. Eventually his drug use led to police raids of our house and his arrest. It broke my heart, but I said nothing. By then, we had grown apart. My brother had always just been there, a presence in my life, and now he had become this drug induced stranger. We once held hands as an unspoken expression of love and promise to protect each other. Now, our bond—a bond born in perfect innocence—no longer appeared possible for us.

At the age of nineteen, I started to rebuild my life. I earned a GED, took a college entrance exam, applied to college, and began the journey to becoming the first person in my family to graduate from college.

In college, everyone knew I was a determined student, but very quiet and sad. No one knew why. My professors attempted to reach out to me, but my instinct was to distance myself—and still is—and I rejected their advances. I knew I was a mystery to them and this attracted their attention, so I learned how to hide my sadness, but the regaining of my voice was a slow and painful process.

A couple of years into my college career, my brother appeared at my apartment door. He was distraught. I remember how he seemed so lost. He looked saddened and tired. The drugs had

toughened him. Yet he appeared older and frailer than me. His hands trembled. We tried to talk, but there was something strained about our conversation, as if it could not bear the burden of our memories. He started to cry, his sobs filling up the silence. Then he wiped his eyes, breathed deep and said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes,” I said.

“What if something horrible happened to you and you can’t undo it, you can’t unsee it? How do you live with it?”

“What horrible thing are you referring to?” I asked.

He looked at me for a long time, his face gray and fading. There was grief in his expression. “You know,” he said.

I did, but I could not answer his question. I hardly had a voice, and deep down I was ashamed of what had happened to us in Longfellow. A quiet wrapped itself around us. Then he stood up, opened the door, stepped out into the world, and faded away. I did not see or speak to him for ten years, and I have only encountered him a few times since then. Each time he was high or drunk or possibly both. His drug use, my silence, and our shame had separated us forever.

College life beckoned me, so I moved on. I began to talk to my professors. As they listened, I learned to speak the words they needed me to say. I completed my undergraduate degree and enrolled at the University of Akron to earn my first graduate degree. There, I continued to reclaim my voice, excelling academically and becoming a student leader in the graduate school. Having found my voice, I had turned my life around. I no longer felt exiled from the ordinary world.

On one Saturday morning, in the middle of a heavy snowstorm, I trudged and slipped and slithered across campus to return to the house where I had spent the winter of my thirteenth year, this time looking out from within a world that was once just out of reach. I stood on the campus side of the street, which was thick with snow, and looked up at the attic window and remembered that voiceless boy. Although the snow swirled about my face and the bitter wind howled and groaned against my scarf covered ears, I remember that moment as sweet and still.

My story is not a comforting one, and my childhood experiences eliminate any chance of nostalgia. I also know my story is not unique; nor is it as tragic as other stories, including many of our own students’ stories. I know that my story only has value if I recognize that it cannot be just about me. It has to be much bigger than me. It has to be about inspiring others so they can achieve more than others expect of them or they expect of themselves. It has to be about change.

My life did change, but I did not change my life on my own, nor am I the product of a single grandstanding speech or revelatory moment. It took years to gain my voice, and it took hours invested in me by those professors who cared enough to encourage me and spur me on in times when I had no faith in my future or confidence in myself, even as I rejected their help.

The change I experience in college was tremendous. When I began college, I was scared and scarred; I was terrified I would fail. I was certain my professors would find me inadequate. But all that fear and anxiety was for naught. My professors welcomed me, and, when I finally had something to say, listened to me. My professors influenced and shaped me, teaching me that there was somebody out there, that there was somebody listening. My evolution from quiet, anxious undergraduate student to successful graduate student leader was the result of the tireless investments of others. Without them, my snowstorm venture would have been impossible.

My story does not end on that snowy Saturday morning on the campus of the University of Akron. I went on to complete my degree at Akron and earn another one at Mississippi State University.

Upon my final graduation, I did not know what to do with my life. For ten years, I was accustomed to having a purpose: pass this class, semester after semester after semester, and finally graduate. I needed a new purpose. I never wanted to feel lost or feel like I was an observer in my own life again. Then a call brought me to Chowan, where I found a culture of caring, where I found the ability to articulate my meaning in the world, where I discovered the opportunity to change the lives of students.

Since Chowan's founding in 1848, it has advanced its historic culture of caring. It has done so even as its identity and mission has evolved over time. In 1848, it was a school for Baptist women. Today, it has an increasing population of capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to their educational and/or socioeconomic circumstances. If Chowan is to meet their needs, it must continue not only to advance its culture of caring, but to enhance it.

Many of our students have deeply personal stories, stories rooted in pain, anguish, hopelessness, sadness. Many have been so focused on surviving—on just getting by day-by-day—that they have become mute, unable to communicate their own hopes. They are powerless and afraid, and so they do not speak or speak in a way that effectively communicates their dreams. Many of them long to change their lives, but they have no concept of what that change looks like. They do not know how to communicate that longing for change. Anxieties and fears press down upon them, and they cannot find their voices. They desperately want to speak, but, voiceless, they cannot be heard. When we do not hear them, then we are unable to speak the words they need us to say.

It takes time to listen to the voiceless student. It demands patience. Too often, we are so busy judging them—usually by our own experiences—that we fail to realize they are seeking someone to listen to them. Listening to them is not an easy task. My professors found it a difficult task to hear what I could not say. Listening for us means helping our students learn how to express themselves. Listening requires we dig deep, ask questions, and understand as much about our students from our students as we can. Listening demands we get passionate about what we do. Listening requires that we invest in their lives, which is an investment in their futures.

We need our students to come to us, to find us, to reach out to us, especially at their darkness times. Yet, many of them fail to get the help they need out of fear there is no one available to

listen to them. Thus, they need us to draw them in, to listen to them, to help them develop a vision of their future.

To address these needs and in our continued efforts to create a more open relationship between students and faculty, Chowan launched the I'm In program this week. The purpose of the program is to make our campus a welcoming place for our students to live, work, study, and play. A team of faculty members have agreed to be available to listen to students—any student—as they voice their challenges, fears, concerns, hopes, dreams, or anything they have a bad feeling about. If students need assistance and do not know where to go, they look for the I'm In sign and go there for the answer.

It is our hope the I'm In program as well as all of our initiatives designed to engage our students will let them know that there is no situation where they are wholly alone. All they have to do is ask for help. If we succeed, and we can, our students will gain their courage from the power of our community and we will bring them to a place where they can achieve, some for the first time in their lives, where they shake away their anxieties and fears, where they can find their voices. Instead of just espousing a faith in their future, we will equip them with the more important tool they need—their voice—to have faith in their own future and that will change how they view their world and this world. That will be their shining achievement as well as our collective one.

This is a challenging and difficult task. However, by choosing to come to Chowan, with its culture of caring, we made a conscious decision to embrace the necessity of helping our students to reclaim or develop their voices, their courage, their hopes. We must, at all times, strive for that moment that opens our ears, which opens the lines of communication. We must be there for our students and to listen to them. Our students want to mean something in this world. It is up to us to recognize it—one student, one relationship, and one step at a time. This is our call toward a greater work, a more meaningful contribution to our profession and society. This is our responsibility.

I am not suggesting we will, or even can, save every student. Nor can we heal their scars. However, we can help them discover what they can survive, so they can better understand who they are.

My childhood experiences and how I responded to and survived them make me who I am today. They strengthen me, motivate me, and humble me. They led me to Chowan, and they remain the source of my passion for our students. I listen to their stories, and I engage them in broader conversations about where they come from, where they are currently, and where they are going because I know from my own experiences it will increase the likelihood that the arc of their narratives will change for the better and it will equip them with the tools to succeed in spite of their scars.

I know because I have a good life, yet my scars flow with me, stay with me, always. I remain emotionally detached and quiet. Sometimes I feel that I belong to no place. Sometimes I feel like I am still on the outside of a snow globe looking down. Sometimes I sense that the life in front of me is a Hopper painting, and it creates within me an aching loneliness. Sometimes a sadness has a deep hold of my heart, maybe my soul. Sometimes the weight of Varner and his crimes press

down upon me, and I cannot breathe. Sometimes I think of those back bedroom Longfellow boys, whose names I cannot even remember. I grieve for them, but my grief feels more like guilt. Remembering their names would prove to Varner someone did care, someone was there, someone did hear.

I do remember their pain, though. Their screams echo in my memories; their whimpers linger in my mind. The sound of their cries is with me, still. I cannot unhear them. Memories can be ghosts, and the ghosts of my memories are always at hand, always haunting me.

In my dark moments, I think of my twin, too.

Like the other Longfellow boys, I grieve for him, and this grief is tainted with guilt as well. Mrs. Varner's whispering words of acquiescence—"give in, just give in"—are ghostly reminders of the choices I made. My need to speak out broke my brother's arm and his spirit. My silence drove him away and into a lifetime of drug addiction.
Thirty years ago I had a responsibility to take my brother's trembling hand in my hand as he sat at the kitchen table in my apartment and listen to him, much like he did for me on that Sunday evening in Mrs. Peterman's office. I didn't, and it is the saddest day of my life. I live with the thought that it could all have been otherwise. Maybe that day could have been the beginning of a new life for him. I was no Ernest Angley, but maybe I didn't need some imaginary static hum to heal him. My brother was suffering, and maybe all I had to do was to be there for him.

Instead, I looked beyond my brother. I did not want to live in our broken world, and I did not understand why he wanted to dwell in it, so I abandoned him, failing to recognize that forged within our brokenness was something beautiful—our bond. In my rush to move on, I had left the beautiful part behind. Our bond remains only a memory, a long ago memory of a bond that once seemed to be the only thing Varner could not break.

I have this recurring dream where I hear my brother at his wit's end, screaming out for me to save him. Terror drives me until I find him. He holds his hand out and I take it. There is a linkage of electric fusion as our hands touch. It ignites, transmitting from me to him, then racing both ways at once. With a voice as strong and confident as I have ever had, I tell him to hold on. We made it. We sail away from Varner and Peterman and the ghosts of our pasts and the memories that live within us. Our scars become illusive, dissipating and severing from our bodies. We are whole again.