We all construct our lives. That is, our lives are consciously and unconsciously created, enacted, by each of us, day by day, fabricated from our hopes, dreams, beliefs, expectations, social interactions, reflections, daydreams, attitudes, values, and, equally critically, our social locations. It is critical to know, recounting autobiographically my professional journey, that my social location is white, female, southern, the descendant of mountain people, clannym and taciturn with strangers, and Georgia red-clay farmers, freeholders, cotton growers and pine resin contractors. For those for whom birth order matters (one brand of psychologists), I am my father’s fourth child of five, the first girl.

The fact that we construct our lives—create, enact, make them up as we go—does not alter the fact that there are very real, tangible material circumstances to our lives. I grew up in Tampa, Florida, a very real physical place, a far sleepier and dreamier place, it seems, than the booming city I find today, and often spent parts of summers on my father’s farm outside Baxley, Georgia, a farmstead left to him and his brothers as an inheritance by his mother, with a farmhouse occupied by my father’s aunt, my great-aunt Laura, and her third husband. I loved those summers, even with no indoor plumbing or running water, and found Aunt Laura and Uncle “Pat” Patterson bonny company for a gangly kid. On the farm, I learned a
lot of largely useless skills, at least useless for my life today: how to feed corn through a sheller for feed and seed, how to avoid the corn snakes that lived among the dried ears, how to unseat crabby hens for their eggs while avoiding egg-sucking black snakes around the nests, how to milk a surly cow, how to haul water from a cool draw well, how to harvest scuppernongs from the tall trees they climbed, how to ride the mules barebacked with only a rope halter, how to drive a tractor, and how to cook a lovely peach cobbler over an open hearth fire. My memories, as is true for all of us, make me partially who I am today.

One memory which stands out from the early years, largely because, in the wake of a professional life I have enjoyed and derived many satisfactions from, is a high school memory. My mother wanted my sister and me to go to college, a luxury she never had, having come of age during the Great Depression. My father, however, a bit more old-fashioned, believed college to be largely a waste for young girls, unless they planned, as one of my aunts had, to become school teachers. Good grades were drummed into both of us, however, and my father’s “take” on the world was that he earned the money, and our “jobs” were to be students, period. So we earned good grades, my sister and I (as had our brothers before us), made the National Honor Society, and went to a high school out of our residential district that would today be labeled a magnet high school. A beautiful Gothic building, it was dedicated to academically gifted students.¹

Despite doing well academically, and being extremely busy with school activities and clubs, one of the high school counselors, Mrs. Ruby Tyree, had other ideas. Ruby Tyree and her family had moved down from Georgia about the same time my father’s family had moved to Florida during the Depression. Somehow, although I never got a clear connection, the families knew each other well. And so my father trusted Ruby Tyree, who got “constructed” in my mind as my high school nemesis. Ruby Tyree had somehow decided, despite my good grades and deep involvement in the high school theater group, the high school annual staff, and other things, that I was “not college material.” Mrs. Tyree’s judgment about me—based no doubt on my somewhat lighthearted approach to schoolwork, and a bit of high school airheadedness—influenced my father greatly, and he opposed my being sent to school at all. Fortunately for me, I was a National Merit Finalist, and got enough scholarships that I could partly escape the Cotton Mather-like pronouncements of the well-intentioned Ruby Tyree regarding my academic ability, for I loved university life, and the longer

¹ In the May 16, 2005 issue of Newsweek magazine that high school was named the 10th best (out of the 100 best) in America.