

We Women: From the Age of Aquarius to the Coming of Age  
An Intimate Look at the Challenges of Aging in America through the Eyes of  
Pinellas County Women

by

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to two indomitable women: my mother, Phyllis Annette Schmidt, and my mother-in-law, the late Grace Hamel Bray.

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## Abstract

The following interviews with self-defined women of the counter-culture constitute a shared auto-ethnographic experience. This experience serves as an illustration of the events that defined us during our teen years in the late 1960s, and speaks to our intention to challenge the negative perceptions we face as senior citizens. We are aware of bleak scientific and media forecasts as the roughly seventy-six-million of us in the baby boom generation continue to impact Social Security and healthcare costs, as well as the overall economy. Although we are pleased to anticipate living longer, healthier lives; due to plummeting 401K and IRA accounts, declines in our home values, and lack of pension plans and substantial savings, we are concerned that our funds may not be sufficient for our life-spans. Based on the burgeoning cost of assisted living and nursing home environments, as well as their institutional nature, we plan to find alternate solutions for our late life experiences. The purpose is to show how the outspoken culture of the 1960s prepared us for our approaches to the next twenty-five or thirty years. Through our choice to stay engaged; those of us who participated in counter-culture movements, as well as some of our more conservative peers, are initiating a triage on aging for our own benefit, and the benefit of the younger generations that follow us. Our goal is to maintain independence while promoting quality of life and supporting our communities.

## Preface

On July 4, 2012, four days after my husband, Spencer Bray, and I were married, my new mother-in-law, Grace Hamel Bray, clutched her chest and fought to breathe as a lung melanoma caused her right lung to fill with fluid. Over the next year we witnessed not only her physical suffering, but also her confusion from a state of increasing dementia. We laughed in discomfort when she colored her eyebrows with red lipstick and rode the elevator at her independent living facility to the dining room wearing only her bra. We cringed during hospital visits as she yanked invasive tubes out of various parts of her body. Depending on Grace's condition, and recommendations from her doctor and her lawyer, Spencer, his sister Bonnie, and I shuttled her back and forth from one facility to another. She went from independent living to hospitals to hospice; from hospice to a rehabilitative nursing home; from the nursing home to a memory-care facility, and finally to a private condominium for the final two weeks of her life. Grace passed away on May 11, 2013, just prior to her ninetieth birthday.

My involvement in Grace's ordeal, and my own recent inclusion as one of the "young old," makes my research for this work very personal. Although I have a sense of humor regarding some aspects of aging, other aspects (such as loss of mental acuity and personal control) are more frightening. Grace's actual health status affected me less than her valiant efforts to go through the motions of a life it appeared that she no longer wanted. She often told me that nothing was the same. Unlike many elders, Grace did have

the necessary legal documents to protect her estate, and she had named Spencer as her Power of Attorney. Yet even with these preparations in place, Grace had little protection from hospitals, doctors, and care facilities that failed to communicate with each other concerning her medications, her condition, and her stated wishes. Grace was not alone in a late life experience that failed to factor in her quality of life.

A friend of mine, Lisa Klug, related that two years and three months ago her mother suffered an attack of peritonitis and a stroke that reduced her ability to communicate. Lisa shared that after a second stroke her mother was moved to hospice where she currently experiences hallucinations and has conversations with people who are not there. Lisa says, “Right now, my sister and I are in the same position as many people our age. We feel sad for our parents and wait patiently for them to go on.”

Barbara Lewis, a woman I met on one of Jon Wilson’s downtown St. Petersburg walking tours, told me that her husband, Steve, was under hospice care for a year and a half. Lewis shared that the doctor who diagnosed her husband said, “Okay, you have renal-cell carcinoma that’s metastasized in the bone, so basically there’s nothing that can be done. Sign up with hospice and get your affairs in order.” The doctor that gave her husband a second opinion said: “Stay away from Moffitt—they will treat you to death.” Author Lillian B. Rubin writes, “I sometimes think the story of aging in our time is a tale of ‘yes, buts . . .’ Yes, the fact that we live longer, healthier lives is something to celebrate, but it’s not without its costs both public and private.”<sup>1</sup>

Public discussions explore the financial impacts of growing elderly populations on Social Security, health care, and the general economy. Private discussions center on life quality, independence, financial security, and a sense of personal connection and

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian B. Rubin, *60 on Up: The Truth About Aging in America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 7.



community. A number of authors, as well as the media, tend to pit the needs of senior citizens (baby boomers in particular) against those of younger generations.

Born between 1946 and 1964, the baby boomers, like myself, were “the largest, richest, best-educated generation of Americans, the favored children of a strong, confident and prosperous country.”<sup>2</sup> Many of us who reached our late teens in the 1960s were portrayed as intelligent, irreverent, promiscuous, self-absorbed consumers who occasionally dabbled in drugs. Although we may not have matched these labels as individuals, it is true that we were relatively fearless, using our voices to end the Vietnam War, stop racial discrimination, protect the environment, and support women’s rights.

Now mostly in our sixties, we are caring for elderly parents and experiencing our own transitions into the burgeoning senior population. Although we do have challenges that may include our own negative perceptions of aging, we feel vibrant and positive about our future. We plan to retain our autonomy, and remain engaged in society through work and volunteer activities. Unlike our parents’ generation, we choose to age in place with no intention of removing ourselves to retirement communities. If our life choices could be based on our intentions alone, there would be no issue. But as Maria D. Vesperi in *City of Green Benches: Growing Old in a New Downtown* argues, “the problem lies not with old age itself but with the way aging is perceived by the wider community.”<sup>3</sup> With increased longevity, retirement is now more of a process than a destination, so we are reinventing ourselves to prepare for the expectation of twenty-five to thirty more

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<sup>2</sup> P.J. O’Rourke, “How the Boomers Saved Everything,” *Tampa Bay Times*, January 22, 2014, SSP.

<sup>3</sup> Maria D. Vesperi, *City of Green Benches: Growing Old in a New Downtown* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13.

years of life.<sup>4</sup> Our goal is to maintain independence, while promoting quality of life and supporting our communities.

A current dialogue and perception triage on aging is critical, as no one wishes to be invisible without respect or voice. Although my peers and I are currently labeled the *young-old*, as opposed to the *old-old*, we are beginning to experience the impacts of negative ageism. Fellow graduate student, Kyle Pierson, relates that her daughter's friend said, "I think it is so cool that your mother would go back to school. I don't know anyone who is that age who would do that." Marcia Sullivan, Director of Health Information Management for Tampa General Hospital, says: "Someone mentioned today during a software demo that the presentation of the application was different for seniors, starting with age sixty. I was appalled. I don't need a larger screen with few, less complex options." Recently, while enjoying cabernets at the Garden Restaurant on Central Avenue with my husband, our young waitress smiled at me and said, 'Oh, you're just so cute.' Apparently, those of us in our sixties are not only "cute," we are "active." While active is a positive term when it refers to work, exercise, or any other type of positive engagement, when paired with the word "seniors" it becomes pejorative. My peers and I reject our media portrayal as vapid active seniors with nothing to do but take cruises and play golf. Although we may enjoy cruises and playing golf, these activities are not the sum of who we are.

Barbara Lewis recently moved from Tampa to an upscale condominium in St. Petersburg. She shared that once her [Tampa] house sells she will probably join the Dali, the museum featuring Salvador Dali's work, and find something additional to volunteer

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<sup>4</sup> Dorian Mintzer, quoted in Christine Dugas, "Baby Boomers Reinvent Retirement: Fresh Start's Fun, but Confusing; Luckily, There's Help," *USA Today*, January 16, 2013, 3B.

for in St. Petersburg—maybe Florida Craftsman. She says, “I do know that the most interesting people I know are the ones who aren’t finished yet and won’t ever be.” Barbara’s friend, Carol, is a jeweler, a fiddle player, and a volunteer at WMNF, a Tampa community radio station. Vicki Morgan, a recent USFSP Masters of Social Work graduate, works full-time in the counseling field. Diane Craig, a USFSP Masters of Liberal Arts graduate in the Florida Studies program, writes for the *Tampa Bay Times*, does copy editing, and teaches occasional classes for Eckerd College. Civil rights activist, Gwen Reese, heads her own company, and Becky Wilson continues in her profession as a school counselor. Above all, my peers and I are engaged individuals contributing our time and money to the things that interest us as we always have.

We have concerns regarding books and articles that portray senior citizen baby-boomers as a funds-depleting enemy with a single character. In a recent review of *Gray Dawn: How the Coming Age Wave Will Transform America—and the World*, David Kusnet gives Peter G. Peterson accolades for “explor[ing] the social, cultural, and geopolitical consequences of the aging of advanced societies.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, he takes Peterson to task for failing to pose humanizing aging solutions such as protecting Social Security or admonishing corporate heads for passing over qualified seniors for “technical and management positions.”<sup>6</sup> Social Security is one of the programs that gave our parents the security to have children, and have faith in the future following the Depression years and World War II. By shedding light on individual voices, I hope to continue the dialogue to find successful aging solutions for ourselves, and the young people who follow us. A

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<sup>5</sup> David Kusnet, “Geezer Nation: As Life Spans Lengthen, a Study Argues, the Elderly will Become America’s Biggest Problem,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

close friend, who just turned sixty, asked the rhetorical question, “How do I navigate my sixties?” My thought was, *and the seventies, the eighties, and nineties?*

Let the wild triage begin.

## Introduction

Nothing is harder to overcome than the perceptions and social constructs that label us, with the exception of ingrained perceptions. As a woman, what author Simone de Beauvoir calls *The Second Sex*, I have had many labels in my life: girl, daughter, sister, hippie, mother, student, lifeguard, late bloomer, wife, tutor, supervisor, corporate manager, and baby boomer. Recently, the label most women wish to avoid, that of ‘senior citizen.’ Those of us who have witnessed our parents’ decline know the possibility of a dark future where society views us simply as old, rather than as individuals. In “The New Fighting Word: Old,” *Tampa Bay Times* columnist Bill Maxwell notes, “We live in a culture that abhors aging.”<sup>7</sup> Author Lillian B. Rubin writes, “Our revulsion with aging, our flight from it at almost any cost, is deeply ingrained.”<sup>8</sup> Yet I, and the women interviewed, approach this time in our lives with an irreverent edgy optimism. We are not in denial. We have seen subtle changes in our bodies and faces, and walked beige retirement halls where cleansers fail to mask the smell of urine. The good news is that we may have long lives. The reality is that our funds may not last the length of these long lives, and we have no map for what comes next. Consequently, our challenges will be to remain engaged in our communities, and participate in finding solutions for successful aging.

As members of the seventy-six million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964, we are part of a group large enough to bring about positive change. During our teen

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Maxwell, “The New Fighting Word: Old,” *Tampa Bay Times*, July 14, 2013, Sec. P.

<sup>8</sup> Lillian B. Rubin, *60 on Up: The Truth About Aging in America*. (Boston: Beacon, 2007), 3.

years, as members of this group, many of my female peers and I participated in various aspects of counter-culture activism. In 1968, I protested the Vietnam War by joining in marches and sit-ins at Trenton State College in New Jersey. Diane Craig launched into social activism in 1967 after she participated in a *Cursillo de Cristiandad*, a radical course in Christianity. Gwen Reese devoted her life to civil rights when Dr. Martin Luther King was shot on her nineteenth birthday. Becky Wilson identified with the 1967 film, *The Graduate*, in lieu of the main character's "growing disillusionment with the values of his parents' generation." As a group, we were the initial products of mass communication, higher education, consumerism, and our parents' longed-for peace following the Second World War. As counter-culture individuals, we learned to question authority and the status quo, just as we intend to do in developing our own plans for aging.

In some cases single events pushed us toward activism. Author David Farber notes that on February 1, 1960, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond chose to confront existing Jim Crow laws in Greensboro, North Carolina by sitting down at a *white's only* lunch counter. "[T]he young protesters learned . . . it was up to them . . . to change their country's direction."<sup>9</sup> In 1963, I was in eighth grade at Stillwater School in New Jersey when President Kennedy was shot. Seeing teachers cry—a young person does not forget that. But, there was also a sense of possibility and wonder in the 1960s. When the Beatles arrived on U.S. soil in 1964, my friends and I held transistor radios against our ears late at night and fell in love. In 1968, Woodstock brought over 500,000 people together on Max Yasgur's farm in Bethel, New York, and in 1969, Astronaut Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. As youth

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<sup>9</sup> David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 67.

experiencing new concepts and ideas amidst a vortex of cultural change, our parents' conservative button-down hegemony had little meaning for our realities.

In 1969, Theodore Roszak wrote that “the adults of the World War II period, [were] trapped . . . in a frozen posture of befuddled docility.”<sup>10</sup> Without question, Roszak's statement is a broad and critical generalization. Yet with hindsight one can understand the generation's desire for normalcy and peace following the horrors of the war years, the insecurity of the McCarthy years, and the ever-present threat of nuclear proliferation. Our parents were members of the post-World War II generation, and most of them did their best to keep us safe and provide us with material comforts. They also encouraged us to think for ourselves. Farber notes that, “The new economic realities of the postwar years affected Americans' sense of values and helped produce what some have called the ‘culture wars’ of the 1960s.”<sup>11</sup>

There were a number of adults who celebrated and encouraged counter culture movements in the sixties, feminists like Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem, as well as authors Allen Ginsberg, and Ken Kesey. However, many individuals in our parents' generation were unprepared for the cultural upheavals that occurred when protests related to the Vietnam War, civil rights, feminism, and environmental movements came together in confluence with rock ‘n’ roll music, drugs, and a loss of respect for authority. Unlike our parents, those of us who were educated, middle-class, counter-culture youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s experienced a time of great individual freedom and endless possibility. As young women, we met men on an almost level playing field due to

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<sup>10</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 22.

<sup>11</sup> David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 4.

education and the availability of birth control. We were the first generation to realize fully what it meant to be young, and we thought we always would be.

We believed the slogan “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” And yet, here we are in 2014, senior citizens in our sixties. Our years allow us to recognize intimately, and not always approvingly, the core of who we are. We cerebrally understand what may be ahead of us. Emotionally, seeing a stranger’s aging face in the mirror surprises us as we put on makeup or brush our teeth in the morning. Rubin writes, “Inside every seventy-five-year-old is a thirty-five-year-old asking, ‘What happened?’”<sup>12</sup> If we have children, they are now adults. Our parents are growing older, dying, or have already passed and, in between visits to the doctor and the bathroom, we are making our plans for what one of the interviewees Becky Day Wilson calls, *The Third Thirties*.

Although many of us continue to have full-time careers, as well as own businesses, some of us are semi-retired and have concerns regarding sufficient funds for the growing life expectancy of twenty-five or thirty more years, particularly if illness strikes. We have concerns about loss of agency and personal freedom. For we women, the aging challenge differs somewhat from men’s challenges, as more women consider drastic options such as laser treatments, facial injections, and plastic surgery to appear more youthful. Programs like Kathie Lee and Hoda’s *Today Show* program on February, 26, 2014, “Kiss my Wrinkles: Learning how to Love Your Lines,” are disturbing when the program’s commercials are sponsored by Andrew Orden’s Fill & Freeze for “younger looking skin instantly.” In many ways we are victims of the youth culture we blithely helped create.

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin, *60 on Up*, 135.



Consequently, the views of some of the women I interviewed, find the transitions from mid-life to senior citizen as or more challenging than the transitions we made from our teen years in the late 1960s to adulthood. My friend Sarah Gonzalo says that, “Getting old is the strangest experience on the face of the Earth.” I tend to agree. Beyond the unpleasant physical change, we feel uneasy as we lose our parents and know we are next in line. Rubin writes: “Accepting our own aging may come too close to the realization that life is finite and that we’ll soon reach its limit—a truth that’s extremely difficult for most Americans.”<sup>13</sup>

Our experiences with our parents and aging relatives have shown us a future we plan to avoid. However, due to cockeyed optimism, or a recognition of the authenticity and joy that can also attend this portion of our lives, we intend to change our own aging experiences. Perhaps our decisions will help to change the dialogue concerning what Rubin calls, “a society that sees old age as repugnant at the same time that it expends precious resources on the dream of extending life still further.”<sup>14</sup>

Since several of us have witnessed our parents’ experiences of what David Sedaris calls “the seven circles of Hell,” We note that we would rather take our own lives, or have our friends take us to a state where euthanasia is legal, than end our lives in nursing homes.<sup>15</sup> Hopefully, our goals of maintaining health, re-inventing ourselves through late-life careers and volunteerism, and aging in place will help us change some of the stigma of aging. Roszak validates our fitness goals stating, “No previous generation

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<sup>13</sup> Lillian B. Rubin, *60 on Up*, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Rubin, *60 on Up*, 170.

<sup>15</sup> David Sedaris, *Naked* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1997), 33.

has been so health-and-fitness conscious.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike many in our parents’ generation, we continue to question bumper sticker assumptions, maintain friendships with young people, and stay open to fresh ideas, music, and technology. We believe, as we did in the 1960s, that one can and should change the existing state of affairs. Through planning, laughter, and our own stubborn initiative, those of us in our sixties wish to change the current perceptions of aging.

Many in our parents’ generation removed themselves, or were removed by their families, to independent living centers that also offer assisted living and memory care based on an individual’s needs.

My own home county, Pinellas, is full of them: Examples are The Fountains in South Pasadena and Brentwood in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Fountains, which sits along Boca Ciega Bay, is a monolithic retirement community with an outdoor pool and a boat



Figure 1: Grace's room in Memory Care at Brentwood showing floor clutter and unsafe wires. Photo taken by author.

dock. After Spencer took Grace’s car keys following an incident where she almost backed into one of her neighbors at her condominium in Pasadena Cove, my husband and his sister moved her to The Fountains. At The Fountains, Grace’s sixteenth floor independent living studio gave her panoramic views. The lobby and the dining room were, and are, elegant. Grace often said, “I have so many friends,” followed by, “I just

<sup>16</sup> Theodore Roszak, *America the Wise: The longevity Revolution and the True Wealth of Nations*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 10.

love my place.” Unfortunately, her worsening dementia, her disorientation following a number of hospital stays due to her lung melanoma, and her tendency to fall and hit her head, meant she was no longer capable of independent living.

Consequently, the family moved Grace into a private assisted living apartment at Brentwood. Eventually, Grace needed even more assistance with medications, dressing, and toiletry. The family moved her again from her private assisted living apartment at Brentwood to a shared suite in their memory care unit. The memory care unit cost Grace \$3,500 a month. In the memory care unit, Grace’s day consisted of scheduled meals, with afternoons spent in front of a television in the common room.

Although the Brentwood fees ostensibly covered weekly housekeeping and laundry services, as well as daily tidying and bed making, her room was always cluttered and had an



**Figure 2: Grace's bathroom in Memory Care at Brentwood showing broken toilet paper holder. Photo taken by author.**

underlying odor of cleaning fluids and feces. Unsafe conditions in her room consisted of broken-and then missing-louver closet doors, a broken toilet paper holder, and tangled lamp wires. For a woman as elegant and fastidious as Grace, her time at Brentwood was unconscionable. The most difficult thing in visiting her was wondering how she felt when Spencer and I left for the evening. Although a few of the caregivers at Brentwood were intelligent, compassionate people, others were negligent. On one occasion it appeared she

had been pulled by her wrists to a standing position, rather than being lifted from beneath her arms, and we found her with badly bruised wrists.

Based on my recent experiences, it appears there are no perfect solutions for elder care at the moment. While my husband and his sister and I were finally able to transfer Grace to a condominium at Town Shores in Gulfport, finding a reasonably priced caregiver proved challenging. Although hospice came to visit Grace a few times a week, she now needed twenty-four hour assistance. Licensed agencies quoted us approximately \$7,500 a month for this type of care. Local nursing homes would have charged her an approximate monthly fee of \$8,000. Future hopes for better retirement outcomes will be challenging, not only due to the costs of care, but in terms of the environments where individuals spend their later years. However, new concept nursing homes like the ones in the Green House Project are non-profit and provide home-like environments. Only twelve residents live at each home, and residents have their own rooms.<sup>17</sup> In addition to alternate types of nursing homes, new technologies may help people age in place. Sally Abrahms explored a system for the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) called “Lively,” consisting of sensors that alert family members by “text, email, web, or phone if something is out of the ordinary.”<sup>18</sup>

My research over the past two years, and my own inclusion as one of the *young old*, gives me an acute awareness of the current broken aging model. Since I am a member of the group I am researching, this work is both auto-ethnographic and non-traditional. Touring facilities such as the Allegro at College Harbor, and visiting

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<sup>17</sup> “The Green House Project: Caring Homes for Meaningful Lives,” The Green House Project, 2014, <http://thegreenhouseproject.org/about-us>.

<sup>18</sup> Sally Abrahms, “Is This the End of the Nursing Home: New Technology could allow you or your parents to stay at home,” *AARP Bulletin*, Vol. 55 No.2, March 2014, 20.

Spencer's mother, Grace, in residence at the Fountains, Brentwood, and the Abby Nursing Home, I have some knowledge of late life retirement costs and processes. I visited Grace at the Bayfront hospice facility in St. Petersburg, and then toured the mid-county hospice Care Center in Pinellas Park. I attended an elder estate planning seminar with the Hill Law Group, P.A., and a seminar hosted by hospice where we could pose questions to local attorneys.

I initially conceived of this project over two years ago based on the irony of moving to St. Petersburg, a city with a reputation as a place for the “newly wed and nearly dead” while I was in my twenties, and then finding myself as a newly minted senior citizen in the town as it appeared to be getting younger. Reading Maria D. Vesperi's, *City of Green Benches: Growing Old in a New Downtown*, increased my interest in the project and I began to solicit feedback from individuals regarding their concepts of St. Petersburg and of aging. My mother's and mother-in-law's illnesses, as well as shared experiences with peers and local St. Petersburg women in their sixties, led me to further research personal responses to aging. Kathleen Woodward's *Aging and Its Discontents*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Aged by Culture*, and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, alerted me to the concept that many of the negative impacts of aging are based on perceptions and social constructs. Although the impacts of aging cannot be avoided, aging is a natural process rather than an illness to be cured.

Interviews with over thirty local women in Pinellas County helped me realize that the main resolutions to the physical and mental challenges of aging lie in continuing personal engagement with life and a concurrent sense of community. Central to the work are the voices of three women who represent aspects of 1960s counter-culture, regarding

their histories, present concerns, and future goals. Although the three women profiled are not paradigms for all women of a similar age, their stories illuminate trends that bear watching.

Diane Craig's early focus on feminist issues plays into continuing concerns over equal pay, legislation that limits abortion rights, and the prevalence of rape and incest in current society. Her situation also highlights the wish many women have for autonomy, versus the desire for male companionship and financial security. Craig's spiritual transformation from classical Catholicism in strict obeisance to Papal edicts and confessions, to a more radical Catholicism will also be of note to those interested in discussions concerning women and the Catholic Church. Although Jon Wilson notes that prior to the 1950s, St. Petersburg "had a history of racial tension that sometimes flared into horrific violence,"<sup>19</sup> civil rights activist, Gwen Reese, is not representative of these early legacies of segregation. However, she brings much to the table through the recounting of her St. Petersburg Junior College experiences, as well as her concerns for current aspects of local racism and concurrent white privilege. Becky Wilson shares the challenges she faced in lieu of culture and systems changes in her work environment. Her narrative also represents the importance of family and place in our lives.

Although this work is not a local version of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, it does have similar aspects. Just as Friedan focused only on middle-class suburban women, this work focuses on educated Pinellas County women primarily in their sixties. Yet, these voices are innately representative of the issues, pleasures, and

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<sup>19</sup> Jon Wilson, *The Golden Era in St. Petersburg: Postwar Prosperity in the Sunshine City* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), 129.

challenges most women will face in approaching the “revolution of longevity.”<sup>20</sup> It is a bit refreshing that the same Roszak who called us a counter-culture in the 1960s should now say that we are “causing a different kind of cultural trouble by the very act of staying alive a good long time.”<sup>21</sup> Charles Russell is correct in saying that as youth we could not avoid, “the biological facts of puberty, sexual maturity, and menopause . . . [or] easily resist the social demand to earn a living, marry, or retire.”<sup>22</sup> Yet we believe, as does Russell, that with knowledge and a new way of perceiving late life, these years can be our best.

I used the artistic concept of negative space in conducting my interviews. When using the negative space method for a work of art, the artist literally draws the space around the subject, rather than focusing on and drawing the subject itself. This method is particularly effective in helping the artist see the subject with new eyes, thus overcoming any preconceived notions of how the subject should appear. When the artist represents the space accurately, the subject emerges with its unique characteristics perfectly rendered. I used the negative space concept for the interviews, by purposely refraining from asking a specific set of questions. This method allowed the interviewees to select the narrative content they wished to share for a true representation of their lives, hopes, and concerns.

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Revolution of the Wise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Russell, *Good News About Aging*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), 4.

## Chapter One

### Mythical Eve—Diane Craig

In the introduction to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Judith Thurman notes that:

The hardest [secret], perhaps, for Beauvoir to avow—is that a free woman may refuse to be owned without wanting to renounce, or being able to transcend, her yearning to be possessed . . . by which she meant the temptations of romantic love, financial security, and a sense of purpose derived from a man.<sup>23</sup>

In the following interview, Diane Craig provides a contemporary voice for the on-going female struggle between personal independence and the longing for security.

Diane Craig, adjunct professor, editor, and freelance writer, retains much of the passion that fueled her activism in the 1960s and '70s. Diane and I meet at her home in Gulfport, a small town in southern Pinellas County that welcomes aging baby boomers and individuals on the fringe of society with a flair for art. Diane moved to her current house after nine years in an elegant fifth-floor condominium on the water in Gulfport's Town Shores. Her new home is a small, free-standing duplex half the size of the condo, with wood floors, and stubborn windows painted shut by an uncaring landlord. She volunteers that she has never owned a home, and never wanted to because she never saw

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<sup>23</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, xv).



herself as much of a commitment person. “I’ve always said, until I know how to spell the word, I wasn’t ready for it.”<sup>24</sup> However, like many of us in our sixties, she is downsizing and simplifying and she sees the move to the duplex as the beginning. Even as she plans the furniture arrangements for this new, more intimate place, holding court amidst her books and art, Craig knows this will not be her last home; she talks of living in an RV for a few years, and building a tiny house. For some reason I think of the first line in *Colette: Break of Day*, “Is this house going to be my last?”<sup>25</sup>

Craig sits in a tan wicker chair as we chat, wearing a soft calf-length gathered skirt in green, cream, and brown, and a brown scoop neck pull-over shirt. Her feet are bare. I ask if anyone has ever compared her to the actor Judy Dench, and Craig concedes this has happened on occasion. She keeps her hair cropped like Dench’s, and she has a direct gaze and manner. I ask Craig what she would like to discuss and she says:

“I’d like to talk about what it means to be single, almost sixty-six, with no kids and no significant other because I think it hits on what it means to be an aging single woman in today’s society. On one hand, it’s extremely freeing – I have no one to be accountable for (except my cat) and I can pretty much do what I want to when I choose; on the other hand, it can also feel lonely and vulnerable. Unlike my siblings – I’m the oldest of five children – I don’t have a built-in support system. With no spouse and no kids, I think about what might happen should I become sick. That’s the personal side, and that’s where the fears are.”

As Craig talks, I consider Helen Keller’s quotation: “Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience

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<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all quotations in Chapter One are attributed to Diane Craig.

<sup>25</sup> Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, *Colette: Break of Day*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 6.

it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.”<sup>26</sup> Craig’s concerns for her status as a single woman in today’s society with no support system appear to be universal. I have had similar discussions with my sister who chose her art over having a family, but often questions her decision not to have children.

Craig continues: “Then, there’s the political side. I come from an age where the personal is political, where how one chooses to live her life is as much a political expression as anything else. Truth is, I’m invisible in society, totally invisible. In the old days when we respected maturity, I would have been the krone, the woman in the village people came to for counsel, support, nurturing, whatever. Now, either because I don’t have money (which I don’t), carry a huge student loan debt, and I don’t have kids or a partner, I essentially don’t exist. I am not depicted anywhere. The only place older krone-like women appear is among the wildly successful – women like Maya Angelou, who is much older than me incidentally. Perhaps it comes down to the fact that I don’t have children, and I don’t have money or a partner. Truthfully, if I were a gay woman I’d have more visibility. But I’m a heterosexual, single, childless woman, soon to be sixty-six. Plus, having lost both my parents within two months and two days of each other two years ago, I’m essentially an orphan. Don’t get me wrong, I love where I am in my life, I absolutely love it. However, I think my life would not have been what it has been if I had children. It would have been very, very different. Although some say I would have managed anyway, I kind of doubt it.”

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<sup>26</sup> “Helen Keller,” BrainyQuote.com, 2014, Xplore Inc, 2014.  
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/helenkelle121787.html>, accessed March 1, 2014.

Craig had two opportunities to have children: her first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage when she was only twenty, and she aborted the second pregnancy due to scarring from pelvic inflammatory disease, and the risk of an ectopic pregnancy. Long an advocate of a woman's right to choose, Craig is appalled at the way states are restricting access to abortion and birth control. "Abortion is still legal; it's a federal law for heaven's sake," she bangs on the coffee table for emphasis.

"This 'war on women' is out of control. When they [abortion foes] challenge the Supreme Court of the land as a bunch of judges going against the will of the people, it's crazy! Thank God, thank God the Supreme Court is still able to uphold laws, otherwise we might still have segregation, lynching, and women wouldn't be able to vote. That's why I'm dedicated to teaching history. It's important students know how far we've come."

I understand Craig's vehemence concerning abortion rights as female reproductive control affects almost all women in terms of health, education, and financial stability. In "For Texas Women, Access to Abortion Keeps Dwindling, with No Hope in Sight," Amy McCarthy reviews efforts by the Texas Legislature to restrict abortion laws. McCarthy states that, "over a third of the state's abortion clinics . . . closed following the passage of HB2, [resulting in] "Thousands of women [being] denied local access to safe and professional abortion care for the first time since *Roe v. Wade*."<sup>27</sup>

The pelvic inflammatory disease that prompted Craig's abortion continued to cause her pain and, in 1981, she chose to have a hysterectomy. Consequently, with no

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<sup>27</sup> Amy McCarthy, "For Texas Women, Access to Abortion Keeps Dwindling, with No Hope in Sight," *Healthcare, Dallas Observer*, March 17, 2014, [http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2014/03/abortion\\_access\\_in\\_texas.php](http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2014/03/abortion_access_in_texas.php).

children of her own, she looks to her nieces and nephews “as the place where [she] can do legacy work.” Craig wants to show her sibling’s children an alternative lifestyle that may not involve getting married and having children of their own. “Education is a big part of that; being an adventuresome spirit, that’s part of it, too. But challenging stereotypes and traditional male and female roles is probably the most important part of it.”

A few of Craig’s nieces and nephews feel close to her and often ask for help with writing projects and life advice. Like me, Craig is friends with people of all ages. “There was a group of women here the other day, all friends. One woman is forty-six, another, fifty-six. I’m going to be sixty-six and we have mutual friends who are thirty-six and twenty-six. One of the women has a son, sixteen. We realized that we’ve got five generations in a small circle of friends. I find that astonishing.”

Craig pauses to light a slim Djarum Black cigar. I think about her place in life and consider how many women define themselves in life as wives and mothers. Craig smokes. I comment on the rings on her hand, a diamond chip pinky ring and a silver Celtic band. She tells me the diamond ring is platinum and was her mother’s wedding ring. When I question her heritage, she says she is “‘Scot-Irish’ and adds that her mother’s father was Italian, so, Scot-Irish Italian—charming and passionate all at the same time. And mid-western for sure, with family from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.” Her snowshoe Siamese cat, Samantha Blu, rubs against the coffee table seeking attention.

Craig tells me her father, “Robert Craig, handled the advertising for the McDonald’s [chain restaurant] franchise in Michigan.” Her mother, Doris, was a

professional photographer. “We were . . . a very traditional household. Mom was part of a bridge club and an Altar Society, and dad was part of a bowling league and a men’s club.”<sup>28</sup> As a member of the Altar Society, Craig’s mother took care of the priest’s vestments and the chalice used in communion. In World War II, Craig’s father, a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army and trained in intelligence, used his artistic skills to map the first Allied invasion into North Africa. Of her childhood, Craig says: “You know, we were very active in the church—always, always.” Although Craig’s childhood appears traditional and family-oriented, particularly with the family’s involvement in the Catholic Church, Craig now shares a darker side of her childhood.

“I’m a child of incest, as were my sisters, by my dad. I finally came to terms with it when I was involved with Saginaw County’s Rape Crisis Center; came to understand it, and what effect it had on my life. It was years before I spoke with my folks about it, though. I think if I were to really do some serious regressive work, regression work, it might go back to the time when I started being abused. I don’t know. I do know I wanted to be a nun when I was ten years old. I have wondered, though, if the two weren’t somehow related. The thought of entering the convent was probably why I was such a good girl in high school. You know I didn’t drink, I didn’t smoke, I didn’t have sex. Even now, I pretty much play by the rules. For instance, I don’t drive when I am drunk--well not anymore. We all did in the 1970s, but, I don’t go out to the bars and drink; I don’t run stoplights; I don’t run stop signs, and I don’t speed. In fact, I have never gotten a

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<sup>28</sup> Altar Societies are organizations within the Catholic Church responsible for maintaining the priest’s vestments and holy vessels, like the chalice used in Communion. They are traditionally comprised of parish women.

speeding ticket in my entire life, ‘touch wood.’ In some ways, I tend to be kind of straight, cautious. I have always been like that.”

Although Craig had a boyfriend in her senior year at St. Andrew High School, she entered the order of Adrian Dominicans a few months after graduation in 1965. When asked her mindset in actually joining a convent, she said: “To be a bride of Christ, to teach. The Dominicans are an order of teachers. . . . I just figured that’s what God had intended me to do.” As a postulant, Craig rose at 4:30 a.m., donned a long black skirt and a starched black shirt with pleats, and prayed before mass at 6:00 a.m. She lived in a dormitory with twenty or thirty women. She gardened and took out trash in the mornings, and attended classes and climbed trees.

The phone rings and Craig breaks off our current conversation to let me know a friend of hers will be stopping by to hang a shelf in the bathroom. Once she is off the phone, I tell her I am curious about her emotional relationships because of the things she has shared with me, and what she experienced early on. I am particularly curious about her idea of being “regressed.” I believe Craig mentions regression therapy as this type of therapy ostensibly helps individuals understand and then heal from the causes of negative past experiences. In regression therapy, the individual is encouraged to re-experience the negative event in an attempt to understand what occurred, and in the case of sexual abuse, to realize that she was not complicit. Having talked with female relatives and friends who have been sexually abused, I know that each woman experienced some sense of shame as though she too were responsible for what occurred.

Craig confirms my thought. “I think it comes down to a feeling of shame, which an awful lot of abused children carry with them into adulthood.” She says, “Although I certainly wasn’t aware of that at eighteen, I think I thought I could get rid of it by turning myself over to the Lord, or in this case, Christ. I was going to be a bride of Christ. It doesn’t get any purer than that!”

In spite of her initial calling, Craig left the convent after only three months with the Dominicans. In 1966, she became involved with Saginaw’s community theater, and played in several productions including *The Owl and the Pussycat*, and *Gypsy*, where she played Mazeppa, one of the three strippers in the musical. As Mazeppa, the trumpet playing stripper, her gladiator costume was purple and black, with a black and purple feathered headdress. Mazeppa was one of her favorite roles. She grins, “Any chance you get an opportunity to do a showstopper, you always wanna’ take it.” Craig met her future husband, Jim Gaertner, in 1968 at the theater. Gaertner had been involved with the theatre for years prior, and had just returned from processing body bags in Okinawa. “That was his job.” After they were introduced, their first date was midnight mass at St. Joe’s Catholic Church. Craig notes the church was “in the ghetto.” She remembers Gaertner, who was white, walking up to Lou Oates and saying,

“Hey, N\*\*\*\*, how you doing?”

Craig was shocked to hear that word used to address a black man. “Seriously! I thought, oh my God, where am I?”

“That was the banter,” adding that “going to mass as a white middle-class Catholic girl and worshipping with a totally diverse population, black, Chicano, poor was . . . just what [her] faith should be.”

In 1968 Craig took a *Cursillo*, or small course in Christianity, noting that the course “radicalized white Catholics in America.” She says that *Cursillo* challenged Catholics to live like Christ. The course lasted three days, though the emphasis was on the fourth day, or every day after. “We were challenged to live the life that Jesus lived: taking care of the poor, the homeless. We were to care for the hungry, advocate for social justice, and of course, resist the [Vietnam] war and promote peace. I got involved with Saginaw Valley Peace Watch, and more. I quit my job as an information operator at Michigan Bell, and became a community worker in the war on poverty.”

Craig remembers 1968 as a pivotal year: “Johnson said he wasn’t going to run again because of the war; we had two assassinations, [Rev. Martin Luther] King and [Bobby] Kennedy; Eugene McCarthy, the peace poet, faced off against the traditional liberal [Hubert] Humphrey in Chicago. And I went to jail protesting the draft. I think that was the year when my social activism took hold,” she says. At one point, a black newspaper in Saginaw photographed Craig for an article, calling her *Saginaw’s blue-eyed soul sister*. The pin Craig wears in the photograph shows her support for La Raza Unida and the grape boycotts against A & P



Figure 3: Craig as a young poverty worker circa 1968-1969, Saginaw, Michigan. Photo used with permission.



grocery stores, organized by Cesar Chavez. “I got involved with all sorts of wild and crazy-assed things. I picketed with Mexicans, worked with black folks, advocated for peace and social justice, but I was so young, so wet behind the ears. Eventually though, I think everyone realizes that a white person will never know what it’s like to be black, or Chicano. But by God, I knew what it meant to be a woman, and I knew what it meant to be a Catholic woman. And that changed everything!”

In spite of her emerging feminist leanings, Craig and Gaertner, the man she met in theater, were engaged in 1969 and married in 1970. They both attended Saginaw Valley College, where Craig often attended class barefoot and bra-less--wearing dangly Indian bell earrings. Although Gaertner was president of the Student Senate and Craig was a Senator, they never had a traditional collegiate experience because they lived off campus. Their relationship reflected the times: Eventually, their marriage became an open marriage; they smoked *pot* in the student government office, and often “a big waft of smoke would escape whenever the door was opened.”

During a portion of the 1980s, after first living in Bay City, Michigan, Craig lived in various California locals: Downieville; during what she calls her *mountain woman phase*, Silicon Valley, and Santa Cruz. Visiting San Francisco for a rafting trip with friends, she met a retired surgeon who she says, “was a serious pot smoker.” He told Craig that he never smoked while in surgery, but always smoked after he was done. “He was convinced that marijuana was going to keep us younger.”

As Craig and I agree, marijuana was available everywhere. I was personally introduced to it in 1968, by a friend at Blair Academy in tiny Blairstown, New Jersey, just before I graduated from Newton High School. In *The Age of Great Dreams*, Farber

notes that, “The counterculture seemed insidious. It was everywhere and nowhere, hard to define and thus difficult to stop.”<sup>29</sup>

Craig and Gaertner’s marriage did not last. She asks me, “Have you ever seen *Hair*? You know the song that starts “how can people be so heartless? It talked about feeding the masses, but not taking care of the person next to you. That’s what we became. We never should have married, however we were . . . anti-war peace activists and represented one of the more radical elements of the Democratic Party in Saginaw County.” Craig says it was after her divorce from Gaertner in 1975 that she really launched into feminism. Emboldened after taking a class, *Radical Feminism*, while at Saginaw Valley College, she went on to become a co-founder of Women United for Social Justice that organized the city’s first women’s conference. This conference was instrumental in creating a shelter for battered women and their children. Craig helped create the county’s first rape crisis center and became the executive director.

In 1969, while still married to Gaertner, Craig taught the history of the American women’s movement to fifteen young black women at an alternative educational center run by a Dominican nun. She remembers the women were *feisty* and it was a great class. While in Saginaw Craig found that some of the doctors were inappropriately telling young black women that having a



Figure 4: The *Saginaw News* interviewed Craig at her Bay City apartment for an article on divorce in the 1970s. Photo used with permission.

<sup>29</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 168

hysterectomy could regulate their periods and get rid of their monthly cramps. So they would perform hysterectomies on very healthy young black women. Craig says this is what *clinched* teaching as a career. She says, “Of course I’m saying [to them], ‘you have to understand this [the doctors’ suggestions] is crap, absolute crap!’” Craig recounts that one night after theatre rehearsal, a few of her fellow actors were enjoying a drink at the local watering hole when she received a call from one of the women in her class. The woman told Craig that after they talked about the unnecessary hysterectomies, she decided to get a second opinion and learned she did not need the surgery. Craig says, “Teaching can make a difference in a person’s life.”

In spite of her growing involvement in feminist movements, Craig has always enjoyed and sought mutual relationships with men throughout her life. In 1976, she began a six-year relationship with a man named John Stark. The relationship ended in 1982, a year after her hysterectomy, though they remain friends. Following this relationship, Craig moved to Bay City, Michigan, and then west to California. Although she lived in several California locals during the 1980s, she took a break from the California lifestyle to live in Cornwall in Southwest England from 1984 through 1986. During the 1990s, Craig had a rather long relationship with a man named Bill Bateman. Her notes say she lost him, and although she gives no details regarding this relationship, I wonder if he was a man who held her heart.

Craig headed back to Cornwall from California in 1999 to “follow a dream.” Then her travels took her to Ireland and Scotland. She came to Florida in 2000 to be near her parents and started work as a copywriter in 2001. The last few years were dedicated to

achieving her bachelor's degree from Eckerd College where I met her, and then master's degree in Florida Studies from the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

In discussing the secondary role of women Craig says, "A paradigm which has a woman as a secondary person, secondary to man, is unacceptable to me at my core level. After I was divorced, I went to the first international conference on the ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood. A priest gave me a ticket and I went, and I do not remember much of anything else except the place was packed right out the door and there were a couple of female theologians on the stage. I was in my late twenties at that point; I got married at twenty-three, divorced at twenty-eight, a pivotal year in numerology. First of all, the whole idea of women theologians was a mind-fuck to me, but it's what they were talking about that changed everything: the Eve Syndrome, the idea that women, *by their very being*, were responsible for everything bad in the world, stopped me in my tracks. The idea that we were historically the temptress, the seductress, the person behind the 'fall of mankind' made me look at feminism in a much more personal way. That one lecture changed the core of who I was; it put absolutely everything into perspective."

"I cannot look at a relationship, at politics, at religion, at siblings with anything that smacks of the intimation that *I am less than, weaker than, dumber than a man, and that I need to be taken care of and protected*. That's probably why I am single, because not many men, as loving as they are, get that at a cellular level. If they say 'I don't get it' and they do not give me grief about where I am with it, I am okay with it. To argue with me about it does not work. If I allow myself to fall into that patriarchal mindset in a relationship, then I tap into the victim part of my life, and I absolutely will not go back to that. I understand victim-ology."

Still, like many of our unmarried peers, and as she noted earlier, Craig would like to have someone who is there for her. I ask what her vision may be going forward.

“First of all, it’s important to know that for much of my adult life, probably since my mid-thirties, I’ve never seen myself growing older living with a man. When I look ahead and I see myself at seventy and eighty, I see a single person who has a relationship with a man who is much like me – their own person with a life of their own. The older I get, the more I realize how hard it is to live with someone else and carry on a life of your own. But, I’d like to know that someone has my back, someone I can put down as an emergency contact, and a person I can count on when I need him. I could have really used that when my folks died – that’s when I really felt the void. They can be in the same town, they can be in a different state, and it [doesn’t] matter, as long as they were there for you no matter what. I do not have that, and wish I did. Would I have traded my life to have that? No. I see it more as another chapter in my life, the next chapter of my life.”

Craig feels she is at a new point in her life now that her parents are gone. She truly misses her mother. Although she has her master’s degree and experience she feels she can bring to anything, she has large student loans and says, “I really don’t want to continue to do it all by myself” I ask why Craig believes she is not with someone now, thinking she will say something to the effect that all the good men are taken, as I have heard from other women our age, but she says, “I’ve always said that until I could spell commitment, I wasn’t ready to make one. Well, I’ve finally mastered the spelling, so perhaps I am ready. I don’t know. I’ve had men tell me that I’m too strong, too intense, too smart--too opinionated. All of which is probably true; I can’t argue with that. I just don’t understand why it’s such a . . . threat. I think I also give the impression that I don’t

want to be with anyone, that I'm perfectly happy all by myself, which is also true; I have no trouble being by myself, which is also true; I have no trouble being by myself. But, that does not mean that I don't want someone who thinks I'm the cat's ass?"

Craig offers me a glass of 2011 Blackstone Cabernet and some wasabi almonds. We move to her screened porch to sip the wine. I will say that wherever she lives, her presence brings a sense of peace and style to the place. The air smells of rain. I ask her if she feels a connection to Florida after thirteen years here. She hesitates. I have apparently hit a nerve. "When I first started the Florida Studies Program, I was interested in trying to understand the women of this state. I mean, Janet Reno and her mother Jane Reno, are Floridians. There's Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and Mary McLeod Bethune . . . all these amazing strong women, and then you have Katherine Harris, Anita Bryant, and titty bars and gentlemen's clubs and lingerie modeling on every . . . corner. It's part of the culture." Craig remembers coming in from the Tampa International airport on the way to her parent's home in Port Richey and seeing Scarlet O'Hara's, a so called 'gentlemen's club,' "right there on the beginning of the Causeway." She laughs: "At the same time, Florida proclaims itself to be this Bible belt state. Florida is a paradise for writers; that's for sure. There's a story on every corner ... but a real connection to Florida? No. I do feel a connection to Gulfport, but Florida is the South and, well, I'm a Yankee in my soul. Don't get me wrong, I have learned a lot here. But Florida is not where I will die, nor is it a place I want to get sick in and end up in the hospital. No, no, no."

"Sometimes I wonder what the hell I'm doing. I'm in the last half of my sixties, have mild arthritis in my lower back, and I've started collecting Social Security, and here

I am, starting a new career as an adjunct professor. Crazy. I had a chat once with one of my professors, a woman my own age, just before she retired. I commented on how bizarre it was – that she was retiring from teaching just as I was getting started.”

Craig’s professor said, ‘but you’ve done a lot more things with your life than I have’ and Craig thought, “she’s right! I have. My most hopeful future is to teach and write till I drop. That’s where I can be visible and keep making a difference. That’s one of the reasons I love to teach. I see it as a way to make real and lasting change.”

## Chapter Two

### This Different Child—Gwen Reese

I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold, service was joy.<sup>30</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore

During our initial phone conversation on July 11, 2013, Gwendolyn Reese shared that her life changed on her nineteenth birthday, April 4, 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. She says, “I became this different child” on that day.”<sup>31</sup> On that day Reese decided “there would be no back of the bus.”

I ask Reese if she will agree to meet for lunch, and she suggests Cassis American Brasserie, an upscale French-inspired brasserie on Beach Drive NE in St. Petersburg. We meet there for lunch in late July 2013. I arrive a few minutes before Reese and choose a corner table in the rear for privacy. White tablecloths dress the tables, walls are maize gold, white, and chocolate, and chairs and banquettes are also a deep chocolate brown. Zig-zag patterned hand-painted ceramic tiles cover the floor. A few businessmen are having lunch, as well as two women with their children. I worry that the loud piped music, French ballads and Louie Armstrong, may impact our upcoming conversation.

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<sup>30</sup> “Rabindranath Tagore Quotes,” Goodreads, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all quotations in Chapter Two are attributed to Gwendolyn Reese.



Reese arrives with a smile and great presence, her style somewhat mirrors the brasserie's style--classic but edgy. She wears a white gauze ensemble accented by sterling silver and black stone necklaces. Black rimmed glasses frame her eyes. Our waiter, Nick, is bright, young, and attentive. He brings us ice water and Reese orders a drink called a M nage-a-Tini, consisting of Ketel One Vodka, St. Germain Elder Flower Liquor, and Champagne. Reese says, "It's kind of fruity, but it's good, I'm a martini drinker, generally a straight up, a dirty, a filthy martini, but every now and then, especially this time of day, I'll get something a little fruitier." I tell Reese a little about my thesis topic, and note that I am originally from New Jersey, but feel I should have been born in Florida because Florida this is where I feel at home.

Reese smiles: "I never should have been born in Florida. I was born here but I don't consider myself a Floridian. I'm a North Carolinian. And that is because my mother was from North Carolina, my father was from North Carolina, I was conceived in North Carolina, but my mother moved here and I was born here. So I'm not a Floridian, I just happened to be born here. It's like I tell people, 'I'm a person of African American descent born and raised in America; I'm a North Carolinian born and raised in Florida.' I never felt like I belonged here although I'm still here, and I'm here for reasons that are a part of who I am. I know so much about this place, and I wanted to make changes in the world. I wanted to be a change agent, that's who and what I am. I decided, well why go somewhere else to change and make someplace else better? Just stay home and make it better. And primarily that's the reason I never left, but I travel like crazy because I really don't belong here. So I hope very soon not to live here all the time."

“I really want to live in Ghana. I’ve been in Africa at least six months out of the year . . . to see where it is I want to live, although I think it would be Ghana, just because the transition would be the easiest because English is the language there. And there are so many, not expatriates, there’s so many re-patriates in Ghana. So it would be home, so that’s my next trip and I don’t know if it’s going to be the fall of this year, or the early part of next year. It’s depending on the weather, and I really plan to do some searching for an apartment, or land, or something so I can begin that transition of maybe going for a month and coming back because my parents are older and they’re still alive.”

Our waiter comes to the table—Reese orders salmon; I order asparagus with pita points and a tomato bisque soup. I ask about Reese’s parents while we wait for our lunch. She shares that her mother is eighty-two and her father is eighty-five, and that both of them are in good health. “I see a difference in my mother’s memory and so I’m not sure if that’s dementia or Alzheimer’s. She’s finally agreed to be tested, so maybe we’ll learn a little something. But basically a lot of what they’re dealing with is just age related, so they’re basically healthy.” Reese’s parents live just ten minutes from her in their own home. “As long as they’re together, they’re completely self-sufficient. When one of them transitions, they will not be self-sufficient. But the two of them make a whole person.”

I ask if she has made plans for when her parents may not be self-sufficient. She says, “Yes, but they’re fearful plans because I’m fearful of that. I really am. It’s not what I want in my life, but I know it’s what will be in my life. Well . . . I’ve asked my parents their wishes because I think it’s important that the end of their life is lived the way they desire. Neither of them wants to be put in a facility of any kind, so my intent is to take

care of them at home. They have a wonderful home that can--one story can easily be outfitted. I'm in the process of doing it.”

Reese sips her martini, “So mom had hip replacement surgery two years ago in September, and we did a little outfitting for her to come home. They have a beautiful home and I want them to be happy. I plan for them to remain at home.” I ask if she will personally care for them and she says, “I will be the primary caregiver. But my parents’ money will stretch if we keep them at home as opposed to putting them in a facility. You know we can even have in-home care, and it would cost nothing like it would cost if I put them somewhere. Their home is their home. The family can come—my brother and my mom’s sisters. My mom’s sisters just left yesterday but there are enough rooms that they could visit and stay in the guest rooms. My brother could come up from Ft. Lauderdale for the weekend.

“I had help when my mother had her hip replacement, a sitter kind of person, not a nurse kind of person, so their desire is to remain at home. I have wonderful models for that. I have a classmate whose mother has Alzheimer’s and she’s keeping her mother at home, and living there with her mother. I don’t plan to live in the home with my parents unless it reaches the point that I have to. Another friend of mine kept her mother at home, and another friend of mine kept her mother at home, and their mothers were so happy in their own homes.”

Our food arrives. I ask if she believes the choice to keep her parents at home is cultural, since I saw only one or two black people in the assisted living and nursing homes I visited and wondered why. Reese agrees that it is, “Yes. Yes. It goes against our nature to institutionalize family members. And we only do it if we absolutely have to. So

the only way I would do that is if it was life and death, but only then it would be just to go in the hospital and come back. There's no equipment they could possibly need that we couldn't have at home. So yes, I think it's very cultural. We have a history of knowing that we're not always treated kindly, and courteously, and respectfully, and lovingly, and so we've always taken care of our own. Yes, so it's cultural.”

We talk a little about the changes in our own lives as we get older, and we agree that we both feel young. I mention civil rights and women's liberation. Reese says, “Well the black women were always liberated much more than white women to a degree. Not out in the real world but in our culture.” I mull over this unexpected thought.

Reese asks if my tomato basil soup is good. I share that it is good, but not great and ask her if she wants to try it. She declines sharing that she's “not big on tomato based anyway.”

We return to the topic of liberated black women and I ask her if her comment was a generalization. She agrees that it was, but says, “As a whole our group of women tended to be more liberated than, as a whole, white woman. There were some very pioneering white women, that were, you know courageous and strong and liberated even in the midst of all that, so yes, generalizations are typically very not okay--she laughs--they're not.”

I say that social constructs have no basis in fact, including racism and concerns about women's liberation. She agrees, and I state my language displeasure in the phrases “You throw like a girl,” and “You cry like a girl.” Reese says, “Or a sign of weakness—because we're not. If men had to bear the pain of childbirth or menstrual cramps on a regular basis—they can deal with pain--but they didn't have regular pain like menstrual

cramps or whatever. It's known we're not the weaker sex, we are very much so the stronger sex."

Reese's mother told her she was always strong, resisting segregation as "a six-year-old, a seven-year-old, and an eight-year-old. She says, "I think I had always been unwilling to fit into the box that white America wanted to put me in, in that area of segregation. I never fit in to that." I was reminded of my initial phone conversation with Reese where she told me that on her nineteenth birthday, the day Dr. Martin Luther King was killed, she dedicated herself to civil rights and helping people and became "this different child." She says, "I don't know if it would have affected me that way had it not been on my birthday. Because it was, it just solidified the direction I was moving into before it happened. I was just moving in that direction, it wasn't solid, it wasn't definite, and that assassination just defined it all for me and I knew what my path was at that point."

I say that the 1960s was a strange decade, and note that many of us remember the sixties more than we may remember the last thirty years. Reese says, "It was an incredible time, aside from having more assassinations than in the history of this country. You know there was Malcolm X, there was Martin Luther King, there was John Kennedy, there was Bobby, there was--never in the history of this country has there been so many assassinations. As I look back on it, it was probably a paradigm shift with this country because I think the violence has escalated since that era. I think a lot about how those things were handled because I believe in karma to a degree. We control our destiny because there is a karmic influence. There is a karmic influence dependent upon what we do and the actions we take."

Reese says, “I think Trayvon Martin is another example of a shift in the consciousness of America.” In February of 2012, George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager. The incident caused debates on civil rights and racial profiling since Zimmerman, a person of Hispanic origin, claimed self-defense and was found not guilty of second degree murder as charged.<sup>32</sup> She continues, “And so what we do in the aftermath of his murder and the verdict will determine a lot what happens to America in the future. I really believe that. I think that verdict has pointed out the huge disconnect between black and white women. That’s a generalization because we’re not all disconnected, we do have some personal relationships, but you know what I found even in my personal relationships? That the racism in this country so permeates us even on a level of unconsciousness and unawareness that even when we have a substantive meaningful relationship with a white woman, there will always, there is always something. We don’t know what that something is, but when it appears, there is an *it* that then surfaces in a relationship that changes the relationship. We see the white privilege, and we see the distrust, we see the historical distrust, we see all of those things. We don’t know what that *it* is, and it’s different for every relationship and every person. But there is an *it*. For some people in their relationships with white people, the *it* was Trayvon Martin, and they realized they had such different opinions, and that *it* raised its ugly head.”

I share that some of my black friends say they have to prove themselves every day—always well-dressed—always careful.

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<sup>32</sup> Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, “Zimmerman is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Reese says, “And even then, you’re not protected from anything. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, a Harvard University professor is mistreated on the front porch of his home by a police officer and taken to be someone breaking into his own home. I heard someone say, ‘We used to tell our boys not to run; now we have to tell them not to walk fast.’ I heard that on television yesterday, a black man said it. So now we have to tell them not to even walk fast. What’s heartbreaking about that is no matter what we tell our boys we can’t protect them. Cause it’s all substantive. We tell them this, but it depends on the person they encounter. So it’s out of your control and it’s in the hands of a person that you don’t know who does not know you, who may not care to know you. I don’t know how many people have such little control over those kinds of challenges.”

I note that perception is often more real than truth regarding thoughts and beliefs so ingrained in us that we do not even realize we have them.

Reese agrees, “And we don’t question.” We have a discussion about the movie *Crash*.<sup>33</sup> *Crash* is an uncomfortable film that literally crashes individuals of varying races into interpersonal scenarios. These interactions expose the characters’ dark sides and ingrained prejudices, as well as their humanity. Reese owns the movie, but chooses not to watch it. I understand her position. In discussing ingrained perceptions, Reese says, “You are criticized, ostracized, misunderstood even by your own people and your own family. I always marched to the beat of a different drummer . . . I am who I am, and you be who you are. You honor that and you express that however you choose, but people’s lives are so small, people spend more time accessing others than accessing [themselves] and growing from that.”

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<sup>33</sup> *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis (2004; Los Angeles, CA: Lions Gate Films).

We discuss varying cultural realities and Reese tells me a story that stuck with her for seven years. Reese's cousin was an executive in Washington, D.C. The cousin told Reese that her mother was the first female in her mother's family to be affected with dementia or Alzheimer's. The cousin said it had always been the men in the family who got Alzheimer's in the past, and said, we would laugh and tell the boys, 'You all got to worry, and we don't have to worry.'" Reese tells me, "Well her mother, my mother's first cousin was the first one. And so the cousin brought her mother to D.C. to live with her. The cousin would come home from work and you know, she might say, 'I'm tired.' And her mother said, 'What do you mean you're tired? How can you be tired? You've been sitting at a desk all day?' Well her mother did what we called day's work. She went into peoples' homes, white peoples' homes, and cleaned their houses. So, the cousin's mother felt that sitting at a desk you should not be tired. She had no idea of the mental stress of that kind of a high level job."

Reese says, "When I started my own business my mother was very fearful--she had never worked for herself--and she said: "Well, how you gonna get paid? Who's gonna pay you?" My cousin said to me, 'You have to understand that being self-employed is not a part of your mother's reality.' My cousin's mother still doesn't understand, but my mother gets it now. She finally understands that I work for myself, so now that means I'm free all the time." Reese laughs. "I never have to work--so my mother thinks I'm free to come at her bidding." Reese changes the subject to racial profiling.

"Being profiled is not a part of the reality of a white person. So much of my experience is not a part of the reality of a white person, and so white people could never



understand. You can't understand something that is not a part of your reality. I brought activist and writer, Tim Wise, here back in April, and I went online to see what he had written about the Trayvon Martin verdict. Tim has a film coming out in the fall called *White like Me*. I went on to watch the trailer, and then I watched another little piece that went back to the movie, *Black like Me*. Remember? And what's the man's name who played the part? Anyway, it showed clips of it and how he darkened his skin. And what Tim said was, when he read that book in high school he was so intrigued, he thought it was just absolutely the best thing. Then as he got older he realized it really wasn't. He said because it's not about finding out what it feels like to be a black person, it's about finding out what it's like to be a white person, and accepting white privilege. You know you can go and experience the black experience, but until you understand white privilege and how much of a part of your life it is, and how it influences you . . . So Wise said white people don't need to figure out what it's like to be black, they've got to understand what it's like to be white."

I tell Reese that I have thought about this so much, and she says, "What it means to be white?" I say, yes, as well as what it means to be a woman in a man's world, because, if all of us are not free to do what we need to do, and be as strong as we can be, and fail or succeed, they can't either.

Reese agrees, "No they can't."

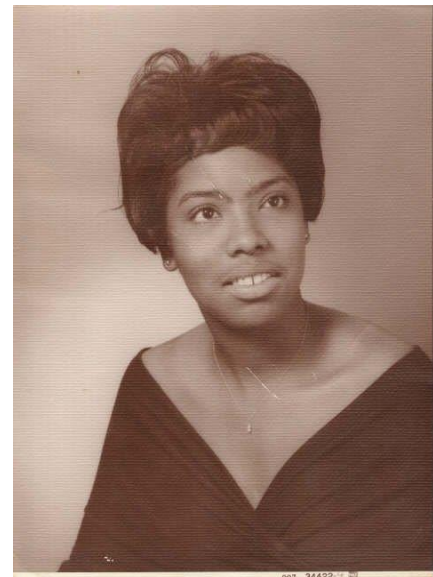


Figure 5: Gwen Reese's Gibbs High School Graduation photograph circa 1966. Photo used with permission.

Since many women who were counter culture in the 1960s were exposed to various movements on college campuses, I ask Reese if she went to college when she was young. She says, “Yes, but I didn’t finish it.” Reese graduated from Gibbs High School in 1966 due to skipping a grade in grammar school. “My parents were not college educated and didn’t have the understanding and the wherewithal and the support that was needed to support me in going to college, so I landed a few scholarships. One was to, believe it or not, University of Florida, and I said, ‘I ain’t goin there.’ The scholarship was in what we call home economics. Once I took the Betty Crocker test and ended up with the highest score at Gibbs High. Then I had the highest score among other high schools, including white, and they offered me a scholarship to University of Florida.”

In spite of the scholarship and the fact that UF was integrated at the graduate level in 1958, Reese said she knew she was not going to the University of Florida because it was so “racist.” Reese notes that she also had a scholarship to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, then shares that her parents, “weren’t able to support her in a lot of that,” so she started summer college at Gibbs with Dr. Johnnie Ruth Clarke. In the fall, Reese went to St. Petersburg Junior College and attended school with white people for the first time in her life. She says, “I had white teachers and it was culture shock. There were about twelve of us, a man who went on to become my first state representative was out there with me. We didn’t know any better, so when we registered for our classes, we didn’t register together for anything. Reese laughs. “Besides being the only black student in every single one of my classes, so I had no safety net. The students weren’t very nice to us.”

“They would shoot spit balls at us in the student union building. If we brought our things in and put them in the cubbies, our books and stuff, they might disappear. But I think what was most, what was the most horrendous thing for me, and the most traumatic for me, was to have Mrs. Hill for a teacher. They told me she was from Mississippi, and she had a very Southern accent. I guess she just did not like black people. She was failing me no matter what I did. I wasn’t failing, but she was failing me. I raised my hand; she’d never call on me for anything. I think the class was English EH110. I’m a very good writer and an excellent speller, but my papers would come back red-lined with comments and a big F on them. I had a white counselor, and I would go to him after every English class just devastated and wanting to drop the class. He advised me not to and I hung in there, and I hung in there, and then I couldn’t hang in there anymore. I dropped the class before I got an F.”

“She was no longer at the school three or four years later. I believe that I understood it to be because of how she treated certain students. Coming from a segregated loving educational environment where we all had the same goal of educating black children because this was our way out--it was traumatic for me. I never had a teacher who did not care, who failed you when you weren’t failing, and who totally ignored you. You were not a person, you were invisible, you didn’t exist, and it was traumatic. I believe that’s why I stopped going to college because the experiences were so negative.”



Figure 6: Reese and daughter Andee. Photo used with permission.

“I graduated from high school a month after my sixteenth birthday. I got married in September, just a few months after my nineteenth birthday in April when Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. Following my marriage I had two beautiful children. I did go back to school at different times.

Bethune Cookman had a satellite campus here and I enjoyed my classes with black professors there. I enrolled in the Program for Experienced Learners (PEL) program at Eckerd-- took my first six-week extended trip to Africa during that time--then stopped taking my courses at Eckerd and just never went back to it. I have probably taken enough classes to have a master’s degree, but I chose not to seek a degree because I didn’t validate the fact that you only count if you have a degree. At one time, I felt the pressure of getting the degree, and then that pressure just went away and I said, *I am capable of accomplishing all that I desire*, and that’s what I’ve done.”

I tell Reese that my experience in college may have been very different than hers. I went from a much protected, segregated environment at Paulinskill Lake in northern New Jersey, to Trenton State College, now College of New Jersey. I attended in 1968 when all the movements; Vietnam War protests, civil rights, and feminist movements were at their heights. I share with her that, luckily, I was introduced to marijuana before attending college, as smoking marijuana gave me instant access to politically left-leaning young people at the college. I laugh and admit to Reese that I did not align with the more conservative sorority and fraternity students, although some of them eventually became friends.

Reese is also a nonconformist, saying, “If there’s anything that says I have to conform, I can’t do it. I was in that era of marijuana—it was a wonderful time. Things

were happening for me, but that was a part of it. It sort of intersected, you know . . . that was probably one of the first times that there were any meaningful relationships across race, and it was for some of those very same reasons that you're talking about. Music and marijuana, and all of that you know so, I think there was some shared experiences in there. Although for me, race was a constant focal point of everything, because in the midst of all of that we were still having the race riots. You know we were having all of these other things happening, the civil rights movement, so much was going on. Vietnam adversely impacted so many African American men. As most things still do.”

I share that Vietnam affected all of us as my boyfriend in high school, and my first husband, were both Vietnam veterans, and note that my first husband died from the cancer-causing effects of Agent Orange. Reese says, “It angers me still to today, because we're still, we don't take care of our veterans. I was just listening to National Public Radio (NPR) and here was one more thing that I didn't know about that veterans have to deal with. And I thought, *if you're going to mistreat the people who gave their lives and limbs and all of that for the sake of this country, then you don't care about anybody, you'll mistreat anybody.* . . . I have a brother who wasn't a real brother. That's a whole part of my life you haven't heard about and maybe won't. But I had this young man who claimed to be as a brother, and he died a year and a half ago from Agent Orange and all that it did to his body when he was in Vietnam. And then I was talking to a childhood friend, his younger brother, and he has lung cancer and a couple of other things and he went to Vietnam. And we talked about how he came back a different person . . . he saw his best friend blown up in a latrine next to him and --I mean just horrendous things, and

I know people are coming back from Iraq, and Iran, and Pakistan, and Afghanistan with some of the same experiences.”

“We love our guns,” I add.

Reese tells me that she finally went to the Vietnam War Memorial noting that she walked along the wall looking for the names of classmates from Gibbs High School who died. She took pictures with her camera of their names on the wall. “I’ll never forget, Milford Jones, I don’t think his family had been up there yet, and I took a picture and I gave it to his sister who is now deceased; she was a pharmacist, and I gave her the picture of his name inscribed on the wall. I go to D.C. a lot, but it took a while before I could finally go there. My brother who is fourteen months younger than I am was at school, I believe at Brandeis University at the time. Maybe he’d left there and gone to the University of Massachusetts, but he was in the Boston area. His draft number was coming up and I remember saying to him, ‘You will not go to Vietnam.’ There was a man who was a Catholic priest who would help people to Canada to avoid the drafts, and I had made the connections so that my brother could go to Canada if his number ever came up. How can you possibly go and die for a country that doesn’t respect you and you don’t have freedom and rights here? Absolutely not. Fortunately, his number never came up.”

Reese and I are silent for a moment, and I share that those times for me, and for some other people I have talked to, stand out so clearly still in our minds because it was such a time of change. Reese agrees.

We share some pita and asparagus and Reese shares her experiences with The Institute for Social Justice, and later on with The National Organization for Women (NOW). Reese says, “I believe, I can’t tell you exactly what year, but it was in the late

eighties because I worked at the YWCA of Tampa Bay for seventeen years, that I ended up developing The Institute for Social Justice.”

She tells me that Dr. Dory P. Hite developed the manual for racial justice for all of the YWCAs of the country, all of the YWCAs of the USA. So Reese came to work for them. She said, “I had the most incredible director and sitting on my desk was this manual for racial justice, and I thought ‘Wow!’ And I just started reading it and going through it, and thought, oh I was so inspired. I went to my executive director and said, ‘I would like to start an institute for racial justice based on this manual.’ Reese’s director told her they would probably be the first YW in the USA to actually start an institute. So Reese started working on what the institute would do, and she ran up against opposition from the board of directors. Reese noted that their primary opposition was that it was going to be called the Institute for Racial Justice. According to Reese they had difficulty with the word racial.” She says, “So I was very bothered and thought, why would you have a problem with this? There’s another story behind that but I won’t go into it. So anyway, I was going to a board meeting one night to present my case for the manual being called the Institute for Racial Justice, and spirit spoke to me very calmly. Luckily I heard, and said this is not a battle worth fighting. Why don’t you just call it the Institute for Social Justice? You know that racial justice is included in social justice along with all the others. So instead of going into the board meeting I told my Executive Director, ‘Why don’t you propose that we call it the Institute for Social Justice?’ Of course, they immediately embraced it, because the word racial was taken out of it. But it didn’t mean we weren’t going to deal with racial justice, they just couldn’t take the name. But anyway, I left the Y in 1999. I’m thinking it was the late eighties, maybe the very early

nineties. I was there for seventeen years and I decided to become involved in the National Organization for Women (NOW).”

“I went to a meeting and it was out towards what’s now the Carillon, it was out going that way somewhere, and I went, and there were not a lot of African Americans there. I’m looking at this one lady, [is her name Lydia?] she is scarred because she was burned, she’s black, and she’s been very active in the movement.” Lydia told Reese there were only about three African Americans who attended the meetings. Reese says, “After my third meeting I became very, very bothered because I realized that even though we were saying that we were working together for women’s liberation, meaning all women-- playing out in those meetings was white privilege and power.” Reese thought, “Hey wait a minute, I’m working for liberation of women, but I’m still dealing with racism in the midst of this liberation of women.” She says she made a few comments at different points, noting that “ it was such close-mindedness, such unwillingness to explore what I shared, and such rigidity in holding on to the white privilege and power within that organization,” that she decided to go back to her black community and focus on race. Then she chuckles, and notes that black men and women are dealing with racism and the gender stuff will come later. Reese felt that if she was going to deal with racism in the midst of the women’s liberation movement; then to her racism was the bigger *ism* to deal with. She says, “that was the end of my NOW movement.”

I tell Reese that individually, for whatever reason, people can be insecure. It just may have been the way independent strong women can threaten some men, that she may have threatened the women in NOW.



Reese agrees with me and tells me about another experience she had at Day Springs, a woodsy retreat across the Sunshine Skyway in Manatee County. She says, “They have butterfly gardens, they have dormitories, they have communal dining. It’s operated by an order of, it’s not Franciscan, but it’s got something to do with that. Anybody can rent it and go there for retreats. I went there for a retreat that the Chamber of Commerce did back in the early nineties and we were dealing with issues around race. So they had a Latino woman, oh I can’t remember her name, she was from Miami, we had a Native American man, we had a white--actually the white man was white Jewish and he teaches African studies at USF in Tampa . . . Roy Kaplan.<sup>34</sup> You should have heard of Dr. Roy Kaplan. Anyway, there was an African American . . . it was an incredible four day retreat, wonderful. We had dormitories, everything is wood and it’s just beautiful there. We ate natural healthy food.”

“I’m having this conversation late one night after everything was over with a white woman, who was she, oh, I know who she was, I’ll say first name Ann, and I won’t say anything else. We were a member of the community alliance together and that was sponsored by the Chamber, and she was asking, ‘Couldn’t we be sisters?’ You know that whole sisterhood thing, and I’d had had that experience. I told her ‘No,’ it just doesn’t happen that easy. You can’t just ask me, ‘Can’t we be sisters?’ and then we’re sisters. That’s not how it happens.” Reese laughs, continuing, “It’s about developing the relationship, developing the level of trust; it’s about developing all of that.” Reese said to her, ““Are you aware of the women’s movement and women’s rights, the fight for the right to vote? And are you aware how the white women dropped us like a hot potato

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<sup>34</sup> H. Roy Kaplan, Ph.D. USF Tampa African Studies Department faculty member. Executive Director of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ). Day Spring is an Episcopalian retreat.

when they realized they could get the vote easier without us than with us?” Reese tells me, “That’s a historical level of distrust that occurs between black and white women. Even if you aren’t aware of that, that stuff is in our DNA you know, so it will surface and you don’t even understand why, but I know why so we need to deal with this.” Reese says, “I’ve had a couple white women want to be there very early in the relationship without doing the work.”

Reese likes the music that’s playing in the restaurant, and the waiter comes by to box our food—we talk about parking meters and avoiding tickets for a moment.

I ask her if there is anything else she would like to share, and tell her that I like her movie choices on Facebook: *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and *Steel Magnolias*.

“Oh you looked at my Facebook? I’ve put up quite a bit lately because I’ve read some wonderful essays. I read something from a young white rapper singer; Guante is the name he performs under. He did an essay . . . on white privilege--and he has to be in his twenties. It was so refreshing to read that from a very young white person, and so I liked it and put it on my page. . . . It was just incredible for him to talk about white privilege and the role that white people have.”

I agree that white privilege definitely exists, but I do not think most people know that.

Reese says, “They don’t. They don’t.”

I share that one of my friends who is currently with the National Organization for Women (NOW) in New York came down to see her daughter at Eckerd College one weekend and stayed at the Don Cesar. I drove out and had lunch with her at the Don, and

noticed that the only black people at the Don were the waiters. I have also noticed their absence on Beach Drive in St. Petersburg, so I ask Reese, “Where are all the black people?”

She says, “There are times when we will go places like that because it’s necessary for our own sense of self, but typically when you’re going out to relax, you want to go somewhere where you’re comfortable. So, if you’ve gone a couple of places and you’re not treated with respect--a friend of mine, where did he go? I need to call him and ask him. It was a restaurant on the beach somewhere. He was treated so rudely I couldn’t even believe it. He was seated with some people, but no one ever, ever, ever came to wait on him, to offer him drinks or water or anything, and then when he complained to management, the management really did not care.” She says, “When you look at us, you don’t know who we are, what roles we have. You see, we’re seen as black people, we could be a physician, a psychologist, or doctor . . . . It was painful, and you know we do this thing where we don’t want to show the pain, so we don’t talk about the pain, we talk about the anger, and we talk about the other emotions. It’s very hard to actually talk about the pain of it. It’s very hard. So it’s easier to say ‘I was offended, I was angry, I did this, I did that,’ and very seldom will we acknowledge the actual pain that it caused to be treated so very poorly, so disrespectfully, as if we were not a part of the human race.” Reese laughs, “Especially when you see people being so wonderful to their animals.”

The checks come; we thank our waiter, and discuss the inconvenience of parking meters. Gwen says that one time she left her hybrid running and it was so quiet that no one heard it, noting that someone could have driven away with it. I share my love of St. Petersburg and Reese says, “I do too.” However, she says she’s had conversations with

some people recently and realizes how ingrained racism is here in St. Petersburg. She says, “I’ve chosen to live here until I choose not to. I like St. Pete; it’s Florida and the United States that I don’t care as much about.”

In terms of senior citizen status, Reese says, “I’m not that—I don’t plan to be that.” For now, Reese will continue to head her company, IFS, a consulting agency with a focus in the various aspects of community engagement and mobilization. She plans to age gracefully and beautifully.

## Chapter Three

### Florida Mermaid—Becky Wilson

Lie with your ear to the ground. Let birdsong trace its complexities onto your eardrum. Walk with your face in the wind, and dive into the cold waters. Listen with your heart. Tell that story.

Susan Cerulean—“Restorying” Florida<sup>35</sup>

Local author, Jeff Klinkenberg, calls Fall Florida’s *Subtle Season*. “Fall in Florida is not going to blind you with electric leaves. As subtle as a dandelion tuft, the season floats along.”<sup>36</sup> This describes fifth generation Floridian, Rebecca (Becky) Day Wilson; subtle, warm, and unconstructed—a quiet, dedicated rebel in the midst of her often more vociferous peers. Her physical presentation is casual: shorts, sandals, comfortable shirts, and loose soft hair. She wears a Celtic necklace that holds a dolphin charm, a gift from her husband Jon. Becky Wilson says the dolphin is her totem, noting that dolphins are “smart, strong, fun, brave, and can beat up sharks.”<sup>37</sup> In 1970, at the age of twenty, she earned four dollars an hour diving in dolphin tanks at the Aquatarium<sup>38</sup> on St. Pete Beach. “The dolphins were like smart dogs. They had self-awareness and could recognize

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Cerulean, “From ‘Restorying Florida,’” in *The Wild Heart of Florida*, eds. Jeff Ripple and Susan Cerulean, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 4

<sup>36</sup> Jeff Klinkenberg, *Seasons of Real Florida*, (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2004), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all quotations in Chapter Three are attributed to Becky Wilson.

<sup>38</sup> Robert H. Brown, “The Aquatarium: AKA Shark World,” *Florida’s Lost Tourist Attractions*, 2006, accessed Sept. 22, 2013, <http://www.lostparks.com/aquatarium.html>

themselves in mirrors—although, their breath smelled pretty bad.” Once, Wilson rode a dolphin for an article in *The Evening Independent*, St. Petersburg’s afternoon newspaper. At the time, that included the following photograph showing her with a dolphin named Thor dropping a rock into her hand. Wilson says, “That was my last bikini—a one piece was just better after that point.”

She notes that swimming is something that started almost before her memories. Once, when she was three, at the Sunset Golf and Country Club pool, she was under



Figure 7: Becky Wilson with Thor at the Aquarium. *The Evening Independent* circa 1972. Photo used with permission.

water so long that someone jumped into the pool to save her. They need not have worried. Wilson identifies herself as a water mammal, acting as a lifeguard and Water Safety Instructor in her teens. Unlike those who may come to Florida, as nature writer Cerulean notes, to vacation, retire, or develop Florida without knowing the land’s *story*, Wilson’s abiding focus never wavered from her deep attachment and love for the waters

of Florida, and the land and history of her beloved St. Petersburg.<sup>39</sup> She says, “I think it gives me a sense of belonging and permanence. I’m proud to be part of this history, even if it was misguided at times. People see Florida as tourists and beaches. I know Florida as rivers, Spanish moss, family picnics, hardwood hammocks and sleepy swamps. I have sand in my shoes [and] socks.”

I interviewed Wilson on two occasions in Snell Isle at the ranch-style home she shares with her husband, retired journalist and current historian, Jon Wilson, and again at Panera Bread on Fourth Street North in St. Petersburg.<sup>40</sup> At the Wilson’s home, overgrown native plants fill the yard and flank the path to the front door. Stacked books, family photographs, and the occasional strolling cat, welcome guests in for a cup of coffee or a glass of wine--French doors open to the backyard patio and pool. Although they have a place in Hendersonville, North Carolina, Wilson has no intention of leaving St. Petersburg where her roots are. In fact, she identifies so strongly with St. Petersburg that she closely guards the secret that she and her brother were actually born in Tampa.<sup>41</sup>

Her grandparents, Francis (Frank) Bruce Duryea and Agnes Wilkins Duryea, came to St. Petersburg in 1912 at the request of Lou B. Brown. Brown had just purchased *The Evening Independent* and he knew Frank as a newspaper businessman in Kentucky. Following Brown’s invite, Frank accepted the position of circulation manager at the paper. I expressed my interest in Becky Wilson’s grandparents, and she shared her photograph of Frank and Agnes with a group of bathers, in her words, “looking cold as

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<sup>39</sup>Cerulean, “Restorying” Florida, 3.

<sup>40</sup> The Snell Island neighborhood is in Northeast St. Petersburg. The former *St. Petersburg Times* is now the *Tampa Bay Times*.

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Nelson was a friend of Becky’s mother. During WWII her mother lived with the Nelson’s in Tampa and worked for Eastern Airlines. Due to their friendship, and her trust of Dr. Nelson, Becky’s parents drove across the bridge to Tampa to have their children delivered.

heck,” as they posed for a 1914 Christmas Day photo in Tampa Bay. One gentleman held a sign saying, “No Blizzards Here,” in classic Sunshine State promotional spin.



**Figure 8: Christmas Day in Tampa Bay circa 1914. Becky Wilson’s grandfather, Frank Duryea, is the second gentleman on the left. Wilson says, “My grandmother, Agnes Wilkins Duryea (a.k.a. Gaga) is the pretty lady right about in the middle with stripes on her hat.” Photo used with permission.**

Wilson shared that her great grandfather, Milton James Bryan, born in 1813, was the first sheriff of Hamilton County “post statehood” from 1845 through 1866. Milton’s son, Thomas Jefferson Bryan, born in 1837, fought in the Battle of Olustee where Becky claims he was wounded falling off a horse. Thomas’ daughter, Carrie Bryan Daye, was Wilson’s grandmother. Carrie’s son was Wilson’s father, Earle W. Day. Wilson notes that somewhere between Carrie and her son Earle; the family dropped the *e* on the end of their last name. She says, “There’s real pride in being a cracker,” and has often joked that her family has shown “a remarkable lack of imagination in not moving out of Florida.” Then she says, “Although it does mean that the sheriff never had to chase us away.” In spite of Wilson’s warm, slightly irreverent joking about her family, they are unquestionably the core of Wilson’s life. Although she did note that none of them



inherited a *cooking gene*, which resulted in lots of eating out. After graduate school, Wilson did not work until after her children were in school, and then notes that when she did work, it was part-time. She confided, “As you well know, even if you work full-time and [the husband] works full time, you end up doing the grocery shopping and the cooking and the worrying about whether somebody’s got a shirt for the play on Tuesday.”

In the late 1960s, Wilson found she was relatively isolated from the feminist and civil rights movements at Stetson University in Deland, Florida, but says that everyone her age was “touched by the Vietnam conflict.” She notes that her “brother was in ROTC at UF, but got a medical deferment,” and her boyfriend planned to “join the army after graduating.” She says, “I was torn between my ideals and my traditional upbringing.” This was true for many of us who attended college during those years. David Farber writes that, “While many . . . have exaggerated the impact of the 1960s on today’s America, those times were explosive and they were the source for many of the changes with which we now live.”<sup>42</sup>

Although Wilson states that she was “wild and crazy” during her college years and says she “broke every rule known to man,” her protests generally consisted of ignoring dormitory curfews and drinking “Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR)” beer. Films like *The Graduate* (1967) spoke to her through the main character, Benjamin’s, “growing disillusionment with the values of his parents’ generation.” Her favorite quotation from *The Graduate* is the famous line in which an adult acquaintance encourages Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) to go into *plastics* now that he is a college graduate. For a person who believes in individuality and preserving the history and natural character of St. Petersburg

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<sup>42</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 5.

as Wilson does, the word *plastics*, as mentioned in the film, represents the antithesis of an environmentally conscious lifestyle. The films, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Easy Rider*, also spoke to Wilson as she says their "common thread . . . [was] conflict with authority. We broke down barriers that had grown up in the 1950s, but with such gusto that some important things might have gotten trampled in the process, like nurturing." Farber states that, "By the early 1970s, Americans of all political persuasions understood that their country had gone through a cultural and political sea change."<sup>43</sup>

The result of the changes Wilson and others of us experienced in our late teens in the 1960s was the lasting desire to be relevant individuals throughout our lives. As noted earlier, women today are often assailed by messages touting the value of youth and beauty, and the concurrent decline expected of those who are aging. How can we avoid the impacts of these messages as they permeate our technologically saturated environment, and have since the advent of televisions and computers? Nonetheless, Wilson celebrated her sixty-third birthday in January of 2013.

Like many of us in our sixties, Becky feels young and prefers to think of this time in her life as the "third" thirties. She says that, "calling it the third thirty helps because it gives me a sense of one more lifespan almost. . . if I can think of [sixty] to ninety as something that's going to happen, I don't feel quite so much like death is breathing down my neck." She says she thinks about the third thirties a lot, noting that, "people underestimate what a big transition it is."

Wilson belongs to several Facebook groups, including one for Northeast High School, which she attended from 1964 through 1967. She says that since she grew up in

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<sup>43</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 263.

Pinellas County, she and her former friends and classmates often reminisce, “Do you remember the A&W? Do you remember Webb’s City?” Then they all share their memories. She remembers growing up in St. Petersburg in the 1950s as idyllic, riding bikes, spending time on the seawalls and going from house to house through the neighborhoods to see friends. Wilson, and others of us who were lucky enough to experience idyllic childhoods, have often questioned our alignment with and participation in, counter culture movements. She wonders, “If the 1950s were as idyllic as everyone says they were . . . why then did we—what were we rebelling against?” She proceeds to answer her own question, noting that “boredom and the lockstep belief [that] everybody had to do the same thing at the same time in the same way [coming] out of WWII.” Farber references Lewis Mumford in his depiction of suburbia as “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances . . . conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.”<sup>44</sup>

However, as an adult attending a gathering with some African Americans of her age, Wilson reminisced that she and her friends had grown up with idyllic childhoods in the 1950s and one of the African American women at the gathering said, “Not for everybody.” Wilson said, “Wow you’re right,” and thought; “*You and I lived parallel lives that never touched, like parallel lines. You were growing up at the exact same time in the exact same city, but never would we meet.*” So, as Wilson’s African American acquaintance noted, this outward conformity only applied to middle-class whites. Farber writes that as the, “national culture of prosperity [became] the great common denominator . . . black Americans became more surely [the] outsiders.” And yet, those of

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<sup>44</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 10.

us in our late teens who participated in the counter-culture movements of the late 1960s know that for a few brief years we had a very human youth-oriented confluence across both racial and economic divides not experienced either before or after. For all of us, the late 1960s remain indelible in our memories, seeming almost fresher than those of our middle years when careers, relationships, and raising children blended the days together.

Wilson is astonished to think of events she feels happened so recently, only to realize they happened fifty years ago. “That just blows my mind every time,” she confesses. She shared that one radio station she listens to plays music from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, so she thought, “okay, modern stuff,” and then realized the eighties were over two decades ago. Wilson is a school psychologist, now working part-time at Tyrone Middle School. She says, “The children I work with, they were born in 2002, I don’t know, they just were born so recently and they’re in middle school. So the numbers surprise me.”

Wilson retired from her full-time job as a school psychologist four years ago noting that she had reached “the maxed-out point,” then she clarifies: “Not because of me, because my job did a huge shift four years ago.” She notes that she and her peers, the experienced school psychologists, had felt proficient and competent and were the leaders of the school psychologists. Then suddenly, the rules changed. Wilson says that the “new kids coming up knew what they were talking about because they got trained at the university level in this new way of doing things.” She felt like she was drowning. A friend of hers said, “We’re the train engineers and we’re laying the track at the same time.” Wilson decided to stay out one year for mental health purposes, and then another

year, and then a third year. Ultimately she found she could actually leave the position, retire, get her retirement checks and still come back and do the same job.

Often, after working thirty or forty years, whether in various positions or in our chosen occupations, those of us in our sixties just get tired, or bored, or overwhelmed by the onslaught of technological changes. Many of us know of someone, a relative, a friend, a co-worker who struggles with career and retirement decisions. When asked about her decision to leave work, Wilson says, “Well, I had no choice, I was crazy,” and shares that she was experiencing *generalized anxiety disorder*. She had a friend, a co-worker, who just started screaming at people and Wilson did not want to be that person. She says “the stress just got huge, . . . [and notes that] what was lost was a feeling of competence.”

During the four years Wilson was away from her core position, she worked as a tutor and found the work pleasing, but missed being the professional on duty. At one point while working at Sexton Elementary School, a teacher accused her of using others’ computers and coming in the wrong door. Wilson says, “Ah, you know, just . . . petty things . . . things you would never ever bring up to a school psychologist [such as herself].” She felt discomfort in having to explain that she needed the computers to do her work, and came in the door in question as she had some heavy items to carry into the school.

Wilson realized she was tired of working for the school system and decided to take classes at North Shore Pool for recertification as a Water Safety Instructor (WSI). She wanted to teach swimming again but found that her age prevented her from achieving this goal. She laughs, “There were thirteen people in the class, and twelve of them were sixteen years old . . . . They didn’t like me, and they wouldn’t touch me, and they didn’t

want to be my partner. In the end . . . I felt like the kid in PE who nobody would pick, and I just couldn't stand it anymore and I quit." Wilson says the experience of quitting this goal made her uncomfortable and surprised her. She said that inside her head she was still an eighteen-year-old lifeguard and she could have just fit in fine, but says "the young people were totally creeped out by me."

Wilson's mother passed away when Becky was fifty-nine, around the same time as she and Jon were transitioning through career changes and challenges. The stress from these events resulted in what she calls a *bump* in their relationship. Wilson notes that her daughter and her son-in-law graduated from college, had terrific jobs, lost the jobs, and "became people who bussed tables and worked in a bakery." She says, "At the time I was thinking of leaving [my job] all these young people were just not getting jobs anywhere . . . economically it was a big mess." Luckily, Wilson's relationship *bump* made her and Jon even closer and served to help them plan for their third thirty.

In caring for her mother before she passed, Wilson realized, "Oh yeah. . . I'm going to get frail, and old, and die, and be miserable, and not able to breathe, and do crazy things, and people are going to have to take care of me." When her children assured her that they would never put her in a nursing home if she did not want to go, she told them that she would never want them to have to make that decision. She jokes that when the time comes we should all stay at the Holiday House on Fourth Street in St. Petersburg—a row of brightly colored little motel rooms. Like Wilson, many of us make jokes about where we will end up when we can no longer function on our own.

When asked what Wilson thinks of the changes and the growth in downtown St. Petersburg, particularly Beach Drive, she says, "All I can say is we cannot believe it. I am

excited to see Baywalk coming back and Beach Drive is just divine. I mean it's so much fun." However, in line with getting older in a town that appears to be getting younger, Wilson says, "I have had thirty-somethings now telling me that they go downtown and it makes them feel old . . . which [she laughs] is pretty funny when you think about it." As far as the proposed Lens design for the pier is concerned, she says, "Stop the Lens, and put something graceful out there." As a volunteer with the St. Petersburg Preservation Society, her husband Jon leads downtown walking tours including an occasional one based on his book, *The Golden Era in St. Petersburg: Postwar Prosperity in the Sunshine City*. Like many long-time residents, she and Jon would have preferred something more in line with Mediterranean revival for the pier. However, we both know that many of the older buildings are being replaced with newer constructions, just as young people are beginning to replace us downtown.



**Figure 9: Becky Wilson holding an early photograph of Central Avenue in St. Petersburg at the start of Jon Wilson's March 30, 2013 walking tour. Photo taken by author.**

I share with Wilson that my husband and I wanted to sit outside and have a wine at Tryst one evening and were told by the young hostess that we would have to wait for fifteen minutes for a table.<sup>45</sup> So—we sat at the bar to wait. At the time, we were the only ones in the bar-- then suddenly the place was teeming with young people and we never did get seated. I have always wondered if we just did not look young enough to be a business draw for the passersby. I told her it felt weird to be overlooked. Wilson says, “yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s the baby boomer in us. How could we have become invisible? We are the . . . baby boomers, we are never gonna be invisible—don’t even think that!”

Wilson is a sunny person with a natural joy in living. She wishes to remain in St. Petersburg and engage in local opportunities and her family’s lives for a good long time. She and Jon say they plan to take their seventh generation Floridian grandsons, Oliver and Henry, in to Mastery’s Bar, the oldest business on Central Avenue, one day. She knows her dad went there and she is pretty sure her grandfather would have, “even though he was a teetotaler.”

In addition to her current professional work as a school psychologist, Wilson has recently been a volunteer at Great Explorations Children's Museum and St. Petersburg Preservation Society. She stays involved in local, state and national politics by volunteering for various candidates.

As I prepare to end our interview, and thank her for her time, Wilson says, “Wait, we haven’t talked about aches and pains.”

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<sup>45</sup> Tryst Gastro Lounge, 240 Beach Drive NE, St. Petersburg, FL 33701.



## Conclusion

Cultural historian, David Hackett Fischer, writes: “[E]very period of the past, when understood in its own terms, is immediate to the present.”<sup>46</sup> Certainly the 1960s, the years when my peers and I were in our teens, is immediate to the present time. We, the aging baby boomers who participated in the feminist, civil rights, and Vietnam War peace movements—youth buffeted by a confluent plethora of culture clashes and previously unheard of freedoms—plan to use our voices for a new cause. Now in our sixties, we are preparing to take on the scariest revolution imaginable, what Theodore Roszak calls, “The Longevity revolution . . . . A revolution [that he believes] may one day be seen as an environmentally imperative stage in the history of our society.”<sup>47</sup>

The upside of participation in this revolution is that humans get to live longer. The downside consists of fairly undesirable physical and health impacts, as well as impacts to peoples’ finances. Perhaps the impacts to pride will be the most uncomfortable, as society’s youth culture and revulsion with aging discount many elders. Luckily, many of the individuals in the baby boom generation are tough and optimistic. Our sheer numbers make us uniquely suited to affect positive political and cultural change as we explore the opportunities inherent in this unique post-reproductive phase of our lives.

As current members of the “new old,” we have seen our parents’ experiences in assisted living and nursing homes and we plan to avoid this type of institutional housing

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<sup>46</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, (New York: Oxford, 1989), x.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Roszak, *America the Wise*, 2.

choice. Most of us wish to age in place, so we can continue to interact with our friends and families, and add value to our communities. Roszak notes that “many politicians and economists . . . see mass longevity as a fiscal calamity . . . [Asking] how can we afford all these people?”<sup>48</sup> Johnson and Schaner counter with figures showing that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, adults aged 55 and older in the U.S. contributed \$161.7 billion worth of volunteering and unpaid caregiving.<sup>49</sup>

In our late teens, my peers and I learned to question authority, including that of our parents, our government, and our religious institutions. Our participation in the 1960s movements, as well as expanded freedoms due to advanced educational opportunities and the availability of birth control, affects the way we see ourselves. We were the first generation to fully realize what it meant to be young. We were also the initial products of mass communication and consumerism. As we age in record numbers, Farber notes that [many] “hope to see this most affluent of senior generations shop its life away by turning it into an unprecedented merchandising opportunity.”<sup>50</sup> However, based on peer discussions, many of us plan to release many of our possessions and downsize to smaller homes and apartments. Diane Craig did just this in moving from a large apartment at Town Shores of Gulfport to a smaller more intimate home.

The key interviewees depicted earlier provide relevant counter-culture voices for their experiences in the 1960s, as well as their current thoughts and concerns. My influence in possibility and unconventional thought came from my fifth grade teacher,

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<sup>48</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of an Elder Culture: Reflections on the Future of America's Most Audacious Generation*, (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2009), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, R. and S. Schaner, “Value of Unpaid Activities by Older Americans Tops \$160 Billion Per Year,” *Policy Briefs/Perspectives on Productive Aging* No. 4, The Urban Institute, [www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311227\\_older\\_americans.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311227_older_americans.pdf). Quoted in a draft manuscript provided by Jay Sokolovsky.

<sup>50</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 6.

Mrs. Payne. In 1963, Payne, a woman so short that she had to peer through her steering wheel rather than over it to drive, asked me to review Madeleine L' Engle's young adult novel, *A Wrinkle in Time*, for our class.<sup>51</sup> This quirky multilayered story introduced me to fractals, tesseract, and the world of possibilities in science fiction, thus forming my life-long addiction with anything related to space. While I watched *Star Trek*, read Isaac Asimov novels, and pondered alternate realities, President John F. Kennedy's goal of upstaging the Soviet space program by landing a man on the moon was already in actual planning. Although Kennedy would not live to see his goal realized, believing in future space travel opened previously unimagined possibilities. Some of those possibilities reached fruition during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969 when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.<sup>52</sup> As the prospects of space exploration altered our perceptions of the external cosmos, rock music and its accompanying drug culture altered our internal thoughts.

Farber notes that when rock music exploded into youth society in the late 1950s and early 1960s, "[The] music defied region, race, and religion, and many young people [including myself] saw it as defining their own separate culture."<sup>53</sup> The Beatles, with their British accents, mopped hair, and irreverent attitudes toward authority, provided the template for our own increasing departures from 1950s norms. The music spoke to many of us as our innocence evolved into experienced despair during the ongoing escalation of events in Vietnam.

By the Fall of 1968, I was participating in war protests at Trenton State College and receiving letters from my boyfriend, who was "humpin the boonies . . . 6,000 meters

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<sup>51</sup> Madeleine L' Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, (New York: Square Fish, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

from Cambodia.”<sup>54</sup> So, even before I left for college, I had begun to question everything I had previously learned from my parents’ positions on politics and acceptable individual behavior, to the teachings of the Presbyterian Church. Farber reflects that, “In the chaotic 1960s marketplace of new ideas, new products, and new responsibilities, a great many Americans—and not just radical protesters—were challenged to find new rules and understanding by which to live.”<sup>55</sup> The aging revolution will also force people to find new rules and understanding for late life.

In lieu of the negative prejudices inherent in the current culture of aging in America, those of us who participated in the culture wars of the 1960s, and many of our peers, refuse to accept these prejudices. In a recent article in the *Tampa Bay Times*, Craig Kopp quotes USFSP Anthropology professor, Jay Sokolovsky, as saying, “[O]ne of the things going on in the United States . . . is a really dramatic redefinition of what late-life human maturity looks like . . . even in the language that we use.”<sup>56</sup> In a recent article in the Job Link section of the *Tampa Bay Times*, “Role Reversal: Millennials as Mentors,” *Miami Herald’s* Cindy Krischer Goodman, writes that, “in a trend called reverse mentoring, companies are pairing grizzled veterans with young up-and-comers.”<sup>57</sup> Grizzled veterans? Perhaps Goodman should have read Bill Maxwell’s article, “The New Fighting Word: Old,” for awareness of negative print language that promotes ageism.<sup>58</sup>

Connie Boyle, a school counselor at St. Petersburg Collegiate High School, says, “You know what? I am not at all personally influenced by what the media in any form

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<sup>54</sup> Private Letter in author’s possession, November 8, 1968

<sup>55</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Jay Sokolovsky quoted in Craig Kopp, “When it Comes to Age, He’s Got Our Number,” *Tampa Bay Times*, December 1, 2013, Floridian 14.

<sup>57</sup> Cindy Krischer Goodman, “Role Reversal: Millennials as Mentors,” *Tampa Bay Times*, October 20, 2013, sec. 3D.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Maxwell, “The New Fighting Word: Old,” *Tampa Bay Times*, July 14, 2013, sec. 3P.

thinks of me in terms of aging. Funny, I never thought about it, but personally I don't put myself in the same category when I see portrayals. If it's funny (especially cards) I laugh and buy them. Lifestyle lifts, I think, oh yeah, I'd look a little better, but it's not worth the risk and money. . . . Everyone else may be getting old, but not me.”

Artist Kathleen Plautz says, “It seems we are among the fortunate seniors to have good health, and good attitudes. . . Peter [Kathleen's husband] and I are enjoying traveling not only the U.S., but the world. Recently while traveling, we took advantage of opportunities to experience adventures such as zip lining, horseback riding and kayaking—and this summer we even went skydiving. . . . We have always enjoyed time with our children and grandchildren at home, on vacations, and during many of our adventures.”



Figure 10: View from Barbara Lewis's condominium at Signature Place. Photo taken by author.

Former teacher and realtor, Barbara Lewis, the woman I met on Jon Wilson’s tour of St. Petersburg has the ultimate aging-in-place retirement location—her recently purchased Signature Place condominium. I met with Lewis at the condominium on April 4, 2013. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Lewis grew up in Miami due to her father’s physics professorship at the University of Miami from 1949 to 1996. In spite of the years she spent in Miami, the family had close ties to Tampa as her parents grew up there. Her grandfather was born in Ybor City and became the first medical examiner in Hillsborough County.

Lewis says, “So, how do I feel about life over sixty? Well it turns out life is wasted on the young because turning sixty coincided with my body requiring attention. You know, things became apparent that weren’t right. . . . It is a big thing. I remember walking into Walgreens, you know I think I had just turned sixty . . . and [the pharmacist] hands me a certificate to transfer a prescription, and I said I don’t have any prescriptions--and boom, suddenly I have prescriptions. What’s that?”

Lewis asked me if I had read a book a few years ago called *The Number*. I said that I had not read it.

She said, “Well the basic premise is that most people have a number and nobody talks about the number, but the number is how much you need before you retire. It’s really well-written and engaging, but in this book is the question, “What would you do if nothing else mattered [ostensibly in terms of things like health and money]? I’m still working on that one.”

Lewis attended Eckerd College from 1966 to 1970, when it was known as Florida Presbyterian College. She shared that, “Growing up on the campus, we were an isolated

community, but we were a community. I think that's where I first sensed community. As a realtor I came to realize that is what everybody craves. The neighborhoods that work: Seminole Heights, Old Northeast, whatever they are over here in St. Pete, the neighborhoods that work are community-oriented." She says "that it took her parents over twenty years to choose their retirement community in Dade City near her sisters and their grandchildren, and they hated it." She thinks a moment and then says, "Well my father died in December, and my mother is predisposed to hate everything, but, it's like a false community."

Just as Becky Wilson calls this time in her life the *third thirties*, Lewis laughs and says, "I call it a two-star tribal elder. You're a tribal elder when you're fifty, when you're sixty; you're a two-star tribal elder." When Lewis told her father her notion of two-star tribal elders he said, 'What are you gonna do with the stars?' Lewis thought about it, and said, "Didn't Wonder Woman have stars?"

Successful aging depends on individuals having a sense of value based on personal autonomy, and a sense of engagement with family and community. Income, genetics, and overall health will also contribute to an individual's ability to age successfully. Yet, over-reaching all other factors will be how perceptions and social constructs view society's elders, including their perceptions of themselves.

Certainly, my peers and I are aware of the current culture of aging, from those who recoil from individuals in late life, to accusations that elders will bankrupt Social Security and destroy the economy. We have witnessed our parents' unpleasant experiences in institutional environments such as assisted living establishments and

nursing homes. Although there will be occasions when all of us will need assistance, there are a number of organizations working on plans and technologies to better service mature individuals.

My mother-in-law, Grace's, brief rehabilitative experience at the Abby Nursing Home on Dr. Martin Luther King Street North in St. Petersburg was not entirely unpleasant. The staff was helpful and attentive, often keeping her company as she ate lunch or dinner, but due to fire codes, she was not allowed to keep the small live Christmas tree we bought for her. Personally, I never wish to live in a place where I cannot have a small live Christmas Tree. This request is small, and seemingly unimportant in the overall picture of successful aging; however, there can be no success if the wishes and the voices of the aging themselves are not heard.

This aspect relates to the dominant themes of all the women interviewed, and particularly to the three featured counter-culture women. First Craig, with her feminist theme of the desire for autonomy versus her longings for love and security--even if that security may mean returning to the sisterhood of the Catholic Church. Then, business professional and activist, Reese's theme centers on the goal of racial equality, even as she faces personal cultural obligations for her parents' late life care versus her personal goals. And finally Becky Wilson, whose theme resonates with the importance of family and place through her generational love of St. Petersburg, and her belief in historic preservation.

In spite of brief mentions regarding health, such as Becky's parting comment about aches and pains, or Barbara Lewis's lament that she suddenly needed prescriptions, noticeably absent were the women's deeper concerns regarding impactful health issues.



Craig laughs when she says her leg is acting up and then notes she has mild arthritis in her lower back.

Discussions on aging will continue to take center stage, particularly as the baby boomers begin to retire. Roszak states that “Longevity is here, it is inevitable, it is good,” and he encourages us to use our extra years as a resource.<sup>59</sup> Leading Anthropologist, Jay Sokolovsky, notes, “Aging need not be thought of only in the catastrophic terms of abandonment and loss but also in terms of the crucial roles that elders play in their kinship and community groups.”<sup>60</sup> As early as the 1950s, urban philosopher, Lewis Mumford, criticized segregating the elderly from children and employment opportunities.<sup>61</sup> Those of us who experienced the upheavals and culture wars of the 1960s plan to remain present and engaged in our communities as the triage on aging continues. Roszak defines his book, *The Making of an Elder Culture: Reflections on the Future of America’s Most Audacious Generation*, as “an exercise in practical nostalgia [that] mines the past to find solutions for the future.”<sup>62</sup> We hope the individual voices in this work will open an avenue for future scholarship in the field of successful late life maturity.

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<sup>59</sup> Theodore Roszak, *America the Wise*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Jay Sokolovsky, *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> Judith Ann Trolander, *From Sun Cities to the Villages: A History of Active Adult Age Restricted Communities*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 242.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of an Elder Culture*, 12.



Figure 11: The author at age 19—Summer of 1970—Paulinskill Lake, Newton, NJ. Photo in author's possession.

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