

## ABSTRACT

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AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Responding to the notion that old age is like a foreign country, this study explores a small portion of this understudied terrain by examining the lives of eight old New England women (four primary subjects and four supplemental participants). In keeping with current ethnographic and life history practice, this cultural study of these American women in late life uses a journey format with the researcher engaged in exploration along with the other project participants. After a comprehensive review of the various literatures on aging women, this study provides detailed cultural portraits of the project participants who ranged in age from 60 to 92 when their participation in this ten year study began. By a close reading of their writings, by in depth life history conversations, and by participant observation, including living with each participant for a brief period of time, this study illuminates how these women in old age see themselves, the choices they have made or resisted in late life and what gives their lives meaning. This study is

intended to illustrate the usefulness of the person centered life history method as a lens through which to examine the complex ways in which women negotiate aging.

Old age, as this study shows, is experienced quite differently by each of these individual women; the old are far from a homogenous group. Even within this small group of white New England women of similar class backgrounds, many factors differentiate their experiences. One key factor has to do with their different cultural meaning systems. Using a “cultural traditions” model in conjunction with contemporary life history methods and ethnographic participant observation techniques, and informed by nascent age studies perspectives, this research examines how and to what extent the old age experiences of these women are affected and influenced by the particular cultural orientations of key cultural traditions these New England women bring with them into old age and how the aging process affects the ways they work with these traditions.

OLD YANKEE WOMEN: LIFE HISTORIES  
AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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Professor Judith N. Freidenberg  
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Professor Sandra Murray Nettles  
Professor Judith H. Paterson

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## DEDICATION

To my companion of more than 51 years  
John Elmer Tydings

. . . that best portion of a good man's life, His  
little, nameless, unremembered, acts of  
kindness and of love.

William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*

To my children

Christopher Ashley Tydings  
Jessica Tydings Mannarino  
Jeffrey Mills Tydings  
and  
Michael David Tydings  
(1961-2005)

*He came, he made us laugh, he left.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Old age in America has often been described as “another country” (Cowley 4), a “new country” (Porter 102), a “foreign country” (Sarton 1973/1992 23), “uncharted waters” (Fowler and McCutcheon xiii), and “new territory” (Pipher 16) with an “unknown language” (Sarton 1973/1992 23). Thomas Cole, Professor of Medical Humanities, tells us that in a search for personal meaning, he has been “exploring the cultural shoreline of later life, charting its historical forms and sounding their historical depths” (1992 xvii). The late historian Page Smith wrote that, for him, growing old meant “devising strategies for a campaign over unfamiliar territory where one has to improvise as one goes along” (7). Gloria Steinem notes, “I realize now that fifty felt like leaving a much-loved and familiar country . . . but sixty feels like arriving at the border of a new one” (vii). She considered the “central years” of her life as over and looking ahead wrote: “A whole new and unimagined country lay beyond” (xv). Age studies theorist Kathleen Woodward confirms that “the metaphor of old age as a foreign territory or new country is widely used” (2002 213).

Much in the spirit of Margaret Mead venturing to Samoa, how appropriate it seems, then, for an ethnographer like me to undertake an expedition into this foreign terrain of old age. It is not my intention to provide a Baedeker to this unknown country. My goal is modest. The life history method, or person centered ethnography, is especially well suited to this project. Participant observation and ethnographic interviews will enable me to explore a portion of this *terra incognita* by considering the lives and listening to the words of several American women in their late decades of life, who are New England natives of this other world whose voices are seldom heard.<sup>1</sup>

The interdisciplinarity of American Studies makes aging a congenial area within which to work. In the late seventies the distinguished American Studies scholar, Gene Wise, spoke prophetically about how the field of American Studies needed to pay better attention to the diversity of perspectives and experiences within our society. Along with American Indian culture and youth culture, he mentioned *regionalism*, and *the culture of the aged* [italics mine] (192). A decade later, in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association (1988), Linda Kerber called the relationship of American Studies to the traditional disciplines “a dynamic and continuing one.” She predicted that American Studies was positioned well “to move towards issues that by their *nature* [italics Kerber’s] do not settle well into traditional disciplines.” She noted examples of three such issues: black culture, the construction of personal appearance, and *aging* [italics mine] (425). Austrian Americanist and literature scholar, Roberta Maierhofer, responding to this challenge, in the 1990s began to marry feminist criticism with literary gerontology in her examination of the portrayal old women in contemporary American literary texts. A decade after Kerber, in an article “American Studies Growing Old,” Maierhofer echoed both Wise and Kerber: “If the strength of American Studies has been to provide the focus for inter-and cross-disciplinary investigations, it will now be able to incorporate a discussion of age into its field” (1999 266). However, almost a decade after that she lamented: “Academia has been slow to pick up the topic of aging and incorporate it into research and the teaching of English and American Studies” (2007 24).

With American Studies my academic home, and trained as an ethnographer, I came to this present project, a cultural study of some late-life New England American women, at a fortuitous time in my own life and, serendipitously, at a time when various

relevant disciplinary streams such as literature and gerontology, were just beginning to converge, and others, disability studies, New England studies, and age studies, were beginning to emerge. In my sixties in 1999 when I began interviewing a few northeastern women in depth about their experience of growing old, I am now in my seventies as I write up what I found on the journey. Several strands: a curiosity about what old age might have in store for me, what it has been like for a few contemporary American women who live in the region of my childhood and my ancestral roots, a desire to be conscious of my own experience of aging, and the desire to contribute to ongoing academic discussions about aging in America, all have conveniently meshed with the reflexive turn in ethnographic work, and with the recognition of there being value in pursuing ethnographic inquiries close to home, even within one's own culture. With one foot already inside the little known country of old age, I am not, as with most ethnographers, "a temporary immigrant in an alien culture" (Caughey 1982 240); instead I have served as my own informant alongside other project participants. As a researcher and a pioneer, I have been both an insider and an outsider; the observer and the observed, as I have been engaged in exploration along with other late-life project participants. And as will become clear below, in the academy, both women's studies and the nascent age studies are not alone among the disciplines calling for the voices of old women to be heard.

This project uses a journey format; the researcher-traveler being a familiar convention among researchers, especially women (Reinharz 212). In addition, the quest itself, as well as the discoveries, is part of the study; "the process becomes part of the product" (212), one becomes "the phenomenon one is studying" (Caughey 1986 243;

1989 35). This quest or journey format is a good fit with the reflexive ethnography exemplified by Caughey (2006; 1994); Myerhoff (1978), Geertz (1988) and Behar (1993, 1996, 2007) who have moved beyond conservative classic ethnography that claimed a certain objectivity while rejecting introspection. The challenge, according to Geertz, is to create work that combines “an intimate view with a cool assessment” (1988 15). Speaking of Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days*, an ethnographic study of elderly Jews, Victor Turner described the approach as being one that throws down barriers “between self and other, head and heart, conscious and unconscious, history and autobiography” (Turner/Myerhoff 1978 xiii). My journey took ten years, with three years lost to hazards encountered along the way.

Chapter One describes the beginnings of my expedition into the foreign land of old age: how I came to this present project and why I chose to focus on New England women and why this work should be useful to men as well as women. I begin an examination of the literature, both popular and academic, that up to now has provided what little information we have about this under explored territory of American women’s elder years. Chapter Two reviews previous ethnographic studies in the area of woman and aging. It deals with methodology, a discussion of the life history method, and the selection of project participants. Discussing the “peculiar work” anthropologists engage in, Myerhoff notes that assuming the “native’s” point of view is a “means of knowing others through oneself” (1978 18). This necessitates that life historians engage in self-ethnography. There is also a call from age studies scholars to colleagues to interrogate perspectives including their own internalized ageism<sup>2</sup> (Copper; Ray). Since this project is a participatory ethnography with the ethnographer as a co-informant, in Chapter Three I

paint a cultural self-portrait, a self-ethnography that describes the lens of my own cultural traditions through which I think about aging and through which I observed and listened to the women participating in this study.

The next three chapters focus on the lives and words of three research partners that I interviewed, observed, and lived with for various periods of time. Chapter Four first addresses the issue, just who is a “Yankee,” then attends to the life history of Rhode Island artist and community activist Adé Bethune, 85 when I began this study. Chapter Five focuses on Vermont woodcut artist Mary Azarian just entering her seventh decade. Chapter Six introduces Maine writer Luthera Dawson, 92 when she joined this project, 98 now. Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, compares similarities and differences among the women, and considers what was learned during the journey into this under explored country of old age.

What I particularly wanted to do with this study was to use contemporary life history methods to explore in detail how several individual New England women experienced old age. I wanted to use in depth interviewing to learn about and describe what they had to say about how they thought and felt about old age and I wanted to use participant observation to live with each woman in order to carefully look at and to describe where and how they were living this period of their life. I wanted to enter their world with all my senses fully alive to tasting their food, viewing the geographical landscape out their windows, attending to their interests, meeting their friends, sharing their pleasures, really hearing them and listening between the lines, walking in their shoes as best I could, and recording that world in this dissertation. As a woman approaching late life myself, sixty-four when I began interviewing, seventy-four now, I also wanted to

tell of my own experience of aging and the ways my experiences intersected with and compared to those of my project participants. As my study progressed I became more and more convinced that – despite certain important similarities – even within a particular region, race, and class, old age is experienced quite differently by individual women – confirming something May Sarton wrote in her early old age: “There are as many ways of growing old as there are of being young, and one forgets that sometimes” (1977/1995 193). While there appear to be many factors behind this, cultural meaning systems seemed one important dimension here. So a major question of my study became how and to what extent is the experience of old age affected and influenced by the particular cultural orientations or key cultural traditions the woman brings into old age and how does the aging process affect the ways in which she works with her cultural traditions? Also, initially or along the way, I was or became interested in a variety of other related questions and issues that my participants brought up or that came to seem important to me in my own early experience of old age. These include questions and issues relating to concern with living arrangements, connection or attachment to locale, how much did self esteem have to do with physical abilities, and whether or not old age has any meaning in itself. I was interested in creativity in old age. Of the four of us who are research partners, two are visual artists and two of us are writers. Lastly, although beginning this project in my sixties, I was approaching my mid-seventies when considering my findings; being in my last year as “young old,” and ready to transition to the “old old” category according to developmental psychologist John Santrock (2002 534) and gerontological expert Harry Moody (2010 5). Thus, my project is the beginnings of an answer to the question posed by age studies scholar Margaret Cruikshank, “What would aging research look like if old



women themselves conducted interviews with thousands of diverse old women” (2003 195).

This study is also intended to illustrate the usefulness of the person-centered life history method as a lens through which to examine the complex ways in which people negotiate aging. It is my hope that this project will promote discussion within age studies about the value of this particular ethnographic method in conversations about growing old in America. I hope too it will serve as a catalyst promoting dialogue within American studies about the inclusion of age alongside other dimensions of difference such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, region, sexuality and disability.

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<sup>1</sup> Culture provides “a set of principles for map making and navigation. Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas” (Frake, in Spradley 7).

<sup>2</sup> Psychiatrist and gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” in 1969. Although the original meaning was prejudice against old people, and it is often used that way, Gullette notes that “ageism” has many meanings (2004 7). For example, the ways adults might abuse their power over children and adolescents is called “ageism” by the field called sociology of childhoods (2004 201). I will be using the term in its original meaning.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

We are culturally illiterate about aging.  
Kathleen Woodward<sup>1</sup>

### How I Came to do This Research

Entering my seventh decade, aware of old age stereotypes and the medicalization of old age, and remembering apprehension about growing old I perceived in young people, including students I taught in two prep schools for girls, young nuns I taught in two years of summer classes, and college women I encountered as a university campus minister in 1982, I became interested in how women in late life actually negotiate late life in contemporary American culture. How much could old women be agents of their own aging I wondered? What are their daily experiences? I wanted to find out the actuality of women's later years, and if old age is experienced only as a time of decline, or if any old women viewed their last years in a positive light. Women live longer than men; what are the strengths of old women and could something be learned from them? If I lived as long as my paternal Yankee grandfather, who lived to ninety-eight, I would have a third of my life ahead of me. I wanted to know how some women said it felt to live in a body that was chronologically eighty or ninety; a body well past middle age as mine was fast becoming. These were some initial questions at the outset of this project. As time passed and I, along with my co-informants, traversed more of the little known territory of late life, I began to more clearly see the importance of cultural meaning systems that research partners and I brought into old age with us, and how these cultural orientations impacted how we negotiated aging and choices we made in our elder years. I began to examine more closely our key traditions as they emerged in interviews and participant observation. Increasing longevity, the fact that "old age" might last three decades without

even “demarcations provided by clearly named phases, goals, or features” was something I, like anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, found “astonishing” (1984 308).

Using Florida as a model for population aging,<sup>2</sup> gerontology scholar Harry Moody notes that just as today close to one in five Floridians is over 65, that is now true of Italy and Japan with Great Britain close behind; the expectation being that the whole United States will reach “Florida-ization” thirteen years from now (2010 xxi).<sup>3</sup> Men and women are living a larger portion of their lives in old age than ever before in history. It is now common practice to make distinctions between the “young-old,” ages 65-74, the “old-old,” ages 75-84, and the “oldest-old,” ages 85 and over (Moody 2010 5; Santrock 2002 534). Santrock notes that some believe these terms, young-old, old-old, and oldest-old should refer to functional age, not chronological age “Some 85-year-olds function better than some 65-year-olds” (534). Without contesting or commenting on this categorization, I note in passing that I was just entering the ranks of the young-old when I began this project with some aging Yankee women, and as it comes to its conclusion I’ll be leaving that less rubble-strewn under explored terrain in October 2010 to be categorized by gerontologists and developmental psychologists as “old-old!”

#### An Examined Life

Many women in my age cohort, those of us born around 1935 as I was, members of the “Silent Generation,”<sup>4</sup> grew up sadly lacking in bodily information.<sup>5</sup> Take the area of pregnancy and childbirth, for example. That all-informative, legendary book, *Childbirth Without Fear*, by London obstetrician Grantly Dick-Read, edited in 1959, didn’t reach these American shores much less my hands in time for the birth of the first two of my four children, in 1959 and 1961 respectively. Whatever one’s views on natural

childbirth, the type of drug-free delivery promoted in that book, Read provided women like me, those not fortunate enough to be enmeshed in a large female family network, with much needed information on the anatomy and physiology of pregnancy and birth; our male obstetricians being chary with details. The culture of that time as I experienced it is symbolized by the memory of my 1959 middle class white hospital roommate, an “enlightened” bottle-feeding mother, frantically summoning a nurse to pull the curtain between our beds so she wouldn’t have to view me learning to nurse my son.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps not surprising when one considers that seven years earlier, when Lucile Ball became pregnant in real life, and the pregnancy was written into the script of *I Love Lucy*, CBS wouldn’t allow the word “pregnancy” to be used, instead Lucy was an “expectant mother” (Halberstam 200).

Like Alix Kates Shulman (2008 104) and others of our generation and class, Dr. Spock helped to carry me through child rearing years. At various other times in my life I’d searched for answers. Now in my early sixties, cognizant of negative American mainstream cultural attitudes towards old people, I felt the need for another guidebook, something perhaps entitled “Old Age without Fear,” and I decided to search for such a manual. Acquiring information beforehand is an ingrained trait, my stock in trade, a cultural imperative, instilled in me when, along with all other little American Catholic girls and boys of the Forties, I had to memorize that guidebook called the *Baltimore Catechism*. Full of questions and answers, it provided a plan for life in one sentence. To the sixth question, “Why did God make me?” we answered, “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next.” That carried some of us only so far. As a product of a “mixed marriage,” my mother Catholic,

my father christened Congregational, and also a partner in a “mixed marriage,” my husband baptized Episcopalian but unobservant, I taught comparative religion, liturgy, and other religious studies in three Catholic prep schools, including Georgetown Preparatory School, the oldest such Jesuit school in America, in addition to teaching some summer classes in Church history and spirituality to young Sisters of Mercy nuns in Rhode Island, followed by a stint as a campus minister at a Catholic university in Virginia, while raising four children. Along the way I found no guide for observant Catholic women, in person or in books, offering advice how to combine being a busy mother with spirituality and religious practice. I only found other Catholic women with the same questions I had. Puzzling over this during the Sixties I posed the question in print in a Catholic magazine, “Contemplative Prayer and the Den Mother” (1968), sharing my search and suggesting some answers:

We have a problem ladies! . . . books like ‘The Feminine Mystique’ and ‘The Illusion of Eve’ have helped us to realize that we are searching for our identity, seeking personal fulfillment and what is worse, women’s magazines tell us – we are trapped! Either we are trapped at home with little ones or we are trapped in an endless round of outside activities – flute lessons for Junior . . . PTA, dentist appointments, and so on . . . The Catholic mother has Sodality, CCD, choir practice and Cana . . . we have ‘Catholic’ magazines telling us . . . we should stay home, raise lots of children and zinnias, bake our own bread and make our own clothes (212-213).<sup>7</sup>

My proposed solutions aren’t germane here but I note my article as an example of my usual seeking for information at various junctures, my attempt to live an examined life, and my use of writing to clarify my thoughts.

Growing up, a significant female role model was my mother’s oldest sister, Serena Virginia Crowley, whom we called “Jinks.” Jinks never married and she and her mother, my Irish grandmother, “Dearie,” lived with us; my parents and two younger

brothers, a third to come much later, for part of my girlhood. Jinks worked for Travelers Aid in Seattle where we lived during the War. She provided comfort and travel directions to weary tourists and bereft military men and women and then went on to organize and direct the Community Information and Referral Service for the city of Philadelphia's Health and Welfare Council. She moved up in the field of social work, becoming a national authority on information services.<sup>8</sup> My aunt Jinks was my lodestar; information was her business, and it rubbed off on me. My paternal Yankee grandmother, Grama, an active Red Cross volunteer, her first aid kit always stowed in her Woodie, knew how to splint a leg, taught me at age six how to do hospital corners on sheets, and was honored by Rhode Island Hospital for driving an ambulance during the War. So not surprisingly, scouting, with the Girl Scout motto "Be Prepared," found in me a congenial spirit. Earning the gold "Curved Bar" in 1948, then the Girl Scout equivalent of being an Eagle Scout, I was taught how to identify poison ivy, build a campfire and J-Stroke a canoe.

I had an uprooted, itinerant childhood; my father a traveling salesman in the bulk oil division of Proctor and Gamble for the first fourteen of his thirty-five years with P&G. The fact that I lived in two different apartments, eight different houses, and two boarding schools in five different states before graduating from eighth grade; having attended seven different schools, from Mrs. Klobner's Nursery School at age two and a half in Newburyport, Massachusetts, through Holy Child Academy for first grade in Portland, Oregon and Sacred Heart Forest Ridge in Seattle, until Immaculate Conception in Montclair, New Jersey, for grade eight, with St. Theresa, Seattle, and St. Aloysius, Caldwell, New Jersey, in between, and having to negotiate two different classes of Catholic nuns and student populations, resulted in a desire to feel prepared for new

situations beforehand. One form this took was the pleasure I felt in acquiring a new pencil box to take to school with me each year, that green or blue snap lid cardboard box, slightly bigger than a cigar box, containing two pencils, a small rectangular pencil sharpener, an eraser, a six inch ruler, a semi-circular protractor, and a never used sharp pointed stylus.<sup>9</sup> The *Baltimore Catechism* with its answers, my aunt's life in information services, my Red Cross Yankee grandmother, my time in scouting, were cultural influences from which I gained some security in thinking I could be prepared for whatever might lie ahead in life.

#### The Search for Veteran Voices

So, prompted by the advent of old age encroaching, with my mother, my aunts, and my grandmothers having passed away, I naturally began looking for some guidebook that would help direct my feet over the unfamiliar ground of late life where the years ahead seemed to me to be especially inhospitable to aging women. When I began seeking material on old age, women and aging in particular, and looking especially for first hand accounts from a veteran female voice,<sup>10</sup> I expected to find an abundance of information, Google then not an option when I began my search in 1999 when I was sixty-four. I had kept up my research skills, born in the public library where I worked as a teen, utilized as a high school junior winning a writing and research competition devised by philosopher Jacques Maritain then at Princeton, strengthened in grad school, and honed through the years working on conference papers and essays as an independent scholar in the area of Protestant and Catholic religious studies. But with the exception of gerontology texts and some sociology and psychology journals, my original searches yielded little, and what I did find often was based on studies with aging men. An exception was *Journal of Women*



*and Aging, the multidisciplinary quarterly of psychosocial practice, theory and research*, that's been around for about twenty years. Searching there among more scientifically oriented articles by and for gerontologists, social workers, nurses and other health professionals, I found three articles that spoke to my questions.

Ruth Ray, gerontology and English professor, wrote about "Teaching to Transgress: The Need for Critical Feminism in Gerontology" in 1999. In that same issue, J. Dianne Garner, a professor of social work and journal editor, wrote "Feminism and Feminist Gerontology." While I was not attracted to trying to place myself in any of the feminist frameworks deriving from within "a multitude of intellectual paradigms and political positions" delineated by Garner: ecofeminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, global feminism, post-modern feminism and the like (3-12), I was pleased to find on the first page of Garner's essay the words of a veteran voice. There were Shevy Healey's first hand observations of what it was like to be an old woman.<sup>11</sup> I was interested in Ray's call for "fuller representation of women and women's issues in research, theory, and practice" in gerontology, confirming what I had been discovering, that women up to recent times seemed to be missing persons in gerontology. The Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging excluded women for the first 20 years. Ray urged "feminist" gerontologists to assume "an interdisciplinary stance" and align themselves with women's studies and the newly emerging "age studies" defined by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (171-184). In a 2003 issue of *Journal of Women and Aging*, nurse Heidi Petry shared the results of interviewing nine Swiss women age seventy or older, who lived alone, "in order to give beginning insights into how aging is experienced" (51). Petry wanted "to search for positive stories in order to counterbalance the negative

images of older women in the Swiss society” (53). These also were veteran voices but they were European not American voices.

What sparse popular literature there was on aging when I began my search in 1999 was hard to find. Borders bookstore shelved it next to “death and dying.” In my Frederick, Maryland Wonder Books used bookstore, *USA Today* tagging it “one of ten best used bookstores in the U.S.” (Wilson), “aging” was located in a section dedicated to illness. Our public library had no section for aging. Of the few books on aging I found used at Wonder, the titles were instructive. Some, *Smart Aging* (Hodgson), *Successful Aging* (Knopf), and *Successful Aging, The MacArthur Foundation Study* (Rowe and Kahn) were prescriptive, conveying the notion that if one just did everything right, whatever that everything was, good nutrition and adequate exercise of mind and body came to mind, one would grow old intelligently and successfully. But logic implies failure is a possibility; I found that troubling. There were many more books with titles like: *Stop Aging Now* (Carper), *Your Guide to Perpetual Youth: Age Protectors* (Claflin), and *Live Now Age Later, Proven Ways to Slow Down the Clock* (Rosenfeld). These seemed designed to assist in denying aging altogether. Then there were the titles especially aimed at attracting women who wanted to camouflage the effects of aging on the body, like *Women’s Edge, Growing Younger, Breakthrough Age-Defying Secrets* (VanTine and Doherty). Few of these books seemed to stay in print very long.

Turning to the humanities, certain that women’s studies would provide some answers to questions I had about women’s aging, I searched the literature and scanned curricula, stunned to find almost a lack of recognition that women age. I learned that in 1985 the late feminist writer, social worker and activist Barbara Macdonald, now

considered “a pioneer in feminist aging studies,” (Marshall vii) had angrily addressed a plenary session of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) asking “Has it ever occurred to you as you build feminist theory that ageism is a central feminist issue?” (20). It had taken Macdonald, a social worker who had at one time taught in the University of Maryland, School of Medicine, four years of fighting to get the subject of aging included in a plenary session and she was finally given twenty minutes:

From the beginning of this wave of the woman’s movement, from the beginning of Women’s Studies, the message has gone out to those of us over 60 that your “Sisterhood” does not include us . . . you do not identify with our issues, you exploit us, you patronize us, you stereotype us. Mainly you ignore us. (20)

Four years later, in 1989, *Woman’s Studies Quarterly* devoted one issue to “Women and Aging.” In its pages Nancy Porter reported one of the, to me astounding, results of a survey carried out by NWSA: “Few of us under age sixty have ever lived with a person over age sixty” (97). Having had a nurturing live-in grandmother I found this surprising.<sup>12</sup> Later in my search I would learn that in “our age-segregated society, many people have little or no contact with older adults” (Bonnesen et al 135, citing Riley and Riley).

At the turn of the century, in her NWSA presidential address, “Berenice Carroll showed where Women’s Studies had been and where it will head. . . She discussed the challenges of women of color and lauds the more recent inclusion of lesbian studies. Nowhere, however, did she mention aging issues” (Calasanti et al 2006 13). After Macdonald had died, almost twenty years after she had spoken to the NWSA plenary, her partner Cynthia Rich was invited to NWSA in Las Vegas in 2002. She read through the conference list of presentations, noting the invisibility of late-life women, instead of giving the requested reading, she gave a talk. “Old women were still outside the

sisterhood in Las Vegas” (Lipscomb 2006 5). With the exception in 2003 of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women devoting an issue of *The Women’s Review of Books* to aging, that same year age studies scholar Margaret Cruikshank could still write that “old women have been missing persons in women’s studies” (2003 174). Finally in 2005 an entire plenary of NWSA focused on aging studies, and NWSA established an aging caucus that I joined. The Spring 2006 *NWSA Journal* was devoted to aging and ageism. In that issue sociologist Calisanti and colleagues remarked: “For the most part, feminists have not talked to old women to explore their daily experiences” (14). They pointed to the judgment that old women’s bodies are unattractive and Cruikshank’s acknowledgment that there is next to nothing known “about how old women endure this rejection” (2003 16). The daily experiences, and reactions and resistance to mainstream American attitudes towards old women, are precisely some of the issues I determined to investigate when I set out to culturally explore the lives of a few women in their late years.

### Poetry and Memoir

Over time I was to find some veteran voices of old women in popular literature, in memoir and poetry, and one or two voices in academic ethnographic projects. Some American women like author May Sarton have written about their old age, although only a handful of such voices are well known. “The quality of May Sarton’s work won her an audience . . . but scarcity made her an icon” (Cruikshank 2009 187). Through extensive digging over the last decade, I found more voices of 20th century American old women hidden in anthologies and books long out of print (see Appendix C). Memoir, journals and poetry as a source for age studies has been discovered by a few scholars including

psychologist Harry Berman (1989; 1994), English professor Barbara Frey Waxman (1997), English professor Sylvia Henneberg (2006 106-125), and more recently another female English professor, Lois Rubin (2009 254-265). The list of old women who have written about their personal experience of growing old who are considered by the above scholars is short, including for the most part just a few familiar names like memoirists Florida Scott-Maxwell (Waxman; Berman 1994), Doris Grumbach (Waxman; Berman 1994), and May Sarton (Berman 1994; Waxman; Henneberg), and one or two poets, Maxine Kumin (Rubin). Like Hansel and Gretel finding a hard to see trail in this under explored territory of old age, I serendipitously stumbled across the work of other female poets writing in late life capturing visions of themselves as contented old women. Some of the poets I found were Grace Paley, Kate Barnes, Barnes' mother, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maya Angelou. Here is Paley, the last book of her poetry, *Fidelity*, published posthumously in 2007 at age 84.

“The Choir Singing”

From the balcony of the Thetford Hill  
First Congregational Church  
I look down at the choir singing  
the adoration of Christ their Lord  
the high foreheads of the older women  
shine why! that's the condition of  
my own forehead which seemed in the  
bathroom mirror to appear unusually  
intelligent this morning the delicate  
daily hair loss contributing to the  
reality and appearance of wisdom.  
from *Begin Again* (71)

“On Occasion”

I forget the names of my friends  
and the names of the  
flowers in

my garden my friends  
remind me  
Grace its us the flowers just  
stand there stunned by the sun.  
from *Fidelity, Poems* (5)

When I began my search I found that, not only women's studies, but also English, American studies, and anthropology with some few exceptions, had avoided aging women. So ten years ago looking ahead to growing old I was in the same position I had been in at other junctures in my life, looking for information about what might lie ahead, this time, in the unknown country of old age in America.

#### Return to Graduate School

Fortunately my vested interest in women and aging coincided with a return to graduate school at the University of Maryland, College Park after a hiatus of forty years from academia. In 1958 and 1959 I held a teaching assistantship while working on and completing an M.A. in History in New York at St. John's University. In the first semester of my second year of graduate study, like most in my age cohort, I married,<sup>13</sup> and we settled in New Jersey close to my husband's Army research lab, three hours commuting distance away from my university.<sup>14</sup> Then a very observant Catholic, "Irish quadruplets"<sup>15</sup> followed immediately, foreclosing for the time being my formal studies.

Just three weeks after the birth of our fourth baby, a C-section, something unthinkable now but typical of us Silent Generation mothers, with four children under four, we moved from New Jersey to Maryland to accommodate my husband's new position at a Navy lab. There, impelled by a conscience formed in the Catholic spirit of social action or "the works of mercy,"<sup>16</sup> and heavily caught up in the whirlwind of the Sixties, taking my small children with me, I worked alongside my best friend, a nun

belonging to the Sisters of Mercy, to work on various social action and social justice projects. Hard to believe there was a time when mostly men headed PTAs but I succeeded six men as the first woman to head the PTA at our elementary school. To help with the family budget, although an inexpert typist, I took a job doing typing at home for a national organization of reform minded Catholic nuns, The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, based in Washington, D.C. Having worked during summers and school vacations, except for the first few years of marriage, since I was fifteen, when my youngest child began kindergarten, on the strength of some articles I had written on Catholic spirituality and church history, having graduated college with teaching certification and with an M.A. in history, I was asked in 1969 to teach and then chair religious studies at Ursuline Academy, a private Catholic secondary school for girls in Bethesda, Maryland. When, after eight years, that school closed, I went on to two other private Catholic secondary schools then worked for a short time as a campus minister at a Catholic university. Finally, having published a book, numerous articles on lives of Catholic and Protestant saints, recognized as an independent scholar in certain aspects of Catholic spiritual theology, having spoken nationally and internationally at Catholic and Protestant retreats, and theology and spirituality conferences, including once to priest theologians in Rome at the Franciscan study center, the Antonianum, and having been an invited observer at a consultation at the World Council of Churches in Switzerland, it was time, as I entered my sixties, to look ahead to the future.

### My Time

With the advent of thirteen grandchildren and two more on the way, a growing awareness of advancing years, stirrings of a desire to interrogate my roots, and an

increasing sense of needing to complete something left unfinished, my long-ago academic life, I felt it was “my time.”<sup>17</sup> When in my fifties, I had volunteered time giving some assistance to two British priest academics and a Catholic layman as they worked on their theology licentiate or doctoral dissertations. Thinking perhaps I might want to use it in future doctoral work myself, one priest scholar asked about my thesis<sup>18</sup> in my 1977 book, *Gathering a People, Catholic Saints in Charismatic Perspective*, and I helped him without a second thought, lending him some rare books from my library. More recently an Irish graduate student cited work I had done on NRMs (New Religious Movements) in 1999.<sup>19</sup> And like Alix Kates Shulman who began feeling old and unnerved when young scholars came around with tape recorders to interview her about the early days of the woman’s movement (1995 5), I was similarly startled when students at the University of Maryland visited me with recorders to ask about the history of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement. Looking back, I could relate to how anthropologist Ruth Behar, a MacArthur Fellow, a Cubanita, described feeling when students would come to her for help fixing their papers before they showed them to other [more important] professors. She felt “like an intellectual maid” (1993/2003 340). One of my former students, now an author and playwright, acknowledged me in print as a favorite teacher. While grateful to have been part of the lives of my children, my grandchildren, my students, and some academics, as I moved into my sixties I sometimes felt like: “always a bridesmaid, never a bride.” That feeling had been especially acute in 1980 at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland to which Catholics may not belong but may be invited as discussants or observers. Although I was invited to lead an impromptu panel that was well received, for the first time, amidst all the mostly men, mostly male clergy, most of



them academics, I felt my views were being dismissed by some because I had four strikes against me, and for some of the men, five: I was American, and Catholic, and female, and without a doctorate. In this very ethnically and racially mixed group, the General Secretary of the WCC then being a black West Indian Methodist minister, I was also conscious for the first time in my life, that I was white. It seemed to me that the lack of a Ph.D. after my name was my most serious deficiency in some eyes.

### Gender Discrimination and Ageism Open My Eyes

Some clergy friends encouraged me to pursue a doctorate in Catholic spiritual theology. They offered to help pave the way for me to do it quickly at a Catholic institute in Britain or at the University of Birmingham, where I would just need to be in residence in England for short periods while writing a research paper, as two of my male friends had already done. But a niggling sense that somehow this was not the right path for me propelled me to explore graduate theology programs at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., arranging a meeting with the revered spiritual theologian and Dominican priest, the late Fr. Jordan Aumann, all of whose books I owned. Showing him some of my published work I eagerly awaited his advice. Exasperated, he grumped: “Why do you want to pursue a Ph.D. at your age? [I was then 62]. You’ll be just like all those nuns who taught in parochial schools for forty or fifty years. When they get old and retire, they go back to school for advanced degrees, many of them here at CUA. Then all they do is die with a diploma in their hand!” “They probably die happy” was my first thought but I felt punched in the stomach. My aspirations summarily dismissed, the disdain for hundreds of thousands of dedicated religious women who have taught in parish and private Catholic schools all over the world was palpable; a reminder that

Catholic women, even vowed nuns,<sup>20</sup> are often viewed as second class citizens in a Catholic Church that denies ordination to women while, paradoxically, venerating the mother of Jesus and a pantheon of dead female canonized saints.

The meeting with Aumann had lasting effects. The disrespect towards so many Catholic women was distressing and sparked in me the beginnings of feminist consciousness raising; something that had been latent but not far below the surface. Also, it was the first time I was aware of being discriminated against because of my age and that angered me. The meeting served to steer me away from theology and towards finding a program that would build on my graduate degree in history at a “secular” institution.

I had been fortunate in knowing some exceptional Catholic priests including Bishop Fulton Sheen, and Belgian theologian Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, who treated me and other women as equals, but they seemed the exception. I began to think thoughts like, “*Who cooked the Last Supper?*” the title of a book that came out two years later (Miles). For me the moment was an epiphany; a crucial turning point. Having been sometimes a token woman, other times a token lay woman, nuns getting a little more respect than women not in vows in many Catholic clerical gatherings, I realized at that moment, no doctorate in theology would ever eventuate my views being treated with equal respect in much of the male Catholic clerical academic world. Even if it had, for me the position of women in the Catholic Church, or lack of it, was becoming a human rights issue that opened my eyes to other problematic areas in the institutional Church.

Two things about this epiphany: Strauss and Howe describe my Fifties generation as transitional; sandwiched between the G.I.s and the Boomers. They quote Howard Junker on the Silent Generation: “grown up just as the world’s gone teen-age” (281).

Much of what Strauss and Howe write about us “Silents” is validated by the writings of many others of us like Benita Eisler,<sup>21</sup> Frank Conroy,<sup>22</sup> and Wini Breines.<sup>23</sup> Strauss and Howe speculate that because of our position in relation to historical events, our life-cycles are marked more by “passages,” “seasons,” and “turning points;” transitions “bearing little or no relation to the larger flow of public events” (282). My epiphany fits this narrative.

Besides fitting Strauss and Howe’s turning point narrative, the epiphany precipitated by the meeting with Aumann matched one experienced by Mary Catherine Bateson, also a “Silent,” described in a book assigned in Caughey’s American studies ethnography seminar. Bateson, Margaret Mead’s daughter, four years younger than I am, had three less children than my four. Unlike me, she was able to find time to participate in consciousness-raising groups with other women for a year in the early seventies. Uncomfortable because she was the oldest member in the group, she recognizes now, she also was “insufficiently angry.” Ten years later, when in her forties, Bateson experienced a painful series of events culminating in being asked to resign from her post as dean of faculty at Amherst, by an all-male faculty committee and a new male president, after she had served only eighteen months. Writing about this when in her fifties, she tags this Amherst event as the moment when she first experienced being discriminated against because she was a woman, and it finally made her angry. This was a turning point for Bateson, and she credits her work with life histories of other women in her project *Composing a Life*, with being “a form of consciousness raising” for her that carried her “beyond the discovery of anger” (114).

My meeting with Fr. Aumann evoked memories of other times I had been treated dismissively and rudely in Catholic male clerical settings<sup>24</sup> and it also precipitated a hard period during which I questioned my motives for wanting to return to graduate school. Was it really something I wanted to pursue as a way to be of better service to others; a lifetime primary motivator with roots in early Catholic formation, as with Gina one of the subjects of Caughey's ongoing life history research (2006 47), or gerontologist and feminist sociologist Toni Calasanti,<sup>25</sup> or was it selfish? Perhaps I should stay home and concentrate more on grandmothering, which had factored as a saving influence in my own life, as it had in Myerhoff's. Increasingly, wanting to return to formal academic life left behind so many years ago felt selfish, conflicting with an element of the 1940s European version of Catholic spirituality I had been imbued with that stressed self abnegation (Fisher 34; Armstrong 1981/1994 182; 1983 20).

Just after exploring doctoral programs at CUA, I casually picked up a book because I liked the cover. *Sweet Mystery* was a memoir by Judith Paterson, a journalism professor at University of Maryland, College Park, mother of two, my age, who had gone to graduate school after a hiatus of some few years. She too had examined her several motivations for pursuing an advanced degree concluding: "I did it, too, because it gave me great pleasure and satisfaction and was a very good thing for me to do" (6). That sentence pierced me! It helped to sweep away sixty years of trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to practice Catholic self-abnegation or "dying to self." And later, reading sociologist Eisler, I saw that Fifties mainstream cultural attitudes towards women had also been a restraining factor. "Ambition was only acceptable when you made a contribution to society" (90). In one fell swoop I felt free to do something just because it

would give me pleasure, notwithstanding my desire to contribute to ongoing academic dialogue in age studies. I felt free to return to graduate school despite what Aumann or others might say about my age.

### Late-Life Reinvention

Cruikshank writes about late-life women reinventing themselves (2009 19), anger often being a precipitating factor as it was in Bateson's case, or mine vis-à-vis my encounter with the Catholic University priest professor. That anger prepared the way for me to be open to Paterson's words. "The prospect of reinventing the self in old age has special relevance for women, who may not have been able earlier to express their full individuality" notes Cruikshank. "Life after seventy may present unanticipated opportunities" (2009 19).<sup>26</sup> Sometimes such women may be more willing to risk social disapproval for choices they make and families can be puzzled by what seems uncharacteristic behavior, and she suggests that the "reinvention myth" in late life may be more rooted in the ordinary. "'Grandma Climbs Mountain' may be a less compelling story than 'Helen Wong Says No to her Neighbors for the First Time'" (2003 20).

Paterson's memoir, besides noting her reasons for a return to graduate school, revealed a childhood with similarities to mine and I experienced the power of personal narrative to bring insight and foster personal growth. I reviewed *Sweet Mystery* in an advocacy magazine for which I was a book reviewer,<sup>27</sup> to bring it to more people, and arranged to meet Paterson. Although a journalism professor, Paterson served as affiliate faculty to a department I was unfamiliar with, American studies. My M.A. thesis had dealt with an aspect of Woodrow Wilson's life, and as I learned more about American studies it seemed like a good fit, more so than history, which I had been considering.

Selling my Yankee grandmother's beautiful 9x12 Persian rug that I was much attached to, to pay tuition,<sup>28</sup> I signed up for a year of study at College Park as an advanced special student to participate in John L. Caughey's ethnography seminar.

To explore American studies further I went to Seattle in 1998 to attend the American Studies annual meeting and wound up chatting with Angela Davis. As a long-time community activist a highlight of my trip was meeting her.<sup>29</sup> I talked with her about doing a project on women and aging and she encouraged me. Davis is interested in women's prison narratives and we were at a talk by Donna Rowe, someone from my own University of Maryland American studies department and a student of Caughey's.

All my research, writing and speaking in my adult life was based on what could be learned from lives lived by Catholic and Protestant saints, along the lines of the 1974 work by Protestant theologian James McClendon, *Biography as Theology, How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. The Sixties had been a time of reform in the Roman Catholic Church, with many renewal movements gathering strength: new biblical scholarship, a liturgical movement, a catechetical movement, a charismatic renewal movement, a lay community movement, and a move towards a reexamination and deconstruction of myths surrounding lives of canonized Catholic saints, leading for example, to the acknowledgment that, despite all those statues and medals in automobiles, there is no evidence that St. Christopher ever existed. I wrote short revisionist biographies of Protestant and Catholic saints for an international Catholic magazine<sup>30</sup> for fourteen years into the mid-nineties.

## American Studies

Ethnography involves writing, and lives; interviewing real people. My years spent doing hagiography, researching and thinking about lives of saints, seemed a good foundation for becoming an ethnographer. I caught Caughey's enthusiasm for moving out of the library, where I had spent many years, and into the field; a field that could be right around any American corner. An interest in people, curiosity about life, giving voice to the voiceless, and a love of writing seemed all rolled into one in ethnography. In fact, ethnographers are sometimes called "novelists manqué" (Clifford 1986 4). Behar characterizes what anthropologists write, namely ethnographies, as "a strange cross between the realist novel, the travel account, the memoir, and the scientific report" (1995 30). Learning author Tom Wolfe, often called a participatory journalist, had a doctorate from Yale in American studies, explained for me why his prose is so rich in detail.

Engaging in seminars with Caughey and other professors in our department, I found American studies an exciting place to be. Graduate students in my department were working on a variety of innovative projects, and American studies has a history of encouraging an effort towards making its findings accessible to readers outside as well as inside the academy and that appealed to me.<sup>31</sup> I read several American Studies Association yearly Presidential Addresses and resonated with Linda Kerber's delight in American studies that had gripped her since she was a sixteen-year-old freshman in 1956 at Barnard College:

The program I entered . . . set before us an intriguing mix of projects – projects which I can see were typically American Studies projects in their experimentation, their impatience with disciplinary boundaries – involving not only poetry and prose but architecture and art history, technology and design, Freud and Crazy Kat.

Speaking about an American studies that was forty years older than the program Kerber entered, University of Maryland's Mary Helen Washington, editor of books of narratives by black women, *Black-Eyed Susans* and *Invented Lives*, expressed the same pleasure in the scope of American studies. In her 1997 ASA Presidential Address she remarked:

There is, in American Studies, no such thing as an obscure topic; nothing remains untheorizable, unworthy of examination, and, though there are some who find this the problem with our intellectual lives, I want to celebrate the exuberance, the wit, the intellectual inventiveness . . . [of the 1997 annual conference panels].

In the course of working on this project I found footprints of American studies in many places. A pioneer studying aging, W. Andrew Achenbaum,<sup>32</sup> a nationally recognized leader in the field of gerontology, in a groundbreaking 2008 issue of *Journal of Aging Studies*, where age studies scholars from many disciplines reflected on their lives, Achenbaum, "born at the vanguard of the baby-boom cohort," related how lucky he was to wind up in college in American studies:

American Studies was one of the best (in terms of popularity and rigor) majors at Amherst. As Henry Steele Commager's research assistant, I helped compile his "Search for a Usable Past" (1972) . . . Commager taught me to appreciate paradox as revealed in Alexis de Tocqueville's life and writing. . . .Leo Marx's (1964)" Machine in the Garden" won kudos while I was studying with him . . .I learned to be multidisciplinary in college. (187)

Later when looking for scarce narratives of aging by American women, I located a wonderful mid-life account by a former DuBois scholar at Harvard, now at Spelman College, Gloria Wade-Gayles, who earned a doctorate in American studies in 1981 when she was forty-four. And the pioneer issue of *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts* in 2007 contained an article by someone from American studies and English, an Austrian professor, Roberta Maierhofer. The article focused on women and aging. In American studies I found an intellectual home.



## Memoir

I was coming back to formal study and to American studies on the cusp of the burgeoning memoir movement. Paterson's memoir helped me to reflect on my own life as I prepared to move forward. It precipitated an intense period of two years during which I found and read dozens of childhood and mid-life personal narratives by American women in and around my age cohort: Adrienne Rich, Alix Kates Schulman, Audre Lorde, Jill Kerr Conway, Vivian Gornick, Marge Piercy, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Monika Hellwig, Carol Buckley, Anne Roiphe, and Mary Catherine Bateson. I contrasted my life and cultural traditions with theirs, observing choices these contemporaries had made, and experiences they described. Few had grown up Catholic.<sup>33</sup>

After my year as an advanced special student in Caughey's ethnography seminar, I applied for admission to the doctoral program in American studies and was on tenterhooks for months, concerned my age would be prohibitive. At the same time I allowed myself to be a little hopeful, thinking that if any academic home might open its doors to students my age, it would be American studies. Americanists like Gene Wise had predicted that American studies would eventually consider age alongside race, gender and ethnicity. When I was admitted I was overjoyed and grateful.

The following year I studied life history with Caughey and saw how it would be possible to pursue my interest in women and aging using Caughey's cultural traditions approach to person centered ethnography. So, during the summer of 1999 I traveled to Rhode Island and moved in for a week with a woman in her eighties to explore with her how she was negotiating the country of old age, looking through the lens of my cultural traditions and contrasting hers with mine, mine with hers. And as I began this

ethnographic project I kept in mind a watchword about research created by a group of old women, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC), “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Cruikshank 2009 184).

My work from the outset was enriched by participation in the Life Writing Project,<sup>34</sup> in particular by the reading of memoirs in draft by Sharon O’Brien<sup>35</sup> and Saundra Murray Nettles.<sup>36</sup> These gatherings that mixed professors and grad students, the three creative nonfiction courses I took with Paterson that I felt would enable me to write ethnography well, along with Caughey’s seminars, were a good preparation for life history work. Other American studies seminars introduced me to the history of American studies, and to the critical thought of, among others, black feminist scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, helping me to think about issues surrounding aging women in America that emerged as I worked on this project, including standpoint theory.

#### Missing Persons – Voices Not Present

At the same time that I began interviewing my first project partner, I took a closer look at women’s studies and other fields to try to understand why old women were missing persons. And over the course of working on this project I kept an eye on emerging literature. About aging in general, thirty years ago two women, both anthropologists, Barbara Myerhoff and Margaret Clark, puzzled over why few scholars were studying the late years of life. Clark “observed that few of her peers undertook aging studies, because most saw the subject as a ‘morbid preoccupation – an unhealthy concern, somewhat akin to necrophilia’” (Riggs ix). Myerhoff, noting the same avoidance, said academics found it “vaguely repellent to them” (Riggs ix).

Very recently, some academics in age studies were asked to reflect on their personal and professional lives for a special issue of *Journal of Aging Studies*. Sociologist Toni Calasanti's personal account is a cautionary tale. Coming from an all-girls' Catholic high school, as I did, entering graduate school in 1977 two decades after I did,<sup>37</sup> she hadn't "regarded gender as a major axis of inequality" as I hadn't. Through her research that focused on retirement, and her life experiences, she slowly came to take seriously gender inequality, followed by an interest in aging. One of Calasanti's findings was that being married contributed to men's life satisfaction but not to women's.<sup>38</sup> "I was stunned by the lack of sociological interest in old women's work lives," she says. Before she began her research she had found that "the only longitudinal data set on retirement excluded women as primary respondents." She became a "gender scholar." She says she knew that in the academy "feminism is viewed as biased by its conscious concern with women and that my use of this approach would limit my standing in both sociology and gerontology." Initially she was a "gender scholar who studies aging." She has now transitioned to a place where she describes herself as a "scholar of aging." She decided the stigmatization of aging and the equation of aging with disease made ageism a "form of inequality worthy of study in itself." She reveals she personally struggles with "the low status of age studies," and her own decreasing acceptability as an aging woman. She says slowly though a network of other scholars, she is "learning to embrace, rather than apologize for, my interests in both aging and gender" (2008). As to why those working within the area of women's studies have not addressed until very recently the subject of women's old age, gerontologist and feminist scholar Margaret Cruikshank noted in 2003, "aging is emphatically not a trendy subject" (175).

Cynthia Rich, just a year or two older than I am, feels the reason old women aren't integral to feminist concerns is that "contempt for old women is so pervasive that nobody really notices it. They think it's natural. We have to remember when contempt for people of color, contempt for gays, felt just as natural" (Lipscomb 8). Marilyn Pearsall wrote ten years ago, "Looking in the mirror these days is not easy for most feminist women fifty years old or older who went through the second wave of the women's movement in the United States or Europe in the 1970s and 1980s" (1). At fifty, in her memoir *Drinking the Rain*, Alix Kates Shulman, noted feminist of the second wave, jotted down her anxiety, remarking that she had become infected with "the world's insidious opinion of aging women. . . I was dismayed by these feelings, even ashamed, having always presumed that a good feminist would beat this rap" (1995/1996 6). Baba Copper, writing at age sixty-six, called upon women to recognize their own internalized ageism and the ageism between women. She credits "mother-trashing" as a reason why the women's movement and women's studies has not addressed old women's issues. "When we old women try to raise the consciousness of feminists to ageism, we are asking politicized women to clean up their act, to rethink our relationship to our most intimate oppressors – the ones against whom we have rebelled – our mothers" (11). Macdonald and Rich speak eloquently about "the wall separating young women from old" (54). Cruikshank agrees and quotes Copper: "The irrational loathing and terror of female aging casts a long shadow" (2003 176).

Disability studies and women's studies scholar Barbara Hillyer, born in 1934, one year older than I am, taking her first step in her sixties "toward developing a feminist analysis of the embodiment of old women" says at one point when she is discussing

plastic surgery, “we cannot know that for certain *until old women tell us their stories*” [italics mine] (1998 49). And she later comments that “no one is yet ready (although Gullette and Wendell may well be as they age) to look at ability and disability as they are experienced by women in old age” (51). Cruikshank writes: “as more old women write and tell about their experiences, the many dimensions of their aging will be better understood” (2003 205). Calasanti and colleagues (2006) state that: “For the most part, feminists have not talked to old women to explore their daily experiences . . . . (14). “We don’t ask why it seems denigrating to label someone old . . . what is so unmentionable about this stage of life” (15). Copper, choosing to call herself “old,” wrote that “the perspectives of women in their seventies and eighties and nineties” are “voices not present” and “we know next to nothing about what it is to be an old woman in this society” (1986 56). “The mind of a post-menopausal woman is virtually uncharted territory” (B. Walker 1991). Calasanti and her colleagues ask: “Where are the old women in Women’s Studies or their advocates?” (2006 25). They note that, privileged by youth, many scholars “tend not to see the importance or contours of age relations” that “push old women from our professions” thus leaving us “ignorant of their perspectives” (25). Cruikshank finally ponders, “What would aging research look like if old women themselves conducted in-depth interviews with thousands of diverse old women?” (2003 195).

### Age Studies

“Age Studies has been called into being in the twenty-first century” wrote Margaret Morganroth Gullette in “Age Studies as Cultural Studies” (Cole et al. 2000 217), who named the nascent field in 1993 (Gullette 2004 202; Cruikshank 2003 185;

Ray 1999 175), calling it a “movement of thought in the human and social studies” (Cole 2000 216). Gullette counsels: “We must teach ourselves to read all texts and relationships ‘for’ age as the human studies have learned to read for gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.” (Gullette 2004 38). Listing “major forms of oppression in the United States” University of Maryland sociologist and author of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins includes age along with race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and ethnicity (4). English professor Kathleen Woodward points out: “Recent research in cultural studies has been virtually dominated by studies of difference. We have invented courses in colleges and universities that study gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class. But not age” (1999 x). Gullette has authored *Declining to Decline, Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (1997), and *Aged by Culture* (2004). Age Studies considers the whole life span. As American studies scholar Roberta Maierhofer notes, some other age theorists and age studies practitioners speak of “Aging Studies,” privileging the “othered” part, the old part of the life span. I agree with her that the distinctions are often blurred (2007 32) and in this emerging mostly untheorized field of age and aging studies, boundaries are often unclear and the terms are often used interchangeably. I catch myself doing that.

Maierhofer is of the opinion that gerontologists “have been hesitant to accept scholarship in literary criticism as useful to the field, as they prefer quantitative (sic) studies and sociological and medical methods” (2007 23). Anne Wyatt-Brown notes that two studies about the rise of gerontology as a discipline, *Crossing Frontiers* by Achenbaum (1995) and *Disciplining Old Age* by Katz (1996), treat the development of gerontology “as a scientific enterprise,” neglecting to pay much attention “to any area of humanities and aging” (Cole 47). Maierhofer points out that Wyatt-Brown, a professor of

linguistics and a gerontologist, credits the slow recognition of literary gerontology to it being a “daunting task for literary critics ‘to study gerontological issues and theories’” and “‘master an unfamiliar social science vocabulary’” (2007 24). Wyatt-Brown also notes that scholars working in the area of literature and aging, like Kathleen Woodward, who engage in psychoanalytic explorations of literary works and their authors (WB 1990 300) pose a challenge to gerontologists. “Important as these articles are, gerontologists may well find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of unfamiliar psychoanalytic and literary concepts and jargon” (306).

I came across a discussion of this kind of difficulty in a book review. A professor in the Clinical Sciences Program in the Cancer Research Center at the University of Hawai`i, Lana Sue Ka`opua, wrote this in her review of *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging* by sociologists Calasanti and Slevin (2001):

The authors’ presentation of old age is justifiably complex, yet readers’ understanding may be hampered by the book’s use of terms not readily understood by those uninitiated in feminist and social constructivist theory and language. For example, there are a number of awkward, albeit essential sections of the book that describe ‘multiple social locations,’ ‘gendered meanings,’ and the ways in which we ‘inhabit our bodies.’ Such specialized jargon may confuse or even obscure understanding. This reviewer is struck by the use of language that, de facto, functions to exclude rather than include the diversity of readers who may be interested in a book that unabashedly focuses on social inequalities. (99)

Reading literature on aging that comes from various academic homes, I too have encountered some challenging passages and some unfamiliar terminology in my efforts to be able to place this ethnographic project in its proper academic context; to see where it fits in the just beginning academic conversations about old women. The interdisciplinarity of American studies requires of its scholars some degree of fluency in more than one academic language, depending on the Americanist’s area of interest.

In the first *NWSA Journal* to be devoted to aging, in 2006, Leni Marshall, first and former chair of our NWSA aging caucus, pointed to reviews of feminist books on aging. She said these reviews noted the importance of the books, while reflecting “the larger social amnesia” (viii). Such groundbreaking works as: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1973), *Look Me in the Eye: Women, Aging and Ageism* (1983) by Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991) by Kathleen Woodward, Margaret Gullette’s *Declining to Decline, Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (1997), and Margaret Cruikshank’s *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (2003) were all hailed as original and important. Woodward’s 1991 book and Cruikshank’s 2003 work were saluted as “pioneering.” Marshall comments: “Thirty years and we’re still ‘pioneering.’ This must be rough country indeed!” (viii).

Too recent to have informed the above mentioned groundbreaking *NWSA Journal* issue was the appearance, with a nod to Cornel West’s *Race Matters*, and *The New York Times*’ *Class Matters*, of the landmark book, *Age Matters* by Calasanti and Slevin (2006). In 2007 The Gerontological Society of America launched a new journal, *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts*. Included in the premier issue was an article by Austrian American studies and English professor Roberta Maierhofer: “An Anocritical Reading of American Culture: The Old Woman as the New American Hero.”

Maierhofer makes an interesting and unique case for “female aging as a paradigm of American culture” (25). Based on the work of Pearson and Pope (P and P 1981 80), Maierhofer says “in many cases, women begin new lives in old age” (2007 25). Aging doesn’t bring loss of identity, but rather individualism is expressed “more prominently



than in youth.” She is convinced that since the 1970s the prototypical American male protagonist with his quest for self “as a rebel against societal pressure has been supplemented by the female hero” (2007 25). Maierhofer has been analyzing various texts: film, short stories, novels and biography to “determine in which way women integrate an understanding of self in growing old, and which coping strategies female characters develop in fiction in order to come to terms with the various aspects of growing old” (2007 26). The thrust of Maierhofer’s interest in women and aging, from her Americanist literary platform in Austria, and from a perspective that is twenty-five years younger than I am,<sup>39</sup> very much parallels the questions and concerns that led me to engage in this present ethnographic project; a good example of how life history research can complement the work of scholars like Maierhofer.

Age studies looks at issues like the fragmentation of the life course, it’s sundering “into imaginary parts, reified by naming” (Gullette 2000 214), and the fact that aging has become synonymous with decline. Gullette’s name has become synonymous with the notion that we are “Aged by Culture,” the name of her 2004 book. “The basic idea we need to absorb is that whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all” (1997 3). Gullette’s work in this area since she named it in 1993, has begun slowly to penetrate, as when Shulman, off on her Maine Island to ruminate on turning fifty, wrote:

More and more I found myself playing the numbers game: calculating how many years and decades had passed since certain events had occurred. . . I became infected by the world’s insidious opinion of aging women. I shuddered when I heard the names: old hen, biddy, little old lady in tennis shoes....old is a moving target, receding like the horizon as you approach it. ‘A socially constructed disease with an adolescent onset,’ in the witty formulation of M. M. Gullette. (1995 17)

Ten years ago Gullette considered why age studies had a long way to go, saying it was then too early to look at why this was so:

It is too soon to list and order the conditions that have prevented age from receiving the scrutiny it warrants, but we might pause to wonder why the respect, sensitivity, skills, and urgency that go into analyzing gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, nation, or geographic place (and sometimes politics, handicap<sup>40</sup>, and religion), have not been transferred to age. (1997 201)

Calasanti and colleagues also tell us that “We need to recognize that just as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation serve as organizing principles of power, so does age” (2006 25). On the other hand they suggest that adding age to the raceclassgender list now will do aging studies “a disservice, because doing so suggests old age is already a theorized area” which it is not (Marshall x).

Barbara Hillyer agrees that our experience of our own bodies is culturally mediated but points out that some old women really experience conditions in the body, disabilities caused by age, and no theoretical basis has been worked out yet to include them, the old woman “unable to be conventionally active or productive” (50-51). She finds one scholar in disability studies, Susan Wendell, who, in *The Rejected Body*, mentions old age disability, but, as Hillyer notes, Wendell’s book is about disability in the young and middle-aged. I agree with Cruikshank who, in *Leaning to Be Old; Gender, Culture, and Aging* (2003; 2009), takes issue with Gullette’s notion that human beings are aged by culture first of all, saying it is “an argument that works best for midlife than for old age” (2003 185).

### Why Women?

When I made the decision to examine American aging by painting cultural portraits of a few women in late life, some colleagues asked why I wasn’t studying men

as well as women. Just as Calasanti (2008 152-157), noted above, had felt at one time she needed to apologize for her interest in women and aging, having similar feelings, I decided to address how I answer the question. I was motivated by five reasons. First, I discovered the work of CUNY English professor Nancy Miller who wrote about having had an intense memoir-reading period similar to mine, at age 50 to my 60, and who mused she was afraid to look ahead to old age and felt lonely; that was my first prompting:

I would be lying. . .if I said I didn't care about growing older. . .But perhaps in time I'll take my hands away from my face and see what's out there to lean on. Other selves like us and different, who've also journeyed in time. That might feel less lonely. (98)

I too wanted to look for "other selves" for myself, and for other women like Miller.

My second reason, I was struck by how often it is mentioned that because American culture is so hostile to old women, aging is more painful for women than men, the "double standard of aging," Susan Sontag called it (1979). Sontag noted:

Society allows no place in our imagination for a beautiful old woman who does look like an old woman – a woman who might be like Picasso at the age of ninety, being photographed outdoors on his estate in the south of France, wearing only shorts and sandals. (474)

Sontag argues that our culture has a horror of aging female flesh, and, thirty years before Michelle Obama, she likens how women are psychologically damaged by this to "the way in which blacks have been deformed in a society that has up to now defined beautiful as white" (475). Thomas Cole, professor of medical humanities, wrote about the last years of his grandmothers: "both felt a sense of shame and revulsion at their own failing bodies." He writes that their feelings "reflect our culture's intractable hostility to physical

decline and mental decay, imposed with particular vengeance on older women” (1992 xxiv).

As a sometimes book reviewer, I’ve reviewed several books by the prolific and graceful writer Kay Redfield Jamison, a clinical psychologist on the psychiatry faculty at Johns Hopkins (Tydings 1991, 1995, 2005). In her best-known work, the memoir *An Unquiet Mind*, Jamison, a MacArthur Fellow, and then not yet fifty, provides an illuminating example of how a well-educated, intelligent and professional young American woman thinks about growing old. In trying to describe how the illness of depression feels Jamison writes:

Depression is awful beyond words. . . There is nothing good to be said for it except that it gives you the experience of how it must be to be old, to be old and sick, to be dying; to be slow of mind; to be lacking in grace, polish, and coordination; to be ugly; to have no belief in the possibilities of life, the pleasures of sex, the exquisiteness of music, or the ability to make yourself and others laugh. (217)

The young Jamison is telling us in 1995 that envisioning herself in old age is “awful beyond words.” It is to be lacking in grace and polish; deaf to exquisite music and humor.

Paradoxically, while old women are labeled ugly and many old women think of their bodies that way, as did Coles’ grandmothers, old women and those on the way to late life, also claim to feel as though they are invisible. Echoing the feelings of writer and feminist pioneer Alix Kates Shulman,<sup>41</sup> Americanist Sharon O’Brien writes:

I’ve reached the age where I seem to be invisible to men, the time when the words “fifty-two” call up their image of their mothers, and of their own deaths. . . . Yes I know this is cultural, and my response not appropriately feminist, but that doesn’t change the way I feel. What makes it worse is feeling it’s politically and spiritually incorrect to hate getting older. But I do hate it – the physical part, that is, and the way our culture makes women feel about aging. (317)

Old women are invisible elsewhere than in America. Swiss nursing scholar Heidi Petry speaks of late-life women in Switzerland as silent and invisible. “. . . the far-reaching explanations for the invisibility of older women are likely to be the widespread sexist and ageist attitudes traditionally inherent in the Swiss culture” (52). Kathleen Woodward begins her introduction to *Figuring Age, Women, Bodies, Generations*, with an incident Barbara Myerhoff recounts in “Life not Death in Venice: Its Second Life” that is included in the posthumous collection of Myerhoff’s writings, *Remembered Lives*. An eighty-six year old woman was leaving the Senior center that had been the focus of Myerhoff’s work that became *Number Our Days*. The old woman was run over and killed by a young man on a bicycle. When asked how it happened, he replied, “I didn’t see her” (ix). Woodward reminds that Myerhoff called this “death by invisibility” (ix).

Sociology professor Sarah H. Matthews, in her first published work, thirty years ago, noted people who “labored under a category of socially shameful difference.” She listed: “Old women, the retarded, the physically handicapped, the diverse sexual variants, racial minorities” (1979 10). Now thirty years later, with the election of a black American president, the emergence of black and other minority studies, disability studies and queer studies, it seems “old women” is the last in Matthews’ list of “shameful differences” to need addressing. My social justice conscience inculcated through Catholic schooling prompted my wanting to work in the area of old women.

### Third Reason: Betty Friedan and Women’s Strengths

Third, Betty Friedan pointed to much research on aging having been done with men, yet women live longer and the strengths that might enable this hadn’t been explored. This was another impetus for my focus on women. I read Betty Friedan’s late

work, *The Fountain of Age* (1993), little mentioned in age studies. After helping launch the second wave of the women's movement with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in her early sixties Friedan turned her interest to aging prompted by a phone call from Robert Butler, then head of the National Institute on Aging who had coined the term "ageism" in 1969 (Bernstein; Cohen):

He wanted me to get interested, politically, in the problems of age. Because women are, in fact, the great majority of the old, the problems of age are really women's problems, he said. Yet most of the policies and programs and research on age had been designed by and about and for men. (16)

Most of the old are women, a "feminization of aging" (Voyer et al 84); something "neither gerontology nor women's studies has really come to grips with" writes Cruikshank (2003 x). Dr. Thomas Perls, founder and director of the New England Centenarian Study has said: "We have noticed for quite some time now that when we go and see centenarians more than likely it is going to be a woman on the other side of the door" (Warshofsky 35). *Newsweek*, for a 1995 magazine cover highlighting an article on "Mediscare," depicted a young man being crushed under the weight of a heavy-set old woman in a wheelchair (Sept. 18).<sup>42</sup> When Friedan attended conferences dealing with aging she encountered "this strange predilection of gerontological experts for dealing with age only in terms of pathology" (24). And she was especially troubled that long-lived women were viewed as a problem to be solved and a burden to society. She caused a stir at one gerontology conference when she asked "Why can't men age more like women?" (25). She reflected on this. "Nobody ever talked about the strengths that allowed women to live so much longer than men and how they might be used, and even emulated by men to live longer themselves" (24). When Friedan asked questions at conferences she was told that gerontologists were uncomfortable because she referred to

her own aging. “That’s not the way it’s done” she was told (24). Reading Friedan convinced me that, not only was research needed on how women age, but that such a project could be useful to men as well as women.

My fourth reason for limiting my study to women was my discovery of the early 1980s unpublished doctoral work of Denise Connors. Connors, a nurse, did a sociology doctoral dissertation project with very old New England Irish working class women completed in 1986. To prepare for her study she immersed herself in “autobiographies of women who had lived to old age, biographies, letters, journals...” (42). That convinced me the years I had spent reading memoirs of women in my age cohort, and later those of women in earlier cohorts, was good preparation and a good platform from which to launch a project such as this.

Lastly, I saw in *Composing a Life* by Mary Catherine Bateson, assigned reading for my ethnography seminar, a model for work on women that speaks to men and women, something Bateson herself noted (1990 9). She laid out life histories of five women side by side, one life being her own, looking at some examples of women’s lives that had called for improvising; adapting due to discontinuities of female biology and care giving. She examined various strategies women used to patch together discontinuous lives, something these days many men have to learn to do, as well as women. My hope is that the life histories of the women in this project, seen through the lens of their cultural traditions, will prompt both men and women towards new ways of thinking about late life as the conversation about learning how to be old<sup>43</sup> is just beginning.

## Why New England

I located this project in New England, purposefully selecting research partners who were dwelling by choice, in their last years, in the northeastern United States. Having lived such an itinerant childhood, I had always felt linked with my Yankee paternal grandparents who lived all their lives in the same house in Rhode Island, and through them linked to Yankee ancestors going back twelve generations. I felt I belonged in New England, remembering the cadences and accents of Massachusetts where I lived almost from birth through kindergarten.

Many women have retreated or moved permanently to various, often lonely, spots in New England, frequently near the ocean, to recollect themselves and to assess their lives. They found solace and inspiration there, leaving behind a record of their thoughts. These women have included Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Rachel Carson, May Sarton, Doris Grumbach, Joan Anderson, Alice Koller, and Alix Kates Shulman.<sup>44</sup> Shulman lived alone for a year on a Maine island to consider her life as she turned fifty. Writing about the possibility of some American women reinventing themselves in old age, Cruikshank writes, “The more interesting aspect of reinventing the self is not the geographical move but the interior one” (2009 18). I have valued the personal accounts of the interior journeys of these women and in arranging field trips to New England to visit and interview project colleagues, I made plans to carve out some hours of quiet reflection for myself.

Just as age studies, literary gerontology, feminist gerontology and disability studies are emerging, so too are regional studies, and New England studies is no exception. Some examples of scholarship coming from this area include: *The*



*Encyclopedia of New England* (Feintuch and Watters 2005), Ardis Cameron's excellent piece "When Strangers Bring Cameras, The Poetics and Politics of Othered Places," in *American Quarterly* (2002), Delbanco's *Writing New England* (2001), Brown's *Inventing New England* (1995), and Conforti's *Imagining New England, Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (2001). The above scholarship has enriched this project.

### Personal Narratives by Aging Women

Before reviewing previous ethnographic studies in the area of woman and aging in the next chapter, I want to note that in the course of the journey that is this project, I found many personal narratives by American women who have reflected on their experience of growing old and have written about it or spoken about it in interviews. Cruikshank writes recently that "narratives are the heart of feminist gerontology and should count as gerontological knowledge" but "a problem for feminist gerontology is that we have far too few personal narratives" (2009 190). But I discovered many veteran women's voices in short and long narratives, some a few pages, some book-length, one a 3-hour-long taped interview on Book-TV with the late Susan Sontag, recorded not many months before she died. I found reflections on growing old by women seldom or never mentioned in age studies literature, some of whom are well known: Helen Nearing (1986), Susan Sontag (2003), and Maggie Kuhn (2004). Sociologist Denise Connors also found such voices because in preparation for her doctoral work with old women twenty-five years ago (1986), she says she immersed herself in autobiographies of women who lived to old age, or letters and journals, but she gives no references (42). I have listed my findings in Appendix C; all are narratives by American women published after 1967. I

offer this material to those who ask “where are the voices of old women?” (Copper 1986 56; Cruikshank 2003 205, 2010 209; Calasanti et al 2006 14). I also add the voices of the women in this study to the list.

Of the few narratives by American old women reflecting on their own aging, that do appear in academic literature, the most frequently cited are by Barbara Macdonald, Baba Copper, and May Sarton; mentioned somewhat less are Shevy Healey, Carolyn Heilbrun, Doris Grumbach and Florida Scott-Maxwell.<sup>45</sup> All these women are white. Cruikshank has noted that “many black writers have died before they could become old, including Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Barbara Christian, Toni Cade Bambara, Rhonda Williams, and June Jordan” (2003 193). She cites black American studies scholar Gloria Wade-Gayles saying that she “cannot find books in which black women describe their aging” (2009 184). However, there is a study *From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones: The Life Experiences of Fifty Professional African American Women* (Slevin and Wingrove) by two sociologists that interviewed women born from 1907-1941, although much of the book deals with the lives of these women before retirement. There are also the memoirs by the Delaney sisters, *Having Our Say* and *On My Own at 107*. There is poetry about late life by Maya Angelou. And although Lorde was only fifty-eight when she died, the ideas she left behind are invaluable for those of us studying or moving into old age. Waxman notes the same (106).

To recapitulate, there is a wealth of material already available by old American women writing about the last stages of life waiting to be mined. Recently gerontologist Harry Moody lauded Florida Scott-Maxwell’s well-known nursing home journal (2009), but I would also recommend the nursing home journals by anthropologist Carobeth

Laird<sup>46</sup> or by poet and English professor Joyce Horner.<sup>47</sup> Age studies pioneer Margaret Morganroth Gullette recently lauds gerontologist Ruth Ray's memoir and love story, *Endnotes* (2008), referring to it and Shulman's new book, *To Love What Is, A Marriage Transformed* (2008): "non-fiction books about aging-into-old age, even good ones, cannot dispel. . . fears [of chronic or progressive illness in old age] or teach us to avoid shunning as well as these memoirs do" (2009 306). Gullette is right but I wonder if she and other age studies theorists know how much memoir material is out there. The personal narratives I found do exactly what Gullette says the two she reviewed do, they dispel fears, and inform; the reason I turned to them as preparation for my own aging. And what about the voices coming from ethnographic work, Freidenberg's *Emiliana*,<sup>48</sup> and Myerhoff's *Basha*?<sup>49</sup> These memorable real, not fictional, women need to be placed alongside Doris Grumbach and Florida Scott Maxwell. Perhaps future age studies researchers, those from women's studies, Americanists, and literary gerontologists, need to reclaim the veteran voices of women in old age much the same way black women scholars like Americanist Mary Helen Washington (1987), have been reclaiming black women's literary tradition.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1999 xv.

<sup>2</sup> Moody notes the “average age of the population is increasing, and the proportion of the population made up of people over age 65 is rising” (2010 xxi). This change in demographic structure of the population is called “population aging,” Moody citing R. L. Clark, et al, in 2004, *Economics of an Aging Society*.

<sup>3</sup> Moody’s model of what he calls the “Florida-ization” of countries is useful. Typos appear in a description of this model in the 6th edition (2010) of his standard gerontology text *Aging, Concepts and Controversies* on pages xxi and xxii, clarified through personal communication.

<sup>4</sup> Tagged the “Silent Generation” by historian William Manchester, William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Generations* delimit the Silents to those born from 1925 to 1942. Gail Sheehy in *New Passages, Mapping Your Life Across Time*, considers Silents to have been born from 1930 to 1945. For Chuck Underwood in *The Cultural Imperative* the dates are 1927 to 1945. Mary Catherine Bateson, born in 1939, also a Silent, writes in *Composing A Life*, of adjusting her life to her husband’s career, following him to the Philippines and then to Iran. “These assumptions were standard when I grew up” she writes (12).

<sup>5</sup> English professor Nancy Miller, six years younger than I, is of the opinion that “we were the last generation to get our ideas, if not our information about sex from books rather than movies” (62).

<sup>6</sup> Benita Eisler reports on breastfeeding in the 50s that it ran counter to “both the image and roles of the antiseptic suburban wife and mother, striding from her stainless steel kitchen of labor-saving devices to the station wagon. Her schedule was dictated by commuter trains, car pools, Cub Scouts . . .” One mother told Eisler that it took her until 1964 to brave breastfeeding with her third child. And even then she was pressured to stop: “my husband was angry and jealous, my gynecologist was embarrassed, my mother thought it was lower class, and my Junior League friends teased me for being a hippy” (292).

<sup>7</sup> *The Illusion of Eve, Modern Woman’s Quest for Identity*, published in 1965, was an attempt by Sidney Cornelia Callahan, a Catholic, married to Dr. Daniel Callahan, co-founder of The Hastings Center, listing her main occupation as “Mother-Housewife,” to suggest how women might find fulfillment along with careers as wife, mother, housekeeper, chauffeur and the like. Not all women would be satisfied adding volunteer activities to lives as wives and mothers. Women were going to have to find their way. Two years my senior, born in 1933, she graduated college two years before I did, in 1955. After she wrote this book, she then went back to school more than a decade after college graduation, getting an M.A. in psychology in 1971 and a Ph.D. in 1980, 25 years after college graduation. She is a licensed psychologist. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* came out two years before, in 1963. A third woman mentioned in my 1968 article was Solange Hertz, a Catholic, whose book was *Women, Words and Wisdom* (1959). Married in 1938, mother of five children, she counseled that being a housewife was a Catholic vocation. Her book, a guide to contemplative life for laywomen, was given to me by a priest who also gave me *Contemplative Life in the World* by Amelie Goichon.

<sup>8</sup> “The Place of Information and Referral Centers in Community Planning,” 87th Annual Forum of The National Conference on Social Welfare” at Columbia (Crowley 1960).

<sup>9</sup> It was used by some boys in the lower grades of Catholic parochial schools to poke holes in the tops of wooden desks.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Sandra Murray Nettles for the notion of “veteran voice,” *Crazy Visitation*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Shevy Healey (1922-2001) was a clinical psychologist.

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<sup>12</sup> I wondered if most of the respondents to the 1989 survey were white, middle class, as I am, NWSA having come under criticism in those days for lack of minority membership and representation.

<sup>13</sup> Gail Sheehy, born in 1936, a year after I was, describes our “Silent Generation,” with special attention to those born near us. She writes that by the time they reached the age of 24, 70 percent of the females in the Silent Generation were married.

<sup>14</sup> During my second year of graduate study I was only required to be on campus two days a week.

<sup>15</sup> Considered a derogatory term, “Irish twins” describes siblings born in the same calendar year. The term referred to the fecundity of Catholics, many of them Irish, the fecundity a result of the Catholic prohibition against “artificial” birth control. When my fourth and last child was born, when I was 27, I had four children, under the age of four, all single births, thus I invent the designation “Irish Quadruplets.” While the Roman Catholic Church still prohibits the use of “artificial” birth control,” allowing the rhythm method, or “natural family planning,” which many Catholics find unromantic, clinical, and prone to error, studies show that now many American and other Catholics consider this a private matter of conscience, and they ignore this prohibition. Sixty years ago in the U.S. this was less common, partly due, I think, to ignorance about sex. Masters and Johnson had only just met a year before I was married in 1958. “The pill” was first approved in 1960.

<sup>16</sup> The Roman Catholic Church speaks of fourteen “works of mercy,” seven corporal and seven spiritual, derived from scriptural injunctions found in both the Old and New Testaments. The following list are as I memorized them while a student at Forest Ridge, the Sacred Heart Convent school in Seattle, with the more modern translation in parenthesis. The corporal works of mercy are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbor the harborless (to shelter the homeless), to visit the sick, to ransom the captive (to visit the imprisoned), and to bury the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are: to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the afflicted, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences willingly (to forgive all injuries), to admonish sinners and to pray for the living and the dead, the sixth spiritual work seeming to me more the province of priests.

<sup>17</sup> Abigail Trafford, a columnist and former health editor at *The Washington Post*, has written a book entitled *My Time, Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* (2004). Trafford designates “my time” as “a period of personal renaissance inserted somewhere after middle age, but before old age” (xvi).

<sup>18</sup> I applied Baron Friedrich von Hugel’s theological construct of the three elements in religion, mystical, intellectual and institutional, to the charismatic renewal movement in the Catholic Church in my book *Gathering a People, Catholic Saints in Charismatic Perspective*.

<sup>19</sup> *Spirituality and Cultism: A Case Study of a New Religious Movement – The Magnificent Meal Movement* by Mike Garde BD, H. Dip Ed, M.A. , a M.A. dissertation, Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Dublin, Ireland citing Tydings, “Shipwrecked in the Spirit: Implications of Some Controversial Catholic Movements” in *Cultic Studies Journal* Vol. 16, No. 2, 1999, 83-179.

<sup>20</sup> I am aware there are canonical distinctions between Catholic nuns and religious sisters but for purposes here I conflate the two.

<sup>21</sup> Benita Eisler, *Private Lives, Men and Women of the Fifties* 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Conroy, *Stop Time*, 1967.

<sup>23</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable, Growing Up Female in the Fifties* 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Belgian Cardinal Suenens, renowned for his expertise at Vatican II, and for helping to pave the way to reform for religious orders of women, arranged for me to participate as the only woman in a Marian theology conference of priest academics in Rome in 1975. Unhappy, the priest organizers first tried to

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dissuade me from coming; then put me in a group of speakers with Fr. Edward D. O'Connor C.S.C., and Fr. Fred M. Jelly O.P., but left my name off the program.

<sup>25</sup> Calasanti credits her interest in sociology, gerontology, feminism, teaching and service as having roots in her “working-class, third generation Italian and Catholic background” as well as growing up in California in a diverse environment (2008).

<sup>26</sup> The second edition of Cruikshank’s book, *Learning to Grow Old* (2009) appeared just as I was completing writing up this project. There has not been time to do a complete comparison of the two editions so when I cite a passage I will usually give the publication date of the edition used, 2003 or 2009.

<sup>27</sup> *NAMI Advocate* Oct/Nov 1998, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Looking back now ten years later, my husband says I didn’t need to sell the rug and I miss the rug. It was a connection to my Yankee grandmother. Perhaps in an almost fifty year marriage and a child of my times, I felt the rug was one of the few things that was really mine, and it was important to me to return to graduate school as my thing, on my own.

<sup>29</sup> Another highlight was visiting Elliott Bay Bookstore on Pioneer Square and hearing Native American writer Sherman Alexi read from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

<sup>30</sup> *The Word Among Us*.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Bode, a founding father of the American Studies Association and former professor at the University of Maryland who passed away in 1993, believed American Studies and the Association “should reach beyond the university to all of those interested in studying American culture” (Davis 2-3).

<sup>32</sup> Achenbaum received his B.A. in American Studies from Amherst College, his M.A. in American Civilization from the University of Pennsylvania, and a PhD in History from University of Michigan.

<sup>33</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, Monika Hellwig and Carol Buckley. Other women from different age cohorts who grew up Catholic who have written about the experience, and with whose work I am familiar, include: Mary McCarthy, Mary Gordon, Patricia Hampl and Anne Rice.

<sup>34</sup> The Life Writing Project was founded in 1998 at the University of Maryland, College Park by American Studies professor John L. Caughey and English Professor Susan Leonardi. It brings together graduate students and faculty from across disciplines.

<sup>35</sup> O’Brien, the John Hope Caldwell Professor of American Cultures and professor of American Studies and English at Dickenson College, offered for comment the initial pages of what was to become her memoir *The Family Silver, A Memoir of Depression and Inheritance*. She also led life writing/memoir workshops for several years. I participated three years in a row.

<sup>36</sup> Nettles shared with our group what was to become the memoir *Crazy Visitation, A Chronicle of Illness and Recovery*, recounting her experience as a University of Maryland professor struck down with a brain tumor.

<sup>37</sup> As a T.A. I began an M.A. program in History in the fall of 1957 at St. John’s University, New York.

<sup>38</sup> “Gender and life satisfaction in retirement: An assessment of the male model” in *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 51B 1996, S18-S29.

<sup>39</sup> It appears to be a convention that many women and some men working in the field of age studies reveal their age. Why many scholars disclose this standpoint is so far, unaddressed. Perhaps it is because some

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scholars modify their views on aging as they themselves age. Cruikshank comments that late in his life Eric Erikson “modified his belief that wisdom is the particular province of old age” (2003 187).

<sup>40</sup> Disability Studies has come a long way since Woodward wrote the above.

<sup>41</sup> Turning fifty, Shulman expressed similar feelings, saying she had become “infected by the world’s insidious opinion of aging women.” She says she is ashamed of her feelings presuming that “a good feminist would beat this rap” (1995 6).

<sup>42</sup> My thanks to Meredith Minkler and Carroll Estes for noting this cover in their “Concluding Notes” in *Critical Gerontology: Perspectives from Political and Moral Economy*, p. 375.

<sup>43</sup> Born in 1922, British novelist and essayist Ronald Blythe, editor of Penguin Classics for twenty years, in 1979, published *The View in Winter, Reflections on Old Age*, a product of interviews he conducted with people from all walks of life who had survived to old age. Stressing that longevity is a relatively new phenomenon, Blythe wrote: “Perhaps, with full-life spans the norm, people may need to learn how to be aged as they once had to learn to be adult.” This is a theme of the recent book by Cruikshank entitled, *Learning to be Old, Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Myerhoff also cited Blythe (1984 311-312).

<sup>44</sup> *An Unknown Woman* (Alice Koller); *Drinking the Rain* (Alix Kates Shulman); *A Gift from the Sea* (Ann Morrow Lindbergh); *A Year by the Sea* (Joan Anderson); *The Sense of Wonder* (Rachel Carson).

<sup>45</sup> *Look Me In the Eye, Old Women, Aging and Ageism* by Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich; *Over the Hill, Reflections on Ageism Between Women* by Baba Copper; *Endgame, A Journal of the Seventy-ninth Year*; *Encore, A Journal of the Eightieth Year*; *At Eighty-Two*, by May Sarton; “Old Lesbians Speak Out” and “Confronting Ageism; A Must for Mental Health” by Shevy Healey; *Coming Into the End Zone, Extra Innings*, and other memoirs of aging by Doris Grumbach; *The Last Gift of Time* by Carolyn Heilbrun.

<sup>46</sup> Carobeth Tucker Laird (1895-1983) had little formal education but was married to anthropologist John Peabody Harrington who recorded the language of Native Americans of the West. She left Harrington after many years of being his assistant to marry a Native American. *Limbo* is her nursing home memoir. She didn’t publish until she was eighty.

<sup>47</sup> Joyce Horner (1903-1980), former Mt. Holyoke College English professor, due to an accident and arthritis, was confined to a nursing home in her early seventies. Her poetry having appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper’s*, author of two novels, a writer all her life, Horner kept a journal about life in the nursing home she entered in 1974. It was published by the University of Massachusetts two years after her death as *That Time of Year, A Chronicle of Life in a Nursing Home*. It is a rich source of material by a reflective and perceptive writer.

<sup>48</sup> *Growing Old in El Barrio*.

<sup>49</sup> *Number Our Days*.

<sup>50</sup> In the Introduction to *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975), by Mary Helen Washington, Washington talks about how black women are stereotyped and how other people “try to define who she is” (ix). It is possible to replace the words “black women” with “old women.” I am not trying to suggest that old white women have had it as bad then or now as black women, but a remedy for the situation all old American women find ourselves in is one Washington suggested then for black women, and she proceeded to work on it. She determined one factor contributing to misconceptions about black women was “the treatment of the black woman writer,” almost “never taught in college-level American literature courses and rarely mentioned in women’s studies courses.” Washington laments that what is missing is the black woman’s “special and unique vision of the black woman.” I suggest that is just what is missing for the most part so far in understanding old women – the old woman’s “special and unique vision.” The many voices of old women already available in print have yet to find their way into age studies and related fields. See Appendix C.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHOD

Anthropological studies of older adults, and particularly qualitative descriptive studies . . . are necessary to understand the ways in which sociocultural variables influence the process of aging and adjustment to old age.

Melba Sanchez-Ayendez<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter addressed the emergence of age studies, giving particular attention to the current state of work in the area of women and aging. In this chapter I review previous ethnographic studies that assisted my work in some direct or indirect way. I follow this review with a consideration of life history, or person-centered ethnography, the method used in this project.

### Previous Ethnographic Studies

First it needs to be said that, although many of the ethnographic works addressed below are “reflexive,” in that they include to a more or lesser degree elements of the ethnographer’s own life and personal experiences while working on their project, something earlier ethnographies avoided in the interest of “objectivity,” these are ethnographies. They study a *group* of people, rather than individual lives. Or as Caughey would say, the operative pronoun in ethnography is “they” not “he” or “she” as it is in life history (2006 7). Ethnographies, using the same tools of participant observation and interviews that life historians do, produce cultural descriptions of groups. Occasionally certain individuals in a group portrait of men and women will stand out, and here I think of unforgettable women like Myerhoff’s Basha,<sup>2</sup> or Freidenberg’s Emiliana<sup>3</sup>, but ethnographies study groups, and they often tend to generalize and meld differences. Often the interviews that ethnographers conduct with each informant in the group consist of only a few hours, as for example, Furman’s study of elderly women frequenting a beauty



shop discussed below. By contrast, life histories, such as this project, use ethnographic tools to study just a few individuals over time, usually years.

A good number of issue-oriented studies coming from outside the humanities using ethnographic techniques of interviewing and participant observation, focusing on groups of aging women, have been produced by nurses and sociologists, gerontologists, social workers and psychologists, for example: “Persevering: The Experience of Well Elderly Women Overcoming the Barriers to the U.S. Health Care System” by two nurses and a social worker (Duggleby, Abdullah and Bateman 2004). A few group portraits of late-life women have been less single issue or problem-oriented, and more an attempt to seek general information, to “uncover and report upon the lives of older women” (Ford and Sinclair 5) and they have informed my work. These include the research of five Americans, Connors (1986),<sup>4</sup> a nurse doing doctoral research in sociology; Hurwich (1990),<sup>5</sup> a psychologist; Laferriere and Bissell (1994), a nursing professor and a clinical nurse specialist; and Kinsel (2004)<sup>6</sup>, a social worker. All except the work of Laferriere and Hamel-Bissell<sup>7</sup> are unpublished doctoral dissertations. Two European studies were useful. These are by British sociologists Ford and Sinclair (1987),<sup>8</sup> and Petry (2003),<sup>9</sup> a nurse and scientific collaborator at the University of Basel, Switzerland.<sup>10</sup>

#### Connors

“‘I’ve Always Had Everything I Wanted (But I Never Wanted Very Much)’: An Experiential Analysis of Irish American Working Class Women in Their Nineties” is a sociology dissertation project using ethnographic techniques, completed in 1986. The author, Denise Donnell Connors, describing herself as “a feminist-nurse-sociologist” (36), was mentored by Shulamit Reinharz, author of *Feminist Methods in Social*

*Research*, and the late, disabled sociologist Irving Kenneth Zola, author of “When Getting into the Field Means Getting into Oneself.” Connors, of Irish ancestry with working class roots, followed six women from Irish working class backgrounds, in their nineties, for two years, interviewing and interacting in their daily life. In the course of her research Connors says she relied on a method described by Reinharz in 1979 in a book entitled *On Becoming a Social Scientist*, called “experiential analysis.” Connors explains:

The goal of experiential analysis is to study experiences in their entirety—both the experiences of the researcher and those of the group the researcher comes to know. Experiential analysis holds that [quoting Reinharz] “what one person experiences is related to or reflects psycho-social arrangements and forces, so that to explicate the former is to illuminate the latter.” (353)

From the experience she gained locating informants Connors took for granted that there were many women “in their nineties living on their own” to the surprise of people questioning her on the topic of her doctoral research. This reaction only served to further her conviction of the invisibility of the late-life old, most of whom are women (4).

Likewise Cruikshank assumes the existence of many hardy old people:

To remain healthy in old age is to defy expectations...Since the robust among them [the old] tend not to appear on the radar screen of policymakers, their numbers are probably greater than anyone realizes. The ordinariness of late-life vigor goes unreported. This is a hunch based on letters I received from potential contributors to an aging anthology. If they had ailments they didn’t mention them, even though most were well over eighty. A composer in his nineties expressed disappointment that he no longer got commissions. (2003 40)

Freidenberg also makes this point, that in the United States “the healthy elderly are considered exceptional rarities of ‘successful’ or ‘productive’ aging” (101).

Connors reveals why she chose to study “old, old women.” She said she wanted to break “the silence about old women’s lives [that] has contributed to their invisibility” (4). By working with women of Irish ancestry Connors also hoped to gain insights into her

own ancestry, akin to anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff's interest in her Jewish heritage as it evolved in *Number Our Days*, and my own interest. Connors' method required that she reflect on her own experience during the study, as mine does. She was way ahead of her time in realizing that she needed to interrogate her own internalized ageism if she was going to work with old people.

Although I assumed I suffered to some degree from ageism, I hadn't explored where on the ageist continuum I might find myself...I was too quick to offer reassurance regarding their [her informants'] feelings about "looking old." At times when they gave no indication of needing help I ventured to give it (the nurse in me anticipating/creating? needs). (15)

Connors addresses stereotypical images her subjects confronted and strategies they used to maintain face (170) as well as how they perceived and handled health problems. She considered social support networks. Among other sources, Connors leans on Myerhoff's "Rites and Signs of Ripening: The Intertwining of Ritual, Time, and Growing Older." Building on Myerhoff, who described "the ritual of putting the house in order as a way of ordering a life that is ending" (Connors 105), Connors shows how her project participants give things away and "clean house."

#### Hurwich

The Ph.D. dissertation, *Vital Women in Their Eighties and Nineties: A Longitudinal Study* by California psychologist Cecelia Hurwich was completed in 1990. I found the study useful and Hurwich's personal story invigorating. Hurwich, apprehensive about growing old, had a face-lift, then went to graduate school at age 59 (Friedan 158 ff.), only a few years earlier than I did at a month shy of age 63. She wrote an M.A. thesis on *Vital Women in their Seventies and Eighties*, her work based on interviews with ten economically and educationally advantaged white California women, three still married

to husbands of more than fifty years. The project, begun in 1981, investigated common characteristics and themes among the women using psychological tools. To Hurwich's surprise, the women did not give answers in terms of diet or exercise; health issues, while present, were not seen as a major concern. All had a "highly developed sense of social consciousness" (134). Most of the women reported old age as the best time in life.

For a Ph.D. project to accompany doctoral studies in psychology, Hurwich, now age 68, went back to the same women seven years later, the women now in their eighties and early nineties. Four of the initial women were deceased so Hurwich worked with the remaining six. At age 70 Hurwich received her Ph.D. in life-span developmental psychology specializing in the later years and in 2005 Dr. Hurwich was Delegate from California to the White House Conference on Aging. In her late seventies she traveled to the Hunza in the Himalayas to interview Muslim women to study their health and longevity ([www.earthelders.org/council/CeceliaHurwich](http://www.earthelders.org/council/CeceliaHurwich) accessed 11/20/08).

#### Kinsel

Beth Kinsel, born in 1949 with a 1983 M.A. in gerontological studies, in early 2000 when she was 50 pursued doctoral research at Ohio State in social work. Citing relevant sources, Kinsel noted that in their later years women tend to have more chronic health issues than men do, plus challenges related to gender inequities and societal expectations for caregiving. She was interested in the small, growing body of work on resilience in "older" women suggesting this ability might ameliorate the challenges of later life. She decided to explore this to add to knowledge about what contributes to resilience in aging women. Using a qualitative approach with a theoretical orientation that integrated life-span development, a feminist life-span perspective of aging and

critical gerontology, Kinsel interviewed 17 women between 70 and 80 living in Ohio. Twelve were Caucasian, five were African American.

During interviews the women were asked to discuss any childhood adversity, major challenges in midlife, and the first adversity in later years, as for example, care giving of an ill spouse. Kinsel found that various internal and external resources emerged as the women persevered in the face of adversity that were protective. Kinsel's results are found in her 2004 doctoral dissertation, *Older Women and Resilience: A Qualitative Study of Adaptation* and "Resilience as Adaptation in Older Women" in *Journal of Women and Aging* (2005).

#### Laferriere and Hamel-Bissell

Rita H. Laferriere, a professor of nursing at the University of Vermont School of Nursing, and Brenda P. Hamel-Bissell, a Vermont clinical nurse specialist, studied the aging of six oldest old white women, ages 87-93, each of whom lived alone in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, a sparsely populated area (1994). Each woman was interviewed in her own home for between eight to ten hours. Laferriere and Hamel-Bissell were impressed with the way oldest old women in this area of Vermont were aging and set out to explore this by looking at "successful aging," accepting uncritically Rowe and Kahn's 1987 thesis. This study, the results published in 1994, was done at a time when numerous critiques of the notion of successful aging by age studies scholars, feminist and critical gerontologists was yet to come (Moody 2009; Cruikshank 2009, 2-3, 194; Masoro 2001). That said, this study is interesting in its detail of various chronic illnesses, the instances of resilience or emotional stamina in the wake of misfortune, and examples of how these women stayed active. Although not noted as typical Yankee cultural characteristics, such

cultural orientations were obvious throughout in mention of the importance of the work ethic to these Vermont women, their self-reliance, and their keeping busy and active.

#### Ford and Sinclair

*Sixty Years On, Women Talk About Old Age* is the 1987 ethnographic work of Janet Ford, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Loughborough University, and Ruth Sinclair, then a research officer for a UK county council, teaming up to explore the lives of “older” UK women twenty years ago. Ford and Sinclair aimed to have interviews as unstructured as possible rather than pre-selecting issues to be considered as a way of not having their own views of what was important dominate. They recorded interviews with fourteen women ages sixty to ninety, locating the women through personal networks, selecting them from a variety of situations: Some had never worked outside the home, some were single, some married, some widowed. One lived in “an old people’s home.”

Reading through then available literature about women interviewing women and feminist research, and the possibility of different responses of women to male and female researchers, Ford and Sinclair leaned towards findings that women have a greater willingness to trust other women, but that the approach “requires the researcher to adopt a shared or non-hierarchical role and to develop trust by a willingness to share experiences and enter into discussion” (11). It was this ethnography that introduced me to the work of Ann Oakley (1981), who raised issues of women interviewing women, and the ethics and issues surrounding ethnographic work in general, prior to Judith Stacey (1988). Ford and Sinclair concluded that the goals of the elderly women that emerged from the interviews were: to balance their need for security with maintaining independence and self-respect, and to live a life of non-work that was meaningful. Ford and Sinclair stress that “old age”

can encompass thirty years, and that “the old are not one homogenous group. They exhibit great variety” (3). I was particularly struck by the seriousness with which Ford and Sinclair entered into relationships with their project participants and they influenced how I approached my study colleagues with respect and concern for their feelings.

#### Petry

In *Aging Happens: Experiences of Swiss Women Living Alone* (2003), nursing professor Heidi Petry studied the experiences of nine Swiss women between the ages of 73-89, living alone for the previous ten years. She conducted 17 interviews and found that for these women “age was not a central issue” (55). Being old wasn’t meaningful in itself and here her finding tracks with Kaufmann (1986). Petry notes that although things in Switzerland have improved, “generations of women were socialized in a society that treated them as second-class citizens” (53). So Petry asked her subjects directly how they thought their life might have been different had they been born a boy. She used this prompting question because initially the women did not divulge they had experienced any disadvantages. Petry as a nurse was positioned well to notice physical complaints and she picked up that her subjects had memory concerns and all of them, regardless of education, had taken some action to exercise their memory. Petry came to the conclusion that her project participants had been affected by ageist beliefs, by common stereotypes about aging and memory, and that their concerns were not always biologically based. She notes research in this area showing low self-evaluation of memory performance is not determined exclusively by biological factors (64). Another theme that emerged was a concern for safety.

Before leaving contributions to the study of late-life American women from the social sciences, I note the work of three other scholars whose work was indirectly useful to me, the work of Susan Savage-Stevens, and the project of Kathleen Slevin and Ray Wingrove.

#### Savage-Stevens

Susan Savage-Stevens, from the department of human development at my university, influenced by the example of her mother-in-law, “a gritty and hardy New Englander,”<sup>11</sup> was interested in meaning in the lives of women over age 65 and the influence of health on meaning in older populations. Her doctoral dissertation, *Meaning in the Lives of Older Women: An Analysis with Hardiness, Health, and Personal Projects*, completed in 2003, applied a “personal projects methodology. . .to the characterization of meaning” in the lives of 151 mainly white women over age 65 living independently, examining cognitive, affective, and motivational components of meaning as explicated by clinical psychologist and therapist P.T.P Wong. While this study was too scientific for my purposes, the discussion concerning why Savage-Stevens focused on women to the exclusion of men was useful. She cited research supporting the notion that heterogeneity increases with aging, so research with both aging men and aging women risks interpreting findings “according to a normative bias, assuming life experiences of men and women are more alike than different, or even the same” (2).

#### Slevin and Wingrove

*From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones, The Life and Experiences of Fifty Professional African American Women* (1998) is the interesting work of two sociologists, the average age of the women interviewed being 69, the youngest 53. Perhaps because



the author-researchers suggest that these women in retirement could serve as models for middle-aged women (5), or the relative youth of many of the subjects, although one woman was 87, I find this work seldom mentioned in age studies literature. Perhaps too, it is due to the fact that much of the text deals with the subjects reflecting back on their lives. Fifty women participated, each interviewed once for an average of three hours. Nine of the women studied in the above project held doctorates, 24 master's degrees. The chapter "Free at Last," one that relates to women in late life, focuses on the idea that these women in retirement finally felt free from schedules and free to do things like travel.

One anomaly I found strange, is that the researchers, when quoting anthropologist Irma McClaurin, identify her as an African American anthropologist (7), yet, with this study focusing on African American women, Slevin and Wingrove never clearly identify themselves as white sociologists until the end of the book in "Researcher's Comments on the Study."

This prompted me to think more about the cultural distinctives of race, class, chronological age and the like that researchers bring with them into the field, and how or whether to identify themselves. The difference in race between researcher and researched, after I thought about it, while I think germane to disclose up front, is perhaps not much different from the situation with many researchers like Myerhoff, for example, who are much younger by decades than the elderly men and women they study, perhaps why many academics writing and working in age studies and with elderly populations today now disclose their age early in the text. In this study I sometimes note the age of a researcher when discussing their work.

Not many cultural group portraits or ethnographies of aging, much less aging women, have so far come from the humanities. Those projects that studied both men and women that assisted my work indirectly include the work of anthropologists Barbara Myerhoff, M. Margaret Clark, Sharon Kaufman, and Judith Freidenberg.

### Myerhoff

Barbara Myerhoff (1935-1985), a social worker turned anthropologist, has been well known to several decades of scholars who study aging. Thirty years after her work appeared, Myerhoff still has an impact on age studies scholars. That her work is so valued underscores the importance of the contribution anthropology can make to age studies. A quick search of recent age studies literature finds Myerhoff cited by Cruikshank (2009), Henneberg (2006), Woodward (1999) and Waxman (1997). Myerhoff's work with elderly Eastern European Jews in Venice, California, *Number Our Days*, beginning in 1973, is a model of the newer reflexive ethnography. Her views on aging, and on ethnographic work with the elderly, can also be found in *Life's Career – Aging, Cultural Variations on Growing Old; Remembered Lives, The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older; Stories as Equipment for Living, Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff* and “Rites and Signs of Ripening: The Intertwining of Ritual, Time and Growing Older” in *Age and Anthropological Theory* (Kertzer and Keith). For those particularly interested in the aging of women, Myerhoff has much to offer, beginning with autobiographical takes on her own life that was strongly influenced by her European-born grandmother, Sofie Mann (1980 237 ff). *Number Our Days'* first pages introduce us to the eighty-nine-year-old woman, Basha, and the book ends with Myerhoff's visionary reflections on the senior center women. “Perhaps women in general

are more prepared for the inevitable infirmities of old age by a lifetime of acceptance of their bodily limits and changes” she speculates (1980 264).

Myerhoff’s work that became *Number Our Days* was a project pursued within her own Jewish culture, and she reflected on the challenge as well as the benefit:

The anthropologist engages in peculiar work. He or she tries to understand a different culture to the point of finding it to be intelligible. . . Working with one’s own society, and more specifically, those of one’s own ethnic and familial heritage, is perilous, and more dangerous. Yet it has a certain validity and value not available in other circumstances. Identifying with the ‘Other’ – Indians, Chicanos, if one is Anglo, blacks if one is white, males if one is female – is an act of imagination, a means for discovering what one is not and will never be. Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process. (18)

Myerhoff focused on life at a senior center serving a Jewish beach community in Venice, California. “I would be a little old Jewish lady one day; thus, it was essential for me to learn what that condition was like, in all its particulars” (19). It was not to be as she died of cancer just shy of fifty, in the midst of another ethnographic project.<sup>12</sup>

#### Clark

Ten years older than Myerhoff, medical anthropologist M. Margaret Clark (1925-2003), author of the 1967 project *Culture and Aging: An Anthropological Study of Older Americans*, is almost never cited in literature I have reviewed. Mention of her work is even missing from *The Oxford Book of Aging* (Cole), but her findings are remembered by some few age studies scholars. Cruikshank is one of them. “Thirty years ago the distinguished anthropologist Margaret Clark pointed out that the old in the U.S. have only one important social function: getting sick” (2003 35-36). Cruikshank then argues that viewpoint is even more persuasive today with the rise of corporate health care. Karen Riggs, who studies mass media, is also familiar with Clark’s work and resonates with

Clark's positive view of aging (ix). I enjoy Clark's sense of humor as she makes some common sense observations about anthropologists and the study of old age.

Clark notes that it was strange anthropologists were "newcomers to the field of aging studies" because, after all, anthropologists have relied on the memories and insights "of old informants for much of their data" (55). Secondly, she says anthropologists have claimed for a long time "the study of cultural patterning of the human life cycle" as "one of their special concerns" (Ibid). Then she writes:

However, if one is to judge from typical anthropological accounts, the span of years between the achievement of adult status and one's funerary rites is either an ethnographic vacuum or a vast monotonous plateau of invariable behavior. (55)

After citing some examples of negative views of old age in American culture, she observes, "Since anthropologists are indeed creatures of their own culture, it may be that prevailing attitudes toward aging are manifesting themselves in unconscious decisions by ethnographers to ignore this aspect of the life cycle" (56).

#### Kaufman

*The Ageless Self, Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (1986) is a book based on doctoral research by Sharon Kaufman, a medical anthropologist, done over nine months in 1978 and 1979. Kaufman conducted interviews several hours in length with 60 white, urban, middle-class Californians over age 70. "I wanted to look at the meaning of aging to elderly people themselves, as it emerges in their personal reflections on growing old" (5) she writes. From her initial group of sixty she chose 15 to discuss their life stories in detail. Kaufman asked her subjects how they felt about growing "older," and how they described themselves. Kaufman concluded that for the people she studied, old age was not something that had intrinsic meaning and old people rarely see themselves as old.

They have a sense of self that is ageless, she argues, thus the title of her project. For the people in Kaufman's study, "being old" is "not central to the self-perceptions of these people over 70" and "these people have not created an 'aged role' for themselves."

#### Freidenberg

Judith Noemi Freidenberg, a professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland, College Park, is the author of *Growing Old in El Barrio* (2000), a vibrant ethnographic account of lives of elderly Latino residents in East Harlem. It is about "how living in a low-income urban enclave throughout most of the life-course colors an immigrant's experience of aging" (1), and it "advocates that an ethnographic understanding of social issues should inform the development and implementation of social policy" (5). As a long-time community activist, I especially appreciated Freidenberg's perspective that with a project such as hers, ethnographic informants "not only 'inform,'" they "participate in the policy debate" (5). A good example of the OLOC slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us."

The goal of Freidenberg's research was "to understand the life conditions of the Latino aged in low-income urban enclaves so as to ascertain their needs, both addressed and unaddressed, and offer policy recommendations" (5). Some of the questions Freidenberg asked included: "How do individuals perceive their own aging?" and "What is daily life like for the elderly?" I was interested in answers to these same questions.

And for an ethnographer like me, with a particular focus on women and aging, although Freidenberg includes excerpts from transcripts from interviews with forty six Puerto Rican men and women, her organizing device is her chief subject "Emiliana," who stands out, joining never-to-be-forgotten women like Myerhoff's Basha, and Behar's

Esperanza.<sup>13</sup> Although I agree that, as Freidenberg states, “it is not the same to be an elderly woman suffering from arthritis in wealthy New York as it is in El Barrio” (272), many of Emiliana’s concerns about issues like personal safety are similar to the elderly New England middle class women in this project as they are for her. Especially helpful to me were selections from her diary that Freidenberg kept while working on the project and that introduced each chapter. They modeled for me reflexive ethnography written in a lively and revealing way.

Three projects that studied only aging women, that assisted my work more indirectly, come from religious studies, Frida Kerner Furman; anthropology, Melba Sánchez-Ayénde; and American studies, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis.

#### Furman

*Facing the Mirror, Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture* (1997) is a well-received ethnographic study of aging women and beauty shop culture in a Midwestern beauty salon by Frida Kerner Furman, a religious studies professor who describes herself as a feminist social ethicist. The women who frequented the salon were mostly Jewish as is Furman, and the twenty women she interviewed considered themselves middle class, and were between the ages of 65 and 85. Furman describes the friendships and caring in the salon setting, and encourages researchers to look outside the usual places of family or neighborhood to find how late-life women are emotionally sustained. Furman discusses how anger can precipitate resistance to combat incorrect, unjust cultural assumptions. As a feminist social ethicist she has a commitment to social change and she explores how “older” women might “contest some of the ways they are perceived, pictured, and named” (176). Furman continues reflecting on this study in an essay published two years

later, “There Are No Old Venuses: Older Women’s Responses to Their Aging Bodies” (1999).

Furman “discovered that asking women to reflect on their facial wrinkles and other marks of aging was too intrusive and intimidating a request” (10). I encountered no such reaction with my research partners and wonder if Furman’s experience relates to the focal point of her study being a beauty salon, drawing women who were already concerned about their appearance. Furman also did not ask women about their sexual orientation “as this question might have been perceived as possibly offensive to women of their generation” (189). Ford and Sinclair report of their study population: “Long-established conventions that preclude the discussion of sexual matters remain quite strong amongst these older women, not only with regard to their own lives, but when commenting on other peoples and other activities” (13). Since my study colleagues are not anonymous, this was an area excluded for the most part from our conversations.

#### Sánchez-Ayénde

Another ethnographic project that, like Furman, limited the study just to women in later life, is the work of an anthropologist, Melba Sánchez-Ayénde who in 1984 did her doctoral dissertation on *Puerto Rican Elderly Women: Aging in an Ethnic Minority Group in the United States* for the University of Massachusetts, focusing on the cultural contents of ethnicity “as variables that affect adjustment to old age” (vi). Two years later, Sánchez-Ayénde, then cultural anthropologist in the department of Social Sciences at the University of Puerto Rico, summarized this ethnographic study for an anthology (J. Cole). The nineteen-month New England project, done with 16 Puerto Rican women of low income in Boston from 1981-1983, pointed to supportive relationships among

friends, mutual assistance in elderly couples, and women seeing themselves as subordinate to men. This study was personally interesting to me as I am aging with a long-time spouse of over fifty years, and Sánchez-AyéndeZ notes culturally influenced habits among married couples like newspaper reading patterns and who keeps up with family news and this prompted me to more closely examine such habits I may have. In addition, the kind of Catholic influence on women that Sánchez-AyéndeZ calls *marianismo*, motherhood seen by “older” Puerto Rican women as the central role of women, as opposed to *machismo*, was in force thirty years earlier when I got married.

Clark-Lewis

In *Living In, Living Out, African American Domestic and the Great Migration*, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis drew her information from interviews with women in their eighties and nineties. Her project did not focus on aging but did involve working with elderly African American women recounting their experiences as domestic servants in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In this book Clark-Lewis encourages scholars to listen “to the stories of all kinds of people, and listen especially to the frail, sometimes hushed tones of older people whose lives illuminate our own” (198). At the time I met Clark-Lewis in conjunction with one of Caughey’s seminars, and read these words, my project was beginning to form in my mind. Her words prompted me to think about old women I had known, whose lives in old age I was beginning to see might illuminate a path ahead for my old age. Clark-Lewis further wrote: “. . . this vital resource will soon be lost forever to the slow, the apathetic, or the careless explorer” (198). I was thinking of three women in particular whom I had known in their old age, all were New Englanders: my Rhode Island grandmother,<sup>14</sup> Mae Mills Church; Maine Shaker Sister



Mildred Barker; and Rhode Island artist Adé Bethune. Of those three, only Bethune remained alive. Not wanting to be a “careless explorer,” I determined to seek her out. Clark-Lewis exhorted: “dig deep right where you are standing. This is the last time you may find ‘the old women gathered’” (198).

#### Kamler and Feldman

Before leaving this section on previous ethnographic work from the humanities that in various ways was useful to me, I need to mention the project of two educators, Australian language and literacy professors, Barbara Kamler and Susan Feldman. In 1994 Kamler and Feldman developed two six-week writing workshops in which eighteen predominantly white middle to lower-middle class women, ages 58-84, participated. Entitled “Writing Stories of Aging” the women were encouraged to explore how their own autobiographies might challenge conventional stories of aging women (1995). In “Please don’t call me ‘dear’: older women’s narratives of health care” Feldman makes the case that in post-structuralist terms “the relation between lived and imagined stories is significant” (1999 270). Referencing Lyotard, Feldman notes:

The stories we tell provide the framework through which we act. They operate as interpretive resources for dealing with the everyday world and for taking ourselves up within the cultural story-lines available to us. Such notions are useful in providing ways to theorize the ageing woman as positioned within categories provided by available cultural narratives. From this perspective the ageing woman is not seen as merely passively shaped by others, but rather as capable of taking up discourses through which she is shaped and through which she may reshape herself. (270)

The initial workshops were a pilot project, followed by a three-year longitudinal study of forty women aged 70-85 years. The researchers wanted to find out what kinds of stories aging women would tell about their lives in a supportive workshop setting and what might they say about their health and well-being (271). What was learned from the

project was that since some of the aspects of growing old “are not pleasant,” the women “challenged any romantic notion to valorize the positive aspects of aging” of which they thought there were many. They did not, however, want images of weakness replaced with images of courage. They had a positive future outlook, but had ongoing daily struggles. An earlier discussion of this work is described in “Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Reflections on Aging” (Kamler and Feldman 1995). In summary, the previous studies that proved most useful to me and informed my research are those by Hurwich, Connors, Kinsel, Petry, Ford and Sinclair and Kamler and Feldman. Each of the studies described above sharpened my sense of the issues aging women face and offered ideas about how to understand and describe the ways they negotiate these issues.

### Methodology

My methodology included a close reading of the above mentioned literature and a review of work concerning ethnography and the life history method: Watson/Watson-Franke; Langness and Frank; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw; Cole and Knowles; Behar; Caughey; Spradley; Bateson; Geertz; Rosaldo; and Reinharz. Also helpful was *Between Women, Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write About Their Work on Women* (Ascher, DeSalvo and Ruddick 1993). I located seven willing project participants through personal networks and snowball sampling in four of the six New England states, and obtained permission from the University of Maryland Human Subjects Review Committee to conduct research that involved unstructured interviews and participant observation. I chose women from various generations; at the initiation of this study, the youngest project partner was just turning 60, the oldest 92. At the outset I wanted a subject younger than I was, and also one who was aging along with a spouse as I was

doing. With that one exception, like Petry, I wanted project participants who had been living alone for at least ten years. I invited more women than I needed for a life history project surmising that at our age, and because of the anticipated duration of this study, some of us might withdraw due to disability or illness or some other reason, or some might even pass away. Indeed that is what happened. I eventually lost four project partners, three withdrawing due to health issues, two of these passing away, and another began to travel extensively and our schedules didn't mesh.

None of the authors noted above, neither Petry<sup>15</sup> nor Hurwich,<sup>16</sup> nor Furman,<sup>17</sup> nor even Connors,<sup>18</sup> mention any of their subjects dying, which I initially found surprising. Then I realized none of these studies were life histories, following women in depth over a very long time. None of these researchers lived with the aging women whose lives they were observing. I planned for possible withdrawal of some participants, choosing more subjects that I really needed, because, as Cole and Knowles write, a study such as this is based on "emergent design" (64). One of the features of the life history is uncertainty. "It is not possible to anticipate how the research process will unfold, because of the unpredictability and messiness of research into the human condition" (64).

I was able to reside for at least a week with each of the three women who emerged as key research partners. I lived the longest, staying for three weeks, one week for each of three years, with Rhode Island working artist and community activist Adé Bethune. She was in her mid-eighties when she joined this study, 88 when she passed away. I lived for several days at a time three successive years with writer and retired IRS employee Luthera Dawson, a Mainer born in 1911, ninety-two when we began to work together, two months shy of ninety-nine now. With the youngest participant, Vermont

woodcut artist Mary Azarian, seventy in 2010, I lived for a week one year, with two day-long visits at her home other years. All the women informing this project, including me, are Yankees,<sup>19</sup> and all, except me, live in New England and all are white, as are most residents in Maine, Vermont and Rhode Island where study subjects live.

### Marginal Vantage Point

Connors' descriptive, qualitative study, almost 25 years old now, is remarkable for its reflexivity; her interrogation of her ageist assumptions, her Irish ethnicity, her nursing background, her Catholic religion, and her previously unexplored working class roots. Connors judged that much previous scholarship had excluded ways of knowing that are "derived from women's lived experience," and says she is writing up her study from her "marginal vantage point" (38). With regard to knowledge based on women's lived experience, I too am writing from this still marginal vantage point. With regard to my vantage point based on my chronological age, I also write from a state of liminality. "Limen" means "threshold" and I write from a liminal position,<sup>20</sup> poised on the brink of the border between early and later old age, according to "official" gerontological categories, I'm almost in "old-old age." I am betwixt and between. Aging is a continuum, but if I stop to look at the point where I am now located, I sometimes wonder if I am a "Halfie," someone fluent in at least two chronological age cultures. Langness (1965) observed that "life histories are often used to portray some aspect of either culture or anthropology, or both, that otherwise is believed to have been neglected" (14). Watson and Watson-Franke note "This is especially true for the female life history." Life history gives women a voice (170).

## Fieldtrips

The “essential backbone” of anthropology is “the faithful recording of useful fieldnotes” according to anthropologists Langness and Frank who deem the process “unglamorous” (58). All guides for doing life history caution to take notes during or as close to an event or interview as possible. I used three types of tape recorders. A large one to set on a table during interviews, a recorder that plugged into my telephone at home, used with permission of study colleagues, and a small hand-held model for use when, for example, walking around a project partner’s house making a list of types of furniture, books in shelves, pictures of family or paintings on walls, pets and so on. I also used a video recorder for special events as when one study subject drove from Vermont to Rhode Island to meet another project partner; or when on one occasion four project colleagues including me, got together in Maine to talk about aging. When I couldn’t use a recorder, I used a small notebook. I developed a routine; driving to New England twice a year, often but not always with my husband. After one initial summer interview trip in Rhode Island in 1999, I planned my research field trips during the spring and fall, from 2000 through 2006,<sup>21</sup> avoiding the traffic of the busy summer tourist season. My route was to go first to Rhode Island to see Adé Bethune, until she passed away, then to Vermont and Mary Azarian’s home, from which base I visited our short-term project participant in New Hampshire. From Vermont I then traveled to mid-coast Maine. From 2003 on I skipped Rhode Island going straight to Vermont. I was fortunate in being able to finance these trips out of retirement income, my husband John and I planning a day to ourselves, and some evenings during field trips. When I was with project colleagues I went shopping with them, accompanied them to meetings, doctor visits and to worship

services. I cooked with them, and participated in their leisure activities. John and I took study colleagues out to lunch or dinner, and sometimes for drives in the car so they could discuss what in the landscape was meaningful to them.

During my visits and also by phone from home I conducted tape recorded interviews and conversations with each of the women: approximately twenty hours with Dawson, fifteen with Azarian, and ten with Bethune. I had originally planned to conduct formal interviews with a set of standard questions for each participant. However, after consulting with Judith Freidenberg, one of the anthropologists on my committee with extensive experience doing ethnographic work with late-life women, and men, I decided to simply engage my participants in conversations about their lives and about aging and then follow up on whatever they brought up, whatever they thought was important. This was also the method followed by Ford and Sinclair in *Sixty Years On*. “We tried to ensure that the women talked about the topics they thought important, rather than being guided along certain paths by us” (5). They said they could have pre-selected issues to be considered, therefore producing “neater” or “more orderly” accounts, but that would have risked making what the researchers thought was significant dominant. We negotiated such issues as their desire not to be anonymous and what areas would be off limits, or if discussed, off the record. These areas included sexual activity and current and past relationships with children. Finances were another problematic area for discussion; understandable as their real names are being used here. They all had worked; all had planned financially for late years. I transcribed some of the interviews and paid someone to type up the remainder of the tapes.

I exchanged e-mails with the research partners, sometimes with questions about something they had brought up, sometimes about plans to visit, and sometimes just as a way of keeping in touch. Informed by my own sense of appropriateness and by Ford and Sinclair's observations about relating to informants, based on what they learned from Oakley (12), I kept a record of birthdays, and sent flowers, cards and small gifts to my research partners, in one case even to a pet cat. After some careful consideration, I made the decision to keep up relationships after project completion if partners wished it. In turn project colleagues sent me books they had written or that they especially liked, or CDs.

I videoed and took still photographs of the interiors of the homes of key participants to help me observe how they had arranged their living space. *Martha Stewart Living* visited Mary Azarian's woodcut studio and I obtained a copy of that show.<sup>22</sup> The Bethune archives at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul Minnesota, now St. Catherine University, had a short film on Bethune's life; and Dawson had appeared in full colonial costume, in her nineties, in a training video to teach guides in the Montpelier museum in Thomaston, Maine. I obtained copies of all this footage. At home I kept a large box for each research partner and collected menus, notes, e-mails, books they had authored, photos of them as children that I was allowed to copy and other artifacts. I used the small notebook for some field notes, a larger notebook for notes I wrote in the evenings. I did not acquire a laptop, a gift from my husband, until my seventieth birthday, when I was through much of the fieldwork part of this study. Langness and Frank suggest that:

...all kinds of data are valuable for the life history. Photographs, taken in as many situations as possible, are an invaluable aid, for once you have left the field your memory fades quickly. . . .An inventory of the person's household can be useful, as well as accurate descriptions or maps of the location of houses and gardens, or both, and so forth. If you are fortunate enough to obtain materials in the form of a medical or prison record, you can put them to good use. (57)

John turned out to be a secret weapon. A mechanical engineer, there is nothing he can't fix from cars to furnaces to plumbing. Some project colleagues asked him to make some small home repairs and all enjoyed his company. Adé Bethune, the first colleague in this project, was adamant that I could never visit her again without him and I didn't.

I did a close reading of writings produced by study subjects, especially those written in early or late old age. All four of us key project partners are published writers. I paid special attention to Adé Bethune's writings containing reflections on old age. Luthera Dawson's memoirs helped organize chapters of her life and assisted in gaining insights into her cultural traditions. Mary Azarian's books are for children, but her cultural traditions are reflected there. Two project partners are professional artists and I did a close examination of their work.

Lastly, I set the life histories side by side as it were, looking for patterns, similarities and differences. I analyzed transcripts and my observations and field notes, and I re-listened several times to audio and video tapes. Since I had selected six project partners on the basis of their having lived alone for the past at least 10 years, a condition of selection Petry used in her Swiss study, one major theme that began to emerge early in my project was the concern the research partners had about residential decision making; how and where they were going to live their last years: in a nursing home, aging in place with help, or in some sort of continuing care community. So I did some reading about various kinds of retirement venues, and read two nursing home memoirs (Horner and Laird).

Over the years that I worked on this project the stereotypical notion of the American nursing home as a large unpleasant institution where residents live unhappily



and mostly against their will, persisted in the minds of my study subjects. This almost Dickensian notion is the backdrop for the experiences of both Horner and Laird (see Ch. 1, endnotes 46, 47), described in their nursing home journals. Fear of nursing homes is understandable because poor conditions have been exposed in some but not all such institutions Moody notes (2006 283). In time I became more educated in the area of Senior housing, and, contemporaneously, more options for Seniors, especially middle and upper middle class Seniors, began to appear. For example, the British and Canadian “granny flat” has been reinvented by a Virginia pastor who calls his portable dwelling a “MEDcottage.” It is a high tech small pod that can be trucked in to a family’s yard (Kunkle); an innovative housing solution that in some areas runs afoul of zoning ordinances. Physician William H. Thomas and his wife Jude have pioneered “the Eden Alternative” and the “Green House Project” to deinstitutionalize long term care facilities with small housing units, pets, plants and laughter.

Moody makes the important point that the distinction between housing for the elderly and long-term care services isn’t clear-cut (2006 282). American long-term care options now include forms of assisted living, adult foster homes or adult family homes, adult day care, home care, and high-income continuing care retirement communities, CCRCs, that combine housing, varying levels of health care, nutrition, social support and security for the rest of a resident’s life. One short term study subject, Harriet Baldwin, lives in such a CCRC in New Hampshire with her husband. Medical alert devices and services like Lifeline allow for more independence in old age. Two project partners living alone in their homes, Dawson and Bethune, wore bracelets with alert buttons.

I learned that despite the widespread idea that many elderly Americans are housed in nursing homes, the reality is that “among all people over 65, only about 4% (1.6 million people) are in nursing homes at any given time” (Moody 2006 287). But that low figure need to be viewed alongside the fact that increasingly nursing homes “have become facilities for very sick people” and up to 40% of Americans will spend some time in a nursing home before they die” (284, 287). Short term project participant Elisabeth Ogilvie spent some months in a nursing home in Rockland, Maine after she suffered a fall and broken bones when in her 80s. When she had recovered sufficiently, she then returned to her home in Cushing. According to gerontologist Moody, 32% of those in nursing homes stay less than a month (287).

Another issue for project colleagues seemed to be where the housing would be located: near family members in another state, or wherever they could find affordable retirement housing, or somehow near particular scenery and landscape. A sense of place seemed important to the women in this study. Knowing I was working on this project, sometimes people would ask me why, if my research partners could live anywhere in their last years, why would they chose to live where it is so cold in winter - so I looked into New England regional studies<sup>23</sup> and local color literature.<sup>24</sup> American studies professor Myron Lounsbury early on reminded me about Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs* that is set in the area where four study colleagues lived. I also read personal reflections by old women about being attached to their coastal or rural region in New England; the memoirs of Sarton and Grumbach, describing their coastal Maine landscape.

Interrogating my own cultural traditions and those of my first research colleague, Bethune, a major shared tradition emerged; a particular form of Catholicism we were immersed in as children and in middle life. We had both been boarders in European convent schools, mine run by French nuns in Seattle, Bethune's, Holy Family Institute in Belgium. Although we both knew relevant vocabulary, rituals, and spirituality, I located literature about convent childhood schooling and European 1940s Catholic spirituality to better contextualize this cultural influence.<sup>25</sup> Another key collaborator, Azarian, predated but presaged the "back to the land" movement in Vermont and so I researched that tradition to better understand what she was telling me.

#### Project as Journey

All in all, in constructing my account of the journey that is this project, a journey also into my own old age, traveling along with seven other women for a short time, then that group pared down to just three in for the long haul, I used: interview transcriptions, participant observation, field notes, additional researched contextual information, an examination of the artistic creations of co-investigators, their memoirs, art, and essays, looking to identify their various cultural meaning systems and whether or how they were influencing how we negotiate old age. As noted in my Introduction, it made sense to format this project as a journey; a way of organizing suggested by Reinharz (1992 211) and Caughey (2006 88). Reinharz says the journey or the quest is common among feminist researchers.<sup>26</sup> She speaks of the "researcher-traveler" who reveals the process of discovery. "Initial discoveries energize the scholar to continue on her quest" (211). This "process format" requires a reflexive attitude that must carry throughout the study, from

“why did I do this study?” to “write-up.” It “means acknowledging the self changes during the journey” so “the process becomes part of the product” (212).

From the beginning I wondered what would happen to me along the way during this journey. John Lennon’s familiar line kept running through my head: “Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.” Looking ahead, on the negative side I was mostly thinking of age-related bodily diminishments, wondering when I approached seventy if I would develop arthritic complaints or cataracts. On the positive side, I was looking forward to getting to know the women in this project, to gaining insights into various strands of my own cultural heritage and theirs, and to contributing something to the age studies conversation in the academy. Now as I write this it seems shallow in light of what did happen along the way.

This project has taken more years than I ever anticipated. In all I lost a combined three and a half years to life events that intruded on completion of this study. The reasons why are emotionally charged and I haven’t been able up till now to explain why it took so long, or what happened. As I was writing up this study I developed writer’s block for a long, long time and was unable to continue. Then, when doing a Google search one day I came across an article, “Ethnographic Representation as Relationship” by two psychology professors, Mary and Kenneth Gergen, who produce *The Positive Aging Newsletter*, and who wrote:

The qualitative methods movement promotes experimental alternatives to traditional writing.... Alternative ethnographers break away from the conventions of social science inscription to experiment with polyvocality, poetry, pastiche, performance, and more. (14)

They gave some examples of alternative ethnographic work, including a poem by sociology professor Laurel Richardson, “While I Was Writing a Book” (17). The poem

lists adverse things that happened to sons, a sister, and in the world, while she was focused on writing a book. It was originally published in one of Richardson's books, *Fields of Play, Constructing an Academic Life*, the word "field" having several different meanings, one being the field the ethnographer enters to do fieldwork. Her poem broke the dam that was blocking me; my inability to name what occurred while I was engaged in this study. It prompted me to create my own version below. To many, Richardson's poem will seem to have been written tongue in cheek, but perhaps apropos of the state I was in, I took it literally. And when I later researched Richardson's life, and read some of her books, it appeared that much of what she noted had really happened. First, here is Richardson's poem.

"While I Was Writing a Book"

my son, the elder, went crazy  
my son, the younger, went sad  
nixon resigned  
the saudis embargoed  
rhodesia somethinged  
and my dishwasher failed

my sister, the elder, hemorrhaged  
my brother didn't speak to me  
my ex gurued and overdosed  
hemlines fell and rose  
texans defeated the e.r.a.  
and my oil gaskets leaked

my friend, the newest, grew tumors  
my neighbor to the right was shot  
cincinnati censured sin  
and my dracena plant rotted

I was busy. (203-204)

At the beginning of this study I was the mother of three sons and a daughter, grandmother to fifteen, older sister to three brothers, aunt to seven nieces and nephews,

wife to a husband of more than forty years and about to interview and culturally observe seven women besides myself. Here is some of what happened on my journey that is this project, this dissertation having initially been entitled “Uncharted Territory, Yankee Women Coming of Age: Life Histories and Cultural Significance.” Thus, the title of my poem:

#### While Working in Uncharted Territory

my son, the middle one, died  
my daughter became ill  
9/11 happened  
I passed my comps  
I was given a one year LOA  
my brother, the middle one, died

an “informant” won the Caldecott  
three passed away  
one turned ninety-eight  
my neighbor across the street shot himself  
a car cut in front of me - surgery followed  
my left arm doesn’t work too well  
I was granted a one year extension.

a spouse dies, one is “widowed”  
no word tho for mothers outliving children  
I’m ten years older  
Carolyn Heilbrun killed herself

my paperwhites are blooming.  
January 2009

#### Life History Method

American studies’ Roberta Maierhofer, exhorting American studies to begin to incorporate the topic of age into its research and teaching, has suggested this might be done, as she is doing it, through a literary approach, focusing on the cultural narrative of personal identity that she deems particularly American; “the cultural narrative of the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society”

(2000 108). She, an Americanist and an English professor, analyzes American fiction with an eye to aging, particularly aging women.

Recommending now for many years the kind of person-centered ethnography that is informed by an introspective researcher, Caughey has argued that it “offers many opportunities as a supplement to historical and literary approaches” (1982 115). The ethnographic project engaged in here, using the cultural traditions life history method to investigate a small portion of the American landscape of late life, will supplement Maierhofer’s approach and the work of literary gerontologists and age studies in general. Through his work and teaching, Caughey has shown that his model of life history “seems essential” to exploring contemporary multicultural, complex societies. He defines cultural traditions in this way: “a system of meaning that includes its own vocabulary and beliefs and its own set of rules for acting in the world” (2007 14). Person centered ethnography sets out to avoid psychological theories so popular today, and instead works to understand lives culturally. Informed by nascent age studies and the works mentioned above, my study that employs Caughey’s cultural traditions model of life history, is also informed by the work of the other anthropologists noted above, and two sociologists Laurel Richardson and Shulamit Reinharz, both pioneers in qualitative methods.

There is need for life histories of those Americans who are peopling the country of the old. McCall and Wittner write:

To groups who have been ignored, to emergent collectivities who are just beginning to speak in their own name and to develop their own past and future, life histories are an important, perhaps essential, tool for formulating, publicizing, and pursuing change. . . . (46-47)

An effective life history will, locating the person culturally, look for informants’ explanations of how they see themselves, what gives their life meaning, and why they

have made or resisted certain choices. The life historian, like any ethnographer, will, through participant observation, enter the subject's world in an attempt to understand his or her point of view. The ethnographer, an "outsider," will attempt to move as "insider" within a project participant's world in order to understand the "native" point of view. Behar calls anthropology a "necessary form of witnessing" (1996 5). I began this study with an aim to engage in what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls "deep hanging out"<sup>27</sup> with these women who agreed to work on this project with me, talking about what growing old has been like for them. Knowing I already had one foot in this unknown country of old age, a researcher who was at once both an insider and an outsider, I decided I wouldn't need to adopt any special practices to enhance this "hanging out" as Myerhoff did.

Myerhoff, not yet fifty, made efforts to heighten her "awareness of the physical feeling state of the elderly" (18). To simulate old age decrements of senior center members, she tried to perform ordinary tasks while wearing stiff garden gloves. She took off her glasses and plugged her ears. Sometimes she slowed down her movements by wearing the heaviest shoes she could find. Once she stumbled and it frightened her. Adding this experience to close observation, she believed she had learned about elderly concern to avoiding falling.<sup>28</sup> At the beginning of the journey that is this study, while I admired Myerhoff's efforts at ethnographic empathy, I dismissed the idea of doing something similar as I was thirty years older than Myerhoff was when she did her study. In fact, I was hopeful that my age would make project colleagues comfortable and this turned out to be the case.



The methods used in this project did not require that the seven individuals I selected for investigation be considered typical (2006 8). Caughey rightly notes that much of the life history ethnographic work coming out of sociology or anthropology has had a “strong tendency to focus on individuals who are understood to be ‘representative’ of a particular group or culture” (8). He argues that much of value can be learned from any life, perhaps especially from “people who are unusual, atypical, rebellious, or deviant” (2006 9). I agree that there is much to be learned from any life; that in a way no life is ordinary. When looking for a research partner, Caughey suggests looking for someone “interesting” (9) and able to be introspective or reflexive, enthusiastic about the project, hopefully with storytelling ability and “some common ground and many cultural contrasts” (2006 25). My project partners fit this profile.

Many ethnographers now eschew the term “informant” because of “its objectifying and othering connotations.” Caughey suggests referring to those being interviewed for an ethnographic project as “research participants,” “research partners,” or sometimes as “subjects” (2006 235). I follow this practice and have used some additional descriptives: “project partner,” “colleagues,” “co-investigators,” and “collaborators.” This maintains the dignity of the person interviewed while acknowledging that without the “expertise” the interviewee is providing, there would be no study.

#### Project Partner Collegiality

Reading into the history of ethnographic work I often came across reference to an article by sociologist Judith Stacey (1988) who as a beginning ethnographer questioned whether ethnographic methods are compatible with her feminist principles. Stacey reminds that the researcher is intruding into a system of relationships that the

ethnographer is far freer to leave. Reinharz writes about women studying women in all-female settings (67). I agree with Reinherz' view that it seems unreasonable "to abandon all ethnographic studies because of the impossibility of the researcher being all things to all people at all times" (75). Both Reinhartz, in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, and Ford and Sinclair in *Sixty Years On*, note the pioneering work of Ann Oakley and her contribution to the area of ethnographic work with women pursued by women researchers. The discussion informed the way I related to my subjects. Oakley, a British sociologist, did a project in 1974 on the sociology of housework. In 1985 she reissued her study with a new preface criticizing her previous methodology. She said she had approached her study in an academic context that "emphasized the role of social scientists as collectors and analysts of objectively verifiable data." Looking back, years later, she wrote that had meant "treating women who are interviewed merely as data-providers" (Reinhartz 28). In 1981 Oakley wrote:

The mythology of 'hygienic research' with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production must be replaced by a recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other, and to admit others into their lives. (Ford and Sinclair 12)

Based on her reflections, and her experience with further studies, Oakley stressed the importance of interviewing being based on commitment to a relationship. Reinhartz points out that in one of Oakley's studies more than a third of her interviewees continued their ties with Oakley after four years, four becoming close friends (28). I can appreciate that some ethnographers might disagree with this approach and find the idea daunting. There is much in the literature about leaving the field and leaving one's subjects; one of the issues that concerned Stacey. For this project I came to the conclusion that I could not

intrude into the lives of women in this study without making the kind of commitment Oakley talks about. My entrance into my participants' lives, and the initiation of a relationship, had varying degrees of importance for my research colleagues. My oldest partner, ninety-eight in June 2009, transitioned to assisted living three years into our partnership, and there was no way ethically that I could enter her life without becoming a friend who would continue the relationship after the study's completion if she wanted it. We became friends anyway, continuing our relationship after official interviewing had concluded. Reinherz points to the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild who suggests that the "ethnographic work done by women [not all of whom are feminist]" is "different from ethnography done by men to the extent that men and women interact in different ways. She [Hochschild] notes that when women study the elderly and/or when women study women, they can act on a 'nurturing' impulse that is reciprocated" (67; Hochschild 143). I mentally made a commitment to all my project colleagues to be available as a friend to whatever degree each desired and it guided how I conducted myself throughout this study. Even as one short-term research partner, novelist Elisabeth Ogilvie, began slipping into dementia, I continued to visit her and bring her lobster rolls from a particular restaurant she favored. In turn, she taught me, through her openness to our relationship, that her dignity and identity as a writer persisted in the midst of cognitive difficulties.

#### Life History Issues

Since the three key project colleagues, Bethune, Azarian and Dawson, are published authors, in addition, Bethune having had a biography/oral history written about her, all participants decided to eschew anonymity. They were used to owning their own

words. Even had they not all had some sort of public persona, Langness and Frank write that “while anonymity is desirable in much anthropological research. . .many life history informants *want* to use their actual names” (126).

This of course complicates the life history process. Langness and Frank point to problems Frank encountered in her 1981 project with Fields<sup>29</sup> that later became the book *Venus on Wheels Two Decades of Dialogue on Disability, Biography, and Being Female in America*. Since Fields wanted her real name used, Frank “felt compelled to jettison certain materials reflecting on living members of the family” (127). As my project moved along, I found, as mentioned above, that there were certain areas of my project partners’ lives that they talked about that needed to be kept off the record, but not many. I offered to give each study colleague a draft copy of the chapter containing her contribution for review, something Caughey recommends, and that, to my surprise, Bateson did not do with her *Composing a Life* project that contained much private information about women whose real names are used.

I called project colleagues by their first names when I wrote the first draft of this study as Bateson does in *Composing a Life*. Then I visited the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. and while there thought the work of two study subjects, Bethune and Azarian, should be better known, and belonged there.<sup>30</sup> It was then I decided I would use surnames. It struck me that at a Georgia O’Keeffe exhibit people don’t call the artist “Georgia.” They refer to her by her last name. While at the museum I remembered that Bethune, my first research partner, had been approached by the Smithsonian<sup>31</sup> to place her papers, and architectural models, designs, and originals of her illustrations, in their archives. Instead she chose a small Catholic college<sup>32</sup> in Minnesota.

## Conventions

Just a word about conventions. Throughout this work, as Barbara McDonald did, I eschew the descriptive term “older woman” so often used to describe old women or women in late life, a term I prefer and one I have seen little used elsewhere. Some age studies scholars eschew the term “older woman,” as I do, because they feel it reflects ageism. But it also reflects the fact that there are few non-ageist terms in common usage to describe the chronological period of a woman’s life from retirement age, until, twenty years later, when one is in the eighty to ninety year range, and perhaps by then belonging to the category, frail elderly. And even that term has problems. Like McDonald I embrace the word old, and consider myself in early old age. Where the text requires me to speak of another’s work, and that academic uses the adjective “older,” I put it in quotes to show the usage belongs to another.

When mentioning various scholars engaged in age studies, I have given their chronological age at the time of writing. As previously noted, it seems to be an evolving practice that an increasing number of age studies academics reveal their age or age cohort somewhere in their text (Blaikie viii; Cruikshank 2003 x). We are used to seeing Patricia Hill Collins identify herself as a black scholar, so it should be no surprise that an increasing number of age studies academics locate themselves in their texts somewhere along the chronological age spectrum.

## Lady Sarashina

Throughout the journey that is this life history project, one that includes reflections on the process, on myself as subject, on lives of other women, and that requires analysis and interpretation, I kept in mind a story, and a story about the story,

that is told in *Interpreting Life Histories* (Watson and Watson-Franke) and seems to confirm Calasenti's discovery that being married contributed to men's life satisfaction but not to women's.<sup>33</sup> Lady Sarashina was an eleventh century literate Japanese woman who in old age wrote about her life. Although having been married, and a mother, Sarashina recorded things of special interest to her. She "focuses her account on events that illuminate her development as a self" (161). She wrote about her travels, visits to shrines, and about dreams and death. Watson and Watson-Franke tell the story of how this autobiography was received by various scholars through the centuries. The scholars were men who expected to see references to Sarashina's husband and children as central. They weren't left out, but they only got brief mention. So, over hundreds of years her account of how she made sense of her world was treated dismissively until recently. Watson and Watson-Franke use what happened to Lady Sarashina's life history as a cautionary tale to illustrate how preconceptions, like those held by anthropologists who used a Freudian frame of reference (163), or those scholars influenced by societal norms who expected women to see themselves in relation to others, as a resource and servant (163), can affect analysis of a life history. I was especially delighted to read that one eighteenth-century scholar criticized Sarashina's memoir as without a central point and "rambling." Because as I look at a 98-page journal article I wrote in 1999, I am cognizant that my writing now, ten years later, is becoming diffuse; another word for "rambling." I took note of Watson and Watson-Franke's instruction and have tried to guard against assumptions I already held about how old women should behave, or make sense of their world, or how I expected I would age. I acquired a copy of Lady's Sarashina's life story, and savored it, in wonderment that I could so easily step into her life and share many of

her thoughts, one old woman to another, separated as we are by eleven centuries. I join my voice to the voices of my collaborators here as we tell about our travels in the unknown country of old age. We look to Lady Sarashina for her blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> Melba Sanchez-Ayendez, "Puerto Rican Elderly Women, Shared Meanings and Informal Supportive Networks" in Johnnetta B. Cole, Editor, *All American Women, Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind*, 1986, 172.

<sup>2</sup> *Number Our Days*

<sup>3</sup> *Growing Old in El Barrio*

<sup>4</sup> Denise Donnell Connors, "I've Always Had Everything I Wanted (But I Never Wanted Very Much)": *An Experiential Analysis of Irish-American Working Class Women in Their Nineties*, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Hurwich Ph.D., *Vital Women in Their Eighties* and *Vital Women in Their Eighties and Nineties, A Longitudinal Study*, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Beth Kinsel Ph.D., Resilience as Adaptation in Older Women.

<sup>7</sup> Laferriere and Hamel-Bissell's project was written up in a nursing journal, *Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Winter 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Ford and Ruth Sinclair, *Sixty Years On, Women Talk About Old Age*, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Heidi Petry, Ph.D., RN., *Aging Happens: Experiences of Swiss Women Living Alone*, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Petry is now an associate professor at the University of Washington Bothell.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> Were Myerhoff alive today, we'd be the same age, both born in 1935. I own and prize an autographed first edition of *Number Our Days*.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Behar a professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan did a life history of Esperanza Hernandez, a Mexican street peddler published as *Translated Woman, Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*.

<sup>14</sup> My maternal grandmother, Serena Ford Crowley, died earlier than my paternal grandmother.

<sup>15</sup> With her nine women Petry conducted 17 interviews, two each with all but one subject.

<sup>16</sup> Hurwich did one interview each with six women between the ages of 80-92 plus administering two psychological tests. She had already collected life histories from these subjects for her M.A. research seven years earlier. Her doctoral research involved analyzing the women looking backwards at changes since the previous interviews.

<sup>17</sup> Furman interviewed 20 beauty salon customers, the women ranging in age from 55-86, mean age 73.5. Interviews lasted two to four hours each; longer interviews divided into two sessions.

<sup>18</sup> Connors' study with six working class Irish women in their nineties lasted two years, from March 1983 to March 1985. She tape recorded interviews with five of the women but does not give the number or length of these "informal unstructured, conversational interviews (46).

<sup>19</sup> The meaning of the word "Yankee" is discussed at the beginning of the next chapter, Chapter Three.



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<sup>20</sup> I have to thank Carolyn G. Heilbrun for this notion of liminality being a “lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs” and “poised upon uncertain ground.” (See *Women’s Lives, A View From the Threshold*, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999, page 3).

<sup>21</sup> We missed two trips in 2005 due to a family emergency discussed below.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Stewart Living Show 8021 October 10, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> *All Over the Map, Rethinking American Regions* by Edward L. Ayers and colleagues; *Natural States, The Environmental Imagination in Maine, Oregon and the Nation* by Judd and Beach; *Imagining New England* by Joseph Conforti; Feintuch and Watters’ *The Encyclopedia of New England* and the excellent article by New England Americanist Ardis Cameron, “When Strangers Bring Cameras: The Poetics and Politics of Othered Places,” in *American Quarterly*, September 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs; New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs* edited by June Howard; and when recovering from surgery or in need of relaxation reading I read mysteries by contemporary authors that are set in New England states, like those by J. S. Borthwick that are set in a fictional town that is really Thomaston, Maine where one of our project colleagues lives or the “Home Repair Homicide” mysteries of Sarah Graves, set in northern coastal Maine..

<sup>25</sup> *The Catholic Counter-Culture in America, 1933-1962* by James Terrence Fisher; *Catholic Girlhood Narratives, The Church and Self-Denial* by Elizabeth N. Evasdaughter; *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy.

<sup>26</sup> I should probably note that, although I use material that talks about “feminist researchers,” I do not label myself as such. I eschew being so tagged and consider myself a woman doing research on women. Perhaps that will change as I interact with more scholars.

<sup>27</sup> James Clifford quotes this from a comment made by Rosaldo at a conference in 1994. Clifford, “Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology” in Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, Chapter 10, footnote 2.

<sup>28</sup> Perhaps due to a familiarity with Myerhoff’s efforts to simulate being old, to my dismay, some school children, under the guise of teaching them to be sensitive to the needs of the elderly, are made to don eyeglasses that simulate vision problems, special gloves that are supposed to simulate arthritic stiffness of the hands, and then told to pick up coins off the floor, and made to spend an entire class period walking with dried macaroni in the shoes to “simulate painful foot problems many seniors endure” (4) from “Senior Moments” in *Frederick Senior*, March 2003. Besides perpetuating the decline narrative of old age, I can imagine at least some children winding up with this experiment have the opposite of the intended effect!

<sup>29</sup> In *Lives, An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (1981) Langness and Frank talk about the subject of *Venus on Wheels* as “Diane Fields,” and they discuss her insistence on her real name being used (127). In *Venus* the subject is called “Diane DeVries,” the subject having married Jim DeVries.

<sup>30</sup> Azarian’s work hangs in some small galleries, and she has been awarded the Caldecott Medal, and her work has been featured on Martha Stewart Living, but her work is still unknown to many. Bethune’s huge oeuvre from her magnificent huge mosaic in The Cathedral of St. Paul in Minnesota, to the Iwo Jima Memorial, is best known only within the Catholic world.

<sup>31</sup> Stoughton xii; Maynard 12.

<sup>32</sup> College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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<sup>33</sup> “Gender and life satisfaction in retirement: An assessment of the male model” in *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 51B 1996, S18-S29.

## CHAPTER THREE: AN IRISH YANKEE

Women in mid-20th-century America had to create a positive existence out of circumstances that didn't always make it easy.  
Marilynne Robinson<sup>1</sup>

### The Wedding

One might well wonder about the relevance of W. E. B Du Bois' widely quoted statement, "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line,"<sup>2</sup> to the wedding of a white girl in New Jersey in the fifties. But it was. Here is a vignette.

A black limousine stops curbside in front of the three storey brown-shingled Victorian on quiet, tree-lined, Elston Road, in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. Early November, 1958, red and gold leaves blanket the sidewalk. John Everett Church, eleven generations removed from Richard Church of Plymouth, my handsome six-foot Yankee father, dead ringer for Leslie Howard in *Gone with the Wind* everyone says, leads me down the steps toward the waiting car. We're heading a few blocks away to St. Cassian Roman Catholic Church where I'm to be married to a Protestant in a ten-minute ceremony. The brevity of this sacramental ritual signals disdain; how little Catholicism values this particular marital rite that grudgingly blesses a "mixed marriage," for which hours have been spent fitting and altering the wedding dress that both my mother and her mother wore. I'm just grateful a recent change in Vatican rules allows me inside the church; something denied my Catholic mother when, in 1935, she wed my father, also a Protestant. Designed as a warning to other young Catholics, and to shame the Catholic partner, couples like my parents were married in the rectory, the house next to the church in Philadelphia where my mother's parish priest lived. In Forties Baltimore the Protestant aunt of my soon-to-be-husband had at least gotten inside the church building, exchanging

vows with a Catholic man in the storage and changing room inside the church, the sacristy, but out of sight of the sanctuary where the altar was, and the nave where the congregation was sitting; her “non-Catholic” but connected father having arranged for the sounds of the ceremony to be piped to assembled family and friends. By the Fifties, at the time of my wedding, the Mass is still in Latin, most Catholic churches still cruciform with the altar against the wall, the priest’s back to the people. Although we will get inside the nave, the shaming will continue in our being forbidden to have our brief exchange of vows in the normal way, as part of the Mass, the central act of Catholic worship. Even though the pastor, as is the custom, has extracted a promise from my fiancée to raise any children we might have, “in the Church,” we are still denied a nuptial Mass.<sup>3</sup>

For me, that bittersweet day comes to symbolize an intersection in my life of race, gender, class, ethnicity, politics, and religion in Fifties America. It is revelatory of then American Roman Catholic values and customs, of the then American white mainstream cultural attitudes towards blacks, class differences, women, political parties, Protestant Catholic relations, and my family’s ethnic inheritance, a Yankee Irish American mix. Although shaped or altered during my adult years, all the above influences are in my backpack as I travel into old age. Painting this ethnographic self-portrait, this self-ethnography, I’m acknowledging that my particular combination of cultural traditions is inextricably part of my ethnographic gaze as I pursue this expedition, seeing and “knowing others through oneself” as Myerhoff would say (1978/1980 18).

On the short drive to the ceremony my father looks over at me. “Well, at least he’s not black!” he intones grudgingly.<sup>4</sup> His unhappiness is palpable. It stems from the fact that my fiancée, a Johns Hopkins educated mechanical engineer,<sup>5</sup> is a “government

worker” employed in an Army research lab. On that November day more than fifty years ago, my Yankee Wasp Republican father, who judged all people who worked for the government as lazy, and my Church, are tolerating, but not endorsing, much less celebrating, my behavior.

As I was growing up my Irish-Catholic mother too often told the story of the wedding reception my Yankee paternal grandparents arranged in Providence, Rhode Island after her rectory marriage in Philadelphia that they didn’t attend. I’m sure my grandmother, Mae Mills Church, assumed that my slim, beautiful mother was pregnant with me and she was right. To even be friends with a Catholic in the Yankee Congregational circles my paternal grandparents traveled in was unthinkable. And like typical Wasps then, they were steeped in family ancestry (Feintuch and Watters 686).<sup>6</sup> To have your son, an only child, a graduate of Wesleyan, whose grandfather Church was Phillips Andover 1868, Amherst A.B. and A.M., whose uncle George Dudley Church, president and headmaster of a prestigious Maine prep school was *Who’s Who in New England*, as well as *in America*, with an honorary degree from Brown, descendants all of Richard Church of Plymouth, related to Rhode Island’s Captain Benjamin Church, famed leader of the colonists in King Philip’s War,<sup>7</sup> marry a freckle-faced impoverished Irish Roman Catholic, and in what looked suspiciously like a shotgun wedding situation, was an abomination! According to my mother’s oft-repeated scenario, in the midst of the crowded reception my grandmother hissed, “I wish you were black so everyone could see what’s wrong with you.” Things obviously weren’t much better 23 years later when I married, apropos my father’s remark.

Worse for me, that day I lost the friendship of three people I cared about. Even though my fiancée and I were paying for part of the reception, something embarrassing to my mother, considered wonderful, and necessary, by my father, my parents refused a wedding invitation to my black Jamaican senior year college suitemate. And the white working-class couple, from whom I rented a room in my first year of graduate school, could attend the wedding but not the reception, so they of course didn't come.<sup>8</sup> Thinking back I wonder once again why I didn't just elope and have whomever I wanted at my wedding. I suppose partly it's because I felt sorry for my mother. She'd been looking forward to the nuptials of her only daughter when she would show off to all the relatives her "scholarship girl" who was making a good marriage. Proud of the house and neighborhood where she lived, but bored to tears and feeling overworked with four kids and no money, remembering her affluent childhood with live-in Irish servants, she had enjoyed few happy moments in her married life. Some, after many commentators on the Fifties, would say I acquiesced because I was typically speechless and conformist, characteristic of our "Silent" generation.<sup>9</sup> I would point to all the Catholic enculturation about obedience. I was torn between my parents and my friend Jeanne. Were the Yankee relatives to see her in the wedding congregation, they would most certainly have walked out, and my father would have been disinherited – a threat that hung like a pall over our family life the whole time I was growing up and beyond. My grandfather lived into his ninety-ninth year! My parents had a long wait during which they were on their best behavior whenever around my father's Yankee relatives.

My fiancé also felt stymied. John reminds me now that his grandfather would also have walked out. Baltimore in the Fifties was segregated, and for Granddad John Elmer,

blacks were servants, just as my New England grandparents considered the Irish as servants. Granddad Elmer had a black gardener, a black cook, “Little Lillian,” who also did housework, and Hattie, a black woman who did the wash, who also did the laundry for years for my fiancé’s family. Granddad was publisher of a Hearst paper, *The Baltimore News Post*, when William Randolph Hearst asked him to move further south, to Atlanta, to take over a newspaper there. Granddad refused, left Hearst’s Baltimore paper, and purchased a radio station that at the time I was married was the Baltimore CBS affiliate, WCBM. He became president of the National Association of Broadcasters and was on the board of BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated) rival to the older ASCAP. My virtual father-in-law, John’s father having been killed by a drunk driver when John was in college, Granddad was a mover and shaker in Baltimore. I grew to love him but would not have wanted to cross him, nor would my soon-to-be-husband.<sup>10</sup>

Despite my friendship with Jeanne, I was “blissfully” unaware of segregation or the experience of American blacks. Jeanne, with her “cultured” British accent, the kind of black that bell hooks encountered at Stanford and called “elite” (2000 35), was the only black in my Philadelphia Catholic women’s college, and in 1956-57 she and her Italian American roommate, and I with my Latina roommate, shared one of the only four suites in the college. Sociologist Wini Breines, like me, a white adolescent in the Fifties, although six years younger,<sup>11</sup> notes that “middle-class white girls [in the Fifties] had little opportunity to know black people” (19). About twenty years ago Breines began studying the environment of white, middle-class American girls born during or near World War II “to discover among them any signs of cultural discontent and resistance” (xi). (A lonely pursuit, she says, as most scholars were studying those who were marginalized.) She

wondered how the Fifties culture that “constricted our minds and spirits” could have produced “a sector of my generation” that “rejected or at least distanced ourselves from the traditional feminine lives that were so resolutely set out for us” (xi). She built her study on sociological research, letters, autobiographies, fiction, and ethnographic work, interviewing some women who were also adolescents when we were.<sup>12</sup> Breines included reflections on her own life in the study, calling it a “sociological memoir,” entitling it *Young, White, and Miserable, Growing Up Female in the Fifties*. It seems Breines didn’t have to contend with the added weight and constriction of growing up Catholic as I did. She’s in wonderment she made it from being a Fifties Long Island cheer leader to academic sociology. For my part, though I can see now that in my adult life what I said in my teaching, writing and speaking as an independent religious studies scholar within the tent of Catholicism was resistance of a sort to the Fifties culture that shaped me, and to some elements of the conservative, European-style Catholicism<sup>13</sup> I had absorbed from convent schooling in my girlhood, I am in wonderment that it took so long, until I was almost sixty-three, to get to an academic world that is outside that tent.<sup>14</sup>

#### Reading for Context

Working on this self-ethnography, material on the Fifties helped inform my exploration of generational and Yankee identity. Mary Cantwell, an editor with *The New York Times*, five years older than I, grew up Catholic in Bristol, Rhode Island surrounded by inhospitable Yankees, including many Churches from my family tree. Her recollections provided context for my memories of feeling less than welcome among cousins and aunts during otherwise wonderful summer months spent with my Rhode Island Yankee grandparents. To be Irish was to be second-class, rightly reckoned



Cantwell's mother (12). As a child it hadn't dawned on me I was part Irish and in Wasp country, with my freckled face marking me as Irish. And I was Catholic, with a touch of triumphalism instilled by the nuns. As I look back, this was probably good protection. Instead of feeling crushed with hurt, I took some pride in my martyrdom! But the experience was painful none the less. Cantwell described her town at the time of her birth in 1930:

By the time I began my journey toward Lying-In Hospital the town had Congregationalists, Episcopalians High and Low, Baptists, three varieties of Catholics, Holy Rollers, a flock of Benjamin Church descendants, rich and poor and in between, summer people and locals, teetotalers and drunks and peculiars and – oh Lord! – what wasn't there among the 11,000 folk who made up Bristol! (20)

My paternal grandmother, born Mae Olive Mills, her father hailing from Todmorden, England by way of Chicago, grew up in a townhouse in Bristol, spending summers on the family farm in South County, Rhode Island, and winters in their home in Puerto Rico. She, whom we called Grama, married one of the many Churches who populated Bristol and Little Compton. Cantwell remembers the Bristol neighbors of her childhood. One was famous for her baked beans, another for her angel food cakes, and “old Mrs. Church was for not letting people enter her house by the front door until they were eighteen years old” (174). She may well have been talking about my Episcopalian paternal great-grandmother, Grama's mother-in-law.<sup>15</sup> I have her sterling bread basket and *Book of Common Prayer*.

Two writers with New York childhoods, Anne Roiphe on Park Avenue, and Vivian Gornick, in the Bronx, both born the same year I was, wrote memoirs that helped me contextualize our shared Forties and Fifties circumstances, as did Judith Paterson with her Alabama memoir. Other personal narratives by women in my age cohort also assisted

my cultural introspection.<sup>16</sup> Gail Sheehy (b. 1937), writes about us “Silents” in *New Passages, Mapping Your Life Across Time* and books based on interviews and research by other contemporaries are: *The Fifties, A Woman’s Oral History* by journalist Brett Harvey (b. 1936) and *Private Lives, Men and Women of the Fifties* by Benita Eisler (b. 1937), a literary biographer, who has taught literature at Princeton.<sup>17</sup> Nancy Mairs (b. 1943), nearly eight years younger than I, nudged my introspective examination with her eight books of essays and memoir. We share a passionate connection to New England where we lived as young children, and to our Yankee roots.<sup>18</sup> In her essays Mairs often alludes to her Yankee characteristics and Yankee grandmother. She knows the vocabulary: in Maine a milkshake is a “frappe” but “in Providence, Rhode Island they’re called ‘cabinets.’” (1989/1995 32). We share a connection and affection for the Catholic Worker movement, and although we live that spirituality in quite different ways, we try to practice the works of mercy as best we can. Lastly, Mairs is crippled [her word] with MS, and her reflections on living with this disabling illness have applications for living in the world of the frail and not so frail elderly,<sup>19</sup> a connection she makes and that has yet to be fully explored.

Back to my wedding, I had hoped my friend Jeanne would empathize with my dilemma, understanding why I was giving in to parental pressure, but I should have known better. Jeanne, being Jeanne, was so angry she never spoke to me again. It was an explosion like the one that happened two years earlier when we were still in college. In 1956 we were riding public transportation to downtown Philly to spend a Saturday with underprivileged children. Jeanne looked up and saw a public service sign promoting “racial tolerance.” She deconstructed what the word “tolerance” meant, how it was being

used and what it signified. “Why do Americans have to be exhorted to tolerate me?” she demanded. Good question.

### Class – A Race Horse – Not a Plough Horse

“There is an un-American secret at the heart of American culture: for a long time, it was preoccupied by class,” wrote Charles McGrath in a series of articles on class that *The New York Times* published in 2005, collected into the book *Class Matters* (193).

Another article suggested that a difficulty talking about “class” was that the word means different things to different people:

Class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste. It is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money. It is an accident of birth that can influence the outcome of a life. Some Americans barely notice it; others feel its weight in powerful ways. (Scott and Leonhardt 8)

“Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand,” writes bell hooks reflecting on her journey from working class to upper middle class in *Where We Stand, Class Matters* (vii). I grew up multicultural amidst vocabulary, values and customs of several Forties and Fifties American and Catholic class systems; worlds, situated somewhere between the “lower uppers” as Matt Miller (2006)<sup>20</sup> now calls the lower upper class, and the middle class.

Maybe the Catholic Church was telling me something other than the obvious when it frowned on mixed marriages. Maybe it, or she, she is called “Mother Church,” which of course, since I was “Miss Church,” led to many poor jokes by bishops I met, maybe I was being warned that I could wind up, as I did, straddling such different cultural worlds, I’d have to be constantly on the alert for subtle social cues and points of etiquette. There was the Philadelphia Catholic world where, except for the three years in

Seattle they lived with us, Dearie and Jinks lived in an elegant apartment with doorman, near Rittenhouse Square. They were devoutly Catholic and kind, Jinks subsisting mostly on chestnut paste, camembert, and coffee with saccharine tablets from the tony gourmet Spruce Market across the street where you put your food “on account.” They lived in faded elegance among old furniture, paintings, and artifacts rescued from headier days when they appeared in the social pages of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. There was the world of home, the style of the “genteel poor,” as my parents thought of themselves, but it wasn’t quite, and the ordered, reliable home of my Yankee Rhode Island grandparents.

Class distinctions were something I sensed growing up but for which I had no language. Like writer Mary McCarthy I was schooled some of the time in single sex upper class private Catholic convent schools in small classes (one of seven students all through high school) where we were “young ladies” learning rhetoric and French, and how to curtsy properly to the nuns. Other times I endured overcrowded classrooms (in 8th grade we had 48) in Catholic parochial co-ed parish schools with a high working class Polish and Italian immigrant population, where we were “girls” sitting next to boys as we read about Dick and Jane, and were sometimes subjected to physical punishment, outstretched palms being smacked with a ruler when the nun teacher was overtired. I learned to adapt to whatever cultural world I found myself in at the moment. As preoccupied with class as she was, my mother had difficulty seeing what Edith Wharton wrote about in her turn of the 19th century class novels, that “in America new money very quickly, in a generation or less, takes on the patina of old” (McGrath 196). My mother didn’t seem to apprehend that she herself had been a product of new money and was treading water waiting to inherit old money. Incredibly, when I was in labor with my

first child for more than 24 hours, pacing the hospital corridor she shouted to the doctor struggling with forceps, “Remember, she’s a race horse, not a plow horse.” Breeding mattered!

Reading memoirs of other women in my cohort I found no mother like mine with similar notions of class until I encountered essayist Barbara Holland, born in 1933, two years my senior, who grew up in Chevy Chase (*When All the World Was Young* 2005). Her mother valued “brains and breeding.” And the “right sort of people” had “small ears set close to the head” (41). As an infant, my ears stuck out too much to suit my mother. Pictures of me beginning from birth on show me in a bonnet that tied under the chin that I was still wearing even at age two, to train my ears to stay flat. Carol Buckley, the late William F. Buckley’s little sister, writes about a mother somewhat like mine and Holland’s. When placing her mother, then elderly and suffering from mild dementia, in a care facility, Buckley worried: “Will she tell a board member that his ears stick out?” (215). Breeding mattered; I was a race horse, not a plow horse and my mother was determined that I be a “lady.” Comic books were for children of the unenlightened, chewing gum was out, and soup was spooned from the far side of the bowl and quietly, never slurped. Although desperate to play the violin, picking out melodies by ear whenever I encountered one, my mother’s view was that young ladies did not look graceful bowing a violin and should stick to the harp or the piano.

My parents’ upper class pretensions are understandable but rested on rickety foundations. My mother’s father, Henry James Crowley, born in Connecticut in 1865, whose parents, Robert and Ann Crowley, were born in Ireland, grew up with many siblings on May Blossom Farm, in Avon, Connecticut, which census records show the

family owned from 1850 until 1900 and beyond. After high school, my grandfather served a mechanical engineering apprenticeship at Pratt and Whitney in Hartford, over time winding up a wealthy Catholic Republican in Philadelphia, noted in *Who's Who in America 1922-23*, *Who's Who in Engineering* and *The Story of Electricity* (Martin and Coles).<sup>21</sup> As General Manager for American Electric Power Company he oversaw installation of trolley car systems, “electric railways,” in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Richmond and was in charge of engineering, construction and operation of 30 electric railway, electric light, and gas companies in twelve states. A Fellow of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, he supported the arts and belonged to exclusive clubs that didn't exclude Catholics. He lived in a large home near the University of Pennsylvania, still standing at 4339 Pine Street, providing my mother with an affluent Catholic childhood.<sup>22</sup>

My mother and her two older sisters spent their elementary and high school years boarding together in their own suite at the Catholic Holy Child convent school at Sharon, a Philadelphia suburb. I grew up enjoying her tales of the three making toothpaste sodas after lights out, hiding cans of sardines under their middy blouses, and about the portrait of Tennyson's Lily Maid of Astolat floating down a river, scantily clothed, that hung in their bedroom, and that a nun hung a towel over every night before they went to bed. Throughout the world, and in America, for upscale Catholics, Jesuit and Benedictine prep schools for boys and French Sacred Heart and British Holy Child convent boarding schools for girls was Catholicism's answer to English “public” schools for boys like Eton and Harrow,<sup>23</sup> and New England elite boarding schools for boys like Phillips Andover and Exeter, and Miss Porter's for girls. Summers found my mother and her two older

sisters, “the Crowley girls,” living for the entire season at one of three Catholic camps for girls: Jeanne d’Arc in the Adirondacks, that still exists and where I served as a CIT (Counselor in Training) in the summer of 1953; On-ti-Ora in the Catskills, where I worked for two summers, and Tekakwitha in the Poconos.

My mother, the youngest of four children, two sisters and a brother, was a teen when her father died of a stroke in his 59th year in 1924. Up to that time the family included a live-in Irish cook and Irish maid; interesting because this grandfather I never knew buried his Irish roots, barring any contact between his Philadelphia children and his Connecticut birth family. I’ve found clues to indicate this was most likely a reaction to his experience of paternal drunkenness of the kind eloquently described by Frank McCourt (1996) and Joe Queenan (2009). A story my mother infrequently told based on family hearsay: one winter day, her Irish grandfather, Robert Crowley, while “three sheets to the wind,” bet a neighbor that he could drive his team of horses across the nearby Farmington River while it was iced over. Unfortunately, he lost the bet, fell through the ice, and drowned. While working on this project I found little about my Irish forebears, but did confirm through Connecticut newspaper archives that Robert Crowley drowned in the Farmington River, February 11, 1888 at age 61.

One twist in our family tree, religious multiculturalism, branches from my maternal Irish grandmother Dearie, Serena Ford Crowley. Her paternal grandfather, Jesse Ford, is a figure in American Methodist history as a circuit rider. I have his license to preach from St. George’s Chapel in Philadelphia dated 1833, the apothecary scales he carried on his route riding horseback, and his obituary from 1863 published in the *New York Christian Advocate*.<sup>24</sup> Correspondence from him to the Chapel is kept in the St.

George's museum in Philadelphia. The family story Dearie passed down from her mother was how Jesse Ford would be away from home for months at a time preaching the gospel and wasn't there when his son, my great grandfather, was born. On coming home, Jesse bent down over his little infant son, grasped his tiny fist, shook it, and said: "How does thee do James?"

I realize as I write this I'm hooked into the Yankee tradition of interest in family stories and lineage. I spoke on ecumenism at a conference of Methodists in Great Falls, Montana some years ago introduced as Jesse Ford's great great-granddaughter, and as one who had a Catholic maternal grandmother, a Catholic mother, a father christened into the Congregational Church by Congregational parents, his paternal great-grandmother Church being a devout Episcopalian. I held up her tiny copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* in one hand and my great-grandfather's Methodist Episcopal preaching license in the other. It was the seventies then, the age of "living-room dialogues, considered avant-garde at the time."<sup>25</sup>

### The Hepplewhite Chairs

Before and after she was widowed my grandmother Dearie and my mother and her siblings were frequently covered in the Main Line social column of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Pasted in my baby book are clippings with photos of my mother's two older sisters at a Davis Cup tennis match and vacationing at Atlantic City, and my mother and sisters are shown participating in various Philadelphia charity events. In a gossip section the *Inquirer* reported that one of Dearie's friends borrowed a volume from a set of encyclopedias. When after several entreaties the friend neglected to return the book, my grandmother strapped together the other nineteen volumes leaving them on the friend's



porch with the note: “One of us might as well have the complete set!” The fact that these society news clippings were pasted in my baby book alongside hair from my first hair cut and notes about taking my first steps, shows my baby book was also my mother’s memory book; perhaps signifying too her upper crust hopes for me.

Dearie, after she was widowed, so the story goes, like one of those old silent movie plots, made some bad financial moves counseled by her husband’s former business partner with whom she fell in love; she eventually lost much of the family money as well as the prospective suitor. The Hepplewhite dining room chairs were sold to Henry du Pont for Winterthur. Among family papers I found photos of those chairs taken just before they were shipped to Delaware. Dearie eventually allowed a few of the rooms in her large house to be rented by Penn graduate students where her son, my uncle Bob, was in the school of architecture.

#### “Our Charming Johnnie”

Like my mother, my father had a privileged but unconventional childhood. His mother’s hobby was photography and travel and Grama took my father and one of his friends, as a companion, out of school for months at a time, to travel in Europe or to drive across America in her Woodie to camp in various national parks. I have some of her films and one of her travel diaries. Meanwhile my Yankee grandfather stayed home while Grama traveled, working in the bank, playing golf every afternoon, and charming many lady friends.<sup>26</sup> My father took after him, his high school yearbook noting him as playing the ukulele, singing in the glee club, captaining the tennis team, and describing him as “our charming Johnnie;” the same activities, plus squash, mentioned in his Wesleyan

college yearbook. And like Christopher Buckley, *Steaming to Bamboola*, my father took off on a freighter for months trying to figure out what he wanted to do with himself.

When in their twenties and thirties, my parents resembled F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald in some ways. They were charming, good-looking, great dancers, drinkers, and immature. They both “lived among their family portraits with perfect assurance of inborn worth” as theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, my age cohort, once described her father’s progressively impoverished relatives living on their family estate (35). In their forties, while my mother chain smoked and sat midst the breakfast debris sipping Pepsi, listening to intelligent chatter on the radio, Dorothy Kilgallen’s breakfast program [*Breakfast with Dorothy and Dick*, beginning in 1945] that reviewed New York plays and books, my father played at working, making a minimal salary in sales with P&G. We finally stopped wandering when my father moved partway up the corporate ladder, and was assigned to an office in Manhattan. We then moved to Upper Montclair, my parents having decided we would either live there, or in Chappaqua, where the Clintons now live, and where we almost bought a house with a crumbling tennis court. Keeping up appearances and the mystique, every morning my father strode down our front steps to walk to the train, wearing his perfectly brushed gray felt Homburg, popularized by Edward VII, dressed in a sartorially perfect business suit and topcoat, and we children were gathered at the open door with my mother to wave him off.

#### Turn the Venetian Blind

My mother considered housework beneath her, doing as little as possible while writing light verse about the miserable lot of the housewife and overworked mother, which verse she tried unsuccessfully to sell. I have one of her rejection slips.

“Conversation”

You were patient oil burner man  
Dropping those tools and priming can  
Explaining cheerfully each small  
In kindly tones that touched my heart.

The burner still remaineth Greek  
Yet your courtesy did bespeak  
Knighthood once again in flower  
Now I know – you work by the hour!

“Magic”

Futile it be disturbing dust  
But some folks spy the furry crust  
A solution, neat, I did find  
Simply turn the venetian blind.

Kathleen Crowley Church

Light verse was in fashion in the Fifties. Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978), five years older than my mother, published nine collections of light verse, children’s books, and four books of essays, some on lives of Catholic saints, extolling the life of the housewife; her writing considered wholesome. Touted in the Catholic press as the model Catholic woman, honored by Notre Dame with their Laetare Medal,<sup>27</sup> McGinley won a Pulitzer for Poetry and made the cover of *Time*. Photos show her looking sophisticated with cigarette in hand, like many women then. McGinley was a model for my mother; like her she loved writing mainly humorous verse, she smoked, she was Irish, and she was a Catholic. While middle class family sitcoms like *Life With Father* and *Father Knows Best*,<sup>28</sup> designed to sell cigarettes and detergents for washing machines, spun a version of American married life on the first television set we acquired when I was 14, McGinley’s happy housewife tales carried American Catholic cultural expectations for

married woman to even more unattainable heights. Friedan's "problem that has no name" was a double burden for Catholic women.

### Yankee Legacy

My father disliked paid work, his salaried position with P&G, but like a typical industrious Yankee he always kept busy working at something, usually various projects around the house like building bookcases, teaching himself to cane chairs for which project he soaked reeds in the bathtub, working in a vegetable garden or playing tennis. In his memoir, *Cheerful Money, Me, My Family, and the Last Days of Wasp Splendor* (2009) Tad Friend comments: "Wasps have a horror of being at loose ends, believing you could at least be doing needlepoint (227)."<sup>29</sup> My father exhibited typical Yankee characteristics. He was always reticent, reticence being something essayist Nancy Mairs sees in herself (1996 84). She also notes other Yankee "conventions" applicable to my father including "thrift, diligence, restraint, discretion, modesty, a cheerful though undemonstrative disposition, and, as soon as we're old enough, a vote for the Republican ticket" (1989/1995 17). According to the recent *Encyclopedia of New England* (2005), Yankees, residents of the six northeast states, still exhibit characteristics of "frugality, resourcefulness, industriousness, self-reliance, tenaciousness, and neighborliness" (813).

When I was fifteen, saying it was to instill a work ethic and teach me thrift, when I needed extensive dental work done as a result of a 2nd grade school accident, my frugal and house-poor father took me to the local Upper Montclair bank to take out a loan for the \$325 dental bill. (I remember to this day the startled expression of the loan officer.) My father cosigned it and, obtaining an underage job permit, I located through *The Newark News*, a summer job at 75 cents an hour cleaning out files for a credit agency so I

could begin to repay the bank loan. Refusing to let me work unless I gave her some of my meager salary for a weekly maid, I acquiesced to my mother's demand. It wasn't so much she was going to miss my being around to do chores, it was so that for at least several months she could have a more proper Upper Montclair housewife image like the one in the recent 2002 film *Far From Heaven* set in the 1950s where the black maid, Sybil, arrives at the lovely New England home to do child care and clean. In coming of age novels of the Fifties mothers are portrayed as "discontented, frustrated and controlling" (Breines 78). The recently published memoir, *Not Becoming My Mother* (2009), her third, by the editor of the recently defunct *Gourmet* magazine, Ruth Reichl, depicts her mother, two years older than mine, as just as unhappy and unfulfilled as mine, and Reichl observes that this misery was hard on families.<sup>30</sup> Reading hooks, born in 1952, I found another interpretation of my mother's control over money I made. Hooks' father controlled the family money, as my father did, her father was not generous, mine was parsimonious. "In relation to her children our mother duplicated the manipulative use of money that our father used in relation to her" writes hooks (2000 53).

Working in the local library during the school year on Saturdays, and doing secretarial work in the personnel department in a nearby hospital, it took several years to pay off my bank loan and by then I was saving money for clothes for college. For three summers subsequent to my Newark file clerk job I was unable to make money. Although I worked as a camp counselor, teaching fencing and drama, my mother, without my knowledge or consent, prearranged for my brothers to attend the companion boys' camp with tuition waived in lieu of my salary. Reichel's mother too made the same kind of major decisions for Ruth behind her back; sending her off to a Canadian boarding school,

and then to counsel in a summer camp in France, all without prior discussion and expecting to be obeyed (1998 89) and she was. From my father and his New England family I inherited resilience and absorbed resourcefulness, self-reliance, industriousness and cheerfulness, the first three subsumed under the Yankee quality my grandmother called “gumption.” But unlike my Yankee relatives, my cheerfulness wound up being demonstrative, more like my mother’s Irish side of the family, and I am not reticent like typical Yankees. Two vignettes, one from the Forties, one from the Fifties, give a picture of class as I experienced it growing up.

### The Dance

Keeping up appearances was de rigueur for the Fifties (Breines 1) but putting up a front, preserving a facade, was my parents’ modus operandi anyway, even in the Forties. Here are two vignettes, the first, illustrative of my parents’ class strivings as they tried to hang on to a place on the ladder they had experienced as children. The latter reveals my struggle with the trappings of “refined” culture. It is October 1941 and I’m in a cornfield in Portland, Oregon with my parents, my baby brother Peter dozing in the back seat of our P&G company car parked nearby. My father has snapped leather covers over the circular man in the moon P&G logo that’s painted on the doors of both sides of the two-door auto. My parents, mortified they have no money to own a car, the benefit of having the company car that came with my father’s job has turned out to be a mixed blessing as they think it makes him look like a tradesman. The covers are for use on parkways like the Schuylkill Parkway outside Philadelphia that forbids commercial vehicles. However, unless he is travelling on the job, my father uses the covers most of the time until P&G takes the logos off in the early Fifties.

I am helping my parents collect lots of tan and gold corn stalks that my father loads in the car trunk tying the lid because the stalks are long and hang out. Once home in the large gracious house in the historic Irvington section of Portland we are renting this year, my parents gather the stalks, tying them into big shocks. Opening the pocket doors separating the dining and living rooms exposes a vast expanse of wood floor, turning these two large spaces into a ballroom, the shocks are arranged around the walls. Having joined the Multnomah Club, dues for a club membership provided by my Yankee grandparents as the yearly Christmas present, we now ski on Mount Hood and I have my own skis. My parents invite other attractive couples from the Club to their Halloween dance which is a great success and people exclaim at the clever decorations. Everyone assumes our sofas, chairs and tables are in storage thus emptying out the rooms for dancing. Of course the truth is, we have no furniture in either of those rooms. The little furniture we do have is in the kitchen and upstairs in the few of many bedrooms up there that we are using.

#### Lacordaire Academy Library

Beginning formal education in Mrs. Kloeber's Nursery School in Newburyport, Massachusetts one month shy of three years old in 1938, I attended kindergarten at Thorndyke Model School, a public elementary school in Worcester two years later. While there in 1941 our class was IQ tested. Someone from school visited my parents to bring a record of my results, telling them I was gifted. With a lot of chutzpah my mother was to use that piece of paper to wangle a scholarship for me at three private Catholic convent schools in three different states. In 1949 at the third, Lacordaire Academy in Upper Montclair, about to enter ninth grade, I was placed in the library and given a test after my

mother's visit to the nun headmistress, making a case the school would be fortunate to have me as a student! In the 1940s nuns in convent schools expect a particular kind of deportment and vocabulary from young ladies; parochial parish school nuns have no such expectations. I'm torn because I've been brought up, my mother's rules, and the convent school nuns, that a lady never calls anyone fat. A person can be stocky, or healthy, or hearty, or wholesome looking, never fat. The Lacordaire scholarship exam includes a list of vocabulary words one of which is "corpulent." Sitting there at that heavy oak table I know to match it with the word "fat," but wrestle with how it will reflect on me or my family if I reveal I know the definition. (This from one who has happily worked her way through Dickens before finishing seventh grade and is now reading *War and Peace* with a flashlight at night under the covers because my father insists my lamp be out at nine.) I can see myself now, hunched over the test in that dark-paneled library smelling of furniture polish and old books, knowing I have easily and correctly answered every other question. That struggle is a good metaphor for my experience negotiating class among various orders of Catholic nuns in two very separate Catholic school systems, and my experience of the Fifties, with one of its defining characteristics being keeping up appearances. Project colleague, Adé Bethune, introduced in the next chapter, had a similar experience, at the same age. At 13 sent to board at a Belgian Catholic convent school her mother had attended thirty years before, her mother warned the food wouldn't be as good as what she had at home, but if she complained it would reflect poorly on the family. "Even when I didn't like the food, I ate it because I didn't want to cast any aspersion on my family" (Stoughton 21). Knowing this was a convent school, desperate for the superior education I knew a convent school would provide, I wound up purposely



giving an incorrect definition, was given the scholarship, joining in fall 1949, a freshman class with six other young women.

The class ahead of us numbered three. Lacordaire amounted to virtually four years of private tutoring during which time the nuns entered some of us in every contest imaginable, the Academy gaining favorable publicity when results were published in *The Montclair Times*. The U.N. contest awarded me a tour of the U.N., *Scholastic* magazine's writing competition published my essay. Philosopher Jacques Maritain came from Princeton to Lacordaire to award me the prize for winning his research and writing competition. A Catholic nun at a local Catholic college had kindly been giving me reduced fee piano lessons since 7th grade and each year I played before a panel of judges at the Mosque Theatre in Newark working my way up to Young Artist category. I was summer organist in the parish church and a student usher at the old Metropolitan Opera in New York. I'm immensely grateful to those wonderful women who were my teachers at Lacordaire, but regretful at the restricted lives they led, not allowed to drive, and trapped in habits so hot in warm weather that they had to slip blotting paper inside their tall Dominican headdresses; regretting also the ways they constrained our lives inside the narrow confines of Catholic novelists and Waugh's world of *Brideshead Revisited*.

Behind the façade of our Upper Montclair house, from eighth grade through college, we scraped by as to clothes and food and other expenses. Neighborhood children envied us because they enjoyed roast turkey only at Thanksgiving and Christmas. In our house it was always Thanksgiving. A thirty-pound turkey could be made to last a very long time, appearing thinly sliced in a sandwich and also as croquettes, or creamed on toast, or as turkey salad with celery, but mostly as soup; everlasting turkey soup. When I

wasn't wearing a school uniform, I was dressed in clothes from an upscale consignment shop, including evening dresses for proms. Meanwhile my little brothers, wearing white gloves, attended dancing school, gratis, because young men to partner the girls who were paying customers were always in short supply. As Tad Friend puts it, “. . . an ability to waltz and foxtrot is the Wasp's traditional ticket to inclusion” (2009 291).

### Gender

In my baby book my mother pasted a cartoon clipped from a 1940 newspaper. It depicts a baby sitting in a high chair, spilling food onto the floor. The mother is wearing an apron and washing dishes, the father in shirt, tie, vest and trousers looks on and says: “Those vegetables cost money! I can't afford an extravagant daughter and the sooner she learns that the better.” In that year, 1940, the first of my three brothers arrived.

I was not lucky enough to be born of a woman not taken in by the feminine mystique. Excited about being invited into an honors program in history for my senior year in college by historian and Hungarian émigré John Lukacs, then just beginning to publish, now the author of more than twenty-five books, my mother ruled I couldn't do honors because I had to get teaching certification. (I met with Lukacs recently and he told me following my mother's orders was a bad decision!) The nuns who ran the college didn't allow students to do both, which I could easily have done, but the nuns decreed the work too hard for us. I had gotten to college on my own on scholarship, and was twenty, but my mother or the nuns ruled my life. Like so many other mothers in the Fifties, mine insisted I prepare for teaching, “so you will have something to fall back on.” Doing this self-ethnography was freeing; misery loves company. I found I wasn't alone. Breines reported one woman wrote to Betty Friedan after reading *The Feminine Mystique*: “You

caught my...mother's goals for me, my refusal to elect the honors program I was offered, my decision to trade a senior year [at Pembroke] for a quick start in the baby business" (79). It would be years before many young women coming of age in the late Forties and early Fifties realized, as their mothers never did, that "a man is not a plan."

Painfully I experienced in my relations with my mother the same paradox many other young Fifties women did and that Breines nailed (35). On the one hand, my mother, not a college graduate herself, exhorted me to work hard in school and did her best to get me into superior schools up through high school. But then I was supposed to eschew college, stop all intellectual activity, get married and raise children, and until I got married I was to live at home, teach school, pay rent, and help to put my brothers through college. For those few young women fortunate enough to have had mothers who encouraged higher education, the script stopped at college graduation, especially if you were Catholic. During high school, told I wouldn't be sent to college because girls got married and didn't need higher education, but that my three younger brothers would go, I had been desperate to get a college education. A full board and tuition scholarship to college, Catholic of course, didn't fit with the parental plan for my life.

Had the assistance been necessary I'd have considered complying, but I had belatedly realized that growing up we never had much money for food or clothes (thank God for Catholic school uniforms and large turkeys) because we were always house poor. Most of my father's income went to pay rent or mortgages on the usually beautiful houses we lived in, in whatever state we lived in at the moment, as my parents tried to reduplicate the venues of their childhood. We might not have much furniture, or pairs of shoes, or toys, but we always had a view, usually in upper class environs; in Seattle

overlooking Lake Washington, in Portland, Oregon, in the historic district, windows framing a half-acre private rose garden, and now Upper Montclair, New Jersey, a sort of old Chevy Chase or Roland Park in Baltimore. I decided to move out and go to graduate school figuring it was my parents' responsibility to put my brothers through college, or my brothers could figure out how to get there as I had done. This "rebelliousness" wasn't greeted with equanimity.

### Gender and Religion

Gender and religion conspired to make higher education, especially high quality education, almost an impossibility for any American Catholic young woman who entered Catholic secondary school in 1949 as I did. Like most nuns then, and author Patricia Hampl (2007 118) notes the same, and she came along 11 years after I did, our teachers wouldn't write recommendations for us to attend "secular" colleges. I wanted to go to Radcliffe, Harvard and similar universities then excluding women, knowing it was better than any Catholic college for women. My nun teachers were scandalized. A first tier Catholic college was second best but while taking college boards in January 1953 to meet first tier Catholic college April scholarship deadlines, in the midst of the afternoon area tests at Montclair High there was an ice storm, the building lost electricity and heat, we were moved to rows near windows so we could see, and allowed to write with mittens on, but the testing was halted before we finished because it grew too cold. By the time I was able to take the boards again, only second tier Catholic college scholarships were still open and I was given board and tuition scholarships to the two I applied to.

So far, working on this self-ethnography and reading for context, learning about Ruth Reichel's mother, Barbara Holland's mother, Cantwell's description of Yankees in

Rhode Island in the Thirties and Forties, and Breines observations that I was not the only one disallowed from doing honors work in college, was revelatory. More was to come. Still reading for Fifties context I read in *Between Women* (Ascher, DeSalvo, and Ruddick 1993) some of the short memoirs by various professors about their early years, and how they came to the academy. Included there was a personal narrative by an English professor, Jane Marcus, four years my junior, a Boston native, who lied to the nuns in her high school and to her parents, got some money from an aunt, applied to Radcliffe and got in, accepted as an “experiment,” there being a Jewish quota of 40%, the “Catholic quota was measured in one figure” (385). So, reading about the cultural restrictions of those times, I was more relieved than angry. It was freeing to learn 50 years after the fact, that as a Catholic, even had my teachers cooperated, I would have had little chance of getting into Radcliffe anyway because of the Catholic quota.

### The Marriage Plot

Cultural resistance, moving out and graduate school, wasn't common for young women then, especially “good Catholic girls.” Gail Sheehy, two years younger than I am, in *New Passages, Mapping Your Life Across Time*, writes about my place as a “Silent”:

The women at the very beginning of the Silent Generation, born between 1931-35, bore a whopping average of 3.17 children. And the script for them basically ended there. . . the women who graduated from college by 20 to 24 (5.4 percent, a shockingly small percentage compared with the women in succeeding generations) went comparison shopping in their senior years for the best husband prospects. Very few went on to graduate school themselves. (30-31)

I fit the profile perfectly. Born in 1935, I graduated college at 21, married at 23, and then had Irish quadruplets. My resistance to mainstream cultural pressure, and Catholic pressure, lasted only a year after college graduation. Getting married just as my academic

career was beginning, in my second year of graduate school, meant my resistance had crumbled!<sup>31</sup>

The few women I saw at the graduate school at St. John's University were young Catholic nuns taking education courses. All the messages in mainstream culture read that I was approaching twenty-two, almost beyond the time I could attract a man. I was in danger of being maritally retarded. Breines writes that among white women in college in the Fifties, two out of three dropped out before graduation. "To remain single or pursue a profession . . . was to be considered deviant and marginalized" (50). Singleness was at an all-time low in the twentieth century she concludes.

In my second semester of graduate studies I was in love but conflicted. There was something about marriage as construed in Fifties America that felt like captivity, especially the Catholic version. "Marriage and the Family" was a required course taught senior year in my Catholic college. The Fifties Catholic Church, with its rules about sexuality and marriage, and every marital act having to be open to the possibility of conception, seemed dehumanizing. And with the wedding ceremony inside St. Cassian Church I lost my name. I'd never heard of Lucy Stone and the Lucy Stone League, dedicated to educating women about the choice they have to retain their birth name and resist social pressure. Losing your name because you were the female half of the marital equation was like becoming a prisoner and being given a number. Not only was I losing control over my body, I was losing my identity, my individuality, and my link to Yankee roots.

Novelist Katie Roiphe (b. 1968),<sup>32</sup> writing in *Slate* in 2004, echoes my sentiments: "If you change your name to your husband's, how are you connected to your

ancestors in the shtetl, or the potato famine, or the decks of the Mayflower?” Exactly. Richard Warren, a signer of The Mayflower Compact, came over on the Mayflower, one of his daughters marrying my many greats back grandfather, Richard Church of Plymouth. To many, a connection to your ancestors is irrelevant. To some others like me, it is meaningful. It was with my Church grandparents in New England, despite their disdain for Catholics and the Irish, that I felt rooted and secure.<sup>33</sup>

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anna Quindlen (b. 1952) wrote in her *New York Times* column about her decision to keep her name:

This is the story about a name. The name is mine. I was given it at birth, and I have never changed it, although I married. I could come up with lots of reasons why. It was a political decision, a simple statement that I was somebody and not an adjunct of anybody, especially a husband. As a friend of mine told her horrified mother, “He didn’t adopt me, he married me”. . . Damn if I was going to be hidden beneath the umbrella of his identity. (34-36)

When a nurse in a hospital uses her husband’s surname, and inquires of her, “Mrs. Krovatin?” Quindlen replies, “No, this is Mr. Krovatin’s wife.”

In one of the seminars I took with Judith Paterson, she assigned Adrienne Rich’s essay “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity.” I turned to this again when I reached this point in culturally examining my life. Six years older than I am, Rich was half Jewish and had gotten in to Radcliffe. She had three sons before she was thirty and found herself “in the predominantly gentile academic world of Cambridge, Massachusetts,” describing herself as “Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, Yankee nor Rebel” (640). Feeling split at the root in early childhood I had opted for the Yankee identity. In this essay what hit me was Rich’s observation that in the Fifties getting married was the only way we knew to disconnect from our first family (649). That was another revelatory moment. I realized she was right. I had partially disconnected by

moving out, but I hadn't moved on. And where could I have gone in a culture that stigmatized single women as deviant, and a Catholic culture that was pressing me to fulfill my vocation as a woman: to marry and bear children while bearing in mind that the husband is the head of the family while the wife is the heart!

In my experience of the Fifties, American mainstream cultural attitudes towards women often were conflated with Catholic gender positions. The few nuns I encountered in graduate school looked askance at my presence, especially in my second year when I was married and quite visibly pregnant. When I tried on a gown for my M.A. graduation a nun looked at my pregnant belly that was pushing out the folds of the black robe and exclaimed: "You're not graduating looking like that are you?" And I didn't. I had the diploma mailed. While researching the Fifties for this self-ethnography, what a pleasure to encounter in memoir professor of feminist theology Rosemary Radford Ruether, one year younger than I am, reflecting back on her graduate education having met similar opposition from nuns:

One nun at a Catholic university, where I took a summer course in medieval philosophy, insisted on engaging me in counseling sessions where she enquired earnestly after 'my devotion to Mary.' I could hardly tell her that my devotion to Mary was somewhat less than my devotion to some far more powerful divine females that I knew: Isis, Athena, and Artemis! However, she horrified me in turn by exclaiming as I departed her school, that she 'was so glad I was getting married that fall,' since I 'would soon be too busy to read any more of those books.' Her image of normative marriage was evidently that of a procreative orgy, wherein the mind once possessed by the wife sank rapidly down into the diaper pail and was extinguished forever. (45)

As I write this I realize my daughter and grand-daughters have no idea what a diaper pail is. They are fortunate.



## Irish Heritage

My family never celebrated St. Patrick's Day nor did any Catholic school I attended<sup>34</sup> but because I had a freckled face and blue eyes, as did my mother and grandmother, and my mother was named Kathleen, her paternal grandparents born in Ireland, I was told on occasion that I had the map of Ireland on my face. Any sense of my being part Irish registered little. Dearie, whose mother's maiden name was McCurley, had taught in a Catholic elementary school before she married, and during the periods she lived with us she always tuned the radio to Jack Benny to hear the Irish tenor Dennis Day sing "Danny Boy" and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." Irish sweepstake tickets were illegal in the U.S. but my father was always able every year to somehow get her a ticket.

The only Irish thing I can think of from my childhood I barely associated with Ireland. Today people know what Chia Pets are; animal-shaped clay figures, grooved so that grass or salvia seed can be planted in the ridges, water applied, and grass or small green leaves sprout. Right around St. Patrick's Day in the early Fifties, every year my mother would buy a clay head, about six inches high, with grooves where hair should be. She planted grass seed in the grooves, poured water, and after some days green "hair" sprouted on the clay head. I can still see the face with ape-like features, a pug nose, called "Paddy O' Hair." None of us recognized this as the ugly Irish stereotype that it was. We just thought it amusing and an interesting way to grow a plant.

Connors, a New England native, in her doctoral work with women in their nineties, reflected on her own Irish heritage. She was proud of it, but like me she knew little about it:

What I continue to find remarkable is the fact that a sense of Irish pride has

survived and has been passed on to me even though I remain unable to articulate what I'm proud of or what it means to be Irish. (22)

### Roman Catholic Tradition

Catholic enculturation began before birth when my father, an unobservant Congregationalist, promised a priest to raise me Catholic as a condition for marrying my mother. Wanting to name me after the heroine in her favorite novel, *Judith of Blue Lake Ranch*,<sup>35</sup> my mother hit a brick wall as the baptizing priest announced "Judith" not the name of a saint.<sup>36</sup> The priest suggested he give me the middle name "Mary" and that would fix things. Proper young ladies didn't have middle names my mother insisted. The priest went ahead anyway and she heard him name me, in Latin of course, "Juditha Maria."<sup>37</sup> Then a few weeks later, more afraid of crossing my Yankee grandmother than of breaking a Church law banning rebaptism, my mother went along with my being christened into the Congregational church in Rhode Island, while having no intention of having me raised Protestant.

I experienced two varieties of Catholic practice at home and in the two kinds of Catholic schools I lived in or attended. Dearie and Jinks were fervent Catholics, going to evening novenas as well as Sunday Mass, often taking me with them. My mother on the other hand, was a grudging minimalist practitioner of her Catholicism until the last decade of her life in the 1970s when she was the happy wife of a millionaire, donating generously to her favorite priests and Catholic causes, the Catholic Worker movement chief among them as well as a group of reform Capuchin Franciscan priests, five of whom traveled from New York City to New Jersey to concelebrate her funeral Mass. She said the Church's ban on birth control had ruined her life.

As a child I had trouble with accepting the Adam and Eve story the conventional Catholic way. I'm sure I wasn't the only Catholic child thinking that I hadn't been in the Garden of Eden so why should I wind up with original sin? And the story seemed to make the woman the culprit. Growing older, my thinking coalesced into a more profound question: "If Adam hadn't sinned, would Jesus have come anyway?" I couldn't accept that Christ's existence was occasioned by Adam's sin thus making Christ an afterthought. Sin didn't bring about a change in the divine plan I reasoned. Of course if redemption wasn't the main purpose for Christ's coming, this negates the evangelical thrust that "Jesus saves," or at least it demotes it to a less important precipitating cause. Teaching young nuns of the Sisters of Mercy in Rhode Island during the summers of 1969 and 1970, and invited to speak at some Catholic and Protestant retreats and conferences, I encountered along the way some priest theologians, one steering me to the teaching of a Franciscan saint, Blessed John Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308) who taught at Oxford, Cambridge and the University of Paris.

While Aquinas agreed with St. Augustine that God would not have become man if Adam had remained faithful (Pancheri 26), Scotus taught that the Incarnation (Jesus coming to earth and becoming man) was all part of God's initial plan in the first place. The primary role of Christ is not to be "an assuager of the universe's guilt," rather "the universe is for Christ and not Christ for the universe" (Mulholland 2001). The primary motivation for Jesus coming to earth was love. This way of looking God becoming man, not as a result of sin, but as part of His initial plan, is called "the doctrine of the primacy of Christ" and is an entirely orthodox Catholic position. Interestingly Aquinas' own teacher, St. Albert the Great, believed in the primacy of Christ, as did many saints who

came after Scotus: St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Lawrence of Brindisi, and St. Francis de Sales (Meilach; Pancheri). Most Catholics haven't heard of the doctrine of the primacy of Christ and hold the conventional view.

I was interested to learn from Scotus scholar Pancheri that while the followers of the Scotian school explicated the position theologically, the usual Catholic way then, it was the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth who came at the primacy from a different direction giving it biblical underpinnings, basing it, in part, on a section of St. Paul's letter to the Colossians, especially Col. 1:15, which refers to Christ as "the first born of all creation," (93). So in the position I came to hold, I wasn't saying that Jesus did not save or was not Redeemer, I was saying that wasn't the chief reason why Christ became man. Unlike St. Augustine who argued that Jesus is like a physician who came to heal a sick man and had there been no illness there would have been no need for a physician, I side with Scotus. Whether one is Catholic or Protestant, a whole theology flows from that doctrine of the primacy surrounding Christ being fully human and being an exemplar, showing us how to live. In some inchoate way that understanding of the Incarnation has stayed with me infusing my life up to the present.

In the Sixties and following years while working in Catholic prep schools and being involved in theology groups, and social justice groups, and traveling and speaking in various venues, I experienced Catholic ritual and worship in a variety of settings, from St. Peter's in Rome with Cardinal Suenens celebrating Mass, to private Masses in monasteries like Greyfriars in Oxford, to small intimate groupings of six or seven. With priests and nuns among my best friends, Mass was said in our home many times. One of my sons made his first communion in our living room.

And briefly I make note that I was imbued in childhood with a very European Catholic spirituality of self-abnegation, dying to self, epitomized in my very favorite childhood movie, *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), and in the life of Simone Weil.

#### More Yankee Tradition

My Rhode Island Yankee grandmother, Grama, taught me my colors on an oilcloth depicting yellow, green, and orange teapots, on her sunny kitchen table, and she toilet trained me. Written in my baby book is the notation that at eighteen months when I still wasn't trained, despairing of my mother's efforts, Grama drove her Woodie to Massachusetts, picked me up, took me back to her house and accomplished the task quickly. For the more than forty years I knew them, except when they were away in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Florida, my grandparents followed the same daily routines; their home on Parkside Drive, situated on the edge of Roger Williams Park, an oasis of predictability and normality. All through the 1940s every morning, the first down the stairs, Grampa ground coffee beans in a hand grinder fixed to the wall, the aroma filling the house. Grama finished dressing in her morning clothes and morning jewelry. Before breakfast beds and bedrooms were always aired with bedclothes pulled back, windows open. After breakfast beds were then made with hospital corners. Mattresses were turned every two weeks. Grama slept with a bed board under her mattress and was proud of her almost six foot angular frame and perfect posture. I don't remember either Grama or Grampa ever visiting a doctor or mentioning seeing one. In the upstairs bathroom Grama had an ample store of restoratives, medicaments, and astringents. The downstairs lavatory had only a small store of medicinals, those likely to be needed in an emergency: band aids, a tourniquet, and remedies for fainting. Grama had been through Red Cross training

and I have her Red Cross handbook. She carried an emergency kit in her Woodie, all part of her “be prepared” approach to life that rubbed off on me as it also did from Jinks. Like so many in those years Grama was a great believer in fresh air and sunshine. She had been affected by what she had encountered of the physical culture movement.<sup>38</sup>

Like stereotypical Yankees Grama and Grampa saved everything and there were boxes and drawers for everything they saved. They saved the pins that came back with shirts from the cleaners; they saved rubber bands and bits of soap and wrapping paper. Grama always said, “A place for everything, and everything in its place.”

Grama taught me the correct way to keep a house. The sink and dish towels had to be bleached at least once a week. There was a proper order to washing dishes, glasses first before the wash water was greasy. Standing at the sink the back had to be straight, and one never leaned against the sink! Early afternoon around 2pm Grampa came home from the bank to get his golf clubs and change his clothes. When he returned from the club, he’d take me with him someplace close to the shore of Narragansett Bay to purchase fresh fish or clams for dinner. These routines were comforting and as familiar as the routines experienced in convent boarding schools and Catholic summer camps.

There was a strong sense of neighborliness on Parkside Drive. No homes changed hands the entire time I was growing up and, although people respected one another’s privacy, there were always waves of greeting all around as men went to work and women went out to shop or hang wash. There was always a homemade cookie for the grandchild who went next door to borrow a cup of sugar and although I was “from away,” and a freckled Irish Catholic, whom these neighbors saw walking alone to Mass on Sundays, I was covered by the respect given to my grandparents. Not so when I visited Rhode Island

homes of my father's cousins or my grandmother's sister. It would be some years before I fully understood what was wrong with me and why a child was treated with such coldness. One great uncle Fred purposefully gave my small hand a painful crushing grip whenever he took it to greet me and I was spoken to with disdain. Delbanco notes that New England has "been brutally hostile to immigrants, outsiders, or anyone deemed deviant according to the prevailing norms" (342). Luthera Dawson, a key project partner in this study, native to mid-coast Maine, born in 1911, was to tell me that in her area of New England, the outsiders looked down on when she was growing up were Finns.

### Inventory

Completing the self-ethnography, I took inventory in my backpack to see what cultural influences I was aware of carrying into old age. I noted first a social justice conscience derived from Catholic schooling. Another legacy from Catholicism is an attraction to a school of spirituality known in Catholic spiritual theology as "practicing the presence." Based on writings of Brother Lawrence, born 1614 in France, and Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, born also in France, in 1675, this spirituality teaches the formation of a habit of trying to live every moment in God's presence. In *Abandonment to Divine Providence* de Caussade wrote: "Divine activity floods the whole universe . . . We have but to allow ourselves to be carried forward on the crest of its waves" (7). This spiritual approach very much included the notion of living in the present moment and being fully present to others.<sup>39</sup> This practice was enhanced by my friendship in the Seventies with the Quaker Observer at Vatican II, Douglas Steere, who taught at Haverford, who wrote the well received *On Being Present Where You Are*. I can't say I've ever been very successful at this practice but I try. The already noted doctrine of the primacy of Christ

informs my notion of Christianity. Another item in my backpack is a family gardening tradition. Everywhere we lived my father rented extra land, sometimes for a dollar a year under high tension wires, and grew corn, tomatoes, cucumbers and beans. My mother was mostly an indoor gardener, having a large greenhouse window full of various ferns. There is also a tradition of seeking information, wanting to be prepared and to live an examined life, deriving from the influence of Jinks, Girl Scouts, and my Red Cross trained Yankee grandmother.

Some other cultural influences relate to my Yankee heritage: interest in stories related to family history and valuing “gumption” or resilience. Additional cultural influences include: my coming from a long line of Yankee writers, Benjamin Church’s memoir of King Phillip’s War being the first, another Church family member producing the magazine *Galaxy*, a short lived publication, 1866-1878, competing with *Atlantic Monthly*, featuring the work of Mark Twain. There is my musical training, John and I both play the piano and harpsichord; he has built two. There is my relationship to the natural foods movement and macrobiotics, collecting Inuit sculpture, water gardening, Newfoundland dogs, we are on our seventh in forty years. Another cultural orientation derived is derived from family, I take grandparenting seriously. I consider Barbara Myerhoff a kindred spirit, not just because we were both born in 1935, or because we have both done projects with the elderly, it is because in *Number Our Days* she memorialized a grandmother who saved her from an otherwise unhappy childhood. Myerhoff painted a portrait of her nurturing maternal Jewish grandmother Sophie Mann; stout, corseted, jolly, patient, calling her wrinkles “drapes,” telling her granddaughter stories. I am the product of two quite different, but very nurturing grandmothers, an Irish



grandmother, “Dearie,” who was stout, kindly, patient, a comfortable person, always there, always sitting in a rocker knitting sweaters for grandchildren, and just like Myerhoff’s Sofie, when Dearie was unclothed I would see “her big yielding body marked by the tracks and notches of her whalebone corset stays” (239). In fact, just as with Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, sometimes I was recruited to pull on the laces of that corset. My Yankee grandmother, Grama, tall as women went, capable and strong, meticulously groomed, charged around in her Woodie or charged into the ocean, taking a small child seriously enough to teach her all manner of things, how to listen to the ocean in a conch shell, how to make blanc mange from Irish Moss picked up on the beach, how to make a proper campfire. I believe in the importance of being available as a grandparent. How my relationship to my cultural traditions that I was bringing into old age with me may have changed and how that may influence my later years is found in the concluding chapter as I looked back over the years comprising this project.

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Bob “At ‘Home’ With the Past, In Life and In Her Novels,” Marilynne Robinson Looks Back to Find Meaning.” *The Washington Post*, C1, C2 Oct. 20, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *The Souls of Black Folks*, Chapter Two.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Greeley, assigned to his first parish, in Chicago, in 1954, and remaining there 10 years, reports that in that time there were few mixed marriages; “years would go by without one” (179). A Catholic priest and academic has told me that it is the Catholic partner now who pledges to raise the children Catholic.

<sup>4</sup> I had two black friends: a male fencing coach and my senior year college suitemate. Until that moment in the car I had not realized that my WASP father had feared I might fall in love with a black man.

<sup>5</sup> Sociologist Benita Eisler, my contemporary, remarks: “Engineering was the favored profession for fifties white-collar movie heroes. Combining specialized and advanced education. . .with . . .craft skills (anything they can do on the assembly line, he can do better), the engineer was the perfect college-educated ‘ordinary guy’” (229). She says that we fifties women wanted to marry the “‘ordinary guy’” and that guy often had a crew cut. My husband, an engineer, had a crew cut, and his sister also married an engineer. And as my children and grandchildren can attest, my husband can fix anything.

<sup>6</sup> The New England Historic Genealogical Society was founded in 1845 in Boston “the first such organization in the Western world” (Feintuch and Watters 686).

<sup>7</sup> Thankfully that war has been written about from the point of view of the Indians in Jill Lepore’s *The Name of the War, King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity*.

<sup>8</sup> Hurt, no matter my attempt at explanation, they replied they weren’t going to drive from Long Island to New Jersey for a ten-minute ceremony.

<sup>9</sup> Breines 17; Sheehy 29; Strauss and Howe 279.

<sup>10</sup> Grandad’s connections were helpful when our second child was born with a heart defect. He arranged an appointment at Johns Hopkins Hospital with renowned pediatric cardiologist Helen Taussig of the famed blue baby operation, who saved Michael’s life.

<sup>11</sup> I was 2 months shy of 15 when the decade began, and married, with 4 month old son, and pregnant again, when it ended.

<sup>12</sup> Among scholars who helped Breines: Americanist George Lipsitz and sociologist Judith Stacey.

<sup>13</sup> The three Catholic convent schools I attended through high school were founded, two of them in the French tradition, one in the British tradition. Vivien Leigh and Eunice Kennedy Shriver and her sister Patricia, were among boarders at the Sacred Heart convent school in Roehampton, England for many years. Separated by several years, Mary McCarthy and I boarded at the sister school, the Sacred Heart Forest Ridge convent school, in Seattle. At these schools there were two classes of nuns. One class did all the domestic work, all the cooking and cleaning. The so-called “choir nuns” wore a different habit and did the teaching.

<sup>14</sup> As I have sought and reviewed literature on women and aging I have been encouraged to discover academic women who earned advanced degrees later in life, and who focused their attention on women and aging as I have. Here I think of Cecelia Hurwich (b. 1920), who earned a doctorate in life-span developmental psychology at age 70; sociologist Ruth Jacobs (b. 1924), earning a B.A. at 40 and a Ph.D. at

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45; Beth Kinsel (b. 1949), who received her Ph.D. in social work when she was 55, and psychotherapist Rachel Josefowitz Siegel who got her MSW from Cornell in 1973 at 49.

<sup>15</sup> Grama, my grandmother Church, taped butcher paper to the walls to cover her expensive wallpaper on the walls leading to the upstairs whenever my little brothers visited.

<sup>16</sup> *Dreaming, Hard Luck and Good Times in America* by Carolyn See (b. 1934), the already mentioned *Sweet Mystery* by Judith Paterson (b. 1936), *When All the World Was Young* by Barbara Holland (b. 1933), *An Accidental Autobiography*, by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (b. 1934), *How I Became Hettie Jones by Jones* (b. 1934), *1185 Park Avenue* by Anne Roiphe (b. 1935), and *Fierce Attachments by Vivian Gornick* (b. 1935). *I wonder why so many of us Silents wrote memoir.*

<sup>17</sup> David Halberstam's *The Fifties; The Generational Imperative; Understanding Generational Differences In The Workplace, Marketplace And Living Room* by Chuck Underwood, *Generations, The History of America's Future 1584-2069* by Strauss and Howe and the recent 2008 book, *The Lucky Few, Between the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boom* by Elwood Carlson, a professor in the sociology of population, were also useful.

<sup>18</sup> I lived in Massachusetts through kindergarten until I was almost six.

<sup>19</sup> See my comment in "Words That Matter, Or Not" in *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2009, A11.

<sup>20</sup> Matt Miller, author, economist and columnist for *Fortune* magazine has coined the term "lower uppers" to designate the educated upper class who are less wealthy than the "ultras" who reap rewards from what he considers rigged systems like hedge fund managers.

<sup>21</sup> Just as many upper class families would note their appearance in the social register or women might belong to the Junior League, families like mine, the "genteel poor" as they thought of themselves, partly built their sense of worth by hanging on to *Who's Who*. My mother was proud that the *Who's Who in America* for 1923 listed both her father, and my father's uncle.

<sup>22</sup> My mother's early years were similar to the way Kennedy and Buckley children were sent away to boarding schools. The memoir of one of these children, Carol Buckley's *At the Still Point, A Memoir*, is a cautionary tale of the childhood of William F. Buckley and his siblings; probably not good preparation for parenthood as confirmed by *Losing Mum and Pup* by Christopher Buckley, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> In England Catholic gentry dispatched their boys to the Jesuit Stonyhurst and the Benedictine Downside.

<sup>24</sup> My Aunt Jinks, social worker and a role model, an eldest child of four, as I am, was a family historian, passing to me the Methodist artifacts and various genealogical records.

<sup>25</sup> *Time* magazine July 8, 1966, "Ecumenism: Theology in the Living Room."

<sup>26</sup> At Grampa's funeral, he died in his 99th year, there were two mourners, "mystery women," my mother called them, women we did not know whose faces heavily veiled. They slipped away in the crowd before we could meet them.

<sup>27</sup> This is the same medal refused in 2009 by Harvard Professor Mary Ann Glendon, a prolife advocate, in response to President Obama, who is prochoice, having been invited to give the commencement address.

<sup>28</sup> *Life with Father* ran from Nov. 1953 till July 1955 on CBS. Beginning on the radio in 1949 *Father Knows Best* ran from October 1954 through 1960 moving back and forth between CBS and NBC.

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<sup>29</sup> My father was a Yankee and a Wasp. Harvard's Werner Sollors (NY: Oxford U Press 1986) uses the words interchangeably in *Beyond Ethnicity, Consent and Descent in American Culture* in his discussion of a *New Yorker* cartoon from 1972. A white family is sitting at an elegant dining table and the daughter asks her parents, "Are we ethnic?" (24).

<sup>30</sup> Two important points this work makes are how mothers like mine and hers were told, after the Second World War, the patriotic thing to do was stay home, out of the workforce, and leave the jobs to the men. Reichel cites an Army general from a popular magazine (51). The second notion she fleshes out is how miserable her mother and her mother's friends were; my mother was just as distressed. "I have never known so many unhappy people. They were smart, they were educated and they were bored. . . Their misery was an ugly thing, and it was hard on their families" (9-10).

<sup>31</sup> Benita Eisler in *Private Lives, Men and Women of the Fifties*, born in 1937, graduated from college in 1958 and was married three June's later, the statistics of her college class matching the national statistics: "By 1957, 96 percent of Americans 'of marriageable age' were indeed married" (9).

<sup>32</sup> Kate is the daughter of memoirist and novelist writer Anne Roiphe.

<sup>33</sup> There is much humor at the expense of those who claim Mayflower heritage. Many of the voyagers were not upper class, but were workers with skills much needed in colonies like carpentry. And with the passage of time Mayflower descendants now number in the millions so it isn't the elite group some members of The Mayflower Society make it out to be.

<sup>34</sup> I encountered a few red-haired Irish students during my Catholic school years but Polish and Italian students were more predominant.

<sup>35</sup> *Judith of Blue Lake Ranch* by Jackson Gregory, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1919.

<sup>36</sup> It was custom not Catholic dogma that children be named after saints, but in 1930s America parish priests held sway. A few priests might have had no problem as Judith is the heroine of a book of the Old Testament bearing her name; a book accepted by Catholics and considered apocrypha by Protestants.

<sup>37</sup> In 1941 Anne Rice's mother named her Howard after her father, the priest balked saying there was no St. Howard. So he added "Frances" to her name (2008 45-46).

<sup>38</sup> The physical culture movement spanned 1890-1930. *The Progressive Era's Health Reform Movement, A Historical Dictionary* by Ruth Clifford Engs, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003 256. The elements of that culture included emphasis on proper eating, posture, rest, lots of fresh air and personal hygiene.

<sup>39</sup> When renowned British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge became a Catholic along with his wife Kitty, she worked on a fresh translation of de Caussade's book calling it *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (1989).

## CHAPTER FOUR: ADÉ BETHUNE (1914-2002)

Born in Belgium, arriving in the U.S. as a teen, Adé Bethune, American multimedia artist, architectural consultant, Catholic theologian, Rhode Island resident and advocate for affordable housing, designed the wreath on the Iwo Jima memorial, the line drawing of lyre and scroll over the entrance to the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the bronze candlesticks used on the outdoor altar in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome at the close of the Second Vatican Council, and the huge mosaic in the baptistry of the Cathedral of St. Paul in Minnesota. She was also a writer, editor, lecturer, business-woman, and community activist. A combination biography and oral history of Bethune's life, "Proud Donkey of Schaerbeck," was published in 1988. "'Useful to the Mind': Adé Bethune's Illustrations for *The Catholic Worker*, 1934-1945" is a University of Maryland 2006 master's thesis.<sup>1</sup> Bethune's archives are housed at the College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota. Additional papers are found at Marquette University and the University of Notre Dame.

We are rarely presented with the views of old people about themselves and given an opportunity to hear how aging is experienced by them, 'from inside the native's head,' so to speak.

Barbara Myerhoff<sup>2</sup>

As the years advance, what do I want of life? Only one thing, to make my last years the best of all my life. I am only eighty-one.

Adé Bethune<sup>3</sup>

### On the Beach

Nearing the Connecticut turnpike exit for Westerly, Rhode Island on a warm June day in 1999, in my green Subaru Outback, Maryland eight hours behind me, I open the sunroof, and hungrily inhale; it's beginning to smell like "home." The air is different here I think, a little having leaked from Rhode Island across the Connecticut state line perhaps. *New York Times* columnist and editor Mary Cantwell, Rhode Island native, once described coming back to her home state from Manhattan into air she described as like that which comes off the Hudson, only "this air is ten times saltier and has a green top note"<sup>4</sup> (9). Thirsty, I pull into a McDonald's, surprised to see Lobster Roll on the menu. Succumbing to this touristy ploy and knowing it won't be the "real thing," I sample the

too mushy, inauthentic creation, happily sinking my teeth into the mess, throwing half of it away.

On Route One in South County, Rhode Island the vegetation changes to the scrub found near the ocean. Here and there sand has drifted onto the highway. The sign for Green Hill comes up on my right and, although my destination is Adé Bethune's house in Newport, I can't resist the urge to make a brief detour. Bouncing down the Green Hill Beach road to the shore, the tide is out revealing familiar rocks that caress tide pools where in the 1940s my brothers and I clambered as small children, finding tiny crabs and other treasures. Slipping off my shoes I step through the tidal wrack decorated with empty, black, rectangular egg cases of the skate. I see a dry digitate sponge, "deadman's fingers," that I used to bring back to our cabin and place on a window sill along with quahog and razor clam shells. It was on this beach my Grama Church and I once gathered Irish moss, rose colored seaweed that we took back to the kitchen to soak and clean in order to make blanc-mange, a jelled pudding dessert similar to junket.

Situating this project in New England, beginning it standing on this beach, feels right; integral to my own journey into the under explored territory of old age from the vantage point of cultural influences. My Yankee grandparents and great grandparents reside in Rhode Island's Pocasset Cemetery; earlier members of our branch of the Church family are buried in the Commons in Little Compton not far from where Bethune lives. I taught young Catholic nuns every weekday morning for two summers some miles north of here in Cumberland thirty years ago. Afternoons I drove south to the ocean with my four children, having the use of the Sisters of Mercy's large beachfront "cottage" in Watch Hill near here. Sinking my toes in the sand I recall Myerhoff writing in the first

pages of *Number Our Days*, how she sat on a bench near the ocean outside the Venice, California Senior Center whose members she had come to study, as she thought about “how strange it was to be back in the neighborhood” where she had worked as a social worker. She says she had made no conscious decision to “explore my roots or clarify my origins” (11), yet here she was asking herself: “Was it anthropology or a personal quest (12)?” In some ways I feel this study chose me. Anthropologist Ruth Behar, in the first forward to *Translated Woman*, her ethnographic work with Esperanza Hernandez, recognized that the book was longer than she expected it might be when she started. Much had happened to her and she writes: “You don’t chose to write the books you write, any more than you chose your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, or your comrade” (xxi). I believe that is true of ethnographic projects. May Sarton in *The House by the Sea* wrote: “There are as many ways of growing old as of being young” (193). I want to know how the participants in this project negotiate aging in particular ways and how their cultural traditions have influenced their choices. My Yankee roots have brought me back to this region.

#### Who is a Yankee?

“Who exactly is a Yankee?” That question is addressed in *The Encyclopedia of New England (ENE)*, recently published, and a product of the emerging field of New England Studies:

To New Englanders, a Yankee is someone of ‘original’ New England heritage. To the ‘foreign-born’ American, the term refers to a native of the United States. To a European or Asian, a Yankee is an American; to a southern American (below the Mason-Dixon Line), a Yankee is a northerner; to a northerner, a Yankee is a New Englander; to a New Englander, a Yankee is a Vermonter; to a Vermonter, a Yankee is a person who eats apple pie for breakfast; to a Vermonter who eats apple pie for breakfast, a Yankee is someone who eats it with a knife. As this popular definition indicates, the term is nebulous, its definition changing over

time and responding to shifting images and ideas about the character of the region. (811)

Another useful take on the word “Yankee” comes from Susan Orlean. Originally from the Midwest, working for a time at the *Boston Globe*, she wrote a weekly column “defining the character of the region.” Because she was “from away,” having an outsider perspective, she found New England “strange and fascinating.”<sup>5</sup> For Orlean, a “Yankee is hale, upright, laconic, rocksteady; clean, mean, and never unseemly” (93). She points out that the word has nuances that range from flattery, as in “Yankee ingenuity” to a slur, the 1960s “imperialist *Yanqui*”:

The species is indigenous to, and flourishes in, towns such as North Adams and West Bethel and East Derry and South Dartmouth – all well north and east of New York City. A Yankee may be well-heeled and worldly (and thus risk classification as a Brahmin), or long-suffering and small town. A Yankee is crankier than a preppy. A Yankee believes all foods are best boiled till gray. A Yankee favors clothes that look old when they’re new. A Yankee reveres family tradition. . . A Yankee may be known, on occasion and under duress, to spend money. . . you’ll find Yankee-as-an-adjective all over the place. . . this adjective is just the sort that screams out value and durability and reliability and disdain for extravagance.” (93-94)

A repository of Yankee ways has been the popular monthly magazine *Yankee* that began publishing the year I was born, 1935. I grew up with *Yankee* and until very recently when content, dimensions and number of yearly issues changed, it was just a little bigger in size than *Reader’s Digest*. *Yankee* followed me around the country to whatever house or state we lived in at the moment. A familiar presence atop the tank in a bathroom, or in summer in a basket on a screened porch, often with original paintings of Maine ships or New Hampshire fall foliage or peaceful Vermont farms on the cover, *Yankee* was an idiosyncratic amalgam of poetry, advice for fixing tools, short stories about shipwrecks, notices of family reunions, a popular swapper’s column, and the



cartoons of Don Bousquet. A native Rhode Islander, Bousquet, an anthropology major at University of Rhode Island, has for many years turned his observant eye on his native state and region, lampooning Rhode Islanders and their New England neighbors.

Much of what is said about the word “Yankee,” could be said of “New England” which is comprised of six contiguous states but to an outsider like Orlean, New England seemed “a lot like a frankfurter: most people know what it is, but don’t really know what it’s made of” (5). She argues this isn’t true of any other part of the country. She sees a unifying principle in other parts of the U.S., but for her New England is full of “quirks and contradictions”:

It is, after all, the part of the country where people brag about bad weather; have equal admiration for the cod and the Kennedys; boil their food and bowl funny; call all bodies of water, regardless of size, ‘ponds’. . .and have unbelievably weird accents. . .They say ‘Down the Cape’ when they mean ‘Up the Cape’! They think milkshakes are just shaken-up milk. This kind of character, cobbled together from orneriness, unnatural reverence for antiquity, arrogance, xenophobia, and a love of fish, mystifies and intimidates outsiders . . .That’s just as New Englanders would have it: after all, one consistent trait of the regional character is a passion for confounding strangers. (5-6)

*ENE* lists six Yankee characteristics: self-reliance, tenaciousness, industriousness, resourcefulness, frugality and neighborliness (Feintuch and Watters 813). That neighborliness doesn’t necessarily extend to outsiders who are called “from away.” New Englanders have a conflicted relationship with tourists; the “leap peepers” who visit in autumn, those who head for lobster festivals in summer, or ski slopes in winter. The early spring mud season is not a draw, nor is the black fly season roughly extending from late spring to early summer. On the one hand locals rely on tourism to boost the economy; on the other hand, they can’t wait for them to go home so traffic on Route One in Maine and roads elsewhere, can go back to normal. In four New England states, Rhode Island,

Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire, where my co-informants live, tourism is the second biggest industry. In Massachusetts and Connecticut it is third (Feintuch and Watters 1451).

Those from away provide fodder for humor and some believe a unique sense of humor is New England's greatest heritage. Close to the beginning of the film *A Seal Called Andre*, 1994, set in Rockport, Maine, one man says to the other, "What's the difference between a tourist and a canoe? A canoe tips." *ENE* notes that "as tourism has intensified the demand for 'authentic' New England places and experiences, Yankee humor deflects and subverts the tourist gaze." One Maine bumper sticker reads, "If it's tourist season, why can't we shoot them" (737). Another favorite subject is Yankee frugality or parsimony.

I am describing the women in this project as "Yankee" because all except me live in New England. And although some were born elsewhere, they are New Englanders by blood, having longstanding ancestral ties to the area, as Dawson and I do, or they were drawn to live in the Northeast more than forty years ago, as were Bethune and Azarian, or like Baldwin, spent summers in New England then retired there, making these three, Yankees by adoption. Barnes, York and Ogilvie are Yankees by birth having been born in New England. As I stand looking out at the ocean, with waves lapping at my feet, I know the "reality" of New England is complex. There is the New England that exists in my mind; the one that is an amalgam of nostalgia and happy childhood memories, sights, smells, tastes of local foods, sounds of unique accents and vocabularies. Pleasant memories thankfully outweigh some painful ones of only being tolerated in certain Yankee family gatherings, an outsider because I was part Irish and being raised Catholic.

There is the New England of the tourist, and lately the retiree,<sup>6</sup> and then there is the world of struggling mill towns, closed factories, depleted fishing grounds and lobster catches. These latter worlds are on display in books like *I Was Content and Not Content*, *The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry* (Chatterly), and Frederick Wiseman's 2000 documentary film "Belfast, Maine," wonderfully critiqued in *American Quarterly* by Americanist and New England Studies professor Ardis Cameron.

I turn my thoughts to Rhode Island, the smallest of the fifty states. Almost five hundred Rhode Islands could fit inside Alaska (Heinrichs 10). Nicknamed the Ocean State, the Atlantic Ocean washes only about forty miles of the southern coastline where I am standing. Narragansett Bay, the largest estuary in New England, cuts twenty-five miles inland from Point Judith to Pawtucket. Rhode Island is the most Catholic state in America; something my Protestant grandmother warned was coming and mourned. Native Rhode Islanders have a distinctive accent and vocabulary. My grandparents said "wata" for "water," and "blueburries" for "blueberries," with the accent on the first syllable. Looking at the night sky, "the big dippah" was "the big dipper." A "bubbla" is a water fountain. Bousqut has provided guidance to Rhode Island language that can be accessed at [quahog.org/factsfolklore](http://quahog.org/factsfolklore) and in *The Rhode Island Dictionary* (Patinkin).

In Rhode Island an ice cream milkshake is called a cabinet; a milkshake is just that, milk with some flavorings, then shaken. The "official" state beverage is coffee milk made with coffee syrup. Then there is the "awful awful," a 24-ounce super cabinet introduced in 1949 by Newport Creamery, a chain restaurant. A favorite local food is jonnycakes (carefully ground white flint corn and water) with the cornmeal of choice being from Kenyon's, a mill dating back to 1886, still in business, and one my

grandmother took me to many times in the '30s and '40s. Rhode Island people don't use an "h" in jonnycake, as they do in the rest of New England (Early 107). Other favorite foods include clam cakes, codfish cakes, fried mush, Rhode Island clam chowder (no milk, no tomato), fried clams with bellies (not tasteless clam strips), lobster rolls, scrod, dishes made with quahogs, a large hard shelled clam, and berry cobblers, crumbles, crisps and grunts. Actually, blueberries or other fruit stewed to a sauce with sugar and topped with a dumpling is a grunt in Massachusetts, and a slump in Rhode Island (Stetson 56). The state is home to Brown University, the third oldest college in New England, seventh in the nation. In some ways I will be a tourist "from away" in New England, and in this unknown country of old age, but in other ways, I will not be a tourist; I will be coming home, and I have one foot in old age already.

Looking forward to what I will learn from Bethune I turn back towards Route One and on the way to the Jamestown Bridge I pass signs for the tiny coastal villages of Jerusalem and Galilee and then Point Judith where my grandmother camped with me many times, her Woody having screens for the windows and three rows of seats, two rows removable to accommodate cots. The Jamestown Bridge, opened in 1940, links Jamestown or Conanicut Island to Western Rhode Island. After Jamestown I cross the Claiborne Pell (Newport) Bridge. Opened in 1969, it connects to the city of Newport on the southern tip of Aquidneck Island and I see Bethune's studio home from the middle of the span. Looking to the right it is the first house, on the edge of Narragansett Bay, in an area of Newport called the Point.

## Newport

Newport, a city on Aquidneck Island, is Rhode Island's leading tourist destination. In the 19th century it was a summer playground for the country's wealthiest families who built fabulous mansions, called "cottages," eleven now owned by The Preservation Society of Newport County which charges admission and gives guided tours. In the 17th and 18th centuries Newport harbor was Rhode Island's chief port and Newport was the fifth largest town in British colonial America. Many colonial homes have been restored. During the Second World War Newport was home to a portion of the Atlantic Fleet but in 1973 the navy withdrew most of its operations; still there is the Naval Undersea Warfare Center that my husband often visited in connection with his work at the Naval Ordnance Lab before he retired. Many Newport streets are paved with granite cobblestones that were once used to weight ships. The city is home to Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in America, called by President Kennedy in 1963, "One of the oldest symbols of liberty" ([www.tourosynagogue.org](http://www.tourosynagogue.org)), and Newport's Redwood Library and Athenaeum the oldest lending library in America and there one can see the original collection of 755 books purchased from England in 1756.

The John Stevens Shop, a Newport stone carving business, begun in 1705, was operated by eight generations of the Stevens family. In 1927 carver John Howard Benson purchased the Shop from the Stevens family, the business is now in the hands of a third generation Benson who recently designed and carved the inscriptions on the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. It is perhaps the longest continually operating business in America and the work of the Benson and Stevens families can be seen in local Newport graveyards. Adé Bethune, the woman I am coming to Newport to interview,

once apprenticed in this Shop, and then for a time partnered with the first Benson who taught at the Rhode Island School of Design. She designed the wreath that Benson carved into the base of the Iwo Jima Memorial and the line drawing of lyre and scroll on a wall over the auditorium in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

### Many Hats

Adé Bethune, Adé a short version of Adélaïde, and pronounced “Ah-day,” is a Yankee by adoption, having immigrated to Manhattan with her family from her native Belgium at age fourteen, moving to Newport in 1938. I know Bethune through our having collaborated on two projects in the last fifteen years. I once arranged for her to design the cover for a Catholic magazine for which I wrote; another time I encouraged her to the Washington, D.C. area to give an art lecture and I have stayed several times at her home. A vital, cheerful, active presence, “a force” might better describe her, I would always leave Bethune’s home invigorated as did the late Catholic social activist Dorothy Day who wrote in her memoir: “Whenever I visited Adé I came away with a renewed zest for life” (1952 191).

Making a right turn off the bridge, and turning right again, I see young boys jumping off a concrete pier. Turning left on Washington Street, I arrive in front of a gray house with a bright blue front door. Ringing the bell I hear noise within. A young woman, Bethune’s new assistant,<sup>7</sup> a draftsman and secretary, opens the door but before she can say a word Bethune bounds towards me. “Bay-bee, here you are!” She flings her arms around me. The fatigue of the nine-hour drive drops like a cloak at my feet at the pleasure of seeing my friend and having someone older than I am call me “baby.”

As is her custom with everyone, Bethune immediately begins ordering my life. She directs me to park across the street on the grounds of an abandoned Catholic convent, formerly a Newport mansion or “cottage,” because, “it is tourist season and the cars whip around that corner.” “Come see my many hats,” she says breathlessly, when I return from reparking my car, “and then we will have tea.” I don’t know what Bethune is talking about but I follow her. Her “hats?”

Bethune is now eighty-five, twenty-one years older than I am. In preparation for this week-long visit during which I’ll interview her, observe her comings and goings, share her life, and try to discern particular cultural orientations she has brought with her into old age to see how they might be affecting how she is negotiating old age, I asked Bethune to consider the many different cultural worlds she inhabits in the course of a day and a week. I also suggested she think about her life, dividing it into chapters; a helpful life history interviewing technique recommended by Caughey (2006 28) and used by medical anthropologist Kaufman when she studied men and women in old age (1981 63).

Bethune is now taking my arm and pulling me down the front hall still talking about hats. We pass her downstairs office on the left through which I can see the door open to her small greenhouse built to provide vegetables and solar heat in winter. Slowly I begin to understand Bethune is already launching into a discussion of her many cultural worlds. Having a playful sense of humor, she is referring to the many projects she is involved in as hats she wears in her various roles as artist, community activist, promoter of preservation of Newport historic buildings and improvement of city transportation, fundraiser, writer, self-employed businesswoman, advocate for affordable and creative housing in community for the elderly, and liturgical consultant; one who works with

church architects to see that light, location of windows, spacing of pews, placement of the altar and baptistry, all serve to enhance the worship or sacramental experience. We pass her pine coffin with its painted pictures, at the moment piled high with boxes and clutter. Bethune used to keep her sewing things in it. I don't know what's in there now, and make a mental note to ask her about the coffin and her funeral plans.

We enter Bethune's downstairs workroom at the back of the house, a large space with windows along the wall facing Narragansett Bay, but despite the windows, this is a dark room with mahogany stained paneling, dominated by a huge Gothic wooden table that looks like it belongs in the great room of a castle in a Vincent Price movie. In front of the unused fireplace are two leather and wood antique chairs topped with brass lions for finials, relics from Bethune's great uncle Jean-Baptiste Bethune, the renowned architect who designed the famed Maredsous Abbey in Belgium, including its stained glass windows. Bethune calls him "Gothic John." This is one of three workrooms that Bethune uses now. Her downstairs office to the left of the front door still has two desks, hers by the window looking out on the Bay, another near the greenhouse door where her former secretary used to sit for thirty years. The upstairs workroom has two computers and is where Bethune's new assistant, who knows drafting and helps with Bethune's design work for Terra Sancta Guild, spends most of her time. This downstairs workroom as usual has papers and files all over the table top<sup>8</sup>, but looking more closely I can discern discrete piles that Bethune begins to pat. "See," she says, "my many hats."

She points to the first pile. "This one; I wrote an article for *Jubilee* magazine many years ago and then I made it into a booklet." I miss a little of what she's saying as it takes a few minutes to reacquaint myself with the way Bethune talks. Emigrating from



Belgium as a young teen who spoke Flemish and French, and now often still speaking French with members of her large family, many still in Europe, others scattered near Newport and elsewhere, her English is heavily flavored. A reporter interviewing her in 1995 for *The Providence Journal-Bulletin* described her as “speaking in her lilting accent with French and Flemish overtones” (Merolla).

Bethune ploughs on. “A child should learn to write first; then learn to read,” she says emphatically. “Nienhuis Montessori in Mountain View, California wants all the booklets<sup>9</sup> I have left and they want me to redo it.” Before I can ask her to clarify what she is talking about, she has moved on to pile number two. I whip out a notebook because I left my tape recorder in the car and I write furiously. “This is Terra Sancta Guild” Bethune says, patting this new pile. I do know this is a business that manufactures bronze Jewish and Christian religious items like door knockers, commemorative medals, and menorahs for which Bethune is designer, and has been since the Guild was begun in 1965. As she pats a third pile of letters, documents, and drawings relating to a church in South Carolina that she is working on, I notice she has lost weight, perhaps twenty pounds since I last saw her, and she has ugly bruises on both arms and the backs of her hands.

Continuing the whirlwind tour, Bethune picks up the pace. Pointing to pile number four she says, “This is Church Community Housing Corporation. I’m on the board.” This is a blizzard of information coming at me. I hazard a question. “Is Church Community Housing (CCH)<sup>10</sup> a religious organization?” “No,” Bethune replies forcefully and with passion. “You do the works of mercy without any religious affiliation

just because they are good.” I jot down the key phrase, “works of mercy,” familiar to me as I memorized the list in second grade, but referred to now by Catholics as social action. We have not quite reached the middle of this long table when Bethune taps pile number five. She says emphatically:

AB: “Star of the Sea. I am the president. I am gathering a community of elders to live across the street and hope to get money for historic preservation. I wanted it to be a housing cooperative but cooperatives have little history in Rhode Island. You must hear my lecture number seventy-two on showers.

JT: Showers?

AB: Old people should have showers, not tubs. Showers are good for wheelchairs. And we will be a community of people who still have something up here. [She taps her head with her index finger.] Not all old people are Alzheimer’s.

I assume Bethune gives fundraising talks to various groups about this elders’ community project, but I’m sure she doesn’t have seventy-two talks and I laugh with her at the joke. I don’t mention at this juncture that my mother, weakened by various medications and emphysema, died ten years ago, at 79, from tripping as she stepped out of her bathtub. Bethune hands me an article she wrote, based on personal experience, about how to live with elderly parents and tells me her father had Alzheimer’s for many years. I note it appeared in a Rhode Island publication for Seniors in 1994 when Bethune would have been eighty. In Bethune’s house for only fifteen minutes, two themes, housing for one’s last years, and the specter of dementia, have entered the picture. Late-life housing will turn out to be an overriding concern for principal study subjects, and in some fashion the subject of cognitive impairment is one that will emerge in conversations with all major study colleagues and three of four short term participants.

The next pile turns out to be work on an index of Christian iconography. Bethune has lectured widely over the years about Christian art, has painted icons for churches, and

various artists have apprenticed to her to learn icon painting. Pile seven is correspondence dealing with her archives. The College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, now St. Catharine University, houses the Adé Bethune Collection.<sup>11</sup> Apparently some of the boxes in the hallway by the front door are waiting to be shipped there. Pile eight deals with an exhibition of some of her early work about to open in a few days in Newport. In conjunction with the exhibit, Carol DeBoer-Langworthy, an American studies professor at Brown, is coming tomorrow to construct a “Chronology of Ade Bethune’s Life and Times” to accompany the exhibit and then send to her archives; available at <http://www.stkate.edu/library/spcoll/ABCade.html>.

The next to last pile has to do with the Catholic Worker movement with which Bethune was closely then more loosely associated since she was nineteen when she drew pictures of saints in modern dress that gave *The Catholic Worker* newspaper its distinctive look. The central figure in that movement, Dorothy Day, has been dead since 1980, and, other than redesigning the masthead of the paper more than a decade ago, Bethune has produced no original art for the *Worker* paper in more than fifty years. Her striking illustrations, however, have been recycled up to the present day, it being unusual for there to be a month without several Bethune pictures appearing in an issue.<sup>12</sup> She allows her art to be used free of charge by non-profits; there is even a clip book of her pictures, so it isn’t unusual for her drawings of Christian symbols or saints to appear in a Methodist church bulletin as well as in a Catholic parish newsletter. Many of the people originally associated with the early Catholic Worker days have passed away, but their children and newer Workers write to Bethune. The last pile, she announces, is

“Foundation for Newport. I’m on the board. We work with the department of transportation to improve Newport traffic.”

After this whirlwind tour I think: “This woman is 85, is this typical of an 85-year-old?” I check myself resolving to try to leave my culturally conditioned age stereotypes at the door. Literature of emerging age studies has made me much more aware of my internalized attitudes about age. I recall reading Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days* again recently, noticing her description of her key “informant,” Shmuel. She wrote, “He didn’t look eighty” (45). This is the kind of comment now considered ageist. What is eighty supposed to look like? I chuckle recalling again Gloria Steinem’s observation about women; that we’ve lied about our age for so long who would know what any age is supposed to look like.<sup>13</sup>

Bethune is a little taller than I am, and I’m 5’2”. Her thinning white hair is worn short, framing a round face, moderately creased, with a sweet expression, lively blue eyes behind rather large glasses with clear plastic frames dusted with a faint hint of tortoiseshell. Fifteen years ago when I first knew her, she tended towards being a little plump, now she is quite thin. She dresses simply in comfortable clothes that launder easily. Although family members have recently provided her with a front loading European washing machine, Bethune does some laundry by hand, drying items on hangers in her shower. She favors cotton jumpers with a tee shirt or loose skirts, often denim, knee socks and flat shoes, canvas espadrilles or leather flats. Probably what my son-in-law calls “aging hippy,” which is how he describes what I usually wear. She wears a watch on one wrist and an alert bracelet on the other. Although she’s old enough to be

my mother, most of the time I'm not aware of our chronological age difference, aging being a continuum.

### In the Field

The second floor dormitory-style guest room where I stayed during previous visits has three single beds and its own bath, but it's been given over to Bethune's sister, Francois, who is 89, visiting from Switzerland. Their brother, Andre, and his wife, who live in Portsmouth about fifteen minutes away, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary two days before my arrival. Francoise is over for that and for at least a week. I wince at the news wondering why Bethune didn't move my visit. Later I learn she was afraid in changing the date I might have been unable to come, perhaps jeopardizing her participation in our project. Still later I realize her cooperation has less to do with contributing to the general conversation about how women age, and the impact of cultural traditions on that process, and more about passionately promoting to me her vision of the way old people like herself should live in common; her Star of the Sea project.<sup>14</sup>

My "accommodations" consist of a narrow fold-away cot that Bethune and I wrestle from a closet into her second floor workroom. I'm stunned at the energy this old woman<sup>15</sup> displays, even now when she looks not well. I'm struck with what a kindness it is that Bethune is helping with the cot; I think many people would just have shown me where it was stored and left me to it. We sandwich the cot between stacks of books, and almost floor to ceiling cartons of her papers waiting to be shipped to her archives. It is late June, the temperature in the 90s, this almost 100-year-old house has no air-conditioning, and the dusty books and boxes trigger itchy eyes and nasal congestion. An hour after retiring I push my cot up five feet so the top of it rests across the threshold of a

very large bathroom that looks out at Narragansett Bay. With the window open, and the coldness emanating from the tiled bathroom floor (the cot is so low I am practically on the floor), I am able to listen to the waves and sleep. I'm tired from the long drive from Maryland, a section of the Connecticut turnpike presenting some of the most challenging driving I've done in my life!<sup>16</sup>

Next morning, lying there looking at the ceiling, I ponder these conditions: a long, occasionally harrowing drive, the dust in this workroom, the heat, the lumpy cot, sleeping partway in a bathroom, the rest of me walled by cartons and books. This is "being in the field!" Turning my head I peruse the titles of some of the books that tower beside my head: *Solar Homes for a Cold Climate; Desert Wisdom; The English Mediaeval Home; The Political Palate, A Feminist Vegetarian Cookbook; A Montessori Mother; Making Homemade Soaps and Candles*. Thankfully, later in the day Bethune will hand me keys to a small cottage two short blocks from here that a friend has recently vacated.

#### Laundry List

Lying here thinking, I consider how I'll begin the interview sessions with Bethune. In the past year I'd been making a list of things I wanted to ask myself and project colleagues and I'd thought about ways to be alert to our cultural worlds. Along with my central question, identifying cultural traditions, then exploring how they might be affecting how we project partners are moving into old age, I'm interested in what bodily changes we've experienced as we advance in chronological age. Is there much thought about death? What about religion or spirituality? Do thoughts often turn to the past? Do we think we've been affected by mainstream attitudes about old age? Does old

age have any meaning in itself? What do we think about the notion of “successful” aging? How about relations with the medical community? Why live in New England?

But, as noted in the methodology section in chapter two, before leaving for Rhode Island I touched base with anthropologist Judith Freidenberg who has experience doing ethnographic work with late-life men and women.<sup>17</sup> “Don’t go with a laundry list,” she counseled me, advising that I wait and see what would emerge in conversations with study subjects. That way I’d find out what was on their minds, not mine. It made sense, but not having a list to work from made me a little uneasy, like stepping into uncharted terrain without at least a minimal map; certainly a metaphor for this whole project and for moving into old age itself.

#### Bethune’s Apprentice?

I could hear noises emanating from the first floor and going downstairs found Bethune seated at the round pine kitchen table with Francoise who was knitting. I served myself some oatmeal. Coming to America in her teens with her family, Bethune has supported herself since she was out on her own in her twenties, engaged in several businesses, all centered on religious art and architecture. As an artist, especially one who painted icons, she has sometimes had apprentices<sup>18</sup> working with her, some even living with her in earlier days. I prepare to make tea for the three of us and wonder if I will be cast in the role of apprentice. This does become something of a reality during the ensuing week, much less so during the visits of the next two years when she is less well.

Geyla Frank recounts that when doing her life history project that became *Venus on Wheels*, while she thought of her “informant” as “my” subject, she found her subject “casting me in a supporting role in her life” (20). Frank calls for life historians to be

mindful of power dynamics and record it as it is taking place, rather than noting it afterwards. I needed to be aware of mainstream cultural attitudes, my own internalized ageism, as well as power dynamics, noted also by Caughey (2006 33).

### The Ethnographer Being Helpful?

I do notice something right away in conversing with Bethune, and it sticks out even more when I read through the transcripts later. Used to Bethune talking very fast, I notice a change from my last visit four years ago. Bethune keeps up her train-racing-down-the-track usual pace, but now sometimes stops to find a word. I see that I, with my impatient temperament, and usual “helpful” mode of functioning, can’t just sit still in silence. It bothers me to see Bethune struggle to find the right word, and I rush into these gaps and suggest a word.

JT: What kind of tea? Shall we try Apricot Ginger or Black?

AB: Black. You know if I go to a restaurant and the water is bad, [Newport being on the water, restaurants and homes heavily chlorinate their drinking water] you need something to drink so I drink coffee because the coffee covers the taste of . . . (very long pause)

JT: . . .chlorine. You’re redoing a booklet on teaching children to write?

AB: Um, on handwriting? I did that, oh . . . (long pause)

JT: . . .many years ago.

AB: . . .back in the sixties. It was published in ‘Jubilee’ then, but it was reprinted into a booklet and I need to revise it.

JT: Why are you revising it?

AB: Because you can no longer say ‘the child he.’ That is sexist.

JT: Now, did you ever do anything on teaching children to read?

AB: No, I did not. There are two conflicting theories about teaching children to read. One is the whole word method and the other is. . . (long pause)



JT: . . .phonics.

AB: . . .phonics, and you have to combine the two. Some children react better to one than to the other. Anne<sup>19</sup> was telling me the other day about her two children. Her little girl goes with the whole word method. The only trouble with it is you come to read the name of a street and you cannot spell it out. You can't do anything with it you know, because it doesn't look like anything. And the trouble with phonics is you start going ah, ah, ah, ah and you don't get the thought of it, you know. You have to get to the phonics, use the phonics in such a way that you get to the whole word thing. And of course English is not very easy because it's not written phonetically.

Listening to the tape later and going over the transcript I cringe! It's painful to see how much I interrupted. My husband and I, having lived together over fifty years now, can finish each other's sentences and we do, because by now both he, almost two years older than I, and I'm now 74, have to fish for words several times a day. But I can see how very rude it is to "assist" another person with word finding. Bethune never complained and the conversation just moved along, but in some ways I wish I'd asked her about it. In some ways I'm glad I didn't! Knowing her as I did, I think she would have thought the question idiotic as she did most questions I asked about feelings. Her approach to life was "whatever works" and she eschewed introspection. Connors in her work with old women notes much the same struggle I had. She found that the nurse in her often wanted to "help" the women in their nineties that she was studying (14-15; 33).

#### Bethune and Calder

This is the most colorful room in the house. Having recently enjoyed a Calder exhibit, and owning a book full of color photos describing *Calder At Home, The Joyous Environment of Alexander Calder* (Guerrero), Bethune's kitchen looks much like Calder's kitchen; an unconscious work of art. Straight ahead is an enameled red woodstove like mine at home, unused now, a nod to old age. I always arrive at Bethune's

home with flowers, either wildflowers I have picked, or ones from a shop that look as close to wildflowers as I can manage, and I always choose her antique Chinese blue and white willow-ware pitcher to put the flowers in, placing the arrangement on top of the woodstove. One time I liked the look of it so much Bethune caught me photographing it. Ever the artist she corrected the composition placing a small blue and white bowl with an aqua interior next to the pitcher, and taking one yellow goldenrod out of the pitcher, laying it down near the bowl. Of course, it was just right! To the right of the stove I can see a butler's pantry with open shelving piled high, crowded with mainly blue and white antique European china (Delftware and Meissen), a few Quimper plates, blue and white Japanese porcelain from the 30s, some pieces of brown and gray pottery scattered here and there, probably made by Bethune's apprentices years ago. There are dozens of china and earthenware mugs, one bright orange, all turned bottom up against dust, at the ready as they have been for the almost fifty years of meetings and family gatherings Bethune has held in this house. There are four chairs around the kitchen table in 1999, five in 2000 and 2001. Artist Mary Azarian, our Vermont project colleague, will sit in one of those chairs next year, in 2000, alongside my husband.

"Time to go to work boys and girls," Bethune says, using a favorite expression, as she gives a nod to her sister and to me and rises from her chair. Before heading up to her workroom to prepare for her meeting with de Boer-Longworthy, the American studies professor, she hands me a coffee-table size book in a bright orange dust jacket, *Proud Donkey of Schaerbeek*, Judith Stoughton's combination oral history and biography of Bethune, suggesting I read it. Breezily informing me she's just given up driving, Bethune tells me that in the afternoon she'd like me to drive her around Newport so she can make

a list of the addresses of houses she has designed over the years for the low-income housing program she works with, CCHC. She disappears upstairs so quickly I have no time to tell her I've read the book – several times.

### Challenges

My work with Bethune unfolded far differently than I anticipated. Although she was now 15 years older than when she had given her oral history to her biographer, I had naively expected my experience would be not much different from Judith Stoughton's. She had followed Bethune about interviewing her in 1984. My opening vignette gives a taste of the whirlwind nature of much of Bethune's life in the midst of which she always manages to maintain her cool despite the activity; the many hats she takes on and off in the course of a day, "not to worry," being a favorite expression. The first busy hours of this visit reinforced my expectations. Stoughton had observed:

In her mid-seventies now, Ade is still producing a prodigious amount of daily work in her Newport, Rhode Island, studio-home: pictures for various publications, schematic designs for new or renovated churches, stained-glass window designs, drawings for Terra Sancta Guild bronzes, magazine articles, and plans for low-income housing in Newport. (Stoughton xiii)<sup>20</sup>

Stoughton learned, as I did, that Bethune's days were filled with many interruptions.

Bethune still had her much-loved pets, two dogs and a cat to look after then. By the time I was working with her, Bethune, in her mid-eighties, had made a concession to old age and had no pets, just their photographs on the wall. Stoughton shared her strategy:

I gradually learned to lay traps for her in the midst of her enormously productive days. Taping sessions were subject to long interruptions for visitors, telephone calls, studio demands, and the needs of the animals. (Stoughton xii)

Trying to describe Bethune, Stoughton gives an anecdote from the summer of 1984 to show "a typical behavior pattern" (Stoughton xiii):

Late in the afternoon, we used to take a swim in Narragansett Bay, right by her house in Newport. At first, when we went in, I was cautious in spite of being a fearless swimmer; I expected to stay in sight of my companion. After all, the bay is deep enough for ocean-going vessels! Within a few moments, Ade was out of sight. I started feeling protective about a slightly older woman and went in search of her. Finally, I caught sight of her enjoying a steady swim way out among the moored yachts. (Stoughton xiii)

The Bethune I had known for fifteen years through visits and letters and phone calls, and had last seen four years ago, was the vigorous, healthy, and busy woman Stoughton describes. But when Bethune came to the door to greet me in summer 1999, I noticed immediately that she had lost a great deal of weight and there were some ugly bruises on her arms and hands but she made no mention of them or the change in her appearance.

During three previous stays visiting as a friend, rather than a researcher, I had always taken Bethune out for a pleasant meal at her favorite restaurant, the Rhumblin, in an old Federal house near her home. And Bethune would cut out of her busy day one or two times when she and I, and perhaps her secretary, would gather in the kitchen over tea and we would settle the problems of the world in a half hour. I thought of Bethune when I learned the expression, *refaire le monde*, “remake the world,” in Susan Loomis’ memoir *On Rue Tatin* (271), the French expression a description of discussing and solving problems of the day over tea, wine or coffee. On this first fieldtrip I was looking forward to these times expecting that many of the topics I had placed on my “laundry list” left at home would emerge during these relaxed times. It was not to be. There would be no meal at the Rhumblin, and few chats over tea. A reason Bethune had appealed to me as a study participant was that she was one of the most loquacious people I knew. She always had plenty to say on any topic that might arise so I envisioned this dissertation chapter on Bethune would have text interspersed with long sections of transcript. This was also not

to be. Instead text would be interspersed with some material from transcripts, but also excerpts from her oral history, from interviews with art historians or journalists, and essays she herself had written.

In the intervening time between my last trip and this one, Bethune has been diagnosed with leukemia. When arranging this research visit, Bethune's secretary, who was retiring after 30 years, mentioned it to me. Bethune has a new assistant, a combination draftsman and secretary already in place by the time I arrive. I didn't tell Bethune I knew about the leukemia. I felt I should allow her the space to tell me herself. During the week Bethune did something I'd never seen before, instead of heading to the kitchen for a tea-break, she went to her bedroom every afternoon and shut the door for an hour saying she was going to have "a little lie down," that she was tired from a little "anemia." It was during my second visit in 2000 that Bethune told me about the leukemia. Her doctor was keeping it in check with medication and "since everyone in old age has something" she recommended, tongue in cheek, that I have leukemia if I had to have something! And she was knowledgeable, having had a hip replaced to eliminate arthritic pain ten years earlier.

#### Harbor House

From the first moments of my stay much of Bethune's conversation focused on her efforts to secure the abandoned convent and other buildings across the street from her house in order to establish there a mixed income community for the elderly, planning to live there herself. I finally sorted out that this project was originally called the Cenacle, then Star of the Sea, then Harbor House, Star of the Sea being the name of the corporation established to accomplish the financing. I came to see that no matter what I

asked Bethune or what we might be talking about, the conversation would always turn to Star of the Sea and its progress or lack of it. I initially saw this as a challenge. We weren't talking about her cultural traditions, or about old age, or much of anything else except Star of the Sea. It took me a while to just let go and go with the flow, to be grateful to Bethune for sharing this piece of her life with me, and my finally realizing that here I was listening to the voice of an old woman sharing what was on her mind; what I had come to do in the first place. Here is a sample from a conversation already in progress from that first week.

JT: So you think women age differently than men?

AB: I think they do. They seem to be more resourceful in [old] age.

JT: Women talk amongst each other about hair, children, and health issues, do you think they talk much about aging?

AB: Women tend to gather together. I do have a bunch of old gents who sit on a bench outside of my garage (she laughs) and they sit there and I don't know what they talk about, but they are park bench philosophers. My Dad used to join that kind of group of men and he told them stories of World War One and they loved it and they just enjoyed each other's company, but they don't live under one roof. I think for women it's more important to live under the same roof. It's what we're [meaning men and women in her proposed elder community] going to do. Do you have such a thing as a Senior Center where you live?

JT: Yes we do.

AB: And people go there for lunch? And they have various activities they can do? They might have a lecture or they might play pool or something?

JT: Yes.

AB: That's what we're going to have. We're going to have the equivalent of a senior center plus you live there also. You don't have to go back and forth. It is stupidity to put an old person in a full apartment. We will have a community living room and a community dining room. We don't want to be obliged to give three meals a day. People can subscribe to a food service. Or, people can cook in a family kitchen. Where people live they will have a hot

plate and microwave but no danger of fire. Rooms are not routine size. It will be their own place and they can do what they damn well please. We have all seen people who go into a nursing home and go into decline. Are you familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs?<sup>21</sup>

JT: Not very. I'll look it up and refresh my memory.

AB: Maslow has a great pyramid which is the hierarchy of needs and the lower ones are physical, there are nine needs after that [Actually there are eight levels of need, seven after the first ones are met.] Most places just take care of the physical needs so you are not abandoned all alone in your house. And you know that house becomes too much for most persons. We have lots of old people here in Rhode Island.

JT: We were talking about living with diminishment earlier, what has Maslow's hierarchy of needs got to do with diminishment?

AB: You do have to come to terms with diminishment [failing eyesight or other challenges of old age] but at the same time you also have this desire to go up. You're more interested in going up [see Appendix 2] and learning more.

Bethune was to return to Maslow and his pyramid later, but first she wanted me to begin to learn the history of her Star of the Sea project. She handed me booklets and papers to read, going off to her upstairs computer to work, checking in on me from time to time.

My next challenge, after accepting the fact that Bethune was focused like a laser on her late-life living project to the exclusion of just about anything else, was related to Bethune's being one always careful to husband her time and energy. I think because Bethune now had leukemia, telling me the illness would change in character one day and no medical intervention would then be able to halt it, she was now even more careful how she spent her time. Having handed me a copy of her biography, as well as lots of news clippings and booklets about Star of the Sea, when I would to ask Bethune anything about her life Bethune's gruff response would be: "Read the book!" I sat in her back yard and read it again, and read the literature about Star of the Sea. Afterwards Bethune would answer most questions about her life by responding: "It's in the book." She saw no point

in spending time telling me about her life because I could read what she had already said about it. Believing Bethune's life story "an important chapter in the cultural history of our century,"<sup>22</sup> and having contributed to two anthologies on women and the arts,<sup>23</sup> Judith Stoughton, a nun and professor in the art department of St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, taped an oral history of Bethune, making two visits to her Newport home. The published result was a combination oral history and biography, *Proud Donkey of Schaerbeek, Adé Bethune, Catholic Worker Artist*, containing photographs of church interiors for which Bethune was the liturgical consultant, stained glass windows and church tapestries she had designed, pictures she had painted and mosaics she created in the Yucatan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, as well as in the U.S. and Canada, taking her life up to 1985 and published in 1988.<sup>24</sup>

Bethune suggested I attend Sunday Mass with her at a church for which she was a liturgical consultant; she wanted me to see her work and I did go. She also took me to her regular Saturday class in Greek and Hebrew taught by a Benedictine monk from Portsmouth Abbey held in a Newport convent of nuns. The purpose was to prepare for the Scripture readings at the upcoming Sunday Mass, reading the bible passages in the original. Bethune has been attending this class for almost 60 years. And I did drive Bethune to some of the houses she designed for CCHC where we logged the addresses for her archives. After this first visit I began to gain some familiarity with what Bethune was up to, her cultural worlds, projects she was involved in, and what her daily life was like. A synopsis of chapters of her life will ground the later discussion of how cultural orientations she brought with her into old age were influencing her last years.



## Bethune's Life – Chapter One – 1914-1937

Bethune is not a native New Englander, nor is she a Native American. Called “Adé” by friends and family,<sup>25</sup> Bethune was born to European aristocracy as Baroness Marie Adélaïde de Bethune in the Schaerbeek section of Brussels, Belgium, on January 12, 1914. Her maternal grandfather, Vicomte Georges Terlinden, was Attorney General at the Supreme Court of Belgium, her paternal great-grandfather Felix Bethune, had been a member of the Belgian senate for many years, playing a role in the independence of Belgium from the Netherlands. Bethune's artistic talent, especially as manifested in her work as a liturgical and architectural consultant for Catholic churches like the Newman Center Chapel at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, was probably inherited from her great uncle, Jean Baptiste Bethune, a painter and architect who studied with Pugin in England, returning to the continent to design neo-Gothic buildings and stained glass windows.

Bethune credited her lifelong interest in liturgy, formal Catholic religious ceremonies, to a liturgical heritage coming from both sides of her mother's family. Her mother's paternal grandmother received communion at daily Mass during an age when frequent communion was highly unusual.<sup>26</sup> Bethune's maternal grandparents had a country place in Schiplaeken, Belgium. It was difficult for townspeople to get across a canal to get to church so Bethune's grandparents built a Catholic church and established a school. Bethune remembers worshiping in the church during the summer (Stoughton 119).

The small town of Bethune in southern Flanders is now contained within the boundary of northern France. Bethune's mother was Baronne Marthe de Bethune. Stoughton, who knew Bethune's mother, refers to the family as “the de Bethunes.” Adé

Bethune's younger brother, now professor emeritus of chemistry at Boston College, kept the "de" Bethune. Adé Bethune dropped the "de" thinking it pretentious. She once told a journalist that she dropped the title "Baroness" in 1930 at about the same time she became an American citizen (Patykewich). Another reporter also asked about her heritage and Bethune replied:

The general public tend to get funny ideas about aristocracy, often associate it with enormous wealth, opulence and idle pleasure-seeking. Instead, I was brought up with a serious sense of duty, responsibility and service to people. Noblesse oblige. (Merolla)

Six months after Bethune was born World War One began, her father, a major in the Belgian army, left to fight, and German soldiers marched into Belgium. For a month Bethune was cared for by family servants while her mother went to prison for engaging in resistance work; their home a hiding place for an underground newspaper. During the few interviews we did have in her kitchen, Bethune loved telling me her "my mother was a jailbird" story. Bethune as a little girl went with a servant daily to visit her mother. They carried a basket of food covered with a napkin. Bethune demonstrated with a dishtowel how her mother would open the hem of the napkin, place a message inside on tissue thin paper and then resew the hem. In this way she communicated with the outside world and, through connections, was released after a month. When her father returned home from the war Bethune didn't recognize him; less than a year old when he left, she was now five. Bethune tells me her father, a chemical engineer, was gassed during the war and "was never quite right" and couldn't hold a job. Europe had been devastated and there were many dislocated aristocrats floating around Europe:

My mother wanted to try life in America in order to be able to work herself and have her children earn their living instead of being idle, impoverished gentry in Europe. (Stoughton 21)

While her mother made preparations for the family to emigrate, Bethune was sent to live at a liturgically progressive<sup>27</sup> Belgian Catholic convent boarding school for a year.

### Gender

One particular episode from those childhood years is revelatory of then gender expectations and Bethune's chutzpah. Drawing since early childhood, Bethune had her first work published in Belgium in 1926 when she was twelve. Deciding that pictures in her brother's Boy Scout magazine weren't very good, unsolicited, Bethune sent the magazine some drawings, mailing them in secret, and signing the enclosed letter with only her initials. Two were published. She sent more and more were published. The editor sent a note, "Your drawings are great. They are a little bold and modern, but they have good line and humor" (18). Finally the editor talked with Bethune's mother and asked if he could meet the artist:

Mother replied, 'Unfortunately, this child suffers from a real infirmity.' 'How sad, . . . May I come to see him?' Mother answered. 'Alas, his infirmity is that he is a girl.' That was the end of my association with the Boy Scout magazine. I don't know if they continued to use my pictures or not. It was very sad and humiliating to think that my drawings were not wanted because I was a girl and couldn't fit into that world at all. (Stoughton 18)

Bethune told Judith Stoughton:

I wasn't too keen about being a girl. Boys had Tuesday afternoon off from school so they could do sports. They could be Boy Scouts. They could go camping; they could make campfires; they could roast potatoes over the ashes; they could earn badges. They could learn Latin and Greek. Girls couldn't do any of these thrilling things. (Stoughton 69)

Bethune's older brother was professor emeritus of geology at the University of Louvain when he died, and her younger brother, Andre, a chemistry professor, their father having

been a chemical engineer. Her sister Françoise is married to a diplomat, another sister died young of meningitis.

## Chapter Two – New York and the Catholic Worker – 1928-1938

The de Bethune family left Europe in 1928, moving to New York into a tiny railroad flat near Columbia University; later to another apartment on the East Side. Bethune's mother, Marthe, "who had been taught to do fine needlework . . . earned a living at home by making lingerie and laces for ladies of the social register" (Merolla). Bethune's older sister, Françoise, joined her mother in this business selling linens and lingerie to wealthy clients. Either due to being gassed in the war, or showing symptoms of early Alzheimer's, Bethune's father, Gaston, was unable to hold positions he was offered, one time breaking a contract due to paranoia. Her brother Pierre stayed behind in Europe. Gaston and Andre slept on a fold-away bed, Françoise and Adé in bunk beds, and Marthe on a cot in the hall; quite a departure from ancestral mansions and servants.

Marthe's desire that her children learn to work was fulfilled. Adé Bethune cooked and shopped for the family while attending Catholic Cathedral High on weekdays, Parson's School of Art on Saturdays. The next year, at fifteen, she was allowed to attend high school classes at Cathedral in the mornings and the National Academy of Design in the afternoons where, despite being exposed to classes in full figure drawing and sculpture, she remained "devoted to the beauty and elegance of two-dimensional work" (Stoughton 31) that defines her wood engravings and illustrations. Bethune made money as a cutter in her mother's lingerie business, and by giving French lessons. In 1932, after graduation, Bethune became an art student at Cooper Union; one of her fellow students being the abstract expressionist painter Lee Krasner who was to marry Jackson Pollock.

In the fall of 1933, the midst of the Great Depression, Bethune discovered the Catholic Worker newspaper and movement. Hearing some women were giving help and hospitality to the poor in a storefront near Second Avenue and prompted by her works of mercy, social justice formation derived from her European Catholic upbringing and convent schooling, and by seeing homeless, jobless, hungry people as she walked about the city, Bethune went to take a look. There she met Dorothy Day (1897-1980), thirty-seven, Bethune was nineteen.

Day, a free-lance journalist, single mother with a young daughter, was a charismatic figure who had written for socialist publications, belonged to a circle of social radicals and literary people like Eugene O'Neill, Malcolm Cowley, Hart Crane, and John Dos Passos, had been jailed in 1917 with a group of suffragists, was a recent convert to Catholicism, and had begun in 1933 a penny monthly, *The Catholic Worker*, still one cent. It was advocacy journalism promoting Catholic social teaching. Although the label "Catholic" was in the masthead, at no time did either the paper, (still being sold for a penny, still being published), or the movement, have any official ties to the Catholic Church. Day was joined in the endeavor by Peter Maurin (1877-1949), an eccentric, French immigrant, who was attempting to identify with the poor and live a life like St. Francis of Assisi. His contribution to the paper was philosophical blank verse called "easy essays" that have been likened to Zen koans (Fisher 36). As the paper gained readers, needy men and women Catholic and otherwise flocked for help to Day's door. Day and volunteers daily doled out coffee, soup and donated clothing. Eschewing paid advertising, contributions kept the paper going.<sup>28</sup> Day's kitchen was the editorial office and "her apartment was the seed of many houses of hospitality to come" (Forest).<sup>29</sup> As

winter approached the homeless were also seeking help so Day rented an apartment with space for ten women, not long afterwards securing a place for men. In May 1933, 2,500 copies of the Catholic Worker newspaper were printed, and these were distributed by hand. By December 1935, 100,000 copies were being printed monthly and mailed out.

Years hence Bethune would describe how she saw Day, a newspaper woman who:

...smoked like a chimney. She also had a little girl of six. She loved children's drawings, plants, animals, sunshine, babies, old people, the poor, the suffering. And she found spiritual sustenance in the feasts of the Liturgical Year, the Gospels and the lives of the saints. (CW 1985)

The newspaper spawned the Catholic Worker movement that went national, evolving as a countercultural contrast to typical Catholic parish life:

The movement was committed above all to performing works of mercy in a nonproselytizing atmosphere which blurred the distinction between volunteers and afflicted so radically that evangelical programs such as the Salvation Army and professional social service agencies seemed patronizing by comparison. (Fisher 40)

The Catholic Worker approach wasn't always appreciated because some of the men and women they sheltered were labeled, by others, undeserving poor, alcoholics and bums, and some Worker members lived in the Houses with those they served.<sup>30</sup> When a visiting social worker once asked how long "clients" were allowed to stay, Day answered "forever . . . once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ." When Day was asked about the biblical quotation that had Jesus saying the poor would "be with us always," Day's response was, "we are not content that there should be so many of them" (Forest). By 1936 there were 33 Catholic Worker houses across the United States, but unlike religious congregations, these small communities were independent of each other, only loosely affiliated through friendships.

The Worker movement was not just an urban phenomenon; it had an agrarian component, an element of green revolution (Whitman) with farm communes, called “agronomic universities,” (McKanan 2007 84) in Staten Island, Tivoli, New York and Upton, Massachusetts and elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> They provided “an alternative to industrial civilization and a context in which families could live out the ideals of Casti Connubi,” literally, “of chaste wedlock,” a 1930 papal encyclical issued by Pius XI, reaffirming “the traditional view that ‘the child holds the first place’ among the blessings of marriage and strictly forbid all forms of artificial birth control” (McKanan 86). Tamar Hennessy, Day’s daughter from a common-law marriage she left to become a Catholic, had nine children. As of 2008, there were over 185 Catholic Worker communities of various types in the world, putting out their own newsletters (<http://www.catholicworker.org>). In 2008 the Los Angeles Catholic Worker was feeding a meal to a thousand people a day. The Worker community in Alderson, West Virginia visits women prisoners at a nearby Federal Prison Camp offering hospitality to family members and friends of prisoners (McKanan 7-8).

Nineteen-year-old Bethune inspired by Day, and seeing works of mercy in action, was uninspired by the look of *The Catholic Worker* paper. She said it looked “shabby.” As with the Boy Scout magazine seven years earlier, unsolicited, Bethune produced some illustrations depicting the works of mercy and sent them to Day for her newspaper. She reminisced about it more than fifty years later:

I decided to search for suitable themes in the Catechism, where I chanced upon a list of ‘the fourteen works of mercy.’ At the top of the list was ‘harboring the homeless.’<sup>32</sup> Great! Here was hospitality herself. Without further delay, I launched into a series of circular designs. Number one showed a forlorn young woman being greeted at the door by an older one. Others in the series would include ‘feeding the hungry,’ ‘clothing the naked,’ ‘visiting the sick,’ etc. To

round out my first offering to the Catholic Worker, I made a black and white version of a design of Saint Joseph the Worker. . .Joseph was wearing an apron, stands at his carpenter's bench, carving a piece of wood.. .With pounding heart I mailed my hard worked drawings to the Catholic Worker editors. (Bethune 1985 4)

Bethune sent a note: "I mean to do more of the "Corporal Works of Mercy" but I thought I'd start with "Harboring the Harborless" as winter is yet far from finished" (Stoughton 37). Bethune did all fourteen works. The corporal works: To feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbor the harborless, visit the sick, ransom the captive and bury the dead. This has been the traditional wording for the corporal works of mercy, but in a 1986 clip book of her art<sup>33</sup> that she has allowed churches and other organizations to use free of charge, the wording Bethune uses under her picture for "ransom the captive" has become "visiting the prisoner in jail" (6). The traditional spiritual works of mercy are: instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offenses willingly, comfort the afflicted and pray for the living and the dead. "All fourteen drawings appeared in serial in 1934 and 1935, reminding readers of the foundation of the Catholic Worker mission" (Norton 12).

Harvard Divinity School professor Dan McKanan writes that the list of works of mercy deriving from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, was standard by the Middle Ages and he argues recently (2008) that while, as Day said, the works of mercy were the program and rule of life of the Catholic Worker, this didn't mean the Catholic Worker should be seen as a charitable organization concerned more with social service than with social change (8). Day was concerned about social injustice and McKanan (9) cites Day's words from 1940: "We consider the spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy and the



following of Christ to be the best revolutionary technique and a means for changing the social order rather than perpetuating it” (CW 7:8, May 1940: 10).

Upon receiving the unsolicited pictures from Bethune, Day was enthusiastic, printed them, and suggested various saints for her to depict which Bethune executed showing them in modern dress at some kind of work. University of Maryland’s Norton states Bethune’s artwork was featured in every edition of the paper until 1945, and after that they were recycled up to the present. In 1950 wood engravings by the renowned Quaker artist Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990), famous for his illustrations of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, began to appear also (Roberts 58). The striking graphics of these two artists, Bethune and Eichenberg, gives the *Worker* paper its distinctive look and helped draw many people like Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles to the Worker movement and message. It was a far cry from the sentimental pictures and statues found in many Catholic churches and homes.

The earliest masthead of the paper showed two white male workers, one holding a mallet, the other a pickax. After a few issues Day replaced one of the white workers with a black worker. Bethune says: “These were in opposite corners at the top of the paper. . . .[it looked like] they. . .weren’t on speaking terms. . . .I decided to bring them both together in the middle, with Christ’s arms over their shoulders uniting them” (Stoughton 46). This remained the masthead for fifty years until Bethune updated it in 1985. She replaced the white male worker with a white female agricultural worker; a mother with a baby on her back and a basket of produce in her arms.

In 1934 Bethune took a class in liturgy at a Catholic summer school. Three years later she wound up illustrating a book by the Jesuit who taught that class, Gerald Ellard,

S. J., Ph.D., professor of liturgy at St. Louis University, the book, *Christian Life and Worship*, a Catholic college text. Bethune's mother knitted socks for men in the soup line, donating what funds she could to Day's work. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Day wrote: "The Bethune family performed all the works of mercy out of slender resources, earned by the labor of their hands" (191).

Bethune and her parents might have stayed in New York were it not for the fact that her art had come to the attention of a wider public thanks to the *Catholic Worker* paper's increasing circulation, and to new contacts she made as a result of winning, in 1933, a prestigious stained glass competition. The prize was an invitation to Boston to execute her design in the famous Connick studio; Charles J. Connick having designed the rose window in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. She then went to stay with John Howard Benson and his wife in Newport for a month while working on a commission at the John Stevens Shop, carving a crucifix and statues for a Catholic church in Pennsylvania. Benson lent Bethune his carving tools and showed her how to carve. She also learned calligraphy from him, returning in 1936 to spend more time working in his workshop. Recognizing Bethune's exceptional talent for design Benson asked her to design some ornamentation for a tombstone, the first of many collaborative projects, one being the base of the Iwo Jima Memorial. Bethune designed the wreath, Benson did the carving. Another such project was the line drawing of lyre and scroll over the entrance to an auditorium in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

#### Bethune's Life – Chapter Three – Newport – 1938-1964

Benson also taught Bethune wood engraving and she used that skill when she was commissioned to illustrate some religious books to be used by Catholics during worship

to help them understand what the priest-celebrant was saying and doing during Mass that was said in Latin. One of them, Fr. Stedman's *My Sunday Missal* (1940), sold millions of copies. The follow-up, *My Lenten Missal* (1941) again sold millions and was translated into German, Polish, Spanish and other languages. In 1936 when Benson left his job teaching art at the Benedictine Portsmouth Priory [now Abbey] School to accept the post of head of the sculpture department at the Rhode Island School of Design, Bethune replaced him at the boarding and day school, commuting every week to Newport. She moved to Rhode Island permanently in 1938 into the upper level of the John Stevens Shop, bringing some female friends and apprentices with her, keeping in close touch with her family back in New York. That same year she designed seven stained glass lancet windows for a monastery in Brooklyn portraying seven women saints engaged in the seven corporal, seven spiritual works of mercy.<sup>34</sup> Also in 1938 Bethune wrote a small book simply entitled *Work*, discussed below. Her first written work had appeared in *Stained Glass*, in 1933.

Bethune, the first female teacher at the school, got to know the Benedictine monks and began attending services there in the simple Priory chapel rather than in her parish church. One of the monks encouraged Bethune to visit Newport's Touro Synagogue and he began to teach her the Hebrew alphabet in 1939, helping her to begin to read the first book of the Bible in the original. She was so drawn to Benedictine spirituality, the emphasis on prayer and work and hospitality that she saw in this Benedictine community, she joined the Benedictines as a lay person, becoming what's called an "Oblate." She also influenced Dorothy Day to become an Oblate.

In May 1940 Bethune, age twenty-six, borrowed \$1,500, added it to \$1000 she had saved from her commissions and teaching, and purchased a small house in Newport, 36 Thames Street. Bethune told me that had she been married she wouldn't have been able to get a loan; loans were refused to married women! Her biographer writes:

Buying a house was a further step towards realizing her mother's dream that all her children would earn their own living. It was also another step away from the life of the old world gentry. . . . (Stoughton 69)

A year later, in 1941, Bethune's parents, her mother age sixty, her father sixty-six, left New York, and moved in with her. In 1953 they moved again, into a larger house in Newport, 118 Washington St. that Marthe purchased with an inheritance. They would be together until Bethune's father died at 89; Marthe passed away age 96.

Proving to be an exceptional businessperson, from her home in Newport Bethune started the St. Leo Shop, initially a mail order business, to fill requests sent to the *Worker* paper asking for holy cards, greeting cards, and Mass cards using her illustrations from *The Catholic Worker*. For some years Bethune's St. Leo Shop was the sole North American outlet for Dr. Maria Montessori's books on early childhood education. An Italian citizen, Montessori had been interned in India where she was on a lecture tour when the Second World War broke out. Bethune also sold baby carriers made in Europe. In 1964 the mail order business moved into a building near Bethune's home and by then the St. Leo catalogue had evolved into a popular newsletter called the *St. Leo Bulletin* that was mailed to 50,000 subscribers until it ceased publication in fall 1981.

Day kept in contact with Bethune. Bethune thought Day's daughter Tamar, who wanted to get married, should finish high school but Day was against it (Miller 365) and in 1943 sent her sixteen-year-old daughter to live with Bethune for a year to learn sewing,

cooking and baking prior to her marriage. Day herself visited Bethune noting in *The Long Loneliness*, her autobiography, “Whenever I visited Ade I came away with a renewed zest for life. She has such a sense of the sacramentality of life, the goodness of things, a sense that is translated in all her works whether it was illustrating a missal, making stained-glass windows, or sewing, cooking or gardening” (191).

From the time she moved to Newport until the end of her life Bethune received commissions to decorate or design decorations for churches, or to act as a liturgical consultant, which meant she would work with the church architect to make sure decisions made about light and space and where to place doors and the like, all enhanced the worship experience. In 1949 a commission brought Bethune to the Philippines to spend a year decorating a new earthquake-proof church at a sugar mill; St. Joseph Church, Victorias Milling Company, Occidental Negros. Making friends with local children by drawing their portraits, Bethune encouraged them to teach her the local language and to help her scour the ground for bits of broken glass that she then used to make mosaics for the walls of the church. The glass came from pieces of Coca-Cola, Milk of Magnesia, beer and whiskey bottles. Finding the climate eleven degrees from the equator inhospitable to paints then available, Bethune worked through someone at the Columbia University School of Painting and Sculpture to prevail on Union Carbide to send her paint that would survive mold and a climate with torrential rains. In 1955 Bethune went to Mexico, to Bacalar, Yucatan, and consulted on the Church of San Joachin where she painted frescoes. In 1951 she won a prestigious award in graphic design from the American Institute of Graphic Arts for *The Catholic Art Quarterly* magazine that Bethune was then editing.

## Bethune's Life – Chapter Four – 1965-1988

Bethune's work as artistic designer with Terra Sancta Guild began in 1965. The Guild manufactures and sells Jewish and Christian religious items made of bronze and pewter from Bethune's drawings. These include menorahs, commemorative medals, plaques, and candleholders. Stoughton wrote of Bethune then in her seventies:

From her drawing table overlooking Narragansett Bay in Newport, Adé continues to draw the sacred signs that put her in contact with people all over the world: a door knocker in Brussels or Minneapolis, bookends in Tel-Aviv or New York City, a tabernacle and altar set in Houston, table pieces for a Sabbath meal in Seattle, an Advent wreath in Boston or Durban, pendants to honor liturgical ministers. (Stoughton 101)

The bronze objects were created in Israel which Bethune visited several times in connection with her Guild work.

The next year, in 1966, Bethune helped to found Church Community Housing Corporation (CCHC), designing prototypes for more than thirty houses for first-time, low-income owners. Bethune's social justice work inspired by her lifelong commitment to performing works of mercy is less well known than her early association with *The Catholic Worker* paper. Her long and distinguished career as book illustrator, liturgical consultant and Terra Sancta designer is even less well known, and almost completely unknown now is her long career as a writer and editor. Besides serving as editor of *Catholic Art Quarterly*, Bethune wrote for many other publications: *Church Property Administration*, *Liturgy*, *Catholic Digest*, *Liturgical Arts*, *Commonweal*, and *Rhode Island Senior Times*, to name a few. She was also publisher and editor of the *St. Leo Bulletin* and a quarterly magazine *Sacred Signs*.

Bethune wrote book reviews. The Adé Bethune I knew was very funny and my favorite example of her humor is found in a 1959 review she wrote of a book that described the famous architect Marcel Breuer's plans for the proposed new abbey church at St. John's Collegeville, Minnesota, a church I know well, having stayed at the abbey and participated in a spirituality conference at there; this Benedictine abbey coming to prominence not long ago as the site of Kathleen Norris' two extended residencies that resulted in her 1996 book *The Cloister Walk*. Bethune wrote that Breuer offered no excuse for turning the new church towards the north to face a gym instead of towards the sun:

To remedy the false orientation . . . Mr. Breuer produced a remarkable scheme. He conceived a monumental structure to reflect noonday sunlight into the sombre façade window. This has been given the rather barbarous name of 'bell banner.' Elegantly designed, like an outdoor movie screen cantilevered on four graceful concrete legs, it is a ninety-foot combination of triumphal arch or gateway, light reflector, sign post, cross bearer and campanile. Even a Boy Scout knife does not claim so many functions. (Stoughton 113)

She felt stained glass designers were getting carried away trying to crowd too many symbols into their church windows and in a 1961 book review called it "symbolitis." In the same review, "Emblems supposed to be related to the same subject (e.g., the life of the Blessed Virgin) are piled on top of each other as in a fantastic banana split" (Stoughton 114).

A Melkite priest in California, pastor of St. George Melkite-Greek Catholic Church, Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Mark Melone, is a practicing iconographer, and his work is in a number of churches throughout the U.S. In his online bio he notes apprenticing to Adé Bethune. He says he studied with her a full year between college and graduate school, and for three summers, the last being in 1977.<sup>35</sup>

## Bethune's Life – Chapter Five – 1989-2002

I date the last chapter of Bethune's life history as beginning in 1989 when she was 75, because around that year, give or take, Bethune began working on her Star of the Sea/Harbor House project. A survey she did with people around her age in Newport is dated 1992 (see Appendix A). Bethune told me she did an earlier survey but she and I couldn't find it. Another reason for beginning this chapter with 1989 is the publication of an essay Bethune wrote revealing ideas she had about old age. In this essay, *The Christian Life Span*, written when she was 74, Bethune addressed a question:

Is a long life desirable? In some ways I think it is. Even the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., on the morning before he was slain by an assassin's bullet, proclaimed with no illusion in his voice, "Longevity has its place." A long life gives you repeated chances to learn, to observe, to experience, to listen, to obey. You do not necessarily gain new insights, but you learn the timeless ones anew, and you have an opportunity to apply them to new situations. (Wilde 87)

An accompanying photo shows Bethune as a young child sitting on her grandfather's lap:

. . .to an elder like myself, life seems but a brief moment. 'Time flies.' 'Where has time gone?' . . .Don't they say. . .that by every seventh year of life the human body has renewed all its cells? By now, then, my body must have been renewed ten times. Yet, something of its form and personality remains constant throughout . . . That cute two-year-old girl whose thoughts I remember so well, whose body I still inhabit, sometimes seems so far away, almost another person, but one whose uniqueness is still with me. (87)

The editor of *At That Time, Cycles and Seasons in the Life of a Christian*, that included Bethune's essay, identifies her as: "artist, theologian, consultant, Christian" (91). This is only the second reference I have found recognizing her as a theologian, and Wilde meant the word in its traditional sense; someone who writes theology. Stoughton calls Bethune a major contributor to "visual theology" (Stoughton 108). Yet, by all definitions of what a theologian is, Bethune was a consummate and prolific Christian and Catholic theologian.<sup>36</sup> There is no room here for considering this notion: Bethune's



lectures on icons and Eastern Christian thought, her body of written work on the Christian liturgical year and Christian art that reflect also her study of Hebrew. Bethune as theologian is a doctoral dissertation waiting to be written.<sup>37</sup>

In May 1994 at age 80, Bethune wrote “Food for Thought, Fresh Orange Juice and Currant Jelly” for *Rhode Island Senior Times*, about her experience living with her elderly parents, her father close to 90, her mother, 96, when they died; Bethune’s mother, 60, her father 66, when they moved in with Bethune in Newport. After her father died in 1966, Bethune’s mother lived on with her for twelve years more years. Sharing some little vignettes of life with her old parents, Bethune uses them as a springboard to make the point: “my parents so clearly showed me” that “learning satisfying new skills” is possible even “into extended old age” (19). The skills Bethune referred to related to working in the kitchen, a room her upper class parents had been unfamiliar with until they came to America in middle age. Bethune discusses how her mother learned to bake bread and how “the summer before she died at 96” she and her mother “canned jars and jars of current jelly.” When Bethune handed me this article in the first hour of my first field trip visit, she told me it was this experience of living with her parents, even with her father’s dementia,<sup>38</sup> that prompted her to envision Star of the Sea/Harbor House.

Bethune left out of this article a description of her father’s Alzheimer’s and how she, her mother, and her employees cared for him. It was true, as the essay notes, that Gaston had lived much of his life with servants and did not know his way around a kitchen and in his late life he did learn the skill of making a simple breakfast for Marthe, taking it up the stairs to her. What goes unmentioned is his mental confusion and forgetfulness that Bethune told me about. It was important to her that Gaston maintain his

dignity. Since Bethune's house was quite hot in warm weather, people who worked in the downstairs office would open the windows. Gaston would sometimes wander into the office and close the windows. After he left the room, someone would open them again. Bethune said no one tried to dissuade him from closing the windows. There is a small war memorial outside her home and Gaston would raise the flag some mornings. The local "old gents" as Bethune called them, knew of Gaston's cognitive problems, and they too would treat him with dignity, helping him raise and lower the flag. In typical fashion, Bethune handed me an old issue of her *St. Leo Bulletin*, explaining she found little jobs for her father to perform. A photo in this *Bulletin* shows Gaston at 81 performing the simple task of putting labels on the newsletters preparing them for mailing.

In 1995 Bethune, age 81, wrote about what she learned from clearing out the house of a woman who had died in her nineties in *Commonweal*. Seeing the amount of stuff the women had accumulated, including bibs and little dresses from her one child who had died early, prompted Bethune to think about her own stuff:

AB: I need to simplify my life . . . I need to write my will and sign a durable power of attorney. I must start giving most of my treasures to the younger generation. I want to see my heirs enjoy them while I am still living, enjoy them as I did, and still do. . . .I might live for another twenty years, but I want to be free to live them in the simple style that befits an elder. . . .I must not leave a mess for others to clean up after I die.

Bethune titled the article "A Way of Life in Old Age: Start a New Community." Again she refers to her experience living with elderly parents, wondering if her parents being "in good health into advanced age," (she does not refer to her father's Alzheimer's), and dying at home instead of in a hospital, something she herself managed to do, wasn't a result of the three of them living a common life. "Common life may be an important part of preventive medicine":

How would it be, I wondered, for older folks to have companions, to live cooperatively, to work out a buddy system where one helps the other and they do not have to be consigned to a nursing institution for sick people? An idea began to take shape: a community of persons over fifty, who want to shake off loneliness, simplify their private households, and enjoy a richer, more interesting life. People who want to retain their independence, personal responsibility, and the feeling that they are really useful, that others need them. . . .Is all this only a lovely dream? To be realistic, a few friends and I have joined forces and formed a nonprofit corporation, Star of the Sea, in Newport, Rhode Island. We are buying a building, the former Cenacle Retreat House. . . .The plan is to renovate it . . . .To bring the buildings up to code and meet the Americans with Disabilities Act, everything must be updated. . . .Today we are launching into the deep to raise \$2.5 million. No dream without a bottom line.

While it is valuable to hear Bethune's veteran voice talking about old age, I think it important to observe that although Bethune was a visual artist, she was also a writer. In her 80s she was writing to share about old age. One of our other project partners, Luthera Dawson, also kept writing in old age. This seems to me to be a resource that writers have that helps to give their life meaning. Writers keep on writing.

### Second Field Trip

Between my first and second trips to Newport, Bethune and I had two long phone interviews and exchanged a few e-mails. Fortuitously, it turned out that the three study participants I was able to live with for at least a week, and who became key co-researchers, were also online and we were able to exchange e-mails. During the first phone interview Bethune, 86 in January 2000, commented that holding the phone for longer than a short conversation bothered her neck and shoulder so in March 2000 I sent her a specially designed phone with large numbers and good speakerphone capability. She replied: "Thank you for the great phone you sent. We set it right up and tried it out on a neighbor and it works like a charm" (3/10/00). Accompanying me, John did the driving on the second Rhode Island visit and we stayed in the second floor guest room as

we did during our third stay the following year. Bethune upon learning John could fix anything, found many little things for him to repair and she really loved him. Some weeks after we got home she sent him a package. Knowing he did *The New York Times* crossword every day Bethune cut a month's worth of puzzles out of a newspaper for him.

When Bethune, John and I sat down in her kitchen for the first time during this second visit I noticed Bethune was sitting in a chair with arms, one of a pair of chairs designed by her great uncle, the one she called "Gothic John" because he was a leader of the European Gothic Revival. It had been moved to the kitchen; the rest of the kitchen chairs were armless. When I commented on the chair Bethune turned it into a teaching moment. "See," she said, "I can push myself up." And she demonstrated, saying that now she needed a little help to get up and down. During this trip also Bethune was very careful getting into our car telling me she was going to demonstrate how old people should do it, passing on a tip for our project. She had John open the door to the passenger side, she turned around with her back to the car, her left hand on the top of the door and aimed her rear towards the seat slowly letting herself go. When fully seated she reached down and helped her legs in. "That's the way to do it" she said. I had begun to interview Mary Azarian and on this second field trip to Newport in 2000, Azarian, the youngest of the eight of us, drove from Vermont to join us, bringing Bethune a gift of Azarian's newly published coffee table book of fifty of her hand-colored woodcuts arranged according to the seasons that Azarian celebrates in her art. I can see now those two artists, heads together bent over the book in Bethune's kitchen.

## Bethune's Cultural Traditions

After several close readings of Bethune's oral history-biography, *Proud Donkey*, reviewing interviews with journalists and historians and Bethune's written work, visiting the Ade Bethune Collection in Minnesota twice, obtaining from the Dorothy Day archives in Marquette copies of letters Bethune sent to Day, viewing a short film on Bethune's life, reviewing transcripts of our conversations, and living with her for a week in each of the last three years of her life, cooking with her, driving her about and having fun with her, as when she got us lost in the fog one night on the way to see a play in Westerly,<sup>39</sup> I gained a familiarity with cultural influences that shaped Bethune's life, including her last years. Her overarching key cultural tradition, deriving from Roman Catholicism, was a meld of three complimentary Catholic spiritualities. What gave Bethune's life meaning and shaped how she negotiated aging the way she did was living a life centered first, on her understanding of the dignity of work; second, on what Catholicism calls performing works of mercy or acts of charity; lastly, on Benedictine spirituality that values work, prayer, and hospitality, the Benedictine motto, *ora et labora*. Another religious dimension that gave Bethune's life meaning was a love of certain artifacts, a bowl, or a picture, things people had given her or made for her, they spoke of that person, the way nature spoke to her of God. She called it being "an animist in communion with Rome." I see influence of another less prominent cultural thread running through her life, class; the effects of an upper class style of life lived with her parents and manifest in how she was to design Harbor House, the central project of her last years. A Yankee by adoption, Bethune was attached to Newport county and city, and nearby Portsmouth Abbey, influenced by a sense of place, oriented to living out her last

years and dying in Newport. In one of her letters to Dorothy Day from May 29, 1947 that I found in a batch I got from the Day Marquette University Archives Bethune is responding to Day's sorrow that she has to sell off part of a farm that she loved, Bethune tells her from experience, "One gets attached to places as to people."

### Catholic Spiritualities

Roman Catholic culture can be absorbed in the home, in one's country as Haiti is 80 % Roman Catholic (Reuters 1/13/10), or one can become a convert later in life as Tony Blair or the late Robert Novak did. Some Catholics are more observant than others and some live a more negotiated relationship with Catholicism. The usual way of living out Catholicism for lay people (e.g. people, not priests or nuns) is engaging in parish life. Some Catholic lay people choose to consciously follow a way of life considered more devout than regular parish life. They elect to follow a path characterized by a particular "spirituality," usually but not always based on imitation in some fashion of the life lived by a particular saint, that way of life having usually having been the foundation of a religious order. There is Franciscan spirituality lived by those wanting to imitate the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Those who chose Jesuit spirituality find inspiration in the life of St. Ignatius Loyola, Dominican spirituality from St. Dominic, and Salesian spirituality from St. Francis of Sales. A not exhaustive list of varieties of Catholic spiritualities would include the above in addition to: Marian, Josephite, Carmelite, penitential, desert, contemplative, Claretian, charismatic, Benedictine, or a life devoted to charitable works or works of mercy as in St. Vincent de Paul's Sisters of Charity or Dorothy Day's Catholic Workers. Then there are sub-groupings combining various aspects; some

Carmelites are more contemplative than others for example, some in early days wore shoes, others did not, calced and discalced.

### Rich Point – A Cultural Tradition Emerges

I would have expected that Myerhoff and Furman's studies with Jewish elderly or studies with other aging minorities, those by Freidenberg or Sánchez-Ayández, would reveal how cultural traditions influenced the ways men and women negotiated aging in particular ways. But with my small life history population, although the women are regionally and racially similar, my co-researchers are a culturally disparate group without a shared framework of meaning. I expected it would be quite a challenge to recognize their particular cultural traditions and very difficult to discern whether or how those orientations helped to shape their last years. In the end I think the fact that my chief co-investigators were all three in the midst of considering or planning where to live their last years, made cultural influences easier for me to discern. But in the end it was what linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar calls a "rich point," recognition of a languacultural difference, that gave me a clue to pursue with Bethune.

When I had my first look at Bethune's piles of papers representing her "hats," I asked if the Newport organization she co-founded in the 60s, Church Community Housing Corporation (CCHC), that worked to provide low income housing in the city, was a religious organization, an obvious question considering the name and the fact that Bethune was so linked with Catholicism. Bethune's response: "No, you do the works of mercy without any religious affiliation just because they are good" startled me. Michael Agar labels as "breakdowns," or "rich points," times in a relationship between ethnographer and research participant, when the researcher is surprised by something or

puzzled (Agar 1994 142 ff). This was just such a rich point. I had not consciously thought of the phrase “works of mercy” for years, although versions of Catholicism I had been enculturated with in my youth used that phrase often, and I had been formed by it, leading me to view the world as a place where men and women were instruments of God’s mercy and compassion expressed in time and space. I knew the phrase, but those of my 15 grandchildren who are Catholic would not know that phrase. I remember that around the Sixties we Catholics began to replace the phrases works of mercy, or acts of charity, with social action, social consciousness and social justice. Knowing I came from a Catholic background, Bethune assumed I’d know the vocabulary but in the more than two decades separating Bethune and me some Catholic vocabulary had changed. And I found it striking she would answer my question the way she did. It led me to research her connection with the phrase “works of mercy,” and to explore what she meant. In doing so I realized that this way of looking at the world, this meaning system, and the use of the phrase “works of mercy,” was evident throughout her life from childhood right through to her last years. It meant that as she went through her days, she watched for acts of kindness she could do for others. It was evident in what she chose to depict in her art. What Bethune had been telling me in answering my question the way she did was that working towards people of low income having places to live in wealthy Newport was a way of living out the fourth listed work of mercy, “harboring the harborless” or “sheltering the homeless,” and that all people were called to do good works no matter whether they had any religious affiliation or not. It was like Martha Stewart saying “It’s a good thing!”



## Dignity of Work

In 1938 after she moved to Rhode Island Bethune wrote a small book simply entitled *Work* (1938).<sup>40</sup> She had learned about the dignity of work from her mother who didn't want her children to be idle gentry and who started a business when she came to America. Adé Bethune worked hard too, as a teen cooking for the family, earning money by cutting fabric in her mother's business and giving French lessons, all while going to school. She volunteered at a Harlem Catholic Worker house giving art lessons, and labored over her pictures for the *Worker* paper. She was now fulfilling commissions for sculpture, for tombstones, and illustrating books. She had listened to lectures on the dignity of labor at the Catholic Worker by two French thinkers, Peter Maurin and the philosopher who later encouraged my writing, Jacques Maritain, who visited the Worker center in New York City often. Bethune told a story to an interviewer in 1978. She said one day she was listening to Peter Maurin, who founded the Worker movement along with Day, speak about having a philosophy of labor and she said she realized that philosophy of labor "was just love of work and that's what my mother was practicing at home" (Ellis).

It was the thirties, most American workers were men, and Bethune's book, which was recently reprinted,<sup>41</sup> does not reflect feminist sensibility her work exhibited later on; her feminist consciousness strikingly manifest in her decision to change *The Catholic Worker* newspaper's masthead, replacing the image of a working man with a female agricultural worker in 1985 when she was 71. Despite the use of "man" for humankind, and masculine pronouns, the drift of Bethune's thinking is clear; notions she carried with her into old age. The young Bethune wrote:

Work is man's great vocation. By working, man is of service to his fellow-man. . . Every worker who looks at his work from this point of view, suddenly realizes his own value. . . He is not a parasite, living off plunder, graft, dole or inheritance. . . We all want happiness. But we cannot find it outside of work. (3)

Bethune wrote that assembly line work was characterized by “stupefying monotony” (4) arguing if workers could keep in mind they were serving others by their labor, and that other people were children of God as they themselves were, then a worker would find joy in work. Looked at in this way, Bethune argued, work was a kind of worship; work became prayer (7). All her life Bethune led a busy life most of the time working at something, and she did everything with gusto. But the vision of Bethune as a young woman of 24, having spent more than half those years with servants, in a world of huge family estates that in photographs I've seen look like small castles, giving advice to assembly line workers, is poetic at best, and plainly preposterous. In addition, it was later to be her mother's inheritance that enabled Bethune to move to a larger Newport house despite Bethune having written earlier about people living off inheritances being parasites! But it is a good illustration of how seriously Bethune looked upon work as part of a thought out meaning system.<sup>42</sup>

### Being Shaped by Work

Bethune argued that people were shaped by their work. Work was the “greatest school of life,” a “useful school” for the one who worked (6). She determined that her artwork should be useful. Norton draws attention to this citing something Bethune wrote explaining her pictures: “It seldom occurs to us that pictures should be something ‘useful to the mind.’ ... The purpose is to inform by their meaning and arrangement” (CW 1938 8). It's from this quotation that Norton derived the title for her University of Maryland research: “*Useful to the Mind*”; *Adé Bethune's Illustrations for the Catholic Worker*,

1934-1945. Norton's thesis in her very well researched paper that travels untilled ground is that the pictures Bethune did for *The Catholic Worker* in its early years that were recycled for the next fifty years even until after her death to the present, served several functions. Norton acknowledges the illustrations accomplished the usual. ". . . expected functions included increasing the publication's appeal to potential readers, and reiterating the messages delivered in the text."<sup>43</sup> And Bethune's illustrations were "hieratic." The stark black and white pictures had "a ritual stiffness that emphasized the characteristics of frontality, stasis and severity" (McDannell 78). The purpose of sacred art having a hieratic quality, according to Thomas Merton, is to convey "the awesomeness of the invisible and divine reality, to strike the beholder with deep reverence" (Merton 15). Norton argues that, in addition to the above, the images were "physical embodiments of Bethune's ideas" (40).<sup>44</sup> I would agree. Bethune wanted her art to work on many levels, it was not just to give pleasure and sit on a page. I would argue that those early *Catholic Worker* pictures of saints at work stressed one particular important theme - what Bethune believed about a way of life based on the dignity of work that included performing works of mercy.

### Works of Mercy

The second strand of Bethune's spirituality was a commitment to performing works of mercy. Bethune wrote the article in the *Worker* newspaper explaining her pictures in 1938, the same year she wrote her book on *Work*. And this was the same year she designed seven stained glass lancets for a Brooklyn monastery. Photographs of the windows appear in her biography (Stoughton 84-85). They depict fourteen women Saints engaged in works of mercy. Some of these fourteen were: St. Catherine of Genoa visiting

the sick, St. Frances of Rome feeding the hungry, and St. Margaret of Scotland visiting prisoners. In 1962 in her *St. Leo Bulletin* Bethune was to write: “The saints are Christ. . . Their works are his work of mercy and forgiveness (Stoughton 83). Bethune’s biographer wrote in the 1980s: “Bethune continues to ponder the meaning of ‘works of mercy’ (39). Bethune told her that a work of mercy could be almost any action if it fills a need for something good. They were not limited to just the official Catholic list of fourteen.

Bethune’s said her ideas about work and her works of mercy approach to life derived from watching her mother. When Marthe’s own mother passed away, Marthe moved her children out of a beautiful modern house designed by a renowned architect, and went to live in a row house on her father’s estate, the house where Adé Bethune was born, so she could oversee her father’s care; a work of mercy. Seeing her husband, Gaston, home from the War and unable to find work, and “not right,” according to Adé Bethune, Marthe moved her whole family to Manhattan and began a business, visiting homes of millionaires who appreciated her fine laces and linens. Being a Baroness probably helped to gain her entree. There were just as many affluent women in Newport so Marthe was able to reestablish her business there later. There is mention of Marthe in Dorothy Day’s autobiography – that the de Bethune family performed works of mercy from their slender resources. Stoughton knew Bethune’s mother and describes her in Newport at age 83 “performing the works of mercy” by driving her “oversized Checkers car” to take “old people” out to do their shopping, some of them the ages of her own children (xi). In addition to Marthe’s influence on her daughter, Dorothy Day and her houses of hospitality emphasized works of mercy in their teaching and actions. Marthe had cared for her father, her ill husband, and her children. In turn Bethune cared for her

parents till they died as well as the former Belgian family cook. After 35 years of domestic service in the U.S., this woman retired to Newport and lived in an apartment above the St. Leo shop. Various nieces and nephews lived with Bethune at various times.

### Ora et Labora

Alongside the dignity of work, and works of mercy aspects of Bethune's Catholic spirituality, there was the Benedictine influence. I find it significant that when Bethune came to depict the "holy family," Jesus, Mary and Joseph, for the *Worker* paper, she not only drew figures who were working: Christ engaged in carpentry, Joseph sawing wood, and Mary sewing, but this drawing was accompanied with lettering at the top in English and Latin. It was the Benedictine motto: "Pray and Work. Ora et Labora." She drew this in 1937 after she had been teaching in the Benedictine monastic school for a year. She had begun going to Sunday Mass at the school chapel because "she loved the unpretentious frame chapel" and "monks singing. . .Gregorian Chant" (Stoughton 53). Bethune was so attracted to Benedictine spirituality, its motto work and prayer, and the way the monks performed the liturgy, that as previously noted, Bethune joined the order becoming a lay Benedictine.<sup>45</sup> Bethune was still attending services at Portsmouth thirty years later as Stoughton writes about meeting Bethune's mother in 1965 and attending Holy Week services with Bethune and her mother at the Benedictine Priory, now Abbey. The simple Benedictine motto, pray and work, was close to what Bethune had written in *Work*, that work is prayer.

The renowned Benedictine authority on the spiritual life, Dom David Knowles, explicated Benedictine spirituality in an essay, *The Benedictines: A Digest for Moderns* (1929/1930 <http://www.osb.org/gen/knowles/index.html>). Chapter Four is devoted to

“Benedictine Work.” Knowles notes that in Benedict’s *Rule*, “the necessity of work is insisted upon.” Then Knowles says that there is freedom from limitation, “there is no peculiar Benedictine work,” and many things can be considered work. Knowles mentions farming, but also crafts and art. Bethune was a natural fit with the Benedictine approach to life and work; another link with the Benedictines being her great uncle having been the architect for the Belgian Benedictine Abbey Maredsous.

In addition to work and prayer, Benedictine hospitality is the hallmark of Western monasticism and in the *Rule* that St. Benedict wrote, Chapter 53 deals with reception of all guests based on Christ’s words in Matthew 25-35: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Prior to 1999 when I stayed with Bethune or sometimes dropped in unannounced just to say “hi” when I accompanied John on one of his Newport trips, I found her hospitality expressed in an open door policy. Both Stoughton and I noted people feeling free to drop by anytime. But during my three week-long visits over three years at the end of Bethune’s life I no longer saw what Stoughton describes when Bethune was just turning 70:

Those in real or imaginary need can have Adé’s time and her sympathetic hospitality any hour of the day or night for as long as they want. No job, no matter how pressing the deadline, is more important to her than a needy person who phones or drops in to talk. Endless and repetitive conversations are welcomed if the person needs a sympathetic ear, even late at night, or very early in the morning. (Stoughton)

Certainly by 1999 Bethune with her leukemia and advancing years, she was 85, I saw fewer people knocking on the door unannounced. I saw her secretary/assistant caring for Bethune in an unobtrusive way. By 2000 and my second research visit, Bethune had moved into the ranks of the frail elderly.

The above survey of the three strands of Bethune's Catholic tradition reveal the roots of those spiritual versions of Catholicism in her life story, and how those strands came together to give her life meaning. I have chosen to show how these Catholic cultural influences shaped the way Bethune negotiated aging by choosing two works of mercy from her last years that exemplify this: "Harboring the Harborless," her Harbor House project, and "Burying the Dead," Bethune's long held concern with low cost funerals, including her own. The influence of class will be addressed during the discussion of Harbor House. Attachment to place is noted in both sections.

### Harboring the Harborless

Out of a concern for those who needed shelter and motivated by her works of mercy spirituality, in November 1966 Bethune had co-founded the non-profit serving low income families, Church Community Housing Corporation of Newport County (CCHC), along with a Newport group that included Hershel Carter of Newport Hospital and Canon Ballard of Trinity Episcopal Church (DeBoer-Longworthy). In 2002 the CCHC Executive Director reported that CCHC had developed 100 single-family housing units and 500 rental units, and helped other organizations build another 200 units for low income Newport residents (Pattison). I asked Bethune how there could be many people of low income in wealthy Newport and she reminded me the city was a port, having been home to a portion of the Atlantic Fleet until 1973. Many sailors and their families needed low cost housing then and there are some naval installations still there. Also many working class people were employed by those more affluent. In 2002 the CCHC Director related how Bethune designed most of the houses built by CCHC in the early 70s, including the first solar house:

Her influence continued through every project we've done since then. She's actively reviewed every project to see that the family that lived there has the best designs. . .including natural light and easy access to the laundry facility. (Pattison)

Bethune told me she'd been concerned "that poor people were usually ghettoized" so she pushed to make sure CCHC houses were spread out in more comfortable neighborhoods. But "not the wealthy neighborhoods" she told me with a laugh.

So, when it came time for Bethune to consider how and where she wanted to live out her last years, informed by her positive experience of living for a long time with elderly parents, the expertise gained with CCHC, impelled by her works of mercy spirituality that prompted her to not just think of housing for herself, but housing for others as well, and having a strong sense of place centered in Newport, she envisioned living a common life with people of mixed income there. Conveniently, across the street from her home was a complex of empty buildings of venerable vintage that had been a convent and retreat center. These included a 1914 Neogothic chapel, the 1840 Auchincloss House built by New York financier John Auchincloss whose grandson Hugh was Jackie Kennedy's stepfather;<sup>46</sup> the 1860 Rice House, the 1907 St. Francis House, and the former chaplain's cottage<sup>47</sup> that in future would house Bethune's small living unit, plus connecting structures. By happy chance, Bethune, a child of the early 20th century European upper class, and educated about architecture, was just the perfect person to appreciate the empty buildings and the perfect person to direct restoration. If she could make the project a reality she told me she wanted both the interior and exterior of the buildings to be beautiful. She talked to me about the loveliness of the stained glass windows in the chapel that would be non-denominational and she wanted to preserve as



much of the interior woodwork as possible. “Peculiar nooks and crannies of the old, homey buildings will be preserved” she wrote in *Commonweal* (15).

### Influence of Class

Bethune was no ascetic. Her archive houses notes from a silent retreat she attended in 1941 along with Catholic Workers where the priest director issued a call “to renounce every pleasure that is not purely for the honor and glory of God” and counseled distrusting self (Stoughton 88). While Dorothy Day was enthusiastic about the retreat, Bethune was not:

I did and still do find a serious error in the emphasis of spiritual masters and hagiographers of all faiths on self-denial and austerity as an end in itself. . . . We must do good because it is good, not because it is difficult. (88)

Although the Bethune I knew myself, and the younger Bethune in photographs I have studied, did not use cosmetics, wore her hair in a long braid around her head until she had hip surgery in 1989, and dressed simply, she enjoyed good food and had a happy zest for life. Some comfortable elements of Bethune’s upper class life before coming to America followed her when she and her parents rejoined each other in Newport in 1941.

Stoughton writes: “Both Marthe and Gaston de Bethune had grown up in European mansions staffed with servants” (Stoughton 89). They hired a local young black woman as a day worker. Forty-three years later, in 1984, this woman, Charlotte Williams, was still working for Bethune, Marthe having passed away. Stoughton interviewed Williams while Williams was ironing:

She [Marthe, Bethune’s mother] had a system to everything she did; one thing never overlapped another. By the time I got there in the morning, she had the laundry and breakfast dishes done. I was supposed to take care of one floor each day. You could have eaten off her pine floors. She wanted you to get down on your hands and knees and scrub those floors. (Stoughton 90)

Some might look at the de Bethunes' domestic help, and highly polished floors, as incompatible with leading a devout Catholic life and might criticize Bethune for continuing to employ the same day worker after Marthe passed away. Bethune was involved in two businesses, St. Leo Shop, and Terra Sancta Guild, and having domestic help released her to focus on her professional work, but that isn't my point. What I want to argue is that Bethune had been surrounded up to age 14 with polished floors, polished marble steps, stained glass windows in her grandfather's dining room, a childhood educational trip to Rome and, although she purposely lived very simply as an adult, she lived that life in something of the same upper class atmosphere she had enjoyed as the daughter of a Baroness in Belgium. In the second Manhattan apartment Bethune had been again surrounded with some of the Belgian family furniture and was appreciating the parish church there over the one in the less affluent New York neighborhood they were leaving. At her first parish church there was:

. . . no Gregorian Chant and no celebration of the liturgy involving the people. . . We were just part of a human herd in the pews. . . That parish church offered very little in addition to the Low Mass. . . Later on when we moved to the East Side, our parish was St. Ignatius on Park Avenue. That was a plush church (Stoughton 25).

After 1953, when Marthe purchased 118 Washington Street, Bethune lived in a comfortably sized large house that, at the time I began to visit her, had three bathrooms, a greenhouse, a water view, a butler's pantry, a workshop in the basement and three floors in the prestigious 18th century Point District of Newport.<sup>48</sup> Bethune's background had attuned her to appreciate the potential of the buildings across the street, and in addition, she had lived in lovely surroundings much of her life, and wanted that same beauty to surround, not only herself in her last years, but also others who could not otherwise

afford it. Bethune's upper class enculturation served her and Harbor House residents well.

A hint of an upper class attitude manifested itself occasionally, as for example, when Bethune was explaining to me and once to a reporter how people get funny ideas about the aristocracy, and how she was brought up with a sense of duty, service to people and responsibility, called "noblesse oblige," [nobility obligates](Merolla). I think in some ways there was an element of "noblesse oblige" conflated with her works of mercy philosophy. This is not to criticize, after all her background was Belgian upper class, little elements of that surviving around the fringes in her later life. I attribute to her upper class tastes that she saw the beauty in the abandoned estate across from her house and wanted to preserve it, and when she succeeded in acquiring it, she maintained as much as possible of the beautiful interior woodwork, and nooks and crannies, and stained glass.

#### Star of the Sea Evolves

Bethune launched an effort to raise money to purchase the complex of buildings, and she gathered together people interested in being part of the community she was envisioning. Ever resourceful, Bethune devised her own surveys. She had no copy of the first one to give me, but across the top of her second survey conducted May 31-July 17 1992 (see Appendix B) she had written: "We can make the Senior Center more interesting for you and for all other members if you will kindly list below some of your personal interests, experience, tastes or talents. Thank you." Fifty-seven people responded listing 92 activities they were interested in pursuing while living in the proposed community. The results were printed as a percentage of the 57 who desired that activity. Some responses included: walking (66%), helping others (61%), church services

(58%), reading to little children (35%), afternoon tea (32%), plants (30 %), and dogs (25%).

Besides doing this second survey of prospective residents' suggestions, also in 1992 Bethune produced an 8x11 eight-page booklet whose cover read: "A proposal to found a Cooperative Multi-Purpose Senior Center and Independent Living Community for personal growth and mutual help and to renovate the Complex of Buildings of the former Cenacle/Corpus Christi Retreat House at 21 Battery Street, Newport, Rhode Island." The Proposal listed Bethune as President of a Board of Directors. The rationale for the project was described:

Among today's rising number of elders, 80% are home owners. In generally good health, they do not need institutional care. Typically, they live alone. Their house may be run down, or unsafe, or simply too large, or frustrating to declining abilities. Sooner or later the owner must move; but personal assets (the value of the house) disqualify him/her for subsidized elderly housing. Yet, few are wealthy enough to ever afford the luxury of a retirement home. Where can they go? As a practical alternative for these older Americans, the Cenacle-by-the-Sea [later called Star of the Sea, then Harbor House] proposes a different life-style: cooperative ownership – combining mutual help and personal privacy – in a residential senior community center, with simple comfortable independent living quarters for older adults from all walks of life.

The proposal explained that around 1840 John Auchincloss purchased a field to build "a summer retreat for his nine children." Over the next seventy-five years the house was enlarged and other buildings added. In 1905 the property was purchased and became the Cenacle retreat house run by French Catholic nuns, then Carmelite nuns from Trinidad. In 1992 the property was one and a quarter acres needing acquisition, renovation updating of the buildings and grounds, ongoing management and maintenance.

The proposal was Bethune's vision of what the "Common Areas" would include: reception and office spaces, 500 sq. ft. sitting rooms, congregate kitchen and dining

room, 1000 sq. ft., community laundry with coin operated washing machines, a 500 sq. ft. library and “space for quiet study and personal projects,” a non-denominational chapel, a public hall for “lectures, theatre groups, movies, meetings, fairs, and dancing, an enclosed patio “wind-free, sunny and quiet,” community workshops: greenhouse, carpentry shop, classroom, photography darkroom, sewing room, thrift shop, storage for sailing and fishing gear. Then there was a description of the “Independent Living Quarters” in the various buildings, and an explanation of what a cooperative was. “A cooperative is a non-profit corporation that sells housing shares to its members. Cooperatives are consumer oriented and view housing as a service rather than a speculative investment.” The target opening date was 1994. Here is Bethune at age 80 planning for space for “sailing and fishing gear.” Not a vision of the typical nursing home!

The project moved along slowly. The name changed from Cenacle-by-the Sea to Star of the Sea. The March 31, 1994 *Newport (R.I.) Daily News* reported that Star of the Sea had received \$5,500 from the Rhode Island Foundation for legal assistance “in setting up a cooperative living community for elderly people at the site of the former retreat house of Cenacle and Carmelite nuns in Newport.” That same year Bethune produced another booklet, thirty-two pages called *A Little Book of Questions about The Cenacle-by-the-Sea, a Non-profit Center for Elders who Seek to Focus on Personal Growth and Mutual Help in a Lifestyle of Simplicity*. The booklet dealt with questions such as: “Does TV have to be on all day as it is in so many nursing homes? It drives me crazy.” The answer was that “members,” (not residents), could have their own personal TVs and there would be TVs in some of the small sitting rooms in case various groups wanted to watch football or Masterpiece Theatre together, but there would be no TV on

all the time in public spaces. Nowhere in the literature Bethune gave me to read did I see what would happen in the eventuality a community member became so ill as to need nursing care. When I asked, Bethune said the community would be self-governing, and with members helping each other, every effort would be made for the ill member to remain with the community.

### Bethune and Maslow

The title of the booklet mentions personal growth, a notion characterizing Bethune's entire life, but certainly central to her thinking about old age, and when she happened upon the work of Abraham Maslow,<sup>49</sup> she appropriated his teaching on "hierarchy of needs" to illustrate and promote her elderly community project. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), an American psychologist, who taught at Brooklyn College and then Brandeis, popularized the ideas of self-actualization and peak experiences and in contrast to behaviorists and psychoanalysts, Maslow looked at motives and proposed a "hierarchy of needs." When physiological needs are met, he said, then there are safety needs, love is next and the desire for esteem. At the "top of the hierarchy is a striving for self-actualization – the desire to realize oneself to the fullest" (Gleitman et al. 742). When lower-order needs were met, only then will people strive for higher-order needs. Bethune wanted Harbor House to supply elders with whatever was necessary for members, including herself, to reach their fullest potential; to be self-actualized. The visual aid Maslow created to explain his hierarchy of needs was a pyramid – so Bethune appropriated Maslow's pyramid and edited it (see Appendix A). Just as in her pictures and writing she tinkered with the "official" wording of the works of mercy to suit her purposes, she tinkered with Maslow's wording.

Maslow's hierarchy expressed in a pyramid has eight levels.<sup>50</sup> His first level, physiological needs: food, water, oxygen; Bethune's: health, wellness, and bodily comfort. Maslow's second level is safety needs: comfort, security and freedom from fear; Bethune's: security, out of danger, 911. Maslow's third level is belongingness and love needs: affiliation, acceptance and belongingness; Bethune's is belongingness and love: friendship with others; be accepted. Maslow's fourth level is esteem needs: competence, approval and recognition; Bethune's is esteem: be competent, retain skills, approval, and recognition. Maslow's fifth level is cognitive needs: knowledge, understanding, novelty; Bethune's is cognitive: need to know, understand, explore, and learn. Maslow's sixth level is aesthetic needs: symmetry, order, beauty; Bethune's sixth is the same: aesthetic: symmetry, order, beauty. Maslow's seventh level is self-actualization; Bethune's is self-actualization: find self-fulfillment, realize one's potential. Maslow's eighth level is peak experiences; Bethune's is transcendence: help others find self fulfillment.

Bethune was aware of Maslow's needs being met in her own life. She had worked since she was a teen, planned for the future, and was fortunate to own her home and have an income. She had the security of knowing she was wearing an alert bracelet in case of an emergency. She was loved, a member of a close family having lived for many years with father and mother, with a younger brother and his family now living not many miles away. She was enmeshed in the civic network of Newport city. Through the Terra Sancta business she was still esteemed in her eighties for her design skills. She knew she was leaving behind a legacy because her papers and artifacts were wanted by archives; even the Smithsonian has expressed an interest. She knew she was competent and was being paid for her work. She was also writing articles about how to live in old age and being

published in *Rhode Island Senior Times* and *Commonweal*. Her cognitive needs were being met in many ways: by participating weekly in Hebrew and Greek classes, and all her skills were engaged in fighting to make her Harbor House dream a reality. As an artist, wanting to fulfill her aesthetic needs and those of others in the envisioned community buildings, besides preserving “peculiar nooks and crannies,” no two apartments would be the same size; all would be unique. Lastly, Bethune’s elder community was a way to help others find self-fulfillment through plans for many activities like gardening, lectures and concerts. Bethune wanted future members/residents of Harbor House to bring familiar things with them, as well as pets.

Four years before I arrived with my tape recorder, *The Providence-Journal*

*Bulletin* interviewed Bethune in 1995 about this project when she was 81:

When friends speak of her [Bethune], they will mention that she has received a dozen honorary degrees from a variety of universities. Bethune only shrugs. Honors do not interest her...Bethune explained her goals. ‘I am president of a group in process of buying the Carmelite Sisters’ former convent and retreat house at Washington and Battery streets,’ she says pointing to the property across from her front door. ‘The sisters very much need the funds. . .’ Officially known as the Star of the Sea Nonprofit Corporation, Bethune’s 15-member volunteer board of directors has worked tirelessly for several years and is now putting together what she calls an appealing financial package to make it possible for the nuns to sell the property and for 40 to 50 elders to secure a piece of the new intentional community. (Merolla)

Bethune went on to say that there would be a sliding scale “fitted to aging people’s means.” Bethune’s again explained her vision. “I have a dream of elder folk spending their last decades in charge of themselves, not ‘Home Alone’ but ‘Home Together,’ with concerned neighbors nearby, ready to lend a hand. A neighborhood under one roof.” She said this would allow elders to live and die with dignity as her parents had done. She also discussed nursing homes:



When people are older, they have their individual diminishments. . . . It is of . . . importance that we retain our independence and not be lonely. . . . Most older people hate the concept of a nursing home. . . . What makes seniors unhappy in their old age is that they aren't allowed to do things. In institutions, I hear people complain 'They won't let me. . . .' Not all elders need to be waited on hand and foot. Many are interested in doing things for others. (Merolla)

Here Bethune uses the felicitous term “diminishments” to describe age-related deficits in hearing and eyesight and balance. She mentions service to others – another way of referring to works of mercy. She envisioned residents helping each other, a sort of buddy system she told me, by perhaps reminding someone to take a pill, or by people cooking together in a community kitchen. “The unique thing is, “she went on to say, “there will not be a separation between low-income elderly and better-off elderly. It is difficult to do, but we are working on an involved approach to make it possible.”

In 1996 Bethune told a reporter for *Rhode Island Senior Times* about her motivation for Star of the Sea elder community coming from her own experience caring for her parents who had lived with her in their old age. “I think we make a big mistake by treating older people like babies. When I was in my thirties, my parents were beginning to get older. I could see people sending their parents to institutions.’ Adé vowed she would never send her parents away in their old age” (Grant).

Bethune had definite ideas about religion and old age. She told me with her usual playful humor:

AB: Old people like to go to church. They become more interested in intellectual and spiritual things if they are given a chance and not squelched down. Studies have demonstrated that. Old people like to continue going to their churches and even go more as it becomes more difficult for them to go. [Here she gave a hearty laugh at her own humor.] They could have gone when they were younger. Now they want to go. And they want to know more about it. They are more interested in beauty and nature. They never paid any attention to that before. Now they want music and art and nature and flowers and birds and sunsets and things.

## Bethune as Animist

Of particular interest to me was a notion about possessions that Bethune called “love of people through artifacts” that she mentioned when talking about prospective members moving in future to Harbor House. She wanted everyone to bring furniture and possessions they were especially attached to, this being in line with instructions she had provided to a client many years before when consulting on a proposed building project that was going to house people and that had a meager budget:

To save costs, but especially to ensure variety and love of people through artifacts, we recommend furnishing the building with second hand furnishings. For example, a nice chair abandoned in the basement. Learn to cherish it. Antiques are things that other people have used. Something of their life is attached to them. Generally speaking, nothing is more dead than an institution furnished. . .with catalogue pieces of plush furniture, all identical, spanking new, storebought, institutional, trendy, yuppy, ‘interior decoraty.’ Nobody says that every chair around the eating table or in the conference room must be part of a designer ‘set.’ The people who sit in these chairs are not identical either. (Stoughton 136)

When explaining this idea to me, the discussion led to Bethune finally revealing an added dimension to what gave her life meaning that over three years of interviewing so far she had been unable to articulate to me. I had asked Bethune if she thought of herself as a Catholic Worker. She answered in a way that seemed to me reluctant, and said people could call her a Catholic Worker. She didn’t say she would identify herself that way. When I engaged her in a discussion of works of mercy Bethune let me know that was pretty obvious and she kept telling me there was something else she was fishing in her mind to remember that gave meaning to her life. Bethune’s face finally lit up and she told me a story.

AB: When I got involved with Church Community Housing (it is now celebrating more than thirty years), I was one of the cofounders and I went with the

executive director to take a look at a house that we might be able to buy and rehabilitate and then sell it to a low-income family. It was a kind of a work of mercy. The old lady had died and there were two garbage cans outside. It had rained and the garbage cans were full of water. There I saw two bread pans that were in danger of being hauled away. I still have them. I took them and gave them a home. I'll tell you what my spirituality is; I'm an animist in communion with Rome.

JT: Okay.

AB: One of my apprentices described me as that; Thomas Green. He said, "I know your religion. I bet you're an animist in communion with Rome." I guess I respect things; objects of nature or of art. Objects of nature speak of God, objects of art speak of human beings who have made them. You asked me what my spirituality was and I couldn't think of anything until now. I have a whole lot of little things in the kitchen and a particular cup reminds me of a person and a plate of another person and I associate people with that; either I got it from them or I enjoyed it in my childhood. I have a little tiny coffee cup and it kind of gives me a little coffee and that reminds me of my childhood.

After this breakthrough, Bethune sometimes referred back to this conversation calling herself simply an animist. I think knowing I was recording most of our conversations, and that I had promised the tapes to her archives, Bethune would sometimes hastily add, with a laugh, "in communion with Rome;" this I assume in case she might be misconstrued and thought less than orthodox. I kept this in mind as I did one last quick run through the Stoughton biography and there I found an example. Stoughton records that around 1930 after the de Bethunes decided to stay in America, they sent for their furniture. "We could get our furniture sent from Belgium customs-free for a certain time after we arrived. Anything that was over one hundred years old could come in free at any time" (Stoughton 31). Bethune told Stoughton such things were not considered antiques; they were just "old":

My parents sent for our furniture, and we moved to an unfurnished apartment on the East Side. One day in October, when I came home from school, the moving van had come, and all my old friends from our Belgian home were there. I am

something of an animist, and I remember how happy I was to see again the familiar friends I loved. (Stoughton 31)

The way Bethune explained it to me, she felt something of God resides in objects in nature, and something of the person who made or gave her an object stayed with a man-made object. Once when we sat at the kitchen table there was a pottery bowl sitting there and occasionally Bethune reached out and lovingly ran her fingers down the side of the bowl. She told me it had been made by one of her apprentices. Moving on from this Bethune stressed the importance of the people living in Harbor House having favorite objects around them, including furniture that they loved. She then said it was important that people bring plates they liked that could be seen by residents on open shelves in the community dining room.

Here she gave me what she called her “lecture on open shelving” that she wanted throughout Harbor House, but especially in the community kitchen. “When you are cooking and you need an ingredient, after you have opened two or three cupboard doors you have forgotten what you wanted in the first place. Open shelving assists old people with memory problems.” Getting up from her chair, since she herself had open shelving, she mimed a person opening and closing cupboard doors looking for something.

The name Harbor House signifies the work of mercy, “Harboring the Harborless.” Significantly, this particular one of the official fourteen works of mercy was the first picture in 1933 that Bethune drew for The Catholic Worker newspaper. Sixty years after that, Bethune was now working to shelter herself in old age along with people of a variety of incomes, not just the well-off. She worked at this plan for a decade, tirelessly.

## Good News

On April 4, 2000 *The Providence Journal* and *The Newport Daily News* reported that Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I. had joined Bethune in what was to become the community dining room of Harbor House. Bethune had led the effort that resulted in Rhode Island Housing purchasing the Auchincloss estate from the Catholic Carmelite Sisters in 1996 to hold it until Bethune and her friends could raise the funds to ensure the restoration and renovation. The news was that now in 2000 \$4.5 million in federal assistance had been secured that included a \$1 million loan from the state to be paid back through rents:

They came to witness a new beginning for a grand old house. Mostly, they came to see Adé Bethune. Bethune, a vibrant wisp of a woman, stepped behind a podium and nearly disappeared behind it. But when she told of first imagining her dreamhouse for senior citizens nearly a decade ago, and now seeing it begin, the room exploded in applause. (Smith, R. L. C1)

## Third Field Trip

During the third week that John and I stayed with Bethune, in September 2001, we arrived to find that, not only was construction proceeding apace across the street where Harbor House was nearing completion, Washington Street itself right in front of Bethune's house was being torn up by a local road project. The dust was so thick it was almost hard to see and every time we came outside our car was covered. Prone to asthma I began to cough. When we went inside we found Bethune coughing. The first thing I did was find a store selling dust masks and gave some to Bethune. We were no sooner in the house than Bethune handed John a yellow hard hat, she put the only other one she owned on her head, and, leaving me behind, she grabbed John's arm and directed him to take her across the street to inspect the progress on Harbor House. John went on several

expeditions like this with Bethune, and, finding another hat, I was taken along on one when Bethune gave me a tour of the beautiful chapel and the rest of the buildings. John was quite concerned for Bethune's health. He told me one of the times he was across the street at the construction site with her, Bethune was charging around with great energy and, although she was hanging on to John, she tripped in a hole. *National Catholic Reporter* interviewed Steve Ostiguy, the executive director of CCHC of Newport in 2002 in connection with Bethune and Harbor House:

In the Harbor House project, Ostinguy said, developers "got plans approved, and started financing and construction. But Adé started redesigning so that it was completely different from when we started out....it was redesigned at least three times. Adé was out there every day with her hard hat and her big yellow boots making sure everything got done right." (Pattison)

The dust from the street was very heavy all week and Bethune and I continued to cough. Becoming ill with a respiratory infection I sought medical attention for bronchitis when I got home. Bethune and I talked on the phone afterwards; she had been diagnosed with pneumonia. We coughed and moaned about how bad we were feeling, which was a new thing, as I'd never heard Bethune grouse about her health. Finally, Bethune, sort of coming to her senses, said, "We should stop complaining!" I was left to wonder how things might have been had not the road crew been tearing up the road that fall. Bethune sent me an e-mail three weeks later October 5, 2001. "Hope you are feeling as I do, yesterday 95% better; today, 99% better." Always the optimist!

Bethune seemed pleased with the progress of Harbor House but told me several people waiting on the list to move in had died. And due to government regulations she had lost the battle for open shelving and she had had to make some other compromises. "Bethune began pushing the concept of 'congregate living' for seniors in the early 1990s.

She shepherded her plans through several changes, from cooperative housing to assisted living to subsidized rental housing” (R. Smith). Harbor House would not be a cooperative in quite the way Bethune had desired but most of her ideas had seen fruition. Five months after my last visit with Bethune the grand opening for Harbor House took place on February 4, 2002. The successful venture had been achieved through the cooperation of the Star of the Sea Corporation of which Bethune was president, and CCHC which she had helped to found thirty years before. Thirty-one of the 37 living units in Harbor House were set aside for seniors over 62 earning up to 60 percent of median family income with rent ranging from \$465 to \$543. Six other apartments rented for more and one was for the use of a live-in manager.

Bethune moved into the tiny apartment she showed me during my September 2001 visit but spent much of her day over in her office working with her two computers, fax machine, two phones and her assistant, keeping up with her art business. Her brother Andre and his wife moved into Harbor House. Three months after Bethune took up residence the pneumonia returned and the leukemia became out of control, as she had told me it was bound to do at some point, and Bethune died May 1, 2002. *The Washington Post* printed an obituary as did many other newspapers. Harbor House, the work of mercy Bethune worked at so diligently and devoted her years of life to, was completed. Noting the Benedictine motto one Catholic obituary reported:

Her last major project, Harbor House, involved securing the funding, permissions, variances, grants, and the approval of the city government of Newport. A horrible bureaucratic hassle. There were lots of frustration, setbacks, delays, opposition, but Adé never gave up. She had an indomitable, tenacious spirit. ‘Ora et labora’. She devoted the last years of her life (and her money) to create a homey, hospitable, gracious and lovely residence for the elderly, in what had been dilapidated and vandalized buildings. ...She was involved to the last detail, from the design of the bathrooms to the size of the handrails, ‘narrow enough for old

people, whose hands are small' she insisted to the contractor. . . .she was right.  
(Gneuhs 1)

In 2002 the State of Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission posthumously awarded a Historic Preservation Award to Bethune for her “independent-living, self-help senior community” lodged in property that had been restored to its historic character. Andre de Bethune accepted the award for his sister. In 2003 the weekly *Newport This Week* checked into life at Harbor House a year after Bethune died. The conclusion was that Bethune’s legacy lived on. Residents, some former strangers, ranged in age from 62 to 92. Favorite possessions one couple brought to Harbor House included a grand piano. Another couple having met dancing at one of the regular socials had fallen in love. Still another resident was happily photographed with her little dog (Sullivan). The paper ran an editorial noting that neighbors of Harbor House who had campaigned against the affordable housing project, now found Harbor House not the grim, antiseptic place they had been envisaging, but rather buildings that were charming rather than run-down, and residents who allowed use of their facilities for meetings, and neighbors repaid with culinary treats (5/8/03). More than four years after Harbor House opened and Bethune died, *The New York Times* ran a long article, “Creative Housing Ideas for an Aging Population.” Two senior living facilities were featured, both in Rhode Island, which in the 2000 census ranked 6th in the nation for proportion of residents over 65. Harbor House was one of two examples given of creative elder housing. One of the residents, an 85-year-old career Navy man, said he had come to know all the tenants in four years and Harbor House was “like a big family.” Rents are still based on income level of tenants (Abbott).



## Burying the Dead

- I ask that my family be allowed to stay close to me in my last moments, even after my death. I want them to be allowed to remain with my body, if they desire.
- I desire that my body should be washed and cared for as a work of mercy by my relatives or close friends, not by strangers.
- I do not want my body to be painted or otherwise made to look as if I were still alive, healthy, youthful or asleep.
- I do not want my body put on display after it has been put in my coffin.  
(Jencks 12)

The above is a portion of a list of requests suggested as funeral directives proposed by Bethune and members of her St. Leo League, a Newport group of friends who met regularly to discuss articles in Bethune's publication, the *St. Leo Bulletin* (Jencks). One of Bethune's early causes for which she was an advocate was simple and affordable funerals. In 1961 the *St. Leo Bulletin* offered a new item:

For those who would not like to be caught dead in a plush-lined coffin, we offer the traditional plain box of pine, cedar or mahogany, with strong rope handles. Covered with cushions, it doubles as a storage chest or love seat until needed for its ultimate purpose. (Stoughton 97)

Bethune made her own coffin in 1940 when she was twenty-six. When she heard the cost of coffins, or caskets, as some Americans called them, incorrectly she believed ("a casket is a small jewelry box," she would say), she decided to make her own coffin. She made it out of materials at hand including an old cupboard door, 5½' by 1½' and secondhand shelves. Then she painted pictures on it:

The sides are painted with a symbol of The Eternal City, shown as houses in which I've lived happily on God's earth. At one end I painted the Gate of Heaven, cracked open to let me in. (Long)

Bethune told a reporter that the paintings are simple because she “wasn’t going to spend a lot of time on a box that will ultimately go into the ground. But I did want some color” (Long). There are heavy rope handles. A Newport sailor showed her how to splice the rope, interweaving the two ends so there wouldn’t be heavy knots on the inside. When news was slow Rhode Island papers would send a reporter to do a story on her coffin. Two articles show photos of Bethune sitting on it. She used to joke to me that the coffin was narrow and she had better watch her weight. *Time* magazine praised Bethune’s coffin as an example of Yankee ingenuity. Bethune thought it humorous that people were called Yankees because they lived in Rhode Island (Stoughton 97).

Bethune didn’t just want to eliminate the commercialism surrounding American funerals. She wanted to restore simplicity and beauty to rituals surrounding death. She recommended not filing funeral directions with one’s will because the will is usually read after the funeral. Information in Bethune’s *Bulletin* also discussed considering perhaps turning the body over to science (O’Donnell). *The Providence Sunday Journal* provided a description of the death and burial of Bethune’s father, Gaston:

It was a cold Saturday. There was no hearse. A family station wagon was used to carry the corpse of retired Belgian Army Colonel Gaston de Bethune to St. Joseph’s Church in Newport, on the final day of 1966. He had died at home the day before at the age of 89. There was no flower car. The traditional black limousine was also missing. . .A plain wooden coffin was removed from the rear of the blue and white station wagon. . .Miss Bethune believes that the quicker the deceased is buried, “the better it is for all concerned.” She does not believe in long wakes. “We had a coffin for father upstairs in a friend’s barn.” (O’Donnell)

Marthe placed a comforter in the coffin that had been given to Gaston by his mother.

Bethune’s brother Andre arranged Gaston’s clothes. He was not embalmed. After closing the coffin some candles were lit, Gaston’s crucifix was placed on the coffin and friends dropped by in the evening to pay respects. Bethune’s plans for her own death and funeral

were consistent with the views that she had expressed for years. But she wanted to be living across the street in Harbor House when death would finally come:

The death of a loved one is a most personal thing. When possible, I believe the family should play an active role in the burial of the loved one. To many, this active participation may seem wrong. But I believe that such participation can be important. It helps an individual to accept the death of a loved one. When I tossed the earth into my father's grave, I was helping to bury him. . . .Burying the dead is a work of mercy. (O'Donnell)

Although Bethune had told me I was on her list to be called when she died, I was not called until almost a week had passed and the funeral was over. When I returned to New England in 2002 for my next research trip, on the way to Mary Azarian's place in Vermont, John and I stopped at Harbor House to meet Bethune's brother and see the completed, lived in, Harbor House. Andre expressed surprise seeing my age and realizing I had known his sister for 20 years. He, a retired professor, had assumed I was "just" another young grad student doing a paper about his sister, and he seemed apologetic I had not been notified about the funeral. He went out of his way to show me his sister's small apartment in which she had lived for three months and then died, and that he had now moved into. I spoke with four different people about Bethune's last days and burial, and read many obituaries. Here is the picture that emerged.

In the few months she lived in Harbor House, Bethune was taken to the hospital four times. Finally her doctor told her all he could do was alleviate her pain and she was supplied with oxygen and morphine and kept comfortable at Harbor House with the services of hospice. Shortly before she died, on April 28 Bethune was wheeled into the Harbor House chapel where a niece played a cello concert; a Bach Suite. The next day, Bethune asked her brother to sing some old Flemish tunes and they had a last conversation. Three Benedictine priests from Portsmouth gave her the last rites.

After her death family and friends washed her body and placed her in the coffin she had made sixty years before painted with pictures of the houses she had lived in, her humor evident in the Gate of Heaven painted open a crack to let her in! How appropriate I thought for one who had housed so many people in Newport. Bethune was waked in the Harbor House chapel. She had died sometime on Wednesday:

The following Saturday, on a sweetly warm and sunny morning, over two hundred friends, relatives and townspeople gathered at Portsmouth Abbey overlooking Narragansett Bay for the Mass of Christian Burial. Adé's nephews carried her simple wooden coffin. . . .The Mass was austere, with Gregorian plainchant – no choir, no organ. Direct, clear, modest, to the point, no nonsense, just like Adé.” (Gneuhs 1)

The Mass took place in Portsmouth Abbey's Church of St. Gregory the Great, the work of architect Pietro Belluschi, a leader of the Modern Movement. The Benedictine monk who made brief remarks at the funeral service had been one who visited with Bethune right before she died and he shared a little from that last conversation. The only bit that made it into print was one sentence. “She said, It's not what Christ did that matters but Who He is” (Gneuhs 1):

. . .Bethune's coffin was carried from the church down the sloping grass lawns to the graveyard. . .The monks chanted ‘Ego sum resurrecto et vita...(I am the Resurrection and the Life) as the coffin was lowered into the earth. . . .Then Adé's brother, Andre, and several nieces and nephews and grandnieces and nephews shoveled the rich, moist dark earth back into the grave. (Gneuhs 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel E. Norton.

<sup>2</sup> *Number Our Days* 1978/1980 251.

<sup>3</sup> “A Way of Life in Old Age, Start A New Community” in *Commonweal*, June 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Writer Joan Anderson has written: “I never feel legitimately in New England until I’ve crossed the border from Connecticut to Rhode Island. That’s when I become giddy, excited even. . . .” (11).

<sup>5</sup> The articles were collected into *Red Sox and Blue Fish and Other Things That Make New England New England*. Searching for a copy of this book I finally found one used, now considered a collector’s item, for two-hundred dollars. Writing to Orlean to see if she knew where I could purchase a copy for less, she provided me with one at cost for which I’m grateful.

<sup>6</sup> Maine in particular has been making an effort to attract retirees in the last few years. See *Where to Retire in Maine* (Doudera) and the yearly, usually February, retirement section in *Down East* magazine.

<sup>7</sup> I had not previously met this assistant whom I shall call “Mary.” She was very helpful to me over the three years I interviewed and visited Bethune. I had known Bethune’s previous assistant/secretary, Rita Blake, and the woman who managed her St. Leo’s shop, Jennie Amoruso.

<sup>8</sup> A newspaper reporter interviewing Bethune in 1989 noted that she was sitting next to “a large table heaped with books, art work, papers, cups, magazines and blueprints” (Reimer A-1). This was the same table I am describing minus the cups.

<sup>9</sup> For some years Bethune was the only American outlet for the books of Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952). Montessori taught children to write by having them run fingers over letters of the alphabet made of sandpaper. Bethune, an expert in calligraphy, adapted this in 1960 for American children in a magazine article she then produced as a booklet, *Teaching the Child to Write*. She followed this in 1964 with a large workbook, *Uniscript, A New Method for Teaching Handwriting, A Set of Patterns for Making Your Own Sandpaper Letters for the Three Year Old*.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter referred to in the text as CCH.

<sup>11</sup> I have visited the Bethune archives in Minnesota two times. The National Endowment for the Arts provided money for temperature and humidity control. The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian expressed interest in Bethune’s personal papers but she decided to donate to a Catholic institution.

<sup>12</sup> The May 2009 issue included three Bethune illustrations out of thirteen.

<sup>13</sup> The actual words, spoken to a reporter on the occasion of her fortieth birthday were: ““This is what forty looks like. We’ve been lying for so long, who would know?” (Steinem viii).

<sup>14</sup> At the time of my first visit, Bethune’s project for a community of elders was called “Star of the Sea,” a well-known title for Christ’s mother, Mary, and often a name given to Catholic convents or buildings near water, in this case Narragansett Bay. Later the name was changed to Harbor House, a name that reflects one of the Works of Mercy.

<sup>15</sup> Bethune refers to herself at times as an old woman, and tells me she has no problem describing herself as old.

<sup>16</sup> In the course of this first week I have a conversation with an out-of-state tourist who tells me that everyone he knows says the Connecticut Turnpike, especially around Hartford, is frightening. “Even my cat gets scared” the man tells me. I make a note to find an alternate route back to Maryland and I do.

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<sup>17</sup> *Growing Old in El Barrio*.

<sup>18</sup> Various artists and iconographers often note in their resume that they apprenticed to Bethune. For example, one can Google Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Mark Malone, pastor of St. George Melkite-Greek Catholic Church, Sacramento, California, who notes that he is an iconographer, having illustrated religious texts for over thirty years, his icons appear in a number of churches, and he apprenticed to Bethune.

<sup>19</sup> Here Bethune mentions a family member's name. I have used here a different name.

<sup>20</sup> Bethune was in her mid-seventies when Stoughton's biography/oral history was published, but has just turned 70 when Stoughton interviewed her.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), American psychologist produced a psychological theory in a 1943 paper, *A Theory of Human Motivation* that is often represented as a pyramid.

<sup>22</sup> From the front flap of dust jacket of *Proud Donkey*.

<sup>23</sup> The back flap of the dust jacket for *Proud Donkey of Schaerbeek, Adé Bethune, Catholic Worker Artist* by Judith Stoughton, notes that she contributed chapters to *Women's Studies and the Arts* (1978) and *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (1979).

<sup>24</sup> Hereafter quotations from this book will be referenced as PD.

<sup>25</sup> Many books and articles about Bethune say that she was called Adé because when she submitted pictures to Dorothy Day at *The Catholic Worker*, she used the initial "A" followed by de Bethune. This is told in William Miller's biography of Day, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*. Bethune told me this is a myth, it wasn't true. In a 1983 interview with Nancy Roberts, housed in Day's Marquette Archives, Bethune told Roberts she was not called Adé because of a printer's mistake, that was a legend. Her family shortened Adelaide to Adé.

<sup>26</sup> Frequent communion had fallen off during the middle ages and it was not until Pius X that frequent communion was recommended.

<sup>27</sup> At the Institute of the Holy Family outside Brussels every student was expected to own a missal (Stoughton 21). The word "missal" comes from the Latin word for Mass and it contains the prayers the priest says at the altar, especially important in the days before the Mass was only said in Latin. The missal, like the Church calendar, followed the seasons of the year, and contained the assigned passages from Old and New Testament that were read during Mass. It was highly unusual in those days for any Catholic to own a missal, especially a child. This shows the income level of the students at this school, and the high level of Catholic religious education.

<sup>28</sup> There were lean times and better times but contributions up to the present have kept the paper and the work going. Funds came from many unknowns and well-knowns like writer Evelyn Waugh who made his checks out just to "Dorothy Day's Soup Kitchen" (Roberts 51).

<sup>29</sup> From an essay prepared by Jim Forest for The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History available online at the Catholic Worker Home Page (<http://www.catholicworker.com/ddaybio.htm>) Accessed 5/25/2009.

<sup>30</sup> There were also many volunteers who did not live in the Houses of Hospitality, but instead came in by the day as Bethune did.

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<sup>31</sup> Day's daughter Tamar lived this farming life in various locations, bearing nine children. The St. Benedict Catholic Worker Farm in Upton, Massachusetts lives on now in a different form. Paulson, a stained glass master executed the rose window featuring an unwinding spiral Bethune designed at the Newman Center at Rensselaer. Paulson had ten children, two of his sons carry on the stained glass business in Upton where Carl Paulson continued to live in his 90s.

<sup>32</sup> In 1985 Bethune called the fourth corporal work of mercy: "harboring the homeless." Homeless is a more familiar word these days than harborless, which is the word Bethune used in 1933, and then and now in catechisms and the Catholic Encyclopedia, the word "harborless" sometimes spelled "harbourless" is usually used. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10198d.htm>).

<sup>33</sup> *Eye Contact with God Through Pictures, A Clip Book of Pictures from the Adé Bethune Collection.* Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward. 1986.

<sup>34</sup> These lancets were for the chapel at the Precious Blood Monastery of nuns, her designs executed by Rambusch Studios, still producing art glass since 1898.

<sup>35</sup> Private communication 3/10/10.

<sup>36</sup> Much of what Bethune wrote was written with ecumenism in mind.

<sup>37</sup> I've recently been informed that the Bethune Archives has received grant money to study Bethune's social justice work, and the Archives will have funding for two student assistants.

<sup>38</sup> Bethune discussed with me how even as her father's dementia progressed, he was able to do some very simple things, one of which was make breakfast for Marthe.

<sup>39</sup> One night in 1999 I was driving Bethune to Westerly to see a play about Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, founders of the Catholic Worker movement. Bethune was to give a little talk afterwards. We wanted to avoid Rt. 95, and as I was driving down Route One Bethune insisted we make a turn that in the end got us lost. We had a power struggle because I knew the route well. I gave in and in the end Bethune was sheepish and we began to giggle and had some good laughs as we found out way around Narragansett Pier in the dark, the rain, and the fog, without another soul or another car in sight.

<sup>40</sup> The date, 1939, in Stoughton's *Proud Donkey* (104) is incorrect. I own a copy of the small book that Stoughton calls a pamphlet.

<sup>41</sup> Catholic Author's Press 2007.

<sup>42</sup> I sympathize, having myself, a few periods in my life, been caught up in the romantic aspect of Catholicism; the vestments, ritual, Gregorian Chant, monks and nuns in habits, the Sistine Chapel, St. Francis blessing animals, cloisters, Gothic cathedrals, and the incense, can waft one into a state, almost too spiritual to be of any earthly use.

<sup>43</sup> From Norton's Abstract.

<sup>44</sup> My only point of disagreement with Norton is that she holds that Bethune's pictures were also "witnesses or artifacts of Bethune's own practice" (Abstract). I would have nuanced this as I believe this was true unconsciously, but not consciously. Bethune would never have set herself up as an example for others to follow. She did see her *CW* pictures as models of lives readers should strive to emulate.

<sup>45</sup> This simply meant she was publicly committing herself to modeling her life on St. Benedict and to a life of work and prayer and hospitality.

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<sup>46</sup> John Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier were married in St. Mary's in Newport in 1953.

<sup>47</sup> deBoer-Longworthy - Chronology

<sup>48</sup> In our age of McMansions this may not sound very impressive but for the Fifties it was.

<sup>49</sup> I never did find out how Bethune discovered Maslow, but a young person she knew was studying to be a social worker and I think it was through this person that Bethune came across Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

<sup>50</sup> *Psychology* 5th Edition, Gleitman, Fridlund and Reisberg 1999, 742.



## CHAPTER FIVE: MARY AZARIAN (b. 1940)

Mary Azarian, American woodcut artist and Vermont resident, has illustrated over fifty books and written several. In 1999 she was awarded the prestigious Caldecott Medal by the American Library Association for the most distinguished American children's picture book. After graduating Smith College, Azarian taught in a one-room schoolhouse. She created "The Farmer's Alphabet" for the Vermont Council for the Arts who printed and distributed the woodcut alphabet based on Vermont rural scenes, to every public elementary school in the state. In 1969 Azarian started Farmhouse Press producing woodcut prints and note cards on a 19th century Vandercook proof press. In 1978 Azarian helped to found the Montpelier artisans cooperative, Artisans Hand.

I know that as long as I can clutch a trowel I will be a gardener.  
Mary Azarian<sup>1</sup>

The garden must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape.  
Edith Wharton<sup>2</sup>

### Field Notes of an Outlander

We pull into Montpelier near where Mary Azarian lives, the only state capital city in the country without a McDonald's, and the smallest in the U.S. I'm surprised by its size; it, looks smaller than Frederick, Maryland near where I live. It has a pleasant aspect, situated along the Winooski River, and dominated by the beautiful gold-domed state house up on a hill a quarter mile from the city center. The Capitol Plaza and Conference Center where John and I are registered to stay in the heart of this city has all of fifty-six rooms and reasonable room rates. Adding to initial impressions of Vermont is a sign hanging on our room's bathroom doorknob:

Dear Guest, Every day tons of detergent and millions of gallons of water are used to wash towels that have only been used once. Please decide for yourself. A towel on the rack means "I'll use it again." A towel on the floor or in the tub means "please exchange."

There is a similar notice on the bed about changing the sheets. If I want to conserve water and detergent I can leave the card on the pillow and the bed will be made but the sheets will not be changed that day. In small print I'm also told a percentage of profits will be donated to environmental causes. As I write this up now with the "green revolution" spreading, perhaps this housekeeping routine in hotels and inns is more common; I had never seen it before.

In preparation for meeting project colleague Mary Azarian for the first time, in the usual mode of wanting to "be prepared," I purchased a copy of *Vermont Life* magazine at a local bookstore before I left. This regional publication is to Vermont as *Down East* magazine is to Maine, and leafing through its pages I came upon some of Azarian's woodcuts illustrating a calendar of events. The name "Vermont" derives from two French words for "green" and "mountain." Indeed Vermont is the "Green Mountain state," mountains by that name running down its spine. I know Vermont mainly through reading memoir never having set foot in it before. It seems to be a place of exceptional creativity; home to musicians, artists and writers like the late Thetford, Vermont farmer, essayist and Dartmouth professor, Noel Perrin, whose work I came to know through his columns describing rural life in *The Washington Post* over twenty years. Vermont brings to mind memoirist Reeve Lindbergh, daughter of the famous aviator, who lives in the northern part of the state, whose memoirs are favorites of mine, the most recent one about entering her sixties. The family she came from is "Connecticut saltwater cove and Maine island tides people," (11), not "hippy homesteader people," how she describes the Vermont she moved to 35 years ago (2008). Of course there is Tasha Tudor, whom I think of as America's Beatrix Potter. Tudor, a Marlboro, Vermont resident, who died recently at 92,

was a renowned illustrator and author of children's books who won two Caldecott Medals, 1945 and 1957. Then there's the late Maria von Trapp, former Benedictine nun and stepmother to the Trapp Family Singers of "Sound of Music" fame, who settled in Stowe, Vermont where her family runs the Trapp Family Lodge. I met her once in the mid-seventies when I was giving a workshop at a conference at Notre Dame. She was 70 then. Young college students were so excited at being assigned to meet her at the airport, then chagrined, because instead of someone looking like Julie Andrews they saw an "old" woman with gray hair, a bandanna on her head, eccentrically dressed in full peasant costume, holding a large umbrella against the summer heat, and asking to be taken to some woods to look for mushrooms; that's how the young people reported her arrival. She did wear a folk outfit all weekend.

Vermont conjures up for me thoughts of organic Vermont Bread, purchased at my local health food co-op, Cabot cheese, the Vermont Country Store, Ben & Jerry's, maple syrup, King Arthur Flour, Green Mountain Coffee, Vermont Castings woodstoves, we own one, Seventh Generation products, we use them, Annie's Naturals salad dressings, and VerMints, "for people who want to refresh their breath with true flavor rather than chemicals and preservatives." Vermont carefully protects the use of its name on products.

### New England's New England

When people think and write about New England, they often divide it into northern and southern, southern being Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and northern being Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Contemporary tourists and writers often refer to northern New England as the "real" New England, less developed and more

like the entire region looked many years ago. Even decades ago the New England that local color writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Robert Frost were describing was northern New England. This half of the New England region is even thought to have preserved the “Yankee character” more clearly (Perrin 2006 124). Historian Stephen Nissenbaum in his essay, “New England as Region and Nation,” calls “those rural northern areas” that “have become the last true bastion of the Yankee spirit – in effect ‘New England’s New England’” (39). The business of tourism, linked with a Yankee thrust towards preservation, in Vermont’s case preserving the rural nature of the landscape as opposed to the image of pristine villages set upon a commons as in southern New England, has taken notice. For example, in February 2004 *The Heart of New England*, an online free weekly newsletter, was initiated. It promotes itself as aiming to celebrate “the unique character and culture of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont,” announcing that its target audience is those who love living in northern New England, those who have ever lived or visited the three northern states and miss them, and those who have “never been here but pine away for it anyway.” The June 2008 issue stated “Auyh, New England *does* have six states, but the northern three states. . . have managed (for the most part) to keep sprawl in check and maintain the rural New England culture and character”

<http://www.theheartofnewengland.com/newsletter/2010/276.html>).

#### Summer - Three Months of Poor Sledding

Montpelier is right in the middle of Vermont and demographics<sup>3</sup> for the first time I visited the city in August 2000 noted a total population of 8,035, predominantly white, with 113 Latinos, 66 Asians, 52 African Americans and 19 American Indian and Alaska Natives. Snowfall in central Vermont is about nine feet a year with only the four months

of June, July, August and September escaping measurable amounts. The Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce informs that “many feet of melting snow, combined with spring rain and dirt roads, leads to a one-month ‘mud season’ that is uniquely Vermont.” The Chamber ends their climate information with the comment: “A hearty breed have come to appreciate Vermont year-round” (<http://www.central-vt.com/climate/climate>, accessed 5/14/08). The Chamber does not say, but I found elsewhere, that Vermont is one of the cloudiest places in the U.S.:

There are cold and blustery Vermont winter days when even the low-lying clouds are too miserable to snow. An old Yankee is accustomed to this ‘sour’ sort of weather, however, and more than one observer has remarked on Vermonters’ corresponding dispositions. Certainly endless weeks of gray sky do little to inspire perky chatter. (Wuerthner and Matteson 41)

A historian of Vermont has said that “a Vermonter may conclude, without fear of paranoia, that getting from Thanksgiving to Memorial Day can be cruel and unusual punishment” (Bryan and Mares 109) and a Yankee truism I’ve heard for years is relevant here: “In New England we have nine months of winter and three months of poor sledding.” *The Heart of New England* has an interesting list of such Yankee sayings and one can even click to hear a “real” northern New England accent!<sup>4</sup>

Don Mitchell, member of the Middlebury College faculty reflecting on the effects of the weather, population and geographical size on Vermonters, tells a story. He says it is really an old joke. A Texas rancher visiting the state has a conversation with a Vermont dairy farmer. The rancher is by turns amazed, then unimpressed, by how small everything is, especially the state being less than 10,000 square miles, “space for maybe half a dozen good-sized ranches.” The rancher tells the farmer that back home he can get in his truck after breakfast, drive to check on his heifers, have lunch, then drive in another direction

to see some young stock, then drive in another direction to check his fences and when its time for supper, he has spent the whole day in his pickup on his own land. Expecting the Vermont dairyman to be impressed at the size of his ranch, instead the farmer says with sympathy, “Ayuh, had a truck like that once” (12).

Mitchell, who moved with his wife to farm in Vermont in 1984, says this story illustrates how what to people “from away” might seem obvious, is seen differently by Vermonters:

Blame it on an insular and ingrown culture; blame it on chronic cabin fever, or sheer cussedness. The whole state. . .represents a highly unusual set of conclusions about how people should live and behave, and what their goals – individually, collectively ought to be. In some ways Vermont is pure anachronism, as if the 20th century had passed it by: minimal racial strife because there are so few nonwhites, little class warfare because there is so little money, little obvious homelessness because the winters are too long and frigid. (12)

True to form, having gotten my copy of *Vermont Life* before this trip, I walked down the street my first day in Montpelier and bought *The Vermont Owner’s Manual* (Bryan and Mares) at Bear Pond Books, and stopping at a tourist kiosk, helped myself to every available pamphlet. Reading through this literature, mindful it was designed to attract tourists, I gleaned that, just as Mainers consider me as “from away,” Vermonters use the same expression in addition to calling an outsider an “outlander” or “flatlander.” I was told to expect the use of the word “wicked” as an adjective to denote the extreme, as in, “It was wicked cold.” I had already encountered this usage in Maine.

The *Owner’s Manual* tells me some Vermont firsts. Vermont was the first to outlaw slavery in its constitution and the first state to have an African American college graduate. Vermont was the first to give the vote to people without property and the first to permit absentee voting. And, it was the first to pass a “bottle bill,” and outlaw

billboards alongside highways (Bryan and Mares 35). Vermont, the only New England state without access to the ocean, is bordered by Canada, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York. It is 78% forested, making it the fourth most heavily forested state in the U.S. The official Vermont 2008 *Vacation Guide* points to this as a reason that the state has so many wood artisans (12). The woman I am going to meet is a woodcut artist.

### Finding Azarian

It was at an outside stall at the Montgomery Farm Women's Cooperative Market in Bethesda, Maryland in the 1970s that I encountered Mary Azarian's woodcuts for the first time. A summer Vermonter was selling Azarian's alphabet prints; 11x17 poster size woodcuts, hand colored, and mounted on 14x21 light blue construction paper. I had four young children and was teaching school with little left over then for luxuries, but whatever I had gone to the Market to buy, I bought less of it, purchasing the first art I acquired without my husband. I found out when interviewing Azarian later that she had the same thought as Bethune,<sup>5</sup> who sold posters made from her Catholic Worker pictures. Azarian, like Bethune, priced her art moderately so more people could afford to enjoy it. That day I acquired "A is for Apple." Over the next few years I collected other woodcut prints including a series of four Azarian did on the seasons that, below each picture, featured a quotation from Henry David Thoreau. We've used a woodstove for many years to heat our family room in winter and every autumn with a sense of satisfaction John stacks a pile of wood near the house. Azarian's appropriate winter woodcut in her Thoreau seasons series features a man carrying wood into his house; the Thoreau words below: "Every man looks at his woodpile with a kind of affection." Later I acquired a

book of Azarian's alphabet series called *The Farmer's Alphabet*. When it came to selecting women to interview for this project, I remembered how Azarian had portrayed old people, particularly women, in whose faces I read character and dignity. She was to tell me later that "woodcuts are just made for old people."

What jogged my memory to think of including Azarian in this project was an unusual photo accompanying a January 2000 *Washington Post* article about the author Carolyn Chute, whose first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, made her famous. The *Post* picture showed Chute and her husband in their cluttered Parsonsfield, Maine cabin, sitting in rockers, two other empty rockers beside them, and pinned to the wall, between the Chutes, was the illustration from Azarian's *Farmer's Alphabet*, "R is for Rocker!" (Carlson). Thus prompted to pull out my copy of *A Farmer's Alphabet*, I looked at Azarian's contented old woman smiling to herself as she rocked and hulled berries or shelled peas. I sat down and wrote to Azarian, introducing myself, describing this study.

#### Meeting Azarian

It is now August 2000 and John and I are 15 minutes outside of Montpelier, in north central Vermont, driving down one of the state's numerous dirt roads, coming to a stop at an isolated gray early nineteenth-century farmhouse set perpendicular to the road. First to greet us at the door, a tinkling sound coming from the small silver wind chime attached to it, is a beagle, steeping right out of many of Azarian's book illustrations; then a corgi, followed by a tall, 5'10" gray-haired woman, a welcoming expression on her faintly lined face. A few months shy of sixty, she is wearing comfortable loose-fitting brown pants, brown leather clogs, a brown top with a loose smock like overblouse of light blue, and striking copper earrings. Glasses hang by a chain around her neck. She



hushes the dogs and we pass through the slate mudroom to sit at a wooden table in her warm, colorful kitchen, the first room one comes to; two parlors or living rooms reached by passing through the kitchen. After initial small talk, John goes off to read a book, and Azarian and I began the first of many conversations. As I did in Bethune's kitchen, I look about appreciating the interior view. Not a Calder-like kitchen this time, the assemblage more *Little House on the Prairie*: lots of baskets, flowers, plants, dogs and cats, red tomatoes. To my right are shelves with Azarian's cookbook collection, and several rows of blue and white Louisville stoneware. A woodstove behind me, the floor is painted wood, faded aqua and black rectangles, painted light blue cabinets, giving that room the overall pastel look of the Swedish artist and illustrator Carl Larsson. I see no dishwasher and no microwave. "I'm here all day so I don't have to do anything fast," Azarian says.

The largest cat I have ever seen, appropriately named "Big Kitty," jumps onto my lap and settles there purring away as I turn on my recorder and Mary and I begin to review the chapters of her life, something I'd been unable to do with Bethune because of her refrain: "It's in the book." I look down at Big Kitty. I'm not a cat person but were I to find another cat like this one I'd become one in a hurry. I've decided to ask a few questions that weren't on my old laundry list but were on a newer short list. Working on my self-ethnography and reading about the Fifties and thinking about my wedding have made me curious about how married co-investigators felt about losing their maiden name. Five years younger than I, Azarian too is a Silent.

JT: What was your maiden name? And how did you feel about it when you got married, not being known by that name?

MA: Schneider. I didn't think about it at all. It was never an issue. I didn't like my maiden name, so maybe that was why. It was partly the Germanness of it. You know, right after the World War and all that. And Azarian sounded more

exotic. I was born in 1940, living the first five years of my life in Arlington, Virginia. When I was about five we moved out to my grandfather's farm in Springfield, Virginia.

JT: Would you say then that the first chapter of your life is the first five years?

MA: The first five years were definitely, distinctly different because I lived two doors down from my grandmother, my father's mother. My mother worked and my grandmother looked after me. She was an inspired cook and baker and she taught me a lifelong love of cooking and baking. She used to bake every single day either pies or cookies. She made buns and homemade candy. She had a backyard garden. She grew vegetables; she had a parsley patch. I remember flowers, big red rambler roses that went across her garage, and sweet blue violets in the grass.

JT: If or when you ever thought about aging, would this grandmother have been a role model?

MA: No, she definitely was not a good one because she was a bit timid and didn't seem to me to have an interesting life. I know all kinds of women who are older than I am that I think, boy, I hope I'm going to be like that when I get to that age, which is to say independent, of sound mind, and fairly sound body; still interested in life and learning things and just continuing the journey rather than saying, 'well, my life is over. I'm not going to do anything.' So many people seem to do that. If your health or your body betrays you or you get some big horrible disease, well, you know, who's to say. I'm not one of those people who believe that if you get cancer or some horrible disease that you brought it on yourself. If you've read Susan Sontag, "Illness As Metaphor," which I read when I was young, it's bad enough to get some horrible disease without being blamed for it as well. I always for some reason assumed that I would be as energetic and vigorous as I was all throughout my life. I didn't see why I should not be. I think everybody tends to be that way. . . .lately. . .I clearly am getting old and I have to think about how I want to live the final portion of my life.. .My body is definitely slowing down. I'm not as energetic, I'm not as fast, I seem to need to sleep more.

JT: What is the next chapter of your life after the Arlington years?

MA: There's the farm years, that would be until I was twenty. Living on my grandfather's farm in Springfield, which is still only 20 miles outside of Washington, but it was really farm country. My parents built a house on his land. That was my mother's father, my father's father died and my mother's mother died before I was born.

JT: The next chapter?

MA: The next chapter, after graduating from college in 1962, would be 1963 to 1983. I moved with T... [to Cabot, Vermont], doing the subsistence farm bit, which became less and less a subsistence farm, raising the boys [Azarian has three sons], then in 1983 I moved here. Age 41 to 60 has been a good continual period [Azarian turned 60 in 2000].

Azarian tells me two stories from the first and second chapters of her life.

She would lie on a porch swing at her paternal grandmother's house while her grandmother popped grapes into her mouth. Her grandmother peeled them first! The memory from the second chapter is of her maternal grandfather having a parrot. It flew free in his house and when it was time for her grandfather to come home from work, the bird would fly out of the house and down the block to land on her grandfather's shoulder. Azarian has that parrot now, stuffed, in her living room! Both of us were cherished by grandmothers. Azarian savored peeled grapes, Grama named a small guest room in her house "Judy's Room" and so it remained even after I was married and could seldom visit.

Azarian separated from her husband when she moved from Cabot to this farmhouse in Calais. During the time I was interviewing her she lived alone, telling me she has no intention of marrying again. "I like living by myself, she said. I then asked Azarian about Vermont where she had then been living for almost forty years.

MA: I think Vermont is a unique place but then people from New Hampshire probably think the same. Definitely Maine is a unique place. Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire seem very different. I can't articulate it.

JT: What is it about Vermont that kept you here.

MA: Mostly the people I would think. And you can live in Vermont on a very modest scale without feeling deprived. There are plenty of people with lots and lots of money, but people don't show it here, absolutely not, and you can feel comfortable just going into town in what you're wearing to work around in all day long. And even though Vermonters have definite opinions, they're also very tolerant. I'm talking about native Vermonters. I've been here 40 years but that doesn't matter, I'm definitely an outsider.

JT: Why did you move to Vermont in the first place?

MA: I didn't move to Vermont knowing anything about Vermont at all. It was just far enough north that we could afford to buy land. Where we really wanted to move was to the Appalachians, but we were afraid that the political climate was so right wing there and neither one of us was religious, we were afraid we'd be isolated there. T... wanted to move there because of the music. He was a fantastic musician. He went down there and he met all the old greats while they were still alive and he would have loved to live there. The second choice was the mountains of Virginia, but that was too expensive and so was western Massachusetts. We started in southern Vermont and just kept traveling north until we found cheap land. Central Vermont was a great choice. This was a good area to live in because there are a lot of writers, artists, crafts people, and Montpelier is a really nice town because although it's tiny, it has everything. You know it has four bookstores in a town of 7,000 people.

Azarian tells me Vermont is a mix of people. Some are very poor, small farmers run out of business by agribusinesses, perhaps a third of Vermonters. These include people who grew up as small business people, or granite workers, not much education beyond high school. Another third are potters, writers, lawyers, and doctors who moved to the state for a "Vermont lifestyle." These people work out of their homes and "it's still pretty quiet here." Some people live in voluntary simplicity. The last third is divided between people who have second homes in Vermont, and those who moved to the Burlington area to work at places like IBM. "It's still pretty rural," Azarian says. "No big centers of industry here. Winter is too long."

Azarian went to an upscale Episcopal girls' school, St. Agnes, in Virginia, but says her parents were not church goers:

I was barely religious until I graduated from college, then I dropped it. I started out in a very conservative Republican family and accepted all those values unquestioningly. Then when T... and I got together, he was very left and I just made a transformation. I did my share of demonstrating but never anything that put me in jeopardy."

After college at Smith, Azarian expected to get married, as did all of us young women in our Silent generation, and do art as a hobby. Graduating at the beginning of the “back-to-the-land” movement, Azarian and her husband moved to a small hill farm in Cabot, Vermont. Azarian stresses they were not directly influenced by *The Good Life* by Helen and Scott Nearing. Azarian says she didn’t read it until she had made the move to Cabot. The Nearings, the pioneer back-to-the-landers, had written in that book and others about searching for the good life by self-sufficient living on a farm in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Farming turned out to be harder than Azarian imagined. Even with a lot of hard work, since her husband, a musician, was mostly unemployed, and the farm brought little revenue except for maple syrup, with a family growing to include three sons, Azarian looked for ways to bring in some income. Vermont was desperate for teachers. Azarian, with a B.A. in Art, took a six-week education course and began teaching grades one through eight in a one-room schoolhouse. She enjoyed the first two years but in the third year decided she was not cut out to be a teacher, so she turned to her art, producing craft items, and eventually woodcut posters that she could sell at fairs. She says upon graduating from college, “It *never* occurred to me I would have to use my art. My art was a hobby. I never expected to have to earn a living.”

### Becoming a Small Factory

Azarian uses the word “thrilled” to describe how she felt then and still feels thinking about it, at finding out how to make a living with her art. She started out painting tin boxes. Then she began making wood cuts, and as she recounts:

MA: The appealing thing about the wood cut was that you could paint them by hand, another part of the appealing thing. . . you know, you can just keep making that sucker over, over and over again.. It’s not like doing a painting.

When you do a painting you have to get a decent price for it, and then it's gone.

It was hit and miss and she made mistakes, and Azarian tells about sitting at fairs in the heat and not selling anything. But she learned. In time, as her woodcut note cards and poster prints sold, she says she became a "small factory." And she says it wasn't just about making money:

MA: I loved doing it. I had a good time in that era. I'm still absolutely thrilled that I was able to figure out how to earn a living doing art, which put me on my own terms and working when I wanted to work. . . .of course you have to work all the time, but I still feel I've been extraordinarily lucky.

And she was able to work at home - where she also milked cows, baked bread, gardened, cooked and tended oxen, a cow, goats, sheep, pigs, poultry, harvesting vegetables, apples and raspberries and made maple syrup to sell.

#### Creature of Routine

I began interviewing Azarian the same year she turned sixty when she had been living in Calais alone more than a decade, ever since her sons were grown and had moved out. The only animals she tended now were two dogs and three cats, but she was still tending vegetables and flowers. "I am a creature of routine," Mary said as she began to tell me about her typical daily routine. She gets up at seven in winter, five to six in summer.

JT: When you wake in the morning is it a natural awakening or do you use an alarm?

MA: I just wake up. I have a fantastic sense of time. But it's really easy because I have two dogs and a cat.

JT: True.

MA: (she laughs) In the bed! I'm an early morning person. I get all of my work<sup>6</sup> done before noon usually. I make coffee, [Ethiopian Harrar coffee which she

grinds herself] then make latte with steamed milk. Then I'll read for an hour and a half, maybe two hours sometimes and that's great. If I try to read after I eat dinner I just go to sleep. Then I work<sup>7</sup> until noon. Between noon and one I have lunch and then I either take a nap or don't depending on the time of year. I tend to be a little slower in the winter. Lately I've been taking lots of naps; a good long nap sometimes, two hours. Then I take the dogs for a walk and that's it. Then my day is over. I have a pretty regimented day come to think of it. I get up, feed the dogs, make my coffee, sit down and read, sometimes its as many as two hours depending on if I'm really gripped by the book, then I go and work for four hours at the studio, eat lunch, take a nap, take the dogs for a walk, and then, whatever I do for the rest of the day is whatever I do.

The "whatever" she does is gardening, which she usually doesn't mention when she talks about her day. I come to see that gardening for Azarian is like breathing. I have to directly bring it up and then Azarian will offhandedly say, "... lately I spend four hours a day in the garden," or "six hours," or "two hours." She has an agent and she illustrates one to two books a year. When there is a deadline looming and she has illustrations to finish, she may work a solid nine hours in her second-story studio, but then reverts to her usual schedule. She never eats breakfast.

#### Azarian Fieldtrips – Moose Crossing

Azarian, the youngest of this project's participants, I was to make three visits to this house, as I did with Bethune, although I only lived with Azarian for a week; two other times I stayed elsewhere with John. The year of my live-in stay, 2004, John and I drove from Maryland to Burlington and then after a night in a motel, dropping him off at the Burlington, Vermont airport, I drove south to Montpelier past road signs warning "Moose Next 2 Miles," and seeing interesting bumper stickers like "Charity is nice; Justice is better." I feel a pang as Bethune's and my Catholic enculturation geared towards serving others with works of mercy still has a place, especially when people suddenly find themselves unemployed, or a disaster like Katrina or Haiti strikes, but time

and raised consciousness has revealed the difference between giving bread to the hungry, and giving the hungry tools, and teaching how to grow wheat. To be fair, however, in the more than sixty years since I was a child, the Catholic vocabulary and interpretation of works of mercy has broadened beyond performing charitable acts to include social justice activity. For Bethune the debate would have been moot. As she used to say, any good action was a work of mercy.

### Participant Observation

I watched Azarian work in her upstairs studio, went with her to an evening weekly bridge group in a Montpelier café, prepared food with her, she took me to a museum, and I took her for a meal at one of Montpelier's five restaurants run by students from, and owned by, the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier. I went to see the Artisan's Hand in town, the coop Azarian helped to found. Azarian's farmhouse has three bedrooms upstairs, plus her studio and a large bathroom. No wallpaper in sight, lots of white painted wood and bare wide board wooden floors. Azarian's farmhouse has a spare look, no clutter about, her kitchen and studio being cozy rooms. In the studio is Azarian's "reading chair" and lamp. As I began to examine the cultural influences at play in Azarian's life, and came to realize the importance of the gardening tradition, it looked inexplicable to me that we never worked in her garden together. One of the reasons it took me so long to see how gardening dominates her life. Another is that I did walk around Azarian's house several times, admiring the landscaping, but had never walked the full length of her flower beds so didn't know how immense they were. I asked Azarian several years after this visit why we'd never worked in her garden. She told me it



was so much trouble to teach a person the proper way to do things in her garden that she never asked anyone to join her there.

### A Harrowing Drive

After Azarian and I spent almost a week together we set out one sunny morning for Luthera Dawson's house. Azarian had met Bethune, and wants to meet other project participants.<sup>8</sup> Heading to Maine from Vermont isn't easy. John and I once went straight across and it took forever, involving lots of steep hills, and narrow, winding roads where we got behind slow trucks and couldn't pass and John vowed we'd never take that route again. The other way to do it is to drive all the way down to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, then cross the bridge into Maine and drive all the way up to the mid-coast where Dawson lives. Azarian says she knows that route well so we start out, both of us in Subaru's, with Azarian in the lead. An hour later we're in the mountains on an Interstate with swiftly moving trailer rigs, I'm admiring the scenery when I see Azarian's arm waving out her window. She pulls over and so do I, putting on my blinkers. Traffic is whizzing by on our left, on our right there's barely any shoulder and a steep drop-off down a hill. Azarian gets out, hugs close to her car and climbs into my passenger seat. "I think I've thrown a rod," she says. We're initially stymied as to what to do. We can't flag down a truck or car because traffic is moving too fast so we will just have to wait for the police or someone to see us and stop. We also realize we are parked in a dangerous spot.

I'm now 68, Azarian is 63. We both use computers, Azarian an Apple for her business, but we have embraced little else of modern technology. Hard for me to believe now, but it took a while to belatedly remember I have a cell phone with me. My now late son Michael was so frustrated that John and I haven't moved into the hi-tech era that he

signed us up for a plan and handed us a phone. This is 2004. Our children all have cells as do the oldest grandchildren; everyone has urged us to get one but John and I don't see the need. I wasn't sure how to use it and neither was Azarian, who told me she'd decided never to get a cell. Between us we figured it out, she called back to a garage in Montpelier to send a tow truck, we left her car, and I found a place to turn around and drove us back to Montpelier. We had now been on the road more than two hours.

Azarian then couldn't make up her mind whether to rent a car and begin again or just go home. In an interview later on she tells me she doesn't like being decisive, she just sort of slips into reaching conclusions. She doesn't think any cars will be available to rent, Montpelier is a small town. But we drive to Barre, the largest city in central Vermont, and they have a rental. Azarian still can't make up her mind so we sit in the rental parking lot while Azarian weighs pros and cons. But then the thought that she has arranged for someone to care for her dogs and cats for two days decides her.

We start out again. We pass the scene of the breakdown and as we go further south it begins to rain and then it's dusk. I can't believe it when I once again see Azarian's waving arm out the car window. She pulls over, so do I, and she says she's lost. Turns out she knew this route well many years ago. Good with maps, I figure out where we are and back on the road I take the lead. Up to now, the most difficult driving I've ever done was on the Connecticut turnpike on my first field trip to see Bethune. But that white-knuckle experience is surpassed as I lead the way into New Hampshire and into Maine in the pitch dark and a driving rain. Having neglected to give Azarian directions in case we got separated, I have to keep looking back to try to see the headlights of the rental. I call Dawson who's been eagerly anticipating our arrival with

dinner waiting. Limp, Azarian and I pull in after 10pm and after greetings, Dawson heads for bed, hands me the house key, and Azarian and I drive into Rockland in search of a late meal. Thankfully it's a Friday night, some restaurants are still serving, and at the waterfront, over piles of mussels for Azarian and scallops for me, I share with Azarian how Bethune and I got lost in the fog one night. Soon Azarian and I are giggling just as hard as Bethune and I did. Azarian now says she sees the value of having a cell phone. I agree.

Had I not lived with my three key project colleagues, I might have missed things like Bethune at 87, and frail, not many months from her death, surreptitiously taking her medication, not wanting to make a fuss or be seen; or Luthera Dawson, at 92, showing me how to make Indian Pudding, delicious with ginger ice cream; or learning what radio stations Azarian listened to while working. I did eleven phone interviews over six years with Azarian from 2000 to 2006, doing one or two even as my son was battling cancer, and always beginning at 8am to fit with Azarian's work schedule. We continue to enjoy keeping up our relationship chatting by phone in 2010.

When my son Michael died, I found some comfort listening to a CD Azarian sent me by a Vermont folk group called Nightingale. Entitled "Trois" because the group consists of three musicians, Nightingale put to music a small portion of a poem, "The Psalm of Life," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Azarian directed me to that particular selection:

Tell me not in, mournful numbers,  
Life is but an empty dream!  
For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
And things are not what they seem.

### Chorus

Life is real! Life is earnest!  
And the grave is not its goal;  
Dust to dust thou art returnest,  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Let us then be up and doing  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving still pursuing  
Learn to labor and to wait.<sup>9</sup>

The melody and the harmonies were soothing. During a book tour Azarian stayed once at our house in Maryland, kindly speaking to elementary school students about making woodcuts at the Quaker school one of my grandsons was attending. Azarian often is asked to visit classrooms.

### Gardening as Cultural Tradition

Because Azarian spoke about gardening as though it was just such an obvious fact of life one seldom mentioned it, it was several years before I realized gardening was the main tradition influencing her life, deriving initially from her first five years in her grandmother's garden. It is what gives her life meaning and structure, and shapes choices she makes. I had assumed somehow art would be Azarian's chief cultural tradition, or the Yankee work ethic, for which she feels an affinity. When I closely examined books Azarian has illustrated, and those she has written, I realized that most of the greeting cards, calendars, art posters, and book illustrations she has produced depict what she grows in her gardens or are related to her gardening, even the "critters," that sometimes eat her vegetables. Although Azarian gave me a copy of her latest book when I first met her, *A Gardener's Alphabet*, I didn't read it right away or I would have known to pay more attention to what she said about gardening. Later when I read over observations in my field notes, I saw I had written: "Azarian has gardener's fingernails and gardener's

hands. She keeps her fingernails short and creases in her fingers sometimes show traces of dirt that can't easily be washed off." Azarian like so many "real" gardeners doesn't wear gloves in the garden.

I think another reason I initially missed Azarian's main cultural tradition is that my reading on Vermont had stressed the harsh climate and short growing season. "Who in their right mind would seriously garden in Vermont," I thought, assuming working in her gardens was a hobby that didn't take much of her time; her Cabot farming days left behind. It turns out that Vermont has produced some serious gardeners and famous gardens, and Azarian's yellow lilies, pink peony blossoms and a side of her house grace a book jacket: *Your House, Your Garden, A Foolproof Approach to Garden Design* (2003) by a nationally acclaimed Vermont garden designer.<sup>10</sup> It wasn't until I'd known Azarian for six or seven years that she casually mentioned this book when I pressed her about the importance of gardening in her life. Apparently Azarian's flower gardens and her entire property are famous to those in the know. After describing how gardening is prominent in Azarian's life and art work, I will show how this tradition has influenced how she is negotiating moving into old age.

Azarian's first book was a children's picture book, *A Farmer's Alphabet* (1981). As is true of all Boston publisher David Godine's work, it is beautifully produced appealing to adults as well as children. This book is printed on acid-free paper with type that evokes Art Nouveau and William Morris and as *Publisher's Weekly* notes, "it appeals to art connoisseurs of woodcuts as art."<sup>11</sup> The book collects the alphabet posters Azarian did for the Vermont Council for the Arts that Vermont's Department of Education, distributed to every Vermont elementary school to decorate classrooms. In

her “Artist’s Note” in this book Azarian wrote about the idea behind this alphabet. It was to:

...celebrate some of the rural traditions that are still observed in New England today. ...I wanted to make an alphabet to replace the many urban-oriented ones already available, and thus help in the fight to maintain regional diversity. (61)

Along with scenes of “B – Barn” and “M – Maple Sugar,” are “G – Garden” and the fruits of Azarian’s gardening: “A – Apple,” and “Z – Zinnia.”

Another children’s book that Azarian wrote and illustrated that was published the year I met her is *The Gardener’s Alphabet*. She dedicated it to “Grandma Annie” and “Uncle Winnie” and in an introduction Azarian tells readers about “the large garden in my grandmother’s backyard;” the one with the violets and roses and the “endless supply of fresh vegetables.” This Grandma Annie was the grandmother who cared for Azarian until she was five while her mother worked as a salesperson at Garfinckel’s, a local Washington area upscale department store. Uncle Winnie “raised a market garden of fruits, vegetables, and flowers” on her grandfather’s Springfield farm where Azarian lived from age six until she was twenty. “Tomatoes never tasted as good as they did eaten right in the field, sun-warmed and full of juice and flavor.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Gardening – The Most Difficult of All the Arts

In the introduction to *The Gardener’s Alphabet*, Azarian writes that after this childhood it seemed natural that she start a garden when, as a young adult, she moved to a small farm in Vermont. Her vision was to have a “lovely country cottage garden, roses and hollyhocks around the door.” But instead, the first year “saw a garden full of weeds and pathetically puny vegetables.” Then in the following paragraph she tells readers:

After almost forty years of growing all manner of plants, I have almost learned how to garden. I am convinced that gardening is the most difficult of all the arts.

Not only must the gardener master the elements of design and color, she must also study and learn the features and requirements of plants and come to understand the idiosyncrasies of her particular piece of land and the climate in which she gardens. And if that weren't enough, the ficklenesses of weather – the hailstorm that shreds the irises, the wind that takes down ancient trees, the drought that shrivels the corn, the frost that wipes out the tomatoes – are a constant source of frustration. ...But, the garden provides such an intriguing challenge and is such a source of wonder and joy that not to garden is unthinkable.

There is an attractive view from every window in Azarian's house because she designed her landscape with this in mind. She can raise her eyes from her studio worktable and gaze out at something pleasing, even in winter. She might see snow on an Adirondack chair or on a birdhouse. Her windows have no curtains to distract the eye. Her house is situated on five acres. When she first moved from Cabot to Calais, Azarian took lots of perennials with her like lilies, peonies, and iris. "I need the place I live to be beautiful" she told me when speaking of this time in her life. Her first vegetable garden in Calais was about 30x60 she says. She also planted two flowers beds 6X40 ft. She says now the vegetable garden is twice that, and the flower beds six times the original size. She also has a greenhouse.

In 2006 Azarian had begun to slowly cut back her business. She stopped selling prints to stores, stopped doing shows, and yearly calendars that I used to purchase every year. She was still selling her books, and some prints through her website, and fulfilling a few book contracts. I asked Azarian what vegetables she plants. She told me: onions, garlic, melons, herbs, eggplant, squash, rutabagas, potatoes, corn, peas, cabbage, kale, carrots, turnips, parsnips, cucumbers, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, tomatoes and beans. Azarian has a huge freezer in her basement where she keeps some produce. The basement has a dirt floor, good for storing onions, garlic, carrots, beets, and potatoes; the basement acting like a root cellar. She cans tomatoes. She has enough vegetables to last all winter.

To my mind, Azarian's vegetable garden is a huge enterprise. When I ask if she fertilizes she laughs. "Yes, I buy a large load of manure every fall, cow manure, old well-rotted cow manure. Every four or five years I buy a truckload of compost. I am continually trying to improve the soil. She then tells me her vegetable garden is always just a third of the garden; the rest is flowers, some of which have to be staked, deadheaded and separated. During an August 2003 phone interview Azarian talks to me about a book of poems, *Kneeling Orion*, she is illustrating by Kate Barnes, Maine's poet laureate.<sup>13</sup> Barnes joined this study and I interviewed her a few times, but she has withdrawn due to leukemia. "I'm vastly behind," she says, "I have a huge gardening project going on now which involves many, many yards of top soil. A load arrived this morning and I had to shovel it all by hand where it's going because I can't let it get compacted."

Azarian says she is in her garden every day as weather permits. "My preferred summer schedule is to work in my studio until one and then go out to the garden for 2, 3, 4 hours depending on how guilty I feel about walking the dogs. In 2006 she talked animatedly about new flowering plants she had acquired and was about to put in the ground: Carolina lupines, globe thistle and a couple of phloxes that are different from what she already has.

I love gardening, my parents were gardeners, my father vegetables, my mother flowers and indoor plants. I'm into ornamental grasses, some flowers and a water garden, so I know some gardening vocabulary Azarian uses and that helps our communication. Gardening influences how Azarian's house is arranged inside as well as outside. Arriving for a visit in September 2003, walking up the flagstone path to the front door, there are five bright orange pumpkins arrayed on a shiny green bench outside the front door along



with pots of petunias and chrysanthemums, blooms spilling over the sides. Just inside the screen door entering the mud room is a very large rush wicker basket with low sides, full of plump ripe tomatoes. Straight ahead I can see shelves full of jars of canned tomatoes. To my right are shaker pegs above a bench. Hanging from the pegs are a black beret and two pairs of colorful thick Swiss patterned knitted mittens, black and white with red trim attached to a string with clothespins; a black fringed silk scarf, a bright purple scarf, and on the last peg, a short black boiled wool jacket. They hang over a simple three foot wooden bench beneath which are two pairs of well-used shoes; one pair, slip-on dusty black leather clogs, the other, lace-up hiking shoes. On a bookcase shelf to the left of the front door are more baskets and a large wooden trug holding garden clippers and other tools. Entering the kitchen I see late summer flowers in a vase on the round coffee table in the first parlor.

### Influences of Gardening

Gardening affects the clothes Azarian wears and her friendships, the food she eats, and how she spends her time. She favors mostly natural fabrics, cotton, rayon, silk and wool; comfortable clothes that she can wear to garden, make woodcuts and paint and also wear into town. The knees of her pants are often muddy she says. In summer she wears tee shirts, in winter turtlenecks and sweaters with deep pockets for her reading glasses. Azarian has saved money she's made over the years and has some inherited assets but often shops for clothes at consignment shops and the Salvation Army. This isn't because she's frugal, which she is, but she likes the hunt. Her mother, like mine, was a consignment shopper, as I am too. But Azarian has style and doesn't look frumpy. She even says "by Vermont Hippy standards" she has nice clothes. I notice she doesn't skimp

on shoes. She says when I ask her, that Birkenstocks are too ugly! I ask her about her stylish leather clogs and she says they're Merrells. When I ask if any of her friends are gardeners, Azarian says "they all are." Then she tells me that just about everyone in Vermont has a garden. Sometimes she has mentioned to me visiting a friend's garden, or a professional garden like North Hill, seven acres of gardens in southern Vermont created by Joe Eck and Wayne Winterrowd.

Just as Bethune's life of the works of mercy was lived in the light of the Catholic liturgical year, the procession of feasts like Easter, the Nativity, and Good Friday, Azarian's life is shaped by gardening and the Vermont seasons that figure in her woodcuts. In an early book she illustrated, *Recipes from Armenia* (1985), she depicts in a black and white unpainted woodcut, a jar of summer flowers: Queen Anne's lace, daisies and small asters, with four lines of words: "The jar of wildflowers, Keeps alive the memory, Of a summer morning walk, In the warm, fragrant meadow." For *The Cook's Garden* catalogue for Spring/Summer 1996 Azarian illustrated the pages with summer flowers like pink hollyhocks and deep yellow sun flowers. Azarian's own 1999 Woodcut Print catalogue presented a woodcut of flowers titled "Summer Flowers," with an accompanying Thoreau quotation: "Do not the flowers of August and September resemble suns and stars – sunflowers, asters and the single flowers of the goldenrod." This catalogue also included some medieval prints. Azarian wrote: "These prints reflect my interest in medieval manuscript painting and folk art tradition." One such poster print was based on the four seasons. Another showed a man in middle ages dress in a wood with an ax with the saying: "Winter's days are short and cold; Wood is worth its weight in gold." Also in this catalogue are four seasonal prints based on Thoreau quotations that

were commissioned by the Thoreau Lyceum of Concord, Massachusetts. There is a woodcut poster simply called “November” showing a dark figure in rain hat bracing against sleet or rain with these words printed down the long black coat: “No sun, no moon, no noon, no dawn, no dusk, no proper time of day, no warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease, no shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees, no fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds, NOVEMBER.”

In this same catalogue there is a series of 18 black and white woodcuts called the Cottage Garden series. Nine are of individual flowers; four are devoted to the four seasons. The winter print shows a woman who looks like Azarian, seated in a chair by a window. It’s snowing outside and on the windowsill are blooming plants, including an Amaryllis. The woman is bundled in a quilt, her feet on a hassock, and she’s reading seed catalogues. Words beneath read: “Summer gardens bloom glorious in winter dreams.” More recently Azarian’s woodcuts illustrated *Autumn, A Spiritual Biography of the Season* (Schmidt and Felch 2005) and *Spring, A Spiritual Biography of the Season* (Schmidt and Felch 2006). The equally celebrated woodcut artist Barry Moser illustrated the books devoted to the other two seasons. In 2000 David Godine published a retrospective of Azarian’s work, reproducing fifty of her hand colored woodcuts. He says he arranged them according to “the seasons she celebrates in her art” and titled the book, *The Four Seasons of Mary Azarian*. Just about all of the woodcuts portray gardeners, produce, plowed fields or flowers. This is the book Azarian gave to Bethune when she met her.

## Late-Life Housing

Just as I was surprised to find that gardening, rather than being a hobby, was Azarian's main preoccupation and the most important cultural thread running through her life, giving it meaning, a language, influencing her choice of clothes and friends, and rooting her to Vermont and to her farmhouse, it was similarly unexpected that Azarian, 26 years younger than Bethune, would begin to share her concerns about housing for her last years. "I think old people should remain in their homes with help" Azarian tells me when she first brings up the topic. Nursing homes are anathema to her. But then we discuss how our Maine research partner, Luthera Dawson, wanted to do just that and was unsuccessful in finding anyone. Where she lived, in mid-coast Maine, our project colleague had found the pool of people willing to do in-home care was small, the vetting necessary was exhausting, and reimbursement from any source was almost nonexistent so the cost was prohibitive. Another factor for Azarian is the distance her farmhouse is from town.

MA: I'm just very recently coming around to the realization that even if I could live here for a goodly number of years, which I think I can, I always thought 'well, if I just get too decrepit and needing assistance too much, I could hire somebody to move in here and it would be cheaper than going some place.' But there is the isolation factor. I really don't want to be isolated and I can see the possibility of that happening.

Another idea Azarian considered briefly was a move to Montpelier where stores and services would be right at hand rather than so far away that they required driving. Months later she shot down that idea.

MA: I no longer think that's going to happen. The reason that it's not going to happen is that everything in Montpelier is too expensive. It's just out of sight. It's ridiculous. The houses are so much in demand in Montpelier that they sell within a day. They sell within an hour of when they come on the market unless they're really awful or in a bad location. Montpelier has the highest

taxes in the state of Vermont, so that makes me not want to be quite so sure that that's what I want to end up doing. In fact, I've been thinking about going down to Kendal in Hanover, and taking a peek at it and seeing if that's something I might want to do. But they have a long waiting list.

The Hanover Azarian was referring to is Hanover, New Hampshire where there is a Continuing Care Retirement Community. I had been to Kendal once to interview a short term study subject, Azarian knew it by its excellent reputation, and we had talked about it. We agreed Kendal has many things going for it, but both of us react negatively to the Kendal practice of everyone wearing a name plate when leaving their apartment to go to the dining room or elsewhere in the facility. The purpose is to help residents with failing memories address fellow residents when they encounter each other in halls or dining room. In 2003 Azarian tells me she and her friends, all of whom are about five to seven years younger than she is, have been discussing the possibility of working towards some kind of living situation where they will be together as they grow old.

MA: My friend L... and I were talking about it last week. We have the old idea of the big kind of elderly hippy commune where we all buy a big house or we buy a piece of land and build some houses. There's quite a bit of co-housing going on in this area; a little bit. But that is a possibility.

Then Azarian sighs and says, "... but I don't think my friends are ever going to get together to do that."

A year later, Azarian talks about the progress or lack of it, on that front. When she and her friends discussed it before, the prospect of living together seemed far in the future but it didn't seem so now. And problems were emerging.

MA: We are all so diverse in what we want that we haven't been able to decide on anything and no one right now is willing to take a definitive step. For most of us it would mean selling the houses we have now. Some people want to be in town, some people want to be out of town.

Then Azarian seems to have thought this through and come to a conclusion.

MA: Also, we've all become more individual. So I don't know that we'd get along as well as we might need to get along. We probably would, but I don't know. The older you get, your little idiosyncrasies become more pronounced. I just don't want as much company as I used to want. And I am used to being here in this particular house in this particular piece of land and I don't know, I'd have to be really positive about moving someplace else – I don't want to move.

At this juncture I struggle a little with how much to contribute to this free-flowing conversation. Azarian met Bethune and is familiar with Bethune's vision for elder housing that's become a reality. I sometimes just let the researcher part of me lapse and become another aging woman talking with another aging woman. So, in this mode I bring up the plan another "Silent" like us, writer Vivian Gornick, has in New York. *The New York Times* in 2000 reported the efforts of female artists, spearheaded by Gornick, who were meeting and trying to plan for an apartment building in Manhattan that would house "a confederacy of kindred souls dedicated to creating an un-retirement home for female writers, artists, community activists – and those game enough to grow old among them" (Brown). The dream was given a name, "House of Elder Artists" or "Thea." Three years later in *The Women's Review of Books* Gornick described the project. It was still in the talking stage with interested people trying to raise money,<sup>14</sup> even though Gornick has such powerhouses as feminist writer Alix Kates Schulman in her planning group. I told Azarian that when I read about "Thea," I couldn't help comparing this effort with the project Bethune accomplished in her eighties. I think of Bethune with her surveys, and her determination, working her way through all the red tape and fundraising, and am even more amazed at what she accomplished. "I think a lot of people my age and older and probably slightly younger are looking at the dismal prospect of the nursing home and

realizing that there's got to be a better way. It's too horrible. I don't care how luxurious it is, it's just too horrible," Azarian says.

### Luck

Our discussion of late-life housing and nursing homes prompted Azarian to share that, as with Bethune's father, her father also was afflicted with Alzheimer's before he passed away. Her mother would bring him from their home in Virginia to Boston to participate in a research study that didn't seem to benefit her father much. I asked Azarian if she were concerned she too might develop dementia and she answered in the negative. We agreed that no matter how careful an aging woman may be about what she eats, maintaining a healthy weight, getting proper sleep and exercise, that genes and other variables like financial health, matter; there being an element of luck to longevity, and to late-life quality of life.

### Serendipity

There is a kind of serendipity at play in Azarian's life. She sometimes calls it luck. She didn't particularly chose Vermont, in fact, but wound up there because her former husband liked Vermont. She likes snow and loved to ski and is grateful now she located to Vermont. She didn't have an agent to represent her and her work but was approached a few years ago by two agents who represented wood engraver Barry Moser, who had decided he didn't want to do children's books any more. Azarian says she wouldn't have all the book work she has now were it not for these agents. She calls herself a "reluctant decision maker." She says "I've always been kind of willing to let things develop. . . I am better at just a kind of 'slipping in.' "

So, with Azarian's concerns and initial explorations about how and where she would live in late life, and not wanting to move, a solution "slipped in." An answer developed. None of her three sons lived anywhere near Vermont, but one of them married and wanted to move back, and with mutual agreement, he and his wife moved in recently with Azarian for a year to see how it would go. She is now a grandmother and plans to live out the rest of her life just where she is, near her gardens, alongside of which she is having a small house built for herself. Other family members will live in the original larger farmhouse.

#### Other Traditions

There are naturally other traditions that have affected Azarian's elder years. In her late thirties she took up Morris dancing and this lasted for almost a decade. She says it was a lot of "leaping and crashing down;" hard on the knees. So was a skiing accident. So, four years ago Azarian had both knees replaced at Dartmouth Hitchcock in New Hampshire, considered the best medical center in her area. She has lived in New England most of her life, moving to Massachusetts and Smith College right after high school in 1958, and then to Vermont in 1963, so she has been a Yankee by adoption for just over half a century and she admits to Yankee traits; the New England work ethic and being frugal. She has no dishwasher, saying her kitchen is too small and she likes to wash dishes. She makes a concerted effort not to accumulate "stuff." I see also the Yankee interest in historic preservation as Azarian attempts in many of her illustrations to preserve Vermont's rural traditions. She illustrates mostly books with Yankee themes. Some of her books focus on Vermont themes, and some New England in general, as in



the children's book *Louise May and Mr. Thoreau's Flute* (Lorbiecki), based on the true story of Alcott's childhood friendship with Thoreau.

As noted earlier, I had anticipated that the art world would be Azarian's main cultural tradition. Her art is highly valued and collected, the Caldecott Medal just one proof of this. She and her home and garden have been shown on Martha Stewart. Azarian is mentioned in two books by May Sarton.<sup>15</sup> Sarton had a tradition of writing a poem each Christmas, calling it a "Christmas Letter, and sending it to her friends. In *Endgame, A Journal of the Seventy-ninth Year*, Sarton mentions Azarian's work on her Christmas Letter for that year. "Mary Azarian has done a superb job of making a poetic vision of goldfinches on a branch" (161). So it's unexpected when I hear Azarian tell me: "art is my job." She says that had she much free time, she would prefer to garden, or cook, or read – not art. "Maybe if I were really bored, I might do art stuff."

#### Azarian and Vermont

As for regional traditions, Azarian is a confirmed Vermonter. She talks about how she loves the almost daily walk of more than an hour along her road with her dogs. It's always the same walk but she enjoys it in all weather.

MA: I love the fact that we have these distinct seasons here in Vermont. You know it's not all the same. It's always different. I very much value that. I like winter. I love winter. I like the way winter looks. Usually it's the most exciting time of the year to me. Winter is handsome. Summer – I never ever feel like painting anything in summer, but it's beautiful to be out in.

Besides liking Vermont's climate, and learning to have gardens that thrive in that weather, many of the books Azarian has illustrated are based on Vermont themes or stories as with three children's books in particular. The book that won her the Caldecott Medal, *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin), was about the famous Vermonter Wilson

“Snowflake” Bentley (1865-1931) who photographed snowflake crystals. *From Dawn till Dusk* (Kinsey-Warnock) celebrates the author’s Vermont childhood with “long bitter winters.” As for adult books, Azarian illustrated a memoir by Maryland psychotherapist and summer Vermont gardener, Dorothy Sucher, *The Invisible Garden*, and the cookbook by Vermonter Ellen Ecker Ogden, *From the Cooks Garden*. That book combined two loves; home-grown produce and cooking.

Politically Azarian is to the left. She listens to the radio in her studio in the mornings while she works; usually a station centered two miles away at Goddard College through which she listens to “Democracy Now.” She supports Heifer International<sup>16</sup> giving as holiday gifts to some of her friends a card saying she has donated a sheep or a goat in their name. She is anti-war and on occasion has participated with Women in Black,<sup>17</sup> joining women who hold silent vigil from noon until one in front of the post office, the federal building in Montpelier.

One day Azarian said she was taking me to a museum she very much wanted me to visit. She’d been mentioning “Bread and Puppet” for days and I hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. In Glover, Vermont Azarian pulls her Subaru over beside a large dilapidated barn – this doesn’t look auspicious. A sign at the barn door reads: “Enter at your own risk;” even less so. But once my eyes become adjusted to the dim interior lit by just a few naked bulbs, what I see is amazing. Crowded everywhere are gigantic ten to fifteen foot papier-mâché puppets, enormous masks, paintings, signs; huge faces are everywhere. This old building showcases over four decades of the work of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, a politically radical puppet theatre founded in the sixties in New York during anti-war protests by Peter Schumann. The theatre moved from New York in the

1970s to Goddard College, then to this farm. Until 1998 Bread and Puppet held an annual festival that drew tens of thousands. Azarian, her husband and sons participated in this festival yearly until it just got too large and now smaller events are held throughout the summer. The theatre travels, putting on a yearly production in Boston, and participating in New York's Village Halloween Parade. The name comes from a Bread and Puppet core principle that art should be as basic to life as bread; and the theatre has had a tradition of sharing free fresh bread with aioli with the audience. Art is food.

Besides the museum, open June to October, the farm in Glover houses Bread and Puppet Press run by Schumann's wife, who is Scott Nearing's granddaughter. The press creates posters, cards and books on Theatre political themes. The late poet Grace Paley participated in productions. Bread and Puppet offers street theatre workshops.

Azarian told me that when she turned sixty, she didn't just begin to feel old, she was old.

MA: I think that when you turn sixty, you have entered old age; whether you feel old or not doesn't matter. The fact of the matter is that the society you live in looks on you as old. You don't have to see old as bad. Old is just realistic. My body no longer does what it used to do. [When young] you're kind of thoughtlessly running up and down stairs, skiing. You just did it. Now I'm having trouble doing things. When I go to get out of a chair I have to kind of help myself up now. [This was said before she had both knees replaced.]

Azarian memorialized stepping into her sixties with a self-portrait. She drew her face looking out through some winter tree branches. She looks like she is cautiously peering into the unknown.

As Azarian looked into the future she explained to me the difference between gardening and art. First, she said, you want your house to relate to the contours of the land, and the view is what you focus on.

MA: If you are a gardener you want it to look beautiful when you look out the window; even winter scenes. As you learn the contours of the land you learn what kind of soil you have. All art or gardening is to create something that is beautiful and looks right. A painting is done, final, finished. No surprises. A garden on the other hand is endlessly challenging. The weather challenges you. Your tastes change as you grow older. You want certain color combinations; new shapes; mounded pyramids. Gardens mature. There are people who in their souls find gardening the most wonderful thing they could be doing. Gardening for me is compelling. I get lost in it. It is very personal.

Azarian belongs to the Hardy Plant Club. She explains some gardeners in this club are just devoted to one plant, like growing many varieties of dwarf iris.

Her new small house where she will live on one floor is not yet completed. She tells me she enjoys family meals and her daughter-in-law gardens alongside her. In her *Gardener's Alphabet* she wrote:

The garden provides such an intriguing challenge and is such a source of wonder and joy that not to garden is unthinkable. Every year features many unexpected delights – self-sown plant combinations that, in addition to being incredibly beautiful, are humbling, as they are usually far more successful than the gardener's most carefully planned efforts. ...even weeding, which many people (usually nongardeners) consider a tedious chore, can be an immensely absorbing and satisfying way to spend an afternoon. Those of us fortunate enough to live in the north have the winter in which to recover and dream about next year's garden. I know that as long as I can clutch a trowel I will be a gardener. In the words of a Chinese proverb, "If you would be happy for life, plant a garden." (5)

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<sup>1</sup> *A Gardener's Alphabet* 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Wharton, American writer and gardener, was the aunt of the noted American landscape architect Beatrix Farrand . Quotation from Wharton in Hayward.

<sup>3</sup> Information based on the 2000 census.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theheartofnewengland.com/lifeinnewengland/Essays/accents.html>

<sup>5</sup> When Bethune produced greeting cards, and cards for baptisms, weddings, ordinations and the like, using her *Catholic Worker* drawings, she told me she priced them moderately to enable people of all incomes to be able to buy them.

<sup>6</sup> Azarian refers to her art as work.

<sup>7</sup> She does art work in her studio that houses a huge press, and a worktable in front of a window where she does her woodcuts and paints.

<sup>8</sup> The following chapter is devoted to Luthera Dawson's cultural portrait.

<sup>9</sup> Nightingale changed the order of the words on one line of the poem. Longfellow's 7th line reads: "Dust thou art, to dust returnest." Nightingale sings: "Dust to dust thou art returnest."

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Hayward.

<sup>11</sup> Quotation from *Publishers Weekly* is on the front book flap.

<sup>12</sup> This book is not paginated. The introduction is actually on pages 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Kneeling Orion*, Boston: David R. Godine 2004. Azarian illustrated a previous book of Barnes' poetry *Where The Deer Were*, Godine, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> As far as I know, Gornick's dream is not yet a reality. Some original planners, like late life novelist Helen Yglesias, have passed away; Yglesias in 2008.

<sup>15</sup> *Endgame* 161; *Encore* 110.

<sup>16</sup> Heifer International helps families around the world by giving bees, or goats or a heifer or sheep and the like to a family along with training to help them become self-reliant.

<sup>17</sup> Women in Black began in Israel in 1988. It is a woman's anti-war movement which began with Israeli women responding to what they considered violations of human rights by Israeli soldiers in the Occupied Territories. Initially in solidarity with the Israeli women, groups around the world have adopted other causes.

## CHAPTER SIX: LUTHERA BURTON DAWSON (b. 1911)

Luthera Dawson and her twin brother were the sixth and last generation of Burtons to grow up on a saltwater farm in Cushing, in mid-coast Maine. Dawson received her BA in English Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Maine in 1933; an MA in 1934. She worked for the IRS in Washington, D.C. for 35 years first as a typist, then teaching training courses in internal revenue writing while raising two sons, and serving for four years as councilwoman in Capitol Heights, Prince Georges County, Maryland. Returning to Maine in 1974, she cared for a family member, then lived alone until age ninety-three in her two-hundred-year-old house in Thomaston; residing now, at age ninety-eight, in The Homestead, an assisted living facility near her home. She is the author of three memoirs.

Use it up. Wear it out. Make it do. Do without.  
Luthera Dawson<sup>1</sup>

I am a seasoned voyager in the territory of the aged.  
Helen Ynglais<sup>2</sup>

### The Pine Tree State

One warm September afternoon in 2003 we cross over the Piscataqua Bridge from New Hampshire into Maine on our way to meet longtime Maine resident Luthera Dawson. Moving from Washington, D.C. to Maine at age 70, Doris Grumbach wrote of crossing this same bridge, “When we cross the river into Maine, where the air smells of salt and fish, I think how much of my sense of the value of peace and inner serenity I owe to my love for Maine. The color of the air turns from the green of New Hampshire to the grey of Maine. I feel I am home” (1991 46). The air smells briny to me too and the same feeling stirs within me, accompanied by a longing to become a permanent émigré; a Mainer by adoption; a transplant; a “nouveau Mainer.” I am an unabashed “Mainer wannabe,” partly because much of mid-coast<sup>3</sup> Maine now resembles the Rhode Island of my 1930s and 40s childhood and I have ties to this state. My Yankee grandfather’s brother, my “Uncle George,” whom I loved, ran a prep school for boys in Farmington,

Maine, his house still there incorporated into the University of Maine satellite campus at Farmington. My parents lived part of each year on the water in Owl's Head, Maine throughout the 1970s. One of my younger brothers raised a family in Cushing. And stepping into mid-coast Maine is like stepping back to earlier times when the pace of life was slower.<sup>4</sup>

Driving up Route One, John, still my fellow-traveler into old age and on this field trip, wheels our red Subaru Forester<sup>5</sup> into the parking lot of Bosn's Landing in York. We're hungry, having driven straight through from Maryland, surviving on chicken salad sandwiches packed in our cooler and my reading aloud a John le Carré espionage novel. By now most of the people "from away" will have left "Vacationland"<sup>6</sup> as school has started. It looks like this place caters to locals; a good sign. The menu gives me reentry pleasure: oyster stew, scallop pie, lobster pie, lobster roll, fried "whole" clams, fried clam roll<sup>7</sup> and grape nuts custard. Here a milk shake with ice cream is a frappe. "It's a Maine thing," our server says. He has no discernable Maine accent; he says he's the third generation to work in this business.<sup>8</sup> After our meal we get back on Route One and head towards Thomaston in Maine's mid-coast region, on our way passing campy, touristy signs offering various items, "live eels" and "lobster trap coffee tables," and security services, "cottages watched."

Maine is home to the whoopie pie, and birthplace of the carbonated bitter beverage known as Moxie, the state's official soft drink. It is the only state with a one-syllable name; the only state that borders just one other state. Along with Vermont, it is one of the only four states that ban billboards except for outdoor advertising on business premises;<sup>9</sup> the fun signage on Route One an example of that. It has the highest population

of people speaking French at home, more than Louisiana. It is the largest exporter of blueberries. It is the safest state. Four New England states are listed as the top ten safest when it comes to the murder rate: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Maine. Maine tops the list with 1.2 per 100,000 (Griffin 2009).<sup>10</sup>

Maine is the largest of the six New England states; the other New England states could fit inside it. The mid-coast Maine region is defined variably but roughly stretches along Route One from Brunswick, north through Wiscasset and Damariscotta, through Rockland, and up to Lincolnville and Searsport. The part of the mid-coast area that I know and where Dawson lives is in the middle of that stretch, in Knox county, centering around the city of Rockland, and including the nearby villages of Thomaston, Cushing, Appleton, Union, Rockport, Camden, Owl's Head and Spruce Head.

In Thomaston four miles south of Rockland, the county seat, we are going to meet Luthera Dawson who wrote to me two months ago asking to join this study, reading about it in *A Mug-up with Elisabeth*, a fan newsletter devoted to local author, Elisabeth Ogilvie. Some fans discovered I was interviewing Ogilvie and editors of the newsletter asked me to describe what I was doing. I wrote a short piece explaining I was interviewing in-depth and over time a handful of New England women in their sixties through eighties about their experience of aging, keeping it simple, without explaining the focus: how cultural orientations might influence ways women negotiate aging.

#### A Letter from Maine

Unlike several other researchers, I had mistakenly assumed it would be difficult to locate a subject in her nineties, articulate, interesting, good at telling stories, and, I am ashamed to say, I didn't look very hard to find one.<sup>11</sup> Evidence of ageism and ignorance!



In July 2003, a letter from Maine was forwarded to me from my American studies department at the University of Maryland. It read in part:

Your letter in the last issue of “A Mug Up with Elisabeth” was most interesting to me. May I join your group of eighty-plus women in your study? I have just turned 92. I grew up in a little town where Elisabeth lives, described in my book “Saltwater Farm” (1993). I have two degrees from the University of Maine and thirty-five years of government service in Washington, D.C. . . . Retirement has been busy. I do a lot of volunteer work (was nominated for Maine’s Volunteer of the Year award) at two libraries, two historical societies, local schools. . . . I hope to have two small books published this year. . . . Yes. I know about some downsides of eighty plus – lameness, dimming eyesight, ears that don’t work so well – but so far I am coping and living alone in a 203-year-old house – alone except for a cat. [letter to Judith Tydings]

The letter was typed and signed in blue ink, “Sincerely, Luthera Dawson.” Her e-mail address was written on the bottom of the letter. Unable to resist I e-mailed Dawson and began interviewing her over the phone. Her offer came at a propitious moment, the first three Maine subjects I had selected becoming less and less available; and I had no research partner in her nineties. Although we had never met, Dawson urged John and me to stay with her:

Well, the thing is, don’t even think about going to a motel. Stay here! I’ve got three extra bedrooms, nobody in them, the cat might walk through them possibly, private bath and I can make a pot of coffee.

Dawson said her home was large; the whole upstairs with three bedrooms, four if one counts a study, and a bath, all unused now as a few years ago Dawson moved down to the first level of the house. I had been hoping to live a few days with each participant. John and I figured that if the situation with Dawson proved unworkable for some reason, we could always move to a motel. I struggle with the ethics and wisdom of agreeing to move in with a ninety-two-year-old woman I know little about and have never met. What if she takes a fall while we’re there? What if she is someone other than she seems? But I have

spent more than three hours on the phone with Dawson on three separate occasions. She is reflective, articulate, funny, and very interesting. I think this is an opportunity worth pursuing. “Perhaps Dawson will enjoy the company,” I think, as her two married sons live out of state. Something prompted her to write to me,<sup>12</sup> that was a risk for her, and I want to honor her willingness to volunteer. I recognize also that were Dawson sixty-two rather than ninety-two I would have wrestled less with accepting her offer of hospitality. So is some of my hesitation ageist or is it wisdom? Later, when I’m able to slip it casually into conversation I ask Dawson if her family members know about her invitation to us. When she replies in the affirmative I’m more reassured. Still on Route One I decide to review transcripts of three interviews I’ve done with Dawson already. Reaching to the backseat I pull a transcript at random; it turns out to be the second interview.

JT: Tell me a little bit more about your average afternoon. You said sometimes you knit. What else might you do, look at television?

LD: Probably not. I don’t care much for those soap operas.

JT: Is it the afternoon or the morning that you would go and volunteer at Montpelier, be a guide there? [Montpelier is the General Henry Knox Museum located in Thomaston, not far from where Luthera lives.]

LD: In the morning between ten and one.

JT: How often do you do it, once a month?

LD: Once a week. Thursday is my day. But I tell you, I’m going to call down there this morning and tell them that I’ve got to hang it up. There comes a time when it makes sense to stop. After this episode last week, I’m not going to go through that and get so worn out that I can’t stand up.

JT: What happened?

LD: I had just finished doing an orientation [with a group of tourists] and I sat down at reception and a woman came over with a clipboard and asked me to name General Knox’s thirteen children. I went into a dead faint and don’t know if she ever got the names of the children.

JT: Had you ever fainted before? And did you faint again.

LD: Not since high school. [It turned out Dawson needed a pacemaker.] I hate to do that [give up volunteering at Montpelier]. If they have special tours or groups I don't mind going down and doing one or even two, but four in a morning . . .you have to stand in front of a group and talk for about twenty minutes. . .four of them are just too much. They do have a video that I made, all in costume. I don't need this.

JT: What else might you do in the afternoon besides knit? [Dawson knits mittens in three small sizes for her church and for a teacher friend to give to children who need them. Children beyond first grade won't wear mittens, they want gloves.]

LD: Try to read. [Dawson has lost sight in one eye due to glaucoma, and sight in the remaining eye is compromised.] One thing I didn't tell you about morning, if I'm going to write, I do it in the morning. I sort of run out of steam in the afternoon.

JT: Do you have a favorite chair and lamp where you like to sit? When you write is it on the computer or in longhand? And what are you writing?

LD: I have a green wing chair that badly needs reupholstering, but it's very comfortable. I write in longhand at first, a draft. Then I whip over and put it on the computer. In a way I'm writing a continuation of "Saltwater Farm" type of thing. ["Saltwater Farm" is the name of Dawson's first memoir published in 1993.] Uh, last fall I took a course at Senior College called "Writing Your Life." The instructor in the class liked what I'd written, asked if I had more, and I gave her a bunch. I guess she must have 17 or 18 of them [short essays] by now. And she is sweet-talking either the college or the historical society into publishing. Not much has been done on it this summer. Summer in Maine is conducive to much busyness and what goes with it, like company.

JT: Is Senior College connected with the University of Maine?

LD: Well, yes, in a way it's sort of a stepchild. It costs \$25.00 to belong to the College, and \$25.00 a course. I took one last fall called "New England and the Sea" and it was conducted by a fellow who was the curator of the Maritime Museum in Searsport. This fall I'm taking a writing workshop. It meets once a week.

JT: How are you going to get there? [Dawson had told me previously that she decided to give up driving just a few years ago because her eyesight was getting so bad.]

LD: That's a good question. I'm going to call a few people. If I can get down there I have a feeling I can pick up a ride back.

JT: Where are classes held?

LD: In the old Thomaston Academy building where the University has classes now, and where the library is. It's a mile from here. [I learn later that the Thomaston Academy where Dawson attends Senior College is the same building where she went to public high school, the classroom is the same one where she was taught Ancient History and English.]

JT: Who teaches your class?

LD: M. Scott Creighton. She's an author. She writes mystery stories. I think she's got four or five of them. [Googling this I find Creighton's pen name is J.S. Borthwick. She has created the Sarah Deane mysteries, the fictional Deane a professor whose college is the disguised Thomaston Academy. I wind up reading all her books, loving the descriptions of the mid-coast Maine landscape, envying Dawson the opportunity to study writing with Creighton.]

### Many Cultural Worlds

By the time of this second interview, already I'm able to recognize a good number of cultural worlds emerging within the land of old age that Dawson is occupying. I'm benefiting from experience I've gained working with Bethune and Azarian. There's the world of Dawson's ancestors, introduced in *Saltwater Farm*, her first memoir. There is the world of Dawson's childhood on the Burton's saltwater farm;<sup>13</sup> of her college and graduate school years at the University of Maine; the world of her time in Washington, D.C. as a "government girl" and working mother; the world of writing; the world of lifelong learning at Senior College; Dawson's volunteer work at Montpelier, a replica of General Henry Knox's home; the world of Maine libraries and historical societies; the world of her Protestant church, and the world of the local schools where Dawson gives talks on the Depression and on the life of General Henry Knox, George Washington's first Secretary of War who settled in Thomaston; the world of friendships with other

women, various groupings: her church friends, a group of writers and communications specialists, Maine Media Women, and female friends of mixed ages, the “Rockers, short for “Off Their Rockers.” There is the world of her cherished house on Wadsworth Street where neighbors drop by and elementary school students are taken once a year to hear her teach the history of the old house and significance of certain architectural details; and the world of old age, chronologically in her nineties.

LD: I got a call the other day from the third grade teacher. Every year the third grade comes by here. It’s part of their history walk around town and they come in and see an old house and I tell them war stories about the house and feed them cookies [that Luthera bakes] and we have a good time. That will be probably fifty or sixty kids. The story goes that when the house was built, when they were digging the basement, they dug up a couple of cannons that had been buried there. . .when I tell that to the third grade, if you don’t think I have a problem keeping third grade boys from going down to the cellar!” [She laughs.]

#### “I Feed “Tig” First; Then You Eat”

I reach around to the back seat again and pull out the transcript of the first phone interview and read through it. Luthera says she rises between 6:30 and 8 am, depending on what kind of night she has had; then she feeds her cat “Tigger.”

LD: I feed “Tig” first, a hangover from living on the farm. (The animals eat first: the hens, cows, horses, pigs. Then you eat!) I eat breakfast then do chores: make the bed, sweep the floor, water plants, check e-mail, check mail to go out like bills, bake bread or any cooking I have to do. Around noon I eat a sandwich and look at the Portland, Maine News [on TV].The afternoon is for projects, I was going to say sewing but I no longer do that. I may spend some time hunting for something. I’m always looking for something I can’t find. Supper is at 5:30, something light, like soup; [soup she has made herself, that day or previously]. In the evening I watch the news and very likely Jeopardy from 7:30 till 8 pm. My day about ends with Jeopardy, although I might play solitaire on the computer.

As I look up, I see we are entering the lovely section of Route One, called Main Street here, lined by large old, white, sea captains' homes in Greek Revival and Federal styles that is Thomaston.

Dawson's directions are to look for the State Prison Store on the corner of Main and Wadsworth Streets, Wadsworth the street on which she lives. Since 1824 Thomaston was the location of the Maine State Prison, a looming Dickensian structure that to the unknowing could have been a college, or a hospital. What did engage attention of tourists was the store adjacent to the prison, selling items made by inmates like decoys, ship models, and ashtrays made from Maine license plates. The store is still there; the prison was relocated out of Thomaston to Warren and the structure was demolished in 2002.

John and I turn right and Dawson's house is down a short way on the left just over a railroad bridge. We come upon the substantial red brick house with dark green shutters and white trim and pull into the driveway. The front door opens and there under the fanlight stands a Dawson, smartly dressed in skirt and blouse, taller than I am, soft gray hair framing an alert, pleasant face that looks less lived in than I expected; wearing handsome gold-framed glasses. Dawson leads us into the parlor to the left of the front door, the North parlor, where she spends much of her time, her only nod to old age, the use of a quad cane held in one hand that she calls her "third leg." There in the corner is the green wing chair and Tigger curled up beside it. As we visit awhile, Tigger winds up in Dawson's lap, and I notice her footwear: stylish brown leather pumps. She has prepared dinner and we eat in her kitchen, the meal concluding with delicious pie she has baked.

## Anadama Bread

Dawson and I hit it off well and one morning during this four-day visit we bake bread together, Anadama bread. Surprised I hadn't heard of this Yankee food, Dawson tells me the myth about its origins.

LD: A fisherman had a lazy wife and he had to do much of his own cooking. One day, mixing two New England staples, molasses and cornmeal, he created a unique loaf of bread that came to be called "Anna, damn her!"

Checking several New England cookbooks, sure enough, I find Anadama bread. As Dawson efficiently moves about her kitchen, sometimes using the quad cane, sometimes not, I notice she knows just where everything is, and carefully puts measuring spoons and other utensils back in a cupboard or drawer exactly where she found them, washing and drying them first. Partially blind from glaucoma, she has had surgery in Boston to preserve what sight she has left.<sup>14</sup> I'm startled to see the Pyrex measuring cup Dawson uses looks dangerous, with the rim deeply chipped in several places; typical Yankee frugality. My first thought is that I'll purchase a replacement for Dawson as a gift but catch myself, recognizing my urge is ageist, wanting to help the sight-impaired 92-year-old who is preserving her independence. Very quick on the trigger, probably reading my thoughts, Dawson says: "You know, my boys want me to get newer utensils for this kitchen but I don't want to buy things I don't need." Dawson has two married sons.

I notice Dawson only uses New England products for her baking: King Arthur Flour (Vermont) and Bakewell Cream, a leavening agent mixture made in Maine.<sup>15</sup> I don't know these products and this is a rich point, tipping me off, my first clue that Dawson, a Yankee rooted in New England, is strongly influenced by Yankee history, products, weather, customs, food, her main cultural tradition proving to be her identity as

a Mainer, or State of Mainer, as she calls it. Dawson turns out to be a champion baker, sometimes baking twenty or thirty pies for a festive occasion at her church. She bakes bread about once a week as well as cookies and pies and freezes some of her baked goods. Townspeople who give her a ride somewhere know they will often be rewarded with one of Dawson's signature loaves.

### Jerusha's House

Dawson's house that she loves with a passion, has ten rooms. It is a Federal style two and one half story house built in 1800. In one of the short essays in her second memoir, *In the Slow Lane*, Dawson holds an imaginary conversation with Jerusha Hastings who married General Knox's brick maker, Benjamin Hastings. Knox set Hastings up as a tavern keeper in this very house. Dawson tells Jerusha about changes that have come about: electric lights replace candles and whale-oil lamps, and a train, (used by Dragon Cement a plant on the outskirts of town), now runs beside the house. But she thinks Jerusha might feel at home because some of the furnishings reflect an earlier time: the very large spinning wheel that belonged to Dawson's grandmother that is in her dining room, and braided rugs.

Simply furnished, spare, even stark, the interior looks much like those in Andrew Wyeth paintings. In fact, Dawson's mother lived for a time as a child in the Cushing house the now late Andrew Wyeth called home, and where, when one of my brothers lived in Cushing, my nephew as a teen did yard work and was friends with the family. Dawson has reproductions of several of Andrew's paintings in various rooms. The original building had five fireplaces, now closed off, and there is a woodstove downstairs in the small room between the North parlor and the kitchen where Dawson has her



computer center, the stove unused now as was Bethune's. Her sons, expert with computers, have arranged this setup for her. Dawson complains her fingers are so affected by arthritis it's difficult to type but she manages.

JT: How many years have you been using the computer?

LD: Oh since, I would say, five or six years or more than that, seven probably. The kids are forever updating it, new and improved until it's reached a point where I tell them when you come in this house, you don't touch that computer.

On a wall in the computer area a family member<sup>16</sup> has painted a mural of pink, lavender and blue lupines; lupines grow wild in patches in Maine along side roads, by the ocean and in vacant fields. In addition to the kitchen, downstairs there are two parlors, a spacious dining room and a computer room, a bedroom where Dawson sleeps, and one small bath. Upstairs John and I sleep comfortably in one of the three bedrooms. Dawson tells me that the few times she ever goes upstairs anymore via either set of stairs, (she has put out clean sheets for us), she gets up okay but has to descend sitting down.

#### Yankee Widows in Coastal Cottages

Some might at this juncture conjure up a stereotypical image of Dawson as a wealthy Yankee widow coming from privilege. Cruikshank when discussing the diversity of aging women cautions that we cannot say "the aging woman." It remains to be seen, she says, if that will embrace "the black woman in Alabama, working-class or middle-class, and the New England widows ensconced in twelve-room coastal cottages" (2003 186). For anthropologist Judith Freidenberg the jury is in. "It is not the same to be an elderly woman suffering from arthritis in wealthy New York as it is in *El Barrio*" (272). Cruikshank's image of the "New England widow" who is "ensconced," conjures up the notion of privilege, perhaps inherited wealth, and being old with lots of resources.

Cruikshank, a Maine transplant who now lives on the Maine coast herself, is using the New England meaning of the word “cottage” as in a very large house, the notion derived from the large summer homes of the wealthy at the turn of the century in places like Newport and Bar Harbor. I don’t know how many New England widows are ensconced in “twelve-room coastal cottages” at present. Dawson is widowed, lives in a ten-room historic house, in a coastal New England region, her home being about a block from the St. George River,<sup>17</sup> the tidal river she lived beside in Cushing until her teens. It links with the sea, so Dawson sometimes catches a whiff of salt air. This might sound like she is in the widowed cottage-dweller category of the privileged. This is not the place to deconstruct Cruikshank’s image, discuss its usefulness or accuracy, or even what constitutes “privilege,” but it seems appropriate here to briefly sketch Dawson’s property and then her life to supply context. Until a year before my first field trip to Thomaston the state prison loomed on Dawson’s street across from her property and up just a little. A railway line runs along one side of her property, about 50 feet from the house and down a steep embankment next to her treed side and back yard. When I learned the chapters of Dawson’s life story, I wished she did have twelve rooms in a coastal cottage with lots and lots of help and amenities and an ocean view. I was very pleased she has a house that has given her so much pleasure.

While addressing Dawson’s life I keep gender inequities in mind, something else Cruikshank and others have suggested, proposing that work on women and aging include the “cumulative impact of discrimination over a lifetime.” She points to the work of Nancy Hooyman who calls for acknowledging “inequities across the lifespan” as well as a “consideration of women’s strengths and potential for change” (Cruikshank 2003 191).

Bethune had to contend with male architects and clergy resulting, I believe, in a learned flexibility and resilience that served her well in old age as she battled bureaucracy to bring Harbor House into being. Dawson, older than Bethune by only two and a half years, contended with discrimination all her professional life.

#### Saltwater Farm Through Graduate School 1911-1934

Dawson and her twin, Leroy,<sup>18</sup> were born in Utica, New York, where their father was building a bridge, but problems arose with his engineering business and the family moved back to their native Maine moving in with Dawson's paternal grandmother on a saltwater farm in Cushing, Maine. The twins' idyllic childhood is described in Dawson's first memoir, *Saltwater Farm*. Her adolescence was marred by two things; first, by being very overweight since childhood, a family trait she mentions in her second memoir, *In the Slow Lane*, contained in *Beside the St. George's*. "“Young once but never small,’ my father said” (131). Then her father died before she entered high school and Dawson's mother moved them into Thomaston, four miles from the Cushing farm, to an apartment in a house in town, so that Dawson and her twin could go to high school; there was no high school in Cushing. Dawson's mother cleaned houses to bring in income, and when, five years later, in 1930, there was a buyer for the farm, Dawson's mother sold it. It was a 125-acre farm, with a 10-room house and outbuildings, over a mile of shorefront along the St. George River and it went for \$2800. “This money saw us through college, Leroy to a bachelor's degree and me to a master's” (1993 107). I asked Dawson what it was like in Thomaston when she was a secondary school student and her mother was a cleaning lady for twenty-five cents an hour.

LD: When we came to Thomaston when we were entering high school, that's the first time I realized very much about class differences. There was a class in

Thomaston, oh they were the descendants of ship builders, merchants, the people in town who had money. It was a closed society. It wouldn't make any difference how smart I was or how much I ever earned. I would never crack that society. ...I think the lines were much more sharply drawn than they are now. ...The E. . . family was downright horrible! When we graduated from high school she told my mother that my brother and I should not consider going to college. We should go out and get jobs.

In graduate school Dawson was a T.A., as I was, teaching English in the School of Agriculture. She was restricted as to what she could teach, and what teaching materials she could use. She could not teach literature to these prospective farmers, no poetry, no Shakespeare, only grammar and letter-writing. The closest she could get to some approximation of literature was the permitted use of the magazine *The Country Gentleman*. With M.A. in hand, in 1934, in the middle of the Depression, when Dawson went to apply for a teaching position, she was only asked one question in the interview, "Do you smoke?" to which she replied, "No," but she didn't get the job:

We graduated right smack into the Great Depression when there were no jobs, no hope. A teaching job if you could find one paid from \$500 to \$800 a year. (I couldn't find one.) I did housework for \$2.00 and \$3.00 a week. I tried door to door selling. I handed out underwear and prunes for the WPA, one of the many depression agencies. Finally I began going to a commercial college, learning typing and shorthand. This got me a job in Lowell, Massachusetts at \$15.00 a week.<sup>19</sup>

#### Homesick for Maine 1935-1939

Unable to teach, Dawson did what thousands of female college graduates did in her day, and mine, she went to secretarial school, eventually landing a position in Massachusetts, where her mother was remarried and now living. When the business Dawson worked for moved to Ohio, Dawson went along. Homesick for Maine Dawson took a writing class at night at the University of Cincinnati and began writing short pieces

about growing up in Maine that were to be published many years later as *Saltwater Farm*.

Second, she was so sad she lost a hundred pounds, never to regain them:

I found myself transplanted, for the first time, from New England to a place where no one ate beans on Saturday night or spoke in the cadences of Maine. Homesickness hit me amidships, almost physically.

#### A “Government Girl” 1940-1975

Seeing advertisements for good jobs in Washington, D.C., Dawson took the civil service exam and moved to the District in 1940 to be a “government girl,” one of “Uncle Sam’s nieces,” typing for the Bureau of Internal Revenue that changed its name to the Internal Revenue Service in 1953. Starting out on the lowest level in a typing pool, finding that her M.A. was worthless, Dawson began to move up. Women were not allowed to be agents then,<sup>20</sup> and African Americans were relegated to jobs like manning the elevators and working in the kitchen of the government cafeteria. Dawson married in December 1945, after five years in Washington; “an achievement,” she says, as women outnumbered men in the District seven to one.

Her husband was ill much of their marriage, at one time committed to St. Elizabeth’s for mental illness, but later correctly diagnosed with a brain tumor for which he had surgery. Planning to be a stay-at-home mom, Dawson quit work to take care of her family. After two and a half years her husband became quite ill once more and Dawson went back to work, again with Internal Revenue. “He got to a point that he couldn’t work at all. He stayed home and kept an eye on the children somewhat and I worked and tried to make believe it didn’t matter. It wasn’t fun.”

Not having enough money for her husband’s medications, Dawson decided to bake bread at night and sell it at work at the IRS.

LD: I thought a lot of these people haven't had homemade bread since they took their feet out from their mama's table, and I put in an application to make and sell bread and they turned me down. They thought that, you know, I'd be taking bribes or something. I don't know what. But I was furious about it. I took the loaf of homemade bread and my carving knife and got an appointment with the head of the personnel division and marched into his office and with that, you know what, he became my best customer.

Now, this caretaker wife, mother, den mother, government employee, and Sunday school teacher, baked bread every night.

LD: I would come home from work and immediately mix up bread and work on that in the course of the evening and make probably ten or a dozen loaves. It would probably be close to midnight when I could get them out of the oven. And I used to watch Steve Allen while I was waiting for the bread to come out, then I'd wrap them up and take them to work the next morning and sold them for twenty-five cents a loaf and that made enough to pay for the medication. But I'm telling you that was a rough way to do it!

Dawson cared for her husband for ten years until he died, her marriage having lasted thirteen and a half years. She told me she had always wanted "to write the great American novel" and loved writing so I asked if she wrote anything during that time.

LD: I missed it but I swear I didn't have time for it. I guess if I really had talent I would have made time for it, but I was working a full-time job and a part-time job, taking care of a sick husband and bringing up a couple of kids and being a den mother. Oh, you name it. Oh, Sunday school teacher, PTA, town clerk. [for Capitol Heights].

I asked Dawson what the part-time job was and she said she was the "secretary, so to speak, for the town. You know, taking the minutes and keeping track of that and eventually I wound up as the town treasurer collecting all the taxes." Dawson then held three paying jobs: training officer for the IRS, bread baker, and town treasurer. She lived in Capitol Heights for twenty-five years, serving as councilwoman for four.

Discovering a lump on her neck, Dawson had surgery. The growth turned out to be benign, but the doctor accidentally cut through her deltoid muscle and that shoulder

has drooped ever since. She had to sew a shoulder pad in dresses on the affected side to make her shoulders look even. When Dawson talked about the effects of the surgery, it was obvious it was a hard thing to accept and still is. About two years after her husband died, Dawson's mother moved in with her until she died eleven years later at ninety-five. Dawson retired as a GS 13 at age 63, after thirty-five years with the IRS, an exceptional rise for anyone, especially a woman in those days. She had co-written a text for internal revenue writing that is still sold; she had traveled the country giving workshops on writing to IRS employees.

#### Back Home in Maine, 1976 - Present

Being a Yankee and typically frugal, Dawson is proud of the very few years it took her to pay off the mortgage on the Capitol Heights house, and the savings that enabled her to purchase the house she now owns from a relative, and when retired at 63 she moved back to Thomaston. Her father's eighty-three-year-old cousin and some other elderly women were living in the house and came along with it! The eighty-three-year old had been doing all the cooking and was thrilled to find that Dawson could cook, and the octogenarian handed the spatula over to her. The rest of the residents eventually left over two years, but Dawson cared for the cousin for fifteen years as the cousin developed Alzheimer's; ten years in the house with Dawson, five years in a nursing home where Dawson visited her every day until she died in 1989. Dawson was 73, when her father's cousin moved to the care facility. So, it wasn't until she was 73 that Dawson was able to live alone, free from caring for someone under her roof: children, a sick husband, an aging mother or an old family member with dementia.

## Indian Pudding and Ginger Ice Cream

In April 2004 Mary Azarian and I follow each other in separate cars from Azarian's house in Vermont where I had been staying, to see Dawson. She'll be 94 in two months; the quad cane has been replaced by a walker and she moves more slowly. Azarian stays two nights. During her visit I drive the three of us over to Spruce Head to pick up Vivian York, an 80-year-old widow, one who hauled lobsters for three years with her husband before going into the second hand book business called Lobster Lane; a short-term project colleague, one who passed away in the middle of our study. We bring York back to Dawson's where Dawson has baked a cake, and we four have a festive get-together described in the concluding chapter. After Azarian goes home, Dawson and I do things together for several days. I take her to doctor's appointments, and shopping, accompanying her when she goes to speak to two elementary school classes about General Knox, the local hero. We go to a lunch with some local women, the "Rockers," short for "Off Their Rockers," special friends who have been getting together on an almost monthly basis for years. We go together to a church supper. Dawson's Church is a federation of Congregationalists and Methodists, both congregations some years ago having become too small to exist alone. "I'm a Congo" she tells me, saying I am one too; as an infant christened Congregationalist after having been baptized Catholic.

We have enjoyable evenings together. We make Indian pudding and pair it with ginger ice cream from a little stand on Route One Dawson knows about. We watch movies I brought from home that Dawson has not seen. I made fortunate picks, bringing *Anne of Green Gables*, not knowing Dawson loved this book so much she once went to Canada to see the author's home and she still owns her original copy. I also brought the



life of Jill Ker Conway, *The Road From Coorain*. Although Dawson is twenty-four years older than I am, just a year younger than my mother would be, I am not aware of any age difference. We are just two girls having a fun night together.

In September of that year, 2004, John and I come back again; this time my third occasion to live with Dawson for a few days. During that visit I take her to a meeting of Maine Media Women in Rockland which I belong to as an associate member, the only one from away, and Dawson places one of her just published memoirs on the “brag table.” She pushes her walker ahead of her slowly and has some trouble getting about and grouses about it, her energy and determination outstripping physical capability.

A few months later our middle son, forty-four, is diagnosed with terminal cancer and I don't see Dawson again until after our son's death, visiting Thomaston next almost two years later by which time Dawson is living at The Homestead in assisted living; but she insists we stay in her empty house. In the intervening time we talk on the phone, exchange e-mails and snail mail and become even better friends; in fact Dawson winds up calling me “sis,” saying she always wanted a sister. I bridge the gap sending treats to Tigger, and occasional bunches of flowers to his owner. She mails me real estate ads of homes for sale as she knows John and I are mulling over where and how we will be spending our late years together. Dawson has a gift for friendship, keeping up with school friends and others through letter-writing, and making new friends when hers begin dying, although, she explained to me, “it's not the same as replacing a cat!”

Dawson thinks she has had maybe three physicals in her life and she never liked doctors much. After her experience with her shoulder I could understand why. She never did hormone replacement therapy; Bethune hadn't either, nor, it turned out, had any of

us.<sup>21</sup> “I went through menopause with about the least amount of trouble of anybody you ever saw,” Dawson said. Health issues, the instillation of a pacemaker, and some eye surgery connected with glaucoma, have been only recent things and never mentioned until I asked her. She has hearing aids in both ears but I can’t see them. She took them out once to show them to me; they are small and fit inside the ear. The batteries have to be replaced occasionally and are tiny, and I would think this would be difficult even without arthritic fingers, but Dawson says she has no difficulty.

#### Clutter’s Last Stand

Wondering what physical changes a woman might experience when in her nineties, I asked Dawson in 2003 when she was ninety-two, if she would be willing to go head to toe and list diminishment and physical challenges she was now experiencing. She did this with her usual matter-of-fact manner, consistent with Covan’s findings that by the time women are “in their eighty-something decade, they are comfortable with talking about physical signs of aging in themselves” (12).

LD: I guess you start at the top of your head. Your hair thins very much. I used to have very long, thick hair, now it’s much thinner and the color changes. It was yellow, then it turned brown, now it’s more brown than anything else. It has some gray but not as much as most people this age. Eyes, there’s always been a problem. I’ve got glaucoma, that’s my main problem now. I was operated on for glaucoma about twelve years ago. When I’m in a group it’s hard to see who people are. I have to use hearing aids. I’ve adapted to them very well, they’re no problem at all but you still have to wear the damn things. They’re getting more modern and this is one of the kinds that is more modern. It hurts to walk. I guess it’s arthritis. One thing that bothers me a great deal seems to come from the same source and that’s my hands. I used to have beautiful hands and not anymore. The right hand is getting more misshapen and I find it difficult to do many things. My handwriting has gone to pot. Knees are a problem. They get lame quick and when you walk you don’t know whether they’re going outward or inward, and they’re responsible for a lot of falls. An overall problem is shrinking. I used to be over 5’6” and straight and I think that now I’m 5’3” or under and bent over and I can’t straighten up. When you get older

your features are not so well defined. They tend to get bigger and spread out more, ears and nose especially.

Weeks afterwards Dawson interrupts a phone interview we are having about the origins of her church to bring us back to bodily aspects of old age and something she neglected to tell me. “I don’t know how I skipped it. Elderly ladies have trouble with their ‘waterworks.’ An unexpected aspect of getting old is the use of incontinence pads, starting when I was probably 85 or 87. You have to wear pads and when you go anywhere, you make a mental note of where is the bathroom before you go, and if it’s going to be too long you don’t go.” Both of us laugh about the drug ads we see on TV for Detrol, with a young woman leaving her seat in a theatre in the middle of a movie, to head for a restroom. Hearing the long list of Detrol side effects, both of us are unanimous that if Kegel or pelvic floor exercises, or losing weight don’t work, using pads isn’t the worst thing in the world and is a lot safer. I am not a pioneer here in discussing this portion of uncharted territory. Margaret Cruikshank has gone before me and paved the way.<sup>22</sup>

I asked Dawson if she had made any changes to her house to accommodate her increasing age, other than moving to the downstairs bedroom, and cutting down on trips to the upstairs.

LD: I’ve remade the downstairs bathroom. I did an up do on that about four years ago [when she was 88]. I took the tub out and put in a good size shower. I can no longer climb into a bathtub. I guess I could but I sure wouldn’t try it in the house alone. I might never get out! And the downstairs bedroom, I’ve brought downstairs many of the things that I would have kept upstairs, so they’ll be handier here. I have replaced lights out in the kitchen. I’ve installed some fluorescent lights around the cooking area and around the stove and updated wattage in the other lights and tried to keep the light bulbs on the fixtures fairly clean, and that helps the light too. Oh, and another thing. I was having trouble getting in and out of chairs. If there’s arms on the chair, I’m in business. I can get up. Otherwise, it’s a real problem. I got one of these invalid

frames that fit over the toilet. Now let's see, what else have I done around here? I don't have loose throw rugs around. I have a big, fairly good size braided rug in the front hall. I have stuff under it, you know, that holds it in place. I have things so I can grab onto a chair, a counter, or something of that sort, most everywhere.

JT: What about Tigger? Aren't you afraid you'll trip over him? [Bethune had given up dogs and cats by her early 80s.]

LD: No, he stays out of the way. And I know the inside of this house well enough I can walk around it after dark as well as I can by daylight. I keep things picked up. I can stand honest to God dirt better than I can clutter. I have a lovely book called "Clutter's Last Stand."

JT: You are joking, right?

LD: It's not a joke. It's a little paperback book somebody wrote who takes this matter of clutter very seriously and says if you de-clutter your life how much better it will be. Every time I look at that book, I go clean out the medicine cabinet. [She laughs.] It has some great ideas in it. I'm all in favor of it.

JT: Is de-cluttering something you have taken up as you've gotten older?

LD: You don't know what a de-cluttering job I had when I first came here [to this house]. New Englanders don't throw things away!

JT: Do you every find yourself putting a pot on the stove and then forgetting about it? Do you have any memory problems?

LD: I haven't so far. I'll admit sometimes if you ask me 'what's the name of this person?' 'Who's so and so?' and did this, that and the other, I'll say 'oh sure' and describe him to you, but I can't come up with the name right then. You must be pretty familiar with that story about the woman who was talking with her preacher and he was concerned that she wasn't properly concerned with the future life, and she said, 'Oh yes I'm very concerned about it. Well, I think about the hereafter all the time.' And he said, 'You do?' She said, 'Oh, yes. I go upstairs every day and I say what am I here after?'

### Living Alone

Since Dawson no longer drives I asked how she was able to get to church, or to do her shopping, get to doctors or to her hairdresser on a regular basis. "We don't have any cabs here. We don't have any public transportation of any kind in this town," Dawson

told me. There is a transportation service called “Hit the Road” that she can call. It charges about twenty-five dollars for a roundtrip to Rockland. Mostly she relies on church members and friends to whom she often gives a loaf of her bread as a thank you; which of course reminds me of the many nights Dawson baked bread as a government girl and mother of two, to make money for her husband’s medications.

After listing physical diminishment at my request, telling me of her challenges to get around town, it is hard to hear what Dawson adds next because it shows how unpleasant American ageist culture can make it for old people.

LD: I think that’s about all the physical stuff. But then there’s, I don’t know if it’s psychological, mental, or what you’d call it. I don’t know whether it’s what the world thinks of older people, whether it’s something that I imagine, I don’t believe so. I don’t like being called a Senior citizen. It bothers me as I become more and more Senior. It’s almost like being put in a little box. When I go into a doctor’s office, some receptionist that I’ve never seen before, I think she might be eighteen or something like that, and she calls me by my first name. I feel very old.

I ask Dawson if she has thought of resisting, telling her doctor’s receptionist to call her “Mrs. Dawson.” She thinks that wouldn’t go over very well and she would then be thought of as an “old . . . ,” she leaves it to me to fill in the blank with “bag,” or “bat.” It’s an example of old women being demeaned and kept hostage, afraid to stand up for their own dignity because it might lessen their care; as Ford and Sinclair put it describing such situations old women find themselves in, “It is hard to bite the hand that feeds” (9).

Dawson showed me how, living alone, she performed certain tasks. There is a wooden ramp from her back door down to level ground. She insists on taking out the trash to show me how she does it. I try to take it out for her thinking, “Here I am in my sixties and this ninety- three year old woman is dragging out a big bag of trash and I’m

just standing by!” But she insisted. Slowly she opened the back door and managed to use her walker while handling the black trash bag, dragging it by its red plastic handle.

Just as Bethune in old age simplified her life, writing about it in *Commonweal*, giving away cherished possessions in her last years, Dawson has done the same. Speaking to me by phone during a 2004 winter she spent in Massachusetts with a family member, trying out whether she would like to move there, she said she brought her mother’s watch to give to someone, also a bedspread her mother crocheted with a different sailing ship in each square. “I am getting things ready that I can dispose of to family members or groups. I have been doing that for some time, like old pictures and things.” Dawson expressed disappointment the local library didn’t want her books.

Dawson was very open when I asked about finances. She has her IRS pension and she told me what it was. Like the health insurance John and I have, John, like Dawson, a former federal employee, Uncle Sam pays part of her Blue Cross Blue Shield. Since Dawson also held a part-time job in Capitol Heights, she gets minimum social security every month. “Utilities: \$38.00 for light, telephone varies around \$20.00. I don’t have to worry financially. I have CDs and a couple of money market accounts.” Dawson doesn’t depend on a family member to help her with money matters. Even now as I talk with her in The Homestead as she approaches 99, she talks about balancing her checkbook, and paying her bills. “I did well with savings. I was always saving. I wanted to help the grandchildren go to college. There were three of them. I did help them.”

In the 1990s two of Dawson’s family members began a press, Impatiens Press, in Massachusetts, and among the books they brought out was Dawson’s first memoir, *Saltwater Farm* in 1993, a collection of pieces she wrote as a writing assignment in Ohio

more than fifty years before. *The Maine Sunday Telegram* and other papers reviewed it. Dawson was invited on Maine Public radio several weeks in a row on the program *Maine Things Considered*. She had book signings. The same press published *Beside the St. George's* in 2004. It combined *Saltwater Farm* with a second memoir, *In The Slow Lane*. A year later in 2005 then Dawson was 94, the Press published her third memoir, an account of her years as “Uncle Sam’s niece.” Called *Life Begins at \$1440*, the title referring to what a “government girl” earned in salary per year as a typist or stenographer after her first promotion right before the Second World War in Washington, D.C. Dawson said that figure was a powerful incentive.

#### Key Cultural Traditions

Reviewing transcripts, field notes, reading Dawson’s three memoirs, short pieces she has written in local newsletters up to 2009, and what has been written about her in *Down East* and in book reviews, going with her to meetings, and cooking with her and just hanging out watching movies, it became clear that although Dawson is multicultural, moving through a variety of cultural worlds in the course of a day and a week, still true but less so now in assisted living, two key cultural traditions emerged that I see as having had the strongest influence on her life, including her nineties.

First, Dawson takes great pride in being a State of Mainer, as she calls it. Included in this notion is attachment to place or connection to locale, to the area around Cushing where Dawson grew up and now lives, and to Thomaston where she lived for thirty years in retirement. Connection to locale or attachment to place is something I saw with Bethune and Azarian, but with Dawson it rises to the level of Azarian’s gardening tradition, and Bethune’s religious traditions. Before anything else, Dawson is a many

generations State of Mainer. A “rich point” in our relationship tipped me off. It wasn’t a languacultural moment as with Bethune, it was something else. Dawson always takes great care how she dresses, and always looks, “dignified,” is the word that comes to mind. I could see this from photos she gave me to examine from different stages in her life. I always saw Dawson dressed in skirt and blouse. She’s not one for pants, Bethune wasn’t either. But one day early in our relationship I was taken aback. Used to Dawson’s understated look, here she was walking towards me dressed like a tourist from away at the annual Rockland Lobster Festival! She had on a cotton tee and matching sweater, both covered with colorful pictures of various Maine lighthouses! She looked like a walking advertisement for the Pine Tree state. She loves this outfit saying a friend gave it to her. She also often carries a cotton tote decorated with Maine logos. This surprise led me to look more closely at what she was saying and writing about Maine and I remembered how in her cooking and baking she sticks to Yankee ingredients like Bakewell Cream made in Maine. The second perhaps equally influential cultural influence threading throughout her life is her identity as a writer. First I’ll address her strong attachment to the state of Maine that led her to decide to stay in Maine rather than move into a living situation in Massachusetts that would bring her geographically closer to family members. She tried it but decided for Maine.

“If a Cat Has Kittens . . .”

“If a cat has kittens in the oven, that doesn’t make them biscuits,” Dawson once said to me, to explain how native Mainers feel about people from away who move to Maine and after a few years go to the local town meeting and demand services they had in whatever state they originally came from. And she thinks Maine pride comes from



Maine's history of having been part of Massachusetts at one time. Mainers "were so glad to get away from Massachusetts that whenever asked where they are from they always say 'the state of Maine' not simply "Maine." Dawson is not happy she was born in Utica, New York instead of Cushing, Maine where she is a 6th generation Yankee. Essayist Nancy Mairs is "embarrassed" she was born by accident of World War II in California since she is a 13th generation New Englander (1995 13). I can empathize, joining this unhappy group as a 12th generation Yankee, born in Pennsylvania, then whisked off to Massachusetts. All three of us are Yankees by blood, but not by birth. "If a cat has kittens. . ." doesn't really apply to us, but the three of us sense a deficiency. Mairs writes about the situation. Growing up among relatives "whose roots clutch thin and rocky soil" of New England she feels she hasn't "got properly born at all" (13). With her *Saltwater Farm* memoir of growing up in Cushing, belonging to the Cushing Historical Society and working on the board of the Cushing Library, people just assume Dawson was born in Maine and Dawson doesn't disabuse them of the notion. The new book *Maine 101* that includes a contribution by Dawson on MaineSpeak says she was born there (Griffin 49).

Dawson is strongly bonded to the land by the St. George River, old time Mainers like Dawson call the river the St. George's. She will be buried near it next to her childhood home described in *Saltwater Farm*:

It had everything a farm should have: fields, woodlots, pastures with ledges and blueberries, a trout brook, and a rocky shore on a wide blue river where the tides rose and fell each day. Here my twin brother Leroy and I grew up, absorbing history, feeling ourselves a part of the farm and the Burtons who had peopled it. . . .No matter where we went on the farm we were in sight of the St. George's River. . . .The river formed the farm's eastern boundary. We learned early to watch for weather signals from the water; we knew when the tides came and went; even our speech was flavored with the salt water. . . .These days I live four miles up the St. George's from Burton Farm, and I still wake each day to the sight and smell of the river. (2004 14-17)

## MaineSpeak

Dawson is named “Luthera” after her great aunt, a Lowell mill girl, whose father, Charles Hilt, built a brig naming it “Luthera.” Growing up by the water in coastal Maine, in a former flourishing ship-building area, Dawson learned a vocabulary laced with nautical words and expressions, so much so that her college friends from lumbering sections of the state sometimes didn’t understand her. “Come aboard” was her response to a knock on the door. “Heave to” meant “wait a minute.” Wanton extravagance is “Three lamps burning and no ship at sea” (2004 121). Dawson writes that her big collie would not obey a command to “lie down,” but he would drop to the floor if she told him “Let go both anchors” (43). Dawson has written and lectured on “MaineSpeak” to Elderhostel and other groups, contributing to a list of Maine terms and “Five Maine Expressions” to *Maine 101* (Griffin 2009 49) as in “Don’t give me that who struck John,” meaning, “Don’t start an argument.” Dawson told me Maine people are: “independent, rugged, practical and very real and sturdy.” Dawson could be describing herself. She told me it was partly the people that drew her back to retire in Maine. Maine native and journalism professor Corbett sketches Pine-Tree-Staters this way. “The Maine Yankee is a laconic soul, bemused, taciturn and not easily impressed.” That too describes Dawson, laconic, saying much in a concise few words. Corbett also pretty much describes the way Dawson talks when he writes that it’s hard “to mimic the speech of the native. A dry, slow, flat drawl that betrays little or no emotion” (1991). Just as Corbett finds it hard to mimic the sound of native Maine speech, Dawson once wrote that she couldn’t capture it on paper. “I can’t get the essential tone and inflection on paper” (1993 45). Her speech fits with her image; “cultured and precise,” my husband described it. Dawson is dignified

with a strong sense of self and she also seldom shows emotion, a cultural trait I found jarring but at the same time familiar, because my Yankee Island grandmother also kept the same matter-of-fact, seemingly stern, no nonsense demeanor, never revealing her feelings.

### Keeping Maine Alive

Dawson's homesickness for Maine when she lived in Ohio affected her physically. She was always grateful for the weight loss but not for the sadness engendered by missing Maine. In her third memoir, *Life Begins at \$1440*, about working in Washington, D.C., Dawson notes how life there was so different from Maine when she got there in 1940. "I had arrived in Washington in late July, when a prolonged heat wave held the city in a humid warmth such as I had never known in New England" (2005 12):

Without consciously thinking of it, I had expected the seasons in Washington to parallel those I had known in New England – brief springs, comfortable summers, brilliant falls, and interminable winters. I was used to seeing April 19 celebrated as Patriot's Day, gardens planted on Memorial Day, deer hunting season in the fall, and heavy winter clothing broken out by Thanksgiving. I was now in a small southern city where the seasons were not like those I had known. (71)

Dawson assuaged her longing for Maine by attending gatherings and activities sponsored by the Maine State Society:

Almost every state had its own society which met monthly and offered a taste of home to its sons and daughters in Washington. I went to the Maine State Society to hear familiar accents and to enjoy samples of Maine food. Yearly dinners included one of lobster and several of baked beans. ...I experienced both comfort and satisfaction when I sat down before a plate of yellow-eye beans baked the down-Maine way. (25)

Dawson also kept Maine alive in her mind by reading the novels of Elizabeth Ogilvie, six years her junior, born in 1917 and a short-term study subject. Readers across the country found Ogilvie's portraits of Maine, the backdrop of most of her forty-eight

novels, one made into a movie,<sup>23</sup> so enticing that some of her fans actually moved to Maine. Dawson also made Maine friends in Washington.

After a few months as a typist, Dawson moved up to the stenographic pool and began to take dictation. One day she wrote to her mother:

“Today I went into a group of women dictators, where I thought one looked like a piece of fresh gingerbread on a plate of used-up French pastries. Wouldn’t you know she was from Maine?” We became friends in spite of the difference in our ages. (29)

She found Washington to be “a melting pot for dialects, accents, and strange words from all over the country” and she says she had to become bilingual. She had to learn the language of government agencies derisively called “gobbledygook.” She described her own speech this way: “Fresh out of New England, I spoke broad Yankee, flavored with a salt accent and tempered with college English” (41).

Mairs’ depiction of the typical Yankee includes membership in the Republican Party (1989/1995 17). My Yankee father was Republican. Growing up Dawson absorbed many negative images of Democrats. However, when working for the IRS, out of curiosity, having heard a lot about her, she once went to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak at a church in the District and it went a long way towards changing her politics:

When she came on platform it was a surprise and something of a disappointment. She was wearing a long brown dress that didn’t fit. When she walked she almost shuffled; she didn’t seem to pick up her feet. She wore a brown hat that was enormously unbecoming. She was very tall, a big woman. As she talked it changed my opinion of her 180 degrees. I can’t remember what she said, but I just thought she was absolutely wonderful. (2005 20)

Nixon finished her off as a Republican. Dawson returned to Maine a Democrat.

## Why Maine?

When Dawson thought about retirement, she made the decision to move back to Maine, purchasing a house there. Her friends, expecting she might move somewhere warm like Florida questioned why Maine:

LD: My southern friends I had back in Washington were sure I was going to starve or freeze to death down there.[Dawson means “up there” in Maine. In colonial times and later, because of the way the winds blew, when ships sailed to Maine from Boston they spoke of going Down East. Many Mainers, including Dawson, still speak this way.] They thought I was going right back into the wilderness of the log cabins, that sort of thing. This isn’t exactly a wilderness down here. It’s not a metropolis thank God. That’s why I came down here. The climate of Maine, the changed seasons, the people who are here are independent and rugged, practical, very real – all those things I came for. I felt I was coming into my own home. Even though things have changed since I lived here. I wouldn’t for a minute want to go back to the kerosene lamps and the outdoor privies that I’ve known, but I can’t imagine retiring anywhere else.

Besides the harsh winters, some people say they wouldn’t move to Maine because of the black flies. I asked Dawson about that:

LD: They’re here only a short time, two or three weeks. The black fly is a very small insect, much smaller than a mosquito. Sometimes they call them “no-see-ums.” They don’t bite as badly as mosquitoes do, but they can bite and they’re a damn nuisance and they just come in and swarm at you in that time of the year, early June. It seems to me that I always went down to clean up the cemetery around that time of year and there would be tons of them. And then they either go away or we get used to them. I don’t know which. Sometimes people put a veil-like thing over the brim of a hat. I never have. I’ve just swatted them and cursed them.

Dawson said the only thing she dreaded about retiring and returning to Maine was the winters. Writing about winter in Maine for a writing assignment when she was a young woman in Ohio Dawson said:

Don’t be piggy. Take turns. How many times Maine children have heard this injunction! But nobody says anything to winter, which shamelessly grabs time from both spring and fall to produce a white season dominating the whole year. As a child on a Maine farm, always (it seemed to me) winter was the longest

season of the year. Seasons come slowly in Maine, but winter comes most slowly of all and stays the longest, beginning in November and hanging on until April, by then an unwanted guest who will not leave. (1993 40)

The first two winters Dawson was back in Maine the winters were mild. “I felt, this is nothing. I can put up with this. And the minute I let my guard down, we got socked with an awful winter, ‘78. This entire house covered up with snow. No mail, constant shivering and cold.” I had heard winters in the mid-coast area near the water are not as severe as further inland and Dawson said that was true. She said besides the cold, she hates all the clothes you have to put on to go out in winter:

LD: I put up with it because of everything else. The beautiful weather we have here. Summer in Maine is like summer nowhere else. The kids and I talk about a Maine blue day. That’s a day when there isn’t a cloud in the sky. The sky is so blue. I like that. I like the sturdiness of the people, their practicality.

#### Maine Projects

Although Dawson could have volunteered with many different kinds of organizations, with the exception of her Federated Church activities, her identity as a Mainer is enhanced by becoming active in, with the exception of Phi Beta Kappa, mostly Maine organizations. She is on the boards of the Cushing Library that she helped to establish, and the Thomaston Library; she belongs to the Cushing *Historical Society* and the Thomaston Historical Society; Friends of Montpelier, acting as a guide; Maine Media Women, and University of Maine Alumnae Association. *ENE* speaks of history being a “cottage industry” in New England and “the depth of historical record, the number of historical sites and societies...” (732). Dawson had been working on two Maine historical projects when I met her in 2003. The September *Down East* for that year ran an article on a Thomaston venture combining the built environment, culture and history, called “Museum in the Streets.” It is a unique outdoor museum featuring twenty-five signs;

ultraviolet-resistant laminated plaques mounted between two six-foot-tall posts, leading walkers in a self-guided two-mile tour along two Thomaston roads listed on the historic register. The signs feature a collection of properties selected by the Thomaston Historical Society and Thomaston Library for their architectural or historic value. Each plaque includes a photo of what the site looked like a century or more ago along with text:

The first such walking tour in the nation, the stories and vintage photos on these plaques go beyond explaining the town's architectural styles and pull back the curtains to expose the everyday lives of the shipbuilders, bankers, sailors, and quarry workers who built this community into what was once one of America's most significant maritime ports. (Moore 74)

There was an ethnicity debate about this museum project. The *Down East* article credits Dawson as one who helped with the text for the plaques and notes she was opposed to a component of the project insisted upon by its chief initiator who was raising the private funding. The French former museum administrator, who had established five such walking tours in France and who owns the patent for Museum in the Streets, Patrick Cardon, insisted the signage be bilingual. He said it wasn't an issue of language but of tourism. The town gave in and chose French because Maine has a long relationship with French Canadians, not because, as some tourists might conclude, French Canadians had been integral to local Thomaston history.<sup>24</sup>

For Luthera Dawson, a longtime Thomaston resident and member of the town's historical society and library who helped dig up the information for the plaques, the bilingual component was a stretch. "I wasn't all that excited about the French at first, but I went along with it," Dawson says. "If we were up around Lewiston, I think we'd get more French-speaking people, but we don't get that many around here. But since the plaques were made in France and Patrick speaks French, it was almost a natural, and I'm not sure we could've gotten out of it." (Moore 75)

"Luthera Dawson, who at ninety-two admits she was recommended to help with the history tour because 'I'm so darned old I've lived through a lot of it,' says the project

has exceeded her expectations” (100). Dawson also worked on the book *A Breach of Privilege: Cilley Family Letters, 1820-1867* by Eve Anderson. Dawson helped to transcribe some of the letters of Representative Jonathan Cilley of Thomaston.

At the time I met her, besides guiding tours at Montpelier, sometimes in colonial dress, this nonagenarian was training someone how to interview scholarship applicants for a college scholarship her church offers. At Federated Church of Thomaston Dawson has taught Sunday school and served “on just about every board always having an office of some kind.” At 92 when I met her Dawson was “a deacon, responsible for sacraments, nuts and bolts, setting up, cleaning up.” She and the women of her church bake cookies at Easter for shut-ins and organize a church fair to raise money for various charities.

#### The Homestead

While my son was battling cancer, Dawson had a fall or “took a tumble,” as she described it, landing in the hospital, and finally in a care facility, the Homestead, not far from her Wadsworth Street house; she and her family, all of whom live out of state, having reached the conclusion that she could no longer live alone. Tigger is living with a friend because there is already a house cat at The Homestead. When I last visited Dawson in 2004, she was a ninety-four-year-old woman living independently in her own home alone. When I saw her again in 2006, she had become a dislocated refugee. Moving from her home to assisted living was initially devastating for Dawson. She candidly told me on the phone that she spent the first few months in the Homestead in tears. She said one of the staff chastised her, telling her she was acting just like a child who is carrying on, refusing to go to day care. I responded, “You’re acting like a ninety-four-year-old woman



who's been separated from her home and wants to go back." "Well," Dawson said, "I just got mad. I just shut up. I didn't say anything more to her. I just shut up."

Dawson's life-long identification as a Mainer and connection to the state is evident: writing about Maine while living in Ohio, joining the State of Maine Society in Washington, D.C. so she could eat Maine foods like bean dinners and shore dinners and make Maine friends and hear the familiar accents of Maine; reading Ogilvie novels set in Maine, then retiring to Maine to do volunteer work on Maine historical projects, Montpelier, Museum in the Streets, the Cilley letters, giving talks on MaineSpeak. She has written two memoirs about life in Maine. This strong cultural influence, this connection to locale, resulted in Dawson refusing to live her final days in Massachusetts near family, choosing instead to be in Maine. The Homestead where she lives now is two miles from the Thomaston house and is in Cushing where she grew up and will be buried. Family members drive from Massachusetts or fly in from Illinois when they can, and take Dawson to visit her house, which stands empty, when they visit. After those first difficult months, Dawson did settle in, finally telling me her house has such uneven floors, with her difficulty walking, being at home just isn't safe. I turn now to her identity as a writer.

#### Dawson as Writer

The world and writing opened to Dawson when her father and brother built a radio, the parts ordered from a catalogue. They fell asleep at night with headphones on:

Each week a Schenectady, New York, station broadcast a three-act play. ...A Providence, Rhode Island station had a cooking school. It was exciting to copy a recipe its leader gave over the air and cook the dish for the next meal. In fact, I still use some of those recipes today. ...We attended both political conventions in 1923. I still remember that the Democrats balloted 103 times. ...We bought new batteries to insure hearing President Coolidge's inauguration, but the radio fell silent. That day my father died (2004 157-158).

There was a Pittsburgh station that broadcast a Girl Scout program and Dawson became a “lone Scout,” attending weekly on-air meetings, raising her right hand, and repeating the Laws and Promise. Much like Bethune who as a child in Belgium sent her drawings to the Boy Scout magazine, Dawson joined the Big Brother Club,<sup>25</sup> a radio show out of Boston. The dues to join the Big Brother Club were to send in a weekly letter and some of the letters were read on air. Dawson earned the title “Star Letter Writer” when many of her letters were read. Invited to Boston, interviewed twice on air, a Massachusetts newspaper wrote about her and designed a paper doll that little girls could cut out that looked like Dawson, complete with two changes of clothes, and a paper doll cat. Dawson saved the original and showed it to me and I copied it. Above the paper doll was printed: “A Well Known Letter Writer of the Big Brother Club and her Famous Cat Persnickety.”<sup>26</sup> This was the first recognition of her writing talent. Seventy years later she would be interviewed on Maine Public Radio telling some of the same material.

When Dawson moved to Thomaston for high school she got her first library card and looking at all the books she was overwhelmed. “I couldn’t get over the riches!” She says she was “thrilled” to find that when she returned to Thomaston upon retirement, forty years later, her card was still on file.

When she was in college, Dawson belonged to a club for student writers. They raised money to have William Butler Yeats come to their campus to read. Dawson says she can’t imagine what he was thinking of to come to such a remote location. She remembers him as not looking “very pretty.” He had a “shock of white hair, falling over one eye, hair that looked as if it hadn’t been combed in a week or so.” She says he had “a

wonderful voice” and she “hasn’t heard anything like it before or since.” She owns an audio tape of Yeats reading poetry.

When she was living alone at the YWCA in Ohio, and doing secretarial work, she took a writing course at night at the University of Cincinnati and faithfully did her assigned writing every day that formed the basis later on for the memoir *Saltwater Farm*. Dawson went to hear poet Carl Sandberg. She told me “he wasn’t very pretty either.” He was “rather stocky and his voice was nothing special.” He too “had hair falling over his face.” She mentioned hearing him read: “The fog comes on little cat’s feet.” She also went to hear Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was born not far from Dawson’s saltwater farm, in Rockland, Maine.

When working for the IRS Dawson taught people to write, and she also helped to produce the book *Effective Revenue Writing* (Spurlock and Dawson) put out by the U.S. Treasury in 1961. Retired and back in Thomaston Dawson wrote the *History of the Federated Church in Thomaston, United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church*. She helped with the book *A Breach of Privilege: The Cilley Family Letters*. She helped write the text for Thomaston’s Museum in the Streets. Her first memoir was published when she was in her eighties, writing the second and third when in her nineties. She had been taking writing classes at Senior College when I met her. One thing that pleased Dawson especially was my being able to arrange for her to go to a special luncheon honoring Maine authors. A quilt that had been autographed by Elisabeth Ogilvie, Stephen King, Kate Barnes and some others was being auctioned off. From my home, through Barnes, I was able to get Dawson invited. She was in her element rubbing shoulders with other writers and she told me on the phone all about it.

While staying with Dawson I looked about the house. In the south parlor on the bookshelves there are some books on writing: *On Writing Well*, 2nd edition by Zinsser (1980), *The Art of Readable Writing* by Flesch (1949), and *On Writing by Writers* by William West (1966). Dawson, who turned ninety-eight in June 2009, writes humorous and interesting pieces for *Homesteader*, a monthly newsletter of the two Homestead care facilities, one in Owl's Head, the other in Cushing where she lives. Here is a sample:

Observations from the Deck: Early in January, Leo, the yellow resident cat at Cushing Homestead (for many years), disappeared. Authorities suspect foul play, which is under investigation. . .He liked to sleep in the sun, mooch bites of food, and patrol the boundaries of the Homestead property. Like most residents, Leo became crotchety and set in his ways as he grew older. In spite of this he was loved and will be missed. Cushing Homestead is welcoming a new resident, a black and white ("Tuxedo") cat. He is a lively animal, less than five years old, who answers to the name "Mr. Pockets." Both the Homestead and Mr. Pockets are going through an adjustment period. In his explorations, he has caused official eyebrows to raise when he knocks the fax phone off the hook, nibbles on the house plants (some are quite tasty) and stretches out on the table in the sun after rearranging notebooks and pens. (March 2006)

The morning started one of 'those days' at the Homestead. My glasses walked out of their case during the night and were nowhere to be found. I dropped a hearing aid which skittered under the bed. Somehow my left shoe got on my right foot . . . On such a morning I find it calming to repeat the following poem. I hope it will help you too. 'The dog is in the parlor, the cat is in the lake, The cow is in the hammock – What difference does it make?' (2008)

One Thanksgiving she wrote about the history of the holiday for *Homesteader*:

During World War II, President Roosevelt proclaimed Thanksgiving Day on the third Thursday instead of the fourth. This was to allow more time for Christmas shopping and to help a lagging economy. Reaction was immediate; New Englanders who considered the holiday their own swarmed and buzzed like hornets. No one, not even FDR, could tamper with their holiday. I was working in Washington then. I joined a group of New Englanders who went out to lunch and defiantly ate hot dogs instead of turkey. . . We can't credit New Englanders wholly for what happened next. The following Thanksgiving returned quietly on the fourth Thursday where it has remained. (2007)

Dawson also writes occasional pieces for her Federated Church at Thomaston newsletter, *The Moorings*. On the first page of *The Moorings*, September 2005, Dawson wrote about the Search Committee recommending Rev. Anne Roundy as their new part-time minister who would soon be moving to Thomaston from a pastorate in Rangeley:

This selection is a first for Federated in two ways: the Reverend Anne is a former member of this church who returns as its leader and she is also its first woman minister. She was an active member of Federated for more than 20 years, serving on most committees, singing in the choir (and sometimes leading it) and becoming a lay leader. During this time she taught fifth grade at the Thomaston Grammar School and worked with the Watts Hall Community Players as both director and an actor in musicals and dramas. In addition, Anne is well known in musical circles for her soprano voice. She is an experienced librarian, Girl Scout leader and maker of blueberry cake for coffee hours. Anne has two children, both married and living near. She has two young grandsons who are, we are sure, like Lake Wobegone children – above average. One last note – Anne is an ailurophile.

I had to look up the word “ailurophile.” It turns out it means love of cats. Roundy is not only an ailurophile, she is Dawson’s long-time friend, and Dawson has designated her as the executor of her will.

#### Writers Write

“Writers keep on writing” is an insight I gleaned from professor of English Nancy Miller’s reflections on reading de Beauvoir in *But Enough About Me*. Despite any melancholy things de Beauvoir had to say about old age, she kept on writing and had a productive late life. Dawson thinks of herself as a writer, it’s all she has ever wanted to be, and she keeps on writing despite hands crippled with arthritis, and compromised eyesight. She still e-mails me in 2010. Writing gives her life meaning – that and her connection to this part of Maine. She began writing as “Star Letter Writer” to the Boston radio program *Big Brother* as a young girl, she wrote in high school and college, and an M.A. thesis on American humor. In Ohio she did writing assignments that were

reminiscences about Maine. She produced a textbook on writing for the IRS, three memoirs, and numerous little pieces for local newsletters.

#### Star Letter Writer

Dawson has the ability to make and keep friends and still is a “Star Letter Writer,” keeping up a correspondence with friends over many years, and with me since I met her seven years ago. A little selection of her e-mails to me reveals a playful sense of humor, love of cats, love of the Maine landscape, and a valuing of and reaching out for social connection. In these electronic letters we find a message in a bottle, a view through a porthole, a look through binoculars at a native in the little known territory of old age; a privileged look into the life of a woman in her late nineties revealing various aspects of the way she lives life as an old woman:

I’ve missed you lately! You have spoiled me with your phone calls. I’ve been busy with fall activities, such as getting some apples from up country, going to lunch with a retiree group which we call “Off Their Rockers,” reading from the upcoming book at the historical society, taking a writing workshop at Senior College, doing orientations for the Harvest Weekend at Montpelier. And you? Tigger send a purr. (2003)

Other e-mails noted daily events or her thoughts about the changing seasons:

Summer has come to Maine. Back roads are lined with lupine and rugosa roses. . . and where are you? (2006)

Guess what? I’m going to be on a float in the town parade on the Fourth! The church is having a float and I’ll be on it as a member of Federated for 80 years. (The church had quite a celebration of that anniversary earlier. Did I send you a clipping about it? I’m not sure how I’ll get aboard the float. . .but there’s always Art Henry’s crane I suppose. Some people don’t get much brighter as they age, do they? Yr sis. (2006)

Subject: “Getting On.” Here’s another unpleasantness about getting old that bugs me: the voices of old people change to a lower tone, either husky or hoarse. Nobody here talks clearly, including me. I miss the clear tones I had when I was conducting seminars or putting on my dog and pony show on Maine language. You would have loved it. L. (2006)

Subject: “Nice day.” Yesterday was a lovely day. I received two goodies – a flu shot and the town tax bill. Best – Sis. (2006)

I am trying to fake a ho-ho-ho attitude, but with the prospect of Christmas at the Homestead and no family around, I am really having to work on jollification. I’d love to hear from you. Yr sis. [Some of Dawson’s family members visited her on a regular basis, every six weeks or so. They would stay in the Wadsworth Street house and visit Dawson at the Homestead. Sometimes they might visit just before a holiday.] (2006)

I am concerned about you. It has been nearly a month since we have communicated. . . am more or less all right, but gradually slipping. . . I practice walking. . . I remember flashes of things about us – you coming to the door with an armful of flowers, us making bread, riding around Owl’s Head, teaching you what Indian pudding WITH can be, talking up a storm and running your phone bill out of sight. Dammit, I miss you! Sis. (2006)

Please check the appropriate box. I have been: Busy. Writing. Working at Univ. of Maryland catching terrapins, Sick, Coping with family. (2007)

I took a tumble and cracked my tailbone (coccyx, that is – a good scrabble word.) I am not really happy with it. Sis. (2007)

Tomorrow morning I go to the hospital for a minor surgical job on my one good eye to reduce the pressure – not that it will improve matters but will hold sight at its present level if successful. . . Wouldn’t it be nice to have a sis to hold my paw? (2007) (Two years later, in 2009, I suggested to a friend of mine facing similar surgery, that she call Dawson to hear about her experience with the operation. She did. Some might have thought it odd to be getting surgical advice from a 98-year-old, my friend did not.)

Merry Christmas! I’m Luthera Dawson and I approved this message. (2007)

I survived Christmas and hope you did too. Santa was here and left me in a welter of pretty wrapping paper and gifts strewn all over my room and no place to put them. I made raisin bread for the residents’ breakfast, Christmas morning. . . had to knead bread one-handed and could hardly stand up. Let’s talk. Sis. (2007)

Sometimes I sent flowers to Dawson, including a little May basket each year as that was a custom among families when she was a child, hanging them on people’s door knobs. I found a flower shop with modest prices owned by a former social worker who counseled me that flowers for people in old age should have some aroma, like lilies, because most

people in late life had a diminished sense of smell. Sharon, my flower-lady friend kindly always included some lilies that were not yet open so the flowers would last. Dawson wrote from The Homestead:

The flowers are lovely, a Star Lily wide open and three more buds to come and four beautiful dark pink roses. They came on one of my 'down' days and were just the medicine I needed – a special remembrance from you. Thank you more than I can say. Sis. (2008)

Dawson was worried when she didn't hear from me for weeks after the car accident at the end of July 2008, when it took a long time to recover from surgery. I finally got in touch with her and she replied:

I hope your shoulder is improving and the pain medicines are reduced. I am about as usual, but learning what sleep problems can be. I took a sleeping pill, the first in 97 years, and I fell asleep at once; fell off the side of the bed and bashed my face into the night stand. The furniture came out all right. (Nov. 2008)

Let's talk. I can't type very well. Sis. (Nov. 2009)

### Growing Old

After getting a sense of what her life had been like up until 2003 when I first met her, and exploring her cultural traditions, and living with her for several days on three separate occasions, I began to ask Dawson to talk more about her experience of aging. I sometimes read to Dawson paragraphs from academic sources like Ford and Sinclair or Eleanor Covan's "Meaning of Aging in Women's Lives" (2005) seeking her opinion.

LD: I think aging is a natural process. It's a time of change but so is your whole life. I don't expect things to be the same as they were when I was sixteen. It would be nice in some respects and in other ways I wouldn't live through that period again. [meaning she was unhappy being overweight as a teen.] I don't think there's ever been a moment as the dividing line between not being old and being old. It's something that just happens gradually. You expect it. Things wear out when you get older and you've got to live with that.

JT: Have you seen people that you would say were not aging well? What do you think of the notion of 'successful aging?'



LD: I have a friend who is, oh, she's probably five years younger than I am, maybe less, and she has been old since she was in high school and she is really old now! But you don't look at other periods in your life and say, 'Was it a success or wasn't it?' How would you measure success in your middle years? Is it a success if you sail through menopause? Is it a success if you break through the glass ceiling? What is success? Well, I don't know what successful aging is. It's just a process that you're going through. It's change that you cope with as you cope with other changes in your life. I'm not afraid of it. It's something that happens. Sure I wish I didn't have legs that hurt, that sort of thing. I wish I could get around better, but if I could turn a cartwheel, I wouldn't call that success.

JT: Do you like being called a 'Senior?' And you've been taking care of people, serving people, almost your entire life; what do you think of some people expecting Seniors to 'give back to the community,' or spend time volunteering?

LD: A lot of people who don't contribute as older people, didn't contribute anything as younger people, middle-aged or whatever. I wouldn't expect them to change, just because they passed a birthday milestone. Some people contribute, some don't, that is the way it is, and there are more that don't than do I think. Many older people think, 'I've paid my dues.' As they get older they become more self-centered, perhaps they have a chance to for the first time in their lives; some of these women who raised big families, they think, 'it's time for me now.' I don't like it much [the use of the word 'Senior'] but I don't know of a substitute that is understood that well. There are so many older people here in town, a lot of retirees, and they contribute a lot to the community. I was thinking a lot about the schools, the middle school and elementary school. I've gone up there with other Seniors, kids who were having trouble with reading, for instance, those I worked with I didn't think it was so much a problem with reading as the need to have someone listen to them. Seniors are active in all of the churches and they take an active part in the town government. I'd hate to see this town without them!

JT: Did you ever join a Senior's group?

LD: We've got a senior citizen's group that meets at the church. Well, most of the members are from that church, but some of them come up from St. George or Cushing to join the group and all they want to do is be entertained and fed. And I have tried my best to get them to do something, to do something for somebody else. There's so much that needs to be done in the schools. But you think I can get them off the dime? No, shoot! I haven't gone back for the last year or so but I have gone into the schools.

I had asked Dawson to keep her eye out for anything regarding old age that she saw in newspapers or TV that caught her interest and that she had a reaction to. One day on the phone she told me she saw an item in the *Free Press*, a paper that usually had more news about what was going on than the local *Rockland Courier Gazette* she said.

LD: I got a paper today, the 'Free Press', let me get over here by the light where I can see what I am reading. Let's see. Here is a question: 'what if the question is not, why am I so infrequently the person I really want to be, but, why do I so infrequently want to be the person I really am?' There is going to be a discussion group to share answers to this question. [Dawson reads me the names of the two group leaders, one a Ph.D.] They believe that in our vintage years we are challenged to come to terms with who we are, and how we want to live the rest of our lives. The group is called "Embrace Your Vintage Years." I called and they are going to send me a brochure. The meetings are being held in Camden [about a half hour drive from Thomaston]. I know I am not going because they want seventy-five dollars per session. At that price I am just going to struggle alone wondering who I am. [She laughs.] I'd probably go if I could get there and it was a reasonable price. Just to see what it was.

JT: Are you happy with the person you really are?

LD: Yeah. I think so!

Another day we got into a discussion of Dawson's funeral plans and her thoughts about whether there was an afterlife. She misses Leroy, her twin brother, who died in 1983 of cancer, and she hopes to see him again after death. "I believe there is an afterlife," she said, "We just don't know what it is. It seems funny to go through all this and have it just end." She has made a living will and planned her burial:

LD: I want to be cremated and my ashes put in the family cemetery down in Cushing. The cemetery goes back to my great grand parent's time or beyond. I don't want a regular funeral service. I want a memorial service at the convenience of the boys [her two sons] and my executor who is quite a musician. I want her to sing 'Simple Gifts' and 'Shalom.' It's a sort of benediction. The words are: 'Shalom, Shalom my friends; Shalom we'll see you again; we'll see you again, Shalom, Shalom.' That's about it. I attend funerals when I have to, but I don't think anybody likes going to them. I sure wouldn't put my friends through that.

When Dawson was ninety-five and living at the Homestead, in the summer of 2006, I asked her to reflect again on old age.

LD: There are more positives than negatives. Many negatives are like mosquitoes. They're annoying. I guess they could kill you but they probably won't. [Here Dawson listed again some of the changes she had already listed such as glaucoma]. There are pleasures. I think I get more pleasure out of simple things that I either didn't notice before or took for granted. The seasons changing, the color and sounds that go with the different seasons. And I have always enjoyed cats. Another thing. You don't gotta. You don't have to do this, that and the other thing now. You can get up when you want to. You don't gotta get up and get to work. You're much more independent. When does old age begin? Suppose life is divided infancy: birth to three years; childhood: four to ten; adolescence: eleven to twenty; young adult: twenty to thirty; maturity: thirty-five to fifty or later; retirement: sixty to eighty-five; and old age: eighty-five plus, maybe. There is no cutoff date between these categories. One blends into the next without pause. The whole movement depends on genes, environment, state of health and whatever else goes into making each individual different. We don't speak of successful adolescence; that would be different for both the individual and his parents. Why is the emphasis on what makes a successful old age? Aging successfully. I don't believe it. Successfully by whose standards? By reaching artificial goal posts of your own making or someone else setting? By not bothering your children physically, financially, or holding onto them? A lot of years don't necessarily mean success. Is success if you don't develop Alzheimer's, turn into a feisty old lady who's too cussed to die? Become a sweet old thing who manipulates her family? Comfortable aging, for whom? The individual or the caretaker!

Besides disliking the notion of "successful aging," Dawson suggests a change in the way age studies discusses aging. When talking about age-related diminishments, Dawson prefers the word "inability," rather than "disability." I read something to Dawson from Covan's 2005 article: "Meaning of Aging in Women's Lives." In the section on the ninety something cohort conceptualization of age, Covan wrote, "Women in their ninety-something decade are proud of their survivorship, and it is that survivorship that gives them their sense of satisfaction" (14). Dawson's comment on the notion of being proud of one's longevity was, "that's ludicrous." She couldn't understand anyone taking pride in

living longer than other people when one has nothing to do with it. Covan also says that, as a group, women in their nineties are less talkative. That is not the case with Dawson. She and I speak often on the phone, and e-mail and snail mail back and forth. Dawson is now almost 99 and no less talkative that she was seven years ago when I met her. Covan's conclusions about nonagenarians were based on student interviews with sixty-nine mostly white North Carolina women in their nineties, most having an educational level of some courses beyond high school or less.

I learned much about old age just by observing Dawson; particularly valuable was watching and listening to how she adjusted to life in a care facility, so I'll focus on that. To get to the Homestead you drive down Wadsworth Street passing Dawson's brick home, cross the St. George River, then turn right into Lover's Lane, and the care facility is situated at the dead end of the road. I wasn't sure what to expect, but assumed when John and I drove down the Lane, I would see something institutional looking and I was startled to see a small white ranch-style house. A wooden ramp for wheelchairs with railings led up to the front door. I shouldn't have been surprised by the size of the Homestead because Dawson had told me in an interview that there were fewer than fifteen residents.

Dawson was waiting for us in a large sunny room on the first floor. She seemed unchanged to my eyes. It was when we took her out for a drive and a meal that I could see her difficulty walking had increased. Dawson had been living at the Homestead for about a year and a half when I visited her there. Originally she had been given a room on the basement level which she said was dark and unpleasant but she is very satisfied with the room she has now. On the phone Dawson had candidly shared she spent the first

months in tears and had been chastised by staff. She seems to have excellent local medical care and prefers the female nurse practitioner in her male doctor's practice. The nurse practitioner suggested she take an antidepressant. Dawson told me she really didn't like the idea as she isn't one for pills, but is a compliant patient when she feels there is a good reason for medication. She agreed to try it and told me that it did help to lift her mood:

LD: The anti-depressant stopped me from crying all the time, but it didn't do a thing to change the hurt inside of me for being homesick and wanting to be home. The antidepressant pill is something like taking a strong pain pill. You know the pain is there. Way down at some level you can feel it grumbling along, but it doesn't seem to matter. You're on a higher level just going along and it's a funny feeling; disconnected. I think the antidepressants did something of the same. They put the feeling of the house down lower so that I was able to operate on a daily basis a little more or less like anybody else, but the grumbling pain is still there. It still is! I didn't want to take the antidepressants. I didn't want to think that I had reached that point. I think I've always been fairly optimistic, up sort of person.

Having read about nursing home residents being overmedicated, and seeing some evidence of this in appalling care facilities when looking for a temporary one for my mother in New Jersey, I was initially conflicted over Dawson being given a medication to treat sorrow caused by losing her home. It seemed normal to me to grieve. I had to admit, however, I was impressed with Dawson's courage at being willing to try the antidepressant, and her honest appraisal that it helped. She said the nurse practitioner told her that when spring came, with more sunshine, they could try to decrease the amount, and maybe stop it altogether.

For me perhaps the worst aspect of this care facility was that Dawson's only companionship, except for having occasional visitors, is with the staff and the house cat, which of course, when I later thought about it, would be pretty much her life had she

stayed in her home with outside help coming in. When I tried to understand why Dawson talked about having so many of her meals in her room, and not out at a table with other residents, she told me all the other women in this facility have dementia! The only other resident who has “all his marbles” is the husband of a demented woman, but he is not well and not company for her. So she stays mostly in her room. And as for relating to staff, Dawson says she has made an effort to “dumb down” her vocabulary. She doesn’t want them viewing her as “hoity toity!” One time staff lost some of her laundry, her “modest” underpants, and she was given replacements from the “slop pile.” When I first encountered this Homestead experience, I felt Dawson was a refugee, having to negotiate an alien culture to survive.

Dawson has little control over her diet. Up to her mid-nineties she was eating her own cooking. She especially misses her homemade soups. Whereas someone else might be happy not having to cook, for Dawson this is difficult. “I made lots of soups. I would make a big pot of beef barley soup and potato and leek soup, cream of broccoli, vegetable or a refrigerator soup” (the same soup Bethune often made from whatever ingredients happened to be in the refrigerator.) At The Homestead:

LD: They have ordinary, plain everyday food. It’s well cooked. They have the main meal at noon and something lighter at night. You don’t realize it until you’re eating under those circumstances how many things you don’t like. I don’t like to mention it here and be a “crosspatch” or somebody always complaining.

Over time the staff learned to substitute something else for the fish Dawson has always disliked. She also avoids chocolate. The Homestead serves lots of pasta. “I can live a long time without that!”

One day in 2006 when I called Dawson just to say hello, she said:

LD: I'd like to tell you about something I got the other day. I know it's a routine thing which everybody gets, a statement from the doctor of what ails you and what medications you're taking; his idea of what's going to happen to you and the nurse goes over it. Well, I knew in general about all the things that ail me, but I hadn't thought about them, starting with congestive heart failure and going down the line. When you write it all out it's different when you see it. His [the doctor's] conclusion, and the nurse agreed with him, was that I was unable to live alone, that I require twenty-four-hour-a-day supervision to keep me from falling and keep my nutrition where it should be, and generally enhance my sense of well being. I have been having physical therapy sessions a bit lately; it's helped me walk better but I now just thought 'what's the use? Why bother?' I'm just going to be here with twenty-four-hour supervision. I can't stand it Judith! I know it's the only thing that makes sense, but it hit me like a thousand bricks!

Then a few days later she referred to this report again.

LD: I guess part of the trouble is that everything they said on paper I know basically it's the way things are. It's nothing new that I haven't known in bits and pieces all along, but seeing it all put down on a piece of paper in black and white, it makes it look worse. I wouldn't have a fuss with the doctor for anything he said about what ails me or what medication I'm taking. I do think they could cut out some of that without anybody dying but it does make sense to say I can't live alone. I had more difficulty being at home this past weekend than I ever have had. [Occasionally in her first years at The Homestead when a family member visited Dawson, she was driven to her house for a few hours to enjoy a visit there. But it was not safe as the floors of the old house are uneven. For the past year or so she is on oxygen 24/7.] It was so hard to get from one place to another and I tried to be so super extra careful. I braced myself with a hand hold or something firm whenever I moved so that I wouldn't fall. I don't know. I guess it's one of those 'tis as 'tis and can't be no 'tiser.' The doctor told me not to let it bother me. Let me read you the first line of his comment: 'Alert and oriented, pleasant demeanor, very articulate.' How about that? Blood pressure 120 over 64. AP 72, R16, whatever that is. No peripheral edema, appetite good, weight 145 pounds, skin integrity intact right lateral wound healing without complications. Vision impaired regarding glaucoma. . .assist with shower, otherwise very independent, doesn't need remind. Then a list of medications: Neurontin, fish oil, Lasix, multivitamin, Lexapro, and a pain pill I get once in a great while.

## If You Can't Knead With Two Hands, Do It With One

That first year, Dawson didn't bring anything, even her computer, down the street to The Homestead. She said if she did, it would make her think she was never going home again. But slowly that has changed, the computer made it to The Homestead, and Dawson has made a happy life for herself. After several visits home that first Homestead year, Dawson told me she has to accept that it's too dangerous for her to try to live at home with the challenges an old house presents. She also has developed an ulcer on one of her ankles and it doesn't heal completely. It has to be bathed and bandaged several times a day. I slowly came to see that the life Dawson leads at the Homestead might not be possible in a larger more institutional facility. Despite drawbacks, there is something personal in the small setting that suits Dawson. She must have sensed this might be the case because she tried another facility before choosing this one. Despite being blind in one eye with limited vision in the other, Dawson has read all the *Harry Potter* books and was now into *Lord of the Rings*. She only has to make a call to the Maine Library and any book she wants is mailed to her. I ask about print size. The *Potter* books were in large print. She is using a magnifying glass on *The Hobbit*. She plays games on her computer, watches TV news, and Jeopardy, and reads the local *Rockland Courier Gazette* to follow the local doings like the coming of a big box store to the outskirts of Thomaston. She wrote a letter to the paper on this issue. The house cat has taken up residence in her room and that gives her much pleasure. She is often allowed to help out in the kitchen. She does things like snapping beans. Occasionally she is allowed to bake and tells me she has learned to hold on to the counter with one hand, and knead the dough with the other! To



me, that is the hallmark of Dawson's attitude towards old age. If you can't knead with two hands, do it with one hand. Yankees have a word for that, "gumption."

I am sure that in most elder care facilities a resident wouldn't be allowed to help in the kitchen, particularly a person in her late nineties. Unlike nursing homes I visited in New Jersey when looking for a temporary place for my mother, the Homestead in Cushing, and its sister facility, the Homestead in Owl's Head, owned and run by Homeshare, Inc., promote "a homesharing concept." Both Homesteads are shared living residences licensed for food and lodging. No personal or nursing services are provided, "residents contract for these services on an individual basis." The website for Homeshare, which began with the Cushing Homestead in 1987, lists the rent, which depends on the size and type of room, at \$80-\$130 a day and that covers food and beverages, including "some meal preparation," and some items like shampoo and soap. Lawn maintenance, trash removal, cleaning service, access to common areas like the dining and living rooms are included in the rent. Not all bathrooms are private, Dawson has a private bath. There is a Resident Service Coordinator. Homeshare says that the two Homesteads are based on a European model, an alternative to the traditional medical model nursing home.

Dawson's most cherished possession is the Phi Beta Kappa key she is immensely proud of, and she is excited because early in 2010 a dear friend has given her a gold chain and fixed it so she can wear her key around her neck. When she looks out the window of her room there is a pond in the distance, and a garden that people from her church planted, calling it "Luthera's Garden." When I bring up with Dawson some findings of Ford and Sinclair, how their informants in care facilities felt they couldn't complain about care because you can't bite the hand that feeds, Dawson said: "People who are

hostages or prisoners become friends with their keepers.” I told her this was called the Stockholm Syndrome. “Don’t make a big deal of this hostage thing,” Dawson said firmly. “I’m here of my own will and because I can pay for it!”

Dr. Johnson’s Desk

I think many would agree Dawson has had a challenging life. There were islands of happiness: the idyllic childhood with her twin Leroy in Cushing, enjoying her sons, traveling the USA for the IRS, traveling a few times outside the country when retired, and the years in Thomaston after leaving D.C., back in her beloved Maine. Very recently I realized I’d neglected to ask for details about her European trips; she’d only mentioned them in passing to me. So I asked her to fill me in. She tells me that in 1977 or 78 she went to England with a dear friend who had been her supervisor at the IRS. Her next trip was with a different female friend also from IRS days. They began in France and did a tour winding up at the Mediterranean. “You know, one of those trips: ‘If it’s Tuesday it must be Belgium.’”

The highlight of her travel out of the U.S. was a third trip, the second to England. Dawson went with one of her sons and her daughter-in-law. “It was a literary trip. I got to see all the people [here Dawson probably means all the places connected with people] I had studied about all my life. I went to Stratford and saw *The Tempest*.” She exclaims over the sound and other special effects. “You know how *The Tempest* begins? It opens with a storm at sea, thunder and lightening.” She thought it wonderful. She tells me about seeing swans swimming. “In the Avon River,” I volunteer? “Yes,” she replies. Then I ask what the European trips meant to her and if they had any impact on her late life. “I can see things I saw there – they crop up. It was great enrichment and I wouldn’t have missed

it for anything in the world. I only wish I had started earlier” [in her life]. When I ask how she’s doing as we haven’t talked in about a month she tells me:

LD: I hope you won’t be disappointed in how I am now. (We are planning to get together in Maine in early summer.) I’m doing very little, I don’t see very well, and my desk looks like the fellow in England, Dr. . . .(she pauses) I can’t remember.

JT: Dr. Watson? (I think perhaps she has seen a cluttered desk in a Sherlock Holmes mystery on Masterpiece Theatre.)

LD: “No!” (Dawson is plainly exasperated with herself for taking so long to think of the name, and with me for offering such a poor guess.) Dr. Johnson.

JT: “Samuel Johnson?”

LD: Yes. He had a cat named Hodge.

JT: How do you know what Dr. Johnson’s desk looked like?

LD: Because in England they fixed up a room like his study, with a fireplace, and his desk was piled with papers and things. You know, the man with the Dictionary.

I Google Hodge and sure enough Johnson loved his cat Hodge and his *Dictionary of the English Language* was published in 1755. Dawson certainly is proof that dementia is not a normal old age decrement. Her speech is sprinkled with Maineisms, not all of them rooted in the sea. Often when talking about putting up with some element in her life she doesn’t like, but thinks she has to accept, like certain aspects of Homestead life, she will tell me, “ ‘Tis as ‘tis and can’t be no ‘tiser.” Dawson does take seriously one coastal superstition. She explained when John and I were departing after our first visit that she would not watch us leave, and she never did. “Never watch a person or thing out of sight, because you’ll never see them again” (123).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Dawson this is an old Maine expression. She sprinkles her speech with what she calls “MaineSpeak,” several of her expressions recorded on page 49 of *Maine 101* (Griffin 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Generations; Raising More Than Consciousness” by Patricia Leigh Brown in *The New York Times*, August 24, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The mid-coast region of Maine is variously spelled: midcoast, mid-coast, MidCoast, Mid-Coast, and Mid Coast, as in Mid Coast Hospital in Brunswick, Maine.

<sup>4</sup> I am not wearing rose colored glasses. Visions of lighthouses and lobsters do not obscure for me Maine’s economic woes. I am fully cognizant of and fully in agreement with the views of anthropologist and sociologist George H. Lewis, reflected in “The Maine That Never Was: The Construction of Popular Myth in Regional Culture.” In this article in the *Journal of American Culture* Lewis recounts the history of the efforts of the tourist industry to construct a Maine of escape and rejuvenation as contrasted with the impoverished Maine depicted in Carolyn Chute’s *The Beans of Egypt Maine*.

<sup>5</sup> It is common to come across references to the Subaru being the “official” Maine car. Sometimes the same is said for Vermont, probably because the Subaru has four-wheel drive, and is reasonably priced.

<sup>6</sup> “Vacationland” appears on the Maine license plate, something many Mainers find dismaying as they feel Maine is so much more than a tourist destination.

<sup>7</sup> South of New England, except for Legal Seafood restaurants, usually only “clam strips” are available. These are not the whole clam; the bellies have been removed. A favorite childhood food was fried clams with the bellies in, stuffed in a buttered toasted hot dog roll from Howard Johnson’s in Rhode Island.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Peavey, born Mainer, contributing editor for *Down East* magazine, writes that she gets a bit of an attitude from transplants,<sup>8</sup> people who have moved to Maine, because she doesn’t sound like she’s from Maine. She says this is because she grew up in front of the TV and her “accent is Walter Cronkite with a splash of Captain Kangaroo” (9).

<sup>9</sup> The 1977 Maine Traveler’s Information Services Act. The other billboardless states are Alaska and Hawaii. Maine effective date was in 1982. <http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/rules/17/229/229c200.doc>.

<sup>10</sup> Griffin 225 from FBI Uniform Crime Reports.

<sup>11</sup> Connors (4), Freidenberg (101) and Cruikshank (2003 40).

<sup>12</sup> Almost 7 years after Dawson wrote to me I asked why she had written in the first place. Dawson responded that she was concerned she was too old, but hoped she could be lumped in with the 80-year-olds. “It sounded so interesting, it was right up my alley, it was made for me, and I thought I could contribute something,” she said.

<sup>13</sup> A saltwater farm is one that is located on the shore of a saltwater estuary, in this case the St. George River, known locally, Dawson says, as the St. George’s River. After Dawson’s first memoir was published in 1993, it was brought out again in 2004, this time combined with her second memoir, *In the Slow Lane*, under the title *Beside the St. George’s*. Older books on New England and Maine refer to the river where Dawson grew up as the St. George’s River, as Dawson does (Laughlin 1940 378), but contemporary maps call it the St. George River.

<sup>14</sup> Having interviewed four Mainers, I find that “people in the know” only use the Pen Bay (Penobscot Bay) Medical Center in Rockland for certain uncomplicated things. For serious surgery people go down (or up in

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Maine lingo) to Portland, for really serious care, cancer, eyes, people go to one of the Harvard hospitals in Boston.

<sup>15</sup> A bit of regional culinary history: Bakewell Cream, made by New England Cupboard , Winterport Co. in Bangor, Maine, is a leavening mixture invented by a Maine chemist as a response to a shortage of Cream of Tarter during World War II. Many biscuit lovers claim Bakewell Cream produces the highest, fluffiest, lightest and best-tasting biscuits. It is sold throughout New England in IGA, Hannaford and Shaw's supermarkets and mail order through a variety of outlets.

<sup>16</sup> When writing up this project I have avoided mentioning names of participants' children, grandchildren or other family members.

<sup>17</sup> The St. George River, about forty miles long, winds through woods and farmlands in Union and Appleton, becoming a tidal river in Warren on its way to link up with the sea. Some people kayak from there to Thomaston which takes half a day with the tide (trails.com).

<sup>18</sup> Leroy moved down south, and Dawson did not see much of him in later life. He passed away in 1983. "I've never known a relationship that meant as much to me."

<sup>19</sup> This is taken from an annotated timeline of Dawson's life written at the request of a family member. She gave me a copy.

<sup>20</sup> Grace Hinds became the first female revenue agent in 1943 because men were scarce due to the War. She was Dawson's best friend until she died, accompanying Dawson to Europe after Dawson retired.

<sup>21</sup> There was information out there if one went looking in the 1970s. *Our Bodies Ourselves* written by feminist activists was published in 1973 by the Boston Women's Health Cooperative. It raised some warning flags.

<sup>22</sup> Cruikshank reflects on her experience teaching a class on women and aging at the University of Southern Maine. She enters the building where her classroom is located with some of her students. I calculate that Cruikshank is maybe five years younger than I am. She says her students take the stairs; she uses the elevator, dubbing this "performing old." "As I expound on the social construction of aging, I wonder if I should not instead be talking of leaky bladders, morning stiffness, and impaired night vision. I shrink from such personal revelations. Students describe rehearsals for 'The Vagina Monologues' and I can't even say the word 'bladder.' My generation brought the speculum into women's studies classrooms. . .but the 'aging' body is harder to present in an upbeat spirit. My reticence embarrasses me. It's as if the cogs in my feminist brain are running off track" (2003 174).

<sup>23</sup> *High Tide at Noon*, a J. Arthur Rank film was released in 1957.

<sup>24</sup> Dawson later told me the only minorities around Thomaston that she encountered growing up were Finns.

<sup>25</sup> Big brother was the man who ran the program that was directed to both girls and boys.

<sup>26</sup> The article with accompanying paper doll set was published in *The Boston Globe*, no date.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

We live a long, long time to be old.  
Jimmy Murphy<sup>1</sup>

What would aging research look like if old women  
themselves conducted in-depth interviews. . .  
Margaret Cruikshank<sup>2</sup>

Because I see – New Englandly. . .  
Emily Dickinson<sup>3</sup>

The results of this study strongly suggest that the cultural traditions a woman brings with her into late life can have an influence on how she negotiates aging. There are many variables that might affect how each individual American woman moves into old age and these include: historical experiences of her age cohort like the Great Depression, and personal life experiences; educational level, marital status, and not least, luck, genes, income, health, and level of ability or disability – or “inability,” the term Dawson prefers. The project partners in this study sample Adé Bethune, Mary Azarian, Luthera Dawson, and myself, do not constitute a homogenous group although we are all white, middle class, and Yankees by blood or adoption, feeling a strong connection to a certain portion of New England landscape. We are also different in terms of personality. But the life histories examined here reveal significant cultural continuities in the lives of each woman that affected her journey into old age.

### Through A Cultural Lens

Having explored four life histories in the preceding chapters, and having identified key cultural orientations in each woman’s life, its time to consider the ways relationships to cultural worlds each woman brought with her into old age affected how she negotiated or is currently navigating the shoals (Azarian and Tydings) or depths

(Bethune and Dawson) of a portion of the under explored territory that is women's old age in America. Then, as a study subject myself, and a researcher, I'll reexamine cultural influences in my own life, and discuss new insights I've gained into my own cultural worlds as I interacted with project partners and went into the field in New England and into old age territory, literally and figuratively. Finally, I will address other issues that emerged spontaneously in our conversations.

#### Adé Bethune

The most important tradition Bethune brought with her to old age was her version of Catholicism, a mix of several spiritualities that included living open to the possibility of performing kind acts (acts of charity or works of mercy). The most striking example of Bethune's Catholic works of mercy tradition in relation to aging was her establishment of Harbor House to serve as an alternative to aging in traditional nursing homes, places that she saw as inhumane. She wanted Harbor House to serve people of a variety of income levels including people who couldn't ordinarily afford to live in comfortable and beautiful circumstances in their old age. Harbor House is mixed income; affordable housing something Bethune dedicated her middle years and old age to providing for the Newport community through her involvement with Church Community Housing Corporation. But besides Harbor House being a work of mercy, the final project also reveals the strong influence of Benedictine monasticism, and the influence of family caring for family. Perhaps the most important feature of Harbor House, at least in Bethune's mind, was that "members," not residents, would live together a "common life."

## Common Life

It's important to separate out the Bethune family tradition of caring for each other, although that itself is a work of mercy, from religious influences. Bethune's mother left her beautiful, architect-designed, much-loved house to move into a small row house on the edge of her father's stately property so she could care for him and supervise his large household of servants and other family members, when her father was widowed. She cared for a husband, a former chemical engineer, an officer in the army, who was damaged by the First World War and dementia, later said to be Alzheimer's. Bethune's mother and Bethune herself cared for him, preserving his dignity, until he died. During earlier visits to Bethune's home before I began this project, I saw daily phone calls and faxes among various family members in Europe and the U.S. Bethune's younger brother and family lived right down the road in Portsmouth. Various nieces and nephews came and went, one or two living for a time in Bethune's home.

As soon as Bethune made some money from the sale of millions of Catholic missals she had illustrated, she bought a small house inviting her parents to live with her in Newport. Then when her mother came into an inheritance, Marthe bought the spacious home on Washington Street and invited her daughter to live with her. It became a large family community.

Catholic traditions also directly affected Bethune. The prevalence of religious orders or communities is evidence that Catholicism has always valued the common life, as evidenced also by monasticism that Bethune admired and saw lived out at Portsmouth Abbey when she taught there for five years, and that she joined as an Oblate. Bethune told me it was living a "common life" with her parents that convinced her that this was



why they had good health until they died; not dying after a lengthy hospital stay. This, she said, was her prime motivation for establishing Harbor House. Her vision of common life in Harbor House was realized. Her brother and sister-in-law moved into Harbor House, and her brother, Andre, was with her in her last days, singing to her old childhood songs in Flemish at her request.

When I toured Harbor House and matched what I saw with what Bethune herself had told me about how she wanted to design it, the first thought I had was “This looks like a monastery.” That was my second and third thought also. Bethune had told me members didn’t need much space for their individual apartments. Bethune’s bedroom in her home was the size of a monk’s cell. When her brother showed me Bethune’s Harbor House apartment, where he then lived, it wasn’t much larger than her bedroom across the street. I interviewed several Harbor House residents about their experience and that was the only complaint I heard, that some individual apartments were too small. Bethune’s brother and sister were then living in separate apartments. Bethune said she wanted the arrangement and size of rooms to facilitate members living a common life. She valued privacy but wanted to encourage people to gather together in living rooms to watch sports or “watch Masterpiece Theatre,” or to use the library, or to cook together in the common kitchen. The interior of Harbor House was truly beautiful, as are most of the Catholic monasteries I’ve ever stayed in, like Grayfriars in Oxford or St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. In the end, Bethune was attended in her death by monks from Portsmouth Abbey and interred in the monastery churchyard.

Enculturated with the notion of the dignity of work, seeing it modeled by her mother, taught by Jacques Maritain and Peter Maurin, writing a book about the dignity of

work, Bethune continued her design work for Terra Sancta until shortly before she died, her office just across the street from Harbor House.

### Burying the Dead

Prompted by her Catholic enculturation, her social action, works of mercy philosophy, and her frugality, maybe the influence of living among Yankees, Bethune had an influence on how some Americans planned for their burial and death. Appalled by the cost of coffins and funeral expenses, Bethune made her own simple coffin when still in her twenties. She also made plans for constructing an inexpensive coffin available through her St. Leo newsletter. This was covered nationally in *The Boston Globe* and *Time* magazine (Stoughton 97). She and her group of friends, the St. Leo League, came out with recommendations for planning for death, suggesting donating one's body for medical research, and/or, having family members do things usually done by funeral homes and having a low cost funeral. This way of burial was followed when Bethune's father and mother died, and when she died, friends and family washed her body and carried out all her instructions for a frugal and simple funeral.

### Ties That Bind

Bethune loved Rhode Island from the moment she set eyes on the state with its stone fences, as noted in Chapter Four. She loved Narragansett Bay, it reminding her of the ocean she visited as a child and the low-lying landscape of her childhood. She told me she was a "flatlander." She put down roots in the Ocean State in 1938 and by 1999 when I began interviewing her sixty years later, she was culturally woven tightly into the history and life of Newport. She served as an apprentice craftsperson in America's longest running business there, some of her designs on local tombstones, her legacy more

than thirty Newport houses designed for people of low income, and, of course, Harbor House. Her finger was on the pulse of Newport's traffic problems. Her influence seemed to be everywhere. With her retired professor brother and his wife lived down the road in Portsmouth where the Abbey was located, and the churchyard where she would be buried, in old age, she would never have thought of moving to a warmer climate, to her childhood Belgium, or elsewhere. She is an example of the strong connection to locale, or cultural attachment to place, in old age. Many educated Catholics and those familiar with the Catholic Worker movement think of Bethune as the "Catholic Worker Artist." Others know of her as "a great matriarch of the Liturgical Movement" (Stoughton ix). But to most people she was just a wonderful citizen of Newport.

A recent *AARP Bulletin* (2010)<sup>4</sup> notes a new demographic trend of "settledness." It cites a report from the Pew Research Center finding the "lowest rates of adults changing residences between 2007 and 2008 since the government began tracking this trend in the late 1940s" (Gurwitt). AARP finds that "aging boomers and those who have already retired" are more and more staying put because they are connected to their locale, or localized family and friends. In the end, Bethune's life history reveals numerous cultural orientations influencing how she negotiated her last years. Regional and religious traditions resulted in Bethune choosing to live and to die in Newport, Rhode Island. Her appreciation of monasticism, her upper class taste, the Bethune family tradition of family members caring for each other, and her social consciousness expressed as works of mercy, all converged in one of her most enduring legacies, the Harbor House project.

## Mary Azarian

A number of cultural traditions are at play in Mary Azarian's life and work as she approaches seventy in 2010. She has always been attracted to Vermont's rural tradition, living on a hill farm for many years herself, and in her later years she continues to consciously work to preserve the rural tradition by depicting farms and barns and farm animals in her woodcut illustrations and posters, as she did in her first published work, *The Farmer's Alphabet* (1981). That book started out as alphabet posters for school children reminding them of their Vermont rural heritage; these posters hung in every elementary school in Vermont. The books Azarian chooses to illustrate are usually those featuring local people, as in *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin 1998), about the Vermont man who photographed snowflake crystals, for which book she received the prestigious Caldecott medal, and *Louisa May and Mr. Thoreau's Flute* (Lorbiecki 2002), the book she illustrated about Louisa May Alcott's childhood friendship with Thoreau, and *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert 2005), celebrating a real person, the kind of person no northern New England town can do without, one who can plow snow, dig a pond with a backhoe, or fix a barn roof, depending on the season.

Speaking of the seasons, one might think Azarian might move to warmer climes because of Vermont's long very cold winters, in fact Azarian considered it as a family member lives in Texas. But winter is Azarian's favorite time of year and she is attached to Vermont. Her dedication in the book *Snowflake Bentley* reads: "For all the snow lovers of the world, who – like me – think that snow is like chocolate; there is never enough." Like Bethune, in deciding to stay in Vermont next to her gardens, Azarian is manifesting the "settledness" AARP points to as perhaps a coming trend, described they report in an

upcoming book *The Next Hundred Million* by social thinker Joel Kotkin (Gurwitt). More Seniors will stay put rather than moving in retirement he predicts. Azarian is connected, even tethered, to her locale. She tells me she walks the same walk every day, I've walked it with her, and she never tires of looking at the same trees and fields.

The pull of rural Vermont is matched by Azarian's family tradition of gardening, her flower gardens much larger than her vegetable gardens. In Chapter Five I showed how a favorite theme in Azarian's art work, besides farms and the seasons, is flowers and gardens. Being a working artist and fulfilling contracts to illustrate books continues to give her life meaning and to bring in income. But gardening is preeminent. Azarian told me if she had lots of free time, she would never draw another picture. Art is work. She might take up painting, but she will never give up gardening.

The same tradition of family caring for family is evident in Azarian's life as it was in Bethune's. Although her parents lived in Virginia, Azarian was aware of and impressed by the way her mother cared for her father as he became progressively affected by Alzheimer's; bringing him to a hospital in Boston each year to participate in a study. When she was widowed Azarian's mother moved to Montpelier and Azarian helped her mother preserve her independence while keeping a kind caring eye on her. With her children grown, Azarian has befriended various people, allowing them to stay in her home, and in the last few years, some of her family has returned to live with her, and she had built a small house and studio on the property, leaving the larger house to family – with the caveat, she told me when I asked, that her children understand they are to care for her when she needs help later on.

## Putting the House in Order

I asked Azarian recently what she is taking to the new house. “So far very little,” she tells me. She’s in the process of paring down and simplifying her life. She is storing some “stuff” she is not yet ready to part with. Azarian is doing now what Myerhoff spoke about in “Rites and Signs of Ripening” (Kertzer and Keith 312-313). “. . . the old often set about putting their house in order.” Connors’ study subjects were in their nineties, and she includes a small portion of transcript with a woman talking about giving things away to “clean out,” Connors linking it to Myerhoff’s observation (104). Bethune gave cherished things to family, simplified her life in her early eighties and wrote about it (1995). Dawson gave things away. I asked Azarian if she is taking her grandfather’s stuffed parrot and she is. The traditions influencing how Azarian is negotiating old age are a family tradition of caring for one another, attachment to region or place, and gardening. It remains to be seen how increasing age will influence the choices she has made.

Azarian says her eyes are wide open to the possibility that as time passes, her children, all sons, could decide they don’t want to live in Vermont any more. With two knees replaced, she has already given over some of the gardening to a daughter-in-law. How much gardening can she do in future? Azarian wrote in an introduction to her book *Gardener’s Alphabet*, “I know that as long as I can clutch a trowel I will be a gardener. In the words of a Chinese proverb, ‘If you would be happy for life, plant a garden.’”

## Luthera Dawson

Dawson, at 98 the eldest of all of us, has outlived Bethune and two other women who joined us but then became ill, Vivian York and Elisabeth Ogilvie. The cultural

traditions that gave her life meaning in late life continue to shape her days. She continues to write, shooting me off an e-mail the other day, although now filled with typos as her hands are more crippled with arthritis than they were when I first met her. She is still an ailurophile, the Homestead house cat taking up residence in her room. She is still satisfied with her decision to remain in Maine despite the fact that she doesn't see family as much as she might, had she been willing to move to Massachusetts. She still manifests Yankee gumption and a head-on approach to life. Despite what some might think about her situation, surrounded by eleven women in various stages of Alzheimer's,<sup>5</sup> grim some might think, Dawson stays mostly to her room, with computer games, the cat, the view of a garden out her window, specially planted by her church, and the TV news, and the local paper so she can follow local goings on. She stays in touch with family and friends by phone and e-mail. Were she still in her own home, something she knows is unthinkable now, she would probably be doing the same things she does now, sitting in her green chair with Tigger on her lap, just as she was when I first met her.

As someone who was a caretaker from the time she married until she was 73, Dawson has taken good care of herself, saving money, planning for the future, trying out Massachusetts for a few months and not liking it, her cat Tigger didn't either, checking out another care facility and not liking it either, finding The Homestead,<sup>6</sup> putting up with things until she got a room she liked, still paying her own bills and balancing her own checkbook. Known thereabouts as a State of Mainer through her memoirs, work with two historical societies, talks to school children about Maine history and lectures to Elderhostel about MaineSpeak, Dawson continues to be interviewed. She was interviewed by Nancy Griffin for *Maine 101* (2009) and by people from another Maine

history project called *Salt and Pines* not yet published. Dawson seldom complains, and if she does, perhaps she has been served broccoli too often, she will quickly follow any complaint with the MaineSpeak expression that she uses to address any unpleasant situation is “ ‘Tis as ‘tis, and can’t be no ‘tiser” (Griffin 49).

Dawson is another example of a study subject being influenced by connection to region or locale. For Dawson however, as for Azarian, not quite as much for Bethune, the attachment to locale, is more than what Joel Kotkin describes as prompting Seniors to stay put rather than head out to leisure living in the Sunbelt. He notes in *Newsweek* recently, that staying close to “family, friends, clubs, churches, and familiar surroundings” is the reason people in late life are not moving as much as they used to. For Dawson the attachment is to more than friends and church and the familiarity with her surroundings: yes it is connection to mid-coast Maine, Thomaston and Cushing, but Dawson is attached to all things Maine: food (bean suppers), speech (MaineSpeak), the people (“sturdy and reliable”), Maine authors, Maine summer days like no others, Maine history, the University of Maine, and the place by the St. George River where she will lie and her ancestors are buried. Dawson ends her first memoir *Saltwater Farm* this way:

Legally I have no claim to the Burton farm today, save a right in perpetuity to visit the burying ground. Emotionally it is, and always will be, mine. My people lived, worked, and died here. It is part of my being; it helped make me the person I am. To the Burtons who for 183 years made this place the haven I knew for a secure, happy childhood, I can say with the psalmist, “My lines are fallen in pleasant places, yea, I have a goodly heritage.” (104)

Judith Tydings

At first I found it something of a challenge to look at my study colleagues’ lives and my own, through a cultural lens, although I had completed a previous ethnographic project about an American intentional community a year before. Caughey has remarked



on the pervasiveness in our culture of psychological explanations (2006 9), noting that this can be a challenge for life history researchers. I found that to be so. For me, in some ways it has been like learning a skill, like learning to ride a bicycle. Although I've achieved some facility in noticing cultural influences, there is always room for improvement. Of course there is worth in psychological insights, but working on this study has taught me the value of learning to think culturally. Without this approach, in reviewing my own life I would still be blind to the multiplicity of cultural meanings at play in my life and I'd still be emphasizing the effects of my itinerant childhood, giving scant cultural attention to my being an Irish Yankee who came of age in the Fifties with its peculiar repressive milieu of gender, religious, racial, ethnic, and other cultural influences, plus a family tradition or influence revolving around being prepared for future eventualities, gaining information beforehand, that I saw lived out in my maternal aunt, an expert in information services, and my paternal grandmother who was a serious Red Cross volunteer whose personal motto, like the Boy Scouts, was, "Be Prepared." I had been a Scout as well. In addition, while spending time with Bethune, I recognized how impacted I had been by my Catholic social action enculturation, called "works of mercy" by Bethune and earlier generations, and by people drawn to the Catholic Worker movement, now, like Nancy Mairs. I saw that same spirit of service in all study subjects: Bethune with her work with CCHC, Azarian with Women in Black protesting war, and supporting Heifer International; Dawson in her 90s, knitting mittens for needy children and donating baked goods for charity.

"Reflexivity generates heightened awareness." It "loosens us from habit and custom. . .the experience may be exhilarating or frightening or both, but it is generally

irreversible” (Myerhoff and Ruby in Kaminsky 307). “A good life history project partially frees us from the cage of our customary, culturally constituted ways of thinking (Caughey 2006 92). Looking back now I know those observations are true, but reading the words didn’t prepare me for the experience of reflexivity while working on this project, which in the end I found life enhancing. There were times when reflecting on my own cultural conditioning, painting my cultural self-portrait, or considering cultural traditions influencing lives of project colleagues, that I felt a bit disoriented before, in the end, seeing my relationship to the culture of the Fifties and Sixties, or to religion, or to geographical region, in new ways.

Several vignettes from my field trips will help illustrate how cultural shifts in my generational and regional identity were precipitated in ways that have implications for my later years.

#### Vermont Vignette

It is a Monday in April.<sup>7</sup> After a night in a Burlington, Vermont motel, I drive John to the airport and head south towards Montpelier and Hunger Mountain Coop on Stone Cutters Way passing “moose crossing” signs. I want to pick up food items to contribute to meals with Azarian during my stay with her this week. I’ve shopped in this natural foods store on other field trips. It’s the largest one of its kind I’ve ever been in excluding Whole Foods stores that aren’t community owned coops and that lack that indefinable atmosphere and aroma of “real” health foods emporiums. After exploring up and down various aisles and looking at local produce, I purchase lunch at the counter in the small café within the store: a serving of a brown and wild rice mix, broccoli and cauliflower, and a spicy peanut soup. All eight tables look full but a white-haired woman

beckons me to an empty seat next to her. I would guess she is around 75.<sup>8</sup> In ten minutes I learn she grew up in New Jersey, lived her married life in Connecticut, and has a summer home in Vermont where she lives April to November, spending winter months with her mother in the Florida panhandle. She asks me about myself and I explain this project which clearly interests her.

My lunch companion leaves and I look around realizing I feel at home and a sense of wellbeing in this café and try to pin down why. I think partly its how the women shoppers and fellow diners look and dress. It isn't just the slogans on their tee shirts, one reading: "I don't eat margarine, I don't trust chemicals, I eat butter, I trust cows." I realize for one thing it is their hair which on many of these women looks windblown, almost unkempt. But it isn't a windy day. These women don't have a blow-dried carefully coifed appearance, in fact, many women look like they just stepped from the shower and towel-dried their hair; a few have damp heads. Most faces are without makeup, a few just lipstick. Some of the tees some women wear are wrinkled. Some have jeans that are paint-spotted. Most look slender and healthy, many with weather-beaten faces denoting a lot of time gardening or in the outdoors. Footwear includes lots of sandals, athletic shoes, and Dansk clogs; perhaps the attire reflects the high proportion of artists, writers, and craftspeople in Vermont. Playwright David Mamet has lived here for about forty years. Other writers who have called the Green Mountain State home for part or all of the year have included Sinclair Lewis, Saul Bellow, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Robert Frost, John Irving, Vladimir Nabokov, Grace Paley and Pearl Buck. Azarian has explained that in her opinion the high proportion of artists isn't just because of the scenery. Vermont has many poor people. One can live on not a lot in this state, and

people by and large have to be self-supporting, like craftspeople or writers. I know that Archer Mayor, author of police procedurals, whose work I appreciate because of his strong New England sense of place, had an itinerant childhood as I did, and he says he relishes being now rooted in small-town Vermont. For him “It’s a small caring state, with a government that is based on taking care of its own” (Home-Douglas 51). I think about what I am wearing: Clogs, jeans, a short-sleeve black turtle, and colorful socks made purposefully mismatched by the Vermont Sock Lady,<sup>9</sup> whose motto is “Life is too short for matching socks,” a good slogan for how Vermont makes me feel!

Especially sensitive to aromas, knowing I respond strongly to them, I am trying to learn more about aromatherapy. I’m always aware of the change in how the air smells as I travel towards the shore in Rhode Island from Connecticut, something Cantwell noted; or when I cross the bridge from New Hampshire into Maine, something Grumbach enjoyed and A. Carmen Clark wrote was true for many people (1985 187); or the odor of Maine’s low tide that Rachel Carson worked to imprint on her nephew, Roger, from infancy. She hoped he would experience, as she did, “the rush of remembered delight that comes with the first breath of that scent, drawn into one’s nostrils as one returns to the sea after a long absence” (66). I greedily inhale the Hunger Mountain aroma, that pungent, sweet smell, peculiar to many “real” natural foods stores, a mix of scents hard to pin down but overlaid I think with Patchouli,<sup>10</sup> called “the scent of the Sixties;” musky, heavy, earthy and exotic. It is yang like the sun, and like the sun in small amounts stimulates, in larger amounts induces relaxation (Tisserand 263). I immediately feel grounded when I enter Hunger Mountain. That, plus the look of customers in Hunger Mountain and people on Montpelier streets, helps me realize why I feel at home here in

this portion of Vermont. I am recognizing how much I was affected by the Sixties when the natural foods movement, and organics, and the environmental movement began to get a footing.

The little corner coffee shop on Montpelier's Main Street, the "Coffee Corner," offers Tofutti non-dairy "Better Than Cream Cheese" with their bagels. It is like turning the clock back to the Sixties: lots of denim, comfortable clothes, Birkenstocks, tofu, brown rice, bringing to mind Mary Travers, Pete Seeger, *Laugh-In*, the VW Bug, butterfly chairs, pottery, wind chimes, ecumenism, but no free love, pot, macramé, or tie-dyed shirts for me – at least not yet anyway.

A few years after my café visit to Hunger Mountain Howard Dean was running for president and *The New York Times* ran an article entitled "Searching for a Defining Look In the Land of Ben & Jerry's" (Frankel). Vermonters who were interviewed about what they thought characterized Green Mountain State attire replied variously: unpretentious, understated, "antiflashiness," informal and functional. " 'Fashion and grooming are considered a waste of time and energy that could be spent weeding the garden' said Vermonter Carrie Chalmers" (Frankel). It was when I sat in Hunger Mountain and began to analyze why I was experiencing such a sense of well-being, that I realized the atmosphere there and in the town itself conjured up the Sixties; a time for me of hope and optimism. And for someone who had been brought up straddling classes, there seemed to be a kind of informal, class transcending quality present, something I experienced especially as I was engaged in Sixties social justice projects or went to ecumenical meetings. I now see that decade as having been my reprieve from the Fifties.

In the Sixties my Catholic works of mercy conscience had gotten a workout as I participated in my first protest, picketing Bethesda's Suburban hospital alongside civil rights icon Julius Hobson over low housekeeping wages; lobbied successfully for a bus route for a low-income enclave in Potomac; my friends and I helping to find housing for a family living in a packing crate; and working alongside a VISTA worker in a poverty pocket in affluent Potomac, Maryland. It seemed the sun was always shining. In a strange twist, while I collected clothing to send to Gino Baroni, a Catholic priest, to distribute in inner city Washington, D.C., wealthy parishioners in my Catholic Our Lady of Mercy Potomac parish gave me discarded clothing previously worn by Eleanor McGovern, wife of one-time Democratic presidential nominee, Senator George McGovern. Although a Methodist, she donated her clothes to friends in our parish, and I was the only size two woman they knew. Referred to Johns Hopkins by my HMO and diagnosed with probable MS, I researched alternative medicine, found macrobiotics, took cooking lessons (how to make tasty tofu scramble!), learned a whole new vocabulary: miso, tekka, kuzu powder, gomasio, seitan, suribachi, and kombu, ate mostly organic, and the health problems dissipated over a decade.

It should have come as no surprise to me that I favored Sixties "fashion" having spent 12 years wearing Catholic school uniforms, some form of navy blue or black serge. Out of uniform, fifties clothes for us young women were miserable. Sociologist Breines notes that the backdrop to our lives, despite happy images of hula hoops and barbecues, included fear of the bomb, fear of going all the way, (no birth control pill then), fear of Russia, fear of being flat in an era of big busts, Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, fear of polio, and, literary biographer and former Princeton lecturer Benita Eisler, my

contemporary, adds another fear, “fear of how we smelt” (56 128). All sources of “bad odor” had us running to breath mints, Arrid antiperspirant, and our mother’s Evening in Paris or Tweed cologne to ameliorate our anxieties. For young white middle class American women the Fifties was a time of constraint, conformity and cultural anxiety (Breines 9) and our clothes were as restrictive as the culture (Breines xiv). Our hemlines came mid-calf so we were either hobbled by straight skirts, or had to exercise caution walking through a narrow store aisle dressed in poodle skirts, huge circular creations fluffed up with layers of stiff crinolines. Our waists were cinched as tight as we could stand it with elasticized cinch belts. Just five months younger than I am, poet Marge Piercy described “the trappings of my adolescence” as:

... a litany of rubber, metal bands, garters, boning, a rosary of spandex and lycra and nylon, a votive candle of elastic. . . The skirts were long and clumsy. How we waded through summer as they hung from us in fat folds. . . sweaters were tight. . . Girdles: my mother bought me one when I turned twelve, saying to me that now I was a woman. I weighed ninety-two pounds and cast no shadow standing sideways. Rubber coffins. . . . Girdles chafed the thighs raw. It is not trivia. . . These costumes say that flesh must be confined, must suffer in rigidity. (121-122)

As I sat in the Hunger Mountain café I realized that it was that Sixties atmosphere and what it conjured in my spirit that also beckoned me in my favorite coffee house/second hand bookstore, Second Read,<sup>11</sup> on Main Street in Rockland in mid-coast Maine that I frequented daily on Maine field trips. I filed away in my brain that in my late years I want to be near a health food community and people and environs that bring the Sixties to life for me. I purchase some flowers for Azarian, (like bringing coals to Newcastle but I do it anyway), as well as some large containers of Liberté Peach and Passion Fruit Yogourt, one of Azarian’s favorite foods.

## The Rockers: A Maine Vignette

Dawson told me once that in the 1990s she ran into a woman who had recently moved to Maine who said she didn't know anybody. Dawson told her that she herself was running out of friends because they were all dying. Together they formed a group they call "Off Our Rockers," meeting monthly at a restaurant in Camden or Rockland and having a long lunch of several hours together, having a wonderful time telling jokes, swapping stories and catching up. They have been going for seven years, picking up members along the way, when I'm invited to a Rockers' gathering one April, my lunch at Hunger Mountain the week before fresh in my mind.

There are about twelve women present at a long table along a wall of windows at the back of McMahon's restaurant on Route One on the outskirts of Rockland. They all look like they could have stepped off the streets in Montpelier or from the aisles at Hunger Mountain. Several turn out to be about my age, Dawson the oldest member there. One woman says, laughing, "You have to be slightly crazy to belong to the Rockers." At one time their age span went from thirty-five to ninety, now it is about fifty to ninety-three. Dawson having told her Rocker friends about this project that she and I are doing together, and that she was bringing me along to lunch, the Rockers want to volunteer their thoughts on aging, especially growing old in Maine. Some of the women present say they moved to Maine precisely to live their last years here. "When you get to a certain age you become invisible. In Maine you do not become invisible." The women generally draw from the Thomaston/Rockland area; "it's a small area and we get to know everyone." Another added, "Statistically people tend to live a long time in Maine." This perception accords with something Doris Grumbach observed of her adopted Maine



community that she moved to from Washington, D.C. at seventy. “Yesterday I heard a neighbor talking about a friend in Camden who had died, ‘prematurely,’ she said. Turned out the gentleman was eighty-one. Not to reach ninety up here is regarded as a disappointing act of carelessness or accident” (1991 234). “It’s a safe place,” a third Rocker says, “A lot of single women move to Maine. The weather is bad, so bad things don’t happen.” Her reasoning seems to be that Maine winters are harsh and most Mainers aren’t wealthy, so criminals will have less incentive to make Maine a base of operations. Indeed, of the ten safest states (based on murder rate per 100,000), Maine is at the very top with 1.2 (Griffin 225).

I am told Maine transplants are looking for safety, something especially important to late-life women,<sup>12</sup> and one admits to being “attracted by the romance of New England, even if it is ersatz!” She and another Rocker had their appetites for Maine wetted by reading the forty novels of local Cushing writer Elisabeth Ogilvie, her books full of salt air, lobster boats, and fog horns; her books having kept Maine alive for Dawson during the years when she lived “away” in Washington, D.C. and Maryland. I don’t mention, and neither does Dawson, that Ogilvie has been a study colleague. Another Rocker waxes enthusiastic about the local town meetings that she enjoys tremendously and she enumerates various stereotypical characters she says she observes there. “Maine is less frenetic; fifteen years behind the rest of the country,” says another. “In a small town people are accountable for their own actions,” volunteers another Rocker with a satisfied expression. I ask how they feel about the Wal-Mart that has moved to the edge of Rockland. “I hate these stores but shop in them,” says one. I know this Wal-Mart because I’ve driven Dawson there several times. Careful of her money, and knowledgeable about

local resources, Dawson has her prescriptions filled there. She tells me some family members have been exasperated at her frugality.

The women who have moved to this Maine mid-coast area “from away” feel they bring something to their adopted state. “We spend money.” Others say they work as volunteers with the historical societies because usually it is “hard to get natives to join.” (Reviewing this material several years later Dawson confirms this is so.) Some Rockers live with husbands, others live alone. All want to avoid living in any kind of retirement facility which one calls “playgrounds for the elderly” and another characterizes as “waiting in line to die.”

In a very unobtrusive way, these women manifest the same spirit of service I see in Dawson’s life, and that I experienced in the Sixties. Intermingled with the happy conversation about grandchildren, the weather, and neighborhood events, is mention of baking cookies or preparing meals for a church supper, tutoring students, knitting mittens for schoolchildren, and engaging in local politics. Children are another topic of conversation, with several women saying adamantly that they will not live with their children. They don’t want to be a burden to them. Another woman offers the wisdom, “Your children are not your friends,” meaning that one shouldn’t look to one’s children to supply an old parent’s social world, but rather one should look to one’s age cohort for peer relationships.<sup>13</sup> Dawson shares with me later that one of the women present has been giving financial help to one of her adult sons, but the son is ungrateful and causing his mother a lot of pain. I filed this away to think about because as I read through the literature on aging, and about old age stressors like illness and finances, I never see mention of the pain that can be caused to mothers by adult children. The literature is in

the other direction, the stress caused to adult children caring for aging parents or by unresolved childhood issues.

Several women ask if I plan to move to the area. I say I want to but John dislikes moving, and our children question our being “far away.” We will make a decision after this project is completed. I tell them about a *New York Times* article I’ve saved from 1998. It’s about a couple from Cincinnati who retired to Maine, “calculating that their children, now grown, would be more likely to visit them in Maine than in Ohio” (Iovine). And that proved to be true. With two children living in Maryland with their families, the family of my deceased son also in Maryland, and another son and family in West Virginia, and with adult grandchildren living in Maryland, I am geographically closer to my children and grandchildren than this Ohio family apparently was, but I figure with the oldest grandchild an aerial photographer for several years now after getting her BFA, sometimes flying as far up the coast as Vermont, one grandson studying music composition in Massachusetts not far from Maine, two other grandsons in college, and at the other end of the age spectrum, the youngest grandchild in kindergarten, with us seeing family for mostly day-long visits sandwiched between plays and soccer matches, if we’re in Maine, it would mean we’d see family for a week at a time, like the Ohio family, rather than having shorter visits. And we could fly down several times a year. Frequency would give way to quality time. And like Rachel Carson, I want to imprint New England low tide on as many family members as possible. Two Rockers said their husbands had moved with them to Maine grudgingly, but were now happy, doing things like going on bird counts or woodworking, which John already does.

## Maine Media Women: Another Maine Vignette

The following year I take Dawson to a meeting of the mid-coast chapter of Maine Media Women in Rockland, a group of communications professionals: graphic designers, videographers, publishers, specialists in broadcasting and electronic media, artists and writers. Many of the twenty-seven women present seem to be writers, a few of them aspiring. Dawson is a life member of this group; I am their only associate member. It is September and in the 40s outside. I look round the room. Of the 27 women only three wear skirts, the rest pants. All wear socks with sandals or closed or backless clogs. Hair is short, a few with hair pulled up in a bun. One carries a handsome gnarled wooden cane. The average age is close to mine I guess, late sixties, early seventies. Several are transplants. In the midst of the meeting one woman stands up and happily declares, "I'm just celebrating twelve years in Maine." Everyone claps. One writer<sup>14</sup> who is excited at just placing a piece in *The New York Times* about her dismay at her son being a tattoo artist, she has co-written the piece with him, invites John and me to dinner in Camden with her and her husband. Later, over a delicious meal of fresh seafood they enthusiastically tell how and why they retired to Maine. I hope John is listening!

### Mid-Coast Maine

For a treat, one time I take Dawson out to breakfast three blocks from her house at the Thomaston Café. She orders freshly made muffins and I find they make "Sixties food," a great scrambled tofu flecked with red and green peppers, red onions, summer squash and mushrooms and serve it with eight-grain bread. They also make "Yankee food," morning specials are fishcakes Benedict, and silver dollar pancakes, both of which I'd grown up on, the codfish cakes without the Benedict. I've discovered a small natural

foods store between Rockland and Camden called “Fresh Off the Farm.” This mid-coast Maine area, not yet touristy like Camden or Rockport, seems to wed the Sixties with a community of artists and writers, accessible healthy food, a spirit of service to the community, an interest in continuing education, and the ocean is nearby. Much as I would enjoy living in Montpelier, I would miss the sounds and smells of being near the sea, inhaling salt air imprinted at the Rhode Island shore of my childhood.

Rockland is home to University College of Rockland offering for-credit college courses as part of the University of Maine System, and Coastal Senior College, part of Maine’s thriving and growing Maine Senior College Network, twelve years old in 2009, offering non-credit enrichment courses, and affiliated with Outreach Centers and Campuses of the University of Maine System. There are now 18 Senior Colleges throughout Maine. In her early nineties Dawson took a creative writing class at a Senior College campus in Thomaston, taught by mystery writer Jean Scott Creighton (“J.S. Borthwick”), who uses the old Thomaston Academy building, Dawson’s former high school, as a setting for her books, making the Academy a college, and her chief protagonist an English professor. Born in 1923, twelve years older than I am, Creighton is still teaching creative writing and literature at Senior College. Were we to move to mid-coast Maine, I will explore teaching at the Center on Aging at the University of Maine or at one of the Senior College locations.

Maine is becoming a retirement destination, despite the sometimes challenging weather. In Knox County, the center of the mid-coast, the average daily temperatures range from a low of 10.2 degrees Fahrenheit and a high of 32 in January to a low of 57.1 and a high of 79.9 in July. *Down East* in February 2009 noted that while live births in

Maine have been declining since the early 1960s, the state's median age during that period rose up from 29.5 to 41.2 years old today. "Maine now has the grayest population in the country, and the trend doesn't show any sign of changing" (R 4). Retirement communities "are popping up along Maine's craggy coastline" (R 23). Crediting Mainers "fiercely independent" spirit resulting in reluctance to enter institutional living, Maine's population of people living in nursing homes is below the national average.<sup>15</sup> *Second Act*, a monthly Maine TV show produced by retirees for retirees has celebrated its third year profiling people from nonagenarian cookbook author Emily McMann to a Portland painter in his early eighties.

Author and native Mainer Elizabeth Peavey, writes about the increasing number of people like John and me who are moving to Maine:

There was a time when it was considered a birthright for Mainers to look down their noses at the rusticators, sports, back-to-the-landers who invaded our state like so much purple loosestrife. It didn't matter that these transplants adopted their new home with zeal and vigor, they were dismissed as nothing more than Mainer wannabes. No amount of wood stacking or Bean boot wearing or Subaru Outback driving or farmer's market shopping was going to change that. . .Somewhere along the line, however, a shift has occurred. More and more, it is these people 'from away' who are now doing the hiring and decision-making here. In the marketplace, it is often we – the natives, who, by choice or chance, have made Maine home – that are being scrutinized and, sometimes, I'm afraid to report, come up wanting. (2004b 25)

Totally unexpected was how the people and environs in Montpelier, Vermont, and the Thomaston/Rockland, Maine area, make me feel; like I belong, accompanied by a sense of well-being. My son-in-law's description of the way I dress, "aging hippie," should have been a clue to the importance of the culture of the Sixties to my life but before this life history study I would not have given it a second thought. My sense of

well-being at being immersed in the Sixties in Montpelier and in mid-coast Maine, comports with findings of Ellen Langer's 1979 counterclockwise study (2009).

### Counterclockwise

Harvard psychologist Ellen J. Langer details some of her experiments with implications for aging in her recent book, *Counterclockwise, Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility* (2009). In 1979 Langer took some men in their late 70s and early 80s to an old monastery in New Hampshire retrofitted to replicate 1959. Eight men lived for a week in that time period as though they were twenty years younger. Movies they watched, magazines they read, conversations they engaged in, were limited to topics no further ahead than 1959. Langer also had a control group of another eight men the week afterwards, the environment was the same, but these men were to look retrospectively at 1959, not immerse themselves as though actually living in that decade. Langer wanted to “look at what effects turning back the clock psychologically would have on people’s physiological state” (5). Later called the “counterclockwise study,” it revealed the power of mind over body as the men in both groups, the control group somewhat less so, showed improvements in physical strength, perception, memory, cognition, hearing, vision, taste sensitivity, gait, posture, joint flexibility, strength of grip, manual dexterity, and overall well-being (3-11, 179).

In *Counterclockwise*, Langer promotes mindfulness, something she has studied for many years; she wrote a book with that title (1989), and developed the “Langer Mindfulness Scale,” a 21-item questionnaire that her research site describes as to be used for “a training, self discovery, and research instrument.” In a recent interview with

*Kripalu Online*, the newsletter for the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, Langer

describes her understanding of the term:

Mindfulness, as I study it, is something you should be doing all day long – when you're alone, when you're with people, no matter what you're doing. It's not an activity like meditation or yoga, its part of every moment of our lives. . . Mindlessness is when you're on automatic pilot.

For her mindfulness includes “finding something new in what we may think we already know” (182). Langer reasons that if the men in her study could experience such dramatic changes, in just a week, “so too can the rest of us” (11). She writes that elderly people often internalize negative stereotypes and urges mindfulness on the part of old people themselves as a way of combating negative stereotypes, and as a way for those relating to people in late life of avoiding use of such stereotypes. She cautions about “the traditional way we respond to medical information” and recommends having a mindset that questions and finds new ways when we are labeled “chronic” or “incurable” or “terminal.” She wants people to attend to variability. “When a medical person runs a study, it's conducted with certain people at a certain time, with certain amounts of whatever is being done or given. A slight change in anything could change the result” (*Kripalu*). The truth of this was brought home to me in 2005 when my son was diagnosed with “terminal” cancer of unknown origin. I was present when he, a non-smoker, was told by his Johns Hopkins oncologist that there was a promising study with a new drug, but he couldn't get into the study because he was not a smoker. My son's response was to ask how many cigarettes he had to smoke to be eligible – he was serious. The oncologist thought it funny!

It's very important that we recognize that most of the world is a social construction. . . . The results of the best studies only speak to some of us. Virtually all the things that seem impossible are based on somebody else's



understanding of us, and on data collected by people who are not omniscient. One of the things that has always struck me as bizarre, for example, is how willingly people go into a doctor's office and look at an eye chart, a series of random letters in black and white. You take the results of whatever you do that day and say, this is what my vision is. If you'd just been looking at something colorful before you came into the office, if you'd had too much to eat that day, if you were happy, if you were sad – all of these things affect your vision (*Kripalu*).

Langer cautions that not “being able to see past one's own level of development coupled with a tendency to understand behaviors in ways that are most relevant to the observer, can lead to a whole range of incorrect, but stereotypically coherent, attributions about the elderly's behavior” (160). The mindfulness Langer promotes led me to wonder a little if she herself completely saw past her own level of development thirty years ago with her own counterclockwise study. While I agree with Langer's ultimate conclusion, that mind can affect body in powerful ways, and the physical and mental improvements demonstrated by the men in her study are impressive, and I'm grateful for discovering her work because it helps me make sense of my powerful experience of the Sixties in two places on my field trips, I wonder about some of her interpretations of her data.

I have to confess that from my vantage point, as a woman, and from my perch at age 74, I found humor in the fact that these study subjects, all men by the way, stepped back into the Fifties, my worst decade! Langer calls that time, (I did a search and she would have been around 12 in 1959), the “nifty fifties” (9). She reveals in her book that most of the men in her study had been living with their adult children; not on their own. She further reveals one “memorable” intake interview where one elderly man talked in a disheartening way about his life: food doesn't taste good any more, if he goes outside he gets a cold, he has no oomph any more. The daughter, who brought the man in, then says

dismissively and with condescension that her father is “prone to exaggeration” (7) and Langer notes he doesn’t defend himself.

In the *Kripalu* interview Langer reveals that she was so stunned by the results of the counterclockwise study she hadn’t been willing to describe all the results at the time when she wrote it up [in 1981]. “One of the men who had a cane stopped using it. I was playing touch football with all of the men at the end. These were men who, just a few weeks before, were hobbling down to my office to interview for the study” (*Kripalu*). I don’t know the age or genders of Langer’s four graduate students who helped her with her experiment and with staffing the monastery, but I can’t help but think the elderly men might have been energized by eating meals and engaging in various activities and group discussions, and on the last day, playing touch football, with Langer who was then around 32, and, the grad students that I assume were younger than she was. So I wonder how much “living” in the Fifties, turning the clock back, was responsible for the changes in the men, or how much was due just to getting out of their children’s homes, and being around attractive young people who treated them with dignity and as equals. Langer says she encouraged the man with the condescending daughter to participate in the study because he “might have a good time” (7). In an interview Langer gave to a the *Examiner*, Nov. 18 2009, Langer says, “We took old people and put their minds back 20 years earlier. . .the results were close to amazing. Their vision improved, their hearing improved [and] their cognitive abilities improved” (Yannicos). Langer’s ultimate finding, however, that the experiment showed there is a link “from the nonmaterial mind to the material body” (4) that resulted in the men’s overall improved functioning, cannot be denied and for me that’s the take-a-way from Langer’s study. While it looks as though

Langer believes it was a result of the men living in a time when they were more “robust” and younger, “turning back the clock psychologically,” (5) I associate my experience with Sixties cultural artifacts and atmosphere in Montpelier and in mid-coast Maine that resulted in a powerful sense of well-being, with reminding me of what I most value, not as reminding me of a more youthful self.<sup>16</sup>

### Religious Shift

Attempting to keep all conversations with co-researchers unstructured and free-flowing, I made few exceptions; but wanting to think about my relationship to Catholicism, I brought it up with Bethune in one conversation. We talked about many things including how the intentional live-in lay communities that emerged from the Catholic charismatic renewal movement in the 1970s and 80s, part of the wave of NRMs or, New Religious Movements, that were encouraged by the Vatican, that I had thought held so much promise, were now running aground; the familiar top-down, authoritarian, paternalistic Catholic Church structure tending to intrude on more democratic decision-making and not lending itself to lay organizations (Tydings 1999). I asked Bethune what she thought of the Catholic ban on “artificial” contraception, it having been a change when the Church in the early 50s finally allowed periodic sexual abstinence in married life.<sup>17</sup> We also talked about clergy sexual abuse scandals just beginning to get wide press coverage. Bethune said emphatically, “The Catholic Church as an organization is corrupt; but as an organism, oh, that is another matter.” She got across that for her, Catholicism at its heart was something greatly to be valued, despite an exterior that was often unappealing.

When I shared with Bethune that three issues, the Church's ban on birth control, the second class status of women, and mandated clerical celibacy, troubled me greatly, Bethune grinned: "Go discuss birth control with my brother. He has ten children." After Bethune's death I did meet her brother, professor emeritus of chemistry at Boston College and former editor of *The Living Cycle, Newsletter of New England Natural Family Planning* and Andre J. de Bethune talked about Catholicism's position on contraception with me. I will not repeat here anything from our private conversation, but his views are apparent in letters published in *The New York Times* (10/14/93), and another in *National Catholic Reporter* (1/14/2000) in which de Bethune calls himself a "Catholic-in-exile." In those letters he details how on the one hand the Catholic Church calls for "responsible parenthood" but on the other hand, citing some French Catholic bishops from 1968, the Church admits "Natural Family Planning fails to give a sufficiently secure foundation for regulation of births" and this causes "sincere couples" anguish. De Bethune says he and others like him have not left the Church, the Church has left people like him. He, a father of ten, says he knows "families of 6 to 13 children driven to separation, divorce or mental illness by the stringency of church rules" (*National Catholic Reporter*).

What troubled me also, I told Adé Bethune, was my belief that Catholic Church teaching that prohibits "artificial" contraception, not only impacts the relationship between husband and wife, it contributes to over population, a world-wide concern like climate change. Paradoxically, it was while working on this project that I came to see that my works of mercy social justice conscience has made Church prohibition of birth control a social justice issue for me. In 1968 Sidney Cornelia Callahan was writing before

*Humanae Vitae*, (the July 1968 papal encyclical that continued a ban on “artificial” birth control) “those with emotional stability, economic resources, good health, and helpful friends and family,” can cope with more children, but those “poor in emotional resources, material goods or physical health” were less able to cope (191). Now a psychologist and retired theology professor, Callahan in 1995 was writing, “It is no secret that in the 1990s the majority of Catholics disagree and dissent in conscience with *Humanae Vitae*’s teaching on contraception” (McClory ix).

Educated Catholics can make birth control a matter of conscience and negotiate their relationship with Church teaching, but what about those Catholic women and men who are poorly educated, or those who cannot interpret Catholic theologians, many of whom reject *Humanae Vitae*? Mulling over my conversation with de Bethune, I realized I had come to a place where I could not simply act like the Church’s position on birth control doesn’t matter, even when I’m too old for it to be relevant to my life. As an old community activist I found I stood with Adé Bethune’s brother, but am unwilling to call myself a “Catholic-in-exile” as he does.

How I define my relationship to religion matters to me. I was always bothered by the nuns calling my father a “non-Catholic,” never a Protestant, or an agnostic, although I told them he had been baptized Congregational. And Catholics refer to those who leave the Church as “lapsed Catholics” or “fallen-away” Catholics. I am not falling nor am I lapsing. For a time I thought of identifying my relationship to religion the way William F. Buckley’s son Christopher does, as “post-Catholic” (Solomon 2008). In some ways that suits me, but on further reflection, like de Bethune’s designation for himself, as a “Catholic-in-exile,” the word “Catholic” has the importance of being the reference point.

Evelyn Waugh put it well when he wrote: “the Roman Catholic Church has the unique power of keeping remote control on human souls which have once been part of her” (Byrne 2010 119). How I describe my relationship to religious tradition is really still unsettled, but I know elements of Catholic tradition, the doctrine of the primacy of Christ, Christ seen as exemplar, “practicing the presence” stemming from the teaching of Brother Lawrence and de Caussade, and a social justice, works of mercy orientation, will remain with me.

### New Beginnings

As this study progressed, with one foot in old age, and the other now placed once more in the academy, I knew I was beginning to get in touch with the self that had settled for St. John’s University mailing my M.A. degree to my pregnant self at the end of the Fifties while women’s liberation sailed by in the next decades. I can see myself now as picking up the threads of a life left behind many years ago, and grasped in a new way. In her later years American therapist Eda LeShan, who was born in the twenties, commenting on lives of old women, said she found many late-life women were bitter and depressed due to lack of opportunities when they were young, and they lacked the courage to now take advantage of choices they could make to change their lives:

. . .there are a hell of a lot of older women . . . who have a deep sense of dissatisfaction . . . They didn’t do the kinds of things they wanted to do when they were younger . . . their brothers went to medical and law school and they were told to stay home until they got married. There is a lot of bitterness and I don’t think they’re going to overcome it. Some will, of course, and that’s the hope, but most will not. (153)

The significance of my aging in America and not elsewhere was brought home to me during a three-hour Susan Sontag interview on C-SPAN 2 on Book TV’s monthly program *In Depth* that I viewed in March 2003. Sontag, born in January 1933, almost

three years older than I am, was asked by the interviewer about her recent seventieth birthday. “It was a birthday I didn’t enjoy having. It’s scary.” Sontag said it sounded “awesome” but “you don’t feel your age. I feel as though I have a lot ahead . . . Despite two bouts of cancer, I feel fine. I’m physically very healthy.” But, “sooner or later a sack of bricks is going to fall on my head. I’m mortal.” The interviewer drew attention to the fact that Sontag had recently begun taking piano lessons.

Sontag told a story about America and aging. She said once, in Paris, she was waiting in an office for a film producer friend, and she overheard the receptionist talking on the phone about going to America for skiing lessons. Sontag asked why she wasn’t going to the Alps or the Pyrenees. The receptionist said that she was 37 and so was her boyfriend, and were they to take lessons on a European slope they would be laughed at by teens and others and thought weird for being beginners at their age; whereas, in Vermont, in America, no one would laugh at them being beginning skiers in middle age. Sontag checked this out with her French friend at lunch and was told this was true. In America, Sontag said, “great-grandma can learn to parachute” and people say “right-on Granny!”

Americans understand . . . that you don’t have to do things necessarily in order, in a given order. I think this is unique in American culture and its one of the things I like most about America, the idea of the second start, the third start, the new start, the remake your life . . . you can do things at any age and, if anything, you are applauded if you go back to school, take your Ph.D. at sixty-five . . . that is part of the American openness which helps me get older. (Boot TV) <sup>18</sup>

I am immensely grateful that I live in America and have been afforded the opportunity in American Studies at the University of Maryland to recommence my postgraduate education in late life. In *Negotiating Cultures and Identities* Caughey writes:

By increasing our awareness of the ways culture works on us, by acquainting us with alternative meanings, and by shedding new light on our customary ways of thinking, life history helps us obtain more freedom, agency, and choice in negotiating our cultural traditions. (92)

Working on this life history project has illuminated cultural orientations I had at the initiation of this study that were resulting in a kind of mindless “customary way of thinking” and acting. Shining a cultural light on the decade of Fifties, then the Sixties, released me from the “dissatisfaction” LeShan wrote about, and conversations with project partners about religion and the sense of place I think Yankees possess, observing study subjects’ spirit of service, have headed me towards more agency and choice that is already enhancing my life as I move deeper into old age. The family tradition I was enculturated with by my social worker Irish aunt, and my Yankee grandmother Church, that of seeking information, being prepared beforehand, has served me well, leading me first to memoir, then back to graduate school, then to this project.

#### Mirrors of Meaning Systems

Over time I came to see that the cultural traditions meaningful to each project partner were reflected in their home interiors. A striking example is captured in a video made for the Adé Bethune archives in 1984 of an interview with Bethune in her Newport house. As Bethune’s niece, Mia de Bethune, who directed the production, enters the house, the camera pans the vestibule. To the left of the front door is a tapestry woven in 1550 in Bethune’s birthplace, Brussels, depicting Christ at the last supper, the betrayal, and the agony in the garden. I saw this every time I stepped into Bethune’s home and it points to her overarching Roman Catholic religious tradition. The tapestry, Bethune notes in the video, was given to her father by an uncle who was a canon at the Cathedral in Bruges. The camera then pans to the right to reveal a wooden cabinet that Bethune says



was made by another of her father's uncles, the renowned architect Jean Baptiste Bethune, leader of the European neo-Gothic movement. The camera continues on the left to the wall that ascends the stairway to the second floor and we see two photographs; head shots of Bethune parents. The camera returns to the right wall and under the tapestry we see the coffin Bethune constructed and decorated when she was 28. In two minutes or so on entering Bethune's home we see evidence of her religious tradition, the importance of family, upper class taste represented in possessing a sixteenth century tapestry and an antique cabinet, and a commitment to a way of living out her religious tradition, the coffin symbolizing simplicity, belief in an afterlife, frugality, a work of mercy (burying the dead), and her life as an artist.

Mary Azarian's home interior, while it looks lived in and comfortable, could be featured in a book on interior design and it mirrors her main cultural tradition of gardening, as well as her life as an artist. Her house is filled with flowers in vases, plants, pictures on the walls, lots of light (the windows have no curtains), and everywhere you look your eyes feast on pleasing furniture arrangements, and baskets, groupings of fruit, piles of fat red tomatoes or pumpkins, each looking like a still life. The same is true of Azarian's exterior landscaping. Placement of bird houses, an Adirondack chair here, a bench there, Azarian's studio and gardens were also captured by a camera, in this case in 2000 by the Martha Stewart Living TV program.

My field notes and video footage of visits to Dawson's home reveal how the rooms in Dawson's house clearly reflect her identification with the state of Maine. Instead of using a bedspread, Dawson covers her bed with an official University of Maine blanket, given to her when she endowed a scholarship in the name of her twin brother

after his death. She has a print of a painting by Maine artist Andrew Wyeth on the wall of the parlor most frequently used, and another Wyeth print in an upstairs bedroom. On the wall of her computer room is a mural of the pink and blue lupines that grow wild along Maine roadways, painted by a family member. Usually on a downstairs rocker there hung a tote bag illustrated with a lighthouse, a sailing schooner, and the word “Maine” in large letters. A bookcase in a second parlor is filled to overflowing with guides for authors, reflecting Dawson’s identity as a writer.

My home also mirrors my cultural orientations. Walls in most rooms have prints, original art and photographs depicting Maine in some way. There is a photo of my mother’s 1970s Maine flower garden, the ocean in the background, hanging over my computer. On other walls in our home there are prints of Maine scenes by Barbara Ernst Prey and Connie Hayes. Shelves on one side of my workroom bulge with all Elisabeth Ogilvie’s novels, books on Maine poets and writers, New England cookbooks, and collections of Yankee humor. Memoirs mostly by women, books on Catholic and Protestant spirituality, biographies of Catholic saints, and American studies cultural literature, numbering more than a thousand volumes, line two other walls of my workroom.

Interest in family history is reflected on another wall where I have a photo of my great-grandfather Church; white mustache, straw skimmer in hand, standing with a small group of other men. In beautiful script underneath someone has written: “Boys of ‘68, Phillips Andover, June 18, 1908.” Also framed on the same wall are clippings from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* of “the Crowley girls,” my mother and her sisters. Joining these is Grama Church’s citation of appreciation from Rhode Island Hospital for her volunteer

service driving an ambulance during World War II, and a photo I found of the Connecticut Crowley farm where my first generation Irish American maternal grandfather grew up, and that he prohibited his four children from ever visiting. Lastly there are companion photos of my Grama Church, as a child of seven with her family, her maiden name was Mills, and another picture taken ten years later with her family members sitting or standing in the same position. On this workroom wall I have married the Mills, the Churches and the Crowley's. Truly a mixed marriage!

#### Life Review, Reminiscence, the Life Story and Senior Writing Groups

Watson and Watson-Franke in their discussion of life history research (1985) point to Myerhoff (1982) saying that "life histories enhance reflexive consciousness in the narrators as they tell their stories, which may be essential work for very old persons" (14) The women who participated in this project, including me, all felt it a rewarding experience. For me personally, the process of working on my self-ethnography bore a resemblance to the life review and reminiscence work I read about in gerontology, except that it was structured by looking at my multiple cultural traditions rather than looking at the life course. And certainly the elderly women as they told their stories in this study reminisced and reviewed their lives.

As I scan age studies and gerontology literature in 2009 and 2010 I see terms like life story, reminiscence, life review and autobiography, as in Senior autobiography groups, used sometimes interchangeably, sometimes with varied meanings. Gerontologist and English professor Ruth Ray has worked with Senior writing groups and has written about it in *Beyond Nostalgia, Aging and Life-Story Writing*. Gerontology pioneer James Birren has written and taught *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults* (1991).

The underlying notion is that this is a beneficial activity for Seniors. In 2001 Birren produced *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*. Two social workers, one an associate professor, another, a psychotherapist, have written the text *Transformational Reminiscence, Life Story Work* (Kunz and Soltys 2007). I'm not completely comfortable with the idea of life-storying as a therapeutic intervention, as it is used in some nursing homes, "a word that shifts its focus from a creative process to a managerial skill" writes Cruikshank who feels as I do. (2010 289).

I have not yet come across anyone using a cultural traditions model to structure such groups. The teacher and community activist in me is drawn to the idea that the self-ethnography, cultural life history approach, would be a useful framework for a Senior writing group. In future I plan to experiment with this method in structuring a creative memoir writing group for Seniors who want to write memoir for themselves, their children or grandchildren, or the local historical society, or for publication. The thrust of Kamler and Feldman's work with Senior writing groups for women, was to assist old women to combat ageist stereotypes. Ruth Ray says in Senior writing groups she observed all members learned and grew (237). I'm less motivated by wanting to help other Seniors grow and learn, as I am by the idea of facilitating elders like me to create memoir by examining the rich material that is their own cultural life history. If any have a rewarding experience as I did that is all to the good. I have already approached a local Senior center and found this idea welcome. I have before me the example of Dawson, at 91, as a student in a memoir writing class.

## Resilient Women

Like the six women Hurwich worked with, my study partners didn't often mention any physical complaints. Complaints were so infrequent I remember them: Bethune in her last phone call with me just months before she died, when we commiserated about the coughing we were doing precipitated by the road work in front of her house. And even then after some mutual moaning she brought us up short and said we should stop. When I inquired about age-related bodily changes, Azarian, before her knee-replacement surgery, mostly talked about her knees, trying various things like braces and magnetic therapy. Dawson was perfectly open and willing to list every complaint she could think of but only when I pressed for information. I observed, as did Hurwich, that "an older person's source of self-esteem is not solely dependent on present physical abilities" (128), in fact, I found that with our group, self-esteem had little to do with physical abilities.

"Being old" hasn't been central to the self-perception of my co-researchers or me in line with Petry's study that concluded, being old wasn't meaningful in itself for the women she studied and observed. (55). Sharon Kaufman found the same: "The old Americans I studied do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age" (6). Like the 17 women in Kinsel's study of resilience and its characteristics, I could see in the life histories of the four of us study subjects instances of childhood adversity that were overcome pointing to how we might meet the challenges of old age: Bethune, as a vulnerable teen, having to come to a strange country and learn a new language; moving from an upper class life, temporarily, to one close to working class. Azarian, realizing she had to make some money to support three

children and herself. Dawson, her list is almost too long, the death of her father, the loss of the saltwater farm, finding a job in the Depression, all the caretaking until she was 73! Some of my challenges were as a child adjusting to new schools and new neighborhoods almost every year, trying to get a college education, the congenital heart defect in one of our children. Looking at the characteristics of resilient people that Kinsel found, I see most of them in our sample. Certainly a spirit of service, and I think all four of us are unconventional, we have a head-on approach to challenge moving forward with life, we are curious about life and value education. I would probably score the highest in terms of “obtaining information about resources and seeking information to assist with problem-solving” (31). And Bethune would come out on top in “spiritual grounding,” (34).

#### The Long Goodbye<sup>19</sup>

Seven of the eight of us women who began this project together spontaneously brought up the subject of Alzheimer’s or dementia; something I hadn’t anticipated. Perhaps I should have as every 70 seconds a new case of Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) is diagnosed in the United States.<sup>20</sup> More women than men have AD and more women are caregivers of someone with AD. I was only in Bethune’s house a few minutes when she talked about her many “hats,” referring to future members of Harbor House saying, “Not all old people are Alzheimery.” She knew the illness intimately as she had helped to care for her father who had AD. Azarian’s father had AD. Dawson lived with and cared for her father’s cousin who had AD for many years and Dawson now lives in a care facility where she is the only one of twelve women residents who does not have AD.

Harriet Baldwin, born in 1923, 12 years older than I am, lives in Kendal in Hanover, New Hampshire, a continuing care retirement community, half the year, the

other half in her summer cabin in the White Mountains. I chose her because she was aging with a husband of over 50 years, as I am, and before she and her husband retired from the World Bank, she and I had done some volunteer work together. I visited Baldwin two times, once at Kendal, and once at her summer home. Unfortunately not long after those visits I found that Baldwin and her husband traveled extensively, often out of the country. Our schedules did not easily mesh so Baldwin's contribution to this project was limited. Until our first interview I didn't know that Baldwin's aunt had been a president of Wellesley and first head of the WAVES, Mildred McAfee Horton, or that her brother was the renowned Protestant theologian Robert McAfee Brown. In our first meeting for this project Baldwin told me her brother had passed away from Lewy Body dementia, and that she was now devoting her energies to educating residents in Kendal and local Hanover people about dementia, particularly Alzheimer's. She shared that she has had cognitive function testing done at nearby Dartmouth to provide a baseline to monitor her own mental abilities, and then she took me on a tour of the dementia unit at Kendal, pointing out up to date features. Once again AD had entered the picture.

I had forgotten that my Yankee grandmother had dementia in her late 80s. I was only reminded when visiting family and Bethune's archives in Minnesota and a Yankee cousin, a social worker and nurse, told me her aunt, my grandmother's niece, had just died of AD. This meant my Grama's dementia was most likely AD and my cousin and I concluded that one or both of us most likely carry some predisposing risk factor, the SORL 1 gene or some form of the APOE gene found on chromosome 19, that's related to late onset AD. One day during a visit to see Dawson I drove to see the house in Cushing on the St. George River where my late brother raised four children. The house is owned

now by a fiber sculpture artist Katharine Cobey. In her studio several of her art works were on display and I was drawn to a beautiful cream colored shawl hanging on a wooden hanger. The hand spun silk and wool shawl had frayed edges that draped on the floor. Cobey told me she calls it “Portrait of Alzheimer’s” in honor of her mother who died of AD. Shortly after I returned home to Maryland from that field trip, I went on an artisan’s tour near my house. I visited for the first time the studio of Susan Due Percy and saw some of a series of monoprints she had created in memory of her mother who died of AD. The series had themes of the loss of basic skills like: “Eat Desert First” and “Which Brush” and “Holding It Together.” NIH has hung the series in its corridors. In 2010, photographer Jeanette Montgomery Barron’s memorial to her mother’s struggle with AD appeared. Entitled *My Mother’s Clothes*, it celebrated her socialite mother’s cherished clothing and personal possessions with photographs of items like a bottle of her personal scent, a bathing cap, a favorite Bill Blass jacket. These three encounters with AD in art produced by women whose mothers died of A.D. underscored what I was discovering during this study, that AD and dementia shadow women in old age.

Short-term project partner, novelist Elisabeth Ogilvie, who lived in Cushing, Maine, was beginning to slip into multi-infarct dementia when I met her. Relating to her over several years until she passed away relieved me of much of the concern I felt when thinking about AD. There were moments when I saw flashes of Ogilvie the writer and saw that her identity as a writer remained intact as she would pat her fan mail, or tell me about the next chapter she was going to write.

Kate Barnes, poet laureate of Maine when she joined this project, withdrew after the first year due to leukemia. Born in 1932 in New England she is the daughter of two



writers, Henry Beston, author of *The Outermost House*, considered a second Thoreau, and Elizabeth Coatsworth (1893-1986), author of over 90 books, most but not all, for children. Barnes went to college in California, married a fellow poet and English professor, raised four children, was divorced, and returned to Maine in 1977 to care for her mother when Coatsworth developed dementia, and then passed away in 1986. No matter what I asked Barnes, she usually turned the conversation to her mother, describing how even when her mother's mind had slipped its moorings, "she was so much herself." Barnes exhorted me to read her mother's memoir *Personal Geography, Almost an Autobiography*, that contains journal jottings, poetry and rich reflections on old age, the book published when Coatsworth was 83.<sup>21</sup>

#### Aging Without Fear

When I began this project I mentioned I was looking for some sort of manual that would tell me what to expect about growing old, much like the book *Childbirth Without Fear* helped to prepare many mothers-to-be for pregnancy in my day, and *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Murkoff) does now. I never did find that book but as I consciously watched myself age, with regard to bodily and emotional changes over the duration of this study, I came up with an insight or analogy that works for me, and that I have not come across elsewhere in age studies. Were I to be asked, "What is it like to grow old?" I'd respond that from a bodily point of view, any woman who has ever been pregnant, especially during the first pregnancy, will remember the day she looked down and could no longer see her feet! That is like the day you look in the mirror and see your mother, or a stranger looking back at you, or you just think you must be getting old. Then there is the day when your pregnant self, maybe eight months along, has difficulty rising

from a chair. In old age that came for Bethune in her late eighties, when she showed me how she needed a chair with arms to help her rise to a standing position. It came for Dawson in her nineties. That is variable as we age individually. When expecting, there was the day you found yourself rushing to the bathroom frequently, the day your ankles began to swell, the early days when you were so sleepy. There are bodily and emotional changes that accompany pregnancy, same for the aging body. The bodily and emotional changes of pregnancy just happen month after month until delivery. The pregnant body just does its thing and sometimes you wonder what's going to happen next but there isn't anything you can do about it. Petry, after Kaufman, titled an article about her study, "Aging Happens." From my perspective as one experiencing old age myself, and also as a researcher observing closely three women from different generations moving into old age, bodily old age just happens along a continuum. The changes seem imperceptible. You are just surprised occasionally at having a little less energy, at seeing some sagging, crepey skin here and there, as with pregnancy finding you can't digest raw onions as you used to, at feeling the texture of your hair change, at finding tributaries wandering down your face that get a little deeper as they become more familiar, akin to the stretch marks on your pregnant abdomen. When pregnant, most women see their doctor more frequently; usually the same with aging. At some point you begin seeing your physician a little more as eyes get monitored for cataracts; both Bethune and Dawson had cataract surgery in their eighties, and blood pressure and heart rate get monitored also. Dawson had a pacemaker implanted in her early nineties. Azarian had both knees replaced in her sixties, necessitated by ten years of Morris dancing with "much leaping and crashing," and a skiing accident. Bethune had a hip replaced in her seventies. I feel confirmed in

using a model or an analogy that is specific to women, and not all women at that, because I remember how Myerhoff concluded *Number Our Days*. The book ends with Myerhoff's visionary reflections on the senior center women. "Perhaps women in general are more prepared for the inevitable infirmities of old age by a lifetime of acceptance of their bodily limits and changes" (1980 264). And in "Rites and Signs of Ripening: the Intertwining of Ritual, Time, and Growing Older," Myerhoff notes how people put their house in order and clear things out as they get closer to death, likening this to "the nesting that mothers-to-be engage in late in pregnancy, a nesting that is also a cleaning, sorting, classifying preparation for a drastic change" (312).

#### Afterword

In December 2005, three and a half years after Adé Bethune's death, the *Newport Daily News* reported that "a vacant \$2million waterfront home" on Washington Street had been destroyed by fire "leaving just the chimney standing. . . .Ocean winds pushed embers toward the nearby Harbor House. . ." (Gillis). I called the paper and the local library for news and was told the then owner was a Massachusetts man who had been extensively renovating Bethune's house. Although sadly that wonderful quirky wooden house with the million dollar view was gone, Harbor House was spared. Eleven months later *The New York Times* highlighted Bethune's Harbor House as a successful example of creative housing for the elderly (Abbott).

Azarian and Dawson each read the chapters devoted to them. Dawson's chief critique was that I got the color of the shutters on her house wrong. I had written that they were black, she corrected that they are dark green. With her keen editorial eye, after all those years teaching writing to IRS employees, Dawson pointed to one sentence that was

too long. Otherwise, she was pleased at how I had portrayed her. She had managed to read the chapter with her one good eye that is compromised by glaucoma, while complaining that the print for the endnotes is too small for her to see and she was going to have a good friend read them to her. Unfortunately Azarian was in the midst of moving when she received her chapter. She said there were a few minor inaccuracies but nothing worth changing and she thought the writing really good. In June 2010 Dawson celebrated her 99th birthday. By then Azarian had moved in to her new small house but her studio was still unfinished.

I concluded this journey by mailing to my second youngest grandchild a biography of Charles Darwin published last year and aimed at 3rd to 5th graders, illustrated by Azarian; and to the youngest grandchild a copy of the picture book *My Hippy Grandmother* by Vermont writer Reeve Lindbergh. Then I whipped up a tasty kale recipe from *The Hippy Gourmet's Quick and Simple Cookbook for Healthy Eating*. I called Dawson to say I'd be there in Maine with her the second week in July to celebrate the completion of our collaboration on this project with ginger ice cream and Indian Pudding.

#### Last Vignette

On a lovely spring day, with the air sparkling like Perrier, following the harrowing drive Azarian and I made to Thomaston to see Dawson the night before, the three of us pile in my car and drive to pick up Vivian York<sup>22</sup> who lives in Sprucehead, on a tiny spit of land right on the water, and then we go back to Dawson's to have a get together and, at my request, talk about growing old. I look around the dining room table where we were sitting. Dawson looks spiffy, her great-grandmother's huge spinning

wheel right behind her; York has on a tan blouse with maroon flowers over slacks, with reading glasses on a black cord around her neck, her round ruddy always smiling face framed in stunning gray short hair. I'm sure no one else at the table knows that York is wearing a wig. She revealed this to me once when we were discussing physical changes that came with aging. She was in a bad car accident some years before, an oil truck stalled across a winding Maine road at dusk, and she isn't sure if the medications given her then, when in the hospital for eight months, or old age, caused her hair to thin. She took her wig off when she told me that, to show what her real hair looks like. It's thin and although I have seen many women with thinning hair, and thought York looked attractive with her own hair, I could see the wig was very becoming. Dawson has on a blue turtleneck, Azarian a black one, as do I.

"I don't feel like I have any choice in the matter. You start aging from the day you're born. You just go along with it." says York who has just turned eighty, five days ago, and whose Yankee accent is even thicker than Dawson's. "But not everybody does that. Lots of people fight it these days," Azarian responds. Almost immediately we get into the topic of body image. York calls herself "good size" and "plump," and says she wishes she'd been born in an age when Rubens was painting. Azarian, who considers she could stand to lose a few pounds, agrees, although with her tall frame and loose-fitting comfortable but stylish clothes it's hard to tell. Dawson shares about the time she lost the hundred pounds in Ohio, offering the information that part of the weight loss was due to homesickness, but part, this was news to me, was living on sixty dollars a month! Azarian, who is sixty-four, says she feels one should be whatever weight the body wants

to be but if it makes you feel unwell, then maybe one would have to look at losing weight.

VY: As I get older I care less about what people think. When I was nineteen it was important how you looked. [But York does care what her hair looks like because she wears a wig.]

LD: That's one of the benefits of getting older. You have a different perspective.

VY: When I was a kid and my mother was in her thirties, I thought she was one foot in the grave and the other one all ready to slip! [This is a good example of Yankee humor evident also in Dawson's conversations.]

JT: How do you feel about the fact that many American women say they think old women are invisible in our society?

VY: The Orientals have a great respect for their ancestors and older people. They feel they've lived longer. They have more wisdom.

LD: I've heard it said that people should live in America when they're young where everything caters to youth and youth is worshipped; and on the continent in their middle age, where that is respected; and your old age in the orient where it is worshiped.

MA: But I can remember my mother and father, and their mothers and fathers definitely deferred to the grandparents. They had the final say. There was automatic respect. My mother when she was in her twenties kept house for her grandmother when she was nearing ninety. My mother said 'Supper was on the table at five o'clock. Not one minute before five, not one minute after five'. Anything Grandma Hatch said was the way it went. [York and Dawson murmur agreement.] They respected her accumulation of years and her wisdom and the authority she had. I had that feeling about my grandparents, but now what Judith was saying about getting old and being invisible and being not respected and not valued is absolutely true and the era has passed where families take care of their older members. You get pushed into whatever facility you don't want to be in for the rest of your life.

Furman wonders what contemporary aging woman can do to resist dominant cultural expectations and suggests as an answer a group of late-life San Francisco women featured in a video, *West Coast Crones* (175). The women meet regularly to share experiences and claim to be inventing their own aging. Furman calls them "an intentional

community of resistance” (175). Kinsel at the conclusion of her study recommends finding ways to bring “older” women “together to focus on relatedness and interdependence” as a way to build women’s strengths (2005 37). With this in mind I pass around copies of Bethune’s version of Maslow’s pyramid, representing Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Dawson and Azarian immediately engage in animated discussion and are loudly critical of the pyramid. Both Azarian and Dawson feel level one (health, wellness, bodily comfort) should be combined with level two (security, out of danger, 911). Then, interestingly, Azarian says level six (aesthetic, order, beauty and symmetry) should be put before Maslow’s level three (belongingness and love). Dawson disagreed. She believes level three, belongingness, should come right after levels one and two combined. As she’s gotten older, she says, family is more important to her. Then after consuming much tea and Dawson’s pie I close with sharing how I was too old to participate in any consciousness raising groups as the second wave of feminism rolled through, and I wonder if they and/or other women in late life might want to belong to a group that met occasionally to talk about growing old in America, and ageism, and share what they were learning and their own experiences. Another project surprise, all three women looked at me like I was crazy and uttered a loud “No!”

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<sup>1</sup> Line from the song “We live a long time to be old” by country and rockabilly musician Jimmy Murphy.

<sup>2</sup> *Learning to Be Old* 2003, 195.

<sup>3</sup> “The Robin’s My Criterion for Tune”

<sup>4</sup> *AARP Bulletin* March 2010.

<sup>5</sup> This is how Dawson describes the Homestead residents although I assume they may have other forms of dementia.

<sup>6</sup> Although I promised project colleagues I would not write about their children, it needs to be said here, that I am aware one of Dawson’s sons from Massachusetts appeared at critical moments to help Dawson move from one facility to another, and appeared when she was hospitalized once or twice, as when her pacemaker was installed. Dawson was fiercely independent, and this family member gave her space to run her own life. A balance to be admired.

<sup>7</sup> April 19, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Like Alix Kates Shulman I play the “number game” (1995/1996 6). Three years older than I am, a product of the Fifties, Shulman admits that after she turned 50 she began noticing peoples’ ages, comparing theirs with hers, hers with theirs.

<sup>9</sup> This knitter advertises socks in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere and I notice later Azarian sometimes wears them, as does a retired professor friend.

<sup>10</sup> Patchouli in Eastern cultures is considered a general tonic that soothes occasional irritations. (Total Health Network Farmingdale, N.Y. [www.totalhealthvitamins.net](http://www.totalhealthvitamins.net) accessed 7/3/09).

<sup>11</sup> Second Read is still the same but was recently renamed Rock City Books and Coffee.

<sup>12</sup> Maine is listed first at the top of the ten safest states – for murder (state per 100,000), 1.2. (FBI Uniform Crime Reports – Griffin 225).

<sup>13</sup> Of course the flip side of that is that children should take into account the availability and importance of peer relationships for aging parents when pressuring them to move near to them to make it easier for them to be cared for.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Lickteig Makofski, “Modern Love; His Art is His Joy. It Just Didn’t Fit My Plan.” 2/20/05.

<sup>15</sup> This could be a result of Maine’s high poverty rate and residents not being able to afford a nursing home.

<sup>16</sup> I recently learned that Langer is being played by Jennifer Aniston in a movie based on the counterclockwise study to be released this year, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> In 1951 Pope Pius XII allowed use of the rhythm method, now called natural family planning.

<sup>18</sup> During this interview Sontag spoke about her famous 1977 work *On Photography*. She said she never takes pictures but thinks about them all the time and remarked that the interview she was now doing with C-SPAN would be rebroadcast. “We can look back again and again at the same show.” The interviewer remarked the interview would be archived. I taped it and view it about once a year because it is rich with ideas. It is a poignant experience because although Sontag said “I am physically in very good health” she didn’t know that she was not, and that she was harboring her third cancer, MDS, myelodysplastic



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syndrome, a lethal form of blood cancer, and that she would be dead the following year. I am now older than Sontag was when she died.

<sup>19</sup> *Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Newsletter* 5,4 (1985); Ballenger, 137.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.alz.org/national/documents/report\\_alzfactsfigures2009.pdf](http://www.alz.org/national/documents/report_alzfactsfigures2009.pdf) Accessed 2/25/2010.

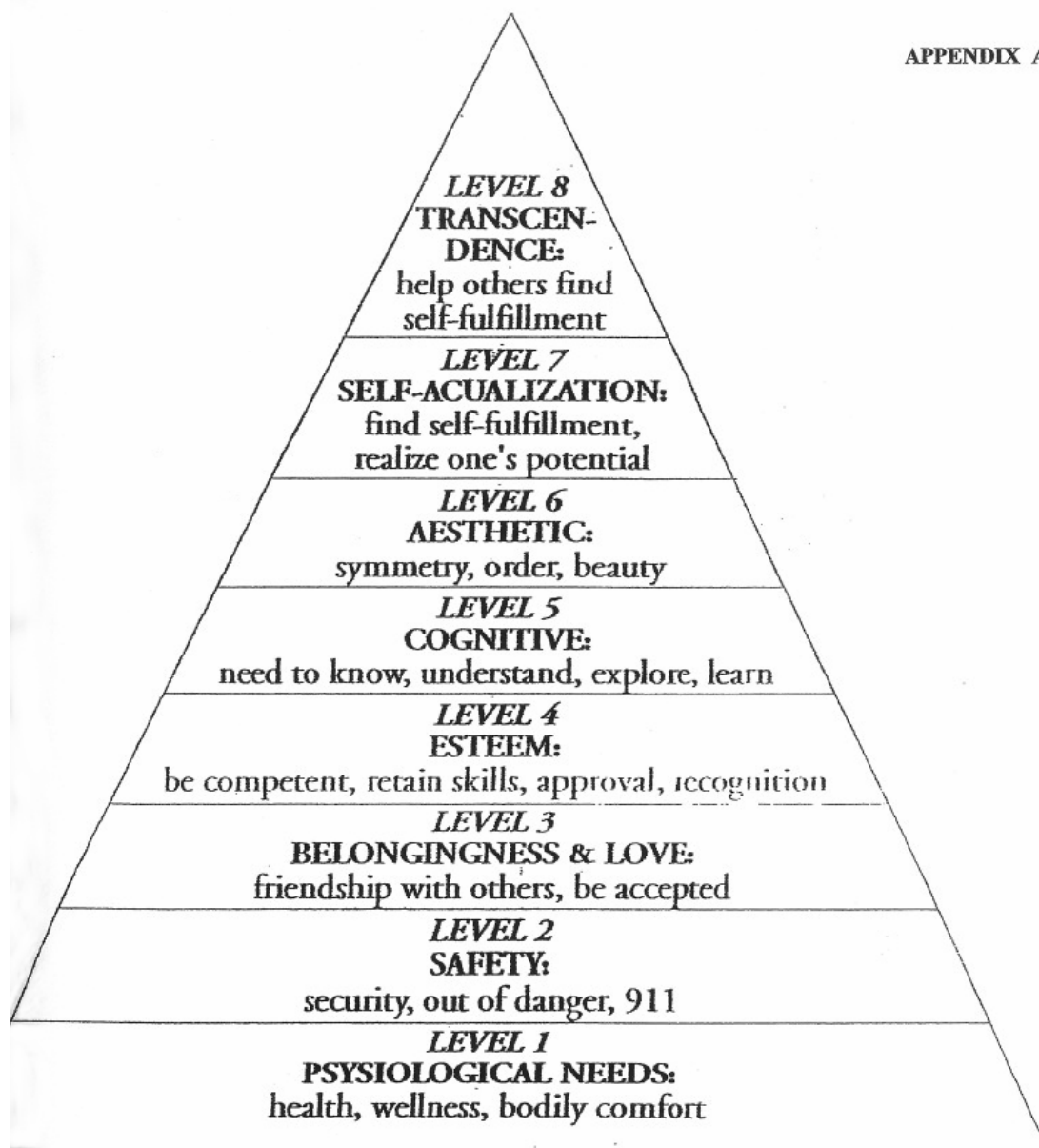
<sup>21</sup> See Appendix D.

<sup>22</sup> Vivian York, one-time lobsterwoman, popular bookseller, was born in Milford, New Hampshire April 19, 1924. A Mainer from age four, she lived as a child across from the Rockland Public Library where she acquired a lifelong passion for reading and books. Graduating from Rockland High in 1942 she married Coastguardsman Donald York a year later and they moved to Spruce Head where her husband worked as a lobsterman and they raised four children. In 1963 they opened Lobster Lane Book Shop in their garage. Vivian was widowed in 1974, two years prior having lost a son in an auto accident. For forty-two years every summer, generations of booklovers would make a pilgrimage to Lobster Lane. It was so famous and unique that it was featured in Boston on WCVB-TV's "Chronicle" in the segment "Main Streets and Back Roads of New England." Not long before this project began York was in a serious car accident caused by an oil truck. Over the early years of this study I interviewed her several times. She eventually lost a leg and illness finally caused her death, April 29, 2006.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A



**MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS (significant even in age)**

Adapted by Adé Bethune (undated, approximately 1995-1999)

Bethune's Adaptation of Maslow

## STAR OF THE SEA INFORMAL SURVEYS

## APPENDIX B.

Survey No.2 May 31 - July 17 1992: **Interests and Abilities**

NOTE: We can make the Senior Center more interesting for you and for all other members if you will kindly list below some of your own personal interests, experience, tastes and or talents. Thank you.

**Response from 57 persons:**

32%	afternoon tea	53%	discussion groups	23%	languages	33%	self-improvement
21%	animals	18%	desk work	40%	lectures	28%	sewing
5%	baby sitting	25%	dogs	14%	lettering	25%	shopping
33%	baking	23%	dressmaking	49%	library	28%	singing
4%	baseball	19%	drama	21%	literacy	5%	stamp collecting
19%	bazaars	32%	driving	23%	liturgy of the hours	11%	story telling
47%	Bible study	21%	embroidery	33%	meditation	42%	swimming
7%	billiard/pool	28%	environment	9%	needlepoint	18%	tai chi
23%	birds	40%	field trips	4%	nursing	44%	theater
11%	bookkeeping	5%	fishing	19%	painting	26%	teaching
12%	bowling	33%	flowers	35%	peace	9%	tennis
14%	carpentry	35%	gardening	16%	photography	14%	trees
18%	cats	32%	geography	9%	piano	18%	typing
12%	ceramics	40%	gift & book shop	30%	plants	21%	vegetable garden
19%	children	26%	glee club	11%	poetry	33%	visiting shut-ins
33%	choir	21%	gourmet cook	9%	pottery	23%	voting
58%	church services	2%	hair styling	28%	potluck parties	66%	walking
33%	coffee house	61%	helping others	30%	prayer group	40%	writing
16%	composting	37%	helping children with homework	16%	quilting	12%	woodwork
18%	computer	37%	history	23%	radio	11%	word processing
56%	concerts	14%	hospital volunteer	35%	reading to little children	16%	yard sales
44%	cooking	18%	knitting	28%	recycling	12%	youth
9%	crocheting			37%	retreats		
32%	dancing			18%	sailing		

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF AGING BY AMERICAN WOMEN OVER 65  
(1968-2009)

- 1968\* – Florida Scott-Maxwell (1883-1979), *The Measure of My Days*.
- 1976 – Elizabeth Coatsworth (1893-1986), *Personal Geography, Almost an Autobiography*.
- 1978\* – Elizabeth Gray Vining (1902-1999), *Being Seventy, The Measure of a Year*.
- 1978 – “Basha” (1889? - deceased), in *Number Our Days* (Barbara Myerhoff).
- 1979 - Carobeth Laird (1895-1983), *Limbo, A memoir about life in a nursing home by a survivor*.
- 1982 – Joyce Horner (1903-1980), *That Time of Year, A Chronicle of Life in a Nursing Home*. (Published posthumously.)
- 1983\* – Barbara Macdonald MSW (1913-2000), *Look Me in the Eye, Old Women, Aging and Ageism* (with Cynthia Rich); “Both Feet in Life, Interviews with Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich by Jean Swallow” in *Women and Aging, an Anthology by Women* (Alexander et al).
- 1983 – M.F.K. Fisher (1908-1992), *Sister Age*.
- 1984\* – May Sarton (1912-1995), *At Seventy; After the Stroke: A Journal* (1988); *Endgame, A Journal of the Seventy Ninth Year* (1992); *Encore, A Journal of the Eightieth Year* (1993); *At Eighty-Two* (1995).
- 1986\* – Shevy Healey Ph.D. (1922-2001), “Growing to be an Old Woman: Aging and Ageism”, edited 1985 presentation to NWSA Conference in *Women and Aging, An Anthology by Women*; “Confronting Ageism, A MUST for Mental Health” in *Faces of Women and Aging* (1993); “Old Lesbians Speak Out: A Perspective on Wisdom and Wellness” in *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association* (1999).
- 1986\* – Baba Copper (1920- deceased), “Voices: On Becoming Old Women” in *Women and Aging, An Anthology by Women; Over the Hill* (1988).
- 1986 – Helen Nearing (1904-1995), “The Irrepressible Helen Nearing, An East West Interview” by Costas Christ.
- 1989 – Elizabeth Yates (1905-2001), “Always Ahead” in *The Courage to Grow Old*.

- 1990 – Alice S. Rossi Ph.D. (1922- ), “Seasons of a Woman’s Life,” in Bennett M. Berger, *Authors of Their Own Lives* (1992, 301-322)
- 1990 - Helen Green Ansley (1900 – deceased), *Life’s Finishing School, What Now, What Next*.
- 1990 – Rachel Josefowitz Siegel MSW (1924- ), “Love and Work After 60: An Integration of Personal and Professional Growth Within a Long-Term Marriage” in *Women, Aging and Ageism*; “A Late Awakening” in *Women and Therapy* (1995).
- 1990 – Katharine M. Butterworth (1899-deceased), “The Story of a Nursing Home Refugee” in *Annual Editions, Aging*, 10th Edition from *Whole Earth Review*.
- 1991\* – Doris Grumbach M.A. (1918- ), *Coming Into the End Zone; Extra Innings, A Memoir* (1993).
- 1992 – Eve Merriam (1916-1992), “Eve Merriman” in *The Ageless Spirit*, 1st Edition, Philip L. Berman Editor; 2nd Edition Connie Goldman Editor (2004).
- 1993 – Sarah “Sadie” Delany M.A. (1889-1999) and A. Elizabeth “Bessie” Delany DDS (1891- 1995), *Having Our Say, The Delany Sisters First 100 Years* (with Amy Hill Hearth); *On My Own at 107, Reflections on Life Without Bessie* (with Amy Hill Hearth) 1997.
- 1993 – Betty Friedan (1921-2006), *The Fountain of Age*.
- 1993 – Cecelia Hurwich Ph.D. (1920- ), in Betty Friedan’s *The Fountain of Age*; in *The New Older Woman* (Downes, Tuttle, Faul, Mudd 1996); *Profiles in Wellness*, White House Conference on Aging 2005; in *Legacy, Portraits of 50 Bay Area Environmental Elders*, Text by John Hart, Photographs by Nancy Kittle, Sierra Club 2006, 111-113.
- 1995 – Alix Kates Shulman B.A., Hon. D. (1932- ), *Drinking the Rain, A Memoir; To Love What Is, A Marriage Transformed* (2008).
- 1996 – Gloria Wade-Gayles Ph.D. (1938- ), “Who Says an Older Woman Can’t/Shouldn’t Dance?” in *Rooted Against the Wind*.
- 1996 – Ruth Harriet Jacobs Ph.D. (1924 - ), *Women Who Touched My Life; Be an Outrageous Older Woman*, Revised Edition (1993).
- 1997\* – Carolyn Heilbrun Ph.D. (1926-2003), *The Last Gift of Time, Life Beyond Sixty*.
- 1997 – Rebecca Latimer (1905-2000), *You’re Not Old Until You’re Ninety, Best To Be Prepared However*.

- 1998 – A. Carman Clark (1917-2005), “A Woman’s Seasons” in SELF.
- 1999 – Lillian E. Troll Ph.D. (1916 - ), “My Coming of Age in Gerontology” in *Generations*.
- 1999 – Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez ( 1925 - ), “Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez” in Cathleen Rountree, *On Women Turning 70, Honoring the Voices of Wisdom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 44-51.
- 1999 – Anna Halprin (1920- ), “Anna Halprin” in Cathleen Rountree, *On Women Turning 70, Honoring the Voices of Wisdom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 64-82.
- 2000 – Emiliana Moreno (1901-1995), in *Growing Old in El Barrio* (Judith Noemí Freidenberg).
- 2002 – Marge Piercy M.A. (1936 - ), *Sleeping with Cats, A Memoir*.
- 2002 – Nancy K. Miller Ph.D. (1941- ), *But Enough About Me, Why We Read Other People’s Lives*.
- 2003 - Susan Sontag (1933-2004), 3-hour interview Book TV *In Depth* C-SPAN 2 March 2, 2003.
- 2004 – Beatrice Wood – (1893-1998), “Beatrice Wood” in *The Ageless Spirit, Reflections on living life to the fullest in midlife and the years beyond*. 2nd Edition. (Connie Goldman, Editor).
- 2004 – Eda LeShan M.A. – (1922-2002), “Eda LeShan” in *The Ageless Spirit* 2nd Edition. (Connie Goldman Editor).
- 2004 – Maggie Kuhn - (1905-1995), “Maggie Kuhn” in *The Ageless Spirit*. 2nd Edition. (Connie Goldman Editor). *No Stone Unturned, The Life and Times of Maggie Kuhn* 1991.
- 2006\* – Martha B. Holstein Ph.D. (1941- ), “On Being an Aging Woman” in *Age Matters, Realigning Feminist Thinking*.
- 2009 – Mary Catherine Bateson (1939 - ), *Across the Generations: Legacies of Hope and Meaning*, Institute of General Semantics, Fordham; “Mary Catherine Bateson” in *The Ageless Spirit* (Connie Goldman).
- 2010 – Adé Bethune (1914-2002), *Yankee Women Coming of Age: Life Histories and Cultural Significance*.

2010 – Mary Azarian (1940 - ), *Yankee Women Coming of Age: Life Histories and Cultural Significance*.

2010 – Luthera Dawson (1911 - ) *Yankee Women Coming of Age, Life Histories and Cultural Significance*.

Date on the left is date of publication. Some personal accounts were published posthumously. Five of the above women were informants in ethnographic studies by anthropologists. The above narratives appeared in many fora: book-length memoirs, contributions to anthologies or journals, as interviews in popular magazines and on C-Span Book TV.

\* Names without an asterisk indicate personal accounts of aging by late-life women that are mentioned seldom or not at all in literary gerontology and age studies.

## POETRY OF AGING

To feel the old body dragging  
 on the spirit's arm –  
 “Not so fast, not so fast, I am tired.”  
 To see the old body stumbling,  
 as it walks,  
 breathing heavily, peering  
 uncertainly,  
 asking for a comfortable seat –  
 what a humiliation!  
 Soon enough the spirit will  
 leave the old body at home-  
 “You want to stay put! Stay put  
 then! I'm off!”  
 “Possibly,” mumbles the old body,  
 “And possibly not.” (172)

Anyone can see at a glance  
 that I am old.  
 I, I, alone do not see it.  
 When I look at myself in  
 the mirror  
 I see a hundred selves,  
 even the child.  
 When I speak or act, anyone  
 of them at all  
 may speak or act for me,  
 even the child.  
 Only of one thing I am sure:  
 when I dream  
 I am ageless. (178)

Elizabeth Coatsworth, *Personal Geography*

When I am an old, old woman I may very well be  
 living all alone like many another before me  
 and I rather look forward to the day when I shall have  
 a tumbledown house on a hill top and behave  
 just as I wish to. No more need to be proud –  
 at the tag end of life one is at last allowed  
 to be answerable to no one. Then I shall wear  
 a shapeless felt hat clapped on over my white hair,



sneakers with holes for the toes, and a ragged dress.  
My house shall be always in a deep-drifted mess,  
my overgrown garden a jungle. I shall keep a crew  
of cats and dogs, with perhaps a goat or two.

Kate Barnes, *Where the Deer Were*

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- Zola, Irving Kenneth. "When Getting into the Field Means Getting into Oneself." *The New England Sociologist* 1.2 (Spring/Summer 1979): 21-30.





## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### EDUCATION

Ph.D., American Studies, University of Maryland, 2010. Dissertation Topic: Old Yankee Women: Life Histories and Cultural Significance.

MA, History, St. John's University, New York, 1959; Teaching Assistantship 1957-1959.

BA, History, Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, 1957. Full Academic Scholarship.

### EMPLOYMENT

Contributing writer for Word Among Us Catholic magazine, articles on Saints unsigned, 1981-1995.

Campus Ministry, Marymount University, Arlington, Virginia, 1987-1988.

Religious Studies Teacher, Immaculata College High School, Rockville, MD. 1986-1987.

Religious Studies Teacher, Georgetown Preparatory School for Boys, Rockville, MD. 1976-1980.

Religious Studies Chair, Ursuline Academy High School for Girls, Bethesda, MD. 1974-1976.

Religious Studies Teacher, Ursuline Academy High School for Girls, Bethesda, MD. 1969-1974.

Taught classes on Catholic spirituality to novices of Sisters of Mercy of The Union, Providence, Rhode Island, Summer 1969 and 1970.

Secretary for Sister Formation Conference, Washington, D.C. (later the Leadership Conference for Religious Sisters), 1967-1968.

### SELECTED HONORS

Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, Burgess, Stanley and McGee, Gary, editors, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1988, ninth printing 1996, bio.

Who's Who American Catholics Vol. 22 1978-79.

Outstanding Young Women of America, nominated by Chestnut Hill College  
1968.

Montgomery County MD Certificate of Appreciation for public service for  
membership, Transportation Advisory Board, providing transportation for  
low-income groups, 1968.

## PUBLICATIONS

### Books (authored)

*Gathering A People: Catholic Saints in Charismatic Perspective.*  
Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos, 1977. (Abridged in Catholic Digest,  
Vol. 42, No. 1, Nov. 1977.)

### Selected Essays and Articles

“Shipwrecked in the Spirit: Implications of Some Controversial Catholic  
Movements” in *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1999, pp.  
83-179.

“God Talks Our Language: The Work of Cameron Townsend” in *The  
Word Among Us*, January 1990, 48-56, (unsigned).

“Blessed Roque Gonzalez and the Paraguay Reductions” in *The Word  
Among Us*, Feb. 1988, 47-53, (unsigned).

“Susanna Wesley, Mother of Methodism” in *The Word Among Us*, June  
1987, 48-51, (unsigned).

“St. Symeon The New Theologian” in *The Word Among Us*, May 1986,  
59-63, (unsigned).

“Catherine of Genoa: God Gives All We Need” in *The Word Among Us*,  
Sept. 1983, 44-49, (unsigned).

“St. Vincent Ferrer: The King is Near His People” in *The Word Among  
Us*, Nov, 1982, 50-59, (unsigned).

“Response to Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm. ‘New Aspects of Spiritual  
Direction’ in *Theological Reflections on the Charismatic Renewal.*  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 1978, 73-78.

“Le renouveau charismatique: une surprise de l’Esprit Saint” in *Paroisse  
et liturgie*, Jan. 1974, 38-46.

“Sancity and the Sanctifier” in *Franciscan Herald* magazine, May 1969, 152-153.

“Dial 656-3424” in *Franciscan Herald* magazine, September 1968, 276-278.

“Poverty and Celibacy” in *Franciscan Herald* magazine, April 1968, 104-105.

“Contemplative Prayer and the Den Mother” in *Franciscan Herald*, July 1968, 212-215.

#### Selected Book Reviews and Op-Ed

“Words That Matter, Or Not” in *Washington Post*, Free For All, April 11, 2009, A11.

Review of “Exuberance: The Passion for Life” by Kay Redfield Jamison, *Advocate, The Journal of The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill*, Spring 2005, 32.

Review of “The Bipolar Child,” Second Edition, with James Mannarino and Brenda Bickel, *Advocate, The Journal of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill*, Spring 2003: 59.

Review of “Surviving Manic-Depression: A Manual on Bipolar Disorder for Patients, Families and Providers” by E. Fuller Torrey and Michael B. Knable, *Advocate, The Journal of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill*, with Elizabeth Farrell and David Seaman, Spring 2002: 49.

Review of “Surviving Schizophrenia: A Manual for Families, Consumers and Providers” (Fourth Edition) by E. Fuller Torrey, *Advocate, The Journal of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill*, Fall 2001: 49.

Review of “Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman’s Journey through Depression,” *Advocate, The Journal of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill*, Dec/Jan 1998-1999: 29.

“Education important in dealing with illness” Op-Ed, *Frederick News Post*, April 16, 1998.

Review of “The Pope’s Armada” by Gordon Urquart, *National Catholic Reporter*, Nov. 8, 1996: 30.

#### Selected Letters to the Editor

“A woman’s pain, misdiagnosed” in *Washington Post*, May 30, 2010: A16.

“A joke past its prime” in *Washington Post*, Dec. 26, 2009: A21.

“The Missing Chapters” in *Women’s Review of Books*, Vol. 24, no. 6, Nov./Dec. 2007: 2.

“Myth and the Mayflower” in *Washington Post*, July 12, 2006.

“The use of the word ‘terminal’...” in *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 2005.

“Skip the Compliment” in *Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 2005: F2.

“Offended by ‘little old lady’ phrase in article” in *Frederick News Post*, July 27, 2003.

“Pondering Past and Future of Whiteness” in *Washington Post*, June 30, 2003.

“Mental Health and Illness” in *Washington Post*, Jan. 1, 2002.

“Attribution missing from ‘yes, Virginia’ “ in *The Frederick Post*, Dec. 29, 1997: A-6.

#### SELECTED INVITED PRESENTATIONS

“Memoir: Reading and Writing,” Salem College, Continuing Education, Winston Salem, NC, March 2007.

“Ade Bethune, Life and Work,” Art Gallery, The Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis, Minn. May, 2004.

“History of Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement.” Wisdom 2001, Minneapolis Convention Center, April 26-29, 2001.

“Disenchantment in Charismatic Covenant Communities.” Communal Studies Association, St. George, Utah, September 25, 1999.

“Catholic Covenant Communities.” St. Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, graduate Sociology class, October 1998.

World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, Bossey Consultation on Worldwide Charismatic Renewal – Invited Visitor/Observer. 1980. Leader roundtable discussion.

“Gathering A People: Reflections on 1 Peter 4” Spiritual Life for Lent and Easter.  
IV Conference for the Institute for Spirituality, St. John’s University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota 1979.

“Pastoral Care and Counseling in a Charismatic Covenant Community.” Society  
for Pentecostal Studies Annual Meeting, Springfield, Missouri, Dec.2,  
1977.

“Mary and the Charismatic Renewal.” XIV International Marian Congress, Rome,  
Italy 17-21 May, 1975.

#### SELECTED VOLUNTEER POSITIONS

PTA President Travilah Elementary School, 1966-1968.

Founding Chair Potomac FISH, coordinating 13 Potomac, MD area churches to  
provide emergency food, clothes and transportation to all residents, 1967-  
1969.

Founder Our Lady of Mercy Prayer Group, along with Rev. Raymond Cahill and  
Sr. Mary Alberic R.S.M., in parish rectory, June 1968. First such group on  
the East coast. Later evolved into Mother of God Community, a Catholic  
and ecumenical charismatic community. (See p. 222, Kevin and Dorothy  
Ranaghan, *As the Spirit Leads*. Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press 1971.)

Montgomery County Council Transportation Advisory Committee, Chair of  
subcommittee on transportation for low income groups 1968.

Chair Regional Service Committee for Washington, D.C. area Days of Renewal  
for Catholic Charismatic Renewal, 1970-1978.

Member Steering Committee for International Conference on the Charismatic  
Renewal in the Catholic Church, Notre Dame, Indiana June 14-16, 1974.

Member National Advisory Committee for Catholic Charismatic Renewal 1974-  
1980.

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill Literature Committee 1990-2005.

#### PERSONAL HISTORY

b. Chester, Pennsylvania, married 51 years, four children, 15 grandchildren.

May 30, 2010