

The Other Side of the Stone

Student Conversations with a Graveyard

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*Old cemeteries are what some theologians have called “thin” places—
places where the veil separating two worlds is translucent.
They are therefore rich in potential for student writing.*

Imagine. A school as big as a county and safe from the effects of bad decisions made by men in suits and ties as they await their pensions.

Imagine. A classroom in this school that has a graveyard, a church, and a time machine (but no computer).

I taught in such a school. Oh, did I mention that God designed the building? Therefore its interior walls were not pale green concrete blocks. They were layer upon layer of forest and grassy hillside. The floor was never swept and the ceiling often leaked. The entire decor, both in color and form, changed with the passage of time, whether measured in seconds or seasons. This school is called the Upstate of South Carolina. It is a mountainous and piedmont area of the state that is one of the Appalachian region’s best-kept secrets. Its rivers cascade southward bearing ancient names given to them by the Cherokee: Chattooga, Chauga, Toxaway, Tugaloo. It is home to a rare wild flower, the Oconee bell. It is not Charleston or Myrtle Beach. There are no T-shirts that celebrate its existence, yet its history is rich in the joys and tragedies of common folk. The whites who settled the area were Scots-Irish who drifted down the Appalachians from Pennsylvania, compelled by the restlessness of their Celtic past. Their descendents are still restless in their jacked-up four-wheel drive Confederate pickups. The few blacks were slaves of a handful of marginal plantations (the land is only moderately fertile and quite hilly). Blacks living in the Upcountry today are devout, conservative people who have often done a better job holding on to family values than their white neighbors.

One day while strolling the halls of my school, I came upon a mysterious old cemetery, hidden deep in the woods on the crest of a hill. A lifelong resident of the area had told me that there was an old slave burial ground here somewhere. I had found it. The site was large—about a half acre—and was roughly organized into crooked rows, so as not to contradict nature too much. Viewed from above, the rows of rough gravestones would have looked like a page of downward-sloping sentences that a third-grade boy might have written. Most of the graves were identifiable by elongated sunken areas from two to eight feet long and two to three feet wide. There were many trees among the graves. Some were pines fifty feet tall and more. An old roadbed meandered along the front and the faint, sunken shadow of an even older road curved around the end of the cemetery like a ghostly mother’s arm clutching her children to her breast. There were no signs that a church building had ever been nearby. While almost all of the grave markers were simply fieldstones on edge, three of them were made from white marble with professional

lettering. The stones were etched by weather and had moss and lichens growing on them. On one of them was a curious inscription that read:

Rev. Tenos Maxwell
Born 1818
Died
May 1, 1885
Husband of M. Maxwell
For 20 yrs a Baptist
Preacher
He died in full hope of
eternal Rest.

A shiver ran up my spine. This stone recalled a person who had a life before my great grandparents ever imagined me. The physical proof of his life lay six feet under my feet inexorably confirming sacred truth: *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. I stood as a visitor in a congregation of spirits and lost liturgies. “If you’re a visitor this morning please raise your hand and one of our ushers . . .” No. It was not like that here. I heard the clank of shovels against stone and the thud of earth being thrown on coffin lids. I imagined the wagon bearing the remains drawn by mules and the funeral procession of family and friends filling the woods and hollows with their songs of pain and joy.

Voices from the Past

In the weeks and months that followed, my students and I often went to the cemetery to meditate, and I always tried to conjure up the imagined scenes of the past. There was nothing morose or dark about my attraction to this spot. On the contrary, each time I went there I left with a powerful sense of peace and well-being. My students would urge me, “Man, we need to find out what this place is.” Or, “Let’s have school up here. This is the kind of shit I want to study. This is real stuff.” “Yeah, I could dig that,” another would reply. “Aw, sick man! You’re really warped.” My students were what some would call “rough.”

A field trip to the local county courthouse informed us that Tenos Maxwell was a black man who was associated with the plantation owned by Samuel E. Maxwell. We also learned that after emancipation he had owned land in the vicinity of the cemetery. The few tidbits of information that we were able to discover served to convince us that Tenos Maxwell and his cemetery could serve as a centerpiece for a meaningful local history project for us. Besides, my students (in their own words) were “totally pumped” about the idea.

Fair Play Camp School is a residential therapeutic camping program for emotionally disturbed adolescent boys. The academic component of the program is experiential, thematic, and integrated across the curriculum. Every six weeks, a different theme is chosen and all the school subjects are taught through the theme. Could my students and I

“hear” the story that this mysterious place had to tell? The therapeutic potential of this idea was appealing. I had for years used storytelling and an imaginative approach to history instruction as a way to elicit reflective attitudes in my students. I knew that the concept of “voices from the past” was a powerful one. So, it had come to this. Some special ed teachers burn out; I was now hearing voices.

My plan was to use archeological, historical, and ethnographic research methods to take my nine students on a journey into the local past. They simply wanted to satisfy their insatiable curiosity about a mysterious place. Mystery. Are there questions about mystery on the state-sponsored “prove-you’re-teaching-the-brats-something-and-we’ll-give-you-another-year’s-funding” tests?

BLAKE: Chief Pat [that’s what they called me], tell the other guys what you told me about the stones talkin’ and stuff. (We are sitting in the graveyard in a circle planning our project.)

CHIEF PAT: Guys, imagine if these stones could talk. What would they tell us?

SIGGY: Man, they’d tell us stories that’d make our hairs stand on end!

WES: Tears. Lots of tears and screamin’. Shit like that. Man, I went to a black funeral one time and a couple of ladies came unglued, like hollerin’ and fallin’ down and rollin’ their eyes back in their heads. It was weird. You think that stuff went on here?

CHIEF PAT: Probably so. Life was hard for these folks. Death was never very far away. You guys still up for this?

GROUP: Yeah, let’s do it man. This is *worth* learning.

The first phase of the project was to clear away the layers of fallen leaves and debris from the cemetery so that we could carefully examine the entire area. We were able to identify 118 gravesites, some with marker stones, some identifiable only by a sunken area in the ground. We also identified and documented 23 stones that had decipherable markings,

We spread shaving cream over stones thought to have inscriptions and when we smoothed the cream with a squeegee we were able to clearly see what was carved in the stones. Some of these had a surprising effect on us all. One in particular was grave number 92.

This grave had a granite slab about sixteen inches tall, with a rounded top that had obviously been carved to shape. When the shaving cream was applied, the inscription *JMC Feb 1 1885* stood out starkly in white against the gray of the stone. It had been carved quite deeply, so the letters and numbers were easily read. We marveled at its clarity. Then a couple of boys began to measure the distance between the headstone and footstone. It was forty-eight inches. The reality of what we had discovered made us fall silent...until one of the students spoke up. “This was just a kid.” Another joined in, “I’m

only a little taller than forty-eight inches.” One by one, my students and I came to touch the inscription, no doubt lovingly carved by a grieving father or brother in order to make sure that this dear lost child would not be forgotten. As we ran our fingers over the letters and numbers, we all participated in that long-forgotten act of love, and we felt honored that we had recovered its memory. I recalled a similar experience when I first visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and ran my finger down a list of names until it stopped on the name of a dear friend. One of my students recorded the following thoughts in his journal at the end of the day:

One morning while we were identifying grave stones we came to grave number 92. We squirted shaving cream on the stone and when we squeegeed it off, out came “JMC Feb 1 1885.” The headstone was just a flat rock, but it was carefully carved into a nice shape. We measured the grave and it was only about four feet long. We concluded that this was a child’s grave. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I started to feel bad for this person. I thought about how hard their life probably was. This person probably saw a lot of things that not many people have seen before. It made me feel pretty lucky.

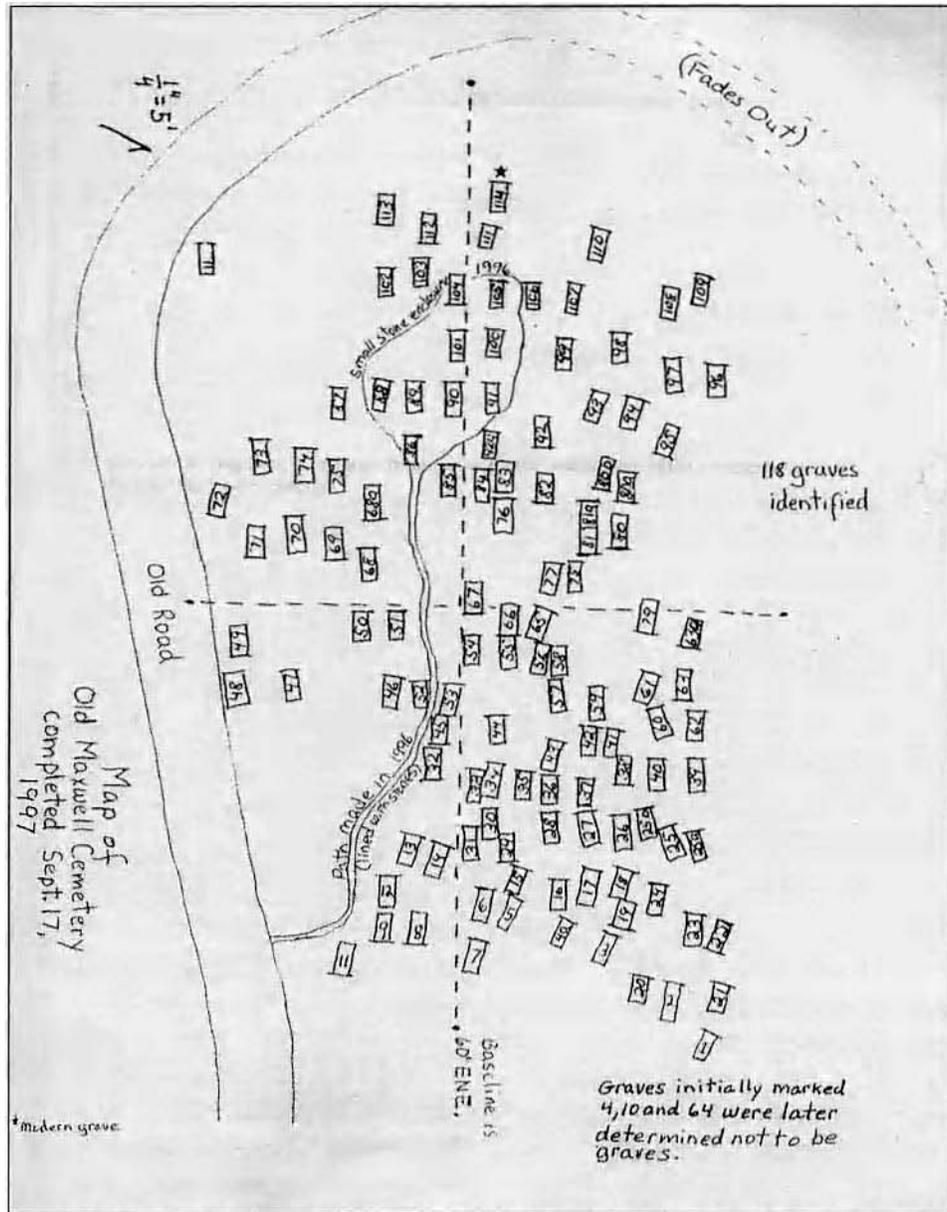
This young man’s father had deserted him, his sister, and his mother when he was just an infant. He struggled daily with the injustice of this act. He understood the seeming injustice in the death of a child after a short life of hardship.

“Chief Pat, we need to go to the black church up the road. They gotta know about this place.” The nearest African-American house of worship was New Promiseland Baptist Church. It was a tiny congregation comprised mainly of three or four extended families. I didn’t know if any of these folks knew anything about the cemetery, but my students were eager to find out. We went to visit their deacon, Mr. Curtis Goodine.

One thing we found out right away was that Mr. Goodine was not going to automatically answer our questions about the cemetery just because we had good intentions. Our first visit convinced us that the only way for us to actually enlist the members of this congregation was to earn their trust. “Hear now. Y’all come to revival meetin’s and I b’lieve y’all’ll find some folks what knows somethin’ about that ol’ graveyard.” The summer revival started the next Thursday. We said that by all means, we would be there.

The meeting room was built to hold about fifty or sixty people. As my nine students, their two counselors, and my family walked in, we found ourselves in the midst of at least one hundred worshipers (all black). We were seated as a group (several folks were made to move to make room for us). We looked (and felt) very *white* in that room. Even my one black student was nervous having to be in there with this group of white people. We fidgeted and sang and observed and all of a sudden the minister, Reverend Sloan, was calling to us. “Brother Pat Pritchard. Don’t you and your students from the camp have a song for us?” It was not really phrased as a question. It was expected. “Amen, yes! Give us a song, brother!” We all looked at each other. One of the boys suggested the song, “I Want Us to Be Together in Heaven.” Everyone nodded in assent. At least we all knew it.

*You may have a fancy car, brand new house that shines by far
 You may live to be a hundred years old
 But if you have not been saved, it all ends with the grave.
 But I want us to be together in heaven.*



*Cemetery Map from the student publication If These Stones Could Talk:
 The Rediscovery of the Old Maxwell Cemetery.*

I noticed that we seemed to be singing in at least three different keys at the same time. However, we were getting some serious sounding amens. It felt good.

*I want us to be together in heaven
 I want to walk down the streets of pure gold
 I want to run through the fields of green clover*

*See the mansions, smell the flowers,
Hear the singing, it's all ours
See the river gently flowing,
Feel the gentle breezes blowing,
I want us to be together in heaven.*

I looked around and noticed that several people had their handkerchiefs out dabbing at their eyes. A woman held her hand high, waving it back and forth, and shouted, "YES, Lord!" As we completed our obligatory song, I realized that we had unknowingly conveyed the message that the New Promiseland folks (and all folks) wanted to hear. The message was: *We accept you. We value you.*

One of my students exclaimed upon being handed a copy of the book he helped to write, "I came here to work on my problems and now I'm an author."

The New Promiseland Family

From that night on we were adopted members of the New Promiseland family. People came to us and volunteered information about the Maxwell Cemetery, or gave us names of people who could help us with our study. In addition to this, we were treated as honored guests every time we went to church there, which was often. I was looking for affective student responses from this project. Once New Promiseland became a partner, we were in an affective gold mine. They made the lives of the people buried in the cemetery have current meaning. Tenos Maxwell was like Reverend Sloan or Mr. Goodine. Three white students wrote the following comments on their relationship with New Promiseland:

Something that actually made a big impression on me was going to New Promiseland Church. I was at first very scared. Everyone else around me was black and I felt out of place, but the people at the church made me feel welcome. Their style of worship was different than anything I've ever seen.

I guess it was! He was Jewish. One day he would be ready to fight you if he thought you didn't respect his ethnicity; the next day he would be drawing swastikas on his arm and making anti-Semitic jokes.

New Promiseland was the best African American church I have been to. They have a great choir. Their choir sounds very good. Their preacher, Reverend Sloan, preaches really good sermons that make you think about how precious life is. They have a small congregation, but they really know how to praise the Lord.

This student was the scapegoat of the group. He had no sense of rhythm and was tone deaf. He had a great time at New Promiseland, but he looked so white when he sang and clapped his hands that it embarrassed the rest of the group.

I enjoyed going to New Promiseland Church. I had never been to a black church but I really felt loved. All of the people there were really nice and would probably do anything for us. That is what I really liked about the whole thing.

This boy had the greatest capacity for love and sensitivity. Trouble was, he was also a master thief. He was put in jail while on a home visit and was not able to come back to camp.

Another student wrote about a recurring dream he had after our visit to New Promiseland:

I've been having this dream for one week and three days. I had a dream that there was a black lady weeping in front of the Rev. Tenos Maxwell's grave. I always see her as if I was right on top of Liza Maxwell's grave. She is always very clear in my mind when I wake up. She looks almost as if she has a veil on or something. She is always kneeling down and I can't see what she is saying but I can see her lips quiver quite distinctly. She looks as if she is about in her late 60's or early 70's. I have no doubt in my mind that I will have this dream again.

We also interviewed some older white people who knew something of the cemetery. One woman told us that when her father was a child, he had been friends with an "old black preacher-man" who was buried in the cemetery. She said that the man's name was "Primus" but she thought that his given name was Tenos Maxwell. She remembered that her father said that this man was "one of the best men that ever lived." It seems that when her father got older he developed a drinking problem. When he would come home drunk, he would often begin to cry and ask his family to "just carry me up on the hill and lay me down beside ol' Primus to die." This personal memory really gave "soul" to the project. As it turned out, her father's old friend wasn't Tenos Maxwell. Reverend Maxwell died three years before her father was born. Old documents that we discovered later, however, did show that there was a former slave who is probably buried in the Maxwell Cemetery who was called Primus.



Another local woman told us that she remembered sitting on her Confederate veteran grandfather's knee as a little girl and hearing him tell of the funerals they used to have at the Maxwell Cemetery. He remembered that when the funeral procession would approach, with the coffin in a horse-drawn wagon, all the field workers, black and white, would quit working and bow their heads reverently. He told his granddaughter that "the singing would just fill the hollows." This story raised a few goose bumps on all of us, since I had told my students about imagining what the singing would have been like at the cemetery.

Our historical research consisted of obtaining documents related to the cemetery and then deciphering them so that we could fit more pieces of this historical puzzle together. We found documents in local historical libraries and were also fortunate to have the help of

Dr. Jim Megginson, a scholar of African-American history in the Carolinas. Dr. Megginson passed onto us several important documents that enriched our understanding of the Maxwell Cemetery and the people who lived near it. One document was an agreement between the former white master and several of his former slaves that, in essence, bound the blacks to indentured servitude. Tenos Maxwell's name was on this list. Another document was a list of Tenos Maxwell's personal property that was sold at probate auction shortly after his death in 1885. This made my students very suspicious that Rev. Maxwell's property had perhaps been stolen from his heirs through quasi-legal methods. After 1877, when federal troops left the South and congress lost interest in the rights of the newly freed slaves, laws that disenfranchised black citizens of their states were enacted all over the former Confederacy. In 1883, the Supreme Court interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment so narrowly in several civil rights cases that it effectively destroyed all the rights granted to blacks during Reconstruction. These state laws instituted a system of apartheid throughout the South that lasted until the 1960s. They were known as "Jim Crow" laws, after a popular cartoon character of the post-Reconstruction era. It was my students' knowledge of this unjust legislation that made them wonder if Tenos Maxwell and his estate had been treated fairly.

My students compiled all the results of our research in a booklet that we published under the title *If These Stones Could Talk: The Rediscovery of the Old Maxwell Cemetery* (1997). All historical documents, many oral traditions, and complete graphic documentation of the Maxwell Cemetery are included in this publication. It is a serious tool for further, more in-depth research of this important site. "God, Chief Pat:" one of my students exclaimed upon being handed a copy of the book he helped to write, "I came here to work on my problems and now I'm an author."

As we neared the completion of our research, my students felt that we should have some sort of celebration that would honor the memories of the people whose graves we had studied. It was decided that on November 8, 1997, we would host a celebration of rededication, complete with dinner on the grounds. People from all walks of life were invited, including university professors, ethnographers, ethnomusicologists, archeologists, local people, and the entire congregation of New Promiseland Baptist Church. On a cool, brilliantly illuminated day, more than fifty people gathered on that peaceful hilltop to celebrate the restoration of lost memories. The pride of accomplishment exhibited by my students was evident in the excellent job they did as hosts. Their work was praised by those who attended, and they, in turn, offered the result of their work as a memorial that truly belonged to the entire community. A professional folklorist who attended the celebration stated that the rededication celebration "brought out the importance of the cross-racial responsibility for maintaining memories of communities. It is not enough to treat one another right *today*; we must be our brother's memory keeper as well." One student described the celebration in the following words:

To prepare for the celebration, the group went up to the graveyard and pulled weeds, raked leaves and removed anything that people could trip on. Then they threw straw all over the tractor road where the people would be sitting. They strategically placed chairs and hay bales where people could see the front.



At about 2:15 pm people started to arrive in the big parking lot for the rededication service. Blake and Allen helped people get situated in Chief Mark's truck, Chief Tom's jeep, or the tractor wagon. When everyone got up to the graveyard they signed a guest register. Some of the people who signed were Gresham Barrett, our state representative, and Jim Megginson, a professor at Hines Community College. Dr. Megginson gave us a lot of information on people up in the graveyard. The Reverend George Sloan also came. He would be bringing the day's message.

At about 2:45 or closer to 3 pm we started the service. Chief Pat started by introducing a few people such as Curtis Goodine, a deacon at the nearby New Promiseland Church. He led the song, "O'I Want to See Him." After that the group sang a special song, "Together in Heaven." When they were done singing,

the Goodine family sang a song for everyone. Then it was time for the preaching. Chief Pat introduced Pastor Sloan, who preached on burial places in the Bible. He said there were burial places for Abraham, Jacob, Lazarus and others. He said that Tenos Maxwell, the freed slave who had donated the land for the graveyard, was an exceptional man because he wanted a burial place for his people, just like Abraham. After that some of the group led the entire crowd into the graveyard for the actual rededication. We got in a double circle around nine of the graves adorning the Toxaway Valley. Mrs. Simpson, an older neighbor lady was given a bouquet of flowers to put on Tenos Maxwell's grave....

Then everyone started to sing "Amazing Grace" and eight people, whoever wanted to, placed bouquets on the other eight graves in the circle. Mr. Willie Lyles, another old friend then prayed a closing prayer.

Chief Pat cautioned everyone to be careful as they walked around the graveyard that they don't trip and fall. He then invited everyone down to the chuckwagon for a good hot meal of stew and cornbread.

I often think about all the people that have long been gone that are buried up in the graveyard. As I sit here across the Toxaway Creek I look around and I can see old trees, but none of them are as old as the memories that the group coaxed from the rough hewn stones up on the hill.

This fellow was a bright, articulate young man. He was the only "Yankee" in the group, having moved to South Carolina with his mother and sister to escape an abusive situation. His father was dying from chronic drug use. His mother was very loving, supportive, and stressed out. He loved to write and he loved the sound of his own voice.

The affective responses of my students to this project were overwhelmingly positive. In their imaginative journey into the past of a small Southern community they learned volumes about themselves, as the following student-composed poems illustrate:

Memories

*I say that graveyards are places
For people of all ages and races
And from the people in the ground
A lot of memories are passed down
The seasons keep going round and round
And sometimes lost memories are found.*

This student had a lot of memories, most of them bad. His mother and father both deserted him as a child. When we made contact with his mother she still didn't want him.

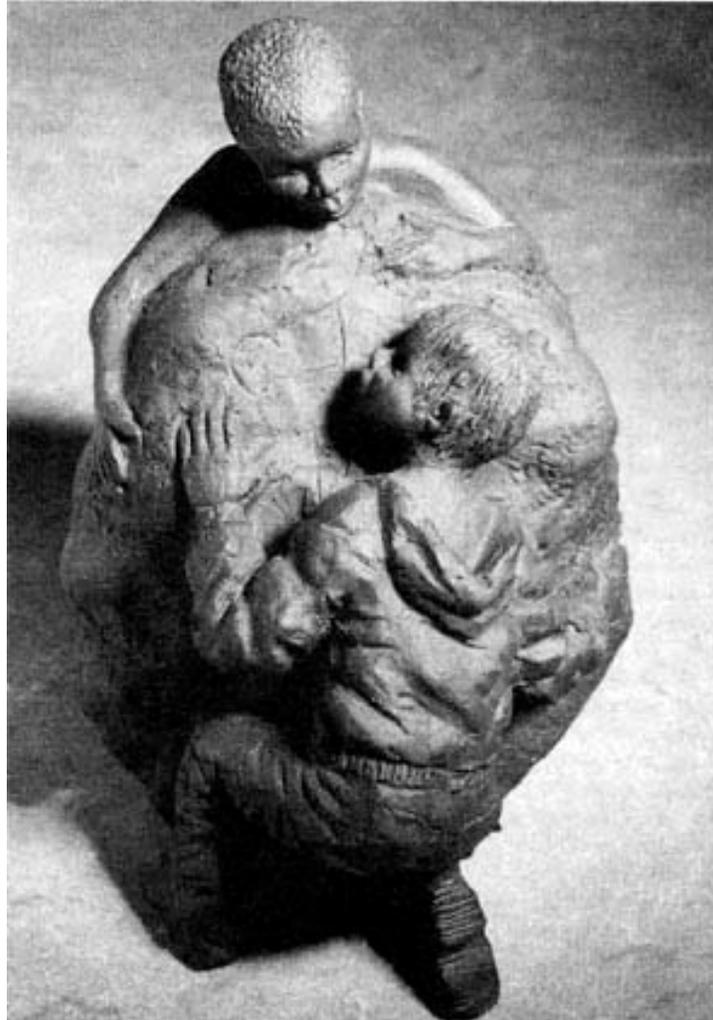
Burial Ground

*When you walk through the gate
You don't feel any hate
When you walk down the path
You don't feel any wrath
When you look at the stones
You don't see any bones
When you look at the graves
You don't see any slaves
Because it's a free cemetery
And it's only momentary.*

This poem was written by our resident “redneck.” When he came into the group nobody liked him, not even the other rednecks. He taught his group patience, and the group taught him how to be a friend.

Another student penned the following reflection as he thought about our project:

I was thinking how memories had died and stuff and how we brought them back to life, and after we have all those people here at the celebration we could get them excited about it. We could make those memories more alive and how a hundred years from now, children would talk to their children about those white people that went up there and cleaned up our graveyard and stuff like that.



Burial grounds are full of taboos. “Don’t step on that grave!” “Whistling through the graveyard.” This makes them incredibly interesting places. I don’t mean new graveyards. They will never be places of mystery or taboo. How could plastic flowers and mystery live in the same location? Old cemeteries, on the other hand, are what some theologians have called “thin” places—places where the veil separating two worlds is translucent. They are therefore rich in potential for student writing. My students were not as sophisticated as those whose mothers drive Volvos, but their feelings for the sublime and sometimes tragic nature of our discoveries would have made Faulkners and Flannery O’Connors of them all, had they the present talent to compose their emotions. Cemeteries are literary places. What does it matter that this was often expressed only as *JMC Feb 1 1885*? These stark symbols made themselves into a full-blown story in the minds of my students. Why? Because they were hammered into a flat stone, stood on end among a hundred other such stony tablets. I think Moses had the right idea.

The photograph on page 8 shows a sculpture by Dora Alexander that was inspired by this project. It depicts one of my students “listening” to a gravestone to see if perhaps he might hear a message from the past. As he listens, a slave boy from the “other side of the stone” searchingly looks across the bridge of time at his peer from another age. This work of art captures the spirit of a local history project that became much more than school-as-we-know-it. It became a transformational adventure that joined teacher, student, and local community in proving that “when history speaks, the heart can listen.”

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