

JULIA MARTIN 1976

(written after their 30 year reunion at school)

The Circle

–for the girls we were then, and the women we have become –

'I'm a Quaker now.'

"I suppose I'm a Buddhist."

"Well I'm a Pagan."

"And I'm still a Methodist."

We all laugh. It's good to be together again.

The little group is chatting, with snacks and glasses in hand, at the beginning of the Class of '76 Reunion, finding ways to connect, to say who we are now. It's late afternoon and we have had a day of walking about the school and singing in the Chapel and talking and remembering. Now I feel the class needs some kind of ritual focus for this bring-and-share afternoon that we have come here to attend. Nothing odd or too challenging, just a way of gathering things together.

Sheena agrees, "I think so too, but what?... I know," she says, "We'll ask Jane. She's good at that sort of thing." And yes, Jane does know exactly what needs to happen.

"We must sit in a circle," she says, "that's good. Then each of us will take a turn to say what Epworth means to us, and what we've been doing in the last thirty years. That's it. Then I can go home."

OK . not exactly unchallenging, but maybe it's what we need.

I try to bring to mind what the school is to me now, how it felt to come here from Cape Town after thirty years; to walk again this morning among the pink-red brick buildings of the Junior School, mynah birds calling from the trees and the early grass still wet with dew. Or to climb the slope again to the tall white-painted High School. Or to sing and talk with old friends, while the current wave of Epworth girls and even boys fill up the spaces of the day with their own urgencies. I expect that for each of us in different ways, coming back is to remember ourselves and each other and the almost forgotten textures of this place. For me in particular it is also a remembering of my mother who was one of our teachers. Now eighty-eight years old and frail and scattered, she was strong and lively then. Perhaps she is much of why I wanted to come.

Karin and Clare and Jenny and I walked about the grounds together earlier in the day, our talk full of stories. Do you remember all those assemblies in the Junior School hall, the visitors who came and the plays we did? Remember The Walrus and the Carpenter and Where is the Light? and the murals painted each year by Standard 5. Do you remember doing a performance of "Oh soldier, soldier won't you marry me?" right here where this classroom is now? And singing together in Sheila Hyman's choir? We notice that the little hall

is different now, no longer an open space for plays and songs, and little girls sitting cross-legged in rows.

"But look," Clare says, "Your mother's Art room is still here."

And yes in a sense it is. Right here where she had us painting and carving and sewing and sticking and making batiks, the room is still crowded with paint and paper and things and art that are still being made by children like ourselves. She used to say that every child is creative, and we believed her.

Now beyond the edge of the field below the classrooms, the secret house we made in the dip by the fence is gone, though we went to have a look, just in case. The little frogs we used to find in the wet muddy grass are also gone. And Fleecy the lamb who became a sheep, and Pudding the Angora goat, and all the mice we had in Standard 3. Remember how their mothers bit the babies because there were too many, and how we buried them all with hymns and proper funerals near the thorn tree and the swings.

When I told my mother in Cape Town that I was going back to Epworth for a reunion, we talked, for some reason, about that graveyard.

"Yes," she said smiling, "It was very solemn. On one of the graves they wrote the words "Beloved of Mrs Reusch."

Mrs Reusch, Karin's mother – from her we learnt to play the guitar and the recorder, and to sing songs in Afrikaans. We certainly had some exceptional teachers. Remember Mrs Wegg in Standard 1, and Mrs Bayer who once bared her teeth and promised to bite one of the girls if she continued to bite us. And remember Mrs Hackland's smile and her farm and her big sons who taught us the word ecology. Mrs Martin, as I called my mother at school, did plays and art and other things, including the library. Did you know that she and I used to come back to school during the holidays to catalogue the books and write out cards? That room's changed now too, but some of the books are probably still around. Do you remember how far it seemed to the Hostel? Look how close it is now. And remember walking all the way to the swimming pool on a hot day. And those red beetles in the changing rooms.

The years, we say to each other, moved slowly then. And our memories of that time are bright and clear as sweet fruits picked from the tree. Now everything is smaller and we are grown.

When I came to Epworth for the first time I had just turned seven, refugee from a government school where the teacher used to smack the children's hands with a ruler in front of the class. They say that from the first day I started smiling again. Returning, I understand that the Junior School – with my mother and our dog Topsy always somewhere around – became for me something like another home.

In many ways the High School was more difficult. Even this morning the complex, powerful arrangement of tall white buildings still brought a little chill of fear into my heart, just as it

did when we first came here. The polished corridors and stairways still seem as wide and high to me now as they did in Standard 6 when we made the passage from the Junior School up the small slope into another life in which exams and marks and Jesse Pease and Petal and really big girls reigned, and Standard 6's had to ring the big school bell and I worried that maybe I would get it wrong. Yet I remember those years being made of heady longings and intensities, and some wonderful teachers and friends. How passionately we sang, sitting on our desks between classes and playing our guitars. "Catch the Wind", and "The Streets of London," and all those Christian choruses. How seriously we argued, sitting together on the lawn at lunchtime, discussing the world.

And here we are now, thirty years on, and what of all this can I bring to the circle? Little boys play soccer on the field where we played and big girls have a marimba band under the trees where we used to sit. They all look happy and busy, and the stories I carry are quite irrelevant to their day. In the Chapel, the choir sings as we sang and the girls in white dresses are ranked behind us in the pews. How we used to laugh at those Past Girls, as they were called, when they returned to stalk nostalgically about our school on days like this. How old they seemed.

Now as women from our class reassemble at Petal's House, Sheena is still the leader. After Jane's suggestion she raises her voice across the chatter of the bring-and-share gathering to explain what we are going to do, and all thirty-something of us bring plastic chairs into a wobbly circle to sit around and talk.

I start the conversation by reading an email Jane Gough wrote me some months back, in which she wonders about the education we had and describes how she has drawn on it in different ways over the years. Then I say something a bit incoherent about my sense that what we had from the school is something precious, and about my mother who taught many of us, and how she is now very old. I do not ask, as I might have done, why we were taught nothing about being a woman, or about a woman's body. Or about men and children. We had to find those things out for ourselves.

Then Jane speaks, then Sheena, and the words pass around the circle. Sitting together, the stories of school and of our lives since then are funny and brave and sad and full of heart. The boarders talk about how it was to be sent away from home to live here, and about the feeling in your chest on a Sunday afternoon when it was time to go back. Washed with emotion and laughter, the women we have become are all familiar, though older of course, perhaps even wiser, with skin and hair and bodies variously aged and tended. Back at school for this day, many of us say we felt ambivalent, nervous, and even afraid to come. But now as the stories of work and family, of hope and pain, move from one to the other, each one different and particular, each one held in the circle of our attention, we come to recognise something that we have in common. You might say it is that each of us has a point of view of her own. Or that each woman is her own person, yet open to others. Then someone points out how many of the stories we tell speak of compassion and social conscience. Once seen, we notice this again and again.

Did our education help us to become this? As a private school, whites-only in those dark Apartheid days, Epworth gave us an experience that was unambiguously privileged. And although certainly not everyone was rich, there must have been some very wealthy families among us. Yet the school never gave any value at all that I can remember to ostentation or consumerism, or self-interested ambition. Perhaps, as Clare says to me afterwards, it had something to do with Methodism – a kind of austerity, an anti-materialism and a social conscience. At the same time certain teachers (in the High School I think especially of Muriel Crewe, Mary Gardner, Helen Shuttleworth, Mike Lambert) helped to shape this culture in particular ways which made us believe that we could and should work to make things better in the world. I think it was very good for us.

I think the Chapel was good for us too, whatever our affiliations. Even though I never became a Methodist, there are hundreds of hymns inscribed in my head from those years and I still love them. When the assembled Epworthians, as we are now called, gathered earlier in the afternoon in the Chapel, the clear blue and red and green glass of the great window gleamed before us just as it did when we were girls: Jesus and the little ones around him, among lupins and arum lilies, coloured light streaming in. "O Joyful Light ." we sang, what beautiful words. For the first time, the sense of them came home to me – the light that shines in all things, in the plants still growing in Mrs Anderson's memorial garden, light shining in us now and in our mothers and children, and in the music that takes us out of ourselves and loops us back to this strange succession of singing, year after year, here in this place. I stood then with Clare and Karin on either side, as we must have done over and over again since we were seven. Their voices sang strong and true, holding me, it felt, against the pain of my mother's ageing and the sweet sadness of all this remembering. My voice singing the high descant part of the school song was full of tears.

Now as the afternoon changes into evening we talk and listen to each one's story. Not everything we remember is positive, and our experiences since school are not all happiness. How could it be otherwise? Life is full of suffering. Yet it seems this circle of talking and listening, and the fact of our open-hearted presence together here, is in itself a kind of affirmation, a kind of witnessing. Pagans, Quakers, Methodists, Buddhists, Agnostics or whatever, we grew up together and it seems we share some values. Kindness, certainly. And integrity. Laughter too. Creativity. The possibility of being different. And also, you can trust us. Thirty years on, you could say we have these things in common, and these we will be passing on.

In Standard 3, when my mother was our teacher, she must have been more or less the age we are now. Now she is very old and we ourselves are mothers, teachers, and everything else. Grown-up women, how we go on. As our conversation loops all the way back to the beginning, I think of one last thing to say about the light, the joyful light, this circle. But the moment is gone and it's time to go.

What remains are gratitude and recognition, and the gathering-up of bags and jackets. Thank you friends, thank you teachers, thank you school. Let's meet again.