



Helen standing near the hog pen on the farm where she grew up, circa 1950.

# A STORY ABOUT BABY PIGS<sup>1</sup>

A year ago, I wrote an essay for a writing class that began, “I want to tell a story about pigs — about a project I had as a kid — but it is difficult to give voice to that story.” I shared the essay as a work in process but never finished it. It is a simple story, but in the five pages I wrote, the only reference to pigs was in that opening sentence. I wandered, writing about Mother and some family history. I spoke about a letter she had written to us children, asking us to write something reminiscent of her round, oak, kitchen table. It is the table where she does her letter writing and some genealogy projects, the one where our family gathered and occasionally still gathers for meals.

It is time to tell about the baby pigs. My heart would break to think I would never give voice to those incidents. But it is hard to build up the nerve without first wandering around the back 40. This time, I will not dwell on Mother or the Gunderson farm heritage. No. It is time to describe my life on that northwest Iowa farm and tell the story of the baby pigs.

It is difficult to pinpoint the date. It was after the time in third grade when Mother was gone to some event and Dad was in charge of getting us kids ready for school. I was slow, as was often the case, but this time, when I ran out of the house and headed down the lane. The school bus had already gone. I was scared and excited but didn’t dare tell Dad what had happened. I hid behind a shed until he got in his car and drove away. Then I went to the house, made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, got a blanket, and went to hide in the hay loft over the cattle shed. I built a small fort with the bales and looked forward to the adventure of spending the day in my secret place. But soon I got cold, lonely, and scared. I went back to the house, wondering what to do by myself. I decided to crawl under a bed to wait out the long day. Soon I heard someone at the front door. I was nervous until I realized it was Mrs. Jordan, one of my favorite neighbor women, whose farm was two miles west of ours. Her daughter Pam and my sister Clara were close friends and classmates in sixth grade. Clara, being the oldest of us kids, and having that natural big sister posture of taking care of everyone, had gotten to school, realized I was not on the bus, and called Mrs. Jordan to check on me. Mrs. Jordan wasn’t scolding or threatening. She was gentle and firm. She took me to school. I was only a little disappointed that Clara had squealed and ended that secret day on my own on the farm.

That was third grade. The event with the baby pigs was later but before I was in sixth grade — a year I can’t forget. Dad, who was the main disciplinarian in our family, had agreed in September to be the campaign chairman for Governor Hoegh and traveled throughout the state during the fall — Hoegh lost the election. Also in September, my dog Dandy died. I was beginning a terrible sixth-grade year with Miss Eva Mae Corsair and those old-fashioned desks where the back of one and the front of another are bolted together on wooden railings. They allowed no room to squirm.

Miss Corsair and I had our power struggles. Finally, one day in October, when our conflicted situation was extremely tense, she called Mother and asked her to come to school. I was surprised Mother came. I knew she was hosting an important women’s meeting at our house.

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<sup>1</sup>A 1991 perspective from St. Helena, California.

Now all those women that she left behind would know about my bad behavior. Mother arrived, and we stood in the hallway where I tried to justify my behavior. She showed no sympathy, but simply said, “The teacher must be right.”

A week later, a messenger came to the sixth-grade door and told Miss Corsair I was wanted in the principal’s office. It was the place where students were sent when they misbehaved. I was perplexed. Mother and Clara were there, and so was my brother Charles, who was a year ahead of me in school, and perhaps a younger sister. Mother told us that Grandpa had died. Grandpa, dead? Grandpa — my buddy who lived on the homeplace three miles from our farm.

The details of that day in the principal’s office and later of Grandpa’s funeral are fuzzy. It, however, became clear as I turned 40 that I had not done the grief work I needed to do around his death. In November of that sixth-grade year, I got a “red F” in deportment. Miss Corsair handed out report cards at the end of the day, and I pulled mine out of the envelope and saw the mark. I was scared, very scared. I kept to myself on the bus going home; then I sheepishly went into the house and handed the card to Mother who was in the kitchen. She mumbled something about having to wait until my father got in from the fields. I went to the recreation room in the basement and sat on the couch. I was too sullen and scared to do anything, not even watch TV. I heard Dad come in the house, exchange a few words with Mother, then come down the steps to the basement. I was afraid he would spank me, but he merely said I had suffered enough already and had learned my lesson. Then he went back upstairs. I was relieved but also wondered how to deal with my shame and how to face the family at dinner or my classmates at school the next day.

Unfortunately, the image of that red F remains with me and seems to have represented my youth and obstreperousness. I used to laugh about it and how I detested Miss Corsair. I could tell tales of my battles with her and my contempt for those rigid desks. But in remembering only the bravado of those years, I have held a distorted image of my childhood as well as a warped self-concept of being a troublemaker. No one took time to console me or ask how I felt about losing Grandpa, who was my best friend. I never realized my behavior might have had something to do with my family and buried grief for Grandpa.

A year later, just before I started seventh grade, there were already six kids in our family — five girls and a boy. Don’t ask how we arrived. We never talked about sex, and I was never aware of Mother being pregnant. It simply seemed that a new child would arrive. This time, things were different. It was the night of August 15, 1957. Dad whisked Mother off to the hospital in Fort Dodge, 45 miles away. Clara was at Okoboji for a few days with Pam. Charles, my younger sisters, and I remained at home. We didn’t know exactly what was happening, but Charles and I had been in Mother’s and Dad’s bedroom and had seen the bedding pulled back, revealing a vibrant red stain on her white mattress cover. Whatever the situation was, we knew it was serious. Charles stayed by himself in his room while we girls crawled under the covers of Peggy’s bed. We were already nervous. Then we thought we heard someone downstairs and became even more afraid. However, Charles said the noise was merely a figment of our imagination and ignored us. We cuddled closer and finally fell asleep. In the morning, we were glad to see Dad and tell him our fears. He said that when he came home in the middle of the night, one of the neighboring farmers was in the kitchen, inebriated and looking for booze. Dad sat Dick down and gave him coffee — and eventually sent him home.

Mother was still in the hospital when Dad got us kids to dress in our best clothes the following day. He took us to the cemetery where a group had gathered for graveside rites. I

was puzzled at the time, but I gradually figured out what was going on. Christian, who would have been the seventh child (and second boy) in our family, was born at 12:50 a.m. and lived five minutes, long enough, by my parents' standards, to justify a funeral. Christian arrived two months prematurely and weighed a mere three pounds and nine ounces.

However, I must not digress. I need to tell about the baby pigs; yet, it seems important to place the event and pinpoint my age. The event was after third grade when I was eight. Perhaps it was after we got our two horses when I was nine. Maybe it was after we moved into our new house that we built on the farm when I was 10, and where my folks still live. Maybe, after all, it was in sixth grade when I was 11. It seems like Clara was in high school and busy with musical activities after school, and Charles was at junior high football practice. Martha, my next younger sister, would have been in third grade.



Young pigs suckle milk from their mother.

By now you probably want to hear about those darn pigs. Well, I am going to tell you. But first some context about my history with pigs. When I was a youngster, our farm was more diversified than it is now. Dad grew corn, soybeans, oats, and hay. He also had cattle, pigs, and sheep.

One time, when I was at odds with myself and looking for something to do, I went to the hog house to check on the pigs. I had on a new, plaid jacket, but I got hot and hung it on a nail at what seemed like a safe distance from the pen. When I went to the house for lunch, I forgot

the jacket. Later, when I went back to retrieve it, the pigs had deviously gotten it off the post and into their pen where they shredded it. Mother and Dad said I was irresponsible. I could not convince them that I used what I thought was good judgement and hung the jacket in a safe place. I am not sure how I was disciplined. It is easy to cut off those kinds of memories.

Another time, I went to the farrowing pasture where there were miniature metal huts inhabited by pig families. I walked around, making a curious but friendly visit. I noticed a dead piglet on the periphery of its family, seemingly forgotten by the sow and others. Feeling responsible, yet cautious, I picked up the dead baby pig and threw it over the fence into a field of six-foot-tall green stalks of corn. It was my way of tidying up the pasture. However, the sow, protective of her offspring, charged after me with such speed that I was utterly scared and could hardly run. My heart was pounding. Fortunately, an old black dog, so ordinary we merely called it Pup, headed off the mother pig while I ran for the gate and scrambled over it just in time.

Another time, I went to a hog pen where Dad, other men, and my brother were conducting what seemed like important business. I sidled up to the fence alongside some of them to watch. The activity had something to do with castrating young pigs, but I didn't have long to observe what was happening. My brother or one of the men told me it was not something that girls should see or know about.

I don't recall being exposed to the birth process either, yet I do remember seeing a bloody discharge in the straw next to the mother pigs after they had delivered new litters. The farrowing house was dark, lit only by the red glow of the heat lamps. The sow was in a rough wooden stall, and the baby pigs presumably had slid out of its rear end, one at a time.

A couple of years ago, I visited a farm and watched newborn pigs. I was amazed at their instinct. The moment they were born, they began the arduous journey to find the mother's nipples. It did not matter that their eyes were covered with mucus. It did not matter that they were tiny and stumbled awkwardly over clumps of straw. It did not matter that there were already four or five other piglets, scrambling to get milk and ignoring a new sibling. It did not matter that when each one finally found a vacant nipple and began to suck milk, the next baby pig would slide into the world and begin its own journey to seek nourishment.

Finally, I am ready to tell the story I set out to tell about baby pigs. It had to have been between third and sixth grade, but closer to sixth grade when I was no longer a child but not yet pubescent. There were litters of baby pigs in the hog house. The dimly-lit building was divided into pens, each with a sow and her young ones. Dad said that one of the sows would roll over on her piglets when they came to suckle from her teats. She had already killed one or two, and her remaining litter was in danger. Dad had taken them away from her and put them in another pen. He made me a deal, saying that the orphaned pigs could be mine if I would feed and take care of them. I was proud and grateful that he trusted me with the responsibility.

Each day, I endured school, then took the bus home and had the farmyard to myself. Dad was in the fields combining beans or plowing. Clara and Charles were busy at their school activities. Clara was not the farm type anyway and would never have been around the farmyard. My two younger sisters were in the house with Mother, who would have been making dinner. As a city-bred woman, she had no interest in doing farm chores.

There I was after school, in charge of the farmyard. I walked from the house across the yard to the hog house, opened the door, and reached high to find the light switch. My pigs were in the first pen to the right. The wooden fence around them was knee high. I stepped over the board, got the round, faded, metal trough for their food, and cleaned it out. Then I grabbed

a bucket and headed back across the farmyard in the cool, gray blue air of dusk to the water hydrant under the yard light. I filled the pail with water, then carried it back to the hog house. I was big enough, strong enough and grown up enough to carry the bucket; but I was still young, and it was hard work. I set the bucket down several times to rest my arms. When I got back to the piglets and their pen, I mixed the water with a powdered formula to make synthetic milk; poured it in their trough, and put clean straw in their pen. I would hang around and watch the little critters and also check on the pigs in other pens. I was in charge and was somebody, even if just to a litter of baby pigs. They began to grow. No longer were they delicate babies but were robust and playful pigs about seven inches tall.

One day I came home, changed my clothes, and headed for the hog house, looking forward to seeing my pigs, doing my work, and feeling in charge again. I opened the door, reached for the light switch, and discovered that the orphaned pigs were gone. What had happened? Who could I talk to? Where could I turn? I hung around out in the shadows of the farm buildings as long as I could to avoid going in the house. When Dad came in from the fields, he told me he had sold the pigs. When the family gathered for dinner around Mother's round oak table, I finally went in, my head low, my heart full of sorrow yet pounding with rage. I managed to express a meager portion of what I was feeling by barely whimpering, perhaps not fully aware of the intensity of my feelings and afraid I would not be heard. But I did attempt to express myself, saying that it was not right, that it was not fair that Dad had sold my pigs. Mother simply said, "Your father had a business decision to make, and you should not feel that way."

My God, I did feel that way, and it did not make any difference that Dad offered me a share of the check he got for the pigs. It is not that I thought the baby pigs would be mine forever. I wasn't naive about the reason for raising hogs. I was a farm girl. I knew that little pigs eventually become meat on somebody's table. But there was something wrong with the fact that Dad had not consulted me before sending them away. There was something even more wrong in Mother's response. It discounted my feelings and dismissed the issue. The father does not have to be the only one taken seriously. There can be more than one will in a family. Money for my share of the pigs was not sufficient to make reparations for what had happened. Not only had Dad sent those pigs away, but in many ways, I felt I had been sold out. Is it any wonder that I struggle to give voice to the story about the pigs or that I feel a mixture of love and disdain for my rural heritage?

I am afraid this story is unfinished. It is not comfortable to leave it here, but this is where it stands for now.

## A Postscript to the Baby Pigs Story

I recall the time in 1992 when I sent an abridged version of my baby pigs story to Mother and Dad. I also sent them a videotape from a panel discussion about the value of writing memoir that was held at the State Historical Society of Iowa. One of the speakers was Curtis Harnak, author of the book *We Have All Gone Away*. It is about memories of his childhood days on a northwest Iowa farm. Harnack's remarks resonated with me, and I hung on every word he said. I assumed Mother had also been impressed by the talk and would have gained an appreciation of the value of writing in depth about personal experiences. Sending the video seemed to be a good way to remind her of the program. I also thought it would help her and Dad have a framework for understanding the importance of what I had written, even if they found parts of it uncomfortable to read. Part of what Harnack said was:

I think a memorist tries to get a feeling of a time. It is not something that can be found by going to a library, although some parts of it may be there, or by going through newspaper files that tell about a particular period.

I think the best time to write a memoir is when you are sufficiently removed from what you have to say to be able to tell it with some perspective, and yet you are close enough to the events described to be able to remember details. If you wait until people who might be hurt or made uncomfortable by what you put into print are dead, very likely the urgency and the glow of the material will fade on you.

The important thing is that the reader has to feel that there is some naked truth right here spilling out upon the page. You may not have all the facts and dates quite right, but you may still be right in terms of what you are saying.

I think writing has a therapeutic side. You exorcize a lot of ghosts and you come to grips with things bothering you or that have fascinated you. And you lay to rest certain notions and investigate nagging questions about one's self, about one's family, and one's world. And by writing it down, you come to decisions regarding the meaning of this material which is the very material of your own self. So writing a memoir frees the author from the claim the past has upon him and often frees him to move on. So in a sense, it is a sort of therapy.

Of course, there is always the problem that the author has in relation to the reader. What is it? What is this for? Why should a reader be interested in this stuff? Why are you doing it? And why should anyone else read it?

Well, the author of a personal account does it because he or she feels he must. It's an urgent thing to do and that no one else could. And if he doesn't do it, the tale might be lost forever, and that loss would matter. So in the end, you have to come out with some kind of contribution to history and society, and that's why you are doing it.<sup>2</sup>

Mother eventually responded to my baby pigs story with a short note simply saying she and Dad were disturbed by what I had written and asking for love and understanding. I called and assured her that she and Dad did have my love and understanding.

I also remember a conversation that I had with Dad in 1995. I had mounted an exhibit about the road project at the Memorial Union at Iowa State University. Everything was set up, but the show was not scheduled to officially open until later in the week. I wanted to add samples of drainage tile. So I called Dad, an expert in finding such things tucked away in a grove or the sheds on his farm. On his next trip to Ames, he brought a fine collection of clay, concrete, and plastic tile.

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2. These remarks are from an abridged transcript of Curtis Harnack's presentation given as part of a panel discussion at the Iowa Time Expo held in Des Moines on June 13, 1992. The event was sponsored by the Iowa Humanities Board and the State Historical Society of Iowa. He is the author of a book about growing up in rural Iowa, entitled *We Have All Gone Away*. Used by permission of Mr. Harnack.

We met in the middle of the afternoon at the Country Kitchen in north Ames. Dad had already stopped by the university for a sneak preview of the exhibit. He said he was proud of my work, and I could see an extra gleam in his eyes that reflected his respect for the project. I had intended that our meeting be quick — a simple rendezvous to hand off the tile from the trunk of his car to the trunk of mine. However, we sat across from each other in a booth at the rather empty restaurant and talked at length. I had calico bean soup and whole wheat toast, and he had a cup of coffee. I reminded him of the story about the baby pigs I had sent him and Mother and how she had responded that it was disturbing for him to read it. I went on to assure him that my feelings toward my rural heritage had mellowed as a result of being back in Iowa and working on my project. He was happy to hear about the softening of my feelings and was more understanding than I had anticipated. It was also the first time that I looked him directly in the eye and told him that I loved him. Dad said little, but through our eye contact, I assumed we both knew a shift was happening in our relationship and that we cared deeply for each other. In fact, there are ways in which we have always cared deeply for each other, but life has its challenges, and there are complex feelings that our family has seldom, if ever, expressed. Dad and I changed the subject to less emotional topics; however, that was not the last substantive and poignant conversation the two of us have had about our rural upbringing and family dynamics.



Young pigs at feed troughs at the Faber, Marjorie, and Paul Harrold farm, 1989.