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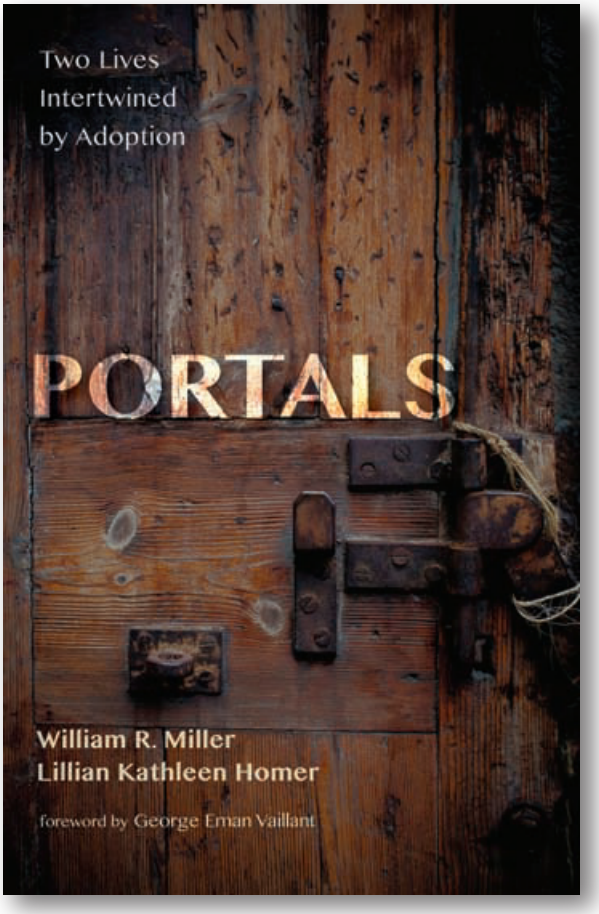
Portals tells intertwining true life stories of adopting and being adopted as an older child. Spanning forty years of development the saga is told both from the perspective of Lillian, adopted at age nine, and of her adoptive father, each of them writing alternating chapters. Lillian frankly relates the harrowing abuse and neglect of her early childhood as well as her turbulent post-adoption adolescence including runaways, hospitalization, and leaving home at seventeen. Her psychologist father, William Miller, offers an honest inside perspective on the challenges of parenting a child through these turbulent years. Ultimately it is a redeeming tale of persistent love and post-traumatic growth as the two streams of their lives flow together in adoption and then apart again as Lillian nurtures a family of her own.

PORTALS

Two Lives Intertwined by Adoption

William R. Miller
Lillian Kathleen Homer

foreword by George Eman Vaillant



"*Portals* is a compelling autobiography, really two autobiographies, as told through the voices of a father and his adopted daughter. Together they share their stories of trauma, commitment, conflict, perseverance, and faith. That the father is a world-renowned psychologist adds even more complexity to their experience. This is a must-read for those who are looking for a tale of resiliency and hope."

—**MELINDA HOHMAN,** Director and Professor, School of Social Work, San Diego State University

"A heartbreaking autobiographical story. . . . Through more than three decades *Portals* illustrates how post-traumatic growth can occur. . . . *Portals* is a harrowing tale. But it also is the story of Love."

—**GEORGE EMAN VAILLANT,** Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School [from the Foreword]

"Few books better convey the wisdom we need to go through—and grow through—traumatic experience. Readers will feel more alive and more able to face life's challenges."

—**DALE LARSON**, Professor, Counseling Psychology, Santa Clara University

"In this inspiring tale, a father and his adopted daughter each share their accounts of the endless struggles of dealing with the 'blows' life inflicts on them and their strengths in adapting to or overcoming them. The authors are refreshingly open about discussing their difficulties. I found their candor very moving; it made the book difficult to put down."

—**ALLEN ZWEBEN,** Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Research, Professor, School of Social Work, Columbia University

"This is a fascinating tale of two lives intertwined by daunting circumstances, ultimately proving how people can overcome seemingly impossible obstacles."

—**PAT ROBERTS,** Artist and Author, Flag Is Up Farms, Solvang, California, parent of 47 foster children

ISBN: 978-1-5326-0444-7 | 112 pp. | $15 | paper

William R. Miller is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of New Mexico. Having published more than fifty books and hundreds of scientific and professional articles, he has been listed by the Institute for Scientific Information as one of the world's most cited scientists. He and his wife Kathy Jackson live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Lillian Kathleen Homer is the proud mother of two children. She and her brother Richard were adopted together following a traumatic early childhood. After living in New Mexico for forty years she and her husband Jeff now own and operate Shakti Cove Cottages in Ocean Park, Washington.

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RESOURCE *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

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Resource Publications
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-0444-7
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-0446-1
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-0445-4

Manufactured in the U.S.A. 10/05/16

To Dr. Rene Silleroy, companion on the journey—WRM

To my mother, Kathy Jackson, who has shown me
what a woman is supposed to be—LKH

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

—Luke 6:21

Contents

Foreword

Portals: Two Lives Intertwined by Adoption is the redemptive saga – opera really - of Bill (born in 1947) and Lillian (born in 1975). This jointly composed, riveting love story begins in 1947 when Bill comes into the world as part of the baby boom. His life is not without difficulty. At the University of New Mexico while becoming one of the world's wisest and most distinguished researchers in alcoholism, Bill and his wife realize that in order to have children they must adopt.

Few who knew Dr. William Miller ever called him anything but Bill. Nobody who knew Lillian ever called her Lil or Lilly. Together they decided to jointly tell in almost choral alternation a heartbreaking autobiographical story of twenty-four alternating chapters or really verses. Through more than three decades *Portals* illustrates how posttraumatic growth can occur. In contrast to Gounod's great opera, *Romeo and Juliet,* most of the chapters are filled with pain and heartbreak but P*ortals* ends happily. After three decades of struggling attachment, Bill and Lillian remind me of another famous verse:

> Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come,
> 'tis Grace has brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me home.

Portals is Bill's and Lillian's joint effort to reassure themselves and the reader that at last they are safely home. Neither of them ignores the fact that God may have played a part.

Bill's and Lillian's joint story is one of courageous adaptation. Over and over again each suffered the pain of seemingly endless

betrayal. Yet neither blames the blows that life inflicted on them; they only discuss how they adapted.

Bill's father's death occurred when Bill was a psychology intern. He tells us that at his father's funeral "On that day I felt the change from being one-who-is-cared-for into one who cares for others." That became his mantra for life. For Lillian, who was to become Bill's adopted daughter after social agencies removed her from her mother's neglect, the transformation came much earlier. "I can't really tell you why at such a young age I felt so mentally alert and grown-up but I guess it was just survival. I had to keep my brothers safe. It was my job to take care of them, or so I thought, which is quite a burden when you're six years old."

Portals is a harrowing tale. But it also is the story of Love. At the end of tumultuous decades together when Lillian at age forty leaves Albuquerque for Washington state, Bill writes, "We still stay in close touch, of course, through copious communication media, and yet I feel a dull ache within me as if something important is missing or incomplete. Of all the losses that come with aging this is a kindhearted one, arising not from want but from an abundance of loving."

Lillian, in turn, sings as she closes the book "I appreciate living more simply and having love and peace in my heart. How good life is!"

The reader is struck dumb, not having expected this love story to end any happier than Romeo and Juliet.

George Eman Vaillant, M.D.

Author and Professor of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School

Authors' Preface

There were two main reasons why I wanted to write this book. First of all I needed to. I thought that going back through my own story could help me and my family understand it better and come to peace with it. Writing it down has done that for me. I am definitely not proud of everything that happened or of some of the choices that I made. Yet this is what did happen and it brought me to the woman I am now. I thought hard about whether I really wanted to tell this very personal story to perfect strangers. A part of me just wanted to keep it secret, but I found that letting go of secrets can be healing in itself and this has helped me forgive those who hurt me.

The second reason is that I hope our story won't just be engaging but might be helpful and hopeful for others in understanding adoption or going through hard times themselves. Doctors told me that I had PTSD and I now think they were right, but people can be amazingly strong. Lots of kids have survived things way worse than what I went through. Your past doesn't have to rule your future. Maybe my story can help others discover their own strength as well.

Lillian

Adoption is the beginning of a long and unforeseeable journey for both parents and children. Of course that is also true when having children of any kind. In considering adoption people often think of beginning with an infant but in fact the overwhelming

majority of children in need of a stable home and family are between the ages of two and eighteen. Adopting older children is a unique experience because they enter the family not only with different genetics but with an extended period of separate and often traumatic life experience. By the time our own children came to live with us they had already experienced more trauma and suffering than any human being should have to endure in a lifetime.

During some of the darker periods my wife and I mused about writing a book entitled *Before You Adopt*. I am glad that we didn't write it then because it would have been incomplete, rather like asking a woman in the throes of painful childbirth for advice about whether to get pregnant. The years reflected in this book include some of the most difficult experiences of my life and I wouldn't have it any other way. I am clear that we did the right thing, what we were meant to do and be.

This is an unusual book for me. I have written for professionals and for public readers before but this is a book that I, like Lillian, needed to write. If it is engaging or useful for others we are pleased, but for both of us it has been a therapeutic working through of our experiences apart and together. We do not presume to advise anyone else on whether to choose adoption. We just tell our unfolding story.

This is also an interim story. Our lives remain a work in progress, an unfinished journey. One never knows where the road goes next. With Teilhard de Chardin, "I am content to walk right to the end along a road of which I am more and more certain, toward an horizon more and more shrouded in mist." It is enough.

Bill

1

Shamokin

Bill

At least as far back as the sixteenth century both sides of my family lived in the Hesse region of central Germany. In fact their farms were only a dozen miles apart, so the families could even have known each other before the Müller ancestors immigrated to Philadelphia aboard the sailing ship Samuel of London in 1732. The Reitzes would arrive nineteen years later, also sailing into Philadelphia aboard the Duke of Bedford. Both families eventually settled in the Appalachian mountains of Pennsylvania.

My mother, Hazel, grew up in a now-razed three-story wood frame house at 103 West Sunbury Street in Shamokin. Her father, Bill Reitz, was a jovial fellow whose mother spoke a Pennsylvania Dutch blend of German and English, bequeathing to the family a colorful collection of sayings and stories. The town knew him as "Pappy" which was also his badge of honor at home. The Sunbury Street house in which I also grew up was on the main route through town for trucks hauling away anthracite coal from the Glen Burn Colliery just around the bend. We were located at third gear from the Market Street traffic light and day or night when trucks had to stop for the light they would be shifting up into third just as they passed our front porch.

The hill that rose directly behind our house is not nearly so high as I remembered but it seems far steeper now. I suppose it is the natural perspective of a boy that a hill looks like a mountain

and each upward step is less daunting for shorter younger legs. We ran tirelessly up and down those slopes, exchanging volleys of rocks in games that now terrify me to recall as a parent. Mounted atop that thickly forested hill was another just as high, bare and black, formed of coal slag hauled up there from the mines in dump trucks winding their way up makeshift roads of hard packed culm. It was a forbidding, treeless place always leaching sulfuric smoke from the inextinguishable hell fires that burned deep within. We were forbidden ever to go up there, warned with tales of air holes, open maws that ventilated long-abandoned mine shafts far beneath. If a boy fell into one of those, as did one of my classmates, he was never seen again.

The footprint of our home was small, a twelve-foot-wide row-house design with narrow alleyways separating it from the Ference and Fiori houses on either side. Pappy had constructed the enclosed front porch from two glassed sound booths he had salvaged from a music store. Summer and winter we could sit out there watching the people and traffic pass by. At shift end the miners would file past, minstrel-faced with only their eyes showing where goggles had shielded them from the coal dust. Many of them would eventually die from black lung disease.

Behind the house was a narrow back yard with rosebushes and a grape arbor. A tree once stood there but had long since fallen into the earth in a mine collapse and been covered over. At the yard's end up against the mountain stood a grand two-story structure with peeling grey paint that we called the fish hatchery. It had been exactly that when the Reitz family operated a tropical fish store that later became Hazel's Gift Shop. After that Pappy turned it into a ramshackle carpentry shop where he puttered building and fixing things after he had retired from the Reading Railroad. From the second floor there was a back door that opened directly onto the hillside. More than once that old building shielded us from mudslides and flooding. I remember during one particularly heavy downpour watching torrents of coal slurry wash down the mountainside gushing jet black waterfalls over the neighbors'

concrete retaining walls and into the basements of their homes on either side of us.

Bill Reitz was something of a folk hero in Shamokin. One midwinter night shift a buddy with epilepsy was working atop an icy boxcar when he suffered a grand mal seizure. In the post-depression era a laborer with epilepsy could lose his job if it came to the company's attention. With help from co-workers Pappy climbed up the access ladder and carried his friend down, caring for him until he came around. Bill married Lottie Savidge in 1911 and they had two children: my uncle Marvin and then my mother Hazel whose identical twin died at birth suffocated by the umbilical cord twisted around her neck. Lottie had an artistic eye and was the curator for the gift shop, which sold ceramics and novelties. She had a particular talent for handcrafting artificial flowers from colored wood fiber, a nearly lost art that she taught to her daughter. When Lottie contracted breast cancer she refused the recommended mastectomy. Instead Pappy drove her across the country to a chiropractic clinic in Denver that claimed to cure cancer, an extraordinary trip before interstate highways. The cancer metastasized and she died the following year.

Hazel graduated from Shamokin High School, but only her brother went on to college and became a music teacher. She worked in clothing mills—literal sweatshops—before I was born and again after I left for college. Her job title at one point was "turner," a person who turns collars, cuffs, and hems in an assembly line. She played piano and mandolin, loved jigsaw puzzles and games. She taught me to play chess as we sat under the grape arbor in summer. She had a child's playfulness, a simple rock-solid Christian faith, a love of stories, and undaunted optimism.

Ralph Miller, my father-to-be, was born in 1909 and grew up in Paxinos, a tiny rural village five miles from Shamokin. His father, Richard Miller, was a laborer for the Pennsylvania Railroad whom I remember as a lean, sullen fellow whose profile strikingly resembled the head of a Lincoln penny. Somewhere along the line he had committed some offense that was spoken of only in hushes, a sin that left him unwelcome in his own home. When I knew him

after he had retired he would rise early in the morning and walk across Shamokin Creek on a railroad trestle to a garden plot where he composted and grew vegetables beside the tracks. He would remain there all day and this is where I would find him when we went to visit. We would sit together quietly, speaking occasionally but feeling no need of it. At dusk he would return for supper by kerosene lantern, where the table conversation flowed easily among my parents, Grandma Leah, my old-maid aunt Alda, and an affable if mysterious boarder named Lee. Grandpa Richard still said very little before retiring to his third-floor bedroom.

Leah was a more gregarious woman whose profile resembled the face of an Indian-head nickel. She tended a coal stove that doubled for cooking and winter heating. On its steel shelf she always kept a jar of Ritz crackers and a tin of warm ginger snaps or freshly baked soft molasses cookies. Without indoor plumbing there was a steel-handled pump outside that drew up iron-tasting water as well as a two-seater wooden outhouse, bitter cold in winter, provisioned with Sears catalogs. Inside the house was an earthen cellar that was cool year round where Leah stored her canned fruits and vegetables. There were stories—perhaps for my benefit, perhaps not—that this cellar was haunted.

Ralph left school after the eighth grade but did acquire a love of reading, particularly war novels. He met Hazel at a church weenie roast, a socializing precursor of the church potluck that centered on a bonfire over which, after it had settled down a bit, people would cook hot dogs skewered on sharpened branches while trying not to singe hands and face. Their courtship was interrupted by World War II when he was drafted and shipped to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to be trained as an Army baker. He never saw combat, however, and when he returned he went to work as a car inspector and yard laborer for the Reading line, one of the more fortunate men who worked above ground. They married in 1945, honeymooned at Washington D.C. and Hershey Park, and I joined the baby boom in 1947. Unable to afford a house of their own they moved in with the Reitzes, living up on the second floor. The tin-roofed third floor became my bedroom.

They were an unlikely couple, a blend of cultures. She was playful and happy, he fretting and serious, or so I remembered. In contrast to her anxious caution he rode motorcycles and liked guns. The Reitzes openly disapproved of Ralph and urged me, "Don't be like your father." In many ways I was not. He loved sports of all kinds; I was terrible at all of them and was most always picked late if not last for teams. He taught me to shoot and liked to hunt, but I wanted no part of it. I'm sure that in some ways I was a disappointment to him.

One of my earliest memories is of a game that we played. Down the center of the second story of the Sunbury Street house there was a narrow hallway. I remember my parents standing at one end of the hall and embracing. I would run down the hall and wriggle in between them, forming a snuggly kind of sandwich. It was a wonderfully warm and safe feeling. I remember Christmas seasons, too, that were filled with traditions. There was a large picture window facing Sunbury Street on the second floor as well as the front porch windows, and each advent Mom would draw Christmas scenes with chalk and then the family would fill in the pictures with tempura paints. Dad was in charge of putting bubble lights on the tree and then setting up the electric train and yard with figurines around it. It was well after Christmas before all of that was taken down and the windows were cleared – a day always tinged with sadness for my father.

Actually I have a still earlier memory that I recovered during a workshop on eidetic imagery when I was thirty-five. Akhter Ahsen had us imagine being at home as small children, looking at the furniture from a child's height. I had a very clear image of Pappy's living room, looking eye-level at the sofa cushions and chairs. Then just for a flash of a few seconds the scene changed and I was outside, looking up at a horrible face with blue sky behind, and a wave of terror swept through me. The face was pale white with wild red hair, and I remember the sensation that this figure was far too tall to be human. Then suddenly I was back in the safety of the living room again asking myself, "What the hell was *that*?" Thinking about it logically later it seemed like it might have been

a clown with white face, stroobly (disheveled) red hair and a too-large grin. Would a clown perhaps have looked so terribly tall? I called my mother to ask whether she remembered me ever being frightened by a clown. "Oh yes," she replied, "I remember it well. We were on the boardwalk at Wildwood, New Jersey and you were in the stroller. A clown came along walking on stilts and tried to make you laugh, but you screamed, so he went away."

"How old was I?" I asked.

"You couldn't have been more than a year old," she said.

It wasn't until Sociology 101 in college that I learned our family was of low socioeconomic class. I had never felt poor. I had a few friends whose families were wealthy, but I don't recall any sense of envy or deprivation. There weren't many extras, but we were never hungry. At that time, one parent could support a family by working a full-time job.

Sometimes there comes an event that forever separates a family's history into before and after. My sister Frances, my only sibling, was born when I was five and quickly became the joyful apple of my father's eye. I loved being her big brother and I have many memories of playing together inside and out as she grew, teaching her to ride a bicycle and trick-or-treating at Halloween. I helped Pappy build an elaborate two-storey wooden dollhouse for her, complete with a staircase and furnishings. Once at the age of two she wandered out the alley door. My parents assumed that she had gone off with me on a walk (it was safe then for children to wander the city streets), but when I returned alone they realized that she was missing. We found her a few blocks away at the Picarelli family fruit market, perched happily on a stool and munching on an apple. At age five she was diagnosed with diabetes, and from there on she appears ever more pale and gaunt in family photos. At the age of eight she fell ill with infectious hepatitis on Good Friday and she died on Easter Sunday. There are no more 8 mm family movies after that. I vividly remember standing on our front porch raging, "Why God?" Yet I think that the tender wound of this loss opened in me a space for compassion.

2

Stockton

Lillian

My name is Lillian. Not Lil or Lilly, but Lillian. It's an old-fashioned name, and so is Viola which was my middle name. You don't meet many Lillians or Violas from my generation. I don't actually appear until chapter 4. This chapter is about my birth parents.

The story begins in Stockton, a city of about a quarter million people in the fertile San Joaquin Valley of California where grapes, nuts, vegetables and citrus are grown. Although Stockton is in central California it is also a seaport connected by the San Joaquin River to the San Francisco Bay.

My birth dad, Richard Calvin Zellner, was born in 1954 and had a pretty rough start in life. As far as he knew his birth parents had been good to him, but for reasons that he never understood they felt unable to take care of him even though they kept and raised his three sisters. What he remembered about his birth father was that he smoked a lot and could fill up an ashtray in half an hour.

Richard went into foster care at a young age, taken in by a police officer who had two older boys of his own. He told me that when he got into trouble his foster brothers would beat him. Tired of feeling pushed around, he often ran away and was in and out of various homes. Sometimes when he was as young as twelve he would live on the street because there he felt like he was on his

own. I can't imagine how scary that would have been. It must have been really bad at his home if he felt safer on the streets.

Richard did not like school much. He was placed in special education which made him feel dumb so he would cut school whenever he could. He didn't think he belonged in the same class as the other kids there, even though his reading and math skills were pretty weak. At age fourteen he was introduced to heroin by a cousin and soon thereafter dropped out of school. At nineteen he was working as a beekeeper in Stockton, California when he met my birth mom through a cousin who had gone AWOL from the Army.

On my birth mom's side the story starts with her mother Carole, a wild and spunky lady who worked as a waitress in California and liked to go to bars and drink. With her first husband she had twin girls followed by another girl and a boy. I'm not sure why they got divorced, but soon after that she met my grandpa Wally, an alcoholic truck driver, and they lived in Alaska for fifteen years. They had two kids together, my uncle and then my mom Terry. Wally was abusive to grandma, though she could hold her own most of the time, and eventually they also divorced.

As the youngest child, Terry was often babysat by the twins who were the oldest so that grandma could work. The twins remembered her as being so fun and such a joy as a child. As a teenager, though, she started getting into trouble at school in Alaska and began using drugs. Terry was a tough kid because she had to be. She didn't get a lot of attention and had to grow up fast. Her sister told me that grandma gave the boys all the attention and liked them better than the girls.

When they moved back to California grandma met her third husband. They were together for a long time before they got married. Grandpa Lloyd really took in my mom and her brother like they were his own children. Grandma began to settle down and Lloyd tried to establish some discipline at home because my grandma never really did that. When he slapped or grounded Terry she would call the police and tell them that he abused her. Sometimes she ran away from home.

Stockton

Terry was seventeen when she met Richard while partying in Stockton. They quickly fell for each other and were married soon afterward in 1974 at Lake Tahoe. Looking back, my birth dad told me they had been very much in love but were way too young to get married and raise children, not even knowing yet what they wanted in life.