



The author, age 46, and Jessie, the author's yellow Labrador retriever, 1990. At the South Carolina Coast.

Interview

I want to be very clear about this. The Kate in your book *A Still, Small Voice: Healing from Abuse* is you, isn't it? And you were the one who experienced the abuse?

Yes, I am Kate and I was abused.

Then why did you name the main character Kate?

My full name is Diane Kathryn Lavett. Deconstruct "Diane" to "Di-ane" and then to "Die-Ann." My mother chose the name "Diane" but my father wanted me to be named Dianna. In other words, he wanted me to be named "Die Anna," when his mother's name was Anna. That is, my first name, which I have always hated without knowing why, is an explicit command for me to die and also expressed my father's desires for his mother, my grandmother. Every time my parents said my name, they were telling me what they wanted of me. Kate is a lot nicer than that, isn't it?

Yes. Is the story absolutely true?

The story is absolutely true, given that sometimes memory distorts or shades events to some extent. For instance, I wrote that my father was over six feet. In reality, he was somewhere around 5'8". I kept the error in because I decided that my perception of his size as a child was more true than the reality of his size, which I did not even know until long after I finished the book. The book is definitely my truth, and I was extremely careful not to exaggerate or distort or report incorrectly. All events in my story happened as they are reported. Any power to my story exists in its truth.

Could you tell me the basic outline of *A Still, Small Voice: Healing from Abuse* ?

I tell the true story of how it feels when being abused, how abuse left me feeling about myself as a child and an adult, the problems abuse caused me in my adult life, how repairing the effects of the abuse is done, and how the healing feels.

Specifically, the story is about Kate, told by Kate in first-person-painful, who was physically, mentally, and sexually abused and was also terribly neglected, which itself is another form of abuse. Kate sets out on a journey to discover why she is in the midst of a divorce and what in herself helped result in her divorce. She finds out many family secrets and realizes that she was abused. The damage caused by the abuse is eventually repaired in therapy, to the extent that abuse damage can be repaired.

Do you think that all abuse damage can be repaired?

No. I am a different person than I would have been had I had good-enough parents. I have experienced traumatic damage, and the effect of that in my life cannot be erased. The abuse was a big factor in my divorce. The effects of that on my children and me still reverberate in their lives and mine right this minute. It affects how my daughter parents her children. My other daughter chose to leave my home for two years. That echoes still between us to some extent and always will. Who I am and how I think about myself is affected by that event. On and on, the abuse reverberates. All that repair does is to change my self attitudes, feelings, and the distortions of perceptions that can come from the experiences.

It seemed that I was reading a mystery story, almost, as I read your book.

Good. That is what I was aiming for while writing. Kate has no perception that her childhood was off, except that she was determined not to do to her children what was done to her

as a child. She has no understanding of the forces that were acting on her. The mystery lies in Kate seeing what was going on in her life. Most abused children, by the way, think that the way they are treated is normal, that everyone else is being hit and thrown against walls. It never occurs to them to ask their friends about what happens to them when their parents get angry. Severe abuse also causes dissociation, from which Kate (and I, of course) suffered, that blocks the memories of abuse.

I found it a very compelling mystery story, by the way.

Thank you.

What is dissociation?

Dissociation is the immediate repression of an event if it is too traumatic. An example would be seeing someone having their foot cut off. The event is still in the memory, it still affects behavior and responses to other events. However, the person who has dissociated such an event may have no active memory of what happened, or may remember but not see the importance of the memory, and, much more importantly, does not remember how it felt while it was happening. Dissociation is the self-protection that the brain gives a person when they are about to be overwhelmed emotionally by an event. It's an automatic process.

Just recently I dislocated my left ring finger at the middle joint. Instead of being straight, my finger formed a right angle with itself at that joint. You would think it would be excruciatingly painful, but I felt nothing. I did not realize I was injured until I looked at my finger and saw the funny angle it made. Then I was puzzled for a moment, before I realized that I had hurt myself. My finger never did hurt. At the hospital, the doctor and nurses were looking at me as if I were strange, especially when I said no, it did not hurt at all. It was only the next day when my therapist called in response to an e-mail that I realized I was dissociating the pain. That is the power of dissociation. It kicks in so rapidly, when there is need, that it is amazing to me. I think I have never really felt acute pain because I learned to dissociate at such a young age. For instance, my stomach ruptured a couple of years ago, and that did not hurt at all.

Dissociation is also the source of flashbacks. Flashbacks are actually symptoms of dissociation. They occur in or out of consciousness, just as an event that is dissociated can be remembered on some level or not. Flashbacks are always quick flashes of intense feelings that are triggered by some current event. Thus, a car backfire puts a combat survivor right back into a combat situation for a moment, with all the fear and anger and lashing out that would happen in combat.

If dissociation is an automatic process, is recovering the memory automatic?

No. Recovering the memory is a painfully difficult process. The mind resists it, at every point, raising a sign that says, "Here be dragons!" In the book, there are numerous instances of that with Renee and Kate going through a flashback of dissociated memories and feelings.

In your opinion, which is worse, abuse or neglect?

Almost all abused people who understand what they have experienced and every therapist who understands what both do to a person agree: neglect is worse than abuse. Neglect tells you that you are not pleasing to anyone. It tells you that you deserve nothing. It tells you that who you are is not worth cherishing. It tells you that you deserve nothing good. A child gains his self-image from the way he is treated. In contrast, abuse just hurts and scares, which is minor in comparison to being told every minute of your existence that you are worth nothing.

What is the "still, small voice?"

The still, small voice is the part inside me that kept pushing toward emotional health even when Renee, my therapist, wanted me to slow down, consolidate my gains, move to other topics or problems. I kept pushing toward the unknown inside me, urged on by the core sense of basic health and goodness, the part I trusted even when I could not sense it.

Renee has told me since then that she sometimes felt as if she were riding a tiger. She said she kept going to conferences and checking the literature, trying to find something that could help her help me. Remember, at the time we were working together, flashbacks and posttraumatic stress disorder were dismissed as neurotic symptoms and not recognized as coming from real events. Therapists were still being taught that reports of parental abuse were the product of neurotic thinking. Even today, the psychiatric mainstream does not recognize multiple personality disorder. Renee was out there on the edge of the unknown with a client who kept insisting on delving deeper and deeper into a horror show. She was incredibly brave.

I never had the sense that I was stressing Renee at all. I was positive that she had a plan, that she knew what she was doing, and that she knew how to help me. She was the first person in the world for whom I developed a complete and total sense of trust. I think that she literally saved my life.



Renee Rocklin at about the time I was working with her, 1976.

Are you still in touch with Renee?

Oh, yes. Renee has become a dear friend and we talk fairly frequently by telephone. When she and her husband were in town recently for a family event, I spent some time with them. If someone has affected your life as strongly as Renee affected mine, they are a part of you forever.

You wrote that you were in therapy for another thirteen years, and that you were diagnosed with multiple personality disorder.

Yes

Were you as flagrant as Sybil was with her multiple personality disorder?

No. Most people who have MPD are not flagrant at all. You have probably interacted with many people in your life who have MPD, without detecting anything wrong. A friend who is a psychologist said, when I told him that I have MPD, “You’d have to be crazy to think that. You’re one of the most consistent people I know.” The first sentence still makes me laugh. The second tells you that a trained observer of people had detected nothing off in me, and we were extremely close friends. Another psychologist friend said essentially the same thing when I told her.

If you had continued to work with Renee, would you have been able to have completely integrated the other 87 parts?

It’s hard to play that guessing game, but I would have to say no, not within a reasonable time frame and at that time. When I began therapy again, it was eleven years later. During that interval, a great deal of research was conducted and there were tremendous strides made in

conceptual thought regarding dissociation, abuse, flashbacks, the entire package. Without that developing knowledge and the developing skills that accompanied it, there was no way that anyone could have helped me to integration. I was lucky enough to choose a second therapist who is one of the leaders in the field. Her skill-set is amazing, just as was Renee's.

Therapy was obviously extremely painful for you. What was the hardest part about therapy?

The complete and total loneliness was the hardest part. I had to keep the therapy secret for professional reasons, just as I had had to keep the abuse secret when I was a child. That meant I dare not share, even with close friends, the most central part of my life, emotional upheaval, for 16-plus years. There were times when I would go from a shattering therapy session back to work or to a friend's house for dinner, and I had to behave completely normal as soon as I arrived. That was tough. Even tougher was going home and caring for my kids after one of those sessions.

What kept you at it day after day?

Mainly, it was the absolute need of my children to have a mother who could parent them properly. I felt an incredibly strong obligation to become well for their sakes. Also, later on, it was the intolerable feelings of where I was at that moment emotionally. I could no more have stayed stuck in a flashback than I could have held my hand in a running garbage disposal unit. I had to get through each flashback, make sense of it, construct a coherent picture that included it.

Why did you write this book?

At one level, Renee gave Kate/me an hypnotic command to do so, without realizing that she did. Towards the end she talks of encountering the aftermath of a forest fire and seeing all the beautiful red flowers, which were the first signs of recovery. That was as I was crying about the death of my grandmother, Anna, and the total refusal of my family to help me find her. Renee then says that I can take the pain and turn it into something beautiful that will take away the breath of people, will astound them. She was drawing an analogy, of course, between the forest fire and what I had experienced, but I had been put into a trance by her voice and the rhythm of it. I went home and immediately started writing and didn't stop until I had completed the first draft.

At another level, I have written it for my two daughters.

At yet another level, I wrote it for all the abused children who exist who cannot speak for themselves.

At the final level, I have written it for all of our society. In 2007, nearly a million children were abused in some way in this country, and a minimum of 1,760 were killed as a result of their abuse. This has been going on year after year. Ultimately it means that probably over 50% of our entire population is affected by abuse in some manner. I'm speaking about the spouses of the abused, their children, and the extended family which they have joined by marriage. That does not include the colleagues of the abused who may have to put up with puzzling reactions, the friends of the abused who can become confused by strange reactions, the people who casually encounter the abused all day without knowing it. Think of the terribly grumpy person in line in front of you in the store. What about the person expressing road rage? And so on. I'm not claiming that all the crazies in our society were abused, but a very high percentage of them were. To have been abused is to walk through life with anger as a constant companion.

There's another reason why I wrote this book, although I did not realize it at the time of writing. Terrence Des Pres wrote *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in The Death Camps* in 1976. In it, he talks about the response of Jews in the death camps to the practice of shoving people's heads into excrement pits, which he called "excremental assault." The universal response was a scream that sounded as if it came from a demented soul. Des Pres asks why the response was so extreme given the other horrible experiences of everyone in the camps. His answer is one that has always astounded me in its clarity. I don't think I can do him justice but I will give it a try.

He talks first about all social mammals having a warning cry that serves the group much more than it does the individual who gives it. In fact, the individual who issues a warning cry may be putting himself at extra risk for giving it. Then he suggests that the near-demented scream of the person experiencing excremental assault is a warning cry to his social group. He also feels that the writing of memoirs by so many holocaust survivors is a warning cry, one that survivors must issue when extreme evil is encountered. It says to all people: this is what can happen when hate becomes too strong, when power is unchecked, when there are no social restraints on behavior.

Until I read Des Pres's book, I did not know why I was writing, just that I must write. He says, "The will to bear witness, as we have seen, is an involuntary reaction to extreme situations. Survivors do not so much decide to remember and record, as simply find themselves doing it, guided by the feeling that it *must* be done." He goes on to say "Earlier I suggested that this act [writing] can be compared to a scream, but perhaps it *is* a scream – a special version of the social animal's call to its group – and thus a signal of warning and appeal which on the human level becomes the process of establishing a record and thereby transmitting information vital for both moral and practical reasons. We learn what to fear, what to call evil and therefore what to call good, by absorbing the costly experience of others." He captured perfectly how I felt as I wrote: I **MUST** tell people what happened.

I have noticed that there are proportionately many more memoirs of life during the Holocaust than there are memoirs of child abuse by parents. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Yes. Those who survived the Holocaust were at least teenagers during their experiences, although I know personally two survivors who were very young children in the camps. However, most were at least teenagers. As teenagers, they had completed many-to-most of the developmental steps that take an infant from a collection of emotional states that are nearly discrete to a coherent, integrated, mature personality.

Think of an infant. The infant is laughing one moment, screaming the next, then back to cooing quite rapidly, next extremely interested in his fist, and so on. These are all feeling states that are quite different from each other. The parents' task is to sooth the transitions from one state to another, teaching the infant how to be in the world, integrating the multiple personality states that initially exist in each of us. To some extent, the maturing brain will do this integrating naturally, but parental help is definitely needed to complete integration.

If, instead of soothing, the parent hits the child for, let's say, crying, then the child learns nothing from the parent and can remain in discrete personality states. Alternatively, an older toddler who has done some integration of these personality states can be derailed by abuse or need to compartmentalize the event of the abuse through dissociation. In either case, the parent has successfully caused a degree of multiple personality in the child, which nowadays is termed "dissociative personality disorder."

The almost-to-completely matured Holocaust survivor is going to be able to express himself about his experiences. In contrast, look what I had to go through to be able to speak my truth: a full nearly 17 years of extremely painful therapy. How many formerly abused children have the personality characteristics and the financial resources to be able to repair their damage? Most I know have been derailed by their experiences so that they are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, earn very low wages, if at all, have dropped out of higher education even though they are extremely bright, are caught in turbulent emotional relationships, and in general are leading very chaotic lives, with very troubled personal relationships. How can such a person sit down and write a memoir of what happened so long ago that is readable ?

How were you able to write your memoir, then?

Sixteen horrible years of therapy with two extremely gifted, brilliant therapists who gave far more to me than most therapists are capable of giving.

You speak of psychological matters as if you have studied in the field. Have you?

Yes. Although one could not minor in a subject at Emory University when I attended it, I took enough courses in the Psychology Department that I would have a minor in psych if I were graduating from Emory now. Then, when I was a postdoctoral student at Yale in DNA biochemistry and working with Renee, I earned an M.A. in marriage and family therapy from Southern Connecticut University. I used that degree in both genetic counseling, which I did for a

number of years, and in college teaching, which I did for even more years. I never used it in doing marriage and family therapy, however, because I felt I had no business messing around with other people's lives when my internal one was in such a mess itself.

Who helped you as a child?

Teachers. Neighbors, to a lesser extent. Camp counselors. A few relatives without them knowing what I was experiencing.

Teachers

There was Miss Carlson in second grade until she fell, broke her hip and died.

Then there was Mr. Safronoff, in fifth grade, who was my teacher for only three weeks. I was then put in a newly organized "gifted student" class. He was the first male who was in my life on a daily basis who did not abuse me in any way, even though it was for only three weeks. He started a stamp and coin club at the public library that year. Because I collected stamps and coins, his club was a natural for me. Once a week we walked the mile and a half to the library together (he didn't have a car). Afterward, we walked back together until we reached his house, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. He really listened to what I said, and he was the first person who did. Of course, I said nothing about abuse, because I was not aware of it, but I'm sure that he sensed something. Abused kids give off a different vibration from those who were not abused.

Miss Helen Lowry in fifth grade was a gem. She introduced me to the Camp Fire Girls and camping during the summer. More importantly, she taught me that doing a decent job on something was not enough. She insisted that I do the best that I could on any task.

Zella Higley (science) in eighth and ninth grades was a dear, feisty sweetheart of a woman. She became a life-long friend. Like almost all my other teachers, she actually listened to me and responded to what I said.

Mr. Spagnola (history) in eighth and ninth grades was a wonderful help to me in many ways. He was the coach for the boys baseball team and allowed me to be the score keeper, which allowed me to travel with the team. I loved that! Baseball has been important to me since I was five and first started playing.

Jim Bradner in eleventh and twelfth grades was wonderful. Jim, too, is a life-long friend, as is his wife. He was my chemistry teacher and they "adopted" a group of four of us. All were very bright, very interested in science, and we all worked on the cyclotron that he was responsible for being built in the school.

Dr. Alan Humphries, Jr., in college and graduate school: Alan was my "major professor," the one who becomes your mentor in graduate school, and he shaped my thought processes as a scientist. He died recently, and I felt that I had lost my father.

Dr. Charles Ray, Jr., in college and graduate school: Dr. Ray was a geneticist and a superb teacher. One year he became very interested in population genetics and I ended up taking three seminars with him that year, plus two full courses, simply because I was the only student who was willing to do that kind of work in the entire college and graduate school. It was highly mathematical and he treated me as a colleague rather than a student. As for me, I wanted him to know that someone was interested in what interested him. He's still alive and I saw him not long ago. I truly love that 99-year-old man.

Neighbors

There were not that many who helped or said anything. Con certainly helped and she became my real mother at some point for all intents and purposes. She died about eight years ago. Danny, my friend in the early part of the book, is her son and is still a friend. Then there was Mabel, an older woman down the street. She used to invite me to tea parties. I fell in love at the age of six with her son and told him I was very sad he was joining the marines because I had hoped he would wait until I grew up and marry me. He was kind enough not to burst into laughter. I had that son's son as a student in one of my genetics courses.

Camp Councilors

A number were exceedingly nice to me. I went to Camp Wathana (earned my own way) all summer, every summer from age 11 until age 15. I used to get in trouble every session for not writing home. Anyway, a large number invited me up for a weekend at their respective colleges. One, Carole Stoneking, is a life-long friend.

Relatives

No one knew anything of what was going on except my grandmother, and no one ever learned the way my parents treated the three of us until I told my uncle when I was in my thirties. Some were exceptionally nice, however, just because they were nice people. Chuck was the nicest when I was a child, which is why I went to see him as an adult. My Great Aunt Nettie was at least as nice as Chuck, but I saw her only once a year for many years. She died about 1993, on her birthday, one of four relatives who died on their birthdays: Grandmother Nana, Grandfather Burt, Nettie and maybe my mother. My mother died sometime after 11:30 at night on the night before her birthday. I don't know the exact time, but it may actually have been the next day by then, or her birthday. My younger brother was buried on my second birthday, by the way. With that legacy, I always felt as if I were dying as my birthday approached, until the day I learned that my younger brother's funeral occurred on my birthday when I was two. I found out when my father died and my brother Spens was going through his papers. For the first time, my feeling of being about to die because it was my birthday made sense when Spens told me. Since then, birthdays have been days of celebration, and that shows the power of information. Had someone simply told me when my brother had died, I would have been able to eliminate the association between birthdays and death that I made. My parents and the extended family couldn't help grieving, of course, but I would have been able to figure out as an adult that they were not grieving for my pending death.

By training you are a geneticist, and you've written a number of textbooks in genetics, isn't that correct? Do you see any genetic component in child abuse?

Yes, I am a geneticist who has written about and taught genetics most of my adult life. I adore genetics, although I must admit that it was fear of becoming like my father that first attracted me to genetics. To me, genetics is what makes sense of all of biology and medicine and, ultimately, so very much more.

Is there a genetic component to abuse? Mostly no, but there is a possible slight genetics component. I think that our society facilitates abuse for the most part, but neurologists are learning about a specific neurological system that could ultimately show a genetic component to abusing behavior.

In the early 1990's neurologists detected what are called mirror neurons. These are special nerves in the brain that help all mammals learn new behaviors from watching. They also seem to be the basis for empathy. I personally have long defined evil as a lack of empathy, by the way. Anyway, a change in the brain waves occurs in the normal person when they see something that would be hurtful or painful to them, such as a needle entering someone's vein. This system of neurons must be genetically determined because they are composed of physical units in the brain. What is genetically determined is going to have abnormalities possible, which means some people and other mammals would be born with a defective set or subset of mirror neurons. Additionally, the integrated function of these mirror neurons must be genetically determined, which means there are going to be genetically determined malfunctioning mirror neuron systems in some people and animals. Already research has shown that there is malfunctioning, at the minimum, of the mirror neuron system in psychopaths, who, of course, appear to lack empathy by any set of objective criteria. People with schizophrenia may have a malfunctioning mirror neuron system, also. Some speculate that all psychopathology and neurosis is based in the mirror neuron system, but I think the research needs to be done before the claims are made.

Is that the only genetic aspect that you see in child abuse?

There's also a gene, *Fos*, that has been found in mice that has two forms: normal nurturing ability toward offspring and a complete lack of nurturing of offspring. The normal form is dominant, while the latter form is recessive. That means, to be a non-nurturing parent, you must inherit one copy of the gene from each parent. When you do, all your baby mice die soon after birth because you do not care for them. Humans have the same gene but no study of genetic status and parenting behavior has been done in humans. It's a dissertation waiting to be done.

However, the role of social learning is far more important, I feel, than genetic input in child abuse. People can and are taught to ignore any empathy they might feel. The commandant of one death camp mentioned in Des Pres's book says that explicitly in an interview. They taught

the people who would kill to ignore the humanity of the people they were killing through various means. They drove empathy out first, so that killing took less of a toll on the killers. At the individual level, kids are taught either to have empathy or to lack it by their parents. Probably, the research will show that the vast majority of kids must be taught *not* to have empathy rather than to have empathy. I think it is innate in humans, just as it is in other mammals.

Have you ever experienced empathy from an animal?

Other mammals have often expressed empathy toward me. The first example that comes to mind was an afternoon after a horrible day followed by a horrible therapy session. I went home, walked in the door, and collapsed on the floor, sobbing, face down. First my Labrador retriever, Jessie, came over to me and lay with her neck on the back of my neck. Then my daughter's cat, Tiger, who was a really nasty cat, came and sat on my back. I ended up laughing.

Child abuse seems to be increasing in our society. In your view, is there anything that exists in society today that facilitates abuse?

I'm not at all sure that the frequency of abuse is increasing. It may be, it may not be, I don't have any comparative figures although I am sure they exist. I do know that in our increasingly sensationalized society, there is increased reporting of what may have been going on all along. I think that because everything else is being sensationalized in the news. Also, we get to hear of all the sensationalized local events from other places. It's not as if I really needed to know that some father in Maryland, for instance, shot his kids. Still, the local news in Atlanta makes sure that I do hear it, in the tradition of, "If it bleeds, it leads." I hate it when a disaster of one type or another occurs simply because that means it will dominate all news reports until the next disaster happens. The reporters rush to the happening and then scream about it for days, dissecting it with glee, *ad nauseum*.

As for what facilitates abuse in our society today? I think it is the breakdown of social constraints that goes along with the increasing isolation of individuals and families. There's also the rejection of the notion that there are absolutes, or the idea that all is relative. What do I mean? It used to be that kids could go outside and play in groups. They were responsible to every adult they encountered. Each child had to pay attention when a mother came out of the house and said "no, do not do that." The child knew that his parents would be told if he persisted, and then he would "get it" at home, later. Now, kids stay inside and play alone or with siblings. They do not experience differing standards from their playmates and do not get a sense of the social roles to which one must adhere or suffer the consequences from their peers. They also do not encounter other adults that tell them what to do as they play in the world. Thus, they do not get subjected to differing standards of behaviors from which they would learn to evaluate standards, and they do not learn the sense that they are responsible to all sections of society.

How can kids learn that to be an adult is to ensure that social rules are followed if they do not experience adults insisting on social rules? Add in the lack of consensus of what constitutes good behaviors. For example, some think it okay to kill others through our courts, some don't; some think it okay to cheat when you don't get caught, others don't. Add in the parental demand for total control over their child's life and the increasing sense in our society that no one knows better than the child's parents what constitutes good behavior or conditions.

By the way, to be a teacher these days is to be constantly harassed by parents, even at the college level, because the parents feel that their standards, not the teacher's, are the ones that should apply to their child, even when it comes to grades. That is what exists in the "good" parents, the ones who truly care about their children.

The bad parents do not have a sense that society will "get them" if they mistreat their children. The bad parents usually also lack the extended family that can be a protective resource to the child and a restraining force on the parents. There are hardly any houses with three generations as the rule in our society, except among some immigrants. We're all isolated families who have moved far from friends and relatives because of jobs. Alternatively, we're single-parent families, which is much worse for children because that single parent, by definition, is going to be stressed by overwork, always having to be "on" for the child, and usually too little money, at the minimum.

As far as I am concerned, our society is losing its consensus and cohesiveness, both of agreement on what is acceptable and what is not and the responsibility we feel one for the other. Sure, there are these groups that feed the starving, provide minimal health care, *etc.* However, the very existence of groups whose job it is to do something makes each of us less responsible for the other. When you feel less responsible, you are much less likely to act. If I do not perceive it my duty to protect a child of some stranger, I am far less likely to say something to that stranger as he hurts his child in front of me.

Have you ever intervened in an abusive situation?

Yes, lots of times. Once I was taking a bus to Florida from Georgia for a meeting. In the bus station there was a mother spanking her three-year-old little girl and yelling that she was bad. All the little girl had done was whine a bit out of boredom. I asked the mother if I could hold the child after the mother and child had calmed down some. I spent a few minutes just praising the little girl and telling her she was so good and her hair ribbons were pretty, and things like that. Everything I said was aimed at her *and* her mother. Then I started telling the mother that she had produced a very pretty little girl because physical appearance seemed to be very important to the mother. I then broadened that out to a very nice little girl, then a very good little girl. The mother was happier after the half-hour rest from entertaining a little one in a boring situation. The child was clearly happier.

Did it make a lasting difference? Probably not. But, just think what would happen if that occurred every day to the child and the mother. The mother might begin to see her little girl

differently. The little girl would get a little holding and attention from an adult and might begin to feel better about herself. Such events would have helped me as a child, I am sure of that. I've done the equivalent many times. In grocery stores, I almost always get into a conversation with parents, telling them what I can that is positive about their child. Many parents take that as a positive comment about themselves so are pleased; others take that as a positive comment about their child and are pleased. The kids who understand are pleased by what they hear. If parent and child are told repeatedly that they are good, they might begin to act and feel differently.

Who are your favorite authors?

The best, most powerful book I ever read was *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth. He wrote it in 1934 and did not write anything else until he wrote a book in the eighties, I think. I did not read the second book. I did not want my impression of him as a writer changed because I always felt that he had written the perfect book. I read *Call It Sleep* when I was 16 and have not read it again because I don't want my memory of it tarnished.

Another writer whom I truly admire is Dean Koontz. He wrote a book that I read about once every two years, *The Watchers*. It is my favorite fiction book about dogs. I do wish, however, that Mr. Koontz would stop feeding chocolate bars to his literary dogs. Chocolate is toxic to them.

Ted Kerasote wrote what I consider the best true dog story ever written: *Merle's Door*. I love books about dogs because dogs have always been a very important part of my life. I'm stuck now on Labrador retrievers and could tell stories about them for hours. I'm also working on a book about the dogs in my life. The working title is "Dog Tales."

Other writers whom I admire are James Lee Burke, who is an incredibly lyrical writer, Jeffrey Deaver, Nevada Barr, Michael Connelly, John Dunning, Harlen Corben, Lee Child, and Greg Iles. *The Mercy Rule* by John Lescroart makes my list, mainly because we had a mercy rule as a child. There was one when we played baseball, that led to dampening of outrageously lopsided baseball scores, but my older brother, Mike in the book, and I had one between us, too. If someone said "uncle," all teasing or harassment ended instantly. It was a signal to each other that we were approaching an overload. Anyway, whenever I see a new book by any of these authors and more, I instantly buy it.

Who first inspired you to write?

I had a teacher, a marvelous teacher, named Melba Marlett. She wrote quite a few novels and had at least one play produced on the Alcoa Hour on TV in the fifties. She knew her writing.

Four days a week we sat down in her class and there was a topic on the board. One time it was a single word: prejudice. Another time it was a list of recently granted patents. We started

writing and wrote the entire hour. The fifth day we read a novel of our choosing, and she came around to speak with each of us about our writing. I felt as if I could not write at all. I was very discouraged by my writing. I was embarrassed by it. Now, I realize that I was censoring myself constantly, and it is very hard to write freely when you are constantly stepping on all free thoughts.

Anyway, one time after school someone asked me in her presence when I was going to write a book. I was stunned by the question and she immediately answered for me: "Diane will write when she has something she wants to say." From that point, I knew I could write someday, even if not then. She was the only one who encouraged me, except an editor, Patrick Fitzgerald, who talked me into trying to write one chapter in a genetics book, which has just finished its seventh edition.

What is the best thing about being a writer?

Freedom to spend the day as I wish. I can read, write, go for a walk with my dog, be in the woods or on the beach, and my time is mine to plan. The worst thing about being a writer is that I can't think of anything that is bad about it, except for trying to live on my writing income.

Do you ever have writer's block?

No. If I cannot write it is because I do not know what I want to say. Then I sit down and figure that out. When I'm actively writing genetics books, for instance, I get up before seven, eat, have a cup of decaf, and then I start writing. Sometime in there I go for an hour's walk with my dog. After lunch, I write until about three or three-thirty. The rest of my day is spent in the woods with my dog and friends. I read or watch TV at night. Sometimes I have dinner with someone, but usually only on Friday nights for shabbes. Sometimes I have lunch with someone, but I'd rather not lose the work time if possible. I live a very dull life, which I happen to love. When I am writing fiction, the pace is essentially the same.

I trained myself to write this way in graduate school, when working on my Ph.D. dissertation. Back then, I required myself to spend a minimum of three hours a day writing or staring at a blank piece of paper. I could not do anything else during that time. Well, writing is less boring than staring at paper. Next, I found out that, if I were to write for too long, I would not be able to write at all the next day. That is how I developed the habit of stopping at three every afternoon. I found that I could write six hours a day, day after day, by trial and error. That is my limit now, no matter how strong the internal push to keep going and no matter who is demanding what of me. I work, then I play.

It seems that play is very important to you. Is it?

Oh, yes. A day without play is a day that has been wasted. That is the basic reason why I have a Labrador retriever. Labs are children for life and need to play every day. I wanted to have an alarm clock for play time, and that's my dog. My dog's needs force me to join her in play, and we have a marvelous time of it! Play was always very important to me. I think it was what saved me as a child. The very freedom that was a sign of neglect was also a gift to me that allowed me to explore the world outside my home. I strongly recommend a minimum of four hours play a day for every person in the world.

There's a quote I came across from some anonymous fourteenth or sixteenth century monk. I've always told myself that someday I was going to paint it on a canvas or wood burn it into a good-looking piece of wood, or find some other way to hang it on my wall, but I haven't taken the time to do it yet. It is, "The book is finished; let the writer play!"