

# ONE PSYCHIATRIST'S INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY

William Hurt Sledge

To speak of my intellectual trajectory inevitably means talking about growing up in the rural South in Greensboro, Alabama, in an area known as the Black Belt for its rich black soil. Rather inauspiciously, I was named after my mother's younger beloved brother, William Hurt, an alcoholic who had been killed in a knife fight in New Orleans the year before I was born in 1945. I joined a family that had recently built a new house that had just the right amount of room for my eleven-and-a-half-year-old brother, my ten-year-old sister, my sixty-seven-year-old maternal grandmother, and my parents, my thirty-nine-year-old lawyer father and my thirty-six-year-old mother; but it did not have a space for me. I was not a planned baby. I was keenly aware that I represented a mistake – of sorts, that is. I think that my mother really wanted me around. I felt mostly beloved by this group with some exceptions on the part of my brother, who used to knock me around until I got to be thirteen and could whip him in all his little silly strength games. My grandmother, Mama Hurt, was the one who consoled me and helped me most to understand the world around me. She was always gentle.

I grew up in a family of gamblers. My grandmother hosted a weekly canasta ring of elderly local ladies, my brother became a stockbroker and made and lost several fortunes, and my mother loved betting on the greyhound races at a track not far from home. As a child, I set up a little roulette wheel in the basement. Risk-taking came naturally to me.

My father, who was much beloved in the community and in the family, allegedly counseled Harper Lee when she could not find a publisher for her first version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My sister remained absolutely convinced that the figure of Atticus

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Finch was based on my Dad. While I knew that Harper Lee had many lawyers in her family and that my sister was something of a fabulist, after I saw the movie I wondered for a moment if she could be right. My father was a wonderful man and a fabulous storyteller, in a town known for good stories.

We lived almost directly across the street from the elementary school that I attended for the first three years of school. However, I had to wait almost six weeks to start school as I was bedridden with a case of poststreptococcal-related glomerulonephritis, an autoimmune, life-threatening illness. The treatment for this at that time was daily penicillin injections for six weeks. This was my first serious encounter with significant illness. I hated the daily shots and after a while, I refused further treatment unless I was compensated monetarily. I settled the negotiations with our family physician, Dr. Ramey, who came to our house daily on his way to work to give me my injection, for a nickel a shot. I felt so empowered by that transaction, so proud of that “buffalo” coin.

That illness set up a routine that lasted for three years. Every day at lunchtime, I would come home from the school across the street and watch, along with my maternal grandmother, my mother, our maid, and sometimes my sister, the noon-time soaps: *Search for Tomorrow*, *The Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*. Every day the women engaged in intense discussions about why the heroine/hero did this or that, and I loved it. I loved the stories, I loved figuring out these fictional lives, and I loved being able to chime in.

Like most boys growing up in the countryside of Alabama in the fifties, I spent a lot of time out-of-doors exploring and playing with my friends. My best friend, Calvin, lived about a block away from me, and between his house and mine, were the lands of the local bank president. He had hired two African American teenagers to take care of his gardens and livestock: Bunch and Pilgrim. These young men introduced Calvin and me to the “facts of life.” They had some pornographic images in the form of comics, which they soberly and thoughtfully used to teach us about sex. It was not sensationalized at all. They believed that we were hopelessly ignorant (which was true, we were first graders!) and we needed some real-life education. Initially I was resistant to this information, but after a few lessons some things at home between my parents began to make sense. I am forever thankful for these two young men – they were so careful, persistent, and clear.

The school system was segregated – this was the 1950s in central rural Alabama now. But I had African American friends, and when I was younger a series of African American girls who lived nearby served as my babysitters. I certainly was aware of the racial ideas that surrounded me, but in this time of my innocence, I persisted in the belief that the South, during the Civil War, had opposed slavery until it was hammered into my head by my family that I was wrong. Later I fell into line with the typical racist perspective of white people from my community at that time – of course to fall out of line again later when I went off to college.

In middle school (grades four through six) I went through something of a transition. At home, as the littlest and youngest, I frequently felt left out of the important

things going on around me. When I got away by a couple of miles from home, a transition seemed to happen almost overnight. Up until that time, I had felt intimidated by older boys and country boys who seemed to know more than me about the world and who were stronger and more athletic and were good at things that I wanted to be good at (hunting, fishing, running, baseball, etc.). While I had loved my lunchtime TV viewing with the women of my household, in middle school things changed. One day in the fourth grade, when one of the country boys shoved me, I hit him as hard as I could in the face. He began to cry, and I told him (knowing that I would be punished if the teachers knew that I had caused the crying) that if he did not stop crying, I was going to hit him again and again until he stopped. He stopped. All of a sudden, my status among my boy peers transformed: I was a leader and certainly aggressive enough to make them regret transgressions. But I was no bully.

In high school I played football and basketball, was president of the student body, and co-salutatorian with my cousin, Mailande. I prospered as a student and athlete. High school was important in another major way that sort of overshadowed everything else. During a football game my junior year, I suffered a devastating football injury. My left femur was fractured and broken in two so that when I fell to the ground, my leg above the knee splayed out at a right angle. My high school football coach ran out on the field, and when this tough ex-Marine, saw me, he threw up. I had to tell him that this was no time to be puking, that he needed to help me.

Thus began a long test of my resilience – I was almost a goner. But I still had some fight left, because when I arrived at the hospital and asked an intern if he thought I could play football next year (the main thing on my mind at the time), he said, “Son, you will be lucky to be able to walk this time next year.” I rose up to hit him but someone restrained me. I ended up in a body cast for six weeks in the hospital, my leg immobilized. While I was in the hospital, I had a tutor who was a graduate student at the University of Alabama, who had me read *Moby-Dick*, and we discussed it on her two or three times per week visits. These tutorials proved transformative. I discovered how much I loved literature, how important narrative can be.

I was cut out of the body cast in six weeks and returned home to a strenuous rehab program. And I played football the next season and for all of college.

During the summertime while I was in high school and part of college, I worked outdoors. For four years I worked for the Department of Agriculture as a cotton checker. The USDA paid farmers not to plant cotton past an allotment assigned to them. I would go to their farms and measure what was planted in cotton and mark it on giant aerial photos. I learned a lot about human nature as I talked to those farmers.

In another summer job I drove a combine, and I was paid in flying lessons. I loved flying and to this day cannot envision a more exhilarating experience. I had some close calls but never crashed or damaged a plane. (Though I did wreck more than one car).

In addition to school, sports, and my girlfriends, I loved the rituals of the Episcopal Church. I was an acolyte for many years and loved the praying and the singing – that is until one of my older cousins (I was kin to seemingly everybody in Hale County)

approached me. She said that when the choir sang, it was fine for me to open up the songbook, but she did not want to hear anything come from my voice. Thus began my disenchantment with church. I was chagrined. And I had loved this woman, Octavia.

As for college, I had wanted to go Princeton, but did not get accepted. I went instead to Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia. I was in a fraternity but did not really like it, so for my last two and a half years, I lived off campus, in the foreman's cottage on an old estate with like-minded friends. I prospered intellectually as well as personally. I majored in English but I could have been a chemistry and/or a biology major as well. I felt connected to both the chemistry and English faculty. It was during this time that Betsy and I solidified our romance and relationship. We had met each other in high school, but she lived in Birmingham, the big city, and I was from the country (our fathers were fraternity brothers and lawyers). She went to Hollins and I was down the road in Lexington; we found each other somewhere there in our freshman year.

After I moved off campus into the country, my roommates and I began to invite selected faculty out to visit for a drink and sometimes for dinner. We also hosted guest speakers after their talks. Robert Lowell, James Dickey, and others numbered among our guests. This experience later subtended my interest in master's teas when I was the master of Calhoun College at Yale.

If it had not been for the Vietnam War and my imminent risk to be drafted, I would have taken time to study organic chemistry in Germany. I knew that eventually I wanted to become a physician. I had been under M.D.s' care for a significant time in my life, and becoming a doctor seemed like the natural thing to do. I thought I might want to go into psychiatry; after all, I was good at science, and I liked people's stories.

But I had a very low draft number. If anyone from my part of the world was going to be drafted, it was going to be me. So, I opted to go straight to medical school. It was a half-hearted decision. I applied to only two schools: Duke and Baylor in Houston. (My older sibs lived in Houston, and many of my close friends at college were from there). I never knew whether I would have been admitted to Duke as I was so turned off by the contrived, hokey way that they interviewed me that I withdrew my application.

My first year and a half at Baylor School of Medicine was a disaster on the surface but in many ways a great learning experience. I hated sitting in classes all day listening to lectures and memorizing facts to be tested on. I tried my hand at laboratory research on my own. A faculty member gave me space (about four square feet) and some resources for me to explore an idea I had about schizophrenia. But I soon realized that while I may have had a very good idea, I did not possess the technical skill to carry out the research that I wanted to do. I finished the project but never submitted it for publication.

Meanwhile, my class ranking in the first year fell to something like 86 out of 88. The dean of students hauled me in and proclaimed that I was the worst disappointment as a student that he had ever had. I told him that he was not so high on my list of

revered faculty either. In my second year, after I got married, my performance began to improve. But I made a mistake on the answer sheet on one of the standardized bubble tests and in my panic to try to rectify it by finding out where I had gotten off track, I began to doubt a bit of knowledge that was crucial. I ended up making the lowest score on this test *ever* made by anyone from Baylor. Another conversation with the dean of students – they were going to make me repeat the whole academic year. I thought fast and challenged them to give me the test over again right there and then. I was bluffing. It took a few days before the school accepted my proposal, and by then I had memorized the material. I made honors on the retake. But the school insisted that my transcript score was to be the average of the two tests. At least I passed.

The next year, my class rank went from the bottom to about tenth, as this was the beginning of the clerkships where I flourished with the experience of hospital medicine. I was so interested in what I was doing that I never felt that I was studying. Suddenly things that I had trouble keeping straight became clear. I ended up graduating with a prize that I shared with a friend as the Best Student in Psychiatry. One summer during medical school, I came to Yale on a clerkship encouraged by one of my Baylor mentors, Dr. Hilde Bruch, who had friends at Yale (Drs. Stephen Fleck and Ted Lidz). I worked at the Yale Psychiatric Institute and loved it. Coincidentally, this was the summer of the Black Panther trial; New Haven bristled with long-haired students and excitement like nothing I had ever experienced.

From that point on, I feel like I have been on a roll. All of a sudden, when I arrived on the wards back at Baylor, virtually all of medicine fascinated me and I had no trouble learning and remembering it. I loved delivering babies – I probably did about sixty as a moonlighter in the Baylor system. I also loved sewing up people – we had a sewing club in the Emergency Department for trauma victims. The following year, my internship at the University of Pennsylvania earned me the graduation prize as the Best Intern at the Philadelphia General Hospital on the UPenn service.

After Penn, I came back to Yale full of fire and enthusiasm. I enjoyed being a resident here and I was rewarded for it. What was most remarkable was this: while I was still a resident, the chair of psychiatry, Mort Reiser, chose me to serve as the acting training director in psychiatry (the training director, a senior faculty member, was on sabbatical). I worked under the supervision of Reiser, to be sure, but now I was a member of the Executive Committee that ran the department. They tolerated me nicely, so that I got into only one big political tiff, and it went my way. In this experience, I learned a lot about how and how not to be an administrator.

After residency, I reluctantly returned to Texas to serve Uncle Sam. Despite my reluctance, it turned out to be a great experience. Assigned to the School of Aerospace Medicine, I was trained and qualified as a flight surgeon. I subsequently taught in the flight surgeon class for the next year and a half. I did research on POWs that to this day is one of the most well documented studies of the effects of captivity on this kind of prisoner. I also studied vasovagal syncope (fainting) among aviators, which

resulted in a rule change so that all vasovagal syncope is not automatically disqualifying for a pilot. I finished my tour with a meritorious honor medal and an attempt by my commanding general to reenlist me. I told him if he would promote me to colonel (two ranks higher than my current rank) right then, I would consider it. He shook his head and walked away. I did not stay in the Air Force, but I did get hired by the FAA to teach aerospace psychiatry to would-be flight surgeons and aeromedical examiners.

Then back I went to Yale on faculty, where I quickly rose to training director and then director of education in the department. I worked at the Connecticut Mental Health Center as the clinical director and later became medical director of Yale New Haven Psychiatric Hospital and later still, worked on the absorption of the Department of Psychiatry at the Hospital of Saint Raphael. I served as acting chair of the department for two years. And I graduated from the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis along the way. These roles brought together my interests in science and in human stories. And they developed my knack for running things and my love of mentoring.

I have participated in numerous national organizations regarding training and was elected president of the American Association of Directors of Psychiatric Residency Training programs. I spearheaded a process that brought psychiatry back into the National Matching program for house officers.

About ten years or so ago, one of my Baylor friends, who is a steward of a private foundation, arranged for me to get a named professorship at Yale, the George D. and Esther S. Gross Professor of Psychiatry. This opened up many opportunities, and I began to focus more on my research, especially on the mental health and medical delivery system. I sought better and more efficient ways to organize medical as well as psychiatric care. This included adding psychiatric resources into primary care, using mentors as assistants and peer counselors to patients, providing hospital psychiatric care to medically ill patients, and using patients as peer counselors. In addition, with Dr. Ralph Hoffman, I became a linguist in an effort to understand better the thought and language disorder of schizophrenia. Working with him was one of many highlights of my professional research collaborations. Finally, I did a variety of studies on the effectiveness of different educational programs.

My research interests over the years have mostly followed the opportunities of where I was working at the time. For a while, I was writing about psychotherapy, which dovetailed into work about linguistics (metaphor in psychotherapy and the language/thought disorder of schizophrenia). The Air Force led to writing about POWs and syncope, and leading residency training spurred a long list of education-oriented publications. As head of Yale's psychiatric hospital, I wrote about recurrent hospitalizations and various service innovations that we have put into the field such as the Behavioral Intervention Team, focusing on its value clinically as well as fiscally.

In 1995, President Richard C. Levin appointed me master of Calhoun College — one of the most rewarding and challenging duties that I have held here. I am enormously



grateful to Rick for his confidence in me. Betsy and I had a blast. Our daughters were making their own way into colleges (Yale, Columbia, and Penn), and living in the college was a kind of way to keep in touch with what they were doing. But, of course, it became much more than that, and we have lifelong friends from that experience, both with the people who lived at Calhoun and those who visited.

Extracurricularly, I took up scuba in the Yale pool in 1997 and quickly advanced through a series of classes and certifications. I have dived all over the world, including the far west Pacific rim, Antarctica, Mexico, Vancouver Island, up and down the Atlantic coastline (various wrecks including the *Andrea Doria*) from southern Florida to Maine, the Saint Lawrence Seaway, the UK (various sinkholes and mines), and Florida karst caves. I stopped diving in 2011 in order to allow healing of a chronic eardrum rupture. The camaraderie among divers is quite special as we have committed to watching out for each other in tough circumstances.

I am the proud father of three wonderful young women who have brought into the world six grandchildren. Our daughters have done well; the oldest is a minister, our middle child is an architect, and our youngest is an academic psychologist at a small liberal arts college outside Philadelphia. One of my greatest joys has been the chance to be their father and help them grow into the fine young women that they are. All along the way, my wife and partner has been by my side with support and encouragement, and I would not be here without her.

Although I have retired from Yale, I am a research scientist for this academic year, which gives me the chance to try to develop a course of study in medical humanities for undergraduates, and I am teaching a course on uncertainty in medicine for first years in Yale College this term. In retirement I hope to be able to continue evaluating aviators for the FAA and the major airlines.