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### **Personal Decisions**

Adolescence is often recognized as the age when children begin to question their parents' authority, beliefs, and way of life. As a result of this questioning, many adolescents assert that they will be different, that they will do something different to surpass the faults they see in their parents. In *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez reports how education separated him from his parents, but does not admit that it was through his own choice. After years and years of choosing the path of education over a family life with his parents, Rodriguez bemoans the fact that he is now separated from his parents and blames education for causing it. However, he is unjustified in blaming education for causing his separation, because the choice of maintaining familial ties while obtaining an education is a personal one. Examples of this individual decision can be found in the lives of: my girlfriend's grandfather, who chose to use education to extract himself from his environment; Richard Rodriguez, who also cut his familial ties through education; and my own father, who used education to strengthen the ties to his heritage.

My girlfriend's grandfather, Mr. John Smith, knowingly chose to use education as a means to escape from his heritage. Mr. Smith despised his parents' social status. His parents were lower class and had no aspirations to change that fact. They were comfortable with their lives and status, living day to day, but John yearned for something more. He was embarrassed to let friends and acquaintances see the conditions in which he and his family lived. He knew that by becoming educated he could get a better paying

job and escape such lowly conditions. However, his parents would not help support, financially or otherwise, his education. To realize his dream, John had to work any job he could get to pay for his education. In fact, he pursued his goal of education so far that even while his children were growing up, the most important aspect of the household was that he was going to school. His studies had higher priority than anything else. After years of work and isolation, John Smith obtained his goal of education and its associated elevated social status. After thirty long and single-minded years he obtained a doctorate in Psychology. Mr. Smith's life demonstrates how one can follow the path of education to escape the environment in which he is raised.

In Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical work *Hunger for Memory*, Rodriguez's own life history contradicts his argument that education forced a separation from his parents. Rodriguez writes of how horrible education is, and was, to him. He writes that finally he "achieved what had eluded me for so long – the end of education" (Rodriguez, p. 73). This passage implies that Rodriguez had been attempting vainly. Even more illustrative is when he claims that the plight of the Scholarship Boy, a stereotype with which he closely identifies, "His [the scholarship boy's] story makes clear that education is a long, unglamorous, even demeaning process – *a nurturing never natural to the person one was before one entered a classroom.*" (Rodriguez, p. 68) However, education is not only an "unglamorous," and "demeaning" process, he also blames it for breaking his ties with his family. After becoming overwhelmed with loneliness while writing his dissertation, Rodriguez returns home to be with his parents again. He writes:

I realized that I had not neatly sidestepped the impact of schooling .... My need to think so much and so abstractly about my parents and our relationship was in itself an indication of my long education. My father and mother did not pass their time thinking about the cultural meanings of

their experience.... because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents. (Rodriguez, p. 72)

He works long and hard to demonize education, blaming it for taking away his culture and his ability to feel at home with his parents. In contrast, however, he repeatedly makes reference to the fact that he chose to persist in his education, knowing full well that it was creating a schism between him and his parents.

He states repeatedly that he knew where education was taking him, that it was separating him from his parents, and that he continued his education despite knowing this. One such admission is: "Those times I remembered the loss of my past with regret, I quickly reminded myself of all the things my teachers could give me. (They could make me an educated man.) ... I remembered too well that education had changed my family's life. I would not have become a scholarship boy had I not so often remembered" (Rodriguez, p. 50). He realizes at an early age that education has changed his family's life, but throughout the rest of his childhood and into his maturity he persists in his education. He is aware not only of the fact that education is changing his family's life, but also that it is distinctly separating him from his parents. He writes:

In the midst of preparing dinner, my mother would come up behind me while I was trying to read. 'What are you reading?' .... I would barely respond, 'Just the usual things, nothing special.' (A half smile, then silence. Her head moving back in the silence. Silence! Instead of the flood of intimate sounds that had once flowed smoothly between us, there was this silence.) After dinner, I would rush to a bedroom with papers and books. (p. 51)

Knowing its consequences, Rodriguez continues his education. When he is having difficulties learning to read, the only thing that enables him to get past his block is that "Books were going to make me 'educated'" (p. 61). He fights through this obstacle for

the sole purpose of becoming “educated.” He wants an education and is willing to do things that he would otherwise never have done to receive it. In fact, Rodriguez himself admits that he was “Haunted by the knowledge that one *chooses* to become a student. (Education is not an inevitable or natural setp in growing up.)” He idolizes his teachers and imitates them, trusting their every direction. “Proudly I announced – to my family’s startled silence – that a teacher had said I was losing all trace of a Spanish accent.” (Rodriguez, p. 44) He supplants his own parents with his teachers, and strives ever more towards furthering his education. Rodriguez chooses to continue his education knowingly, even though it draws him away from his parents. He then complains of his separation from his parents, and blames a “demeaning,” “unglamorous” education. As the life of Richard Rodriguez has shown, education can easily effect a disjunction between son and family.

My father has also chosen the path of education, but instead of having education isolate him from his heritage, it has brought him closer to it. My father comes from a family of Hispanic teachers. Both of his parents were teachers, some of his uncles and one of his aunts were teachers, and even now, two of his brothers and his sister are teachers. While growing up, my father was encouraged to study and to learn. He gained an immense liking of the quest for knowledge, and has let that define much of his life. He utilized all available opportunities to further his education, first moving one-hundred miles south of his home to do his undergraduate studies, then getting his Master’s degree from Stanford. He had a scholarship to cover the payment for his undergraduate work, and found a company willing to pay for him to take a year and get his Masters and then return to the company. After working for years, and raising five children, he has now

returned to school to get his doctorate. With his doctorate, he hopes to become a teacher at a nearby University. All throughout his education, he remained in close contact with his parents and his heritage. We still spend Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and many other holidays traveling to visit his parents and be with them in the celebration of holy days. He has raised his children in his own Roman Catholic heritage, and kept us in close contact with our grandparents throughout our childhood. My father used his education as a means to remain associated with his family and his culture. Throughout going away for education and returning, he has maintained close ties with his family and his background.

Although education can be used as a means to break from a personal heritage, education itself does not necessitate such a sundering. Pursuit of education and remaining true to a cultural heritage are both choices that children must make as they grow and mature. Even though Richard Rodriguez does not see that vital distinction, he is unreasonable in blaming all his familial woes on his choice for education. As much as he would like to console himself with the opinion that it was otherwise, Rodriguez himself plotted his own course through life.