

Coming Home!

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Sunday, May 10, 2015, Worchester, MA

My name is Matthew Bakerson, I am 48, and I live in Worchester, Massachusetts. I used to be an academic whose specialty was architectural history. Today is the first day of my new life. To record this profound event I am starting a diary (which I have never had before). I am moving to California. In five days a truck will pick up my belonging — my books, clothes, furniture (what little I have), tchotchkes, and mementos. They will be taken to storage in the Los Angeles area. Also in five days I will take a Greyhound bus across the country to stay with a friend in Los Angeles until I can find a job and a place to live. (I had to sell my car.) On the way I will spend a couple days in Long Bridge, Minnesota, where I grew up — a place I haven't seen for 25 years.

Monday, May 11, 2015, Worchester, MA

My family left Long Bridge when I was 11, and since then I have lived in Massachusetts. I had a very happy life here until five years ago. What happened then was a series of crushing events. I really don't understand how I survived it all. My sad saga started with the sudden and completely unexpected death of my father, Andrew Bakerson, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Brandeis University, just two years after he retired. He was spending his days in retirement tending to my mother, Gloria Bakerson, who was dying of cancer. He was healthy, strong, energetic, vibrant — a powerful man whom I adored and admired and whom I strove to be like in so many ways. He died of a heart attack.

Simply put, I could not come to terms with his death. I was paralyzed, unable to function. My sister Jane took care of the funeral and took care of my mother. I could do nothing. My mother died four months later. At the end, she was in a great deal of pain, but her normally happy disposition never left her. She was deeply worried about me — as she should have been. I was like a man in a canoe who is caught in a strong current and is heading toward a series of waterfalls.

Tuesday, May 12, 2015, Worcester, MA

In the year before my parents died, I was a tenure-track Assistant Professor at Jonas Rice University in Worcester, Massachusetts in the Department of History. I was two years away from my academic tenure review. I was within a year of finishing a book on alpine farmhouses as well as three major papers. I also had started preliminary work on two short papers that I expected to finish well before my tenure application was due. The Chair of my department thought that, if I finished my book and these papers as planned, I would have a very strong case for being granted tenure given that I had a solid research record prior to JRU and an excellent teaching record after joining JRU. I knew, however, that he wished I had pursued some less challenging projects that would have given me some early publications for my CV. He was worried that I might not be able to finish everything in time. I wasn't worried at all. My book was coming along very well and the three major papers were almost ready to be submitted for publication.

Then my parents died and I couldn't get anything done — no research, no writing, and barely any teaching. The book, with which I had been totally obsessed and thought about every free moment, was forgotten for months. The papers too were forgotten. I was like a sail boat in the doldrums, permanently becalmed. The Chair strongly urged me to apply for disability. But I could detect no disability in me — I just had to get back to work. The Chair then tried to get me to take a leave of absence. But I felt that going for tenure was now or never. I will make this sad story short by saying that my efforts to get back on track failed completely and I was denied tenure — which effectively meant that I would never be able to get a tenure-track job again.

Wednesday, May 13, 2015, Worcester, MA

Being denied tenure was the last straw for my wife, Angela. She had become increasingly dissatisfied with me. I was not the professor she expected to be married to. Living in Worcester was not living in Boston. She felt that I cared about my teaching and research more than I cared about her and our two daughters, Ellie and Wren, and that I had increasingly neglected them. There is some truth about the neglect. The pressure to achieve tenure did sometimes cause me to put my teaching and research first. However, I do not hesitate to say that I was always fully devoted to my wife and daughters and have always loved them. Nevertheless, my wife asked for a divorce and got one, despite my many efforts to find a different way forward. What made it even worse is that my young-adult daughters took the side of their mother and — it is brutal to say — stopped thinking of me as their father.

This divorce and rejection by my daughters — on top of the unexpected death of my father, the horrible last months of my mother, and my failure to obtain tenure — pushed my mental health to its breaking point. I don't really remember what happened. Apparently, at some point I started screaming as loud as possible, and then I ran up to my daughters' old rocking horse, wrapped my arms around the neck of horse, continued screaming, and won't let go of the horse's neck. I was admitted immediately to the psych ward of the city hospital where I remained for six weeks.

Thursday, May 14, 2015, Worcester, MA

Today the truck came and collected my stuff. I am leaving Worcester by bus this evening. It will take a day and a half and several bus trips to get to Long Bridge. It has been a year since my mental breakdown. I am much better now. I was helped by an excellent therapist who told me, bluntly, that my house had burned down and could never be recovered, but I could build a new one, maybe even a better one. I don't know how she did it, but she got me to apply for a job as a history teacher in the Worcester school system. I got the job and spent the last year teaching four different history courses to high school students. It helped me rediscover my joy of learning and teaching what I have learned. It also gave me the confidence to start a new life in California.

Friday, May 15, 2015, Indianapolis, MA

I am in the Indianapolis Greyhound station waiting for my next bus. I should arrive in Long Bridge early tomorrow morning. I will stay in a local motel for a couple days and then continue my bus trip across the country. Long Bridge is a small town, not much bigger than a village, just south of the Twin Cities. I lived in Long Bridge from the time I was born until we moved to the Boston area when I was 11 and Jane was 9. Dad, Mom, Jane, and I lived with my Grandma Vera in a big farmhouse built by my great-grandfather, who owned a large, very prosperous farm. My grandfather, my father's father, inherited this farm and farmed his land until he died a couple years before I was born. Grandma Vera sold off all the land except three acres, the house, and the main barn.

My father went to graduate school at the University of Minnesota and after he finished a Ph.D. in sociology taught for a few years at several colleges in the Twin Cities until he landed his dream job at Brandeis. My father and mother were happy to leave Long Bridge. Both were avid atheists who found it very hard to feel at home in Long Bridge, where Church and Christianity played a central role in the community. It is possible that Dad could have

gotten a good teaching job in the Twin Cities, yet Mom wanted to go back east to the part of the country she came from. I was extremely close to my grandmother, so moving so far away was very hard for me. It was something I cried about many times. We visited Grandma for one week at Christmas every year until she died when I was 23. Visiting Long Bridge every winter was fun, but it was always too cold and snowy to visit the places I liked to go when I lived there. We never visited Long Bridge except at Christmas. My father would usually visit Grandma some other times during the year, but he would go alone since one visit a year was all my mother could stand.

Saturday, May 16, 2015, Long Bridge, MA

I arrived at Long Bridge early this morning. The ticket salesperson told me how to get to the motel where I was staying. It was about a mile walk from the bus station. I got to the motel without difficulty and had an interesting talk with Jill, the manager. I told her that, when I was boy, I lived in Long Bridge in my grandmother's house. She knew of my grandmother and knew that she had lived for many years just outside of town. Even though my grandmother died 25 years ago, she seems to be fondly remembered in this town.

I spent the afternoon walking around the town and rediscovered places I had long forgotten. Jill told me about a nice trail that runs along the river, which I followed. At one point the trail climbs up a hill that has gorgeous views of the river and the surrounding countryside. The walk, and particularly the views from the hill, brought to light many memories from my childhood that had been completely lost. Near the end of the trail was a lovely pond surrounded by woods. Seeing the pond reminded me that this pond was where my friends and I hung out, where we fished, looked for frogs, made rafts, and played in the water. To my great surprise, a lost memory came back to me of how I spied on four high school kids, two boys and two girls, who were skinny dipping in the pond — something I never told my parents.

Sunday, May 17, 2015, Long Bridge, MA

Today is Sunday. Jill suggested I come with her to the local church service. I am not an atheist like my parents, but I certainly am no church goer. So I could hardly believe that I agreed to join her. The service was nothing special for me, but it is very apparent that it was special to the people who attended it. The church was pretty much full. After the service I was invited to the church luncheon, which again I surprised myself by agreeing to attend. Everyone was interested in me and knowing that I was Vera's grandson. They

treated me like a family member and wanted to learn everything about me. Of course, there were many things I didn't tell them.

When I returned to the motel I asked Jill if there would be any problem if I kept my room for a few more days. She said she was very happy that I wanted to stay longer.

Monday, May 18, 2015, Long Bridge, MA

I asked Jill if she knew where the house my grandmother owned was located. She said she did and that nearly everyone knows that house once belonged to Grandma Vera. She also told me that the house is about five miles outside of town, that it was bought by a doctor after my grandmother died, and that it has been on the market for at least a year. She suggested I call the agent selling house, an elderly man named Mike Henson. I called him and told him I grew up in that house and wanted to take a look at it and the barn. He said that he would be most privileged to show me the house. He acted like I was a prospective buyer which I tried to dispel.

I had two reasons I wanted to see the house. First, it was where I lived for the first 11 years of my life. So I was eager to see it again. Second, I remember when I was young there was something special about the barn. I didn't know what it was, but as an architectural historian I naturally was interested in finding out what made it special. I wished I had asked my grandmother about the barn before she died. None of my other relatives could tell me anything special about it, not even my father.

Mike came to get me in the afternoon. As we were driving to the house, I asked Mike if he knew of anything that made the barn special. He said that there is really no other barn in the county like it. The framing is highly unusual and requires much less lumber than a normal barn. He also said the craftsmanship of the barn is extraordinary, so much so that people from all over the state have come to study and admire it. He said my great-grandfather built both the house and the barn and was a highly successful farmer and that in this part of the state he is a legend and that someone should write a book about the barn and about him as well. (I thought to myself, probably not a book, but maybe a paper.)

We could see the house about a mile before we arrived at its site. It was wonderful to see it again. Built in an Italianate style, it had lovely brick work and was surrounded by five magnificent trees. I asked to look at the barn first. Walking into it brought forth a flood of happy memories. I could also see the clever framing and exquisite craftsmanship that Mike had been talking about, something I never appreciated as a child. Yes, maybe the barn does deserve a book. Seeing the barn made me almost giddy. I was almost

running from one part of the barn to the next. I couldn't believe how happy I was to see it after so many years.

We next walked over to the house. Like seeing the barn, seeing the porch flooded me with memories. I felt a bit woozy. And then we entered the house. I immediately walked into the main room. I suddenly, unexpectedly was overcome with emotion. I sat down and started crying. I don't know what Mike was thinking at that moment, but I had no words to explain what I was feeling. After crying for a few minutes, I stood up and proceeded to slowly walk through the house. Every step ignited more lost memories and filled me with more pleasant thoughts. When we were driving back to the motel, we didn't talk much, but when Mike dropped me off he said to call him if I wanted to buy the house — he seemed to have read my mind.

Tuesday, May 19, 2015, Long Bridge, MA

The next day I asked Jill if she knew anything about possible teaching jobs in the area. She said that there were three high schools near Long Bridge and that all of them were short of teachers. She gave me the phone number of a friend of hers who was a teacher. I called him and asked him about open teaching positions. I told him that I had extensive experience teaching history at the college level and some experience at the high school level. He said that there were two history positions that would be open next year and that, if I were interested in either one of them, I could be hired immediately.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about whether I should live here in Long Bridge and whether I could manage to buy Grandmother's old house using my retirement funds for a down payment and a teacher's salary for the monthly mortgage payments.

Wednesday May 20, 2015, Long Bridge, MA

I got up early today. I told Jill that I decided to stay in Long Bridge. She seemed very happy with my decision. I then called Mike and told him I wanted to buy the house and barn. He was also very happy and said that he would do whatever he could to make it happen. After breakfast I walked to the pond and spend some time thinking about the new life I was starting, the life that would replace the one that had burned down. I felt like I had finally come home. Tomorrow I will have to figure out how I can get my belonging sent here from California.