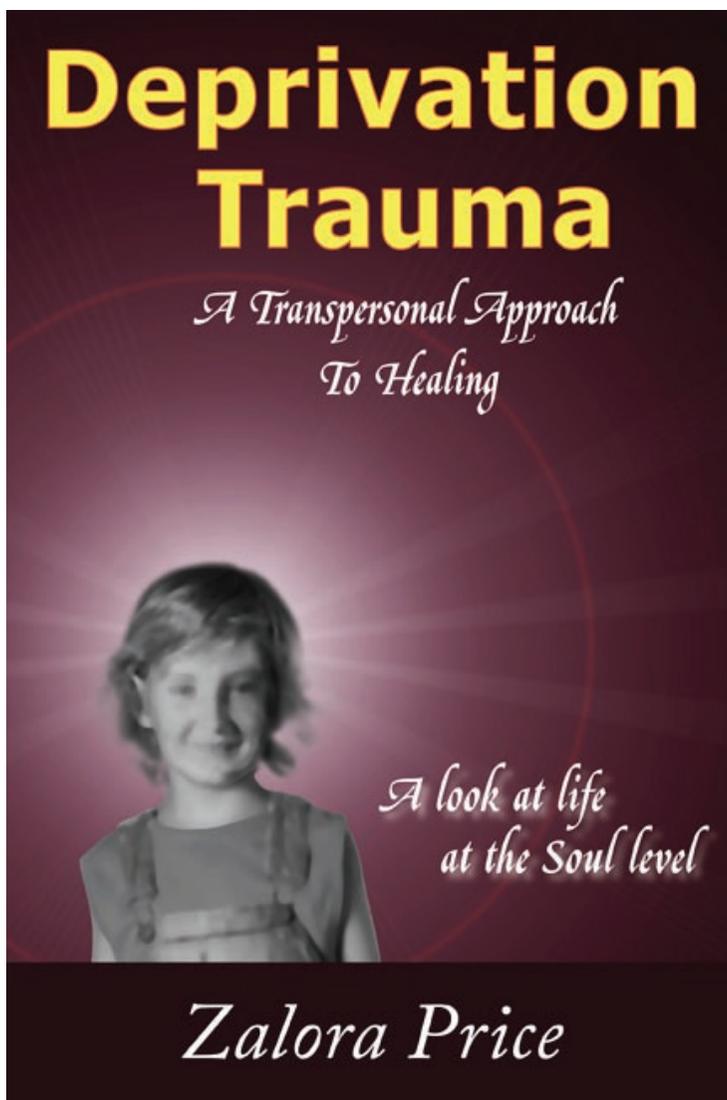


Excerpt from



Part 2, Chapter 12, pages 110-113

This chapter includes examples of the physical struggle, social rejection, and emotional pain suffered by Fay in elementary school.



Chapter 12

Time Again For School

Fall - 1947

*They were laughing,
and saying "Look at
her. She has on a
coat, but no shoes."*

Summer had been muggy. The Mississippi River Basin area flourished with mold and mosquitoes. This only added to the dismal conditions that already existed with the run down house, muddy roads, cistern water, and the mere essentials for existence.

The sheer exhaustion of the summer labor had taken its toll on everyone in the family. Each family member had their place and responsibilities. And the struggle for survival took precedence over personal attention.

Personal hygiene consisted of pumping a pan of cold water and the use of a harsh soap when the accumulation of dirt and dead skin cells became too itchy to tolerate.

My resistance to physical and mental blows caused me to be the last one to the table to see if there was anything left when the others were finished eating and out of the kitchen. Since it was my job to clean the dishes after meals, they knew I would show up at some time. Little, if anything, was ever left to eat. If Mother baked a pan of cornbread with the intent of it lasting for the next

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day's meal, and I took a bite of it, she would scream at me and beat on me.

My body was small for my age; just skin over bones. And my thin red hair looked ragged and unkempt. My feet were crusty and scarred from exposure and going without shoes. I did not notice.

There was only an occasional day of work now. And fatigue permeated the environment. The day hands counted what little coins remained after their debts were paid at the general store, and worried about how they were going to be able to get through another winter. If they had enough money, they would buy a bag of salt, fifty pounds of pinto beans, rice, flour and lard. Coffee and an occasional slab of bacon came next. Rice was served for breakfast. And a little 'grease-gravy' made it more palatable day after day. The grease-gravy was made by adding a little bacon grease to brewed coffee, and then it was poured over the rice. A bowl of beans from the pot on the stove was served for dinner.

It was late fall when the crops were 'laid by' and there was little work left to be done in the fields. It was then decided that it was time for us to go to school. I would soon be seven years old. But, because I had never been in school, I was added to the first grade list.

The school was an old, square, brown brick building. It stood in the middle of a city block with a large, barren school yard in the center of Clarkton, Missouri. Grades 1-3 were downstairs. Grades 4-6 were upstairs.

The first frost arrived in early October. We awoke cold and with no wood for the stove. Our four room bungalow was framed with half inch thick pine boards and had no insulation. Mom always looked for one with tar paper covering the outside. But I would assume that out of necessity she had taken the one we were in. Air whipped up through the cracks in the wood floor and whistled around the window frames with their dirty panes. Our

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furnishings were meager. Nothing covered the windows to hold out the cold. A bed was the only piece of furniture in the bedroom. I rumbled through the piles of clothing scattered around the room. Finding a homemade hand-me-down dress, I pulled it on over my cotton long johns.

Someone called, "The bus is coming."

I ran to the front porch. My frail body shook with the onslaught of frost and cold air. Turning, I raced to the bedroom to find something with long sleeves to protect my small body.

"Hurry!" someone shouted from the other end of the house.

"I'm cold!" I shouted back.

Mother arrived and began to help me search through a pile of clothing in the corner. Digging underneath, she withdrew a hand-me-down coat that had been outgrown by someone in our extended family.

"Put this on," she said.

Putting my arms into the sleeves and wrapping the ladies short coat around me, I ran to reach the school bus just before the door was closed. All the while I was still trying to find my hands in the sleeves that reached down to my knees, and kicking the length that reached my ankles as I climbed the steps of the bus. The bus driver looked at me with a cold frown that said, "Don't ever plan on me waiting for you." I didn't. But I also knew how often he waited at a nice house down the road for a brother and sister who never ran and always looked like they had just been scrubbed and pressed.

He gave a strong jerk and accelerated the bus, as I gripped the back of the seats and made my way down the aisle looking for a place to sit. In each row sat students who shook their heads that said 'no,' I could not sit with them. Somewhere near the rear of the bus there were always seats. Only, the further back I sat the more nausea I had when I got to school. Many times I would dry heave because there was nothing in my stomach to throw up.

When school had started a group of first grade students

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were put in the second grade classroom because the first grade teacher could not take all of us. I was in the group placed in Mrs. Shepherd's second grade class.

When I entered the second grade classroom, Mrs. Shepherd sneered at me, as usual, and turned her attention to the class. I took out a first grade reading book, but turned my attention to the second grade class being taught. I was lost in reverie when the bell rang, interrupting a wonderful story on historical events.

"Everyone outside for recess," came the instructions. I moved cooly down the hall to the front entrance. Caught up in the sweeping motion of everyone moving out of the building, I found myself flowing down the steps and on to the barren earth. My cold feet responded to the sharp rocks and shattered glass that was spread across the school yard. When things cleared, I moved back to the sidewalk, and then to the top step by the door. The sun was shining, but the sharp wind cut through my thin hair. Standing on the concrete steps was like standing on ice. Shivering, I wrapped the coat around me and pulled my hands inside the sleeves. I stood anxiously waiting for the bell to ring again.

In front of me, on the sidewalk, girls were playing jump rope. I shifted from foot to foot, resting one on top of the other for warmth. One of the girls said something to one of the other girls. Then another. And another. In seconds they were all looking at me. And they were pointing their fingers at me. And laughing! "Look at her." They were saying. "Look at her. She has on a coat but no shoes."

Recess became a horror. There were both physical and psychological attacks. Children I did not know would come by me, just to punch at me. Others 'made fun' of me in every conceivable way. Their talk, whispers, and giggles, told me I was an outcast, disliked, and unwanted, because I was poor.

The bell rang. I couldn't tell if the shrill, piercing ring was the school bell or the panic bell going off in my head. They were one and the same. Recess!!!