

WHY THE BROKEN ROAD

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My grandfather, Mr. Henry (Burns) used to tell my mother Lurleen (Wallace), he'd say, "Now Mutt, if things don't go to suit you down there with George and y'all need a place to stay, you come on up here and find the broken road 'cause we won't be far away."

Finding a place where life is safe, understandable and predictable, a no time to pack up your clothes car-ride and, yes, we have enough gas to get there, kind of place. Where "don't you be silly and "that's ridiculous" sounds like laughter, rather than a hissing snake. Simple is better, not a place for complications, opening your eyes every morning when the sun comes through the window; warming up the room. Open doors to front porches, no need to lock the chain. Smiling because you want to, instead of smiling so they'll vote.

A life where contentment exists, with no secrets to keep or share, because there are none. No signposts needed, just look for the broken road, an abandoned roadbed, asphalt heaved up and cracked, mingling with kudzu and shrub trees on the side of a better byway. No longer a road to ride on, just there to point the way.

When we passed through Tuscaloosa, Alabama to cross the bridge over the Back Warrior River, Mother always said, "Now you look for the broken road."

I stared out the window, looking hard to see. Then there it was, the abandoned road that would never abandon me. Can't ride it, can't walk it, just follow beside it to the end. Then you turn down that pig trail path, just wide enough to pass. And when you see that wooden house with flowers on the porch, roll down the window and wave your hands and happiness will wave you back

A difference in views among us, all based on the road we take. Back roads share secrets, tell stories, un-cover the shame and the triumph of life, while the expressways just get you there, no cause for looking at all. No "See Rock City" signs on barn tops, pulling off in a no name town. Picking pears in an unfenced orchard. Scampering away to the tune of "who's out there stealing my pears."

My story is much like that of the broken road, heaved up and cracked for the truth of what power can do. It mingles amidst history for the sake of the truth, gives rise to the inspiration of no matter who we belonged to, "each of us can overcome" and offers hope that America will take the "road less traveled by" before it is too late.

The Broken Road of my childhood still remains with me, packed up somewhere inside, rustling around every now and then to remind me of those days in my life when everything was possible. Where Mr. Henry and my Grandmother, Estelle Burns, sat on their front porch into the night. "Do you see any headlights?" Mamaw would ask. "Not yet." Mr. Henry would say. "Then look harder." She would reply.

No locked doors to bang on, no windows nailed shut. Perhaps one day, the broken road will call me home

The lesson of The Broken Road is one of coming to terms with the past, not for the sake of forgetting or forgiving, but rather for truth. For, history depends on what is told, taught and accepted by those who lived it. The "we don't remember that the way you just said it, or that is not what I heard, or you should have been there" should encourage each of us to share and speak of what we saw, what we did and what others did for us and to us.

For it is through our collective recollections that we, most often, will come closer to the truth. Saying "this just makes him, her or those times back then look so bad" is no excuse.

The crossroads of history are littered with points of view, of the how it was rather than the what it was, stark images in black and white, much better to see them that way, all

those blends and nuances of color and appliques of fabrics do nothing but get in the way. “We disagree” is certainly all right, but “why are you saying these things when it just looks so bad,” is not.

No truth is ever complete, precision not required. But each of us should be willing to speak it as we know it, withdraw it when we just thought we knew it and defend it when it can set a record straight, mend a broken heart, encourage acts of courage and is the right thing to do. It’s like, Mr. Henry said one time, “The one that’s yelling when you do the telling is the one who cooked the books.”

I hope *The Broken Road* will be of benefit to history, recognized as a work of southern literature, of inspiration and in honor of all those who have dreamed of having a voice, a purpose and an opportunity to be recognized for their own hopes and dreams and be remembered for who they were, rather than who they belonged to.

When they were young, my sons, Leigh and Burns, would sometimes pull books from the shelves of their family history, with questions for me to follow. But none of what they read, could adequately address or capture the essence of humanity that lay hidden beneath the overwhelming facts of what their grandparents stood for and what they did.

“Tell us more, Mom. What did you do back down there in Clayton when you were a little girl? What was MaMaw Lurleen really like? Do you think she would come over to our house and sit outside with us and tell us stories? I bet Paw Paw, back when he could walk, would be up and down all the time. Would you let him smoke his cigar inside the house? Why did he do those things to other people?”