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# ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY

## AN INQUIRY INTO FAMILY SECRECY

Christopher N. Poulos

ROUTLEDGE

# ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Each family has its secrets, ones that shape family communication and relationships in a way generally unknown to the outsider and often the family itself. Autoethnographers, students of these relationships, confront many silences in their attempts to understand these social worlds.

Now issued as a Routledge Education Classic Edition, *Accidental Ethnography* delves into this shadowy world of pain and loss in the hopes of finding productive, ethical avenues for transforming the secret lives of families into powerful narratives of hope. It merges autoethnographic method with the therapeutic power of storytelling to heal family wounds.

A new preface text by the author reflects on the changes in the field of qualitative research and on his own research journey since the publication of the original edition.

**Christopher N. Poulos** is Professor and Head of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. An ethnographer and philosopher of communication, he teaches courses in friendship and family communication, ethnography, dialogue, and film. His writing has been featured in prominent journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, *Communication Theory*, and *Storytelling, Self, Society*, and in several edited books. His book, *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy*, was published by Left Coast Press, and won the 2011 Best Book Award from the National Communication Association's Ethnography Division.

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## An Inquiry into Family Secrecy

Classic Edition

*Christopher N. Poulos*

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This book is dedicated to my nuclear family: my wife, Susan, and my sons, Eli and Noah. We are beautiful together! And it is a tribute to my family of origin: my grandparents, James and Ethelyn and James and Fair Jewel; my parents, Bill and Nancy; my brother, Mike; and my sisters, Mary and Sarah. Other important characters in my life include members of my extended family: my aunts Nicky and Lana; my uncles Jim and Bud; my cousins Lynn, Norman, Wordie, Jimmy, and Terry; my in-laws Jackie and Ray and Amy and Ann and Katie; and my nieces, Abby, Ieva, Natalia, and Namaste. Thank you all for your part in making me who I am. Some of you are still here with us; some have passed to other worlds; you are each magnificent in your own unique way, and I love you all. Finally, I dedicate this work to the power of story to stretch, to heal, to transform.

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# PREFACE TO THE CLASSIC EDITION

*Christopher N. Poulos*

A number of years ago, I stumbled into a conversation that gradually led me to believe that a family secret was being *leaked* in my presence. It wasn't that anyone said so directly, nor did I assume that it was a secret simply because it was the first time I had heard the story. It was the *way* they were talking about a long-ago incident that apparently had a rather negative impact on the family, that led me to believe that it was, until that moment, buried deep in the past. This *leak* got me to thinking about secrets, and the more general phenomenon of secrecy, and most particularly the phenomenon of secrecy in families. It got me to thinking about why and how and when people make the choice to keep secrets, about why and how and when they decide to maintain the veil of secrecy, and about why and how and when they might decide to break through that veil (or at least create a small tear in the fabric, and thus give birth to a *leak*).

I got curious about how family secrecy works, and I began to dig a bit into the literature, and to ask questions. Like the ethnographer I am, I started to poke around the neighborhood, my prime research question driving my action: *What on earth is going on here?* Like any good ethnographic archaeologist, I dug deeper and deeper, always digging with care, so as not to disturb the fragments of buried truths too jarringly, to see if I could learn something about the essence—or, at least, the meanings, purposes, and practices—of family secrecy. Along the way, I began to notice that, if I attuned myself closely to this feature of human interaction, *leaks* were more common than I had previously imagined.

What I learned, as I dug deeper, is that nearly every family—and, indeed, nearly every group of humans—has some sort of secret. Some are darker, more disturbing, than others. Some are downright breathtaking. And some are quite puzzling, as (at least in the light of the present) they seem rather innocuous, pedestrian, or even *common*.

Why would anyone keep *that* secret?

But they are all secrets nonetheless, and there is something powerful about the veil that family members throw over things they don't want to come to the surface. Sometimes, the "dirt" is buried deep in the dirt, and hard to find, even with careful, meticulous digging. Sometimes, people just blurt out the secret, as if they have been waiting for years for the opportunity. Sometimes, people don't even think they are keeping a secret.

*We just don't talk about such things.*

I also began to ask people more directly whether they had kept any secrets, and if so, had the "statute of limitations" run out on said secret.

*Could you tell me that story? Could its life as a secret have run its course?*

There are many reasons for all this secrecy, and just as many reasons for the breakdown of secrecy, all of which this book delves into in some detail. More on that in a moment. First, I want to outline how I came to write this book.

During my early digging phase of this accidental ethnographic excavation, as I walked into my *Family Communication* course one fine autumn day, I decided, on the spot, to challenge my students. The major research assignment for this course asks them to dig deep into their family history and communication dynamics, and to write a book about their family, including family stories, traditions, genealogy, cultural norms and expectations, family members' perspectives on family communication, and so on, to try to get to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a member of their *particular* family, and how that experience might compare to others' experiences of their families. Since I see this ethnographic study of a family's culture as a deeper search for meaning, I thought they might benefit from knowing a little about their family's orientation toward secrecy. My thought was to get them to dig a little deeper. Their new assignment was simple:

"Over break, your assignment is to learn a family secret. Bring it back with you, and be ready to report when we meet again."

"But, Dr. P, it's a *secret*. What makes you think anyone's going to tell us?"

"Oh, they will tell. There is always somebody who is willing to tell. You may have to ask around, but somebody is going to spill. I promise. A good secret often makes a *great* story."

Sure enough, they all came back with secrets, now *stories*, to tell.

The following semester, students in my *Communication and Ethnography* course were busy writing their life stories, often consisting of "accidental" memories that emerged in the daily writing exercises I set for them. We began talking—often—of how the memories and the stories and the writing just seem to *emerge* from somewhere deep within, not unlike buried secrets. We began talking about how we might mindfully, perhaps even purposefully, stumble into "accidental" ethnographic revelations, just by taking up the mere act of engaging in writing as a way of entering a new domain.

Along the way, I was digging, and writing, and digging some more, and the idea for a book on family secrecy came to me. So I wrote a proposal, and sent it off to Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, editors of the "Writing Lives" series for Left Coast Press, and to Mitch Allen, the publisher. And they thought I was onto something. So they gave me the green light, and I started writing, and writing, and writing some more. As I wrote, and began to attend and attune myself to the emergence of secrets in everyday conversation, I became acutely aware of just how thin that veil of secrecy can be, and, at the same time, of just how much power the urge to secrecy can have over people.

All that exploring, and digging and poking around, seeking the *hows* and the *whys* and the *whens* and the *whats* of family secrecy, had led me to understand that there are sometimes powerful forces at work in families, forces of fear and control and stigma and grief, that lead people to put the lid on certain truths about the past, and to squash any attempt to convert them from secrets into stories.

Until, of course, they can no longer do so.

After all, a good, juicy secret *is,* from another point of view, just a great story, waiting to be told.

Unless, of course, the players refuse to break the silence, which they sometimes do, often at their own peril.

Memory has a way of haunting us.

Repression has a way of backfiring.

Freedom has a way of calling out.

Stories have a way of coming out.

The problem with closets is that they are dark, and cramped, and uncomfortable. They may be good places to hide, but only briefly.

Better is the warmth of the den and the light of the fire, and a good story unfolding.

So I found myself stumbling into a new way of thinking about ethnography—an approach I came to call "accidental ethnography," a way of asking that prime research question (*What on earth is going on around here*?) by writing my way into and within and through the challenges and conundrums and incidents and coincidences and conversations and hints and conflicts and clues that animate daily life.

In the middle of all this, as with most adventures, an interruption, this time a rather rude one, brought me up short. You see, I may be the first person in the short history of autoethnography to go into the promotion and tenure process at a major university, based *solely* on work published in that genre. Since autoethnography was perceived as a direct challenge (and perhaps even an affront) to "mainstream" research practices, I was very nearly denied tenure, and, in fact, had to fight mightily to keep my job (for the full story, see Poulos, 2010). For those of you who aren't aware of how this process works, suffice it to say that the promotion and tenure process, insofar as it is a structure of power that

disciplines (and punishes) bodies (Foucault,1995), is a secretive process that veils itself behind the anonymity of the "committee," and that speaks in the "code" of "objective" gatekeeping.

Being a man of words (and codes, and even secrets) I easily cracked the code. I wrote a stinging rebuttal to the committee's report (in which they voted 8–1 to deny me tenure), taking them to task on every judgment they had made, from behind their veil of ignorance, about the meaning and import of my work. You see, they got it all wrong, arguing that the weakness of my work was its lack of generalizability. I pointed out that this was its strength and its purpose—not to be generalizable across categories, but to evoke the power of one person's experience in the context of a larger matrix of social–cultural–political relations. I was, of course, able to point out that this approach had a long history in philosophy and literature and theater and creative nonfiction, and that its importation into a so-called "social science" context was, if anything, a welcome relief from the tyranny of statistical probabilities and generalities. I was aided by my many friends in the ethnographic community, who wrote, as the provost later told me, "the largest and most persuasive stack of support letters" he had ever received about anyone.

And, in the end, our arguments won the day.

Never mess with a writer.

Never, *ever* mess with 100 writers.

In our follow-up meeting, my department chair told me that my next task would be to write a five-year plan for my research agenda. I naturally burst out laughing. But once my laughter had subsided, I looked him in the eye, and said, pointedly, "I won't be doing that. But it's not because of what you think. It's not because I'm refusing, or because I don't want to. It's because I don't *know* what's next. I *won't* know until I start writing. I *can't* know until I start writing. I'm an accidental ethnographer. I stumble into my work. I don't plan it; it takes me for a ride."

And I walked out.

So the seed of the central idea for *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy* was now (finally) firmly rooted. I had, of course, already been hard at work on the manuscript. In fact, by this time, it was very nearly complete. But I didn't have the full idea for what I wanted to get at until that conversation. Now I had a way of integrating my approach to ethnographic writing—Richardson's (2000) writing as a "method of inquiry"—with my fascination with family secrecy.

I had a marriage of ideas.

But it was no secret.

All that stumbling was, it turned out, fortuitous. Accidental? I don't know. But it sure felt like it, like I had not set out to do any of this, but rather *it* had set out to grab me and pull me through the process of writing about it. That one little *leak* had led to a flood.

And so, this book was born. In its pages, you will read about memories and traumas and dreams and secrets, about how families fend off pain and grief and stigma by shrouding their missteps in secrecy, and about the healing and hope-generating power of writing secrets into stories. I am, I suppose happy with the results of all that digging. I am certainly pleased that people have read it, and gained some insight from it.

Now, ten years later, looking back on it all, I wonder if, given the assignment, I would write this book, in this way, again. I rather doubt it. Much has happened these past ten years. Many days have gone by. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge. A lot has changed, in my life, in my relationships, in my family. My children, who were young kids when I was writing this book, are now grown men, on the cusp of getting married, setting out on their own adventures, stumbling through life, eyes wide open and stories waiting to be birthed. And the wounds in my larger family have begun to heal, at least a little. A lot of letting go has happened, and communication has, gradually, become more open.

So, if I wrote it today, it would very likely be a very different book. Of course, the phenomenon of family secrecy has not much changed, nor has my approach to writing, though I like to think I've gotten better at it. But, since, as I tell my students regularly, *all good writing is rewriting*, I would most likely revise and resubmit the manuscript. But that is not my assignment. They asked me to write a preface to this "Classic" edition of the book. It's an odd feeling to think of my work as "classic."

So, here it is. I hope you enjoy reading this book. I hope you learn something—about secrecy, about ethnography, about writing, about how great stories are born of fragments—fragments of memory, and secrets, and conversations, and emotions and events large and small in this earthly existence we share. Mostly, I hope it sparks something in you. I hope it spurs you to write your own accidental ethnography.

Along the way, I hope to stumble into you, and have a conversation about it all. That would be delightful.

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# FOREWORD

I thought writing this foreword would be an easy assignment to complete. After all, I've known Chris Poulos since I hired him out of his PhD program to be an assistant professor in a department I then chaired. Too, I knew a thing or two about family secrets, having spent the better part of five years researching and writing about my own. And I've read and admired his previous ethnographic work. So, when Chris invited me to contribute a few words to his book, I agreed.

Like I said, I thought it would be easy. Knock it out in a weekend easy.

It has *not* been easy. And the work has added up to a lot more than a weekend. Why? Describing why that is the case, in fact, is the nature of this particular narrative problem. It is the problem—albeit a happy one—of explaining what hasn't been easy.

For one thing, I have found myself delighted and yet confounded by the rare intelligence and true innovation that ranges throughout this book, which is, I warn you in advance, an intriguing story and a totally absorbing read. I knew Chris had great talent, just not *this* particular great talent. What he does so well is to engage the concept of family secrets by interrogating his own family's secrets, at once seemingly as ordinary as yours or mine—from the spoiled innocence of utterances such as "Let's not tell them" or "Let's keep this between us"—through a steady and increasingly telling accumulation of the long-term effects of keeping those sources of lost innocence lost. So, instead those family secrets and conspiracies of silence seek, and find, alternative forms of expression: unspoken and therefore unresolved alcoholism, failed and problematic relationships, explosions of violent anger, nightmarish fears of being found out, and yet—through it all—moments of genuine humane surprise and sudden, almost noetic sensemaking, which sometimes occurs, as he shows us, through the alternative symbolic forms of expression we simply call "dreams."

I couldn't put it down. I couldn't stop identifying with it. Not that my stories are the same stories, of course, but they are close enough. Too narratively close, in

fact, for personal, much less scholarly, comfort. Chris's family secrets are not my family secrets, nor will they be yours, but my bet is you will find in them a certain symmetry of secrecy, silence, and its aftermath, which is the until now untold story of what it costs all of us to live this way, with our old secrets, with our uncomfortable silences, and with our troubled if occasionally revelatory dreams.

Yes. Exactly. *That's* what Dr. Christopher Poulos is really talking about. What he titles *Accidental Ethnography* is all about finding ourselves suddenly and irreversibly in unknown situations— "accidents"—that cannot, and should not, be ignored. We find ourselves in the most everyday of family experiences—finding an old photo album, listening to a story told reluctantly by a relative, anxiety about an encounter with someone close to us, a heart-pounding waking in the night, a peaceful, reflective walk in the day, or even in the midst of a daydream itself—and at the heart of it is a poignant ethnographic moment, layers of cultural coding inscribed on the very soul of the everyday. If only we take the time, and have the tools to examine it.

Chris teaches us to examine it. He provides the tools.

Here's the other thing. This is an immanently teachable book. The writing exercises that populate the ends of the chapters are entirely useful ways to think about and apply the lessons contained in the text. These lessons are no surprise to me. Chris has always been a gifted teacher who works very hard to show students how to engage ideas through examinations of their own personal experiences and taken-for-granted or at least unquestioned narratives. What makes this book's applications unique are their ability to make students, including those of us who think of ourselves as lifelong learners, think on a higher level of reflective engagement.

Which brings me to my final point. One of the consistent joys of reading Chris Poulos's work is that it so thoroughly integrates his intellectual background in religion, philosophy, and communication studies. Because he draws on these diverse and seemingly disparate sources of understanding, what we have is an inspiring record of a cultivated habit of mind—a way of disciplined thinking through life experiences that makes productive and creative uses of intellectual engagement. Many times reading through these chapters I found myself stopped in my tracks, saying "Hmmmm." Sometime later, I would once again return to the narrative after having made a sympathetic mental and emotional journey of my own based on his encouragement to do so and his own musings.

All of which is only to say, "Oh my!"

"Oh my," because what you have in your hands is a truly remarkable story that will engage, I have no doubt, your most creative and intellectual energies. If it were a new novel or work of creative nonfiction, and if this were a perfect world, it would win some important awards for its narrative quality. If it were a textbook on how to do "accidental ethnography," it would become a standard reference work, which, anyway, I think it will. From the other side of this story, let me say only this: I envy you the reading experience you are about to have.

Your secrets will never be the same.

H. L. Goodall, Jr.

# PREFACE

On a recent morning, I happened to stop by my parents' house for a brief visit. My parents, Bill and Nancy Poulos, are in their midseventies and semiretired. It turned out that only my father was home, but he was apparently in the shower; my mother was out running errands. I decided to wait, to at least visit with my dad for a few minutes. As I strolled into the kitchen, something caught my eye. On the little built-in phone desk by the kitchen door sat what looked like a very old photo album. Perhaps these were photos of our family? My curiosity was aroused.

As I flipped the oversized book open, my hunch was confirmed. What greeted me were very old photographs—ranging in age from some time in the early twentieth century to the mid-1950s—mostly of my dad's Greek side of the family. Some of the people in the photos were easily recognizable to me: my Greek grandfather and his oldest child, my Aunt Nicky; my uncle Jim; my grandmother; my dad as a teenager. The family photos were arranged in no particular order and interspersed with photos of people I had never seen or heard of, most of whom appeared to be Greek like my grandfather. As my dad entered the room, he said:

"Yeah, that was Pop's old photo album. Mary found it when she cleaned out the basement."

"Cool," I replied. "Who are these people?" I point to a photo.

"Ah, those are some of Pop's Greek buddies. I think that guy's name was Nikkos or something," Dad replies with a slight smile flickering across his lips.

"And that would be one of Pop's stores?"

"Yeah, I think that's the one on Broad Street."

"This one of Uncle Jim is funny. He looks tough. Very much the James Dean type." My uncle Jim, who died in his early forties of cancer, is standing, in this photograph, next to a friend. His hair is thick and swept back, a little

greased. His short sleeves are rolled up a notch. He has a cigarette in his hand, a pack rolled up into one sleeve.

"Yeah. Jimmy was cool." My dad looks pensive, which is not his usual mood.

"Too bad about him, Dad. I'm sorry you lost him so early."

"I know. He lived a rough life. I think it *all* killed him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean his *whole* life—everything about it—broken marriage, no real prospects. He was smart, but he just couldn't find a line that suited him. Sure, he died of cancer. He smoked way too much, and he worked in the dry cleaning biz for too long. All those chemicals. But worse, he never seemed to be able to get it together. He just sort of drifted. And he kept drifting back home."

My father is opening up here. I decide to go with the energy of the moment: "Tell me more about Jimmy. What was he like?"

"Well, like I said, he was smart, and funny. But I think he drank too much. All those strange moments, like the time he came home with only part of the car. I think it was the drinking. And, well, that sort of ruined his marriage. But worst of all, it seemed he could never really leave home," Dad says.

"Why?"

"Well, I remember one time he asked me, 'How'd you do it?' I didn't know what he was talking about, so I said, 'Do what?' 'Leave home,' he replied. 'Leave *her*.' He was talking about Mom, of course, who was pretty possessive. So I just told him I had to, I got married, got a job, had a family. He looked at me funny, and said, 'Yeah, I tried that. I just can't seem to escape, to get away, to *leave*.' He just looked at me funny and walked away."

"Wow. That's tough," I respond. "I guess he found a way out eventually, eh?" My dad looks sad, very sad. It seems like he's had enough of this story, so I move on to another photograph: "Who's this?"

"Oh, that's your great-grandfather, George."

It's an old-fashioned photograph of a man with dark eyes, staring intently at the camera. He's wearing a suit, an old-fashioned hat perched jauntily on his head. He does not look happy.

"Seriously? In America? I thought he lived in Greece. Actually, I've never heard anything about him, never even knew his name until just now."

"Well, that's because we don't talk about him."

"Really? Why not?"

"Uh, I guess the story goes that he sort of abandoned his family in Greece."

"Really? What happened?"

"Well, I think he left his wife, my grandmother, when she was sick, and left her in the care of Pop's sister. Apparently, he came to America and never contacted them again."

"Wow. That's harsh."

"Yeah, Pop was furious at him. I think George followed Pop here. I mean, Pop came first and then his dad came. They were in contact at first, but when

Pop found out what had happened, he refused to speak to his father again. He never talked *about* him, either. As far as I know, my grandfather moved to California. Then, when he died, Pop got a call, asking what should be done with the body. Pop told them, 'Bury him.' That was it."

"Seriously? I have never heard any of this story until now. I didn't know he came to America, didn't know his name, nothing. How do you know all this?"

"Oh, I sort of pieced it together."

"And why have I never heard any of this until now?"

"Like I said, we don't talk about this kind of thing." We fall into thoughtful silence for a long moment.

"Hey, Dad. I like this. We should get together and talk more often. You know, you could tell me stories about your family."

"Well, if you put me on the spot, I may not be able to think of any."

"That's fine. Maybe we should just talk and see where it goes."

"Sure."

A brief, simple interlude in an ordinary day. But inside an aging book of photographs, we somehow found an opening to a story. What's more, at least one of the stories was a family secret, which seemed to just "slip out" in the spirit of the moment. A story that might otherwise never have been told, and certainly a rare moment for my otherwise taciturn father. I find hope in this moment: Secrets slipping into stories, stories building relationships, family history becoming *present*—all because of the opportunity presented, and seized, in the act of opening an old photo album.

There's a lesson here somewhere.

Indeed, perhaps this is a significant moment in my family's history—a turning point, an opportunity to engage our "narrative inheritance" (Goodall, 2005) in a new way. An accidental discovery—the photo album, hidden all these years in a dusty basement storeroom—led to an accidental revelation of a family secret, long held in silence—or at least relegated to the dusty basement of memory. Later, I asked my father if he had ever told that story about his grandfather to anyone else. "I think your mother knows," he replied.

And I found myself thinking, as I stared at this old book of photographs, "I wonder how many stories are buried here? How much of what's suggested by these photographs has never been spoken?" I thought immediately of Annette Kuhn's contention, in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995), that a family photograph is most interesting because of what is *suggested* by it. It's not what's *in* the photograph—though that content may be our first clue—but what's *around* it that is most fascinating. The space outside the frame of the photograph—and the people who inhabit that world and interpret both the photograph and the world it shows up in—have rich, varied, and sometimes startling stories to tell. Funny how something as simple as a photograph can trigger a revelation; funny how much is missing from every photograph, and how much each photograph might suggest.

And I was immediately struck by the contrast between this moment and most of the rest of my life in this family. This is a family that has long locked away "secret" knowledge behind a veil of silence. *We just don't talk about that sort of thing*—about the "skeletons" in the family closet, about abandonment, and alcoholism, and abuse, and suffering. We don't talk about our hurt, our loss, our grief, or the wrongdoings of others, especially of family members.

When we do talk, it is usually either "small talk," or a kind of verbal sparring match that seems to function as a way to skirt around the secrets, to keep people in their proper places in the family pecking order, and to keep the deeper emotional connections that may be available in genuine dialogue at arm's length.

We are separated, rather than united, by both our silence and our talk. We rarely fall into story. My family's "narrative inheritance" is an interrupted, truncated, cleansed narrative, mostly filled with long spaces of silence, the gaps only occasionally filled by words.

I have always wondered why.

Why don't we talk more?

Why *don't* we talk about *that* sort of thing?

What purposes are served by holding our secrets close?

Is the pain of our collective grief just too much to bear?

Are we afraid to "bare our souls" through deeper engagement?

And what might be gained by moving from secrecy to story?

Why do families—which, presumably, could be the most intimate relationships we share in this world—so often have so much difficulty engaging at a deeper level?

Finally, what hope may be found in the possibilities presented when secrets do slip into stories?

Well, this is exactly what this book is about. As an inquiry into family secrecy, I hope that it will be read in the spirit of finding hope in the thin places we may fall into—by accident or by intention—that allow for openings to new possibilities, that allow families to move out of the shadows of secret misgivings into the reassuring light of story.

## Hope

As I inquire into the depths and contours and possibilities of the secret worlds of families, I necessarily encounter some of the "darker" moments of the human spirit. But, along the way, I discover—in the eruption of a story, in the soft reminiscent light of accidental talk, in a burst of memory overstepping forgetting—a world of hope.

Of course, as we spin about on this blue planet we call Earth, we all suffer from moments that seem to be driven by whims of fate—moments of loss and pain and grief. Try as we might, even those of us who spend time preparing

ourselves spiritually are almost never ready for the shock—the trauma, pain, grief, and suffering that come with significant loss.

Even when we expect it.

Disruption and tragedy, trauma and loss, death and destruction: Events in our world often strike us mute, leave us breathless, speechless, shaken, stunned. We find ourselves shrouded in the mists of confusion, lost in the shadows of dislocation, covered by the veil of sorrow that seems to engulf us at these moments.

At these times, we are acutely aware of the finite nature of this life we lead.

At these moments of interruption, anxiety may seize us. And anxiety can be a formidable force in this world.

In this post-postmodern moment, in these years after 9/11, in this Age of Anxiety, in this world of wars on terror and global warming and nuclear threats and grinding axes and explosive violence and disappearing resources and stiffening ideologies, we may well feel lost, bewildered, anxious, afraid. Despair, as Kierkegaard (1980) tells us, may, at these times, lurk about, just waiting for the opportune time to pounce and take hold. And despair, says that mad philosophical genius, is a sickness—a "sickness unto death."

When trauma strikes a family—especially a family not trained or prepared or talented in the arts of fending off despair—the wound may quickly grow so deep that it cannot heal of its own accord. What happens at this point is crucial. We are at a moment of the most profound choosing. We can lapse into silence, the kind of dead/dread silence that morphs into secrecy—and thus spin a life of pain and sadness and mistrust and defensiveness and continuing, growing, living, darkening despair.

*Or* we can open ourselves to possibility. Here we find hope: in the soft conversation, in the thin wisp of a dream, in a flash of insight, in the in-breaking of memory, in the warm embrace of a friend, in a moment of laughter, in the light that finds its way in through a crack, in a story well told, in the joy of a child at play, in the music of the spheres, in the accident of discovery, in the drama that proceeds around us and through us and with us—proceeds inexorably, continues whether we want it to or not—here we find hope!

And hope may be our last best weapon against the darkness that threatens us.

I locate the nexus of possibility in this hope.

And then: We are called to *action*.

The action we are called to from this space of hope is, it turns out, *communicative* action. And in communication, as flawed and messy and misguided as it can be, I find a shimmering thread of hope. If, as my friend and colleague Buddy Goodall (2006b) puts it, "communication is—like our lives—best understood as a spirit in transit made manifest through *voice*—in talk, through stories, through what we say and what we choose not to say, as well as the other bodily architecture of sensing, feeling, knowing and being" (p. 37), then I, to achieve my full humanness, must find my voice to penetrate the dark shroud of secrecy.