

**MOTHERHOOD AND ACADEMIC LIFE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA:**

**A UNIQUE PATH OF LEARNING.**

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Dear University of Iowa (and Johnson County school district) students:

I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa for five years (1988-1993) when I was between 38 and 43 years old. Now I am 56 years old, and living back in my home country: Venezuela. However I always said that the five years that I lived with my three sons in Iowa City where the most important, wonderful and inspiring years of our lives. I would like to share with you some of my most inspiring moments during my path of learning.

I have been a professor at the University of Zulia (Maracaibo, Venezuela) and a mother of three children, at the same time, all my active and productive life. At the age of 23, just after graduation from the School of Sociology at the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1973), I began working as a social communication researcher at the University of Zulia. Only two years later, on October 6, 1975, I gave birth to my first son Alvaro Timoteo. Efraim Josue, my second, was born on July 2, 1977, and Dionisio David, my youngest, on July 10, 1978. Right now I am 56 years old and my three sons (now 28, 29 and almost 32) have just graduated from their respective college studies, and are beginning

their own graduate and professional careers. The academic life cycle has begun once again its harmonic rhythm, and is weaving new tapestries.

The way in which motherhood and academic work has been interwoven in my personal and professional life is very important to me. I realize now, looking back, that both have been essential in my own path of learning, even though time and again I often thought that the task I had was enormous and heavy for me.

Reflecting on my own life now, I find three main stages of my path of learning, accordingly to my academic and professional commitment, and my sons' growth. **The first stage** began when I had just graduated from college in 1973 and was engaged to my sons' father and former husband. Because of this relationship, I decided to move from Caracas (my birthplace) to Maracaibo (600 miles away from home), get a full time job as a research assistant at the University of Zulia, and not pursue graduate studies immediately, as most of my classmates did at that time, thanks to the economically generous Venezuelan scholarship program "Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho" (during the Venezuelan 1973-1978 oil boom). Many of them criticized me because of my apparent lack of professional vision, and my traditional values. The first wave of feminism was in full swing then and some of the feminists were advocating that women should pursue their own professional and academic careers first, and forget or defer all about marriage, children and household. And there I was, doing the exact opposite. Especially when my mother, a traditional mother and wife with only an elementary school certificate, had worked so hard for the education of my

younger sisters and my own (one graduated in Computer Sciences in 1974, and the youngest in Psychology and Music in 1979). This decision seemed to be contradictory to the goals proposed by the women's movement, and also a kind of betrayal to my mother's effort. But I did not regret my personal decision at that time, nor did my mother ever reprove me for it. On the contrary, she always supported me on whatever I decided on any issue. I have always deeply appreciated her support and encouragement throughout my life.

On November 1, 1973, I began my academic life at the University of Zulia. I began working as a social communication researcher in the Faculty of Law. From the very beginning I actively participated in many research projects such as *Communication and Ideology*, *Media and Drug Use in Maracaibo*, *Literature of Violence in Venezuela*, for which I presented papers in national and international congresses held mainly in Venezuela, with the company of my fiancé at that time, who was studying in the School of Philosophy at the same University (he graduated in July 1975, three months before our first son was born).

Our research perspectives were based on Marxist theories and methodologies; those of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Nikos Poulantzas, and the Latin American supporters of the Dependency Theory, such as the Silva Michelena brothers, Alfredo Chacon, and Eliseo Veron, among others. Both of us were intellectually "radical" and "avant-garde" in our university circles, yet at the same time very naïve as a young couple that knew nothing about birth control.

After we got married in 1974, it was very surprising to learn that I had become pregnant within a month.

From that period on, I felt I was giving birth to my children and to my books and academic articles at the same time. I thought of each of my efforts as the very act of giving birth: both to ideas and to my children. *Cultural Violence in Venezuela* (published in 1983), my first book, a historical and critical review of the "ideological apparatus of the state", dealt with church, education and media from colonial times to the golden oil period in the Venezuela of the 1970's. It was conceived when I was pregnant with my first son, researched during my second son's pregnancy, and written just before my third son was born. This project lasted three years (1975-1978), and some time later won an academic award granted by the University of Zulia "for its precise, original and valuable review of the contemporary Venezuelan history", that allowed its publication through the University's press. I used the award money (at the time equivalent to \$10.000) to buy my three sons' first bicycles and to travel for my very first time to Puerto Rico, "the island of the enchantment". The rest of the award financed the presentation of a paper, *Religion as informal social control*, at the International Congress of Criminology in Medellin, Colombia in 1984.

However, after my three sons were born, my former husband and myself were under considerable academic and personal stress due to the competition in the working environment, as he also began his academic career at the University of Zulia where he found a stable position at the School of Philosophy in 1978.

Furthermore, he understood that a busy domestic life limited his goals, and after a long affair with his former teacher (and feminist activist in Maracaibo), he left the house and I found myself at the age of 30 raising, alone, three small, intelligent, and super-active boys of 2, 3 and 5 years old. Because I had only had sisters, I did not know anything about raising boys.

At the beginning the situation was very depressing and frightening for me. I was educated in a very traditional (and evangelist) home, where it was believed that marriage lasted forever. All my values fell apart. I was really devastated and desolated, and spent almost one year in psychological therapy. However, my mother's encouragement and prayers, the support of a few friends (some from across the ocean), and above all, my sons' shining presence were literally my salvation. Even though they were just kids at that time, and could certainly not understand my personal situation and academic work, they helped me to overcome these problems.

During this time they helped me to be connected to the "real world". To be (pre) occupied with food, diapers, games, child health care, travels, kids TV programs, films and books, and preschool and elementary school activities was really refreshing after long days of abstract thinking at work. One day in the summer of 1986, when I was finishing a difficult chapter of my thesis, *The Venezuelan Church: Instrument of Domination of Liberation?*, for the Masters program in Criminology (where I also worked then), my boys encouraged me to conclude it in order to get a special prize: to take them out for ice cream while

watching a crucial World Cup soccer match on the big screen. That was their idea. I finished the chapter and we went out and enjoyed our ice cream together. I will point out that it was in 1986 that the Argentinean team beat Germany through Maradona's "hand of God" goal in one of the final matches. My sons and I celebrated it enthusiastically at Maracaibo's Plaza de La Republica while waving Argentinean flags they had made during my study and writing time.

I finally got my Masters Degree on December 5, 1986, and my three sons went to the graduation ceremony all dressed up and very proud of their mother's earnest achievement. After the academic ceremony, each one of them wore my graduation medal which they themselves helped me to obtain. These inspiring moments are still a special memory within all of us.

Looking back, I realize that at that particular time of my life, being the mother of these three little and caring boys really was a wonderfully, refreshing and strengthening experience for me, just as I was developing the first stage of my academic career. At the same time, when I had difficulties and misunderstandings at work—where most of my female colleagues would call themselves feminists and at times mocked me because I was a divorced woman—, my sons' love and care made me feel safe, loved, and capable of achieving all of my goals.

**A second stage** in my academic life began when I won a Fulbright-LASPAU scholarship that allowed me to pursue my **Ph. D. in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, U.S.A. during the years 1988-1993**. First of

all, I will always thank my mother who even though she was terminally ill with liver cancer, handled—for more than one year—all the paper work between the American Embassy in Caracas and myself, so I could apply and be granted this award. Without her encouragement, faith and cheerful spirit under the worst circumstances, I could not have done one-third of what I have achieved today. “You must go for yourself and your sons. You cannot wait until I die. I have been working so hard for you for this scholarship so that you can continue your studies. You must go NOW”. Those were her final words to me. I left my home country on May 4, 1988. My dear mother passed away only 16 days later. My father, my two sisters, my three sons and their father, and other relatives and friends were present at her burial. I was by myself in the United States, respecting her last and dying wish and making her dreams for me come true. Her love and care for us was above and beyond all human understanding. Since then, she has been our shining morning star, our loving guardian angel.

In Iowa, **“beautiful land, the heaven where all dreams come true”**, we spent five of the most wonderful years of our lives. **I always give thanks to God and the Fulbright Program for choosing the University of Iowa for my sons and me. In Iowa, “a place to grow”, we really grew as human beings and students/scholars. We still feel its beneficial influence in many ways.** My sons learned, through my experience as a doctoral student at U. of Iowa, to organize multiple interests living abroad, in order to achieve academic or professional goals, without losing the taste for life's everyday adventures.

My three sons were coming into their teens, and the four of us had to adjust to a cultural, social and economic environment that was different from our home country. It was a real challenge for all of us to learn from each other how to become a multicultural persona and family, not only in the academic world, but also in everyday life. In 1988, when they arrived to Iowa City, Dionisio was 10 years old, Efraim was 11, and Timoteo almost 13. The two youngest went into 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade respectively, and the oldest started junior high school. **The special cultural environment in Iowa City was really stimulating. Its educational system is one of the best in the U.S.A as well the non-discrimination policy, that allows people from all over the world to work, study and live in relative peace and harmony in this beautiful Midwestern state, with its golden and emerald prairies, and so rich for us in multicultural experiences.** Its proximity to Chicago, the gateway of the east-west/north-south interchanges since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gave the city a very special and open-minded environment. **“A place to grow” is not only a slogan; it is the way of life where the arts and sciences as well as the soil and soul are cultivated in a very nice equilibrium.** With my sons becoming teenagers, all four of us had to adjust to a cultural, social and economic environment different than our own. It was a real challenge for us to learn from each other how to become a multicultural people and family, not only in the academic world, but also in everyday life.

I took my courses every semester, still struggling with my language difficulties, and succeeded in passing my qualifying and comprehensive exams



with excellent grades, and wrote my dissertation thesis with the support and encouragement of my advisors John Peters and Kathleen Newman. My sons were soon bilingual, speaking nearly native English, certainly much better than I could, and followed their respective courses with responsibility and dedication. Timoteo graduated from junior high and high school in only 4 years, and completed his freshman year in 1992-1993 in the School of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Iowa. Efraim Josue finished his sophomore year of High School, and Dionisio his freshman year. All of them participated actively in different sports at school: soccer, when the "soccer fever" in the United States was just beginning; and wrestling, which Iowa is famous for across the US. At a personal level, I enjoyed going to their football, track, wrestling, and soccer matches with a book on my lap, while preparing for my exams and encouraging them in their respective games in and out of the city. All of us had a growing circle of friends and acquaintances. **We were very active in the International and Latino/a Students Association and contributed in organizing many different cultural activities during our stay (1988-1993) in Iowa City.**

We also enjoyed taking vacations together during the summer in our old second-hand green Galaxy 500, staying at different AAA camping grounds all over the "American heartland". During the winters we took advantage of the International Family Programs, which allowed us to meet first-hand the "real" American people. This was a very interesting experience, because we had the unique opportunity to meet people from different social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds. Thanks to these family trips we met migrant American

working people at the 1990 National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa during August, and a Republican family from the suburbs of Maryland during Christmas 1991. These experiences allowed us to see the radical contrasts amongst the American people and between these and the U.S. government policies. As a sociology student, born and raised in Latin America in the 1960's, I really was a convinced "anti-imperialist advocate" (and perhaps I still am, but with a broader perspective now). I saw my personal views significantly and radically change during these five years in the United States through all these "up-close" experiences; sharing with "real people" in their own land. We still maintain contact with many of our American friends; we have visited them and they have visited us in Venezuela, making the world really small and full of friendship. In Iowa, we learned to open our minds and souls to a broader sense of humankind.

It was also interesting to compare the knowledge and different perspectives we acquired in our respective schools. When Timoteo and Efraim were taking classes on American History, I was taking courses on American Cultural Studies, Feminist Film Theory, Chicano, Cuban, Mexican and Argentinean cinema, and the approach for understanding the U.S. relations to ethnic minorities. The information presented in each academic context was radically different—especially with respect to Latin American countries. According to the high school American history textbooks, Mexico sold its land to the U.S. in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century voluntarily. In the Ph.D. critical cultural studies seminars, the same history was discussed from a very different point of view. When Dionisio read the Malcolm X biography by Alex Haley for his English class,

his and our perspectives on race and social class changed. He understood, thanks to this reading, that everyone is his/her own master, and his/her own decisions are crucial for the individual and collective progress. To be conscious and proud of your own roots was also important for your future development and personal growth.

At a personal level, I rationalized and became conscious of the concept of "race". In Venezuela, due to our mixed ethnic roots (from indigenous, European and African ancestors), I grew up taking for granted that we in Venezuela were all equals and that, ideally, we Venezuelans had not had racial or ethnic discrimination during our whole republican history. Most of the Venezuelan History textbooks denied the existence of racial and social class problems in Venezuelan society. (Although in the last four years, due to our particular political situation, these racial, ethnic and social tensions have re-emerged with special fervor). In Iowa, I realized that I was not a "white woman" in the U.S. Instead, I was labeled as a "woman of color from a non-developed country" wherever I went, and I began to be more sensitive and to understand, at a personal and not only academic level, the life experiences of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and other minorities in the U.S. and abroad. For this reason, the topic of my Ph.D. dissertation –*Rediscovering the discovery: three analyses from Venezuelan and U.S. perspectives* (1993)– was the first step in a long line of research that I am still developing on the contradictions in the representation of minorities (indigenous and women, primarily) in the contemporary media (especially film and video) in the Americas.

Another important living experience that I took from my Iowa years was a different and more objective approach towards feminism. My personal and academic experience in Maracaibo, Venezuela made me very skeptical towards all these "feminists" and their view points which I see as a particularly hypocritical in practice. Yet, in Iowa, I became involved with the Women's Center as well as the Women's Studies Program where I learned quite different human and feminist perspectives which have allowed me to be in contact with feminist scholars from all over the world in various academic associations in which I have participated: the Latin American Studies Association, the Society for Cinema Studies, the Union for Democratic Communication, and the International Association for Media and Communication Research. I was introduced and recommended to all of these academic institutions by my advisor Kathleen Newman, a respectable and invaluable feminist scholar at the University of Iowa.

With all this strong and formidable baggage of wisdom and knowledge we returned to Venezuela in July 1993. Timoteo (almost 18) continued his studies of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Zulia. Efraim (16) and Dionisio (15) finished their Venezuelan high school to later continue in Mathematics/Computer Sciences at the University of Zulia and Literature/Music Schools, at the University of Los Andes (Merida), respectively. All of them acquired good working habits during our years in Iowa, where they worked as paperboys, baby-sitters, and corn fields detassellers, among other jobs in order to get their own means for entertainment. In Venezuela, all of them have used all the skills they learned in

Iowa; working as English teachers or translators, tourist guides, and small business managers, saving up for their pleasure or educational travels.

Our experience as a family in a foreign country for five years taught us how to adapt intelligently to new environments, to survive successfully in different cultural situations, and to live with optimism and enthusiasm in order to accomplish our own goals.

**The third and last stage** is still in progress. It began in 1993 when we returned to Venezuela, with the wonderful memories and learning path that we enjoyed in Iowa.

My three sons are now their late twenties. They just finished their own college education and are beginning their postgraduate and professional careers. At this very moment they are my best friends, and the most interesting conversational partners on any current theme or topic. I am learning now about many interesting subjects that I never knew about before: Alvaro Timoteo after finishing his Masters Program in Sustainable Energy Engineering at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden is working as energy and climate consulting advisor; Efraim Josue will soon begin an internship abroad (and possibly a Masters Program) applying Mathematics into Technology Business; and Dionisio David studied his master programs in Spanish American Literature at the University of Tulane in New Orleans (2002-2004), and currently is studying his Ph.D. program in Caribbean Literature at the University of Miami U.S.A. (2005-2009).

My intellectual life has certainly been broadened and deepened thanks to my three sons and their professional interests. I know that my own career and life have been useful in making them familiar with the academic life, and thereby contributing to how they guide their own lives.

Since my return to the University of Zulia, I have earned more academic freedom and responsibility. I became a full professor (*professor titular*), and an independent researcher with my own line of investigation in the area of "Communication, Culture and Society". I have continued to work on "Representations of Minorities in Audiovisual Media" –indigenous and women basically. In addition, I have been giving doctorate-level seminars on "Cultural Studies from British, American and Latin American perspectives", and "Communication, Human Rights, and Democracy in Latin America", as concrete products of my line of research. Parallel to this, I have traveled extensively, going to different academic congresses and/or foreign universities in order to present papers or lectures in the areas of Semiotics, Communication, Cinema and Latin American Studies. These new experiences have allowed me to become an active member of research groups in different academic associations. I have been kept busy, active and alive, personally and professionally.

In January 2002, I became emeritus professor at the University of Zulia. Even though I am "administrative retired", I am still working actively. Right now, I am organizing a research group through the *Cine Club Universitario de Maracaibo*, in order to create an academic space for the research on young

audiences and cinema, as well as for communities and cinema, along with other related activities hosted by the University. I am also a member of the Faculty Staff at the newly created National School of Audiovisual Media (ENMA) at the University of Los Andes, where young video and filmmakers are learning how to create, produce and direct low budget works for the *Newest Venezuelan Cinema* with critical and universal perspectives.

In all these projects and travels I can always count on my sons' support and encouragement. On a practical basis they help me to find better connections for airplane flights, the most convenient housing accommodations, and to become familiar with the new computer technology. In more intangible manners, they support me when I discuss freely my intellectual experiences and thoughts about any topic regarding life and work with them. They always know the first version of all my academic writings and research projects. In that sense, I get support from my sons when they give me not only new and refreshing ideas, but also, when they keep our home organized and clean during my frequent absences. For this reason, I am confident that they will do well wherever they go, in the pursuit of their own dreams; and also that they will have all the skills necessary for being good companions for their respective wives and good fathers for my future grandchildren, when they decide to create their own homes.

Looking back on our journey together through life, I realize that my academic life and career literally began with my motherhood experiences. I am so grateful to God and my three sons for this unique and full life that I have

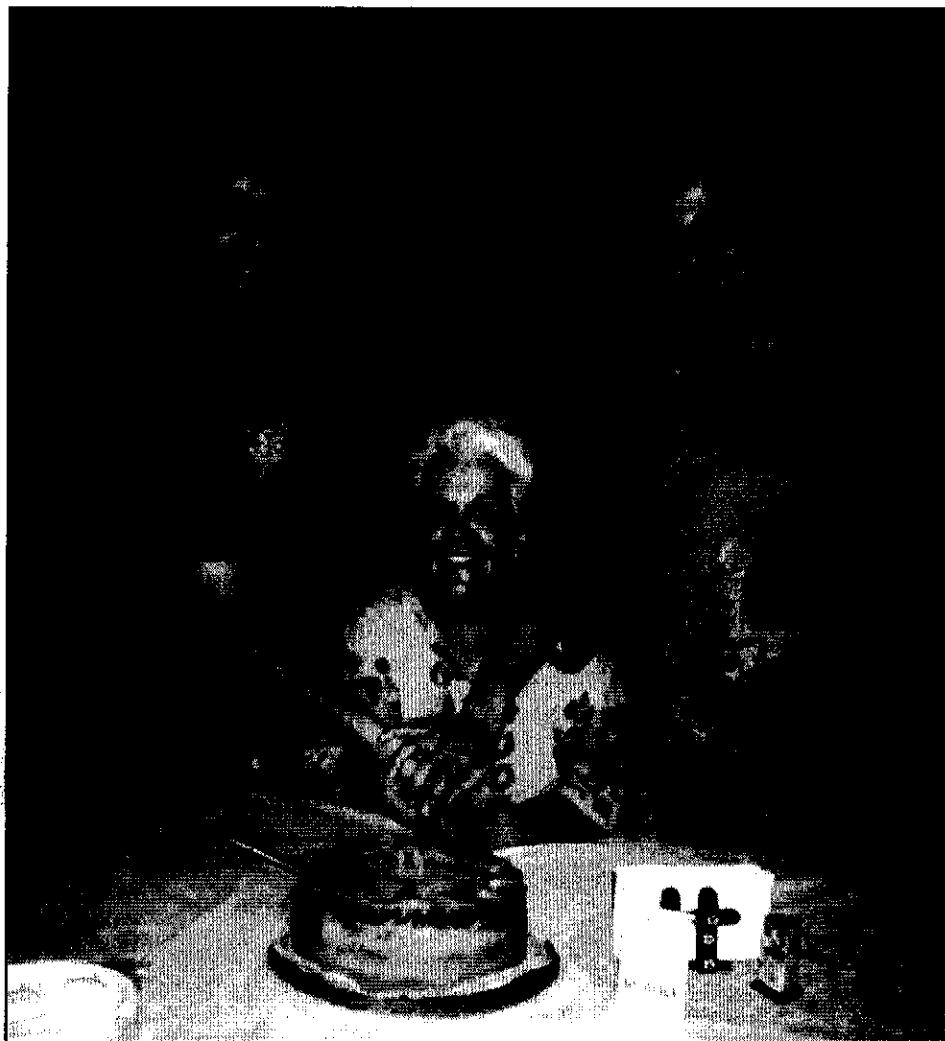
enjoyed for more than 27 years now. In this time period I also include the time of my pregnancies, because during each of the nine months—for three times—I became more conscious of my own body, and realized that giving birth to a human being was indeed comparable to giving birth to new ideas and thoughts – expressed in articles, books and new and exciting living experiences.

Specially, I am grateful to God, the Fulbright Scholarship Program, and the University of Iowa for the most important and inspiring years of my life that I enjoyed with my sons in Iowa City. This experience changed my life and my thought forever: opened my mind , my heart and my eyes, and since then I am able to understand the new generation, the American way of life and the whole world in a broader sense. I agree with the people that consider Iowa as the “Athens of the Midwest”.

For this reason, I deeply believe that *motherhood and academic life* have been one and the same path of learning for me, allowing me to grow and expand my mind and soul as a human being, as a woman, as a mother and as a scholar. These living experiences are in such a manner interwoven within my own life that I can't talk about one without making reference to the other. They are the two faces of the same coin that I am. These are the beautiful yarns that I have used for weaving the exciting and original tapestry that is my life. Thank God for them!

Maracaibo, Venezuela, February 2007.





On my 52nd Birthday (07/17/2002) with my sons,  
before they went to study abroad.

From left to right: Efraim Josué, Alvaro Timoteo and Dionisio David