

One version of my public narrative

3-21-18, WALTS Leader Participant

Just before my 6th birthday, my family moved to Guadalajara, Jalisco in Mexico. None of us spoke any Spanish. One of the things I am forever grateful to my parents for is that they chose to put my three older sisters and me in the Mexican schools where we immediately entered into an all-Spanish school day. I was in 1st grade in the States, but they put us all back a year, figuring it would take us a year to learn Spanish and then we could pick up where we had left off learning the content in our classes.

About a year later, after many, many days of sitting in Kinder and then first grade not understanding a word, I walked into my classroom one day, saw a few Spanish syllables on the board, realized I could read them and suddenly, somehow realized I had learned Spanish.

I have many wonderful memories of my childhood years in Mexico — too many to relate here. What I will say, is that slowly over time, Mexico became my world. My sisters and I were the only Americans in our all girl school. By the time we returned to the States five years later, we only spoke Spanish with each other. All my friends were Mexican. The only people I spoke English with were my parents.

When we returned, I was told we were going home, but everything I knew, everything I loved was in Tepic. When I climbed onto that pullman train in the middle of the night in January of 1963, I knew my world would never be the same, though I had no idea what it was going to be like.

In my new 5th grade class in Nucla, Colorado, Mrs. Hathaway asked me to come to her desk to read for her. Though my mother read to us in English, I had never been in school in English. I was struggling along, but was relieved to see two words a few lines down the page that were familiar. “Los Ángeles” I said when I got there. Mrs. Hathaway gently touched my arm (I can still feel her hand!) and said, “Carol, here we say Las Angeles.” I understood that everything I knew, everything I loved was not welcome there. I understood I had to leave my bilingual, bicultural self at the door.

Years later, my anger at Mrs. Hathaway’s dismissal of who I was turned me into a bilingual teacher in California, promising myself that no child would have to leave their language at the door of my classroom. I taught 1st and 2nd and spent 6 years as the Bilingual Coordinator in a small district.

Seventeen years later, I began to feel restless, wanting something different, not sure what. One day the pastor of my church, who knew this, said to me, “Next Tuesday there is going to be a meeting with a group of religious leaders of different faiths. We’ve been meeting for two years, not sure what will come of it. You might be interested. Want to come along?”

The following Tuesday, I met him and off we went. I was so distressed by the ongoing saga of my then 17 year old runaway daughter that I didn’t really catch his words when he said, “There might be a job opportunity out of this.”

We walked into a room at the San Juan Bautista Retreat Center. There were around 50 religious leaders there: Catholic priests, Sister Religious, Protestant pastors: Presbyterian, Methodist, my own United Church of Christ, the African American Church of God in Christ, two Jewish Rabbis. The room felt electric to me. After introductions, the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) organizer Ken Smith gave a presentation on Walter Brueggemann's 'The Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity'. I was riveted. I found myself, literally, sitting on the edge of my chair. There was a banner up on the wall: Faith, Power, Action. I could not keep my eyes off it. These people were talking about the reality that there actually is enough of everything in the world for everyone, and that together we could create a vehicle by which to act on that belief. Something within me was awakening to a memory of something with which I deeply resonated that I did not realize I had left behind. This was my introduction to the IAF.

My father was a minister, trained at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California in the early-to-mid 1940's. At that time, PSR was all about the Social Gospel, all about our obligation as Christians to act on the gospel for the common good of all humanity. All about seeing Jesus as someone who over and over again spoke truth to power on behalf of the marginalized, who was willing to break the law in order to serve and act on behalf of someone in need.

Long story short, Ken Smith hired me as an IAF organizer. Three years later, we founded a new IAF organization (COPA) Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action, on the Central Coast of California. The founding assembly at Sheridan Hall in Salinas with over 1,000 people (white, brown, black, rich, poor, English and Spanish all in the mix) was one of the most satisfying moments in my life. COPA leaders made a commitment to continue to build power to work on Immigration, Education, Safe Communities, Health Care, Economic Opportunity and Housing. Later, I worked with Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

This work changed me. Changed how I walk through the world. I came to understand my own story in new way. I developed a public life. I came to understand there is a systematic, strategic way to build power that can be used to create justice. When I called a Texas State Representative saying "I am Carol Keeney, organizer with Valley Interfaith" and got an immediate response, it had nothing to do with my name. It had everything to do with 100's, 1,000's of people who had systematically built power, one conversation at a time, across Texas for 20 - 30 years. I liked being taken seriously. I liked being a part of that power.

After six years as a staff organizer, I returned to teaching 2nd grade at a dual immersion bilingual school in Watsonville, California. About eight weeks into that first year back, I found myself feeling helpless, cynical, powerless.

At about the same time, I happened to go to a COPA meeting, the organization now about 5 years old. It felt so good to be there. To sit in that mix of people who shared my values and who were committed to the very difficult, slow respectful work of organizing for power to work for the common good in our community. Sitting there, it became so clear to me that I need to be connected to power or my frustration with bureaucracy, my anger at injustice turns back upon my own self and I feel helpless. I become cynical. I need to be connected to power, to something greater, bigger than myself.

So, I returned to COPA. This time as a leader organizing within my institution, first at my church, later at my school.

In 2016, after 35 years in California, I retired and moved to Montrose. I have had to build a new life, looking to the things I have been passionate about, finding things that I love to do. One of the things I have found (thanks to Robyn Cascade!) is the Great Old Broads for Wilderness. I have been a backpacker for 40 years. The mountains have always been my sanctuary, my solace, the place 'I take myself to heal the earthly wounds that people give me' (Nancy Wood). We'll see where the trail leads next.