The Class of ’65:

Boomers at Sixty Recall Turning Points That Shaped Their Lives

A Narrative Approach

by

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Dedication

Writing this dissertation has been a rewarding, arduous and reflective experience. I would have given up a long time ago, were it not for the inspiration, support and love given to me by my family; my advisor and committee; my colleagues; and my classmates. My children, Meghan and Jesse, have been my heart and have kept me motivated to keep learning and to be the best I can be since their birth. They deserve nothing less. Meghan has read every page (several times), and she has made insightful and helpful suggestions along the way. Both have encouraged me not to quit when the prospect seemed very appealing. My husband, Paul, has been there with his technical prowess – helping me to edit, format, and fix computer glitches that threatened to unglue me. My grandchildren, Logan and Ava (and Beckett still in utero) inspire me to work for a more humane, sustainable and sane planet (and they give me hugs and kisses when nothing else comforts me). My brother, Bill, and sister in law, Barbara, have supported me in so many ways: tangible resources, encouragement, editing, and the use of their home in Atlanta as I did my research.

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To all of you, I am so grateful. I don’t know what the rest of the sixties and on will be like, but I am glad to be traversing the terrain with you.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the lives of baby boomers turning sixty as they use narrative to review their past by focusing on turning points. They reflect upon their present, and anticipate their future. The story begins at the St. Pius X High School Class of 1965’s fortieth reunion, and proceeds to a class sixtieth birthday celebration and focus group. In addition, five members of the class record their life stories retrospectively. This research explores issues of identity, both personal and generational; the social construction of aging; grief, loss and death; and resilience, meaning, and spirituality. Methods used are autoethnography, narrative, participant observation, and writing as inquiry.
Four Quartets

Burnt Norton

T. S. Elliot

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
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Chapter One

The Fortieth Reunion - November, 2005

Walking into the dark, restaurant party room is like walking into a time machine that went amuck. Dangling amid the balloons are signs that proclaim “The Class of ’65.” On the walls are vintage pictures of JFK, the Beatles, and advertisements for Villager dresses and Bass penny loafers. Although it is now forty years later, the Platters still belt out “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” I can remember dancing to this at my first boy/girl party when I was thirteen. The lights are low now as they were then. But instead of preadolescent lust, waves of nostalgia and disorientation crash over my aging body. Has it really been forty years since I have seen most of these people? Could we really be almost sixty?

Norene, a bubbly ever-ready bunny, charges me as I cross the threshold with my husband, Paul, at my side. She crushes me in an enthusiastic bear hug. Her husband, Jerome, follows with a warm, but more restrained embrace. Norene and I have known each other since kindergarten, and she and Jerome and I were part of the nerdy/intellectual group in high school. We stand together, the first to arrive, and look at class pictures. They include old yearbooks and campaign flyers promoting the hard fought campaign for president of student government between Norene and me.

Others begin to arrive. I am grateful for nametags, as I wonder who these old people are. In my minds eye, we are still the young, idealistic eighteen-year olds we were when
we crossed the Fox Theatre stage for graduation, not the matronly and balding “mature” people who meander around me tonight.

A tall, elegant looking Jean-Luc Piccard look alike smiles as he walks up to me and gives me a hug. It takes a minute before I recognize the smile and twinkle in the eyes of the once shaggy, brown haired Greg. Our class president - he was tall, lanky and funny. In just a few short minutes, we demonstrate a technique of telling abbreviated life stories that is the dominant evening activity. He recalls how he graduated from Brown and then went immediately to Viet Nam, only to return to find his wife waiting with divorce papers. After struggling for a few years, he regained his footing, and he has had a long and successful military career. Currently, he works at the Pentagon, and was a hundred yards from the crash site on 9/11. His eyes fill with tears as he confides how he pulled bodies from the wreck that horrendous day. After a moment, he perks up as he brags about his two sons and wife.

Dressed in a blue, Hawaiian shirt, Steve joins our small group. He just flew in today after doing relief work in New Orleans in the hurricane Katrina aftermath. “I am exhausted,” he says, “but I couldn’t miss this!”

He looks much the same as he did in high school, still flaunting a full head of hair, although now graying. I introduce him to my husband.

“My wife died a few years ago,” he reports, as if explaining her absence.

“Do you remember when we went to see My Fair Lady together?” he asks.

I don’t really, but I pretend I do. He looks sad, or tired, or both.

Surprisingly, he blurts out, “I wonder if I could have accomplished more with my life.”
I am taken aback by this sudden, honest confession between people who haven’t seen each other for decades. I feel a need somehow to comfort him. I honestly reply, “Yeah, I feel that way sometimes too. Maybe that is just what getting older is about.”

And the story telling dance continues, as we unbosom the successes, losses and regrets of our lives. I move on and say hello to Peggy, who has been a nun since high school. I marvel at her purple flowered dress and red toenails. Things have changed for nuns since our high school days. The required dress apparently is no longer grey or black baggy floor length habits with weird head contraptions that covered any sign of hair.

Determined to make it to all of my classmates, I amble over and introduce myself to three Kathys, sitting together at a table in the back. I don’t remember any of them. They tell me they were the class black sheep. For black sheep, they look great, and they seem to be having more fun than anyone. I silently regret my years of coloring between the lines. I didn’t have the courage to be a black sheep in high school. I was too busy writing away to convents and going to daily Mass. What a wasted youth! At least I tried to make up for it in college, after I threw away the mantle of my rabid Catholicism.

Laurenthia meanders up to the group. She looks sexy with her sleek blond hair and wearing a long décolleté black dress. Wow, I think to myself. She looks great. She must have been reading my mind, as she confesses, “I’ve had plastic surgery.” “Wow,” I say out loud this time. “You look wonderful.”

I look up and notice an elegant woman dressed in a chic blue sheath standing at the entrance to the room. She quietly and with a commanding presence peruses the party. Who is she? I wonder. There is something familiar about her, but I can’t recall her name. As Norene hugs her, the mystery woman smiles. Her dimples give her away. It has to be
Darlene. My sister-in-law asked about her tonight. I remember a multitude of her brothers and sisters also attending Pius. Rumor has it that she is now a respected Atlanta psychologist. I walk up to greet her.

“Darlene, hi! It’s Mary Poole.” “Of course,” she responds. After a few minutes of chatter, we discover that we share an interest in narrative methodology, and she seems genuinely interested in my doctoral studies. She has a face and eyes that pull me in, and I find myself drawn in to her story. But that will have to be another day, as several classmates surround us.

Looking up, I notice a familiar face standing next to me. I scour the recesses of my brain to come up with her name, but she saves me the trouble. “Mary – it’s me, Susan.” We often spent the night at each other’s homes, but I haven’t seen her since she entered the convent after high school. Her appearance shocks me. Instead of the mousy, plain girl I knew, she presents in a gold slinky blouse with dramatic make up and blond, highlighted hair. I wonder if she is still a nun. She answers my question before I get a chance to ask. “I left the convent twenty years ago. I am now married, teaching and living in Virginia,” she recalls. With that, we sit down, and I prepare myself to hear her tale. “You know, I had to leave the convent to become sober.” Now, that’s a story I haven’t heard before, I think. As her tale unravels, she recounts how the entire time I knew her; she was being tyrannized by her father’s alcoholism and abusive behavior. How could I have not noticed anything, I wonder. I remember him as quiet and sullen, but I never observed abuse. I wish I had known and could have been there for her. It astounds me how many of us had devastating secrets that we kept from our best friends. I know I did.
Several of us sit at a table and tell fragments of stories chronicling the last four decades of our lives. Our conversation moves effortlessly from the present, to stories of the past, to hopes and dreams of the future. Just for this night, we exist somewhere between the past and the present, with one foot in the future. No one seems to want this night to end. At the same time, I feel alive and disoriented.

Eventually, we have to come up for air. I look around and notice that the crowd is thinning out, and it is time to go. I was the first to come and I am one of the last to go. Lingering, I pause to say good-by to those few people remaining. On the way out, Greg and Michael, one of the reunion organizers, suggest we start planning a class sixtieth birthday celebration. We all marvel at how quickly the time has gone and agree that we should get together again soon.

The next day, driving down I-75, heading south on my eight-hour drive home, I mull over the events of the night before. Over and over, I replay the conversations of last night and review the changed faces of my classmates. It occurs to me that a class reunion is a unique opportunity to survey one’s life. It provides “an opportunity to constitute an identity, to lay claim to one’s own life, to the right to tell one’s own story” (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2000, p. 57-58). Reunions are “autobiographical occasions” which both reflect our life narratives, and help to create them (Zussman, p. 5). Curiosity about the life stories of my classmates and the need to make sense of my own narrative ignite my desire to find out more. My interest in aging, personal and generational identity, and questions about how we construct lives of meaning and significance add fuel to the fire. It is a propitious recipe for a dissertation. Inspired by this reunion and wanting to know more about my classmates, I set out on an almost two year research project exploring the class
of ‘65’s life narratives. The result of my efforts harvested more than I could have imagined and had an impact on my life that I could never have predicted.
Chapter Two

Prelude: Approaching Sixty

It is early morning, January 1, 2007. I drive to the pier about a mile from my home on a warm, breezy and overcast morning in Safety Harbor, Florida. It is 82 degrees – unseasonably hot for Florida in January. I am sick of sweating.

I pull my car into a handicapped parking space, thanks to the privileges of my Rheumatoid Arthritis. Parking spaces are hard to come by here. This is a popular place for contemplation. I have an unobstructed view of the pier and the white caps churning in Tampa Bay. I am reflective today. It is the time to think of old acquaintances left behind: my parents long gone; my love killed thirty-eight years ago in Viet Nam; my college roommate lost to breast cancer; and my beloved dog, Barracus, who died last summer.

Not only is it the first day of the New Year, but also today, my fellow boomers born in 1947 have begun turning sixty. I am not far behind. My sixtieth birthday looms just over a month away. Last night, as my daughter wished me happy New Year, she said, “I can’t wait to see what your sixtieth year will bring.” Sometimes, I wish I hadn’t encouraged my offspring to be such positive thinkers. I am not feeling quite so positive about my sixtieth year.

As I take inventory on my life today, my overriding feelings are of disappointment and sadness. Perhaps it is just an aging melancholy, but I had high hopes for my life. So did everyone else. As my high school classmate said at my fortieth reunion, “What are
you president of now?” That was what was expected of me. I was a class leader – class
president, president of student government, national merit semi-finalist. Great things
were expected of me. All of the four orders of nuns believed in my promise when I
graduated from high school. Each gave me a full scholarship to their order’s college.

My sixtieth year finds me unemployed (unless you count a graduate teaching
assistantship), financially insecure, in a challenging third marriage, and with two young
adult children who struggle with finding their place. The positive, half full side of me
that is losing the battle at this moment attempts to break through:

“Come on, Mary. You are also finishing a PhD, teaching classes, have
made many contributions by your previous work and your teaching now,
and have two loving children and two beautiful grandchildren with whom
you are close.”

“Yeah, sure;” bleak Mary responds. “But I have little money in the bank;
struggle to be happily married; and am trying at this late age to reconstruct
a career. Who am I kidding?”

This conversation goes on for a while with no clear winner. Sixty screams out to me
demanding an accounting for my life, and it scares the hell out of me. I can’t really
picture myself sixty. I don’t feel old; I don’t think old; though I feel I do look old.
Looking at myself in the mirror shocks and astounds me. Just this morning, as I was
putting forth an effort to apply makeup and concealer to the circles under my eyes, I
stared at my reflection. My hair is stylishly coifed – short and highlighted red. My
reading glasses that I never remove are colorful and young looking. As I smile at my
reflection, I still can see my youthful dimples in my apple cheeks, but dark circles
surround my eyes, and the lids are drooping and creased. Smiling helps. It lifts my sagging jowls. I suppose I could have plastic surgery, but my feminist self balks at the idea, and my bank account laughs at the absurdity.

What shocks me most of all is that I am struggling to feel that there is anything left for me to look forward to—a meaningful, productive future that I can still create. I worry that no one will hire me because of my age, and that I will slip deeper and deeper into irrelevancy. I fear that I will turn into an older person whom people smile at pleasantly and indulge out of good manners.

And then there is the physical aging and decline. Just last week (12/28/2006), the St. Petersburg Times printed an article, “Schwarzenegger struggles with health issues as he turns sixty.” I consider—if this can happen to the ‘Terminator,’ surely it can happen to out of shape me! I comfort myself, thinking that maybe it is because he did steroids. Nonetheless, I worry about routine tests, wondering what disease will eventually get me. And, I secretly read obituaries in the newspaper, looking at the ages of the people who have died. Every time I see someone my age or younger, I shudder. Every time I read about the death of someone in the eighties or later, I calculate how much more time that allows me.

For Christmas, my family gave me a Nintendo DS with a “brain age game.” They tell me it is so I can keep my brain active (as if writing a dissertation isn’t enough). I believe their story, but I also think they are also watching out for themselves—not wanting to care for a senile older person. My first pass through the game, my brain was estimated to be 78. I told Carolyn Ellis, my advisor, this and she laughed. I wasn’t
laughing. I have been working at it night and day, and I now have my brain age down to 37.

I wonder how my high school classmates who also were born in ’47 are doing. I remember them as young and passionate and full of potential. According to the St. Pius X Alumni Association, 95% of my classmates went to college – some to Princeton, Harvard, and the Naval Academy. Although I shared a brief conversation with some last year at our fortieth high school reunion, I find myself wanting to know more. I want to ask how they are feeling as they turn sixty; how their life stories are developing; and what do they anticipate for their sixties and after?

I want to find a way to get honest answers, so that I can tell their stories of living, and aging along with mine. I think perhaps if I am honest, and show them my story complete with disappointments and losses, they will show me theirs. I am hopeful that they and others can find comfort and companionship, and that together we can add to the body of knowledge available about living, creating a life, and aging for this boomer generation and other generations to follow.
Chapter Three

Introduction

This dissertation explores how the boomer generation is confronting the last decades of life, and making sense of the narratives that they have lived. The Class of ’65 is at the cutting edge of the boomer cohort. Born in 1947, they are only the second year to turn sixty. A day doesn’t go by that we don’t hear about another boomer becoming a sexagenarian. In 2006 it was Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Last year it was me, Arnold Swartznegger and Iggy Pop. Eight thousand of us turn sixty a day. Hundreds of books, articles and commercials discuss the lives of boomers, and predict how we will age. It is time for us to tell our own story.

Many of us are dealing with the inescapable losses and disappointments of living, and are reviewing our lives and trying to make sense of them. People do not live to be old without also experiencing loss. Certainly there are gifts of aging – wisdom, contentment, and fulfillment, building a legacy - to name a few. But by the time anyone reaches sixty, we have usually lost our parents, other loved ones, our youth, and possibilities and dreams that never will come to fruition. In addition, we face the inevitable loss of our own lives looming not too far around the corner. We reach our sixtieth year with a lifetime of accumulated losses and the awareness of the inevitability of other losses to come.

At the least, most of us reach sixty with enough years behind us to tell a story. It’s one that began at the end of World War II. As soldiers returned from the war, they
produced babies, lots and lots of babies -- 76 million of them in the years from 1946 to 1964. This trend was bolstered by VA loans for homes and colleges. This generation was the last born before the introduction of birth control pills in the mid-nine-teen sixties. Although researchers usually consider this boom to begin in 1946 and extend until 1964, the first group, the leading edge of the boomers, born between 1946 and 1957, made most of the cultural waves (Gullette, 2004).

This generation of many -- variously referred to as boomers, bulge in the python, me generation, age wave, yuppies -- wields a power in numbers. These numbers manifest in political, cultural and economical impact. Boomers have been and continue to be a huge and powerful market. Besides their numerical dominance, boomers know who they are as a generation, and they know that they are different from previous and subsequent generations. We are the first age cohort to have a generational identity follow them through their life course (Gullette, 2004).

This identity was shaped partially by historical events. We are the first post World War II, post holocaust, post atomic bomb generation. We always have been aware of people’s potential inhumanity and ability to inflict tremendous suffering upon one another. We are branded by the “death imprint” (Lifton, 1999, p. 81-82), living from the beginning of our lives with the awareness of millions of individuals lost in death camps and at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in fear of mass destruction of humanity due to technological advances in weaponry. We also are the first generation born in post modernity, coping with all of its ambiguities and multiphrenia, as Gergen (1991) describes our frenetic state.
The participants in my ethnographic and autoethnographic research project graduated from high school in 1965. Our class is on the cutting edge of the boomer generation. We were marinated in the juices of the civil rights movement, the feminist revolution, the anti-war movements, and seasoned by the idealism of Camelot and “The New Frontier.” John Kennedy was the first Catholic president and because we were all Catholics, he was our president. He spoke to our idealism and challenged us to join the Peace Corps and to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

From the time of our birth, cultural critics, historians, and media representatives have chronicled our every move. Gillon, in his book *Boomer Nation*, says, “Almost from the time we were born, boomers were dissected, analyzed, and pitched to by modern marketers, who reinforced a sense of generational distinctiveness” (Gillon, 2005, p. 5). That has not changed as we age. In the year 2006, daily newspaper articles, movies, and T.V. shows regaled us with the antics of boomers turning sixty and continue to do so today.

Perhaps because of the sheer number of boomers, and possibly because of our generational reputation to alter and challenge personal and institutional practices, there is interest in how this large cohort is going to age, and the impact we will have on institutions, resources and culture. Will we, as we have since 1946, “stretch the limits of America’s possibilities and its resources (Zeitz, 2005, p. 8)?” Every aspect of our lives, from our continued search for satisfaction; life long education (Palazesi, 2004); technology needs (Coughlin, 1999); marketing (Green, 2006); civic engagement (Simson, 2006); religious affiliation and expression (Roof, 1994, 1999; Porterfield, 2001; Sherkat, 2006; Zinnbauer and Pargamet, 1999); is examined and put under the microscope.
In addition, the quality of how boomers are aging is of interest, as is evidenced in the following literature: are we searching for new meaning in adulthood (Montagnimo-Genza, 2005); looking for our eighties to be like our fifties (Mellor, 2005); refusing to retire; and “declining to decline” (Gullette, 2004; Pogrebin, 1994)? Since we are the generation that questioned everything and helped to change the landscape of our culture, are we going to change the face of aging also?

_The Class of ’65 Celebrates Its Fortieth Reunion_

Given all this interest in boomers, it is somewhat surprising that little has been written about boomer life turning points, and how boomers deal with accumulated and anticipatory loss. Perhaps it has only now, as the first boomers turn sixty, become a salient topic. Recently, as I attended a five hour fortieth high school reunion of the graduating class of 1965 of St. Pius X Catholic High School in Atlanta, Georgia, I was struck with the stories of loss I heard from classmates, many I hadn’t seen in forty years. Unlike the twenty-fifth reunion (the only other reunion we had) most classmates weren’t trying to impress each other with their status and successes, but rather wanted to talk about things that mattered at this point in our lives.

Most appeared humbled by the experiences of life that accumulated in sixty years. As I heard story after story of the death of parents, spouses and children, illnesses, loss of jobs and health, and occasionally recovery from addictions, it seemed that most had been leveled by the traumas and inescapable losses of life and were struggling to make sense of them.

My dissertation narrative begins with the story of my fortieth high school reunion. As I made my way around the 56th Fighter Squadron’s party room, just down the road
from our high school, my interactions with my classmates usually began with a few minutes of small talk, and then quickly progressed to life highlights that often centered upon loss. Topics of death and loss emerged in almost every conversation. It was as if given a short time to tell our life stories conversationally, we all chose to focus predominantly on losses and turning points that changed our lives.

I use an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach in my study of turning points and accumulated losses in this group of boomers. I am a participant observer in the shared class events including the fortieth reunion, the class sixtieth birthday bash, and the structured focus group. And I move my narrative and ethnographic lens both inward and outward, recounting my story among the stories of myself and four other classmates. Like them, my points of loss have shaped my life, and my story is impacted by the historical events after World War II and by growing up in the fifties and sixties in Atlanta, Georgia.

My dissertation ends with an analysis chapter that ties back into the literature and that details what I have discovered about this group of aging boomers, the turning points of their lives, and how they find meaning in and cope with aging, death, and accumulated loss. I hope that my dissertation adds to the conversation about the lives and cultural influences of boomers and provides companionship to others as we proceed through the life cycle. Also, my goal is to shed light on the question of whether we will, as some have predicted, use the power of our generation to shape aging and change the way that individuals approach, live and find meaning in the final cycle of life.
Chapter Four

Literature Review

Aging – A Social Constructionist View

The aging experience, like every other lived experience, is constructed by culture. Margaret Gullette, a “cultural critic who studies age issues,” describes a museum exhibit at the Boston Museum of Science:

Access to the open booth was forbidden to people over fifteen. After standing for long periods with remarkable patience, the youngsters sat down inside under bright illumination, faced forward trustingly – and had their portraits taken by an automatic camera. After another wait, their digitized busts appeared on a TV monitor. Then, tapping a button like a VCR remote, each child could rapidly call up simulations of what she or he would look like at one-year intervals up to age sixty-nine . . . In seconds the computer added grotesque pouches, reddish skin, and blotches to their familiar features. (1997, p. 11)

Gullette and others are disturbed by the representation of aging in this exhibit and in our culture, because it reflects the cultural narrative of aging as a continual process of inevitable and ugly decline. “Decline is a metaphor as hard to contain as dye. Once it has tinged our expectations of the future with peril, it tends to stain our experiences, our
views of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments” (Gullette, 1997, p. 11).

The meaning of age and aging is transmitted in large part by the narrative ideas we have absorbed into our consciousness. As Gullette suggests: “It matters whether a given society . . . permits dense, interesting, encouraging narratives about aging . . . Certainly, whichever accounts you and I find ourselves living with and seeing the world through make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness or reluctance to, at any age, grow older” (Gullette, 1997, p. 11).

Since aging is socially and culturally constructed, Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2000) suggest that we are moving into a time of “new, positive aging” ushered in by the boomers who continue through their life course to transform and redefine the narratives and institutions through which they pass. This “elder explosion” allows for a new period of “elder power” which fosters a new aging that is to “re-empower: reclaiming agency and productivity (Gergen, Kenneth and Mary, 2000, p. 9).” The Gergens support this view by their “Positive Aging” Newsletter, and other efforts to tell an alternative narrative to aging. The following is an excerpt from the newsletter that they began:

The newsletter brings to light resources—from scientific research on aging, gerontology practices, and daily life —that contribute to an appreciation of the aging process. Challenging the longstanding view of aging as decline, the newsletter provides resources for understanding aging as an unprecedented period of human development. By focusing on the positive aspects of aging, and the availability of resources, skills, and resiliencies, research not only brings useful insights into the realm of
practice but creates hope and empowers action among older people. By moving beyond practices of repair and prevention, to emphasize growth-enhancing activities, practitioners also contribute more effectively to the societal reconstruction of aging. (2006, p. 10-11)

Aging and the loss associated with it are part of the experience of growing older, but the idea of aging and the value that we give it is constructed by culture, and since it is so constructed, the idea and experience of it can be changed. Social construction is the concept that the ideas we have about anything arise out of the language, stories and values that a culture ascribes to it. This theory grows out of thinking that sees reality as relational and emergent, rather than an objective reality waiting to be discovered. As Dwight Conquergood reminds us, “identity and culture are constructed and relational instead of essential and ontological” (Conquergood, 1985, p.184).

Hacking supports the idea that much of our world is socially constructed, meaning that a great deal of our lived experience, and of the world we inhabit, is to be conceived of as socially constructed. A primary function of the constructionist view has been to “raise consciousness. Social construction is by its nature a critique of the status quo” (Hacking, 1999, p. 6). Constructionists contend that our ideas of anything - gender, race, age – are formed within a matrix that is a complex of institutions, advocates, images, newspaper articles, lawyers, court decisions, media representations, and narratives.

Central to a constructionist viewpoint is the idea of the social construction of the self (Becker, 1973; Gergen and Gergen, 2003; Hacking, 1999), and the nature of the relationship of that self to others (Gergen, 1991; Pearce, 1989). There is a romantic,
modernist, and postmodern concept of the self, as Gergen tells us in *Saturated Self* (Gergen, 1991), and these ‘selves’ reflect the historical moment in which they were formed, and the impact of the culture at that time. In this moment, we are influenced by all of these ideas of the self, but in postmodern times, with the questioning of meta-narratives, there is a breakdown of the concept of the separate, knowable self, and an understanding that the self emerges in the process of time and relationship.

John Updike in his story, “Oliver’s Evolution,” predicts “what we expect of others they try to provide” (Updike, 1998, p. 67). In other words, we all age, but aging is relational and it is difficult to run counter to the expectations and cultural attitudes about aging. Our self-presentation and self-image reflect language, canonical narratives, and cultural values and beliefs. As Pearce (1989) reminds us, “human beings exist on two levels. On one plane, human beings are physical entities just like rocks and trees. Human bodies age, and show physical effects of aging that eventually lead to death. But on another plane, human beings live lives of moral significance in worlds of honor, dignity, and value. When a person dies, it may be a tragedy, relief, or a crime. When they are born, it is never simply a biological event” (Pearce, 1989, p. 24).

A world of objects and creatures exist in a concrete or finite sense, but the significance that we give this world is what is socially constructed. This construction of meaning comes about through language and through relationship. Gergen and Gergen (2000) tell us that “a pivotal assumption around which the constructionist dialogue revolves is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in communal interchange” (Gergen and Gergen, 2003, p. 7). What we take to be true is brought into being by historically and culturally located groups of people. This is a
revolutionary thought because it runs contrary to the positivistic idea that there is an objective reality that can be known, and it creates the possibility of changing the narrative of aging and decline.

In other words, “the events and objects of the social world are not what they appear. They are not external, ‘found’ things. Rather, they are the product of social action whose continued existence depends on their reconstruction in patterns of communication” (Pearce, p. 19). Individuals and cultures swim around in seas of significance and meaning. “How we know anything precedes from an immersion in a paradigm, a way of seeing, knowing and giving meaning. And this paradigm creates realities - “realities and knowledge that comes not from individuals, but from communities - people in relationship” (Gergen and Gergen, 2000, p. 84).

Berger and Luckman (1966) in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality* detail their view of the process by which reality is socially constructed. They explain that “reality” is defined as a “quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition” (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p.1). They explain how the world of everyday life is taken for granted as reality by most members of society “in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p. 20). This reality, a way of knowing and seeing, is learned by a process of primary and secondary socialization, they suggest, that in turn objectifies this reality, and creates a society in which we perpetuate an “ongoing dialectical process of three moments – externalization, objectification, and internalization . . . What remains
sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products” (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p. 128).

This is a profound recognition, because with this understanding comes the awareness that what we experience as meaning and value is not fixed. This comes about through the ongoing constitutive process of communication. Pearce (1989) sums the role of communication in the “constitution” of society in this way:

We consist of a cluster of social conversations, and that these patterns of communication constitute the world as we know it. In this view communication is a primary social process, the material substance of those things whose reality we often take for granted, such as our ‘selves,’ motives, relationships, what we would otherwise describe as ‘facts,’ and so forth. The forms of communication in which we participate either liberate or enslave us; they facilitate or subvert human values. The characteristics of the material universe and the properties of mind are sufficiently different that any number of stories may be told that ‘adequately’ account for the fact. (Pearce, 1989, p. 11)

How we view and experience aging is culturally constituted by the stories we see, hear and live, and by the language that we use to experience and describe it. It has yet to be determined how boomers will experience their elder years. Much has been speculated about how we will change retirement and old age, but since the first boomers have just turned sixty, at this point it is just speculation. As the literature on boomers suggests, there is not one typical boomer. It is my desire that this dissertation sheds light on the attitudes and stories of at least some boomers as they construct lives, age, and absorb and
make sense of the shocks and losses inherent within the human experience. Since boomers are seen as the generation to question institutions and established practices, this research tells a story about how boomers are living and creating narratives of aging and loss.

_Narratives of Aging, Loss, and Death_

Narratives about aging, loss, and death are plentiful. One of the quintessential works is that of Studs Terkel. In the introduction to his book, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken – Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith* (2001), he reflects upon a lifetime concerned with his mortality. He was an asthmatic child and, as he tells the story, his difficulty breathing gave him a sense of fragility in the face of death. At eighty-eight, he recounts how he goes to bed listing those he has lost in his mind, and thinking of them and stories about them. When he awakes, he says, he thinks of the poem by Coleridge:

> I wake up each morning and gather my wits.
> I pick up the paper and read the obits.
> If my name is not in it, I know I’m not dead.
> So I eat a good breakfast and go back to bed. (Terkel, 2001, p. xix)

He recounts how he was reluctant to write about death, but when he began asking ordinary people about it, he discovered that “we reflect on death like crazy much of our lives. The storytellers here, once started on the subject, can’t stop. They want to talk about it; whether it be grief or guilt or a fusing of both on the part of the survivors; or thoughts about the hereafter” (Terkel, 2001, p. xix). He questions, “We as a matter of course, reflect on death, voice hope and fear, only when a dear one is near death, or out of
it. Why not speak of it while we’re in the flower of good health? How can we envision our life, the one we now experience, unless we recognize that it is finite” (Terkel, 2001, p. xx)? He interviews sixty-six individuals about death, and about living in the face of it, and he tells their stories.

Others share their experience of facing a terminal disease, and knowing that death is imminent. Peter Barton, the founder of MTV and a baby boomer, in his book, *Not Fade Away* (2005), writes about his search for meaning, solace and life as he confronts his own death, and reviews his life in the face of it. Due to his illness, he was no longer able to be the wheeler-dealer and successful businessman he had become, so he stayed close to home, hoping to still make a difference there with his family, finding beauty and meaning in the everyday. Conscious of his generational identity, he tells about the irony at the end of his life, when as a boomer he “can now have all the drugs I want; they’re legally delivered to my house; I’m urged to take them in ever greater quantities – and of course I don’t want them at all” (Barton, 2005, p. 182).

Recently, the story of the illness and dying of the Carnegie Mellon college professor, Randy Pausch, has reverberated around the world. His narrative is infectious. He gave *The Last Lecture* (Pausch and Zaslow, 2008) that millions have viewed on Oprah and You Tube. They have read about him in the book of the same name. He chronicles his struggle with pancreatic cancer and living with the knowledge of his death lurking just around the corner. Not since *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) has a story of a dying person been so watched and observed around the world. The response of so many people to Randy Pausch’s story reinforces the awareness that all of us have at least a curiosity about death and many want guides to teach them how to die when the time comes.
Others - such as Anatole Broyard in *Intoxicated by My Illness* (1992), and Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum in *Cancer in Two Voices* (1991), share the journey through the passage from health to illness and life to death. In these narratives and others like them, writers tell their story of letting go of life and accepting their own deaths. Others tell of watching the death of their loved ones, and chronicle their grief at their loss. Joan Didion’s *A Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) is a magnificently gut wrenching example, as is Ken Wilbur’s *Grace and Grit* (1997), and Carolyn Ellis’s *Final Negotiation* (1995).

I am drawn to stories of illness and death like moths to a flame. It is like watching a train wreck – painful, but gripping, and I am torn by the tension of not wanting to go there and compelled to at the same time. I and others like me know that this is a journey that we will eventually take, and we want to know how to do it and find comfort and peace when that moment happens. These stories also inform how we live our lives – appreciating the tenuous nature of life and reveling in the moment.

*Baby Boomers – Past, Present, and Future*

*The Baby Boomers Turn Sixty*

It is a late Monday evening, and I have just returned from teaching. I plop down on my couch to take in some mindless TV to unwind from the day. On my mind is the dissertation proposal and literature review that I have been laboring over, and the commitment I made to turn it in after the holiday break. I intend to get back to the computer, but I need a break from thinking about and researching boomers. Unfortunately, that is not to be tonight. Perhaps it is the same phenomenon that makes it
seem like everyone else is pregnant when you are, but tonight, every commercial seems to be touting someone turning sixty or retiring. First, there is an advertisement for Diane Keaton’s new movie, “Because I Said So,” about a woman turning sixty. Then there is an insipid commercial touting the benefits of some face cream at a birthday party for a woman turning sixty. A party attendee exclaims, “You can’t be sixty!” The next commercial shows an aging Dennis Hopper of “Easy Rider” fame, saying, “We have never done anything like others did – don’t expect me and my generation to retire like others did either.” (This is a commercial for Ameriprise financial planning.) I turn off the TV and get back to my research. The universe is conspiring to get me back to work.

All you have to do is read the newspaper or pull up Google Scholar, and articles and books attempting to define the boomer generation abound. The year 2006 in particular was a banner year for stories about boomers as the first of the cohort turned sixty. On January 1, 2006, the St. Petersburg Times presented narratives of several boomers reaching this landmark age; twice the age that the boomers were quoted as not trusting anyone over. Later in the year (8/26/06) in the same newspaper, Seniority Magazine showcased an article telling the stories of several local aging boomer musicians and self-proclaimed “hippies.”

The Story of Boomers Past

Who are these boomers? First of all they are estimated to be 76 million strong. They are the first generation to watch thousands of hours of TV in their formative early years; the first to go to college in large numbers; the first to see history and a war played out in front of their eyes; the first to look for self-fulfillment rather than merely survival, and “the first generation to have a defined sense of self as a single entity” (Gillon, p. 4).
Boomers were coming of age at the same time across the world. This was not just a phenomenon occurring in the United States. Boomers were demonstrating their effect in Europe, where boomers were called the “Generation of 1968,” in Canada, India and Mexico. In the United States, the earliest boomers turned ten with Eisenhower as their president. We grew up in the Cold War, fearing the atomic bomb and hiding under desks during “A” bomb drills. We also feared communism and Russia was our “arch-enemy”. Going out to eat was a big deal then, and most of us can remember the first McDonald’s, Pizza Hut and television set.

My classmates and I entered our teenage years the same year that the sixties began. The Viet Nam War was already raging, but it wasn’t widely controversial yet. We sweated out the Cuban Missile Crisis and we were fifteen when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. We listened to Buddy Holly, the Beatles, and Hootenanny. As the decade wore on and we grew older, so too evolved the movements of the time: the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement; and the feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies.

This was the context in which the boomer generation came of age. In his book, *Boomer Nation: The Largest And Richest Generation Ever And How It Changed America* (2004), Steve Gillon contends that the boomers have redefined America’s culture, from religion and politics to civil rights, women’s rights and business.

The boomers have been dismissed by many commentators as selfish or self-indulgent, a generation that never had to make the sacrifices of its predecessors in fighting a major war or battling a great depression; a generation that had too much sexual freedom, that invented the ‘Me
decade’ of the 1970s, and that spent a fortune on therapy and ‘self-actualization.’ But this stereotype is short sighted and misses other very different trends that have also been boomer driven -- the explosion of new religious denominations and steady rise in churchgoing; the explosion of charitable giving; the explosion of entrepreneurship . . . Though they pushed the country toward liberalism when they were young, they pushed it right back to conservatism when they grew older. Beneath all the contradictions, there is a strong signal: they have reshaped an entire culture around their own single cohort. (Gillon, 2004, p. 2)

In Gillon’s book, he tells the life stories of six boomers and situates them in the broader social and political developments of the second half of the twentieth century. Gillon is a historian, and analyzes the historical situation of this generation, and how their lives reflect it. Because of boomers’ overpowering generational size, Gillon declares that “it wrapped our culture around itself like no other generation before or since” (Gillon, 2004, p. 4). Gillon breaks up the history of this generation into three stages:

1) The Cult of Youth (1945-1978)

The boomer traits that challenged authority, focused on self-fulfillment, altering institutions, and “making love not war” evolved as we aged into something else. Gillon contends that the “generation that proclaimed the Age of Aquarius is now busy buying and selling the Age of Nostalgia” (Gillon, 2004, p. 290). He suggests that boomers look back on a childhood that existed in ideals but perhaps not reality, and that included a
sense of community and clearly defined codes of conduct. Yet, Gillon explains that this yearning for simpler times is in conflict with the natural boomer individualism and the embrace of the consumer culture. A result of this conflict is the “intense social divisions of the 1990’s and were a product of these internal boomer conflicts” (Gillon, 2004, p. 310).

Joe Queenan (2001) in his book, *Balsamic Dreams*, presents a less flattering picture of the boomers, although he agrees that this generation has changed our culture. Not only did he suggest that we sold out after our proclamation that we wouldn’t, but that we are greedy, ruthless, value conformity, and are mad consumers.

Clearly this refusal to own up to their acquisitiveness is not the boomer’s only broken promise. They said they wouldn’t become crass and vulgar. But they are. The said they would never become horrid conformists. But they are. They said they would not be ruthless materialists. But they are. It was a generation that once prided itself on questioning authority. Now its only questions were referred to authorities like Williams-Sonoma. Their utopian visions of peace, love and understanding had been replaced by balsamic dreams. In the end, boomers didn’t deliver on any of their promises . . . They retreated into the deepest recesses of their surprisingly tiny inner lives. They became fakes, hypocrites, cop-outs, and in many cases, out and out dorks. And the worst thing was: Most of them didn’t realize it (Queenan, 2001, p.13).
While Queenan’s critique is one sided and lacking in historical context and complexity, he does bring up criticisms that resonate within me and other cultural critics as we search inward and outward for this generation’s imprint.

The philosopher and writer, Ken Wilbur, presents another scathing critique of boomers in his book, *Boomeritis* (2002). According to Wilber, "Boomeritis is simply pluralism infected with narcissism." It is the combination of a liberal, egalitarian worldview and a deep and abiding narcissism. He credits this generation with helping to achieve some of the greatest achievements in social justice. He writes:

The Boomers moved beyond the previous cultural stages of traditionalism and ... scientific modernism ... and pioneered a postmodern, pluralistic, multicultural understanding.... And that is exactly why the Boomers spearheaded civil rights, ecological concerns, feminism, and multicultural diversity. That is the 'high' part of the mixture, the truly impressive part of the Boomer generation and the explosive revolutions of the sixties.

(Wilbur, 2002, p. 35-36)

These revolutions, partial as they have been, changed forever our sense of human possibility and refashioned the contours of human identity. But the low part of boomers, according to Wilbur, is narcissism – a generational hubris that proudly called itself the “me” generation. According to Wilbur, this is the tragic flaw of the boomers – a flaw that undermines its contributions and puts into jeopardy the culture it has shaped.

In the book, *Aged by Culture* (1997), Margaret Gullette suggests a more nuanced and contextualized boomer identity, one in which we serve as the “other” to the “x” generation. She says the boomers are “much too heterogeneous to have a single character
or opinion” (p. 44). Yet now, according to Gullette, boomers serve as the “other” in discourse with “x-ers,” stereotyped as gobbling up jobs, resources and power.

“Conservatives use the word boomer to belittle the generation of ’68. Whether they mean the anti-war protesters, counterculture or the druggies; these were small subcohorts, not a generation” (Gullette, 1997, p. 44). She continues, “No previous named cohort has been so dogged throughout life by its label as boomers have been, on so trivial a foundation.” She quotes Karl Mannheim’s work on cohorts, who attacked those who “discover fictitious generational movements to correspond to the crucial turning points in historical chronology. Such fictions are one sided, he warned, like race or national character” (Gullette, 1997, p. 57).

Gullette thinks that the boomer stereotypes are oversimplifications of the individual life stories. Cultural influences on a generation are part of the story, but certainly not all of it. Rather, the “true holy Grail of the social sciences is the embodied psyche in culture, over time” (Gullette, 1997, p. 141). This includes an understanding of the psyche, as well as each interior self and the family influences that blend together to create a life story, bridging the internal and the external influences.

Tom Brokaw in his book, *Boom! Voices of the Sixties* (2007), agrees with Gullette that our unique experiences result in different realities and world-views that grew out of the sixties. He says:

Everyone who went through the Sixties sees it through his or her own distinct prism. The conventional view is that it was a time mainly of flower children and angry protestors, of black power and militant feminism. But it was also
the beginning of the resurrection of the political right, which had been soundly defeated in 1964 (Brokaw, 2007, p. xx).

One way that these differing world-views are reflected is in our expression of religiosity. Wade Clark Roof (1999) concludes in *Spiritual Marketplace: Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, that the boomer generation is so powerful that they have transformed the religious terrain in the United States, and have started trends “that may be altering our most basic conceptions of religion and spirituality, our interpretations of historic religious beliefs and symbols, and perhaps even our understanding of the sacred itself “ (Roof, 1999, p. 3).

In both of his books, *A Generation of Seekers* (1994), and *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), Roof describes the boomer generation as driven by a quest “not so much for group identity and social location as for an authentic inner life and personhood” (Roof, 1999, p. 7). This quest has led the boomers to challenge the traditional forms of religiosity, and out of this has emerged a “remaking of American religion.” The boomer religious quest results in responses ranging from “dogmatism, born again Christians, mainstream believers, metaphysical believers and seekers, and secularists.”

Many boomers shop around for religion, as they do for anything else in our consumer driven culture, and end up with a syncretic buffet of different religious beliefs and practices, different from those of preceding generations. There is also a segment of the boomers, approximately 20% (Porterfield, 2001; Zinbauer and Pargament et al, 1996; Fuller, 2001), who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” choosing to discard institutional definitions and limitations of their ontological grounding. I researched and
described this phenomenon in my M. A. thesis, “Spiritual but not Religious,” from the University of South Florida in June, 2001

People in the United States have always been and continue to be highly religious. “Polls indicate that 94% of Americans believe in God, 90% report praying to God on a regular basis, and nine out of ten claim a religious affiliation” (Porterfield, 2001, p. 3). These statistics have not changed. What has changed, he suggests, due to the boomers, are the ‘soft’ undercurrents: changes in the discourse about God, self, faith, religion and spirituality.

Furthermore, Roof says that religion no longer exists as we once knew it. “Boundaries separating one faith tradition from another that once seemed fixed are now blurred; religious identities are malleable and multifaceted, often overlapping several traditions. Trends and events stretch our imagination, even as we try to predict the direction of religious change” (Roof, 1999 p. 4). It is not uncommon for individuals to shop around as they would for any other need, and form their own particular syncretic form of religiosity made up of bits and pieces from a religion buffet. This spiritual marketplace is preceded by the boomers and their identifiable trademark quest for an authentic inner life and personhood, as well as boomers mistrust of institutions and focus on the individual, and the emphasis on lived religion replacing religious practices.

As Gillon suggested though, boomers are fraught with internal conflict, and the results don’t take a predictable unified path. Roof gives this example.

A few years ago a local newspaper in a Massachusetts town carried two headlines on religious trends, both on the same day and on the same page: ‘Spiritual Renewal Flourishes: People Seek Lessons of Universal Church’
and ‘Religion Influence May Be Fading.’ Many boomers explore varieties of spirituality while others revert to the resurgence of conservative fundamentalism, accounting for the emergence of several thousand-member fundamentalist mega churches (Roof, 1999, p. 4) Amanda Porterfield (2001) in The Transformation of American Religion agrees with Roof that the boomer generation has reshaped the form of religion in the last years of the twentieth century. Most religious scholars predicted a decline in religions in the second half of the century (Cox, 1969). Time Magazine questioned Is God Dead? on its cover (April 8, 1966). Cox and others were later to recant their prediction in the face of undeniable increasing church membership in nondenominational fundamentalist churches.

In his article, “Counterculture or Continuity? Competing Influences on Boomers’ Religious Orientations and Participation,” Darren Sherkat (2002) found that there were three factors influencing boomers’ religious orientations and participation:

1. Traditional agents of socialization (denominations, parents, schools)
2. Life course factors (marriage, divorce, childrearing)
3. Participation in the protest movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s

His conclusions were that all of these factors had an impact on religious orientation and commitments, but that traditional socialization factors have a dominant influence on future religious beliefs and participation.

Boomers have a varied and complex story line describing their coming into maturity and the decades since. Whether we are the idealistic generation that ushered in an era of challenging outdated institutions bringing in an era of social justice and change, the
narcissists described by Wilbur, the sell-out generation railed against by Queenan, or the right wingers represented by Limbaugh and Hannity, it is unquestionable that we have made our mark and that our generation is more complex than can be described in a reductionist, monolithic analysis.
Coming of Age in 1968

My cohort of boomers, those born in 1947, turned twenty-one in 1968 – The Year that Rocked the World (Kurlansky, 2004). Kurlansky states that “There has never been a year like 1968, and it is unlikely that there will ever be one again. At a time when nations and cultures were still separate and very different . . . there occurred a spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits around the world” (Kurlansky, 2004, p. xviii). Kurlansky says that four historic events converged in 1968 to ignite the combustion:

- The example of the civil rights movement; a generation that felt so alienated and so different that it rejected all forms of authority; a war that was so hated around the world that it provided a cause for all of the rebels seeking one; and all of this occurring at the moment that television was coming of age but was still new enough not to become distilled, controlled and packaged, like it is today (Kurlansky, 2004, p. xviii).

It was during this year that Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated and hundreds of American lives were lost in the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War. Looking back, this year significantly affected the path my life took. The events of 1968 shook me to my core, and challenged every belief and loyalty to God and country that I previously held.
The Story of Boomers Present – We Begin to Turn Sixty

In the year 2006, our current President George W. Bush turned sixty, and three weeks later, our most recent past president, Bill Clinton, also reached his seventh decade. According to reports, he was not too thrilled with the experience. “I hate it, it’s true. For most of my working life, I was the youngest person doing whatever I was doing, then one day I woke up and I was the oldest person in the room.” Garrison Keillor, of “A Prairie Home Companion” fame said: “I turned sixty last week and it’s no picnic and anybody who says so is whistling in the dark” (Reuters, August 18, 2006).

Gail Sheehy author of Passages (1984), has a different view. She recounts that “she enjoys the freedom of being in her sixties. Earlier on in life people are bound by roles such as student, apprentice, spouse or parent. But, after 50, we can finally be truly ourselves” (Health News Digest, 2006, p. 12). Along with George and Bill and myself, Arnold Swarzenegger, Suzanne Somers, Diane Keaton, Donald Trump, and Steven Spielberg will also become sexagenarians, along with about 8,000 other boomers a day (Reuters, August 18, 2006).

Sixty is touted as the new forty, according to AARP executive director, Shereen Remez. “You see boomers buying Harley-Davidsons and taking off on a trip, but boomers are also continuing to work because they didn’t save like their parents. They used credit cards” (AARP, July 5, 2006).

Ken Dychtwald, author of several books on aging, including The Power Years: A Users Guide to the Rest of Your Life, says we’ll see huge differences in the way boomers approach this milestone. “The boomers will never think of themselves as seniors. This group is determined to grow old-young” (Dychtwald, 2005, p. ix).
The American Association of Retired persons went directly to boomers to get their thoughts on turning sixty in March and April of 2006. They completed telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 800 respondents born in 1946. The results showed that of these boomers turning 60 in 2006:

Most remained substantially satisfied with their lives (77%), while being optimistic for an even better future and making plans to bring about that result (only 1% saw age as a barrier to achieving their goals); virtually all respondents had some substantial life change they wanted to make (87% wanted to take better care of their physical health), 48% were AARP members, compared with 30% of all eligible boomers; and work was likely to continue to play a major role in their lives (54% were still working, compared with 74% of all boomers, and 14% of those not working planned to go back to work in the next few years.) Thirty-seven percent regarded turning 60 as more significant than turning 50. Twenty-two percent wanted to live to be centenarians, and 9% expected to live past 100. Respondents who were working were more likely to be satisfied with their lives than those not working (81% vs. 60%). (AARP, July 5, 2006)

The AARP also asked boomers in this same interview about their wishes and dreams. One of the generational stereotypes about boomers is that they are idealistic and change agents. However, when asked if they could have anything in the world they wanted for their sixtieth birthday, only 1% asked for world peace. Most asked for health, love, companionship, and money.
In summation, every day new articles and books come out analyzing boomers turning sixty and asking questions about them: how they spend their money; how they have aged; whether they are optimists or pessimists (Riggs and Turner, 2000); their degree of civic engagement (Wilson, 2006); etc. This generation’s power and clout is obvious from the amount of discussion generated by them. Despite their numbers or maybe because of it, there is not just one monolithic way of being a boomer. Boomers have taken and continue to take varied paths, for varied reasons. We can expect nothing else as they age.
The Story of Boomers Future – The Elder Years

Surely, there has never been a generation whose retirement has been so discussed, analyzed, feared, and anticipated. The “boomers are coming” echoed from the halls of Congress (United States Congress, Senate, Special Committee on Aging). The Senate Committee met in 1999 to anticipate what they and others feared would be a crisis to the health care, social security and Medicare systems. Many other congressional hearings have looked at this issue. In 2001, the Senate conducted a hearing before the Special Committee on Aging that addressed long-term care and asked the question, “Who will care for the aging boomers?” Again, in March 2002, the Senate Committee on Aging addressed the “cost crisis of long-term care for boomers.” Many see the aging of boomers as a problem to be solved that threatens our system of health and care, as well as the federal budget (Lee and Skinner, 1999; Knickman and Snell, 2002; Kosterlitz, 2005).

But along with the possible financial crisis of this huge population aging, many have anticipated both the quality as well as the possibility of how boomers might redefine and reconstruct aging (Freedman, 1999; Gergen, 2004; Reynolds, 2003). Everything from our potential drug use - both legal and illegal (Colliver et al, 2006; Paterson, 1999); our travel habits (Muller, 2000; Peddu, 2000); our technology needs (Coughlin, 2005); our housing needs (Waxman, 2001); our degree of civic involvement (Wilson, 2006); and our taste in music (Bums, 1996); has been written about and dissected. On January 6, 2007, a search on Google for “aging of the boomer” generation yielded over 600,000 responses.

Besides health and retirement, the topics written most about boomers are marketing to them and how they will spend their money. Everyone seems to want a piece of the two trillion dollar annual spending action of this generation, touted as “the richest and most
powerful generation” (Gillon, 2004). In the *St. Petersburg Times* two years ago (August 6, 2006, p. 1), an article proclaimed: “Bank on it: boomers are buyers – that’s the theory behind new magazines, Web sites and other media aimed at a generation starting to turn 60.” The article reports that the founder of Monster.com is building an on-line social network analogous to Myspace.com for the boomer generation.

Everyone wants to know what the buying habits of boomers will be (Gist, 1999; Moschis et al, 2000), (Furno-Lamudle, 1994; Morgan, 2002; Turner, 2006). One article, “Marketing to leading-age boomers: perceptions, principles, practices, predictions” (Green, 2006, p.4) suggests that boomers “will not tolerate typecasting, stereotypes, pandering, or ageism.” The author says that boomers will expect stylish products and will want these products to speak to environmental and sustainability values, among others.

Another area of concern about boomers is what the impact will be as they leave the workforce. Conversely, some are concerned that they will never leave the workforce. If and when they do, because of their large numbers, many anticipate a shortage of workers and expertise. Some hope to turn “Boomers into Boomerangs” (The Economist, February 16, 2006). Some progressive companies like Toyota are adapting their workstations to older workers.

In the year 2008, many boomers who considered retiring or who have retired are affected by the economic downturn, and are considering postponing retirement or returning to work. In addition, many of the over sixty crowd are still vibrant and healthy and wanting to make a contribution. Some are postponing retirement; saying they will never retire, or beginning what Marc Freedman recently called “encore” careers,
described in a book of the same name (Freedman, 2007). An encore career combines continued income, meaning and purpose, and social impact. According to John Gomperts, president of Civic Ventures, a think tank on aging and work, almost ten percent of those between 44-70 are engaged in encore careers (National Public Radio, All Things Considered, July 24, 2008), with the projection that more boomers will embrace these careers past sixty.

Though there are many articles and references to boomers aging, I have found nothing about boomers specifically dealing with the accumulated losses of a lifetime; how these losses have affected their life trajectories; and how they are thinking about and feeling about their own deaths. I have found a few references about the process of completing a life review (Butler, 1974; Halevi, 1980; Merriam, 1993), but most of that research was completed prior to the aging of the boomers. An article was written on “The Impact of Multiple Losses on the Grieving Process” (Mercer, 2006) concluding that the grieving process may be even more difficult in circumstances where there are an accumulation of losses.

Boomers can’t do anything without an audience, and aging is no exception. While thousands of articles and books have been written about the graying of the boomers, it seems appropriate that we define our own aging, as we have done everything else. This story is only now beginning to unravel. The middle and ending chapters have yet to be written.

As I reflect upon my life, the losses have piled on over the years. Losses due to the death of friends, loved ones, parents, beloved pets; as well as losses of jobs, youth, mobility, status, and personal power decorate the landscape of my life. And, the older I
get, the more loved ones I lose, and the inevitability of my physical decline approaches.

As I think about my classmates, I know that I can’t possibly be alone in this. All of us have lost loved ones. Most, if not all, have already lost their parents. Some have lost their children. How does one go on? What is the process by which we make sense of these losses, and continue on creating a life, knowing that we will eventually lose even our own lives?

I am surprised others have not explored this aspect of lived human experience. Perhaps, as some of my friends have suggested, I am morbid. But, I can’t help but believe that if we are able to tell our own personal stories of loss, coping and sense-making regarding aging, death and loss; that this will be comfort, information, and companionship to others going through the same experience (which includes everyone eventually). As I approach my sixties and hopefully seventies and on, what comfort it provides me to reflect upon this shared human experience.

A few poets, May Sarton (1991) for one, write about the emotional, evocative and sometimes gut-wrenching moments of loss and aging. Throughout her last decades, she writes about the death and absence of loved ones, and of moving to the “country of old age” (Sarton, 1991, p. 141). Despite the cumulative losses of living to seventy and beyond, she could still proclaim, “I am more myself than I have ever been” (Sarton, 1999, p. 280). I have found comfort in her words, and her story. I hope the stories that I am able to tell will provide comfort to others as they go through their later years, cope with the death of loved ones, and anticipate their own.

In order to re-invent and re-story narratives of aging, we have to face the ‘terror’ that aging portends: death. Attitudes and practices about death have changed somewhat due
to the books and ideas of people like Elizabeth Kubler Ross, and the institutionalization of the hospice movement in our culture in the last three decades. Yet, it still seems that the ideas presented in Becker’s Denial of Death (1973) are still prevalent. Becker contends that “of all the things that move men, one of the most principle is the terror of death” (Becker, 1973, p. 11). William James called death “the worm at the core of man’s pretension to happiness” (Becker, p. 14). In order to live day to day, most humans repress this thought, and throw themselves into their lives.

This repression, however, takes its toll (Piven, 2003). It results in anxiety, compulsions, addictions, and frenetic living -- running away from the basic reality of our existence. It is this frenetic day-to-day living that discourages people from questioning their lives. Becker suggest that to deal with the terror death:

Man throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look. He doesn’t bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces as a beaver does (Becker, 1973, p. 32).

As we get older, it is more difficult to suppress the reality of our own mortality and to face the end of our lives. Reminders are as real as our last colonoscopy and our last friend’s funeral. I hope that by reflecting upon and exposing our experience of the death of loved ones, and thoughts about our own death, that we can begin to live more harmoniously with the human condition of mortality, and find comfort in our waning years. As the story of the aging and coping with loss of these aging boomers unfolds, I attempt to bring into the open the internal conversations and sense making about living with loss and mortality that boomers are experiencing as we begin our sixties.
Reunions

As I began the research for this dissertation, I looked first to see what literature was available about reunions. This was the original site of my re-acquaintance with my classmates and my motivation to tell this story. I discovered that Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi has written the book that all the other sources I found cited – After Pomp and Circumstance: High School Reunion as an Autobiographical Occasion (1998). A sociologist, Vinitzky-Seroussi digs deeply into reunions and their sociological meanings. He says that:

High school reunions, although episodic and unevenly attended, are a critical vantage point from which to make sense of identity in contemporary America. What is most remarkable about reunions is the thoroughness with which they telescope the life course as they bring the present into contact with the past. (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 1998, p. 4)

The occasion of reunions provides for me and for my classmates a critical moment to “open a window” to our past, and to our identity - - both individual and generational. “As stated long ago by Halbwachs, memories are more often than not unfolded and sustained within the right social and spatial context. Hence, rejoining people who shared past times as well as returning to one’s childhood district provides a locus from which questions about who one was stand a chance of being answered” (Vinitsky-Seroussi, 1998, p. 90).

Vinitsky-Seroussi suggests that although reunions only last about five hours and are tightly ritualized, they can have lasting emotional consequences for returnees. I know that was true for me. Returning from hundreds of miles away, and seeing old friends and
acquaintances whom I hadn’t seen for decades brought back a flood of memories and reminded me of the person I was then. The experience threw me into months of reflection and self-evaluation, as I remembered the dreams and goals I had as a high school student, and compared those to what I have accomplished by my sixtieth year.

Vinisky-Seroussi also proposes that reunions are a unique site for the performance of identity, at which our past and present selves come together. He says that reunions act as a mirror reflecting our struggle to maintain a sense of personal coherence and continuity over the life-course. That certainly was my experience at my fortieth reunion, and from my conversations with classmates, the reunion seemed to be a catalyst for a reflective turn inward. Other articles have been written in response to Vinisky-Seroussi’s book (Cahill, 2001; Zussman, 2000) elaborating on his conclusions, and discussing reunions as autobiographical occasions. K. Ikeda chronicled high school reunions and identity in middle America in her book, *A Roomful of Mirrors* (1998). Reunions hold such a place in our culture that they have even been elevated to the heights/depths of reality television with a new show dedicated to reunions. This experience exists in our culture as an iconic symbol of life passages, and my fortieth reunion and the subsequent class sixtieth birthday reunion was an excellent site for this exploration into the life narratives of boomers.
Description of the St. Pius X Class of 1965

The 1965 graduating class of St. Pius the X Catholic High School, located in the suburbs of the growing southern city of Atlanta, had one hundred and forty-eight students, small by today’s standards. It was a racially and ethnically homogeneous group, mostly white European (largely Irish), with no African Americans or Asians and only a few Hispanics. A few miles away, in downtown Atlanta, St. Joseph’s High School was more racially diverse and included African American students. Most students from St. Pius were Catholic and had attended Catholic elementary schools. Almost all of our teachers were members of four orders of nuns: the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the Sisters of Mercy, the Grey Nuns, and the Sisters of St. Joseph. Most students were middle to upper class.

I chose this group because they share many characteristics and a common cultural history. Because I am a member of this group, they also are accessible to me for study. They represent at least one stratum of people who turned twenty-one in 1968, the “year that rocked the world” (Kurlansky, 2005). Reflecting on my life trajectory, coming of age in 1968 had a significant impact on me. I set out on this research to determine what impact, if any, it had on my classmates.
Chapter Five

Methodological Approach

Qualitative/Interpretive Methods

As I began this research, I set out to enter the conversation about the life stories and lived experience of baby boomers turning sixty, specifically my high school graduating class. Setting about this project, I chose to let the questions emerge, employing the technique described by Laurel Richardson, writing as a means of inquiry (2000). Through the process of the writing and transcribing and interviewing, the story took on it’s own life. What emerged were questions concerning turning points, sense/meaning making; aging, loss and resilience. The narratives included coming of age in the fifties, sixties and seventies; the maturation years in the eighties and nineties; and the later years, 2000 and beyond.

To tell this story, I used qualitative, interpretive tools that included autoethnography, ethnography, participant observation, field notes, interactive interviewing, and writing as a method of inquiry. Interpretive methods imply the awareness that there are a multitude of stories and realities, and that these stories are always represented through the lens of the one telling the story. There are, then, multiple narratives, not just one truth that exists about a particular group of people. I do not attempt to tell ‘the’ story, only my interpretation, based upon the stories and data that I was able to glean through my research.
**Procedural Methodology**

Like all stories, this story has a beginning, and for the purpose of this dissertation, it also has an end. The opening occurred as did the idea for this dissertation at the fortieth high school reunion of my high school graduating class. The introductory scene was written based upon my field notes of the reunion; conversations that I had with classmates during the event; and personal journal entries immediately before, during and after the reunion.

The next chapters are the narratives of five men and women of the class of ’65. I sent out a message to the class email list pulled together by the alumni office and the fortieth reunion committee. The list was made up of one hundred and six classmates, and the message announced my project and asked for participants. Several emails came back undeliverable. Seven classmates responded that they would be interested in participating in the study. It was not surprising to me that most of the individuals who responded are classmates who were friends or acquaintances. Only one who responded, and who eventually was a participant in the study, was unknown to me. Of the seven who responded, I used four narratives, plus my own. Two of the respondents who did not participate ended up being too far away geographically, and the other decided not to participate because of concerns that even with anonymity, her situation would be identifiable, and her marriage would be compromised.

After finalizing the participants, I sent out a letter with instructions to the final four. In this letter I identified the procedure, which included telling their life narrative based upon major life turning points, along with a tape recorder and several tapes. Along with this, I sent the IRB approved consent forms. I also reassured them that if they chose
to remain anonymous, I would protect their identity. Two of the four participants (Norene and Jerome) gave permission to use their names. Two did not. Darlene and Michael are pseudo-names.

The results trickled in from June of 2007 until October of 2007. During this time, I personally transcribed the tapes from the recordings. My transcriptions were completed word for word according to the participants recording. I followed the same procedure for my narrative. I recorded my life story based on turning points, and then transcribed it.

During this same time, I was planning and organizing the Sixtieth Birthday Reunion Weekend, with the help of Norene. Again, emails were sent to the class list with information about both events: the celebratory dinner, and the coffee/focus group at my brother’s home. All class members who had identifiable and current email addresses were invited. I relied upon the alumni office of St. Pius X high school, and the fortieth alumni committee for this information.

Also during this time, I traveled twice to Atlanta to have follow-up interviews with the participants. The only person I was not able to conduct a second interview with was Michael, who moved to the West Coast during this time, and was not able to come to the weekend. I did communicate with him by phone and several times by email to ask clarifying questions.

When I interviewed each individual, I focused on turning points, loss, and the experience of and anticipation of aging and death. I conducted the interview process using interactive interviewing. Rather than approach each individual with a previously defined set of questions, I chose to employ the method outlined by Ellis et al (1997) that encourages a conversation that is comfortable, mutual, emotive, and that allows for the
interview to emerge reflecting each individual story, rather than fitting into a preconceived interview structure.

The narrative presented for each participant is an edited version of their transcribed life story. Nothing of substance was edited out. I altered it only for readability and redundancy. Almost all of what is written is in the participant’s own words. Opening and closing scenes and descriptions come from the interviews and conversations that occurred over the course of the research. Each participant was provided with the final draft of his or her narrative. They were asked for their feedback. It was at this point that Darlene told me she wanted to be represented by a pseudo-name. I also sent each narrative participant a copy of my typed, edited and transcribed story, wanting to reciprocate for their efforts and openness they demonstrated by sharing their story.

Intertwined throughout my classmates’ stories is my story, autoethnographically told. Throughout the year preceding my sixtieth birthday, and in the months following, I have been journaling and reflecting upon aging and loss. This is a part of my class story.

At the joint sixtieth birthday party held in Atlanta, Georgia the first week of November, I again took field notes of this experience. The following day, I conducted a focus group with three of the narrative participants, and four additional classmates, plus myself. Two spouses attended the group with their partners, but did not participate. This was a three-hour plus session that occurred in my brother’s home in Atlanta. I recorded this meeting also and personally transcribed the tapes, word for word.

*Interpretive/Autoethnographic/Narrative Methodology*
I work from an interpretive, social constructionist, narrative perspective that focuses on the storied nature of human conduct (Bochner, 200; Bruner, 1991; Denzin, 1997). Stories are multi-voiced, help us to find meaning, and open us up for connection to others. Coles in his book, *The Call of Stories* (1989), shows us what we have to learn by listening to the voice of the other. We learn about our shared humanity and the varied, textual nature of the experience of every day life. We give voice through stories to the experience of previously marginalized groups and previously not easily talked about subjects - like aging, death, dying, and abuse. This interpretive method is concerned with “horizons of human meaning, moral reflection, subjectivity, embodiment, and empathy” (Bochner, 2005, p. 61).

This interpretive/narrative method challenges epistemological and ontological premises of modernism. Denzin says that narrative texts “reject the search for absolute truth and pursue a form of narrative truth that is suspicious of totalizing theory - breaking down, in the process, the moral and intellectual distance between reader and writer” (1997, p. 215). Employing narrative inquiry, we learn how lives and relationships develop communicatively. As social scientists, “we are supposed to be studying people, looking at and trying to understand their lives, and narratives may come closer to representing the contexts and integrity of those lives than do questionnaires and graphs” (Freeman, 1998a, p. 287).

By “thinking with” (Frank, 1995) the stories that we hear, we enter into dialogue with the story. Stories engage the whole person. By the use of evocative, detailed, emotional stories we are pulled in, with our brains, bodies and hearts to the experience of the storyteller. In stories we find ourselves, and in stories we find the other. In stories
we are able to see the “unity of a life, linking birth, the middle, and the end” (McIntyre, p. 17). We are able to create a coherent story, and to make sense of our lives, by hearing others’ stories, and telling our own. Narrative inquiry provides us with the tools to “investigate what we can do with language to create the kind of reality in which we want to live” (Bochner, 2005, p. 14). It gives us the opportunity to turn experience into meaning.

The narrative turn works to help us make sense of life as we age. As we age, we look for coherence, a story line, themes, and meaning. We want to be able to look back on a life and see how to understand it, and see that it has had some purpose. Major narrative theorists have weighed in on which comes first, life or narrative. “Is life narratively structured, or is human narration an ad hoc grafting of story onto experience . . .Life anticipates narrative,” says Bochner (2005, p. 25–26). Crites (1997) tells us “experience calls forth narration” (p. 297). MacIntyre (1981) suggests “experience can’t be severed from narration because we all live our narratives in our lives and we understand our lives in terms of the narratives we live out”(p. 197). And finally, “Narrative form is not a dress which covers something else but the structure inherent in human experience and action “(Carr, 1986, p. 65). In this research, each narrative emerged from the stories the participants told, and individually and cumulatively they illuminate the generational identity and the cultural and social factors that influenced this identity.

Ethical Considerations

Carolyn Ellis (2007) recounts that there are three kinds of ethical considerations when conducting autoethnographic/interpretive qualitative research. The first is the procedural
considerations that are mandated through the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Their procedures were followed and approved before the research began. This is the easier, more straightforward ethical consideration. The other two, situational and relational, are more involved and not subject to hard and fast rules. Ellis defines procedural ethics as “often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” (p. 4). And even more complicated is the concept of relational ethics. Relationship ethics is based upon Carol Gilligan’s ethic of care described by *In a Different Voice* (1982). It asks questions about the ethical responsibilities towards our friends, and “toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves. How can we act in a humane, non-exploitative way, while being mindful of our role as researchers?” (Ellis, 2007, p. 5). According to Gilligan and Ellis, “care” is the ideal to which a researcher must aspire to do ethical research. I set out with the charge of do no harm.

It didn’t seem at the beginning that the ethical issues to this research would be challenging. The participants were adults, volunteers, and in charge of what information they chose to share. Yet, as the tales evolved and it became apparent that the subject matter involved abuse, alcoholism, and family stories with the potential to be hurtful, I struggled with the conflict between my desire to tell the details/truth, and my need to do no harm. Somehow the admonition to do no harm was no longer so cut and dried. I had to face the reality that even with the best of intentions, it was possible that the telling of my story and the stories of the others could result in hurt to others.

My writer’s instinct was to want the story to be authentic and interesting. As I recalled my own story, I realized that if my mother were alive, telling the story about her depression and hospitalization would be devastating to her. Yet, not telling it would
leave out a major moment in my life that shaped my world-view and psyche. The only family left to read this already knows the details. However, I am aware that my classmates will be reading this, and many knew her and now will know her secret. My ultimate decision was to leave it in. I felt there was greater good to be accomplished by exposing that trauma so that readers who may experience a similar situation could benefit from my experience.

You can’t tell family stories, it seems, without also exposing family secrets. Almost every narrative that was told by my classmates exposed secrets that we kept from each other and the world around us as we grew up. And, it is apparent from hearing the stories that the experiences and the secrets caused us pain and kept us separate from each other. Goodall (2005) and Davis (2008) among others have written extensively about this. There is a potential for healing that comes from bringing the dark family history into the light of day.

I struggled with the description of my abuse. Details would be devastating to current relationships, yet leaving it out seemed dishonest and avoiding a life altering experience that has shaped the direction of my adult life. I chose to leave it in, but to disguise the identity of the person responsible to the best of my ability. Still, I feel some anxiety leaving it in. The struggle between authenticity and the mantra “do no harm” is an ever present and dynamic tension.

As I transcribed Michael’s story, I worried about how he would deal with seeing his story in print. He confided that up to the point of this narrative, he had only disclosed the sexual abuse from the priest to his wife and mother. As he told his story forty years later, I sensed a still open wound, and I felt a strong responsibility to not re-victimize.
I discussed this with him and showed him the transcribed story. He agreed to let the story be presented as it was, with a few alterations. His name and the name of the parish were altered, but there are other details that could potentially be identifying, particularly in our small class. I believe Michael felt as I do - that bringing this out into the open gave a face to the trauma that has impacted so many. Knowing that the travesty of sexual abuse by a priest happened to someone I knew in my own parish was viscerally disturbing to me, and I can only believe that it will be so to others. This awareness could help others who have dealt with abuse and possibly create an awareness that could prevent future abuse. Throughout this dissertation, I have been conscious of the readers, particularly my family and classmates and their families. Discussing topics like abuse, addiction and family secrets have the potential to do good, as well as harm.

In addition, as I described my classmates, I worried how they would perceive my interpretations. For example, I felt that it was important to be detailed describing the difference in Jerome’s appearance in high school and now, because it was such a dramatic change. However, I worried that it would offend him to describe his “protruding tooth.” Fortunately, he seems to have a humorous and humble equanimity about his story.

Throughout this research, ethical considerations arose at almost every twist and turn. I felt a responsibility to be honest and forthcoming with my own story, and with the narratives of my classmates. Always, though, the mantra “do no harm” guided my decisions as to what was left in and what was left out. That is a judgment call, and I hope that my decisions that I made along the way were the ones that best met the needs of my research and my participants, their families, and readers.
Truth/truth

As I sat down to recount my story, I am aware that all along I made choices as to what
I included, and what I left out. There were many things that I chose to exclude. For
example, I didn’t include my abortion that I had at thirty-eight. I’m not sure whether that
was because it didn’t alter my life trajectory, or because I didn’t want to alienate some of
my Catholic classmates, who I knew would look dis-favorably upon my choice. I also
didn’t discuss in great detail my divorces, and other life turning points. I couldn’t discuss
everything, and in a life of sixty years, there are a myriad of possibilities.
However, I do know that I, like probably all of my participants, have a natural tendency
to relate my story in a way that makes me look my best. Does that mean my stories and
the stories of my participants are not true?

Many of the leaders in the field of qualitative/interpretive methods have addressed this
question. It is one of the major critiques of narrative/life story writing. Some of my
colleagues conducted several interviews of leading qualitative theorists that are discussed
in an article soon to be published (Tullis Owen, Adams, McRae, Vitale, 2008). In her
interview, Janice Morse argues that truth is “what a person perceives to be right” (Tullis
Owen et al, 2008. p. 8). Denzin also argues that truth in life writing involves a writer's
relationship to an experience, and, as such, becomes constructed and mediated in the
creation of the text. Truth is “contested, partial, incomplete, and always in motion,” says
Denzin. “Every time you return to truth it is different” (Tullis Owen et al, 2008, p. 10).
In a conversation with Jerome, one of my participants, he pondered whether his story would be different at another time and under different circumstances.

Bochner (1997, 2007) address the dynamics of “semantic contagion,” the understanding of past behaviors looking at it through the present. Events and relationships are changed retrospectively as our way of seeing changes with the passing of time. “It is not the ‘facts’ themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings,” Bochner says, “but rather an articulation of the significance and meaning of one’s experiences” (Bochner and Ellis, 2006, p. 86)). Chris Poulos agrees, noting that “By creating a powerful narrative the truth comes through in whether or not the story resonates with a wide variety of people” (Tullis Owen et al, 2008, p. 19-20).

As I used the autoethnographic lens documenting my journey through sixty, I searched for a coherent narrative to the disjointed events of my life, and that of my generation. Interviews with cohorts from the class of ’65 told other stories, and together, using a narrative methodology, we painted a mural for others to see and hopefully to find companionship for their aging experience and their efforts to make meaning of life and death. In the next chapters, you will hear the narratives of members of the class of ’65: Darlene, Jerome, Norene, Michael and myself. After this, the sixtieth birthday weekend unfolds, along with the focus group, followed by the analysis of the results and the dissertation conclusion. My hope is that these narratives and stories help to “teach a lesson in living” (Mandel, 1968, p. 221) that will be helpful to the participants and the readers. Passing into this unknown terrain can be made easier with stories to ease the way.
Chapter Six
Darlene’s Story – “The Rose”

“The Rose” by Bette Midler

Some say love it is a river
that drowns the tender reed
Some say love it is a razor
that leaves your soul to bleed

Some say love it is a hunger
an endless aching need
I say love it is a flower
and you it's only seed

High School

At St. Pius, the class of ‘65 was divided and grouped early on according to our perceived ability. Our cohort, referred to as the advanced class, started ninth grade together, and stayed together through almost all of the same classes for the next four years. We were a bright and feisty group. During our four years, from 1961 to 1965, we experienced the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the passing of the civil rights act, and a shift in the culture and direction of our country. These events transformed us too. We were tight knit, and we got to know each other well as we navigated the terrain overseen by the nuns and priests at our school.

Darlene was not a stand out in our group. I remember her as quiet and demure. Looking back at our yearbook, she poses in our standard uniform with its gold plaid skirt,
grey blazer, and with a white collar peeking out over the lapel. Her young serious face is framed by curly, short, brown hair. Two dimples grace either cheek, suggesting a glimpse of humor underneath the seriousness. This is one of her defining characteristics. I search for adjectives to describe her expression. The one that comes to mind is bemused.

Darlene didn’t run for student government and leadership positions, as did others in our group. Thus, my memories of her are limited. We were acquaintances, but not close. For example, I never visited her home, nor she mine.

One of my defining characteristics at that time, at least in my memory, was a sense that I was far more of a mess than most of my classmates. Hiding underneath my “President of Class” persona was the muck of my family life, and I struggled to keep it hidden from my other classmates. I had an older brother who did the same. We were masters at charade. I developed a refined skill of putting forth a confident, well-put-together mask. I must have been persuasive, because my gifted classmates frequently voted me to leadership positions, which I filled capably, or at least adequately.

Little did I know that Darlene, too, was compensating for a chaotic and troubled home life. I wish I had known. It would have been comforting to me, and perhaps to her. But in the early sixties, people didn’t talk about messy lives. When we walked out of our homes, we were expected to be well put together, on the outside and inside. In my southern, early sixties world, we still wore hats and white gloves, at least to church. Just as we covered our extremities, many of us were adept at covering up our less than perfect home lives.

In my small group of interviewees forty years later, I find that many of us were dealing with alcoholic parents, physical and sexual abuse, and other forms of chaos and
dysfunction. Darlene was one of these. As she puts it, “At thirteen, my life became chaotic at the death of my father. He left my mother with eight children, and while she had such a wonderful personality and got along with the staff and students at school, at home it was not the same. Having been a homemaker her whole life, she was totally unprepared for the set of events that occurred at his death, and the responsibilities of caring for a home and eight children. She leaned very heavily upon her older children, including me, and I wasn’t so happy about it.” Her story unravels, and I am spellbound. She takes me in, and I want to know every detail. At the end, I feel as if we are soul sisters.

*Darlene, Forty Year Later - November 2005*

Standing at the fortieth high school reunion, chatting with various classmates, I look up as Darlene enters the room. I think to myself, “My God, she hasn’t changed a bit.” Dressed elegantly in a stylish silk sheath, she is still thin and girlish, and sporting those pert dimples and the same bemused look. She stands at the entrance to the room, surrounded by people I don’t know or don’t remember, but I remember her. I haven’t seen her for forty years, but my sister-in-law mentioned her and her family just tonight. She said that Darlene was a respected and well-known Atlanta psychologist. “Interesting,” I think, and note to make my way over to her.

A few minutes later, I walk up to her, conscious that I have put on about fifty pounds since high school, and I haven’t weathered the storms of life as gracefully as she. “Darlene, it’s Mary Poole.” I introduce myself. “Of course, Mary,” she responds, with a hug and a smile. We catch up. I tell her about my husbands, my children and
grandchildren, and my late blooming academic efforts. She tells me that she is a psychologist. Passionate about a new found love for narrative, I tell her about my narrative methodology, and she exclaims, “Oh yes, I use narrative in my psychotherapy.”

We find a scholar, William Parry, in common. I am pleased to have made the connection. But, it is not a night for long conversations, and crowds converge, so I move on.

Darlene Tells her Story

Email To Darlene
Mon., 10 September 2007
Subject: I have spent the last two days with you

Darlene,

I have to say your narrative blows me away. I started transcribing it yesterday, taught today, and have been working on it again tonight. I am still not finished, but I wanted to chat with you a moment.

I have to say I am humbled and awe struck with your story. I am sitting at my desk, with earphone and a foot pedal transcriber, hearing your story for the first time. I don’t want to stop. Your story is riveting – and you tell it well. I am also struck by your honesty and openness.

You have had quite a life, and there is so much I want to ask you. I hope that we will be able to get together in the next few weeks. Thank you so much for your generosity with your time and story. I hope that you got mine, which I sent to you last week.

I have been struggling personally this year with turning sixty. It has been an introspective and reflective time. I am finding that I have
to come to terms with some things I wanted/expected that may never happen. The future and possibilities seem more limited now than they use to. Like you, I have illnesses, death, and unmet desires and goals. Maybe it is just because I have lost someone close, but grieving seems to be a significant part of my life experience lately.

More later. Thank you again.

Mary

Tuesday, September 11, 2007, 8:47 AM

Dear Mary,

I read your narrative as well. All I can say is “Ditto.” I have been struck many times with St. Pius graduates at how they overcame private family situations with personal courage and an astounding autonomy. Your story is so touching – I’m so sorry you had to do so much alone when you were so young.

I am now finding turning sixty (in three months) more of an impact than earlier in the year. The choices are more limited and the losses hurt more (time is less, the future is more contained). This is especially true since the first love of my life (who is not my spouse), just called to say he is ill. In my mind, he could never be ill. In my mind he is a vital interesting man with much to contribute. But here in reality, he is entering a suffering that will take from him much of what has meaning
to him. He told me he called to know he was still loved; that that helps him face what he will shortly face. I am very sad for him.

Stay well during this difficult time in your family. I look forward to speaking with you about both autobiographies. Do you plan a group session? That might produce some really interesting findings for a dissertation.

Take care,

Darlene
Darlene Tells her Story

Hello, Mary. I am sorry this is late, but it is also timely, since I just came back from
the funeral of one of my favorite Aunts, who had a life story of her own. Fortunately, her
children recorded it on DVD, so now we all are able to see it.

I never thought anyone would ever ask me for my life story so I am going to try and
make this coherent and probably I will wander a bit. I am glad you said to focus on
major turning points because that makes it a little bit easier.

One of the striking things about being fifty-nine is that there are so many major
turning points; I am not sure which ones to pick out. Being a psychologist, typically we
do these in a timeline beginning at birth and going on from there, but after fifty nine
years, that would take way more than one or two tapes. So, I am going to start with what
really strikes me.

There are two major life events early in my life that probably changed it. One was
when I was eleven. I got rheumatic fever and was in the hospital for two weeks and in bed
for the summer. What changed my life about that was I met people entirely different from
me and I saw a lot of kids who came to the hospital who didn’t do as well as I did. Some
kids died in the hospital. I, on the other hand, went home to just a summer in bed and
then went back to school. I went through some of the teasing that went on from the other
kids because I couldn’t keep up for a few months. What changed my life was that
everyone I dealt with was so nice, and, it was the first time I ever came in contact with
people dying. I lived in a world, at least up till that time, where people just didn’t die.

Which leads me to the next turning point. Two year later, when I was thirteen, my
father died, and I had little preparation for what was to come. It not only changed my
life, but it changed my mother, and when my mother changed, everyone in our family changed. In some ways, my life got a little better, and in many ways, it got a little worse.

As you remember, my mother worked at Pius, and she had such a wonderful personality there and got along so well with students and staff there. At home, she was not such a good leader. She had been a homemaker her whole life, and suddenly had eight children to raise alone.

Shortly after, I was able to go to live in a dorm at Oglethorpe College here in Atlanta, so I wasn’t so close to the stress. My mother leaned on the older children, and I was quite comfortable across the world. Perhaps that sounds selfish, but when you are seventeen years old, you aren’t really thinking about wanting to take care of your younger brothers and sisters.

My next turning point happened there at Oglethorpe. I wrote a short story called “The Congregation of Believers” which was about the death of my father. It was partly autobiography, part fiction. When I was invited to apply for a Ford Fellowship to Harvard, I submitted my short story, and much to my surprise, I won the fellowship.

That opened up my life and my choices. When I went to Harvard, one of the most outstanding things was the sheer number of libraries, and I had a pass to all of them. In addition, I had classes with only four people in them, a personal tutor, and read books and had discussions about the major contributors in psychology. I was very much accepted and my ideas were appreciated there. That encouraged me to apply to graduate school. Fortunately, I was accepted and given a full fellowship to Northern Illinois University.
This was a good thing, because, at the same time, my mother pretty much cut off my funding. I was not doing what she thought I should be doing. She thought I should stay closer to home, and in the south. Obviously, that wasn’t my feeling about it.

I went to Northern Illinois in 1969. Very few women were involved in clinical psychology there then. Women had a very hard time in the program. Many, if not most, dropped out. The vast majority of clinical psychologists then were men. I resolved to be successful and to complete the program in five years, and I did. I did very well clinically, and I did well teaching, and I was the first student to graduate from the program in the five-year time line.

After graduation, I really didn’t know what to do, so I took a year-long post doc at Northern Illinois, which turned out to be very helpful to me. I was offered a job that at the time appeared to be ideal – a tenure earning teaching job in the psychology department at Georgia State. The job offer looked outstanding, but I learned from this one of the major lessons of my life: what looks outstanding may not be.

I walked into a job that was actually a climb up Mt. Everest. I was successful there, and in six years I was promoted and tenured, but there were many problems. I decided to leave behind my tenure and leave on good terms and go into full-time private practice.

Another thing I have learned in my life is that there is a time when things are done and it is simply time to leave; you can’t go back.

So, for the last thirty years, I have been in private practice. I met a business partner who is still with me thirty years later, and to my surprise, I became a corporate mogul, and started Winway Network. We had a very successful business together for fifteen years. Together we built a practice of which I am proud.
This too had its moment when it needed to come to an end. We brought it to a close, although it still exists in name. This last year I reinvented it as the Winway Network and Institute so that it can once again serve corporations, but this time particularly serve people who have chronic illnesses, which is an area of clinical psychology that always attracted me.

In my adult life, there have been many people who touched my life and impacted it. One of them was my first love. I met him at graduate school. He was writing his dissertation when I was in my first year. I had absolutely no interest in him. He seemed really odd. One day, he walked up to me in the library and said, “I saw you at the faculty/student colloquium, and didn’t think I wanted to talk with you because of the conservative way you were dressed. Then I looked down at your shoes and saw that they were old lady shoes laced up with red ribbons. I wanted to find out who was behind those red ribbons.” I agreed to go out with him, and the rest is history. We fell in love. I thought I had been in love before, certainly had dated before, but what happened with Ed transformed that word love for me. In the long run, our relationship did not work out, but we are still very good friends today. We lost a baby together, which is one of the saddest events of my life. I have never had a child, and that is the only true regret that I have in my life.

Recently, I went to the hospital for a minor procedure. One of the nurses there was very admiring of my clothes. I really didn’t think much of them, but she went on and on about them, wanting to know where I got them, etc. She asked me what I did, and was I married, and did I have children. I responded, “I am married, but have no children.” She replied, “I have no children either.”
I said, “Aren’t you sad?”

“No, I am not,” she responded. “Think of it this way. You get to have these beautiful clothes and you probably go on much nicer vacations.

“I answered, “I would trade all of those clothes and all of those vacations just to see the light in a little girl’s eye when I decorate the Christmas tree.”

That is still the truth for me now at fifty-nine. My husband and I have talked about adopting, but I think my husband has lost interest. I may very well still do that.

Many other people have changed my life. Oddly enough, people at Pius shaped my life. Our last year in high school, I took a course in existentialism from Sr. Ann Julie. I learned more in that class than I ever learned in existential psychology in graduate school. I came to find out in later years in college and graduate school what probably most of us didn’t know, and that was what a very fine academic education we received in high school. Also, we were an unusually gifted group of students. In graduate school I was pretty sure that I must have been far above average intellectually, because I was always at the top of my class. However, at Pius, I was just an average student.

I am trying to think about what to say next. Probably a big issue at fifty-nine is health. There was a life-changing event in 1995. I developed a serious illness that was unfortunately a congenital illness that hadn’t been identified. I had spent a great deal of my life dealing with aches and pains, most of which I thought were psychosomatic. At the same time I was dealing with this, my partner and I had written a twenty million dollar proposal. As my illness progressed, we were unable to fulfill this contract. I became more and more ill. It was a very difficult time in my life. I couldn’t work, and I spent my days waking up in the morning, going down stairs, having orange juice, taking medication,

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eating breakfast, and then being so tired I had to lie down and take a nap. I woke up for lunch, took medication, crawled back to bed, and so went my days. After six months, I tried to go back to work part-time, but went back home after half a day, not to return for another six months.

This was a financial disaster. I was single, in my forties, and these were my high debt years. I was financially overcommitted with every reason to believe that everything was going in the right direction. I wasn’t anywhere near the limits of money people were willing to loan me, but I was way over the limits for somebody who was essentially unemployed.

It took a lot to get the practice back on the road. I did, but I should have declared bankruptcy. I was too proud, though, and I sold my home and paid off my debts. Later that year, I met a man I fell in love with and we got married. We lived in an apartment until we could buy a new home. Now, we live in a beautiful home but it is a long way from the city.

That was 1995. It is now 2007. A few years ago, we bought a condominium on the commons in Decatur, just a few feet from where I grew up. I can see the house I grew up in from my back window. It brings me much sadness. The people who bought it have restored it beautifully to its Victorian age glory, and a little girl now occupies the bedroom where I once stayed. It isn’t a happy thing for me to look out at that house. I have grown a lot of shrubbery to block the view.

Despite that, when I am alone here at this house, it is a great place to be at peace. Here, I dream about the future, and am making my next thirty year plan. As I mentioned, my aunt just died at ninety-six, and my mother is still alive at ninety-one. She still travels
around the world and swims almost daily. I have lots I want to do. In September, I am starting a degree in psychopharmacology, so that I will have the freedom to write prescriptions, and to take a full mind, body approach to mental health. I am so lucky. I am still in a field that I love, and have loved since I was sixteen.

Second on my list: I want to learn to play piano. Unfortunately, I am a little tone deaf, but I think it will happen. Most things that have meaning in my life do seem to happen. I have found that when I rely upon the spiritual to pursue the meaningful, everything works out. So, I am going to follow my own philosophy, and find some way to learn to play piano. I also want to learn French, and travel to all of the big and little places I haven’t been – Egypt, the Swiss Alps, Spain, the rest of the US.

So, what do I have to say about my life at sixty? I have some things I am proud of: my profession, my loves, and other contributions. Recently, I led a movement to stop a development of a stadium in my neighborhood, which would have infringed upon a protected blue line tributary of the Chattahoochee River. I am particularly proud of that.

I hope my health holds up. That has been a challenge in my life. I prayed at my aunt’s funeral that I would be physically healed so that I would live as long as my aunt and do what I want to do with my life.

I hope this is helpful. This process has been particularly insightful to me at this time in my life. Thank you for including me in this project.

Recorded by Darlene -- June, 2007.

Transcribed by Mary Poole, -- July, 2007.
Over the weekend in November, 2008 of our class sixtieth birthday party and focus group meeting, I meet with Darlene twice. I have previously read and transcribed her narrative. Even though we weren’t close friends forty years ago, I feel an intimate closeness now that I can only conclude comes from sharing stories. She is supportive of me in my research efforts, even volunteering to be on my committee.

Before the focus group, she calls on the phone, having difficulty finding my brother’s house. I wait out front of his home, climbing the sunken driveway. While I am talking with her on the cell phone, she pulls up in her white Lexus SUV and parks on the street. As she gets out, we hug, and I walk her to the house. She looks much younger than our years, and as apparently is her habit, is exquisitely dressed in a white leather jacket, skirt, and boots. I secretly wonder if she has had plastic surgery, but never get up the courage to ask. Her makeup, as well as her clothes, is meticulously perfect. I am conscious of my own imperfect, somewhat matronly and frumpish presentation thrown together at the last minute.

As my daughter, husband, brother and grandchildren leave to get out of our way, I introduce them all to her. She appropriately “oohs and aah’s” over the children, and we enter the house and join up with our other classmates. In retrospect, I think of adjectives to describe her. Intelligent, witty, attractive, southern, old fashioned, gentile, sad, determined all come to mind. She is all of this and more. As we ended the focus group, she told us all that she has been meditating on being “the white rose,” and that now she finds them everywhere. When I think if Darlene, I see a white rose – beautiful, alive and untainted.
Chapter Seven

Jerome’s Story – “To Live is to Fly”

To Live Is To Fly
Both low and high
So shake the dust off of your broken wings
And the sleep out of you eyes
Shake the dust off of your wings
And the tears out of your eyes.

Townes Van Zandt

High School

Most of my classmates who responded to my call for participants were friends in high school. Jerome was one of them. When he agreed to take part in my research, I was pleased at the prospect of catching up with him. I see him now as he was then in my mind’s eye – short, dorky, with brown disheveled hair. He was smart, caustically funny, and marked by one signature protruding tooth extending out at a ninety-degree angle from the upper row.

We hung out together, patrolling the halls armed by our Student Government ribbons. We had the authority to give detentions, and we reveled in our power. While roaming the halls looking for scofflaws and gum chewers, we laughed and made cynical comments about the “superficial” popular kids. Looking back on it, we had a sense of intellectual superiority that masked, at least for me, our social insecurities.
Jerome was great company. He was brilliant and hilariously funny. He spoke quietly, and his humor was dry and subtle. Similar to me, Jerome was popular in that students liked him, but not popular in terms of a dating partner. We had that in common. I wouldn’t have had an escort to our junior prom were it not for the kindness of a priest/teacher who took pity on me and arranged a date with a recent ex-seminarian. While I was awkwardly making small talk with a stranger at the prom, Jerome went with a mutual friend. My friend later recounted she feared she would be impaled on his tooth if he kissed her. Despite the cruelty of our adolescent judgments, there was something about Jerome that attracted his classmates to him and that made me curious about the story behind his quiet presence and cynical humor.

Fast forward to the first high school reunion our class organized – our twenty-fifth. We were forty-three years old then, and we gathered outside Atlanta, at Stone Mountain, for a cruise around the lake. I was single, had just lost thirty pounds, and was ready to impress my classmates with my mature “hotness.” As the riverboat cruised around Stone Mountain, I stood at the railing catching up with my good friend Norene, whom I have known since kindergarten. As we laughed and talked together, a strikingly tall, handsome man walked up to us, smiled, and said, “Hi, Norene and Mary.” I wracked my brain to figure out who this charming and elegant man could be, but I wasn’t able to come up with a match. Norene quickly responded, “Why, Jerome!”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Gone was the awkward teenager, protruding tooth and all. The three of us stood together in that lovely July night looking out at the stars and telling in short form our life stories. I wanted to kick myself for not noticing Jerome’s potential twenty-five years ago.
That night in 1990 was a magical one, more so for Norene and Jerome, it turns out. As Norene later told me, when Jerome touched her elbow while they stood under the stars that night, “it felt like an electric current went through my whole body.” A few months later, Norene left an unhappy marriage, and she and Jerome were married. This was Jerome’s first marriage. Eighteen years later, they remain together and happy.

Since the twenty-fifth reunion, I have heard from Norene occasionally. Norene and Jerome remain in Atlanta, and I in Florida. Norene is a better communicator over distance than I. She and Jerome invited me to visit them in Atlanta and to stay with them in their cabin in North Carolina. But, my own life was going through its own dramatic turns, with teenagers, a new husband, and making it through the daily muck of life. We didn’t connect in person again until the fortieth reunion.

On the day of the fortieth reunion, my husband Paul and I meet them for lunch at their home in Little Five Points in Atlanta. My brother, who also lives in Atlanta, tells me that Jerome is a well known and respected. Founder and president of a top renovating company, Sawhorse Construction, and specializes in rehabbing older, distinctive homes. As we pull up to his address, we find his home in the hub of the “hippie” inner city area of downtown Atlanta. Curious about what his abode will look like, we walk up to the front door of a simple, older, two-story home. Norene greets us at the substantial dark wood door, with Jerome standing close behind.

We greet each other warmly. After hugs, I follow behind them as they lead us up to the second floor, where they live. As they head up the stairs, I look closer. Although they have been married eighteen years, this is my first time seeing them together. They walk quickly. Norene is first, and Jerome follows behind, with his hand placed gently on her
back. They seem younger than their fifty-eight years - fit, vibrant, and happy. Jerome, if anything, is more handsome than ever. Wearing what looks like a pair of starched jeans and a Sawhorse denim shirt, white hair tops his still slim, stately body. There is still something unassuming and unpretentious about him. Norene and Jerome guide us around their home. I don’t know what I expect, maybe something more obviously grandiose perhaps, but I am struck with its elegant simplicity.

I look for signs of their personalities. There is little if any clutter, unlike my home. In their workout room - well equipped with weights, a Stairmaster, and rower, I notice a wall of framed album covers. On closer look, I see familiar faces. Looking back at me are the likes of Kris Kristofferson, Towns Van Zandt, Bob Dylan, and Tom Waits, to name a few. In a later discussion I find out that a sound track plays behind Jerome’s life story, as it does to mine. That is a common ground. Like many in our generation, music has reflected and shaped our life experiences.

After chatting for a few minutes, we walk a few blocks to the Newsroom, a lovely New Orleans style outdoor restaurant. We sit there at our black wrought iron table for over two hours, under a warm blue sky in November, drinking beer and sharing our life stories. Jerome’s story blows me away. I marvel at how little I knew about him back when we were roaming the halls of St. Pius X.
Jerome’s Story – Random Conversations

Dictated by Jerome, June, 2007

I don’t know where to begin. I guess I’ll start with one of my favorite books, The Incredible Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera. In this story, a major love affair turns out because one doctor caught a cold and the other doctor filled in for him. I have thought a lot about how we may think that we are in control of our lives, but it is the decision to turn left instead of right at the street that may change our whole life. Looking back on my story, I can say that has been true for me.

The first turning point isn’t really about me. It concerns a hole in the fence. My mother had a job and an apartment shortly after World War II. She found a shortcut to work by going through the hole in the fence by the tracks at the railroad yard. By taking this path, she met my father. If there hadn’t been a loose board in the fence, my mother wouldn’t have met my father, and I wouldn’t be here.

Clearly a milestone would be my birth in 1947. The situation I was born into was not the best. My father was physically and emotionally abusive to my mother and to my siblings and me. My sister told me that once while I was sitting in my high chair, my father threatened to shoot me. From what she tells me, I was just banging my cup on the top of the chair, and the noise bothered him. She grabbed me out of the chair and hid me in the woods until he cooled down.

We lived near a Benedictine monastery, and my mother worked there. She went to the monastery and told the monks what was happening. At this time, women were often counseled by priests to do what you had to do to make the marriage better, and to stick with it no matter what. Fortunately, this was not the case for my mother. The monks at
the monastery responded to her complaints by saying, “There is nothing you can do except get on a plane and get away from this guy.” They actually bought airline tickets for my mother and younger brother and sisters to leave my father. This change impacted us on many levels. It may have saved our lives, but it also had a negative economic impact on my family. No doubt, moving to Columbus, Ga. near my mother’s family changed the course of my life also.

We were only there a couple of years, until we moved again, this time to Atlanta, Ga. The biggest significance of this move for me was that it brought me from a small town to a larger city. My mother worked two jobs after our move, and we were latch key kids. It was my responsibility to watch over the younger kids.

Moving to Atlanta opened me up intellectually. We lived near a bookstore in downtown Atlanta, which revealed a library of books that I didn’t know existed. By the time I was nine, I had read William Burroughs, Naked Lunch. I read a whole section of literature that clearly was not being taught in my parochial school. It opened me up to another world. I had been a reader all of my life, and the books I read from that store in particular had a profound effect on how I looked at the world.

One of the effects was that I began questioning the Catholic Church. At about eleven, I went to see the parish priest, to talk to him about some of my doubts.

“You know,” I said, “I can accept a lot of this stuff, but I can’t accept all of it.”

The priest pointed to a stained glass window. He said, “You see the stained glass window?”

“Yes,” I responded.
He continued, “You know if you throw a rock at the window right in the middle, it will break.”

“Yeah it will,” I responded, wondering where he was going.

“You know if you hit it in the corner, it is still a broken window. It’s the same way with faith. The way it works with the church is you are all in or you are all out,” he finished.

“I guess I am out,” I said to myself. And so it was, at eleven years old, I became a covert atheist. When it was put into that perspective by the priest, it was easy for me to make a clear-cut choice.

College was another one of those experiences that altered the trajectory of my life in so many ways. First of all, I was able to go to Emory University, which would have been financially out of my league, but because my mother worked as a secretary there, my tuition was free. And, while there, I became an athlete for the first time. Between high school and college, I grew six inches. My new height brought me new confidence and new skill, and I began playing soccer. I played intramural sports throughout college. It was while playing soccer that I jumped up to hit a ball, and the rascal playing against me knocked my feet out from under me and I hit my head and was knocked out. This was followed by a couple of other concussions in my senior year in college. Nothing serious, but little did I know that this random event would keep me out of the Viet Nam War, a war in which so many of my peers lost their lives, or if they lived, their lives changed forever. At the time of the concussion, I was very irritated with the guy who hit me. Afterwards, I look back and I would like to know his name so I can go thank him.
One night, not long after graduating from college, I walked into a bar, and that happenstance again altered the direction of my life. There used to be a wonderful bar in Atlanta, long since gone, called the Stein Club. This was quite a place. Walking in, you would see people sitting around the tables playing chess. Other nights, they had limerick and spelling contests. It was a very offbeat place.

One night, I walked into the Stein Club and sat down at a big table in the center of the room. People drank beer, got slightly drunk, and philosophized and argued about things. I sat down at the table, looking for a friend of mine. I got into the middle of a conversation with someone who said they wanted to go down the Colorado River. The guy sitting next to him said, “If you want to kill yourself going down the river, you don’t have to go as far as Colorado, you can go to north Georgia. The Chattooga River in north Georgia is one of the most difficult white waters in the country.”

At that time, which was pre-Deliverance, not a lot of the locals knew where the river was. It took me about three weeks before I found it and was in the river with a friend of mine. Unfortunately, neither of us had any understanding whatsoever of paddling, but somehow we went down the river and survived. It opened up an entire world to me that I cherish to this day—the outside world of white water and backpacking that in so many respects has supplanted the Catholic Church as my religion.

Another conversation in a bar not long after that changed my life in ways I could never have expected. I was sitting talking with my girlfriend. It had been a long day, and we were both tired. My girlfriend was working and going to graduate school, and I had been working without a vacation since grammar school when I had my first job as a paperboy. Somehow, the result of that conversation was we both quit our jobs. She
dropped out of graduate school, and we decided to drive across the country. That put us on the road for about ten months. It opened a way of living that changed how I viewed the world. I went for a period of ten months where there was no set routine. Because I had a limited amount of money, I had to get jobs when I could. One thing I found out was that I really enjoyed working in industrial parts of town. And, surprisingly, I really enjoyed working in factories as a day laborer. I felt very comfortable in the rough and tumble world of factories. When I was in college I thought I was going to be a lawyer, but I never had my heart in it.

After coming back from the trip, I decided I was going to go back to school and get some kind of advanced degree. But, before I did, I was going to go on one last two week hiking and canoeing trip. I was sitting on my bed putting on my hiking boots – the jungle boots that my brother, a Marine, had given me when he came back from Nam. As I slid on the boots, my phone rang, and a friend of mine called me and told me he had a job working at the General Motor’s plant. “You really need to come out,” he said. “I think I can get you a job here for a few days. This is the most amazingly weird place I have ever been. Most of the people are crazy. And, I think you would really enjoy coming out. I am working on some machinery.” I had no intention of going, but he talked me into it.

So, on a whim and at the persuasion of a friend, I went to the plant. I decided to postpone my canoeing adventure and ended up working one night in a very crazy atmosphere in a plant for which I had no training.

That first night, I talked to the people I was working with and made a few suggestions about how they could do their jobs better, which was fairly cheeky since this was my first night. Since I was just a laborer, they were probably just as impressed that I
could read as I could talk. And, all I needed to do was to work for a week, go canoeing, and then go back to what I had expected to be in my middle class life. I told myself, “Just a few days, a few weeks, and then I will get either an MBA or a law degree and go forward with my life.”

One thing, as they say, led to another. Over a period of time, I was requested to stay for another day and then another day and then I was asked to take over this particular project, not knowing any of the background. And it ended up that I took a job that had me travel around the country in Europe and Canada; in an occupation that never in my wildest dreams had I thought that I would be involved in. I became a project manager. I worked in warehouses and had the privilege of working with mob run unions. I had the freedom to observe a lot of organizations. If I had not taken that call, I think I would have probably had a much more pro forma middle class career. That one phone call and my decision to ‘postpone’ my camping trip moved my life in a totally unexpected direction.

Years later, still working with this organization, I returned home to Atlanta exhausted on New Year’s Eve. I had been working in Europe, and I came home late and went to bed. At 11 o’clock, I awoke to banging at my door. My sister then dragged me out of bed, and told me I needed to have some kind of a social life, and made me go to a party with her.

I walked into the party half asleep and saw this woman standing in front of me. I was astounded that she was so beautiful, and there wasn’t a guy standing beside her. That was one of the great loves of my life, and it was significant as a turning point. When I met her, I was working in Europe and had reached burnout. I had a highly stressful job with no particular reason to quit it. One day, I was sitting in a café in Rome, working on
a project, and I thought that life was too short and decided to quit that job and come back to Atlanta. If it had not been for her, I probably wouldn’t have come back to Atlanta then. The relationship with her didn’t last, but my relationship with Atlanta did. I bought a house in an old neighborhood, and fixed it up on the side. I also acquired some rental property and had a reasonably successful career acquiring and fixing up property.

Then I went to a workshop, which would be another turning point in my life. I ran into a guy and he happened to be the owner of a construction remodeling company. We started talking, and we became friends. His problem was that his construction company had grown, but he didn’t have management skills and I had management skills but not too many technical skills. Within a matter of six months, I was president of his company. If I hadn’t gone to the workshop, if I hadn’t sat down at that particular seat, I would not have met Carl, and I would have not ended up the president of a remodeling company. I am not sure where I would have ended up, but I would not have had the job that I have had for the last nineteen years.

The next big turning point was my twenty-fifth high school reunion. At the time it was 1990, and I had just taken over my company. After I agreed to buy it and did a pretty good analysis of the finances, I realized that the place was pretty much bankrupt. I had my work cut out for me to make it a viable enterprise. I was under a great deal of stress. During this time, I received many calls inviting me to my high school reunion, but I wasn’t in a great place. Actually, I was in a pretty depressed state, and really didn’t want to go. If it had not been for the persistence of Norene persuading me into attending the reunion, I don’t think I would have gone. But, I did go and I met Norene and talked to some of my old friends, like Mary Poole and others.
Within two years, Norene and I were married. So, if Norene had not been persistent, and I had not gone on a boat cruise at Stone Mountain Lake, I wouldn’t have enjoyed what has been a wonderful and very, very successful relationship.

So that’s my story up to this point. The idea of aging is an interesting one. I came to sports late in life—well, clearly not in high school. I started running just because of the stress of the job that I had. I have managed over the years to keep myself in very good shape. I come from a family of long-lived people. And one of the few things that has helped me succeed in life is stamina and drive, so I never really considered too much about aging, as I transitioned from being middle aged to being a little bit older.

I have been very fortunate in that I haven’t had a great deal of injuries or illnesses. I have always passed my physical with flying colors. But, last year, the doctors suggested that I take a couple of extra tests because I was approaching sixty and, surprisingly, I found out that I have serious and extensive coronary disease.

I am not sure if this is another turning point yet. I suppose it takes time to recognize them. It has taken time to think about the impact, but clearly my operable assumptions—that I came from a long-lived family and thus I too will live long—have been challenged.

It is something that I am still trying to absorb. I really don’t think of death, and I have never thought of the impact of turning different ages. I have always joked with my friends that these numbers are significant only because we have ten fingers. If we had eight fingers it would be 64, 56 etc.

So the significance of a number like sixty has always been pretty meaningless to me. I have focused on being mentally and physically agile. I think I have maintained that. I also have three wonderful brothers-in-law who are about ten to twelve years older than I
am. The past year one of them was in a serious car wreck and has lost a lot of his mobility. Another one unfortunately has very aggressive leukemia, and a third one and perhaps my favorite, who was a very active man, has had leg and knee surgery that didn’t go very well. So, not only am I dealing with my own health challenge, I am also taking in that my older male role models are not doing well.

I am in a period right now of contemplating the fact that we really do go through phases in our life. There really is a teenage period, a young adult period, a middle age period, and a period of growing older. In that period of growing older there are going to be just as many and probably more to adapt to than when I was a teenager or a youngster. However, this period in my life is quantitatively and qualitatively different than any other. As a child, I was not reflective; I was active. As a young adult and as a mature adult, I really didn’t reflect that much; I did what I needed to do. I did what I felt I had to do, and so now I can look back and see the things that I have done. This period as I grow older is significantly different than other times in my life, in that I know that I am entering it. I don’t know what life has in store for me, but I have reached the time when I can reflect and try to figure out how and in what way I am going to choose to equip myself at the end of my life. For the first time, I think really in my life, I have begun to look forward to a period of my life when a lot of the survival mode is behind me. A lot of the ‘have tos’ are behind me. Now what I am looking at -- and it is very difficult -- is the ‘want tos’ I ask myself what do I want and choose to do at this point? How do I learn to grow older?

As a coda to this tape, I want to talk for just a moment about one other significant milestone in my life. By getting together with Norene, I was able to meet her daughter
Sharon.  Sharon had quite a few physical difficulties, and Norene and I were together for all of about six days when we got a call that she was in renal failure.  Having been a single guy for a long time, I suddenly had this young woman in my life, somebody with special needs. I can’t pinpoint this as a turning point, but I can say that this is and was a significantly wonderful time in my life. Particularly after having been single and perhaps a bit self-centered, it was transforming to have somebody come into my life that I could relate to, and that I could cherish and learn from. My relationship with Sharon was a wonderful experience to bring me out of myself and to focus me a lot more on what is important. Her death in 1999 moved me in ways I can’t find words to explain.

It has been interesting to sit on the back porch and to go through these events.  Probably if I were to go through this two or three more times, I would come up with other points.  I hope this helps you with your dissertation.  Take care. Jerome.

Recorded by Jerome Quinn, -- June, 2007
Transcribed by Mary Poole -- June 22, 2007.

Summer, 2007

Much of what I am writing now about Jerome, I do as I sit on the same back porch where Jerome recorded his story. He and Norene generously invited our family to stay a week in their cabin in Cashiers, North Carolina. The invitation is timely. Just two weeks ago, my children lost their father to a brain tumor. We have all been grieving, and the ability to get a change of scenery, particularly such a lovely one, has been helpful, as we process this life altering event.
It is really a misnomer to call this a cabin. As we ended our drive yesterday, and my husband, daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren emerged from our cars, we were surprised and amazed at the beauty of this home. Sitting on the bank of a river, this three-story log cabin home is nestled in dense trees, and looks across the river at the side of another mountain. It is a lovely haven.

Although Norene and Jerome aren’t here, their presence infuses the place. The master bedroom, where Paul and I are staying, is on the second floor, and has a balcony overlooking the river. On one side of the room is a mountain brook that provides a trickling sound effect that soothes us to sleep. Books fill the heavy wooden shelves of the bookcase in the bedroom. One, *Conversations that Change a Life*, catches my eye.

If I were to describe Jerome’s life, I think I would only add “random” conversations that change a life. The lens through which Jerome explains his life reflects and is an example of his philosophy expressed in his opening statement about *The Incredible Lightness of Being*. So many seemingly random events and people: the hole in the fence, the monks, the priest, the bookstore, the conversations in a bar, going to the factory -- all at first glance resultant from random acts.

I reflect on Jerome and his experiences of these random conversations and people in his life. He seems to have an ability to take risks that many of us lack. And, he obviously has an impressive and creative intellect that allows him to be successful at what he attempts. There is unconventionality to Jerome. He doesn’t necessarily follow the beaten path. Instead, he is willing to branch out and explore unknown territory.

On our way to our stay in their cabin in the summer of 2007, we stop in Atlanta, and visit for the night with Norene and Jerome. We sleep in Norene’s office on the first floor.
of their home. After the grandchildren are settled in for the night, I walk up the stairs to the second floor and sit in the living room with Norene and Jerome. We laugh and talk and drink wine together until the wee hours of the morning.

It is during this conversation that Jerome tells me about the importance of music in his life. While we are discussing the impact of the 60’s in our lives, he tells me that the biggest influence of that time upon him was the music. “Narratives like that of Dylan and others created a space for me to question my life, and I feel as if my story has emerged influenced by and with this musical landscape as a background,” Jerome tells me.

Having just transcribed Jerome’s interview, I comment about his early family experience. “Jerome,” I say, “I was touched and surprised at the story of your early childhood and your father.” “Yes, no doubt that has had a significant influence on who I am,” he continues. “As you know, I married late in life, and I have no biological children. But, it was really important for me in my work life to create a functional family. I am proud of the culture of my business. I think that I have been able to shape a healthy, functional work family.”

Norene joins in. “You should see Jerome with his employees. He has many employees who have been there almost as long as he has, and they are fiercely loyal to Jerome. Why, he has been recognized nationally for the progressive culture of his company.”

It is almost three a.m., and I am struggling to keep my eyes open, but don’t want this conversation to end. Jerome finally says, “I never stay up past eleven!” Reluctantly, I say my goodbyes, hugging Jerome and Norene warmly, and walk back down the stairs to my family. Like Jerome, it has been important to me to create a functional family. My family
has been children and grandchildren. His has been the business and employees he works with.

I reflect upon this process. Re-entering the lives decades later of old friends has been a tremendously moving experience, for me both as an individual and as a researcher. I feel tremendous warmth and connection to Jerome and Norene. The sense of shared history provides a fertile ground for communication, and a sense of being known and understood. I am comforted and inspired by my reconnection with these old friends.
Chapter Eight

Norene’s Story: “Give Yourself to Love”

So give yourself to love if love is what you're after;
Open up your hearts to the tears and laughter,
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.

Love is born in fire; it's planted like a seed.
Love can't give you everything, but it gives you what you need.
And love comes when you're ready, love comes when you're afraid;
It'll be your greatest teacher, the best friend you have made.

Kate Wolf

With the exception of my brother, I have known Norene longer than any other person in my life. We were in kindergarten together, and we spent eight years at Our Lady of the Assumption Parochial School, and then four more at St. Pius. However, it would be twenty-five years till I saw her again at the reunion, and then another fifteen till we reconnected at the fortieth reunion. Despite the length of time between contacts, seeing her is like connecting with a long lost family member. She knew my Mom and Dad, long dead, and she knew me as a child. We grew up together in the roiling concoction of fifties/sixties/civil rights era Atlanta/Catholic school/post war craziness. We were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

As I remember Norene and as I see her now -- she is one of the most energetic, ebullient, active and quick talking persons I have every known. She is and was a dynamo. Norene was tall like me, but where I was curvy, she was lean and lanky.
Brown, curly out of control hair framed her face, and glasses outlined her lively and intense brown eyes.

She exists in my memory in various black and white snapshots. The tallest girls in our class, we stood together dressed in our white fluffy dresses and white veils at the various May Day religious processions. Together, we wore our silly Brownie dresses, went on camping trips, and giggled at sleepovers. We lived in a working class Atlanta subdivision, and I have early memories of delivering newspapers to her home. To supplement the money my father earned as a milkman, my family had a paper route. My father, brother and I awoke at five in the morning. Sometimes in the winter, we would gather with other carriers around a warm fire, fold the papers, and then load them into our cars. My brother and I sat in the backseat and threw the papers in the yard of the subscriber. To this day, I can still smell that sickeningly sweet smell of newsprint, and remember trying to wash off the black ink from my hands.

This is how I learned that Norene, like I, lived in a modest home compared to our mostly wealthier classmates. Most of our peers were children of doctors, lawyers and professionals. Our parents sacrificed to send us to parochial school, which was costly, particularly for working class families. For me, there was awareness that my socioeconomic status was different from most of my classmates. While I often wore clothes that were hand me downs or from second hand stores, I coveted the matched lavender cashmere sweater set worn by our friend, Danielle. Norene was a companion during that time who made me feel not so different.

As eighth grade came and went, we moved on to St. Pius X high school. Some of our classmates went to the more prestigious private girls’ and boys’ schools, but we
joined most of our class at Pius. It was during this time that Norene’s mother gave birth to Terry, a Down’s syndrome child. I don’t remember ever talking to Norene about her, but because of Norene’s influence, I tutored a young Down’s syndrome girl during high school.

Both of us served on student council, took the advanced classes, and competed against each other for student government president. When college came, I went off to Washington D. C. to Trinity, and she stayed behind to go to Georgia State. I remember she wanted to go to Peabody, and I never knew what happened about that. The next thing I heard by way of the grapevine was that Norene at twenty gave birth to twins. It wasn’t until the twenty-fifth reunion that I saw her again. She had quite a story to tell.

Norene Tells Her Own Story

My name is Norene Quinn and I was born in 1947 and was the first child of Norman and Irene Edison. My name is a combination of Nor from Norman, and the Ene from Irene. I was the first child and the first grandchild, and I was greatly beloved. I was ‘it’, and I felt it and knew it. I had a very normal childhood with Tom my brother following me three years later, then Mary Anne, and Steven. We were a close and loving family.

Looking back on it, the first significant turning point that influenced my life was the birth in 1960 of my youngest sister, Theresa. Terry was born and things weren’t normal. Terry had Down’s syndrome. I was thirteen, and my mother and I became very close because of the joy and sadness of Terry’s birth. We soon learned that there wasn’t a place in the world for children with disabilities like Terry. There was no educational
system in place for her, and there wasn’t an awful lot to read and know. Mom and Dad were on the front line of parents figuring out how to help a child like Terry grow up to be all that she could be. The Catholic Church was not very much help to us either. There weren’t classes at Our Lady of the Assumption, where my siblings and I went, for my sister. This was way before the federal law was passed, so Terry wasn’t guaranteed an education.

We were lucky to eventually find a nun who was very interested in teaching children who had learning disabilities like Terry. Her name was Sr. Robert Therese. Watching what she could do with Terry was a real inspiration to me and I thought, “I can do this. I can go to school and find a college that would teach me how to best teach children with disabilities.” It turned out they were few and far between. There weren’t very many colleges that offered courses for teaching disabled kids. Peabody University was one that I found and I applied to go to college there. I had every intention of teaching mentally retarded children and adults.

I got a scholarship to Peabody, but the scholarship wasn’t enough to cover everything. My family didn’t feel that they could afford to send me away to college, so I stayed at Georgia State. I decided to get a teaching degree and it turned out that Georgia State was so affordable that I could pay for college on my own.

I lived at home and went to State and then had another one of those milestones in my life. I became involved with one of my college professors and fell in love with him. He was twelve years older than I and I soon found myself pregnant with twins. We married and began raising them. The birth of the twins was a turning point, and so too was the
way I was married. I didn’t tell my parents. And, in addition, one of the twins, Sharon, was born with multiple birth defects.

The kids were born at Emory, and thank goodness for that. Emory was associated with Egleston Children’s Hospital and they saved Sharon’s life. Sharon had no anal opening, and they had to perform a colostomy immediately. She only had one kidney and it was compromised. Her legs were bent back in a fetal position, and they had to be brought forward. Her ankles had to be brought up. But the doctors there were determined that Sharon was not going to be bound to a wheelchair. They were determined that she was going to walk with crutches and braces one day, and so were we. After surgeries every summer for five years, and lots of hospital stays, she did walk and she did get to go to a kindergarten. Sharon was a huge influence on my life.

Scott was gifted and Sharon was multiply handicapped and so they were both candidates for the first special needs kindergarten in the state of Georgia. This involved me too. Because Sharon had so many things wrong with her, even those in the handicapped kindergarten program weren’t sure that they could handle her urine and colostomy bags, and long leg braces. So, I was hired as the aide in that kindergarten program, which was the first prototypical program for children with special needs. That meant I was in school every day with Scott and Sharon. After kindergarten was over, I stayed till three o’clock and so did the kids. Scott was able to go to first grade in the afternoon after kindergarten, and Sharon stayed with me and napped.

So, we did that for their first year. It was a wonderful year. I learned a lot and I realized how much I wanted to be involved in the kids’ educations. They already could read when they went to kindergarten, because I had spent so much time with them for the
first five years. I didn’t work outside the home and I was a professional hospital Mom. A lot of times Sharon couldn’t move and so I read to her and to Scott.

Because there was no handicap accessible school in our district, I had to drive forty-five minutes each way to take Scott and Sharon to school. So, every day I drove the kids to a school so Sharon could walk around in crutches and braces and not fall down. This school was carpeted, and it was constructed so there weren’t any doors. Sharon had five years at this school. Since I drove so far to get the kids to school, most days I either volunteered at the school, or was paid as a substitute teacher there. Because of this, I was there with them for grades one through five. I was blessed with ten years of being with my kids almost everyday. I never regretted this, and I am grateful for each day I had with them.

Somewhere in this time frame, I took a part time job making money on a switchboard from ten till two in the afternoon. Sometimes I would take the children to school, and then go to work, and then pick them up. It allowed me to make enough money to buy groceries each week, and I felt like I was doing something to help the family.

Another milestone was reached when I bought the answering service I worked for. It was called Answerability. It had been sold to a woman who was using it as a tax write off for her doctor husband. She ended up running it into the ground. Because of this, I was eventually able to buy it cheap. That was the beginning of my entrepreneurship. From there, I started Association Management Services. Through this business, I was the executive director for several volunteer and state associations. This gave me independence, and it gave me my first chance to be my own boss and to be the boss of
other people. I combined both businesses, and used the girls on the switchboard to help me stuff envelopes and get ready for meetings for the Association Management Services.

I did that for about thirty years. That is the way I made my living, and it enabled me to go back into the hospital with Sharon any time she needed to be in the hospital, or had another surgery. It turned out to be a really good thing and it gave me a lot of personal freedom.

Another turning point in my life happened around 1981, when the kids and I came back from a vacation to find that my husband had moved out of our home. This was the time between eighth grade and high school for the twins. He said he was going through a mid life-crisis, and he couldn’t face Sharon going to high school and finding out just how handicapped she really was. He just wasn’t strong enough to go through that, he told me. Actually, he was having an affair, and I found out later he had been having many affairs during our marriage.

We were separated for about two years and during this time we tried to work together to stay married. We reunited for eight more years after our separation. This was the period of time of the last years of my kids’ high school at Lithia Springs High School. They both graduated from high school, and then we worked together for five more years while Scott was in college in architecture at Carnegie Mellon University. It really took two incomes plus everything Scott could do to keep him in Carnegie Mellon. It was very expensive, but it was an excellent school, and he did very well, and we both wanted him to graduate from there. It was a huge experience for our family to have somebody graduate from college. I had dropped out my junior year to have twins. I was proud that Scott did graduate.
In 1990, a huge turning point happened for me at my high school reunion, the St. Pius class of ’65 High School reunion. It was our twenty-five year reunion, and it was the only reunion that we had up until this point. I was still married, and my husband was up on the top deck of the paddleboat cruising around Stone Mountain, sitting there with his ankles crossed and his back against the side of the boat, not talking to anybody, not even acknowledging my presence. It was very typical of our marriage at that point. I think I was just toughing it out and making do somehow.

At that reunion, Jerome Quinn put his arms around my shoulder, and I fell in love with him. By 1992, I was divorced, and Jerome and I were married. My daughter, Sharon, was so happy for me. She was with me, and she really loved Jerome. Scott was devastated, and it took a while for him to get use to the idea. I think what won him over was simply watching Jerome and me together, and seeing how absolutely happy I was. Scott ended up working for Jerome at his renovation business for fourteen years, until just this year in 2007. It has been a really good relationship for both Scott and Jerome. So that was a wonderful turning point and it affected a lot of people’s lives.

Sharon got to know Jerome too. She had from 1992 when we married, until the first week in June of 1999, when she died. Those were some really good years with Jerome as a stepfather. They were really close. One of my fondest memories of Jerome is watching him crawl up on the bed in the hospital with Sharon, and hugging her while she lay close to dying. He has been a blessing to our entire family.

One of the favorite places for Sharon to be was up at the cabin that Jerome and I bought right after we got married, in Cashiers N. C. It was cool in the mountains, and Sharon was cold a lot. We made sure that Sharon had a bedroom that was very warm,
and that she had a loving experience there. One of my favorite nights there was the night that Sharon and I together smoked our first joint. I didn’t do anything like that as a young mother. I had way too much sense of responsibility as the mother at twenty-one of twins and a handicapped child. I took that responsibility very seriously and I didn’t do many things that were daring, like smoking pot. That night, Jerome and Sharon and I sat on the back porch, looking out at the beautiful mountainous landscape and the river below.

Jerome passed the joint first to Sharon, and then to me. We giggled together under the night sky, feeling the pleasure of sharing this illicit moment, both of us for the first time.

Jerome, a bit more experienced than we were, laughed until he cried watching us.

Jerome and I hadn’t been together very long when Sharon’s kidney began failing. Although she was not supposed to be a candidate for a kidney transplant, it turned out that medical technology had moved forward. Her tiny size and her scar tissue that seemed to prohibit a transplant earlier were finally able to be surmounted. I wasn’t a candidate; my kidney didn’t match. Scott’s didn’t either. My ex-husband, Joe, did match Sharon, and he gave her his kidney. They both survived the transplant and did well. Sharon had six years and four more months of life because of that kidney transplant, and I had six years and four months to spend with my daughter. We made good use of that time.

She died in 1999 at the age of thirty-one, though she wasn’t expected to live into adulthood. She had lots of joy and experiences in her life. Because she was so tiny, and had other issues, my mother and I made all of her clothes and made sure she always looked good. She was a beautiful young woman. I took her with me on some of my
business travels, and we traveled to Europe and Canada together. I worked hard to make sure she had a good life, for however long it would be.

Her death was a huge milestone in my life. My mother, Scott and I were devastated by her loss. We grieved, and continue to grieve. Almost two years after her death, my son Scott and his wife Candice had a baby girl, my first granddaughter, in September 2001. Her name was Fiona, and she brings us a lot of joy, but I wanted so much to share her birth with Sharon. Jerome and I have watched her grow up and we help in raising Fiona. We have experienced her firsts, but there is a big hole there in the joy.

In 2004, my Dad passed away. Before he died, I went on trips with Dad and my Mom for reunions with his World War II buddies. We traveled all over the country. It was getting to the point where Mom couldn’t take him on the trips any more. They needed me to help with Dad, and I did. Sometimes my brother Steve would come too. I think I must have gone on five or six trips with Dad. The last one was scheduled after Dad was in a nursing home. He had a stroke, but he was hanging on for the next reunion, which was going to be held in Savannah, Ga. It wasn’t too far, and we knew we could drive there. Dad enjoyed it, and he was still there a bit, although not as much as he had been a year before. But, he did look forward to it, remembered it, and enjoyed it. Soon after that he had more and more dementia, so he couldn’t travel.

My Dad’s passing was another one of those huge turning points, and it left Mom alone in that house we all grew up in. It had a steep driveway and front steps without a banister or railing. It was just an accident waiting to happen. I was very afraid that my
Mom would fall and that there would be no way that she could call to anybody, and no one would know that she had fallen.

No matter how much I tried to convince her to move with us, she wasn’t buying it. I knew it was going to be hard to get her out of that house. She had lived there for fifty-five years. Having that house was like an anchor; it was a point of continuity in all of our lives.

Jerome did it. And the way that he did it was to arrange an acceptable place near me for her to live. We live in the upstairs of our home. The downstairs was converted in the early nineties into a suite of offices for me. I just have to go downstairs to go to work. The house next door is a rental property, and it is a twin of our house, an over/under duplex as well. When the people moved out of the downstairs unit, Jerome converted it to be just what Mom needed. He put in an excellent air conditioning unit with an air filter so that pollen and other things wouldn’t get to Mom so much. It is all on one level, with no steps. We put in a stack washer dryer. He just made it a very special place for my Mom, and it is right next-door.

One of the main reasons Mom didn’t want to leave was because of her plants, some which had been growing for over fifty years. We moved all of Mom’s plants here to her new home. And, they moved wonderfully. They never looked as good as they do here. Jerome and I have worked for fifteen years to make the soil rich, and Jerome put an irrigation system in for all three back yards, so that Mom and I didn’t have to move hoses around and our plants would live.

My Mom and I have had a wonderful time extending what was already a wonderful friendship and a loving relationship. So now – the year I turn sixty – my Mom
is eighty-five, and although she has had one hospital stay for COPD, she is doing great. She came home from that stay on oxygen. We dragged oxygen tanks around everywhere we went. She took courses and she worked hard to get off of the oxygen except at night, and gradually she worked her way off the oxygen at night, too. Now, she has been a year without oxygen.

I work hard to stay active. I bike, and I have been a runner, and now I walk and just jog a little bit because my knees just aren’t very good. I actually tore my ACL in my left knee, and that was a huge setback. It took me two years to work the joint in my left knee and now I am working on making the muscles on either side of my knees strong enough so that I can run again. I have been doing more cycling, because when you are on a bicycle, you are not putting weight on your knees. Jerome and I went on a bicycle trip recently. It was one of the best vacations that we’ve ever taken. We toured for two weeks in Ireland on bikes. I wasn’t the best bicyclist in the group, but I wasn’t the worst either. Cycling has given me a lot of joy.

This is the month that I turn sixty, and today Jerome and I went to one of our favorite places – the Silver Comet. It is an old rail to trails that they have turned to bike trails. We parked in the parking lot and decided how far out we are going to go. It was eleven o’clock when we arrived at the parking lot. We went out for an hour, and after an hour, we turned around and came back to the parking lot. I did twelve miles out and twelve miles back. Jerome did thirty-five. The point is, I turn sixty this month, and I am still working at keeping my knees under me. As I turn sixty, the future looks bright. I think one of the reasons that the future looks bright to me is because I have Jerome.
When I was separated from my first husband, it was Scott, my son, who was running cross-country and track, and he took me on my first road race. I am not sure I would have ever started that but I wanted to do something with Scott, and I needed to do something to get over the incredible sadness and the huge kick to my sense of esteem that having your husband walk out on you would do. And I owe Scott big thanks for that, because that is the first real exercise that I ever did.

It was Jerome who put me on a bicycle. It had been years and years since I had ridden a bike. The first time I got on, I promptly ran into a fence. Jerome and Sharon were watching me, and they laughed until they cried. They always say you never forget riding a bicycle, but I did. I had to practice and I am so glad that I did. Biking has really been a wonderful thing for me.

Just within the last year starting in January, Jerome got me on his rowing machine. What you can do is row against yourself on a previous row. They call it rerowing. So what I did was row against myself on, say, May 23. The little computer would keep the data and so I could see the progress that I am making. These things make me not feel so bad about getting older. It is still a struggle. I still have at least twenty-five pounds I would like to drop to get back to my ideal weight.

This gives me a lot of hope. I may be getting older, but I am sixty years old, and I can still do things to keep my joints flexible, to keep my back from getting stiff, and to make the pain go away. And, I am helping my mom do the same thing at eighty-five.

Mom has been an inspiration to me. So has Jerome’s Aunt Ruby. She is ninety-nine years old and is in excellent health. She hadn’t fallen or sustained any injuries until her ninety-ninth birthday. On that date, she fell asleep, and she awoke to the phone
ringing. As she got up, she slipped and fell on the kitchen floor. Despite her injury, she is still doing great, though. I took my Mom down to eat lunch with Ruby recently. I’ll be darned if Ruby didn’t grab the check. She was faster than either Mom or I. She gives Mom hope that she may be eighty-five and she may be slowing down, but Ruby at ninety-nine can still give us a run for our money.

_Aging doesn’t have to be this down hill sad song. If we put a little time and effort in it, and if we eat right, we can still have a glass of wine or two or three and stay mobile. I think that is why I want to do active vacations with Jerome. As long as I can hike with hiking poles and keep my stability, I want to keep doing it. I have found other people who are my friends who also want to stay active. I have started doing a hike sometimes twice a year with about twenty other women, some of whom are daughters, sister, college roommates, friends, and friends of friends. What we have in common is that we are all women. We hike to the top of this mountain. It is five miles with not a huge degree of difficulty, but it is a hike. These are the kind of things that make getting older not so frightening to me._

_I guess I am not one of those Baby Boomers who think I am indestructible. I tore a ligament in my toes and had to have an operation and they put a pin in my toe. I fell on a hike and broke my arm and had to have a plate put in with three or four screws. But, I still plan on keeping active and helping to keep my Mom as active and happy and independent as long as she can too._

_Each we have the master bedroom on the second floor at the cabin when we plan to retire. I have friends who are putting their bedrooms on the first floor. Well, I don’t plan on being inactive. I am going to drop some pounds and be surprised at how much better_
my knees and back feel. I plan on keeping my mobility. I am married to a man who feels the same way. We are doing that together. We don’t plan to be couch potatoes. We are going to be active and know when it is time to enjoy a book, and have a rest, and enjoy food, and enjoy cooking, and enjoy drinking wine. We will keep it all in perspective, and make this ending a very happy ending.

I hope that this helps Mary. I love you very much. (It would have been easier to type this).

Recorded by Norene Quinn – June 17, 2007
Transcribed by Mary Poole – July, 2007

Afterword

Not long after transcribing this, I pack my overworked Corolla with my recorder, my daughter and grandchildren, and drive to Atlanta from my home, about five hundred miles, or a good day’s drive. For years, Norene has been offering her office below her home to me for a visit, and I finally decide to take her up on it. I am going to combine some dissertation work with a mini vacation with my family. Norene is probably the most gracious host I have ever encountered. She mailed me a key to her office, and left me explicit directions on the accommodations in case she wasn’t there, including parking instructions and sleeping arrangements. She is incredibly welcoming. She makes me feel as if I am doing her a favor staying with her, rather than the other way around. She embodies the essence of “southern hospitality.” Now, more than ever, after transcribing her narrative, I look forward to seeing her. I consider once again how fortunate I am to have chosen a dissertation topic that is so pleasurable for me.
After many hours of driving, listening to mind numbing children’s music, and the whines and cries of a one and three year old, we finally arrive in Atlanta around dinnertime. Norene told me that they would be up at the cabin until later, and to make ourselves at home. My daughter guides me through rush hour Atlanta traffic to Norene’s home, and we snipe back and forth at each other as only mother and daughter can. Finally, we arrive at Little Five Points, and their home. I have been here before, but still struggle to find it. Norene’s directions are good, though, and we finally arrive and park behind her home in a joint alley parking way.

We all tumble out of the car, grandmother, daughter, and rambunctious toddlers with all of their entrapments. Pulling luggage and young hands, I observe the blooming garden that we pass through on the way to the door. I consider that these must be her mother’s plants, so lovingly moved from the family home. It is summer in Atlanta, and flowers and greenery abound.

By this time, I am really tired, though, and I just want to get in and settle down. Opening the door to her office, we walk into a combined living and office space beautifully outlined in dark wood. It is an efficient place, with desks, and computers, and papers. But, it is also combined with a warm living space. There are mantels and pictures, a homey kitchen and a bedroom. Norene told me that this is where Sharon lived before she died. Norene has made the bedroom comfortable. There is a big overstuffed bed, and a cot next to it for the overflow of the children. She left a note, telling us all of her phone numbers, and inviting us to help ourselves to the refrigerator. We do. The toddlers are quieted with juice and raisins. Meghan and I help ourselves to a beer, and I begin to look around.
I am drawn to the mantles and to the pictures. I never met Sharon, but there are plenty of pictures of her here. In one, she stands in between Norene and Jerome. A lovely, open beautiful face with big eyes and a huge smile stare out at me. She has the same curly, flyaway hair that Norene sports, although she has a blonder version. She looks so alive, happy and self possessed, dressed in a lovely red suit that I speculate was made by Norene and her mother. There are plenty more pictures: Sharon at Norene and Jerome’s wedding; Sharon’s tiny body standing next to what I assume must be her 6’5” brother, Scott, a handsome young man. I hear my daughter and grandchildren in the background, and tears fill my eyes. I take so much for granted, and I vow to appreciate the gift that is my healthy daughter. I wonder how Norene could have survived this loss and still maintain her ebullient spirit despite her tremendous grief.

I hear a knock at the door, walk to it, and find Norene standing there with a huge smile. I open it, and we embrace. Norene is tall, lean, and still enshrouded by her copious curly hair. She hasn’t met my daughter, or my grandchildren, so introductions ensue. Wherever Norene is always seems to be a whirlwind of energy and activity, and I am caught in it. It feels as if there has been no lapse in our friendship. She tells me her mother wants to see me, so I walk next door to Gloria’s home. We walk arm in arm. I ask her about the plants. “Oh yes,” she says. “Aren’t they beautiful? Jerome was so kind to make sure they were moved here. Mom wouldn’t have come if they hadn’t,” she laughs. We knock on Gloria’s door, and she greets me with an open smile and affectionate hug. Terry, her sister, is home for the weekend from her group living facilities, and we have a family reunion. Together Gloria and I laugh as we remember our paper route experience.
Later on Norene, Jerome and I talk long into the night, drinking wine, retelling old stories, laughing, and staying up much later than our sixty year old bodies are use to. As I walk down the stairs to Norene’s office, and my home for the night, I am warmed by the several glasses of wine, but mostly by the camaraderie of old friends, and by conversation between thoughtful, intelligent, and compassionate people. Norene inspires me to age consciously and thoughtfully, and to have, as she says, “a very happy ending” despite the challenges and heartache experienced over the course of a lifetime. Surely, if she can do this with all she has endured, I can too. *When I get home*, I think, *I am going to start riding my bicycle.*
Chapter Nine

Michael’s Story – “Shelter From the Storm”

Well the deputy walks on hard nails and the preacher rides a mount
But nothing really matters much it's doom alone that counts
And the one-eyed undertaker he blows a futile horn
"Come in" she said
"I'll give you shelter from the storm".
I've heard newborn babies wailing like a mourning dove
And old men with broken teeth stranded without love
Do I understand your question man is it hopeless and forlorn
"Come in" she said
"I'll give you shelter from the storm.

Bob Dylan

Walking into the fortieth reunion, after my warm greeting from Norene, I notice an
unfamiliar man officiating as host. I ask Norene, “Who is that?” She reminds me, “You
know, that’s Michael. He was in some of our classes, but he left Pius after the junior year.
Remember – something happened to somebody in his family. I don’t remember the
details.”

I search my worn and aging brain for details. It has been a long time. You’d think
I’d remember something; it was a small class. As I struggle to remember, Michael walks
up smiling, with hand extended, “Mary, it’s good to see you.” It throws me off when
someone knows me and I don’t know him or her, but perhaps he was just reading my
nametag. I decide to play it as if I know him, too. “Michael, how are you?
“I’m glad Norene found you,” he replies. “We lost you off our address list, but Norene had the good sense to call your brother. It wouldn’t be a reunion without you!”

Now I really am disconcerted that I don’t remember him. But I forge ahead, “What have you been up to,” I ask, wanting to move out of the past, since I had no memory of him in it.

He tells me about his military career, and that since his retirement, he works with technology at the University of Ohio. I tell him about my late life pursuit of a Ph.D. at the University of South Florida and about my idea for a dissertation. Unlike many people whose eyes glaze over when the dissertation talk begins, he seems genuinely interested. I like him and wonder why I didn’t know him better in high school.

When I put out the e-mail call for participants in our class narrative, he was one of the first to respond. He was enthusiastic, and called me several times. He obviously spent a lot of time with the recording of his story, sending it to me in August of 2007. Because of circumstances in my life, I didn’t transcribe this until a couple of months later. After listening to his heart wrenching narrative, I sit down and cry, out of sadness, and out of anger. At the same time, I marvel at his strength and ability to keep going, and his care for others. Here is his story.

Michael’s Recorded Narrative

Sorry it took so long for me to get started on this. I have a lot of things underway. I hope this hasn’t slowed your progress on your Ph.D. First of all before I get started I would appreciate it if you would keep all of this confidential. Make me anonymous,
please. I don’t know if you will be able to do that easily, but I would really appreciate it.

Thank You.

There are only half a dozen BIG THINGS, so let me do them first. The first BIG THING occurred when I was in grade school in Atlanta at St. Cecelia’s. I was down at the schoolyard on a Saturday or Sunday, playing basketball. I was in the sixth or seventh grade at the time and I was there by myself. An older guy, who was a schoolmate of mine, showed up and we started playing together. To the best of my recollection, he was about a year older than I was. It was a long time ago, and the details are foggy, but the best I can recall is that he basically took my basketball and then wouldn’t let me play. I didn’t live very far from school so I went home and found my Dad. My father could tell I was upset, and he said, “What’s wrong?” As I told him what happened, we got into the car and drove back to the schoolyard. The kid was still playing with my basketball. My father got out of the car and told him to give it back to me. The kid basically just hit him. I was watching this from the car, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. My father walked back and got in the car, slumped over the wheel, and had a heart attack. He died right there in the schoolyard. I guess you could say that was the first life changing experience for me.

I guess I was in shock. I went and got the priest at the rectory because it was only one hundred yards away from where the car was. The priest came out. I don’t remember his name now, but he was one of those Irish imports. There wasn’t anything he could do, so he called the ambulance. It took them a while to get there. My mother wasn’t home. I don’t remember where she went, probably shopping with my older sister. She drove by the schoolyard on her way home while I was waiting for the ambulance. I could see the
car go by, but she didn’t stop. I don’t remember now how I got home and told her, but of course I did, and she was crushed.

So, what does that all mean? Well, here is what it meant to me. First of all, I felt the guilt of my father dying. I still feel it so to say that I got over it - I probably have never gotten over it. I have had a lot of people tell me that it wasn’t my fault, but I still feel that it was my fault. Even though I didn’t hit him, it was my fault for not being able to take care of myself. My father had a heart attack the year before, so I mean it wasn’t like it was a shock. I knew that he wasn’t in the best shape. Anyhow, that really had a major impact on my life.

And it was quickly followed by another major event that impacted my life. I don’t know exactly how to express this, but a Catholic priest who we knew, whose name I won’t give you, not that it matters anymore, who was a friend of our family - who then I guess the best way to describe it is he seduced me and then started to sexually abuse me. He did that for probably close to four years. Not all the time but often. Maybe twelve or thirteen times– something like that. It stopped when we moved to Florida. So, that was the second life changing experience.

As you can imagine, that was a major turning point. As I reflect on it, I never really understood how it started. It was a secret. I was devastated by the whole experience. My father was not there. I did not know to tell my mother. I felt guilty for my father’s death. I didn’t know who to talk to. I couldn’t talk to anybody. I couldn’t talk to my priest. I couldn’t talk to my mother. I was the oldest of my siblings so I couldn’t talk to them. So fundamentally, I had no one to talk to. Surely couldn’t talk to my friends. So, basically I just sort of ‘sucked it up’ if you will.
So what did that do? Well, I used to be a really good student in grade school. Studying was not really all that challenging. School was not really all that challenging. Since then I discovered when I was an adult that my test scores qualified me for MENSA. I’ve been a MENSA member since probably the mid seventies now, not that that’s any big deal. It just means that I can test well. Well, if I can test well it should mean that I can study well and I can do well in school. But fundamentally, I nearly flunked out of high school. In fact, I could hardly get into college. My grades were always in the toilet. You know, I’m sure you can appreciate that I had all kinds of social doubt about myself. You know, I was struggling. There was a couple of times when I did not know what to do and I tried to run away, but I felt that if I ran away, I did not have anywhere to run to. Also, I was worried about what it would do to my mother. I felt that she was already crushed about the loss of my father. She was struggling to raise my sister and my brother and me and to educate us. All this mess was going on. So that was a long-term trauma. I mean it did not just last for the remainder of the time we lived in Atlanta. The impact of it lasted for probably - the easy way to answer - is that it probably still has an impact today, and as you know I am approaching sixty. So, that was, I guess, the second major one.

A few years later, we moved to Florida and I finished high school there – barely. As you probably remember, I didn’t graduate with our Pius class. It was amazing that I graduated at all, and I had to go to summer school to do that. To make matters worse, I hated leaving my girl friend in Atlanta. She was in our class, and she was my first love. I heard she started dating another classmate soon after. What surprised me was that when we went to the fortieth reunion, they were married. They are still married. They have
three daughters and live in Atlanta. She looked pretty much the same. I was surprised by all of that.

I finished high school and I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I had no clue. In hindsight I should have probably joined the Army. At the time I didn’t. What I did do was something that I still to this day do not understand why I did it. I decided I wanted to study to become a priest for the Atlanta diocese. I’ve done a lot of thinking about that and I don’t know how that happened. But it did. I went up to Albany, NY, and I went to school in the seminary. I started in September of ’65 and by Christmas I was home. In fact, I came home before Christmas because I discovered that it just wasn’t for me. I had no vocation. I had no interest in becoming a priest, and actually was really more hostile than anything else, which really in retrospect is not a big surprise. I didn’t know what I was doing there to begin with so I left there and I came home. I was fortunate that I had gone to a high school in Florida that was run by the Marist brothers, and they got me into Loyola University in New Orleans.

So I went to Loyola in January. You know, I was still too immature to appreciate going to school. I don’t really think I had any interest in going to school. I just had interest in being away. New Orleans was a good place for that. I started college in 1965 and graduated in 1981. I tell people that the first year that I was in school, in college, I got no credit for the first semester because I dropped out of the seminary before the semester finished. I came home at Christmas time and did not go back for the test. Then the second semester I went to Loyola and I played scrabble during the day and drank at night and partied. I started off with 4 D’s and an F so after the first year of school I had one semester worth of credit, but it didn’t really count because I was on academic
probation. I stayed there for another year and just drank and partied. Actually I dated a
girl that I met the first week. She was from Pensacola on a chemistry scholarship. We
started dating and I dated her the whole time I was there. I stayed in New Orleans for a
year and a half and I left there the summer of ‘67. I went home to Florida because I ran
out of money.

I got a job working at a gas station all night. When I was not working, I was
drinking. When I wasn’t drinking, I was playing scrabble. I went to the junior college in
Miami. I married the girl I was dating in New Orleans. Now that I look back on it, I think
I got married because of what happened to my high school sweetheart. I was working and
trying to go to school and she was working. She dropped out of college to come to Miami.
We messed around doing that for a year and a half or two years. I thought about being a
cop in Miami. At one point, I had ten different jobs in ten months. The prospects for
having a career looked dim. I had done all kinds of things. I dug ditches. I humped
sheetrock. I was a laborer for a high rise sheetrock outfit in Hollywood. I was a cook in
a restaurant. I did a stint as a hotel desk clerk. I did the night audit. I went to work for
Eastern Airlines in their accounting department. I read water meters for the City of
Miami. Then I got tired of that one day, and I worked my way over to the Army
recruiter’s office, and I basically joined the Army.

That was probably the first smart thing that I did. I went off to the Army. I found
out I was pretty good at it. That was in June of 1970, and by December of 1970, my wife
told me that she was leaving. She told me it was because I couldn’t hold a job and that I
would never amount to anything. When the dust settled, it turned out that she was having
an affair with a pilot she had met in her job as a flight attendant. She left me, and there I
was in the Army. Well, the Army turned out to be the best thing that could have happened at the time – maybe even the best thing ever.

So now basically I am single, and I’m in the Service, and it had all the structure I needed. It had the discipline that I needed. When I joined the Army, I told the recruiter that I wanted to be a Special Forces weapons man. He said, “No problem” because he had been a Special Forces medic. So he told me I could enlist and all I need to do is be what they call “airborne unassigned,” which meant I was unassigned to a particular skill. So that meant that I was right for Special Forces training. Well, it turns out that what it really meant is that I didn’t pick an option so the Army could do whatever they want, so they sent me to cook school.

Eventually, I went to some leadership school and did really well in it. Actually I did the leadership school after basic training. I was trying to get out of cook school. I really wanted to be an infantryman. My Colonel said, “We have never had a leadership graduate as a cook so you can do that first.” So I went to cook school, finished that, and then I told them I wanted to be a Special Forces guy. He said he would help me, and so they hooked me up with the Special Forces recruiter. I wound up going to jump school and then I went to Fort Bragg and to Special Forces training. I finished the first phase of the training and then the Army folks there told me, “OK, based on your scores, you can either be a communicator or a medic.” I said I wanted to be a weapons man. They said, “No, you can’t do that. We’re full of weapons guys. We don’t need any more. We need communicators and medics and you’re one of our guys.” I told them I didn’t want to do that. They responded with a choice: “Well, here’s the deal. If you choose to be a weapons guy, when you finish Special Forces training and then as soon as you’re
finished we’ll send you to the 82nd Airborne division and then you won’t be a Special Forces guy any more. I couldn’t understand why they would do this, so I asked them. Their response was, “Because we don’t need weapons guys, we need medics and communicators.” I had no choice but to agree.

I couldn’t fathom learning how to do Morse code, so I decided to do the medical thing. I went to medical training and became a Special Forces medical sergeant. It took a year and a half and I finally graduated from that. When I finally finished, I went to Thailand and spent a year as a medic on a Special Forces. While I was there, my lieutenant tried to get me to re-enlist, but I told him I planned on using the GI bill, and go back to Loyola, and finally finish my degree. I was about twenty-four, and I figured that after I graduated, I could come back in as a Lieutenant. I really liked the Army. My Lieutenant suggested that I go to Officer’s Candidate School and become an officer, rather than lose the time I already had in the service. I applied for OCS and was accepted and I wound up leaving Thailand and going back to Fort Benning and earned a commission as an infantry man – finally.

OK. Now I am commissioned as an Army Lieutenant. I am twenty-six years old. I didn’t want to do something I could do as a civilian. I wanted to be a soldier. So I tried to get an overseas assignment and I went to Germany. My first assignment as a Lieutenant was to a mechanized infantry battalion in an armored division in Bamburg, Germany. I was in Germany when I found out that Weiner Schnitzel wasn’t a hot dog. I knew I was where I needed to be. The food was great. The beer was great. I met some really terrific people and not very long after that I was introduced and started dating some schoolteachers there, one of whom I married three years later.
One of the significant turning points in my life had to do with a mentor I had in the Army. He was a lieutenant colonel in my battalion. This battalion was in bad shape. The re-enlistments were poor. One of the complaints was that the mess hall was a pit. The soldiers didn’t want to re-enlist because they thought nobody cared about them. Soldiers are kind of interesting that way. Well, the Colonel called me in his office. I was the Lieutenant platoon leader and he said that he had a job for me. He wanted to know if I wanted to be the mess officer. Well I tried everything I could do to get out of going to cooking school, and now all of a sudden this guy wants me to be in charge of the mess hall. I said it wasn’t the thing that would really help me out in my military career. He agreed that there were probably not a lot of generals running around that were former mess officers. I said I didn’t care about being a general. Really, all I cared about was being a good soldier and carrying a rucksack and rifle and taking care of soldiers and being in the woods. The bottom line is that he wasn’t really asking me if I was going to volunteer for this job. He was telling me that I was going to get this job. So he gave me the job for ninety days to run this mess hall. It turned out that I did a good job doing that. I became very close to this guy and he was a counselor and a mentor and sort of like a father figure to me.

He really wasn’t much older than I was. I think he was probably nine years older but he was smart, sharp, and very competent, a great soldier and he really put up with some quirky things that I was all about at the time. He let me be me. Early on in our relationship, he let me read something that he had written when he was a younger officer. He described how he hoped that he wouldn’t lose the vision and focus that he had about taking care of soldiers and making things better. And I said, ”That’s exactly how I feel.”
So fundamentally we were like soul mates. He died just this past year and my wife and I went down to Fort Bragg to go to his funeral. I felt very close to him my whole life and I stayed in touch with him until his death.

I left Germany in the late 70’s, and was transferred to Fort Benning, Ga. My wife was working on a Master’s Degree there, and I was trying to finish my undergraduate degree at Columbus College. I was trying to get an accounting degree, but it didn’t work logistically, so I ended up with a general business degree. I was just trying to improve my options in the Army. I was not looking to get out. I was looking to stay in because I had found a home. In basic training, one of the things the drill sergeant used to say as you’re counting cadence walking from one place to another is, “You came into the Army looking for a home and found a castle instead.” It was true in my case. It provided me with all things I didn’t have when I was in high school and first went to college. So it gave me a family that I could talk to and a family that I understood. The rules were proscribed and there were good boundary conditions. I understood all of that. It worked well for me and I was turning out to be a halfway decent soldier.

I was a soldier and I was having a great time. But, there were a couple of situations in Hawaii while I was stationed there that impacted my career. I had this run in with my commanding officer. He disagreed with something I did, and he asked me about it. He didn’t like my answer so he said not to be flippant. And then he said after this discussion, “Now I know that if you had the opportunity to do this again that you would do it differently.” And I said, “Actually sir, I would not.” Well, that was again taking responsibility. I feel today, twenty years later, just as confident in my answer as I was then. It was the right thing to do. It was the right thing to say. It turns out that single
day prevented me from being promoted again in the Army. It didn’t cause me to get fired but it certainly kept me from being promoted again. Had I been promoted again, I would have been able to stay in the Army for thirty-something years, probably thirty-three years. Instead I retired at twenty-five as a Lieutenant Colonel because I stood up for what was right.

After that, I worked for a while at the Pentagon. While there, I finished a Masters in Information Management. I left there and went to Tampa to US Special Operations Command. I did that for the last three years I was in the service, living in Tampa and working at MacDill Air Force Base. I have to backtrack a little bit. While I was at the Pentagon, my wife and I started going to couples’ counseling. We were having some difficulty and really the difficulty was all about the aftermath of the abuse that I suffered when I was a teenager. I guess I never really came to grips with it. I sort of put it out of my mind. While we were there I talked to the counselor and that whole issue surfaced.

From that experience, I decided to go to Atlanta to confront the Archbishop and my abuser. As I explained what had happened to me, the abuser sat there and took no responsibility for it. He didn’t acknowledge anything happened. It was fundamentally a one-sided conversation. I said what I had to say and the priest said nothing, except that I was wrong – that it didn’t happen. The result was that I hired an attorney and tried to get the priest to acknowledge his responsibility, and the Diocese to acknowledge their responsibility – something they never did. The bottom line was they took no responsibility for it. An important theme for me in my life is taking responsibility for your actions.
My relationship with my wife was very difficult for several years. We went to a lot of counseling while we lived in Tampa. I did some things I am not proud of. I acted recklessly with regard to my wife and made it very difficult for her.

The abuse from the priest, I can tell you, had a major impact on me. First of all, my education was disrupted and I lost my way. It took a long time for me to recover from that. When I got married, I had no desire to have children because I did not feel that I could adequately protect them. I felt like I couldn’t protect myself. When I was a child, I couldn’t protect my father. I didn’t feel I could protect children. I didn’t feel I could protect my wife. It had a long-lasting and profound effect on me. Probably still does to this day because we don’t have children. I’m actually uncomfortable around children, because I don’t know how to act around them. I’m even uncomfortable around my brother’s daughters. I don’t want to be held responsible for anybody because emotionally it’s too daunting. It’s hard enough for me to be responsible for myself, although I accept the responsibility for all the things I have done wrong in my life. I think I have paid a big price. My wife has paid a big price, too, and she’s hung with me for thirty-something years. I’m very fortunate there. And we still struggle with it. We still struggle with the aftermath of it because she doesn’t trust me to this day. It’s hard for her to get past all of this. There are times when it’s made our relationship very difficult.

I retired at the end of ‘95 and I went to work for two universities. I started to work at Purdue in northern Indiana at their north central campus and I worked there for about three years and then I moved to Ohio. I’ve got a good job. I’m happy. We’ve got a good life - a nice house. I have all the things at sixty years old I wanted, with a couple of exceptions. My wife and I have constant irritations and aggravations in our relationship.
Much of that has to do with the abuse. It has had a lifelong effect, and I work at it every day.

So, the loss that I have suffered from all of that is the loss to my family. When I went to Atlanta to confront the priest, my mother went with me. It devastated her because this priest was a friend of the family. I think she also felt that she didn’t protect me adequately. Protection has been a general theme my whole life. I have been obsessed with protecting people – protecting myself, protecting my family, protecting my soldiers, and protecting students. So, it’s tied up in all that.

And now, I’m sort of in a lost place. You know, I’m kind of bored with my job but it’s sort of a good job that potentially I would like to keep for a while but I’m not sure that it’s the right thing for me to do.

I guess the thrust of what I understand of your paper and your investigation is really about crisis points and what led up to them and how we dealt with them and how we recovered from them or didn’t recover from them. So I guess in summary, I can say that I have told you about the crisis points. At one point, I felt like my marriage was going to fall apart. Even today I’m not so sure that it’s not falling apart and I can trace it directly back to this whole business about the aftermath of abuse. So it’s had a huge affect. There are very few people that even know about it. My brother and sister know; my mother knew; my wife knows; and that’s pretty much the limit. Now you know. Part of the reason I want to remain anonymous is because I’m not proud of it. I still don’t know how to deal with it. A lot of people go public with all that information. I’m not interested in going public.
I’ve just reread the paragraph. You said to focus on what happened before the turning point, the turning point itself, and what happened after it and describe how it’s been impacted. Well, I think I’ve done that. You also asked me to explain also what has sustained you through these life experiences. Well, my wife has significantly helped me deal with all this. I think the other part of it is I have a strong belief in God but I have virtually no confidence or trust in organized religion. I certainly have none in the Catholic Church. Actually, I have no confidence or trust in organized religion of any kind. I watch on TV with amazement people who profess to be ministers as they take advantage of poor people, and take advantage of people with little or no education. In my opinion, they seem to use religion as a tool to get donations and build big churches. You look at the televangelists and you know it’s the 1-800 number to donate that is behind it all. The settings are richly appointed. They’re well clothed. They have lots of jewelry. They have plenty of money to spend and throw around. But, in my opinion, they don’t help people.

So what I’ve tried to do with my life is try to make up for all that. I’ve tried to help people. I’ve tried to do things to make life better. One of the examples is I’m on a listserv now for retiring soldiers to try to find post-military jobs and careers. And I do it. I have about 450 people on the list. It’s grown. I started when I retired with about ten of my friends, and now it’s people I don’t even know. What I do is post their job ads and post their resumes and send them around. There is no compensation. I do it because I want people to be helped. That’s all I care about.

So I guess what I am really trying to say is that now I feel like I have turned my life around on the path of doing the right thing. I work at it every day. I try to do things to
help people, help my wife, and help myself - not necessarily in that order. That’s what I try to do. I try to make people happy. I try to be happy. And I’m not even sure that I know what to do or whether I’m doing that right or not. One of the things that I’m struggling with now is when is it time to retire. When is it time to quit working? What would I do if I quit?

I’ve developed a passion for bicycle riding. There is a great place to ride in Dayton, Ohio. There are lots of rail trails, so I try to ride every day. I find peace in it because it’s outside with nature. I marvel at all of the animals that I see. I see lots of deer. When I travel down the Mississippi as part of my job I stop and ride the Natchez Trace and I stop whenever I see turkeys, or deer, or eagles. I just watch them and I know that there is a God - there’s no question about it. Life is a tremendous thing but trying to find happiness in the world is very difficult. I treasure the relationships that I’ve had with friends over the years. I try to keep them all. I try to sustain them. One of the reasons why I went to the fortieth reunion was even though I did not graduate from Pi High is that I feel a bond with the people that I know there.

I’m sort of in that place where at sixty years old I don’t feel sixty. I don’t feel like I act sixty. From the outside appearances I’m reasonably successful. I retired honorably from the service. I had an excellent career that lasted twenty-five years. I’ve eleven years in higher education. I’m serving honorably there. I’m trying to serve honorably as a husband and a spouse. I feel like I’m constantly in search of more knowledge and a better path to happiness, but I struggle with it all the time because I’m not sure what it takes to really be happy. I see people who do lots of things that they enjoy doing. They have families. They are committed to their families. They enjoy things. I feel like in a lot of
ways that I just passed through all of that. I enjoy things I do, but it’s like an out of body experience in some ways. It’s happening to the person who is Michael but it’s not happening to me.

All right, so I am going to stop here. I think I covered all of the major events and I think that I’m not in any better place than anybody else, and a lot of people have had more happiness and success in their life than I have.

So there you go. I’m going to put this in the mail. You will have it shortly. Again my apologies for taking so long to get this done. I hope you’ve got what you need.

Thanks. Allright - I appreciate the opportunity and I wish you great success in completing your Ph.D. and I will rejoice when you’re done. Thank you.

Recorded by Michael – August, 2007

Transcribed by Mary Poole – October, 2007

Afterword

I have to stop several times as I listen to Michael’s story. Sixty years later, from the standpoint of a distant observer, I feel as if I have been kicked in my stomach as his tale unravels. His story about his father’s death is so poignant and unexpected, that it seems surreal. I consider how it must have felt. It is such an incomprehensible tragedy. In my mind’s eye, I see this young boy in shock, watching his father die, and I anticipate the guilt that he will carry around with him for a lifetime.

But that shock pales in comparison to the anger I feel as he describes his sexual abuse at the hands of the parish priest. “How could this beast take advantage of a child grieving the loss of his father?” I scream at my husband sitting with me. I worshipped at this same parish church, the same one where the priest served who abused him. “Who
was he?” I scream. I want to know who did this to him. I want to rage against this horrid priest and the Archbishop who did nothing. I want to go to newspapers and out him. But, of course, I don’t. Michael tells me he wants this confidential, so of course it will be. But my urge to protect this young child screams to be heard. I have, of course, heard of children who have been abused by Catholic priests, but this is the first time that I know that it happened in my world, in my time, by one of my priests. I am furious.

“This priest was the evilest of the evil,” I say to my sister-in-law, Barb, the next day, careful not to disclose identifying details. “How could a priest put his own perverted desires above the well being of this child who had already suffered so much?” I ask, sincerely wanting to know. Barb retired recently as the Principal of a Catholic elementary school in Atlanta. She has stayed close to her Catholic roots and works in a variety of positions for the archdiocese. I want answers.

“This could never happen today,” she tells me. “That doesn’t matter,” I say. Why didn’t they do something then?” I scream back. “He and his wife and mother and attorney confronted the Archbishop and the priest in the nineties, and they did nothing.” “I don’t know,” Barb says sadly.

Today I read in the newspaper that Pope Benedict is traveling to the United States to help to bring about “healing and reconciliation” in the wake of the Catholic priest sexual abuse debacle. I wish I had about an hour to give him a piece of my mind. How can you make up for a lifetime lived in the shadow of betrayal and pain? How can you compensate for the altered trajectory that this abuse triggered?

I am filled with rage and sadness. How could Barb and my brother stay Catholic in the face of this? I wonder. I left the Catholic Church decades ago, and I have never
regretted it. I agree with Michael’s conclusion – “I believe in God, but I will never trust organized religion again.”

I am also astounded that Michael could be so transparent in his narrative. He disclosed that he had only before told his wife, mother, and siblings about his abuse by the priest. With this trust, I feel a responsibility to him. I have his story. I want to protect him. I have done what I can to disguise his story, and he has read the final edit. He says he is okay with it.

Witnessing his pain, I want to do something about it. I wish I had known him more in high school, and we could have taken off our masks, and actually talked about who we were. I know too well the cost of bearing the secret of sexual abuse, and the havoc it can wreak in a life and in relationships. Maybe it would have been less onerous if we had known we were not alone.
Chapter Ten

Mary’s Story – “There’s a Crack in Everything”

Anthem

The birds they sang
at the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
has passed away
or what is yet to be.
Ah the wars they will
be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
bought and sold
and bought again
the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

As I begin this autoethnographic saga and request my classmates to tell me their stories, I decide that it is important for me to share my story with them, too. I sit at my second floor desk overlooking my backyard playground that we have created for my grandchildren, and consider my sixty years. How do I boil it down to a few pages, and how do I decide what is important? I follow my own instructions with a tape recorder,
spending a few hours focusing on my turning points. I decide to just go with what emerges, and not over think it.

Once it is completed, I transcribe it as I did all the others, and I send a copy to each of my participants. It seems reasonable that since they are trusting enough of me to share their life stories, then so should I.

My Story, Recorded, July 2007

My story began on Feb. 6, 1947 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. My father was Lenton Marion Poole, and my mother was Josephine Cecilia Paget. He was a southerner from Atlanta, stationed at Warren Air Force Base when he met my mother, a secretary working in Cheyenne during World War II. Even early on, their marriage was difficult, as I remember. There were lots of fights, tension and rancor. One of my few early memories was of my older brother Bill and me hiding behind my mother’s skirts as my Dad and Mom fought. I recall that I was afraid, and my Dad stormed off and slammed the door. Arguments happened often late at night, after my Dad returned from working at the oil refinery in Cheyenne. Other than that my early memories consist of rabbits (which we raised to eat), rhubarb (that grew bountifully in our yard), and snow.

Cheyenne was cold – very cold.

The cold is what led me to my next turning point. My Dad hated it, and when I was five years old, my family moved from Cheyenne to Atlanta, Ga. I remember a little bit about the journey. We drove the entire two thousand miles. I think it took about three and a half days, maybe four. I don’t remember anything about our belongings and whether we moved them or we bought new, but I do remember driving. And, I do
remember my mother was a mess. She was leaving her mother and her family and she
was sad and angry, and she stayed that way, as best as I could tell, for the rest of her life.
My father supposedly was moving for a business opportunity with one of his brothers,
which didn’t work out. We stayed in funky old motels as we made our way across the
country. We drove late, and my father walked into motels along the way (this was before
Howard Johnson’s and Hampton Inns), and if it wasn’t too expensive, we would stop. If
the hotel was out of our range, we would move on to another site. Once we stayed at a
place with a pool, a huge luxury for us. It was on this trip to Atlanta that I saw my first
television, in 1952. We walked into a motel, and there it was. I couldn’t believe what I
saw. It seemed like magic.

When we got to Atlanta, my parents’ relationship seemed to go from bad to
terrible. Mom didn’t like the South; she didn’t like my father’s family; and she missed
her family. It was hot, and we didn’t have air conditioning. I don’t think anyone did then.
What I remember my mother saying over and over was, “That damned red Georgia
clay.”

That was my mother’s mantra for the rest of her life. But in terms of a turning
point, I’d say that was a pretty significant one because if we had stayed in Wyoming, I
think things would have been very different for us. Of course, I don’t know how they
would have been different, but I do know that being raised in the south, and with a
mother that hated it and everything about it, didn’t make for domestic bliss. We didn’t do
much with Dad’s family, and we were isolated. My mother became embittered and angry
and depressed and probably spent most of her life being that way.
As a child, I discovered books at an early age. I went to the library weekly, and took out as many books as I could. I was so excited to pick out the books, take them home, and read them one by one. I remember the feel and smell of the books, as I picked them off of the shelves, and carefully counted to make sure I wasn’t taking over my limit. I spent much of my time in my bedroom reading. The stories took me away. I think I wanted to go away from my world. I read lots of biographies and lives of the saints. I read other books too, including every Nancy Drew story. I think I spent more time in my room reading than anywhere. My mother used to call me a “hot house plant.”

The next turning point for me had to do with the beginning of a several year period during which I was sexually abused by a family friend. It started at eleven and ended when I was sixteen. With everything else going on in my life at that point, my life was terribly bleak on the inside. But outside the home, I put up a good performance. Lying in bed at night, I was tormented by shame and fear. It was a painful counterpoint to the messages I was receiving about sex in my Catholic education. This whole experience made me pull more and more inward, and I became increasingly isolated and depressed. I already felt marginalized because I internalized my mother’s attitude about hating southerners, and I didn’t fit in. I locked myself in my room at night and I was terrified that anyone would find out. Almost fifty years later, the details of those experiences are etched into my memory.

At about the same time, my mother spiraled down into a terrible depression. I remember coming home from school, and finding her sitting at the kitchen table crying. She just couldn’t stop. Soon after that, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for depression. She was there for several weeks, and I visited her with my Dad and brother.
While there, she had electric shock treatments. When we visited her after her treatments, her eyes were vacant. This terrified me. It was like visiting a zombie. That was a disturbing time. I was only twelve, and I didn’t understand what was wrong with her. No one in my family talked about things. In addition, the abuse was continuing. I honestly don’t know how I got through it. This was probably about that time that I decided I wanted to be a nun. I was very religious: praying the rosary; going to Mass daily; offering up my suffering for my sins. It was a way to make sense of what was happening to me. The Catholic Church taught me that suffering had value. My suffering bought me time out of purgatory. It seems ridiculous now, but at the time, I believed it. At least it gave purpose to what was happening to me. Maybe that is what got me through it.

I guess the other turning point occurred when I was getting ready to go into high school. I recall one Sunday night, as I was getting ready for my first day. My brother sat me down, and said, “You know Kitty (that was my family nickname), I am a big wheel at Pius.” (He was a senior, president of his class, captain of the football team.) “I don’t want you to embarrass me, so you had better behave.” I was enraged. I can distinctly remember thinking, ‘I’ll show you. I’ll leave you in the dust.’

I started high school more determined than I have ever been. I did little but study, and I ran for student government and class president and won both. I was driven and angry. I learned what I could do when I am determined. My brother did me a big favor. That set the tone for my high school, which helped me to emerge as a leader. Looking back on it from the distance of several decades, this helped shape my sense of self. My experiences in high school gave me confidence, and helped me to get scholarships to college. It was a way for me to focus my energies on something positive.
performance at school was something I could control. It felt good to be in control of something.

My home life certainly wasn’t in my control. There were some good things. I loved and was loved by my father, and in a different way, my mother. They tried hard to make sure we were educated and had what we needed. My father had a joy in living that emerged unpredictably and that gave me hope. But, there was also shame, an absence of warmth and communication, and a constant dreary pall.

As I mentioned, I was very religious. I went to Mass and communion daily. From a young age, I wrote away to orders of nuns for information about joining them. My parents were upset, particularly my Baptist father. This draw to the convent continued until my senior year, and then I discarded the nun idea, and applied for college. I was fortunate that I had several scholarships offered, particularly since my family didn’t have the money to send me. My brother was at West Point, and we were the first in my family to go to college. Looking back on it, I don’t think I appreciated until much later how important it was for my mother that we received a good education. My father wasn’t that concerned. Actually, when I told him that I wanted to go to college, his comment to me was, “Why go to college? You are just going to get married, and waste it.” That was another random comment that angered and motivated me. I am beginning to see a trend here. But, it was my mother who encouraged it and made it happen. I appreciate that about her. She made many sacrifices to see that we had private Catholic school and went to college. Thanks, Mom.

I decided to go to Trinity College. They offered me a substantial scholarship, and I liked the idea of Washington. D. C. Plus, I wanted to go far away from home. It also
helped that my good friend Mina Rosenthal was going there too. My college years weren’t stellar. I was homesick in D. C., and felt out of place. Most of my classmates were extremely wealthy. (Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the house and Kathleen Sebulius, the governor of Kansas, both graduated from Trinity a few years ahead of me.) It was an interesting time to be in D.C. It was the late sixties, and there was plenty of activity. It was there that I seriously began to question the order of things: authority, power, gender, race and religion. Looking back on it now, I think I would describe it as awakening to the hegemonic social construction of all of that. I argued with priests in theology classes, and emerged pretty much an agnostic with atheistic tendencies. I was able to get a good education that prepared me to think and gave me a good sound base of knowledge and thought. I am grateful for that.

After my freshman year, my brother married his high school sweetheart, and I met his best man and best friend, Hos, at his wedding. I fell in love. He was a West Point graduate too, and went to Viet Nam the year after. He wrote beautiful romantic letters describing his experiences there, and I was anxious for him to come home. In April of ’68, Martin Luther King was killed. In May, Hos was killed in the Tet Offensive. In June, Bobby Kennedy was killed. My world fell apart. I was distraught, angry, and lost. I already questioned my religion, my government, and my life, but after spring of ’68, I was willing to flush it all down the toilet. This was a definite turning point. It impacted my life, and how I have lived it. I dropped out of college, gave back my scholarship in a fit of rage, and went back home. (One year later, I ate humble pie, begged for it back, and finished my degree a year late.) But, I never looked at the world, and particularly power and institutions, the same.
After graduation, I was lost. I didn’t know what to do with myself. No one suggested graduate school at that time, and it didn’t occur to me. Ken Johns, who I met when I was eighteen, asked me to marry him. I didn’t know what else to do, so we married the summer of ‘69. Looking back, this was one of the more insane things I have done. Although a good guy, I knew very little of him. We had seen each other a few times and corresponded while he was in Viet Nam and Guam, but we spent little time together. Actually, he proposed in the mail, and sent me my engagement ring that way also. After just a couple of years, I discovered we were very different. He was Republican, conservative, and sterile. I decided to move on. My marriage to Ken did locate me geographically in Florida, and I have been here most of my life.

In 1970, I moved to Tampa with Ken and started my first career - insurance adjusting, the business that Ken’s family owned. After we were divorced, and after years of doing a job I hated, I found an ad for a job in the newspaper – wilderness counselor teacher for the Eckerd Youth Alternatives. I remember sitting in my insurance office and making that call. I felt that this was something that would change my life, and it did. I went for the interview, and in two weeks left my insurance world and went to the wilderness, earning about a third of what I made before.

This job was a turning point, and it changed my life. I loved being in the woods and working with youth. For the first time in my life, I felt I was doing what I was meant to do. I was good at it. It provided me with a sense of purpose. And, it gave me a respite. We lived in the woods in tents with no electricity. It was a simple life, and I grew to appreciate it. The quiet and peace of the woods gave me time for reflection and introspection. I found out that I was happy when I was teaching and working with youth.
and that I felt the peace that comes from being where I fit. I healed as much as the girls with whom I worked. Like the girls, I developed self-confidence as I cut down trees and survived three-week canoe trips. And, I became more compassionate, aware, and sensitive to the stories of troubled youth. I wasn’t that different from them. I didn’t get in trouble, but I too was troubled. I also developed a love of the outdoors that has stayed with me a lifetime.

There I met my second husband and my children’s father. He worked at the Camp, too, and we were married the year I turned thirty. He loved children and the wilderness, and he was light and fun, something I needed. He also fed the adventurer side of me. On our honeymoon, we bicycled four hundred miles to Key West from Sarasota, Florida. When my son Jesse was fifteen months old, we bicycled around Nova Scotia for four weeks with him in tow. I was happy for a while, and we had fun and adventure.

My next significant event came with the birth of my son, Jesse. I was thirty-two and really wanted children. David was ambivalent, but I took the lead, and Jesse came into our lives. With his birth, something inside me shifted. I found that archetype/persona that I have embraced for the rest of my life – the mother. Mothering became my passion and my joy and my life. I loved it, and was alternately terrified of it. I didn’t have great role models, and I didn’t want to perpetuate the dynamics of my family of origin. I adored Jesse, and immediately felt this all-consuming love and need to protect that has never wavered, and which I later extended to my daughter, Meghan, and now my grandchildren (and to a lesser degree to random people in my life). It has been the best part of my life, and the hardest, certainly the most rewarding. It has been the alchemical process that has turned the dross of my life into gold. With the joy came fear. Taking Jesse home from
the hospital, I panicked because I realized I couldn’t protect him from pollution. That was the beginning of my worries. I think I started a conscientious objector file for him soon after.

David was a good father, and he had more experience with little ones than I did. We had fun together, and I was able to stay home while I worked with David running group homes for troubled youth. We did that for several years.

About eighteen months after Jesse’s birth, I became pregnant again, and we had an opportunity to move to New Orleans to help run a program for troubled youth that friends were starting. That was a turning point in so many ways. Looking back on it, I think I was insane moving to a strange place eight months pregnant without any support system. I don’t know why we did it, but it was an adventure, and we were adventurers. Of course, we had no idea what was to come.

I think I knew from the moment we got there we made a big mistake. Nothing was as it was supposed to be, and we ended up in a motel until the house we were to live in was ready. When I delivered Meghan, I came home to that same motel. It was awful, and that was just the beginning. I have often described New Orleans as the best of times and the worst of times. There was the great food and music and the flavor of the city that I grew to love. I loved the coffee, the beignets, the Cajun music, and the big easy. But we were very alone with no friends and no family.

And that was just the beginning. We started Jesse at University Montessori preschool, which turned out to be a great place for him, and a great support for us.
I met lots of people there, and became friends with several of them. That helped. Through that I developed a life long appreciation for the philosophy of Maria Montessori, and my grandson now attends a similar school.

But the real turning point happened when my daughter was a year old. While we were sitting at a meeting, David had the first grand mal seizure of many. It came out of the blue. He was a marathon runner and a fitness freak. He had all kinds of tests, but Tulane Medical Center couldn’t figure out what the issue was. The diagnosis was epilepsy, with no known cause. David’s behavior and attitude changed totally. He became depressed and angry and sullen, and eventually, suicidal. He ended up in a psychiatric hospital for several months. Needless to say, that shook the foundations of our life. I was alone and overwhelmed and on top of it had to change jobs, because David and I worked together and he could no longer work. It was pretty terrible, in retrospect. I was alone in a relatively strange city with two young kids, working at a new job at a school for troubled youth, and David was in the hospital.

We were financially strapped, and I felt desperate and alone. I would never have made it were it not for “the kindness of strangers.” The Montessori school took in Meghan early, and allowed me to clean it weekly so that I could afford it. They were amazing. And there were others who I hardly knew who pitched in. It taught me something about kindness and reaching out to others. I hope I have repaid that kindness. I have never forgotten it.

At the same time, my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and that story began.
It was an extremely difficult time. To deal with it all, I entered into counseling and as usual, I turned to books and introspection. I turned to spirituality but not religion, trying to find some meaning. I guess the meaning I found was to endure, and to keep loving my children. David didn’t improve, and we had no answers. Living with him was unbearable and I felt it was destructive for the kids, so we were divorced. David never recovered. He went back to Florida and lived with his mother. He never worked again, and I felt the total responsibility of the kids.

I moved back to Florida and went to work as a social worker for the Eckerd camps. It wasn’t until ten years later that we found out that David had a very rare and slow growing brain tumor in his frontal lobe. This explained a lot, but it also caused a lot of confusion. He lived with this brain tumor, unable to work and function normally for twenty-five years. He died just this past summer at the age of fifty-seven, after living in a nursing home for several years. It has been a long, sad, and difficult journey for all of us, one that shaped my life and the lives of my children.

The same month that I moved back to Florida, my mother died of lung cancer. One year later, my father died of Parkinson’s/Alzheimer’s. I was forty. That was a year. The grief of my childhood, and my marriage, and the awesome responsibility of my life took its toll. I struggled, went to counseling, and tried to understand and make peace both with my family and with myself. Wanting a good life for my children has always motivated me, and I was a very active and involved parent. I made sure they had the best schools possible, and the best opportunities. That purpose kept me going then.

Another significant event was becoming involved in the Unitarian Universalist Church in Clearwater. It was the only church I could find that was compatible with my
unorthodox beliefs and I wanted the support of something. It was wonderful for us. My kids had a sense of an extended family, and although there were dysfunctional elements, it was enriching for all of us. It also helped my teaching and confidence levels. I found friends, and eventually, my current husband, Paul. We had similar backgrounds, and a lot in common. He is intelligent, compassionate, stable and kind. All of that said, of course, it hasn’t been a marriage made in heaven. We deal with his crazy ex-spouse, massive alimony, and his daughter, who has a psychosis. Despite the challenges, at least we face them together, and he loves my children and grandchildren.

In my early forties, I also found a career that fit. I went to work in administration at the University of South Florida in Tampa. There I directed a program for victims of violence, and eventually directed other projects. While there, I had free tuition, so I pursued an M.A. in Religious Studies, and later a Ph.D. in Communication. This ignited my intellect and my curiosity and has kept me energized.

My mid and later forties were good years - a new career, a new marriage, kids in high school, and a new home. There were always complexities, but there also was happiness. For the first time, Paul and I traveled a bit, and I had a real partner. I felt powerful and alive and happier than ever.

In the late nineties, my son and then my daughter left home for college. That was truly a massive change, and I grieved that loss. I loved being the home where the teens hung out, and I loved being with my children. When I dropped my daughter off at college in Baltimore, I cried for days. And then a month later, I couldn’t get out of bed. I was in great pain and my hands and feet were swollen and rigid. I was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis. That was a turning point. Never before had I been ill. For a year
or two, I struggled with pain and immobility and doctors. I kept going to work and functioning, although sometimes Paul would have to dress me. I refused to give in. It has been a challenge off and on for me, but I have been able to deal with it. It put me in touch with my mortality and my vulnerability.

My fifties were good years, too. I realized I love to learn and to teach and to write, and I had the opportunity to develop that. We all stayed healthy, and life went on. I am blessed with a close relationship with my children, who both eventually made their way back from various places and live close to home. I talk with them daily, see them often, and am proud of the people they are.

And that leads me to my next turning point. On the day Meghan graduated from college, she turned twenty-two and became pregnant. She was engaged, and they married and moved back to Florida. Meghan gave birth to Logan, who is a love of my life. My husband and I help parent, and our lives revolve around Logan and Ava, born two years later. There is another one coming who I am sure will have the same effect on us. That has been an unexpected and truly delightful gift.

Approaching sixty has been difficult for me. I am surprised, actually. Fifty and forty weren’t that bad. I think the losses have accumulated and clouded my view. Five years ago, with new university administration, my position was defunded. That was painful for me, as I loved my job and the opportunities and identity it afforded. However, it did allow me to go back to school full time for the Ph.D. and to teach, which I believe is truly my “vocation” as the nuns used to teach us.
Last year, my beloved dog, Barraccas, died of cancer. I am still grieving that loss. My parents are long gone, and now David. I am also aware that my options are more limited than before, and that my mortality looms in the not that distant future.

On the positive side, I am truly grateful to have goals. I want to continue working on my research, to teach, to write, and to help raise my grandchildren. As I look back on my life, there have been difficulties. I am proud that I didn’t fold under them, and that I was able to raise my children and maintain a certain sense of optimism and compassion despite them.

I believe that life is hard for everyone, and have tried not to let my problems define me. I enjoy reading, intellectual pursuits, music, dancing, my family, and the world of ideas. I have been moved to try to make some positive difference in my world; to help to heal the pain of others; and to help to create a more just and compassionate world. I hope that when all is said and done I have. I am not done yet. I have more to do and more to say and more students to reach, I hope, and much more loving to give to those sweet, sweet grandbabies, my family, and friends.

Recorded by Mary Poole – July, 2007
Transcribed by Mary Poole – August, 2007

Afterword - April 22, 2008

My children sit on either side of me in this packed concert venue – St.Petersburg Time’s Forum in Tampa, Florida. We gave each other tickets to see Bruce Springsteen for Christmas. Since Jesse and Meghan were little, we have gone to concerts together. They were eight and ten when I took them to their first concert. We saw Blondie and
Tears for Fears. We almost made it to see the Grateful Dead together on their last tour through Florida about twelve years ago, but Mickey Hart’s dad died, and the concert was cancelled.

This is a huge concert hall, with seats circling the floor used for the Tampa Bay Lightning, our local hockey team. The audience is electric, as we wait for the “Boss” to enter. Finally, almost forty-five minutes late, he and the band walk onto a dark stage. This is his first performance since the death of his friend of forty years and band-mate, Danny Federici. The lights are dimmed on the stage, and a spotlight shines on the empty chair where Federici would have sat. Bruce and the band perform “Blood Brothers” in honor of him. The cameras close in on Springsteen’s face, and tears are falling from his cheeks as he sings. Throughout the concert, Bruce makes several comments about Danny, and those who have seen him before tell me that this concert is inspired and even better than the normal outstanding Springsteen concert.

For almost three hours, Bruce rocks across the stage and plays guitar with a passion and energy that astounds me, only three years his senior. At one point, he slides on the floor into the microphone pole, and does a back split. He plays as if he can sing, rock and dance to drive out the Grim Reaper.

Perhaps I am projecting, but I have the feeling that Bruce is feeling his mortality, despite his display of robust youthful energy. Sean Daly, the St. Petersburg Times music critic said:

Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band just don’t lose fights with Father Time. For four decades, it has always been a mis–match. From epic concerts that rumbled on with disregard for deadlines to thunderous
anthems about thumbing your nose at destiny, the Jersey boy’s
brotherhood is inherently built to push, and punish the boundaries of the
clock. . . They just keep playing as if they have all the time in the world
(March 23, 2008, p. 2B)

Few left their seats as he returned to the stage for his encore. He dedicated the
gospel song, “I’ll Fly Away” to Danny. I look over at Meghan, and see tears streaming
down her face. My son, Jesse, is more stoic, but I can see that he is moved. This was
their father’s favorite song, and we sang it at his funeral eight months ago. It has been a
year when we as a family have had to face more than one death. I consider that none of
us have all the time in the world, not even Bruce. Death touches us all. But, like Bruce, I
want to keep singing, dancing, and living for as long as I have breath.
Chapter Eleven

The Class of ’65 Sixtieth Birthday Celebration

It sounded like a good idea at the time - a joint sixtieth birthday celebration for the “Class of ’65.” Greg Beckham, our class president and an ebullient enthusiast, broached the idea at our fortieth reunion. I liked the idea so much that I wrote it into my dissertation proposal, determined to help make it happen. It’s a good thing I did, because my personal sixtieth birthday was a massive disappointment.

When I turned sixty on February 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2007, I expected a big personal birthday celebration. I love celebrations, and share with my daughter the designation of “family celebrator,” planning and executing massive parties and events for family members. I expected the same for my sixtieth birthday. I needed it for this transition birthday. When the party didn’t happen, I was angry, hurt and went into a long pout. There were reasons, of course--a variety of family illnesses and stressors, and prior commitments. My daughter was busy planning my granddaughter’s first and grandson’s third birthday. My husband was overwhelmed with health, work, and legal challenges. The adult in me understood, but the child of sixty, lurking not too far below the surface, was disappointed.

So when I began planning this joint event, I thought this would help ease my disappointment, and would also assuage the discomfort I felt as I crossed the threshold into my “senior” years. I wanted to look around at a room of people the same age and say, “They [we] seem to be doing okay.”
My planning for our joint celebration was delayed by the death of my ex-husband, the father of my children, from a brain tumor on July 25, 2007. The grief from his death surprised me and shook me to the core. My son and daughter struggled with the loss, and I spent time with them to help them through it. Because of that, I didn’t begin planning this event until September 2007. It was difficult to accomplish from afar. Since I’m not that familiar with Atlanta anymore, I enlisted the help of Norene to find an appropriate venue. Here is the story, beginning with emails I sent out to the class.
Hello my dear classmates, and fellow sexagenarians,

Well, this is the year we turn sixty, and that feels like a celebration! Please come together with members of the class of '65 to celebrate where we have been and what we have accomplished, as well as reflect upon where we are going. As our classmate, Zak Kozak, reminded me, "When you are sixty, our tomorrow is today." This is the time to live now - if ever there was one.

We also know that along the way each of us has lost - certainly our youth; some of us our hair; at least for some of us, our capacity to remember names. On a more profound level, we have lost six classmates, and individually we have lost parents, partners, children, and friends. As Joni Mitchell says, "Some of our dreams have lost their grandeur coming true." We grieve the loss of other hopes and dreams that fall short of the mark.

Whatever you celebrate (or grieve), come do it for this one night with your fellow classmates. We were young together, now let’s celebrate this big birthday together.

When:  Saturday, November 3, 7 p.m.
Where:  Anthony's Fine Dining, Buckhead
Why:  Share this passage with those of your youth, who are going through the same thing
Cost:  $55 per person (plus drinks and gratuities)
What do you need to do: RSVP to Mary Poole at
mary_c_poole@hotmail.com (or 727 742-8126) by Oct.

Also, on Sunday, November 4 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., I (Mary Poole)
am hosting a discussion/focus group/coffee at the home of my brother, Bill
Poole, in Roswell. I am writing a dissertation about our classmates. My
purpose is to talk about our life narratives: what ties us together; what has
influenced our life trajectories; and how this shapes our future. I hope that
this gathering will provide an opening to encourage self-reflection as we
enter into this new stage of our lives.

Please RSVP to this also.

I hope to see many of you soon. I am sorry for the short notice. Life
interfered with these plans earlier.

Mary Poole

November 2, 2007

Hello classmates-

Well, tomorrow is the dinner. We have about twenty RSVP's,
including our principals: Father Harrison, and former priest, Jack Cotter
(calling him Jack will be strange), and his wife (Sr. Laurie Ann), and Miss
Guscio. How wonderful that our past principals and teachers want to share
this evening with us! And it is encouraging that at our age they are still
alive!
I am sorry many some of you won’t be able to make it. I’ve heard from many classmates who send their regards and who would have liked to come, but had prior commitments or responsibilities, or who live in Hawaii or California, or other far away places, and look forward to seeing those who can. After the weekend I will compile comments and a report for all of you who can't come. Many of you are out of town, or had parenting or grand-parenting commitments and are unable to come. I am packing up as I speak, and getting in the car with my husband (Paul), daughter (Meghan), and grandson (Logan, 3), and granddaughter (Ava, 20 months), who are coming along for a trip to the Georgia Aquarium, which I hear from my grandson has a whale shark! How cool!

I look forward to seeing you and will report back to the rest next week.

Peace,

Mary Poole

Birthday Celebration Dinner - November 3, 2008

Today is the day I have been thinking about and planning for the last two years. Norene and Jerome offered Paul and me their home accommodations for the weekend, but since I travel with an entourage of husband, daughter, and grandchildren, we stay at my brother’s home instead. We arrived last night, and today we take a trip to the Georgia Aquarium to provide some excitement for the children. Logan loves whale sharks, and the aquarium is one of the few aquariums in the world to provide a home for them. It is an exciting and exhausting day. We are some of the first to enter when the aquarium
doors opened, and we visit the whale sharks, beluga whales, and every other kind of sea life offered here. Chasing a two and a three year old in a crowded public space makes for an exciting and exhausting day.

I make a point to return to my brother’s home early in the afternoon. One of the joys of getting older is napping, and putting grandchildren to sleep provides an excuse to do so. Logan and I snuggle up on the big blue bedspread in my niece, Kathy’s old room. The room doesn’t look very different from her high school days, fifteen years ago, although she has now moved to Dallas and is the mother of three children. Pictures of Kathy and friends and family are placed around the room, and personal mementos and high school awards are still on the walls. She graduated from St. Pius, too, twenty-five years after my class.

Her room reminds me of my old bedroom at my mother’s home. My mother kept it exactly as I left it until she died, twenty-two years after my high school graduation. My room was a time capsule that served as a shrine to me, long after I left home. My high school years were my glory years to my mother. When I was forty years old she told people that I was president of the student council in high school. When we cleaned out her house after her death, a lion mascot for St. Pius X high school sat on my dresser, just as I had left it many years before. My niece’s room has some of the same ghost-like entombed feeling.

I only sleep a few minutes, and wake up refreshed around four, a perfect catnap. The dinner is at seven, but I want to leave early to be there before the others arrive. Trying not to awaken Logan, I quietly shower and begin to get ready. Last week, I went shopping with Meghan, my dressing guru, and picked out a red, silk pattern jacket and slacks to
wear. I feel self-conscious. I wonder how I will compare with my other classmates. Will they look older, younger, better put together? These last few years have taken their toll on my body. I like to blame it on my efforts to earn my Ph.D., but in reality, I prefer mental workouts to physical ones.

And, the ravages of my Rheumatoid Arthritis have made it difficult for me to walk, much less do other exercises. I walk with a limp and it is difficult to get up stairs and in and out of chairs. When I am having an RA flair up, I sometimes must resort to using a walking stick I bought in Ireland. It wasn’t that long ago, most people couldn’t keep up with me because I walked so fast. I’ve have always seen myself as strong and invincible. It is hard for me to accept these limitations.

For all of these reasons, I am conscious of my appearance, and am aware that I am not in great shape. I take comfort in my hair that was recently cut, colored and highlighted with varying shades of red and brown in a funky, artsy way. Logan’s interpretation is a little different. He said after I had it done, “GaGa – your hair is orange on top and black on the bottom.” Whichever way you describe my hair, it is not your typical sixty-year-old’s style.

And, looking in the mirror, I tell myself that the plumpness of my face puffs out my lines and wrinkles, making me appear at least less wizened than many my age. I wonder if any of my classmates will have had plastic surgery? I remember to apply highlighter to the inner corner of my eyes to make them look younger, a trick Meghan taught me.

After spending much more than my usual fifteen minutes to get ready, I walk downstairs and find Barbara in her kitchen. She says, “Why Kitty (my family name), how lovely you look!” She continues, “Why don’t you let me iron that jacket? It’s a little
wrinkled.” At first, I feel embarrassed that I didn’t notice it, but Barb, ever the diplomat, reminds me that she is “exceptionally aware of these things.” It must be the seamstress in her. She is much more domesticated than I have ever been. I let her take my jacket and iron it while I try to calm down with a glass of wine. It feels pleasantly intimate to have Barb groom me. As she returns with a freshly steamed and wrinkle free jacket, I call for Paul, eager to get going. I am comforted that he is with me, and that I don’t have to go alone. He is pleasant company in a situation like this, presenting just the right balance between solicitousness and independence.

My brother’s home in Roswell is only a few minutes from Buckhead. I remember Buckhead as a small little town. It was one of the haunts of my youth. At that time, it was located between my home and downtown Atlanta, where I sometimes went for movies and pizza. Now, it has become an upscale business and entertainment area, where many of the hipsters and those who have made it live, including Elton John and Jane Fonda. My brother’s law office is also here.

It is a good thing Paul is driving. I am excited and a bit nervous. He has the directions, and he takes us there easily. We pull into a side driveway when we see a sign for the restaurant. There is a sign from the road, but the restaurant is not in view. As we pull around back, I see an elegant, Tudor style building. Valets park the cars, and Paul and I get out of his five-year-old Subaru Forester. I mutter to Paul, “I wish we had cleaned and washed the car before we came.” I look around to see if I recognize anyone. Not yet, but there are members of a wedding party unloading at the same time. I am glad none of my classmates are here to see my dirty, old vehicle.
As we walk in, a maitre de welcomes us, and we announce that we are with the St. Pius birthday reunion. He smiles and walks us back to a private room in the back of the building. We are the first here. The room is cozy, elegant, and exudes a warm ambiance. A fireplace brightens the dark space, and candles grace six white clothed round tables that fill the room. As we enter, a waiter tells us there is a private bar set up in the next room, and I immediately send Paul in for a scotch on the rocks. It is a lovely room and works well to encourage intimacy. Norene, who chose the place, did well.

Soon after, Norene and Jerome bounce in. Norene is, as usual, quintessentially bubbly. Jerome, following behind her, is more of a quiet bubble. “This is a great place,” I tell her as we hug. She hustles around, talking to the waiters, checking out the bar, and arranging the nametags. She is so together, I can’t imagine how she lost to me for student government presidency. It must have been because of the efforts of my campaign manager, Beryl Prevost, who died many years ago from breast cancer. I miss her tonight, and I consider those students in our class who didn’t have a chance to live to sixty. I am told there are six. Not bad odds out of one hundred twenty classmates, forty-two years later. Despite many males who served in Viet Nam, none were killed there. Joan, one of the homecoming court, committed suicide right after high school, and two other members of the homecoming court died early on from cancer. I remember those passed and consider the lives they didn’t get a chance to live, as I prepare for my classmates to show up.

Standing in the doorway between the dining room and bar, I sip on my scotch, and watch as my classmates trickle in. Father Harrison, our principal, arrives and greets me warmly. He is spry for an almost eighty-year old man. I gave my first speech thanking
him when he left our school in my senior year. Soon after, we heard he left the priesthood, and in my college years, I frequently saw him with different women having dinner at a restaurant where I worked. He returned to the priesthood in his late fifties, and serves a parish now. Miss Guscio rolls in on her wheelchair. Norene whispers, “She just retired from Pius after forty-five years.” I am amazed. She seemed frail back then. I consider that if she can make it to eighty, the odds should be good for me.

I find myself lately considering how many years I have left. I add up how many years till my grandchildren graduate from high school, and how old I will be then, and wonder if I will be alive. I’ve also taken to reading obituaries, and taking comfort in those who die at much older ages than I am now, and noticing how many have died who are the same age or younger. I wonder if I am the only morbid one doing this, or if others share in this preoccupation with mortality.

After a few minutes, the room is full of talking, laughing sixty year olds. Looking out at them is like looking at a mirror. “How are we looking?” I ask myself. “Not bad,” I think, as I look around at this vital group around me. I am startled, though, as I notice that two of the women are walking with canes. “Wow,” I mutter. “We aren’t that old.” I later find out that one of the women sporting a cane recently had foot surgery, and the other has had Multiple Sclerosis since young adulthood. I feel a little better knowing that most aren’t yet at the stage where walking assistance is needed.

Soon we migrate to our tables. Paul and I sit with Greg Beckham (a Jean-Luc Piccard look alike); John Walters and his wife, Sharon; and Liz Horsey. Greg and I were friends and shared classes together in school. I didn’t know John well, and I am embarrassed to find that Liz actually went to the same small college I did, and I didn’t
remember her there. I attribute it to my aging brain. As the waiter serves our “butter and red leaf salad,” we reintroduce ourselves to each other. Liz has a cane, and she recounts that she recently had surgery on her foot. As I look closer at John, I am able to see in his now older face the young teenager I knew forty years ago. It is like a reverse process of the aging machine Gullette talks about (1997, p. 11). I begin to remember him. There is a refreshing openness, humility and honesty about John, as he introduces his wife, Sharon, and talks about his life. Greg has come from Washington D. C., where he works for the Pentagon. It is a lively group. At the class reunion two years ago, Greg’s eyes filled with tears as he told me how he pulled bodies out of the Pentagon on 9/11. Tonight, he is more upbeat, and entertains the table describing his exploits at black tie government events. Three other tables around us are filled with animated and talkative classmates and guests.

Before our entrees of Florida Grouper, Filet Mignon, or Chicken Wellington are served, I intend to say a few words to get the group conversation started. I take a swig of my scotch for inspiration and clink my knife against my water glass.

Eventually, the chatter diminishes. I am conscious that what I say sets the tone for what others share, so I choose my words carefully:

Welcome to our class joint sixtieth birthday party. Please thank Greg for the idea, and Norene for the lovely arrangements she made for our evening. (Clapping) I look around at all of our familiar faces, not all that changed since we last attended PiHi, forty-two years ago. I am amazed at how similar we all look and act. (laughter) Yet, unlike forty-two years
ago, we all have a story to tell and a life that we have lived. It is that we
celebrate tonight, as we look forward to the years to come. I turned sixty
in February, and unlike other milestone years for me, this birthday was a
challenge. It took me by surprise. I sometimes still can’t believe that I am
sixty. I find it very comforting to be in a room of people who are facing
the same moment. After our last reunion, being with our class reminded
me of the person I was forty some years ago, and of the person I wanted to
become. Maybe coming together tonight can help us all to recall that in
ourselves. I would like to ask each of you to say a few words, and tell us
what you like about your life, and what you anticipate doing in your
sixties and years to come.

Without hesitation, our class president, Greg, stands up, and with his mischievous
smile, gets the ball rolling. “Well, I guess I’ll begin. I’m really grateful we are doing
this, and want to thank Mary and Norene for making this happen.” With that he begins to
recount his tale.

After Pius, I went to Brown, and then to Viet Nam, like some of you.
When I came back, my wife greeted me with divorce papers. As you can
imagine, that was a bit of a shock. I struggled for a while after that, trying
to find my place. I eventually met my current wife of thirty years and
went back into the military. I work now at the Pentagon keeping the
world together. I have two great boys. I am looking to retire in a couple
of years, and am trying to decide what I want to do. My life now is good,
and I am not all that anxious to give up the good life. Now, I hobnob with people who make things happen, and get to go to black tie events on a regular basis. I am not sure how I am going to keep that going. I want to find a way to give back, though. I am looking for a way to do that. And, I want to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Greg is an extrovert and a talker like myself. He could have talked on for a while longer, so I gently interject, and invite someone else to speak. And the stories move around the room. Liz, sitting at my table, stands up and recounts a tale about a life altering car accident. “I found myself upside down in a ditch filled with water. It was terrifying, and I didn’t know if I would get out alive or not. That experience changed my life and how I look at things. She tells how this event made her want to make a difference. “My big cause,” she states, “is the ethical treatment of animals.” She recalls how she used to be a graphic designer, but technology threw her out of a job. She had to retool, and now she is a paralegal. “I still want to write mystery novels, though, and I do that in my spare time.”

One by one we go around the room and narrate bits of our tale. Mike Donahue tells how he worked for Rich’s Department Store, an Atlanta institution, for twenty-seven years. He lost his job when Macy’s bought it out. “It’s been tough getting over that,” he says, “but now I am into designing landscaping. I had to start over. My grandchildren keep me going.” John describes his ventures in business, and now his anticipated retirement:

Unlike most of you, I didn’t go to college. I joined the Marines and went to Viet Nam, and when I returned, I started driving a truck. Now, I still
work for the same organization and am a regional manager. My wife and I
are planning our retirement and want to spend it volunteering and giving
back. We are involved now with ‘Build it up Atlanta’ and several other
volunteer organizations.

Around the room we go. Norene and Jerome are a class icon, as we watched their
romance blossom at our twenty-fifth reunion. They share with us the joy of their
marriage. Jerome tells how he narrowly escaped the draft for the Viet Nam war due to a
concussion, and how he fell into a career for which he had no training. “It sounded like
fun,” he says. Norene adds, “I’ve never been happier than I am now with Jerome (big
clap). After high school, I kind of lived the hippie lifestyle. I lived in the woods, planted
organic vegetables, and cooked on a wood stove.” She then tells the class about Sharon,
and how most of her life had been devoted to the care of daughter, until she died.

Laurenthia describes her studies at Georgia Tech and her engineering career and
volunteer work, including going to New Orleans after the hurricane to help with the
recovery. Pam’s story unfolds with tales about her marriage, moving around the world
with her husband and children, and her diagnosis of MS. Darlene reports about her
career as a Psychologist and an entrepreneur. “I still have lots I want to do,” she informs
us. “I want to travel the world, and I started back in school this fall to earn another degree
in Psychopharmacology.” Jim Meaney gets up and begins to speak with his gentle
southern drawl. His appearance and speech remind me of Matlock as he tells about his
law practice in North Georgia, and about his children and grandchildren.

Soon after we’ve all had a chance to introduce ourselves, we return to our entrees
and our table conversations. I talk with Greg and John, and savor my Georgia Peach
Flambé. Being with these people in this place has a surreal feel to me. So much has happened in my life since we were all together as a class, and in the lives of all of us. Marriages, births, careers, failures, and deaths shape and season the people we are today. It seems like only a moment ago we were idealistic eighteen year olds. Inside, I feel the confident, optimistic leader of our class that I was then. I feel the achievements, joy, and accomplishments experienced over a lifetime of sixty years; but, I also feel the disappointments I’ve experienced in myself and in my life, too. These conflicting feelings make me feel disoriented, and I’ve only had one scotch. My sense of time and place is warped. It is as if I am a fly on the wall caught in a “back to the future” time warp.

During dinner, I sit with Paul on one side and John on the other. Everyone at the table is engaged in a lively discussion. Paul and I discover that John and Sharon have grandchildren the same age as Logan and Ava, and of course, the pictures come out. I am impressed with the open and obvious affection that John and Sharon have for each other after thirty plus years of marriage. “Sharon has been the success of my life,” John says. He continues, “I tried to retire a couple of years ago, but I seem to keep going back to work. I am planning this next year to make retirement stick, and Sharon and I want to devote our full attention to the volunteer organizations we work with.” He has such a gentle and humble presence, I find myself drawn to him, and want to know more. But, soon, the table conversation turns to high school days, and we reminisce about Sr. Elaine, Sister Susan (the 6’2 “history teacher) and Sr. Regina, who would terrify us with stories of damnation should we succumb to the pleasures of the flesh. The conversation continues this way: back and forth from the past to the present, and occasionally looking forward to our future plans.
After dinner, I walk to the bar for an after dinner drink. Holding a Kahlua and crème, I talk with Pam who leans on her cane. I remember her well from school. She had then and still has now a sardonic and caustic wit. Yet now she displays a vulnerability that wasn’t apparent then, at least not to me. Perhaps it is her disease. I feel a simpatico with her and her illness. My rheumatoid arthritis seems like nothing compared to MS, but it does impact my mobility and causes me to live in chronic pain.

We share stories about our families. She tells me her son returned from Iraq last year and is not doing well. “He’s like a different person since he went away. He has post-traumatic stress disorder and has a hard time functioning.” As I listen to her tale, I am silently grateful that my twenty-nine year old son has not experienced this. She says, ”It was hell when he was over there. Every day, I feared answering the phone. When he came home, I thought it would be over. But, it’s not. The war still rages in him, and I am so angry.” Tears fill my eyes, as I see her pain, and my close to the surface anger at the President and government who use young men and women as cannon fodder rises to the surface. There are no words to make this better, but I have to say something, “Pam, I am so sorry this happened to your son. It is so unfair.”

Darlene joins our conversation, and we quickly move on to other less serious topics. She is elegantly dressed in a stylish pink sweater dress. Thin, beautifully outfitted and coiffed, she would be easy to resent were it not for her snide and cynical humor, which immediately endears her to me. We make fun of our pains and our age together, as we close down the place.

The waiters are cleaning up, but they don’t seem to mind our staying. I know I don’t want the evening to end. The group conversation lasts till after eleven. I move from
group to group, the researcher in me engaged in an internal battle with the excited classmate I become. The researcher listens; the classmate laughs and vies for the floor to tell my story. I remind myself that I am an autoethnographer, and I can tell my story too.

“So you are completing a dissertation,” Father Harrison asks.

“Yes, I respond, and I am writing about this class.” I wonder if this makes my classmates nervous. It doesn’t seem to curtail the conversation. I struggle with trying to come up with a dissertation elevator speech.

“I want to know the life stories and turning points of my classmates, and show how we are aging and planning our future.”

“What a great idea,” Jim Meaney responds.

“I can’t wait to read it,” Pam adds.

One by one, the participants leave. Old friends once young together hug and call out, “See you at the coffee;” or “See you at the forty-fifth reunion.” Eventually, we bid goodbye to most of the attendees. Several say they will attend the coffee tomorrow.

Pam, Darlene, Norene and I sit together after everyone else leaves and share a drink and laughs together. And, of course, we gossip about the people who attended tonight, and also those who didn’t come.

“Everybody looks pretty good,” I start.

“What happened to Father Cotter? I thought he was going to come,” Pam asks.

Father Cotter was our principal after Father Harrison. He was young and hot and we secretly called him ‘hot lips’. Not long after we graduated, he left the priesthood with Sr. Laurie Ann who left the convent, and they have been married since.
“I don’t know,” Norene said. “I think it was something about one of his five children.”

I ask about Steve Raville, who was co-president of the student council with me.

“I had drinks with him a couple of years ago,” Norene replies. “He is president of some telecom company.” And on we go. We talk and laugh until it is obvious that the restaurant staff is ready to go home. Walking out together, arm in arm, we wait for the valets to bring our cars. I secretly hope that mine will be last, but that is not to be. My dirty Forester comes first, and I hug Norene, Jerome, Darlene and Pam, and get in.

Paul knows how nervous I was, and he compliments me on the success of the evening. I feel quiet, silently mulling over the people and conversations. After we arrive home and change, I sit up as Paul goes to sleep, but I am unable to settle down quite yet. Taking out my notebook, I write down field notes about the evening. And I copy over those I took on a scrap of paper at the dinner, as my classmates introduced themselves. I also look over my notes for the focus group tomorrow and jot down a few questions that I want to ask.

At sixty, I still have lots of insecurities, a characteristic that is very disappointing to me. I thought I would be over that by now. I feel confident about a lot of things: that I am smart and can hold a conversation; that I am educated, interesting, and thoughtful. I feel confident in my ability to parent and grandparent, most of the time. But, there are major things I haven’t accomplished in my years. My career has been all over the place, and at sixty I am starting a new one. My finances are far from fluid, as I have spent much of my life as a single parent, doing social work and teaching. I cannot envision ever retiring. Financially, it won’t be possible. But, even if it were, at least at this point, I
can’t see pulling back from the ruckus of life. At least for now, I still want to be in the thick of it.

I realized tonight as I listened to my cohort, that we all have some areas where we think we fall short. Darlene wanted children. Others lost jobs and, like me, face recreating themselves in later life. Some struggle finding and maintaining happy, fulfilling relationships. One of our classmates told me tonight that he has been an alcoholic most of his life, and only three years ago with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous became sober. Perhaps that is the story here. Looking down the pike at the last sixty years, none of us has made it this far untarnished by disappointment and failure. Perhaps that is what the sixties will be about: making peace with all of the fragments and pieces of our lives. But, working that out will have to take place another day. I am tired. It has been a long day. I put down my pen, turn off the night light next to the bed, and join my husband snoring next to me.
Focus Group Narrative

The morning of the scheduled focus group, I awake early. Last night’s birthday party was a success, and I am looking forward to continuing the conversation and camaraderie. As I hurriedly dress, I make mental notes of all I have to do to make the planned event happen by eleven this morning. My brother and sister-in-law have graciously offered me their home for the occasion. It sits on the banks of the Chattahoochee River in Roswell, a suburb of Atlanta, and is in a neighborhood filled with elaborate homes bordering a golf course. Barb and Bill have created a space that is filled with beautiful artifacts from their world travels, and furnished with elegant teak and leather. Flowers are everywhere, and the living areas are meticulously arranged and uncluttered.

I reflect upon my home in Safety Harbor, Florida. Although it is in a pleasant middle class neighborhood on a cul-de-sac, which is a safe and inviting play area for my grandkids, my home reflects my life -- a bit cluttered and worn. My living room furniture, which hasn’t been replaced for over ten years, is tattered and stained, and the most significant articles on display are my grandkids’ toys and pictures, and an occasional piece of art that I have collected. Others have described my home as artsy and warm, but I see it as a bit ragged and reflecting my strained finances. My daughter tells me I have a “house dysmorphic disorder.”

On a more analytical and less self deprecating level, I recognize that my home and my brother’s home reflect choices that we have made throughout our lives, and also some of the inequities of our culture that privilege the male gender and work such as law and business, over nurturing, caring work like social work and education. Yet, something
about being back in my hometown tends to ignite my old insecurities and inadequacies, and I am secretly glad that I don’t have to display my home.

Brushing off these thoughts, I rush downstairs and solicit the help of my husband, and we head out to gather what I need to host the coffee social. Not wanting to put an additional burden on my brother and sister-in-law, I have ordered food for the morning. I gather the individual quiches and bagels at Panera, make a quick stop at Publix for fruit and juice, pick up some flowers, and arrive back while everyone else is still eating breakfast.

I am nervous. I wish that I had time to visit and catch up with my brother, whom I don’t often see, but I want everything to be set up just right for this discussion. Not only is my research for my dissertation at stake here, but also I feel a responsibility to make this event both enjoyable and meaningful for my classmates. They are going out of their way to help me, and I want this experience to have value for them. Last night after the dinner and before writing my fieldnotes, I made sure to reread parts of my textbook on focus groups and to review my guiding questions. I remind myself to provide some structure, but also to let the group be organic, and to let it’s meaning emerge.

Barb and I set up in the basement, which is a lovely living space that includes a family room, pool table, kitchen and work out area. It is private and out of the way, and we won’t be disturbed here. Barb’s tasteful pottery displays the fruit, quiches, and bagels attractively. Coffee brews in a big pot, and crystal pitchers of juice are placed on iced displays. The couches and chairs are spaced carefully in a circle, with my two tape recorders positioned on opposite sides of the room, stocked with extra batteries and tapes. It is a pleasant space, and I am ready to go.
At just before eleven, the participants begin to arrive. I am expecting about ten participants, and I am hopeful that they all show up. The doorbell rings about 10:55, and I rush to answer it. First to arrive is John, with his wife, Sharon. She proffers a homemade cake, and we chat as I show them down to the meeting room. Norene and Jerome show up next, then Greg, Pam, and Laurenthia. Finally, after directing her to our location by cell phone, a lost Darlene arrives, and we all gather downstairs. Mina calls at the last minute and is not able to make it. I am disappointed since she was my best friend in high school, and she wasn’t able to make it last night either. We have nine participants, counting me and including two spouses, a good number for a discussion.

When I arrive downstairs with Darlene, the chatter is loud and lively. We had last night to catch up and renew our friendships, and there is a comfort, familiarity and excitement this morning as we gather together. Greg, our class president, was always a class clown, and he has us all laughing. The mood is light and convivial. After a half hour of talking and eating, I reluctantly move to rein them in and bring us to the discussion.

I move towards the chairs and couches set up in a circle in the living area, and sit down, hoping that the others will follow. They soon do, and I begin. “First, I want to thank you all for taking your time, and some of you, traveling hundreds of miles to be here.” I pause and look around the room. Darlene, sitting next to me, has been on the Psychology faculty of Georgia State University for years, and I am aware that she is familiar with focus groups. I don’t want to look like I don’t know what I am doing. “As you know, I am conducting research on our class, a group of leading age baby boomers turning sixty. I am particularly interested in turning points and exploring the factors that
have shaped and influenced our lives.” So far so good. They are all still smiling and looking at me. Their body language is engaged. And I pose the first question, “What were your plans and goals when you graduated from high school? What did you anticipate your life to be like?”

Thus begins an almost three hour conversation that floods out of the participants like Old Faithful spewing at Yellowstone. As each participant speaks, the floodgates open, and their answers fly out. It takes over an hour to cover the first question. Everyone likes to tell his or her story, particularly when there is common ground. Even the more quiet and taciturn participants speak eagerly about their lives, and it takes effort to get the group to break for a few minutes half way through.

In actuality, in the three-hours time we spend together, only four questions are posed. The first was followed by “Are you still Catholic, and how has religion influenced your life?” The last two questions were: “What, if any, were the influences of the sixties and the counter cultural movements on your lives?” And finally, “How do you plan on spending the rest of your life?” After the group, I emailed the participants, and asked them a question that I didn’t have time to ask at the gathering: ”What has sustained you throughout the challenges and losses of life?”

As I analyze the responses, I break them up into five areas: planned versus randomness of life; religion and spirituality; learning and education; giving back; and finally, sources of our resilience. These categories emerged out of the interviews and the themes emerged out of both the interviews and the focus group. I didn’t envision these categories at the beginning of this process, but rather they emerged from it.
Planned Versus Randomness of Life

As I begin the focus group, I look out the windows on this sunny fall day and gaze at the Chattahoochee River flowing beside the house. Sitting on the brown leather sofa, with Darlene on one side and Norene on the other, I gather my thoughts to begin. Jerome and Darlene are both very concerned about my tape recorders. Jerome takes responsibility for changing the tapes on one. Darlene, probably remembering the pain of her own dissertation, says, “Now make sure that is working. I don’t want you to miss this data!” I am touched by their support and concern for my success with this venture, and I wonder if they came here today to help me, or if they were genuinely interested in the conversation. I consider it is probably both.

Taking a swig of my hot coffee, I dive in. “You know, when I look at my life now, and I think about my time at Pius, I didn’t have a clue about the challenges I would experience, or the way my life would turn out. Why, I wanted to be a nun, for God’s sake! I wouldn’t have believed that at sixty I would be on my third husband.” (Laughter) “I wonder what were your goals in high school and did your life turn out how you envisioned it, or not?”

I waited to see who would go first. The teacher in me is conscious of balancing opportunities for the extroverts and the introverts to speak. I am pleased when Pam, who is quieter than some of us, speaks up and begins her tale.

Pam and I had some bonding moments the night before, and I know of her lifelong struggle with Multiple Sclerosis. Sitting next to Darlene, Pam’s surprising story unravels: I had no interest in going to college. I was convinced that if you wanted an education, you could get it at a public library. I wanted to be a pilot.
My Dad was a pilot in World War II. In 1965, no airlines hired women pilots, but I had it all figured out. I was going to ask my father to use the money planned for college for lessons, then I was going to get a job at a cargo company. My father just laughed at me. He thought it was hysterical. He laughed his eyes out. But, I wasn’t going to let that deter me. So, I went to a career night at the school. I approached the Air Force recruiter. He said, ‘Honey, we don’t take women. But, sweetie, if you want to be in the Air Force, you can be in Air Traffic Control. We’ll let you bring the planes in.’ I was absolutely furious at the condescension. I tried the Army – but they said the same thing. I was angry. So, I decided to do nothing. For a while, I refused to go to college, but I eventually gave in, and earned a degree in German. As it turned out, a few years later, I was diagnosed with MS, so I probably wouldn’t have been able to fly anyway. But that was my plan. The German helped me out, though.

Years later, I moved to Germany with my husband, and it came in handy.

The group reacts loudly. Norene says, “Pam, I had no idea what you went through. I know when I wanted to go to college, there wasn’t a lot of support, and I only wanted to be a teacher.”

“Yeah,” I interject. “When I told my Dad that I wanted to go to college, he said that there was no point. ‘You are just going to get married and have kids,’” he told me. “It was a different time then. What you experienced was so unfair,” I respond.
Pam recalls, “It just made me so angry. I was upset about being patronized and laughed at. You know, it wasn’t until the late eighties that women were allowed to be pilots in the military.”

The conversation continues discussing how limitations and stereotypes were imposed on the women in our group. Laurenthia recalls:

Well, when I left Pius, I wanted to be a Renaissance woman. I loved literature and art, but I also loved math and sciences. At that time, I didn’t know if there was such a thing as a Renaissance woman. I had only heard of Renaissance man. I eventually went to Georgia Tech to study engineering. There weren’t many women there then, and there wasn’t much support for women entering the engineering field.

As she speaks, I think about the Women and Communication class I teach. I tell my students about challenges women of my generation experienced breaking into male dominated areas of the work force, but even after watching the movie Anchorman, it doesn’t seem real to them. What we experienced as we tried to break into jobs previously held only by men wasn’t nearly as funny as that movie. It was often frustrating, deflating, and demeaning. I think it is important for younger generations to know what those of us on the front line endured. I file these stories away to tell my class next week.

Moving the discussion along, I ask for someone else to jump in. Jerome steps into the breach. I know from his narrative that he previously shared with me, that he has a very specific philosophy about this. I wonder how he will tell it to this group. Much of what he says is familiar, but hearing the same story again speaks to its validity. Jerome recounts:
I remember being asked when I was about six, ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ Even then, I couldn’t fathom that question. I think I just wanted to grow up. I became who I am through a random series of happenstance. This is a theme in Kundera’s book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In my own life, a series of random choices, conversations, and events led me in a direction I never could have anticipated.

Greg agrees with Jerome. “I know I had no particular plans. I don’t think I had a clue what I wanted to do, either. I knew I was expected to go to college, so I went to Brown and graduated. After that, I was lost.” I am surprised to hear this. Greg always seemed to be so self-directed, to have his head on so straight. He continues:

I married right after college, but then the Viet Nam war shifted things around for me. I was drafted, and when I returned from my year tour, my marriage was gone too. We were both different people. I floundered around for a while. I didn’t really care much – I just wanted to have beer money. But then I met Ann in ’77, and she had a child from a previous marriage, so I had to settle down. I went back on military duty, and was sent to Iceland. That was the biggest difference in my life. I had lots of opportunities there, and met some important people, including George Bush. After that, I came back to Washington D. C. and have been there since. I work at the Pentagon in a non-political job, and I get to do lots of significant things, like negotiate multinational contracts. I am one of the
people who keep the government going despite the political changes. But, I have to say, I got where I am with no plan whatsoever.

Darlene chimes in with her story:

I was reading college catalogues, and an entry about psychology caught my attention. I was sixteen, and I decided then I wanted to be a psychologist, and obviously, that is what I am today. I have to admit though, I didn’t have any idea what that meant. I was just drawn to it. And, because of a series of events, including a fellowship to Harvard as an undergraduate, I was able to get assistance to do so. My mother didn’t want me to go away to graduate school, and she refused to help. I had to do it on my own. I still practice and love the field of Psychology. I have been lucky. I have been able to do different things in my field, so it doesn’t get old. I taught and sometimes still do teach at Georgia State University. I have a private practice, and I even became a corporate mogul and all within the field I started in.

Norene adds, “It’s funny how things work. When I was thirteen, my sister Terri was born with Downs syndrome.” She continues:

There weren’t any programs then, particularly in the Catholic school system, for kids with special needs. After seeing what my parents went through, I decided I wanted to teach special needs children. Peabody was the only school that offered a degree in special education at that time. When the time came for me to go, my parents couldn’t afford it, so I went to Georgia State instead. When I became pregnant at nineteen and gave
birth to a special needs daughter, I guess I did spend much of my life working to educate her, and to fight for her to have a place within the educational system. And, to this day, I still help take care of Terri.

As Norene finishes, I consider how ironic her story is. She did accomplish her goal, but it wasn’t in the way that she originally thought that she would.

Maybe it is as the Robert Burns’ poem says, that we all live our lives despite “the best laid plans of mice and men.” Many of my classmates reported they didn’t specifically plan their lives. My life, and the lives of Jerome and Greg, in particular, seems to be the result of a random sequence of events. I don’t know what my life would have been like had my first love not been killed in Viet Nam; if the father of my children did not become ill with a brain tumor twenty-six years ago; if I hadn’t landed in Florida – and on, and on. Yet, I consider that what does seem to be constant in my life has been certain values and interests. Education has always been important to me. And, I remember saying in high school that I wanted to work in an orphanage. I did spend the first two decades of my career working with youth with emotional, behavioral, and legal problems. There certainly is a random element to the story of our lives and the roads we follow, but I believe there is a consistency of values that seems to play out in my life, and in the stories of their lives that my classmates tell today.
Religion and Spirituality

As we wind down from this topic, I realize that it took over an hour for the first question. The time is going by too quickly. I am aware that we probably won’t be able to answer many more, so I move to the topic of religion and spirituality. One thing we all have in common is that we started out Catholic, and all of us had at least twelve years of Catholic education. I decide to ask the question: “How many of you still consider yourselves Catholic?” The question is met with laughter, and as we go around the room, only Laurenthia unequivocally says she is. She reports, “My husband, Dwight, and I are still very devout Catholics.” She laughs as she looks around and says, “I guess I am the only one.” I think she is surprised. So am I.

Pam says, “I still go to church sometimes, but I don’t believe what they tell me anymore.” She continues, “Hell, since Viet Nam and Nixon, I don’t believe a damn thing any authority tells me, and that includes religion. I go to the Catholic services for weddings and funerals, at holidays, and out of habit. The ritual is familiar and comforting to me.”

Norene grabs the symbolic conversational baton: “After what happened to my daughter, I became an atheist. I figured if there was a God, they would never allow the suffering that she and the other children in the hospital endured.” She continues, “When I became pregnant at twenty, I initially went for an abortion, but the doctor refused to perform it. Before that, my Downs’ Syndrome sister was born late in life to my mother, and her birth changed the life of my family. If the church were not opposed to birth control, our lives could have been very different.”
Norene, like others in the group, claims not to believe in a God, but she does consider herself to be spiritual. She tells us it is reflected in her love of family and gardening. “I love flowers,” she tells us. “I would love to be a master gardener. I am at a really strange place in my life professionally now, but I am still very, very happy. Jerome and I have been married for fifteen years now. I know what happy is. A circle of love surrounds me. I can feel that love.”

I am surprised by my classmates’ responses. We all started out Catholic, but now out of those present, only one claims to be a practicing Catholic. Jerome’s brand of atheism is appealing to me, although he came to this conclusion much earlier in life than I did. He retells the story he told me in his narrative about his taking on of the mantle of atheism during a conversation with a priest at age eleven. He tells us:

It (Catholicism) just stopped making sense to me. I was cool with the Jesus story, but I prayed to God when I was a kid, and nothing happened. I was skeptical. I asked Father Vincent if I had to believe everything, and he said, ‘See this stained glass window. If it is broken in the corner, the whole window is broken. It is the same with the beliefs of the church. You can’t pick and choose.’ So, I decided to choose to believe none of it.

From then on, I was a covert atheist.

I marvel at how precocious Jerome was. While Jerome was reading Burroughs, I was reading Nancy Drew. We did come to the same conclusion, though. I just came to it a bit later.

After Jerome, John jumps in and recounts his religious influences. “After I graduated from high school, I spent a couple of months at the Trappist monastery outside
Atlanta in Conyers.” As he talks, I remember this monastery. I have visited there many times, and I have fond memories of it. It is a beautiful and serene place, set back in a wooded remote area. I have walked the grounds, listened to the monks chanting, and bought their tasty and nutritious bread and honey. At the end of his life, my father lived in Conyers, and during my last visit with him, we went there for a visit. Together we sat in the pew and prayed (me, a lapsed and doubting ex-Catholic; and he, a Southern Baptist). On the way home, we sang old spirituals together. It was the last time I saw him alive. One year later, he died in his sleep from complications of Parkinson’s disease.

John mentions that while at the monastery, he read Thomas Merton’s *Seven Story Mountain*. Again, I marvel at our commonality. I have been a fan of Merton’s since taking a class with Dr. Fasching in the mid-nineties on ‘The Spirituality and Ethics of Thomas Merton.’ As I muse about Merton, John moves on:

I thought about the meaning of life early on. Catholicism influenced me from an early age, but I don’t claim to be a Catholic, or even a Christian now. My uncle was a Baptist minister. He preached about living. One of my favorite sermons I heard several times in his church was about charity. He didn’t talk about hell fire and damnation. He talked of living and he used the life of Christ and the Bible. He said then: ‘The final elevation of charity is not to think any harm.’ I remember this to this day, and try to apply it in my life. We all make mistakes. Every life has good and bad. For example, I look at this whole Michael Vick thing with the dogs. What he did was horrible, but he is not. Through my uncle, I learned to separate the sinner from the sin. Another influence on my spiritual life happened a
few years ago in California, when I heard the Dali Lama speak. He was
asked, ‘What is the purpose of man on earth?’ He said, ‘To seek
happiness.’ I want to be charitable, do good work, and be happy.

The Dali Lama is someone I respect, and I often describe myself as an atheist with
Buddhist tendencies. Listening to John, I am touched and impressed with his humility
and simplicity. And, I am amazed at how much I have in common with these classmates
of mine. I really didn’t expect to. Somehow, I have this habit of seeing myself as
different from others. I wonder as I listen to them if this is something I impose upon
myself; an old tape perhaps that has outworn its usefulness.

Darlene intently listens to the others’ stories as the topic flies around the room.
Then, she begins to speak in her quiet, unassuming way:

I no longer practice Catholicism, but the Catholic upbringing is present in
everything I do and am. It is unconscious. Now, I would say that I am
spiritual, but not necessarily religious. I see spirituality in everything and
have practices in my life to encourage it. For example, I have a spiritual
practice where I envision myself being a white rose. It amazes me now
how often now I see white roses. Even this morning, I found white rose
towels in the bathroom here.

As I listen to all of this, I am surprised that so few of the classmates here consider
themselves Catholic. My sister-in-law and my brother, who are three years older, tell me
that at their recent Pius reunion, most of those present were still Catholic. Barb thinks
that there is a big difference in our age groups. Her age cohort graduated before the social
and civil rights revolutions of the sixties and seventies, whereas my class was coming of age in the midst of it. She suggests that the influence of these movements caused us to challenge existing institutions, including the church. I think she may be right.

My own religious/spiritual journey has been very different from my still practicing brother and sister-in-law, but more similar to what my classmates tell here today. I tell my classmates, “Many of your stories are very similar to mine.” I didn’t expect that to be the case:

Disgusted with Catholicism, and despite my extreme religiosity of high school days, I left the Church never to return during my years at my Catholic college. As with Jerome, it just didn’t make sense to me anymore. My college was across the street from Catholic University, and while there, I got involved with the Berrigans’ ‘People’s Mass’ which was an updated, non-authoritarian, populous approach to Catholicism. But, eventually even that didn’t make sense to me anymore. I guess, though, you could call me a religious/spiritual seeker. I almost converted to Judaism my senior year in college when I took a course in the History of Judaism. After that, I dropped out of organized religion, but read lots of spiritual books. I tried a variety of things. I became a follower of Meher Baba for a while; and finally settled into a kind of agnostic/Buddhist/pantheist approach to life. My only venture into organized religion was joining a Unitarian-Universalist church, which allowed me to be all of those things. It is there that I raised my children.
In 2001, I finished an M. A. in religious studies, and wrote a thesis on the topic of ‘Spiritual but not Religious.’

As I reflect upon my religious/spiritual journey, and listen to those of my classmates, we have a lot in common. Many of us have stepped out of the bounds of Roman Catholicism. But I do agree with Jerome’s statement: “Once you are Catholic, particularly as we were, socialized in the parochial schools, you can never not be Catholic. I have seen the same thing with my Jewish friends. You may not practice the religion, but the Catholic is still in your blood.” I haven’t considered myself a practicing Catholic for almost forty years, but I am conscious and aware that the socialization process in the Catholic Church shaped my values and formed my identity early on. And, even when I disclaim the religion, those values continue to inform and shape the direction of my life today. The Catholicism we were raised in valued education, equity, compassion and social justice. My narrative and the narratives of my classmates validate these values in our lives. Hand in hand with the Catholic values, the anti-authoritarian/anti-establishment theme of the sixties plays out in our lives, at least in how the majority approaches religiosity.

It is time for a break. I really have to go to take a break, and at this point, we have been talking for almost ninety minutes. Nobody really seems to want to stop, but my physiological needs call to be met, and I am sure my classmates must have some of the same demands. I declare a break, and the chatter continues as everyone gets up and moves toward the food, and waits for a turn at the one bathroom downstairs.
With coffee cups filled and plates full of bagels and fruit, we finally amble back to the group discussion. It’s not easy corralling this group. We sure can talk. It is a challenge to catch up on forty years in just a few hours, but we sure are giving it our best shot. It is getting late, and we have just begun to scratch the surface. I find myself wishing I had started this yesterday, and done it in two parts. But it is too late for that now. This is my only chance, so I push forward.

I mentally sort through potential questions to determine what are the most important topics to discuss. I consider what makes this group unique. For one thing, all of us sitting in this room are the products of twelve years of Catholic education (some of us sixteen), and a Catholic education that is different from the contemporary brand. Almost all of our teachers for the first eight years were nuns. This is not the case in parochial schools today, with religious staffing limited by fewer and fewer women and men joining religious orders.

These nuns did bring some special challenges, like the warnings not to wear patent leather shoes to avoid boys seeing up our skirts, but they also were a dedicated and educated group of teachers. Looking back on it, I believe that my high school education was in many ways better than the education received today by many students at a public university. What high school now teaches “Existential Philosophy,” as Darlene recounts taking in her senior year at Pius? I can remember some of my classes to this day, particularly my English classes. The books I read there and the discussions that ensued were the midwives to my intellectual curiosity.
My high school education instilled a love of learning that motivates me today at the age of sixty-one to write a dissertation and do research. Listening to my classmates tell their stories makes me realize that I am not an aberration. The love of knowledge and learning seems to permeate my classmates’ life stories.

Laurenthia recalls that her goal after high school was “to speak Latin, and to learn, to learn, to learn! I went to Oglethorpe, and decided to study science. After Oglethorpe, I went to Georgia Tech, and studied engineering. I am still learning today.”

Darlene tells about studying at Oglethorpe too. While there, she earned a fellowship to Harvard, where she says she was “mesmerized by the number and beauty of the libraries.” She eventually went to Southern Illinois for a Ph.D. in psychology. “I went back to school this year,” she tells us, “to earn a degree in Psychopharmacology. I want to be able to prescribe drugs and treat my patients with the entire spectrum of tools.”

Jerome jumps into the fray:

In college, I just really enjoyed learning. But, I didn’t connect learning with cash income. I enjoyed going to the library and reading. I always have loved reading from an early age, going to bookstores and reading the beat poets at ages ten and eleven. As I discovered the beats, I was fascinated, especially by Kerouac, and even went to San Francisco to the City Lights bookstore. I guess, like Thomas More, I have a real thirst for knowledge.

Not all speak with such enthusiasm for education and degrees. Greg recounts attending Brown and graduating with a degree in International Business, but “being
pretty shallow.” Norene dropped out of college at the birth of her twins, and Pam resisted going to college, but eventually was talked into Georgia State by a boy friend.

John relates that he was motivated by the value of work, not by a drive for education. His grandfather taught him the value of physical labor, and when he graduated from high school, that was what he wanted to do. John remembers, “As a child I would get together with my grandfather and family members, and just do hard, sweaty work. Maybe it was being with my grandfather, but that was very rewarding to me.” This was in opposition to his father, whom he says collected degrees:

He earned a Masters in electrical engineering from Georgia Tech after World War II on the GI bill. He collected other degrees along the way, Psychology for one. My mother and Dad both passed away last year, and as I was cleaning his things, I found four master’s degrees. I am not sure I found them all. When I left high school, I didn’t want to go to college. I wanted to work, and I did. I have never been that big on higher education, but I am glad that our high school taught us to think.

Unlike so many of the students that I teach at the University of South Florida, who view education as a necessary evil to endure along the path to monetary success, I have a respect, reverence and insatiable appetite for learning. This appetite was nurtured by teachers and classroom experiences that encouraged me to think creatively, and to embrace the world of ideas and information. Two out of seven of us are pursuing advanced degrees in our sixties, an uncommon activity for sexagenarians. Listening to my classmates’ stories, I find that many of us seem to have maintained this unquenchable
thirst for a lifetime. Looking back, I think we were beneficiaries of an exceptional and outstanding high school education that has put us all in good stead for our lifetimes.
Volunteering/Activism

I look at my watch and am amazed to see that it is already one o’clock. The group was scheduled from eleven till one. There is still so much more to cover. I ask the group if they can stay a while longer. They enthusiastically agree.

The question of giving back weighs in my mind. Do we feel a sense of social responsibility to positively impact our world? We were the generation that was shaped by John F. Kennedy, and in particular his statement, “Ask not what the country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” I know it is important for me, particularly as I think about aging and dying, to make a contribution. I want to leave the world a better place. Throughout the morning, person after person speaks about wanting to give back. It seems to be a universal theme.

John begins this conversational thread:

Now that work life is basically over, I looked around for the next thing to do. My wife was volunteering for the arts council and they needed someone to take pictures, so I started taking pictures for them. This got me started on my commitment to volunteerism. We have done a lot of things – and work for six or eight volunteering organizations. I want to figure out what I want to work on next. Right now, I am working on a lot of environmental causes.

Darlene seemed visibly excited as she jumped in and told us about her successful effort a few years ago to save a blue line tributary of the Chattahoochee River near her home:
I was enraged that they were going to build a stadium on this tributary, and destroy a protected ecosystem. I went around to all my neighbors, got signatures, and did lots of research. I went to the county commissioner’s meeting, and gave very specific information and recommendations about the protection of the habitat. The commission voted positively on my recommendations without the slightest change. I am prouder of that than just about anything I’ve done.

Others in the group speak of their activism and contributions. Laurenthia and her husband brought supplies to the victims of Katrina, and have traveled internationally to bring relief to famine victims. Greg talks of his efforts to mentor young public servants and interns when they come to Washington. “Why, the son of the woman who owns the restaurant we went to last night is the mother of one of my mentees!” Norene leads women’s leadership trips and hikes into the woods near her home in North Carolina to encourage women to have self-confidence and to be more active.

As I listen to my classmates, I consider my own volunteering history. Sometimes, I think teaching is like volunteer work, in particular adjunct work, for which I am paid so little and given no benefits. I certainly consider teaching to be social activism. I know that I am motivated to teach because I believe that there is nothing more important than inspiring students to think, and to open their minds. In addition, I have been active in the last elections with Move-On and other liberal groups. And, I volunteered for years in my Unitarian Universalist church, teaching Sunday school and in a variety of other positions. Besides that, I write lots of letters to the editor; traveled to D. C. twice to protest the war in Iraq; and can occasionally be found hanging out on street corners participating in local
peace vigils. My classmates inspire me to want to do more. “After my dissertation,” I think.
Conclusion

After three hours of fast paced ping-pong discussion, we are all tired, and some, including myself, have to travel many hours to arrive home for work tomorrow. It feels as if we have barely scratched the surface, but I am weary, and I sense a weariness in the participants. I have been through two tapes, back and front, and even though there is more to say, I sense it is time to end the group. We begin to reluctantly say our goodbyes. A genuine affection has grown out of our shared history and our time together this weekend. We hug and kiss each other goodbye, saying that we will keep in touch. Greg reminds us, “It’s only two years till our forty-fifth reunion!”

When the last person is out the door, I hurriedly clean up our space, as my family is waiting for me for the eight-hour drive back home. I pour myself into the crowded car. I feel exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. For most of the long drive home, I am quiet, processing the conversation my classmates and I had together. As I replay the discussion in my mind, I consider that there is one question I failed to ask that I would really like to know.

When I arrived home that evening, I wrote this email to the group members. The question is about resilience, and here is the e-mail I sent to them, and their responses that followed:

Dear Darlene, Greg, Jerome, John, Norene, Pam, Laurenthia,

I thought about your stories on my journey home yesterday. I didn't get home until after 1 a.m., and I was tired, and still am today, but I was lost in thought about our get-together this past weekend. I am too tired to write eloquently, but your stories inspire, motivate, move, entertain, and
impress me. The group has experienced war, loss (of children, spouses, parents, and siblings), illness, and challenges to our worldview. Yet, we are still kicking. Each in our own way are growing and changing. What an amazing group of people!

I thank you so much for taking time out of your busy weekend for the focus group yesterday. I am very appreciative of all your support. I believe that our joint story is important, and that others will be inspired and moved by your stories.

As I was driving down the long and boring I-75, I remembered a question I wanted to ask you. I hate to ask more, but if you could take just a few more minutes to answer this question: To what or whom do you attribute your resiliency/strength?

It was really wonderful to see you all and to spend time with you. I hope that this year and the years to come bring health, an opportunity for contribution, learning, love, and fun. Oh yeah, and don't forget, it's our time to save the world. Let's get on it. All of that extra time - we need a project, right?

Mary Poole

Darlene was the first to respond in her usual thoughtful and meaningful way:

Hi, Mary,

I also have thought a lot about our meeting, especially the question you raise. Resilience is something I have thought of for years but for which
there is little empirical research: why do some people do so well with adversity and others come apart?

What made me resilient? I have to reserve the right to add to this answer later but I sure have been blessed with a lot of people outside my family of origin who loved and supported me. Families who took me in and became my "stand in" family when my family was discreetly but truly falling apart after our father died; friends since the early years and friends who have lasted as friends many years; teachers who encouraged me and believed in me.

Two men (maybe more, but two in particular) who loved me as a person and as a woman. My own sense of optimism that is probably a personality characteristic. My apparent ability to "pick and choose" what in Catholicism spiritually supported me (glad I didn't ever talk to Father Vincent about this, like Jerome did). Being a psychologist, having had a truly gifted psychologist as my training therapist. Mine was gifted: high on compassion, intelligence, and talent yet direct and firm. She was especially willing to tell me when I was "missing the boat" on myself (or kidding myself). Yet, I could still tell she was doing this from the kindest of perspectives. She has her own strong sense of spirituality, which allowed her to answer questions I had but without intruding her beliefs themselves onto me.

My spirituality changes and hopefully grows as I do: for example, I just added becoming "the white rose" this past year as one of my spiritual
goals. Speaking about it in the group was the first time I said it out loud to anyone beyond those with whom I have more psychologically intimate relationships. I try to practice my goals each day, which no doubt helps reinforce them.

You did a great job with the meeting: really good questions, allowing relating and connecting to occur, showing you cared, etc. I can't thank you and the other group members enough. I'll be thinking about this for quite awhile.

Maybe one other thing, which I noticed in most of the other people in the group: a certain lack of anger (in a positive sense) about situations they had no control over. Maybe the anger is there, but not much was expressed. Instead, there seemed to be a focus on alternatives, other ways of proceeding, relating, being, etc. Even when anger was expressed, it was expressed in "let's fix this" mode, not in a blaming mode.

There is one demographic of the group which no doubt had an influence on all of us being resilient: intelligence and the resultant education along with a commitment to life learning. St. Pius students, even on the average, are unusually intelligent. I once had my doctoral candidates do a practicum at St. Pius on intellectual assessment. At that time, the guidance counselor shared with me what my students found on the tests: intellectual levels significantly above the average range. I don't know if intelligence mediates anger/blaming but my guess is that, in combination with relationships and spiritual discipline, it does. There is
nothing wrong with anger: it's an emotion. But this group seemed to have found (probably various) ways to resolve it rather than be diminished or excessively influenced by it.

Again, heartfelt thanks for doing this. I realize you are trying to be "Dr. Poole," but the way you went about it was truly inspiring. Keep in touch.

Darlene

Greg’s response was the next to come:

Mary,

I really enjoyed all aspects of the 60th birthday weekend. Regarding your question below, I don't have to think long about the source of strength and resiliency. My parents were very steady for me all along the way. They provided the private education starting with the 4th grade. They supported me in athletics, academics, scouts, part-time jobs, school selection - you name it. Overall, this support impacted me very positively, and I think I'm a better husband/father because of it.

Got to go sell airplanes. Thanks again for everything. Regards, and happy birthday, Greg

And finally, from John:

Mary and Friends

As much as it may feel as though life, family, and career just happen, these are built through our experiences in formative years and through life experiences.
Any amount of strength and resiliency in my life, family, and career come from these [to mention a few:

- Upbringing by parents who put the children's moral learning and education first.
- Educational discipline and learning how to learn - from Sister Mary Ruth(less) and many others - even though I was a B/C student.
- Protestant work ethic and love of the outdoors from my Grandfather, Ira Calvin Walters.
- Spiritual guidance from both my Catholic and Baptist role models: Father Lawrence Schwartz and Rev. William Smith.
- Endurance, discipline, and moral courage from time in the Marine Corps and a Scots-Irish heritage.
- My wife, Fumiko (Sharon), who has a great charitable soul and is thoughtful to the extreme.
- My son and daughter-in-law who are marvelous parents.
- Learning something from everyone that touched my life along the way, both personally and professionally.
- My higher power.

The weekend was wonderful, and I hope we all re-connect again for our 45-year anniversary.

John
I wait for the responses in the days following the weekend. Norene and Jerome rarely respond to emails, and none of the other participants did either. I didn’t take it as disinterest. Everyone, like me, returned to busy lives.

The answers that I did receive from Darlene, Greg and John were thoughtful and insightful. I reflect upon the source of my resilience. Victor Frankl (1959), in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, wrote that in Hitler’s concentration camps of World War II, the captives who were more likely to survive were those who had a sense of loving and being loved, and those who, even amidst that horrid environment, found meaningful work to do. Since I first read Frankl when I was seventeen years old, this has been a guiding principle for my life. I have loved and been loved -- by my parents, by lovers and friends, by my children and grandchildren. And, I have been able to do work that has felt significant. In addition, there were teachers and others in my life who believed in me, and who offered me support and guidance along the way. Others showed me kindness when I needed a boost. In addition, I think some of it has been luck. There have been a few ‘simple twists of fate’ that could have taken me in a different, more negative direction, were it not for good fortune.

Many have questioned the source of resilience. As my classmates who responded to this question suggested, the support of loved ones who stand by us and believe in us is basic to all of us. In addition, having personal characteristics of intelligence, stamina, and a positive orientation to life, along with some kind of spiritual discipline seems to be common. And, certainly, it must be noted that this group has an assumed privilege of race, education, and socio-economic status that certainly doesn’t hurt. Our families had the economic resources to pay for a private high school education. The privilege paid
off, and we took advantage of our societal position and channeled it into education, careers, and family.
Afterword

It was gratifying to me that the participants in the birthday celebration and the focus group said that the process of the discussion was helpful to them. I had a sense that this gathering was different from past reunions, because the format allowed us to go deeper and to be personally reflective about our lives and the process of aging. Sharing our stories brought us closer together and helped us individually to put our lives in perspective. Personally, it feels very comforting to be in a group that has so many shared experiences and values. And, I am filled with gratitude, awe and respect for those who trusted me with their story.

Perhaps everyone feels this way, but I believe that I am a part of an exceptional cohort. My personal goal of providing a context for turning sixty has been met. This group is accomplished, forward thinking, and intent on aging in a healthy, productive and creative way. Being with them this weekend has inspired me to do the same.
Chapter Twelve

“In the End is my Beginning” T. S. Elliot

This story began almost a year and a half ago when I began chronicling the class of ‘65’s fortieth reunion, and our entrance into the sexagenarian decade. Like all autoethnographic explorations, this one has been a personal journey as well as an outward gaze at the other. I began wanting to hear and tell the stories of my classmates and selfishly trying to make sense of this aging passage that symbolized to me crossing over into a realm uncharted and unwelcome. As I began, I wrote, “Hundreds of books, articles, and commercials discuss the lives of boomers, and predict how we will age. It is time for us to tell our own story.” This is what I have attempted to do in this dissertation: to let the boomers speak for themselves. At the end of this process, I am left to make sense of these stories and to consider what they tell us about the boomers’ life course and how we are aging.

Looking back on my story and the stories of Norene, Jerome, Darlene, and Michael, as well as the narratives told by the other focus group members, I reflect upon the analysis of my generation by Wilbur, who suggested that the “boomers are a bunch of narcissists, consumed with their own generational hubris” (Wilbur, 2002, p. 35). Queenan described this cohort as a bunch of “greedy, ruthless sellouts” (Queenan, 2001, p.13). Gillon (2004, p. 290) suggested the boomers who displayed traits that challenged authority, focused on self-fulfillment, and altered institutions and looked toward the ‘age of Aquarius,’ now look back longingly at an idealized, simpler time.
My experience of my fellow members of the class of 65, who entrusted me with their stories, tells me that we are anything but narcissist, greedy, and ruthless sellouts. Almost all of us are looking for ways to give back as they begin to consider their next steps. Some, but not all, consider retirement in the not too far distant future; but their idea is to have a retirement with a purpose. Darlene is an activist for environmental concerns. John is involved in a variety of volunteer organizations, and he encouraged all of us in the focus group to use our later years to change the world. Greg mentors young public servants. Jerome has been recognized for the progressive culture of his business and told us that he wanted to “create a functional work family” since the family of his birth was anything but functional. Michael started and manages a web site to find employment for recently severed military personnel. Norene leads wilderness hikes for women to increase fitness and confidence. Laurenthia worked on Katrina relief and has traveled internationally for famine relief. I am involved in a variety of social issues and actively work politically and culturally to challenge the injustices and inequities of our time. Without exception, each individual personally addresses some issue relevant to the common good and to making the world a better place.

Perhaps it is that we become more humble with age, but I didn’t note any “generational hubris.” Each of us has been leveled by something that has happened to us. One classmate confessed to a lifetime of alcohol addiction. He has been sober for three years, but he confided regretting the damage his drinking caused, especially to his loved ones. One classmate lost everything in a financial reversal. All have stood by and been helpless in the face of the death of loved ones. Several confronted the limiting experience of chronic and life altering illnesses. Many have been to war and experienced
its tragedy, or had children who were left permanently altered by war’s physical and psychological impact.

My class members did not seem to be longing for the “good old days,” as Gillon (2004) suggested. If anything, the participants looked back on the past as difficult and challenging. It was surprising to me that out of a random group of five classmates, three had experienced abuse as children. A parish priest abused Michael; I experienced sexual abuse as a child; and Jerome’s father was physically abusive and threatened his life. Sixty percent of my participants (the five including me, who recounted their life narratives) were victims of childhood abuse. Despite the small sample, that staggering statistic.

Those who weren’t abused – Norene and Darlene- both had early life altering experiences that traumatized their childhood memories. Norene’s mother gave birth to a Downs’ syndrome baby when Norene was thirteen; and Darlene’s father died when she was thirteen, throwing her family life into chaos. None in the group experienced an idyllic childhood. There seemed to be more of a gratitude for the lives they now have than nostalgia for times past.

The individuals I observed were a thoughtful and reflective group. Perhaps it was the situation, but they were looking back at lives consciously and looking forward to the years to come, intending to make them count. After my study, I agree with Margaret Gullette, who in her book, Aged by Culture, observes that boomers are “much too heterogeneous to have a single character or opinion” (Gullette, 2004, p. 44).

My classmates demonstrate many similarities, but there are differences, too. As a whole, it is a very educated group. Of the nine total participants (five narrative
participants, plus four additional focus group participants), seven have Bachelor’s
degrees, four have earned graduate degrees, and one a Ph.D. Two of us, including myself,
are currently enrolled in graduate degree programs. Although I did not ask the
participants to report their economic status, it was obvious from conversations, homes
and lifestyles, that this is an affluent group. In addition, seven of the nine describe
themselves as liberal Democrats, with two dissenting Republicans. Geographically,
seven of the nine remain in the Atlanta area. Greg lives in Washington, D. C. and I live
in Florida.

The representative members of the class of ’65 live up to predictions when it comes
to religion and religiosity. In A Generation of Seekers (1994) and Spiritual Marketplace
(1999), Wade Roof describes my cohort as driven by a quest “not so much for group
identity and social location as for an authentic inner life and personhood” (Roof, 1999, p.
7). He projects that this group will “remake American religion.” As we discussed
religion and spirituality in the focus group and narratives, it was obvious that this cohort
was remaking religion according to their intellectual, philosophical and practical reality.

From a group that started out Catholic and who were the products of twelve years of
Catholic education, only two hold onto the traditional Catholic religion of their youth.
One third of the group self identify as atheist. Four of the nine describe their religiosity as
a syncretic composite integrating different religious influences. And, five out of the nine
participants (55%) define themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Robert Fuller in his
book, Spiritual but not Religious (2001), reported that approximately 20% of the U. S.
population would fit into this category (Zinnbauer et al, 1997). This was also discussed in
my M. A. thesis at the University of South Florida (2001), which explored this segment
of our populations who define their religiosity in this way. This group is highly individualistic and unconventional when it comes to religious beliefs and practices.

Classmates’ lives were also influenced by the cultural influences of our time that impacted our life trajectories. Pam said, “After Nixon and Viet Nam, I have never trusted another authority.” Jerome reported that the beat writers and poets whom he read during his childhood shaped his unique style and his way of thinking. In addition, Jerome recalled that his worldview was formed by the music of our youth. He told me, “Narratives like that of Dylan and others created a space for me to question my life, and I feel as if my story has emerged, influenced by and with this musical landscape as a background.” Greg, Michael and John’s lives were shaped by their military experience in Viet Nam. The year and the events of 1968 dramatically altered my world-view and the choices I made that shaped the direction of my life. In an act of intellectual rebellion, I threw off the shackles of belief and church, and I started to question the cultural pond in which I was swimming. I never accepted things blindly again. To this day, I question all institutions and power, and I have raised my children to do the same.

Just as the second wave of feminism was cresting, our class entered the work force. Early on, several of the women participants challenged the career and life limitations imposed upon them. Pam pushed the envelope to pursue her dream to be a pilot and met frustration and condescension at every turn. Darlene began a career in psychotherapy that was dominated by men, and lived the challenge of balancing a successful business and her desire to have a family. Norene was able to create her own business around the demands of caring for a critically disabled child. Laurenthia dealt with prejudice against
women in the field of engineering. And, unlike our mothers before us, every woman interviewed spent most of her adult life earning a living.

The women in our class clearly were on the leading edge of changing roles for women in the workplace, as well as in interpersonal relationships. None of the women who told their life stories lived in traditional relationships. Both Norene and I have been divorced and are self-supporting and independent. Darlene married very late in life (in her late forties), has no children, and maintains two homes.

In summary, the personal narratives and the stories from the focus group support Gullette’s statement that “boomer stereotypes are oversimplifications of the individual life stories. Cultural influences on a generation are part of the story, but certainly not all of it.” She goes on to say that “the true holy Grail of the social sciences is the embodied psyche in culture, over time” (p. 141). The stories told in these pages illustrate this. They emerge as a blend of the exterior cultural, generational, and familial influences that interact with the interior self to create a life story. The individual narratives are constantly unfolding through a blend of internal and external influences.

*Turning Points*

Turning points alter life trajectories and change the life course. Turning points are defined as “events, as crucially important moments in a life history . . . .There are two essential features of turning points: they are more than temporary detours in the current trajectory, and they are knowable only after the fact “ (Wheaton and Gotlib, 1997, p.1).

The five individuals who recorded their life narratives were instructed to do so by recounting their life turning points.
Turning sixty is a good moment to look at turning points. There is enough passage of time to have lived a life and to have perspective enough to look back on events to see them as life altering ones. More current events, such as Jerome’s recent diagnosis of heart disease, have not played out enough in our life path to determine the intensity of its impact. Jerome said this himself as he recalled his diagnosis in his life narrative.

Wetherington (in Wheaton and Gotlib, eds., 1997, p. 225) reports that:

The majority of psychological turning points (65% over three studies) are associated with having experienced a severe event or chronic long-term difficulty. About 15% are associated with positive life transitions, but these life transitions were determined to have caused or resolved an ongoing difficulty in the person’s life.

In addition, Wetherington found that although older adults (over 55) report just as many severe events as younger participants, they are less likely to see these as turning points (p. 226). As I consider this information in the light of the self-described turning points in the lives of my participants, I see that most occurred in childhood or early adulthood. In addition, a majority of the turning points involved loss or trauma of some kind.

As I coded the self-identified turning points for my five narrative subjects, I grouped them into the following categories: health, death, education, family, abuse, moving, and business and work life. The highest number of turning points (9) involved family transitions, and these could be positive or negative. For example, participants noted marriage, divorce, birth of children, and birth of grandchildren as turning points.
Also high on the list of turning points (9) were educational experiences. Darlene recalled receiving a fellowship to Harvard that changed her expectations and goals and gave her an idea of what she could become. Jerome read authors who challenged his way of thinking at an early age, and he was able to go to Emory University, where he continued to develop his love of learning. Norene was disappointed because she could not go to Peabody University to study exceptional education and went to Georgia State instead. She left there after two years and did not return. Michael floundered early on, failing out of college, and only returning later. It was after his failed college experiences that he enlisted in the military and eventually made it a career. I was transformed by my college experience in Washington D. C. And, all of us were influenced by our excellent high school education at Pius that imbued many of us with a love and appreciation for lifelong learning.

Eight people mentioned issues of health. Darlene reported that her world changed when at eleven she was hospitalized with rheumatic heart disease and saw suffering and death and privilege for the first time. Norene’s life changed drastically at the birth of her Downs’ syndrome sister and again at the birth of her severely disabled daughter. I was impacted by my mother’s depression and hospitalization when I was a child, by my husband’s brain tumor, and later by my own diagnosis of Rheumatoid Arthritis. Jerome reflects upon what the consequences will be of his recent diagnosis of carotid artery disease.

Next on the list of life turning points is the death of a loved one, and this was mentioned six times as a life-altering event. Darlene lost her father as a child, and her family fell apart after his death. Later, she lost her only pregnancy to miscarriage, which
leaves her now at sixty, longing for a child. Both Norene and Jerome were transformed by the death of Sharon, Norene’s daughter. And, Norene reports that the death of her father four years ago has changed her life, and the life of her mother, who now lives near her. Michael witnessed and felt responsible for the death of his father who died when he was only twelve. The death of Hos, a lover killed in Viet Nam in 1968, set off a rant and anger at war and the government and establishment that continues to inform my life today.

Business or work life events were listed six times as life turning points. Jerome discusses how he randomly ended up in a business for which he had no preparation, but which set him on his life path. Later, he again seemingly randomly headed a business, which he now owns. Michael recounts the significance of his military life, and then again, the challenges with getting out of the military after many years. Norene was able to transform experience she had into her own business, which she has had for several decades. Being the owner of her own business allowed her the flexibility in scheduling to care for her daughter. Darlene left an academic career and entered into a partnership and a business that she has been a part of for thirty years. She describes herself as a “corporate mogul.” My lay off from the administration side of the university was the impetus for my Ph.D.

Moving around the country was another life changing moment for many of us. Jerome talks of moving from Alabama to Columbus, Georgia, and then again to Atlanta, as significant to his life journey. My family’s move to Atlanta set me off on a different direction than my life would have been in Cheyenne. Michael moved to Germany with the military and met his wife of thirty plus years there.
As was already mentioned, three of the narrative participants reported physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. This abuse altered the life trajectory of its victims. Michael recounts how this has haunted him his whole life and impacted his desire to have children and his education. As recently as ten years ago, Michael confronted his abuser and the diocese of Atlanta. Jerome’s father’s physical abuse caused the geographic moves and also shaped Jerome’s way of being in the world, and the work and personal family he has created. Personally, it has taken decades of reflection, therapy, and finally, reconciliation, to be at peace with my abuse.

While many of us expressed turning points in similar categories, Jerome’s turning points are unique. Unlike the rest of us who report life-altering events, he attributes most of his turning points to random conversations. First, there is the conversation that he had with Father Vincent about Catholicism, from which he emerged as a self defined “covert atheist.” Two occurred in bars. One conversation at his local watering hole motivated him to explore whitewater canoeing. This, in turn, led him to a lifetime of outdoor hiking, canoeing and activities, which he reports has been his religious replacement for Catholicism. Another evening he talked with his then girl friend in a bar, and they decided to quit their jobs and travel the country. This led him to an appreciation of a different kind of work than he was use to, which influenced his career choices. Not long after his return from this trip, he received a phone call from a friend, who convinced him to go to a temporary job at a factory. This became a career and has shaped his current business. Another conversation occurred at a party with a woman, who motivated him to leave his job and move back to Atlanta. And lastly, a conversation with Norene at the twenty-fifth reunion led to their marriage.
But no matter the reason for turning points, each participant in this research easily recalled them. They seem to be an easy way of marking a personal life course or history. The tellers of theses narratives usually began chronologically, and their stories unfolded, beginning with their childhoods. Most of the significant turning points appeared before adulthood. The life course appears to be more easily altered before adulthood, when worldviews, philosophies, and lifestyles become more set. Life trajectories do change after adulthood, but not as frequently. In addition, loss and trauma in the childhood years leave an indelible mark. This mark can move individuals in a positive direction, but it invariably causes pain and change.

The Impact of the Sixties

As stated in the introduction, this class graduated from high school in 1965 and turned twenty-one in 1968. As I finish this, in the year 2008, retrospectives abound on that pivotal year: the fortieth anniversary of Martin Luther King’s death; the fortieth anniversary of Robert Kennedy’s death; and the fortieth anniversary of my class reaching legal adulthood. A new Tom Brokaw book came out this past year, entitled *Boom! Voices of the Sixties* (Brokaw, 2007). He calls this book a reunion of the Class of ’68, interviewing various known and unknown voices of this era, asking questions about what was the lasting impact of this time.

Authority, health, sexuality, gender, politics, work, music and social roles are all topics that Brokaw considers changed due to the impact of this generation. The narratives of my classmates and myself reflect the relevance of these topics to our lives.
Pam said it best about authority, “Since Nixon and Viet Nam, I have never trusted anyone in power.” This distrust of institutions and established power affected the religiosity of my participants. Several of us expressed no desire to belong to the “institution” of religion, but still see ourselves as individually spiritual.

To some, I suppose, we would look like a conventional group. All that I interviewed were heterosexual, for example. We do retain some of the values of our traditional fifties and early sixties Catholic education. Like me, most have a sense of propriety and manners, which may seem a little old school to some. I know it does to my children. But, despite that, most of us challenged the status quo in some way throughout our lives. Several members of this group are entrepreneurs: Darlene, Norene, and Jerome. Rather than fitting into a job or company, they created their own. Perhaps that is a defining characteristic. Whether it is work, religion, marriage, or politics, many of us chose to redefine it according to our own terms, rather than accept someone else’s definition of it.

Jerome spoke eloquently about the influence of the music of this generation. Like him, I have lived my life to the beat of a sound track. Music has both created and reflected my reality. My social conscience and action was fed by folk musicians like Pete Seeger; protest songs of Phil Ochs and others; and narratives from the story weavers like Bob Dylan and Kris Kristofferson. “The Times They are A Changin” was both an anthem and a wish. This music was on fire, and it fed the flames of the social movements of the times. And, it nurtured the inner life that Roof (1999) and others report is so important to my cohort. I know that it fed and continues to feed my inner life.

I have carried on a life-long love affair with Kris Kristofferson, attracted as much by his mind as his soulful and intelligent blue eyes. Brokaw interviews Kris in Boom, and I...
found out that we both reacted the same way to 1968. Brokaw reports, “The LBJ withdrawal, along with the other traumatic events of 1968 – the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the murders of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy – was the turning point in his thinking. That was when he started not believing anything he was hearing” (Brokaw, 2007, p. 264).

Brokaw reports Kristofferson says he “did a one eighty in 1968.” He changed from a straight and narrow crew cut military officer, Rhodes scholar, and candidate for a professorship in English at West Point to a cavorting and rebellious artist and social commentator. While not so dramatic, I changed from a good little Catholic girl wearing white gloves and accepting what I was told to the cynical, sometimes angry, and iconoclastic person that I have been for the last four decades. Our reaction, Kris’s and mine, to the turmoil and hypocrisy of 1968, was a common one. This unwillingness to accept what we were told, establishment values, and canonical narratives was reflected in most of the stories of my classmates.

Obviously, not all boomers reacted the same to 1968 as Kris and I did. There were deep divisions that are reflected in the political and cultural divisions of 2008. Bill Clinton, interviewed by Brokaw for his book, said:

If you thought something good came out of the Sixties, you are probably a Democrat; if you thought the Sixties were bad, you are probably a Republican” (Brokaw, 2007, p. xiv)

I don’t know if it is that simple, but certainly the events and cultural change at that time was interpreted differently by each individual, and has played out differently in each life, and in our culture as a whole. The same can be said for my classmate participants,
but I think it is safe to say that most would be aligned with the group who say that something positive came out of the Sixties.

Aging

It is not surprising for a generation who challenged all else that my cohort also challenges the canonical narrative about the decline of aging. As previously discussed, the idea of aging is socially constructed by the language and cultural practices surrounding it. The concept of aging and decline is a part of our cultural story. Most in my research group seem to be deliberately countering this narrative. Norene, Jerome and Michael spend a lot of their physical and mental energies working their bodies to stave off physical deterioration. Darlene and I both are pursuing advanced degrees in our sixties, and neither of us is buying into mental decline. It is early in our aging process, but each of the participants in my research seemed intent on consciously aging and living out their concluding chapters.

Most notable to me is the desire on the part of my classmates to spend their remaining years making a difference and giving back. There was a very animated and deliberate discussion in the focus group about volunteering and harnessing the significant power of our generation. As boomers begin to retire, we are healthy, filled with energy and other resources, and expressed a focus not so much on comfort and pleasure, but on paying back for the privilege, abundance and experience of our lives. Some do want to travel as they become free of jobs and careers, but that is not the main focus.

Few volunteered information about how they anticipate and think about their own death, though there was much discussion about the death of others. There is, however, a
very palpable acknowledgment that time is running out. That awareness seems to create an urgency to be reflective.

Jerome most poignantly spoke of aging and mortality in his narrative as he closed:

I don’t know what it has in store for me, but I have reached the time when I can reflect and when I can try to figure out how and in what way I am going to choose to equip myself at the end of my life. I ask myself what do I want and choose to do at this point? How do I learn to grow older?

That statement says so much about Jerome and about our generation. After living for decades with an attitude that we can create a new world according to our values and desires, we approach aging the same way. It is not a reified, established process that we enter into, but a life experience that we can (to some degree) consciously create. Aging can be influenced by how we approach it, and by our actions and choices.

Conclusion

When I began this conversation with my classmates, I had no idea what to expect. As a qualitative researcher and student of Ellis and Bochner, I am aware of the power of stories. Hearing my classmates recount their stories--some that shook me to my core and others that moved me to tears--left me with a visceral understanding and appreciation of the power of narrative.

As I began this autoethnography looking at the lives and turning points of my high school classmates, I entered an ongoing conversation about boomers, turning points, aging, and the impact of this large and powerful generation. I did not know where the process would take me, nor did I expect specific answers. My documenting of these
individuals stories and turning points does not claim to be representative of an entire generation. It is instead a personal trip into aging and meaning and loss and connection that I was able to share with some of my high school classmates. Their lived experience tells us something about their individual lives, but it also tells us something about the lives of all of us. None escaped pain, loss, and disappointments. Most, if not all, transcended these and created lives of meaning amidst the debris. All continue to wring out of life meaning, joy, and pleasure; and look forward to continuing the same as they age.

We are a privileged group: privileged by race, by economics, by education, and perhaps by our position in history. I cannot think of another time in which I would rather have lived. Growing up when we did was frightening, hopeful, exciting, fraught with change, and creativity. This research experience has transformed my aging journey, and it has informed how I make sense of my life course, and how I anticipate the years to come.

My classmates inspire me. I am very grateful to them for opening up with their life stories. Michael told me that he had never told anyone but his wife, mother and siblings about his abuse. Other classmates also were surprisingly open and courageous and shared their secrets with me. I have tried in this work to handle them with tender loving care.

Margaret Gullette in *Aging by Culture* reflects:

The life course should make its claim to a kind of sacredness. This is different from the sanctity of life; a biological birth gift and essence that adheres in each of us at every moment and makes murder a crime. The
life course depends on this original gift, but is distinct in demanding that
we acknowledge the increasing value of a life lived in time (Gullette,
2004, p. 96).

Witnessing and writing these stories has been a spiritual experience for me. Each
story feels sacred, and telling it has been a responsibility and a privilege. It has changed
how I look at everyone – students I teach, strangers in a coffee shop. While they may
look generic, I know that if I had the opportunity to discover it, they too would have a
sacred story. Because of that, I am moved to treat all I meet with reverence. My
classmates’ narratives have convinced me of the power and importance of stories. I am
now a believer; if not in the Catholic Church, government or economic ideology, at least
I can say I believe in something.
Epilogue

February 6th, 2008

The morning is foggy and so am I as I arise early on my sixty-first birthday. I jump into a quick shower, and cursorily glance at my shower curtain printed with vocabulary words. I try to learn one word a day, attempting to keep the brain circuitry working. Maybe I’ll make it two in honor of my birthday. After a year with this shower curtain, given to me on my sixtieth birthday, there are few words left to learn. My eyes light on mellifluous, which means ‘smooth talker.’ I am sure I will have use for this one.

After dressing hurriedly, I crawl over sleeping grandkids, dog, and husband, and dart out the door with a cup of coffee and my briefcase in hand. “Damn,” I think. “It is 6:30 and I am due to teach at 7 a.m. in downtown St. Petersburg, at least a half hour away. As I settle in to my commute, I take a deep breath, and consider for the first time an amazing and absurd reality: I have survived my sixtieth year, and I am now sixty-one.

Looking forward to my sixtieth year, I was anxious and melancholy. If I had known what this year was to entail, I would have been even more trepidatious. This past year was one of the top four challenging and difficult years of my life. The other three were the tumultuous 1968; the year of my divorce from my children’s father; and the year both of my parents died. This one was difficult because of loss, too, but it had its own unique flavor.

Turning sixty was “huge” for me, as my students would say. It represents a marker that challenged my sense of being and security in my own skin and in the world itself. As I anticipated and began this year, a variety of challenges and loose dangling ends
called to my attention. As my sixtieth year passed by, I experienced the death of the father of my children, a life altering financial loss, recurrence of my Rheumatoid Arthritis, and as the year closed, the terrifying murder/suicide of a mother/father and two young children who were friends of my family. The events of this year have altered my life forever.

Somehow in this year, I begrudgingly incorporated the idea of sixty into my identity. It hasn’t been easy. But now, a year later, the shock has worn off, and I am more at peace with my place in the cycle of life.

Yet, I have also the painful awareness that the sands of time are running quickly through. The radio reminds me this morning that it is also Ash Wednesday. On this day, millions of Catholics have ashes placed upon their foreheads to remind them that they are in a cycle of “dust to dust.” I gave this practice up a long time ago, yet the combination of turning sixty-one and ashes remind me yet again of my not so distant mortality.

In the past year, I have been sifting through the matter of my life and the lives of my classmates to see what remains after the hardships, disappointments and losses of a lifetime. I am so grateful that I chose the topic I did for my dissertation. Were it not for this experience, I don’t know how I would have made it through this past year. Reconnecting with my age cohort – these people from my past who were born the same year as I, and who share similar formative experiences--has inspired and sustained me. When I feel sorry for my financial reversals, I think about Norene who lost the ultimate, her daughter. When I am overwhelmed by the demands and needs of my complicated family, I think of Darlene who grieves that she never had a daughter or son. When the sadness of my childhood and early losses creep into my consciousness, I consider
Jerome’s father shooting at him in a high chair, and Michael witnessing the death of his father and experiencing the betrayal and abuse by a Catholic priest.

They are still standing, and so am I. Hearing and watching them living and laughing and going on despite their losses and their heartaches reminds me that I can keep moving forward. These were people I knew from the past, but stories I had never heard. Besides the nine people who honored me with their stories, I am reminded that there are many more stories out there. Those voices not heard of the one hundred eleven remaining classmates undoubtedly would tell similarly complex and inspirational stories.

The year has come to an end, and so too has this journey of my dissertation. As they conclude, I am more at peace than when I started. The experience enriched my life. As my classmates tell me about their future plans, I am motivated to address some of my aging issues, particularly my body. I hear Norene recount her bicycling, hiking, and rowing efforts to stay in shape. Jerome and Michael tell about their hundred mile bicycle trips, and Greg reports his goal to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. Their success moves me to want to address my lack of physical fitness. There was a time when I was a runner, a hiker, and a bicyclist, too. It seems so long ago. I consider that I can intentionally work on my body to keep it as healthy as I try to keep my mind. Yet, I recognize that I will never again run eight miles, nor bicycle around the country. Those days are gone. My knees are shot, and my physical ability has changed. I try to realistically consider what areas I can improve in the years to come to make the most impact, before the “sands of time” run out.

The limitations sadden me. Just this week, the St. Petersburg Times Seniority section had an article on the process of aging. The author, Robert Jenkins (July 29,
2008), quotes the geriatrician, Dr. Robert Palmer. He calls 65-74 the young old. I’m not sure what that makes me and the other members of our class, but it is somehow comforting to know I have not yet reached the official designation of “old.” That will be soon enough. For now, I live in that bardo between young and old, trying to get use to this new phase of life.

When I began this search, I hoped to uncover authentic narratives that inspire those entering the domain of the old with examples of interesting, engaged and passionate older people. Few popular examples of vital elders are proffered about those who are still consciously creating their lives, learning and making a contribution. I dug for honest stories that reflect my life - a life in process with all of its imperfections and limitations. I found what I was looking for in the stories of my classmates: companionship and inspiration for this life transition.

I am still dancing, singing, and fighting the good fight. This year, I appreciate more than ever each breath I take. Despite the insanity of random violence, the economy, gas prices, and the Bush politics of greed, separation, and power, I am hopeful. Barack Obama speaks today as the election moves through their cycles. He presents an amazing opportunity for a change of national perspective. I originally supported my fellow boomer, Hillary, who was born the same year I was. Over time, the next generation, especially my daughter, converted me and I came to believe that Obama is closer to my ideals shaped in the social movements of the sixties. We need a new way of looking at the world, and I am willing to take my aging boomer body on board with him, and engage in the “audacity of hope.” God knows we can use a little hope.
My generation has had its say, and we will continue to make our contribution for as long as we are around. Our story - the story of St. Pius X Class of ’65 is not over yet. We are just beginning another chapter. Perhaps we are coming to the end of the story, but I predict there are still some interesting twists and turns left in the plot.
From East Coker, by T. S. Elliott

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated

Of dead and living. Not the intense moment

Isolated, with no before and after,

But a lifetime burning in every moment

And not the lifetime of one man only

But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

There is a time for the evening under starlight,

A time for the evening under lamplight

(The evening with the photograph album).

Love is most nearly itself

When here and now cease to matter.

Old men ought to be explorers

Here or there does not matter

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,

The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters

Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.
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Mary Poole completed her B. A. in Sociology at Trinity College in Washington D. C. in 1970. She earned her M. A. in Religious Studies at the University of South Florida in 2001. While pursuing her Ph.D. in communication at the University of South Florida, she taught courses in public speaking, women and gender communication, health communication and interpersonal communication.

Her research interests include women and gender issues, health communication and narrative methodology. Mary likes to combine her academic interests of religion and communication, and research how people create and maintain lives of meaning.

Besides teaching and writing, Mary spends her time with her children and grandchildren. In addition, she is politically engaged and volunteers her time with local activist organizations.