

Nuclear Family and Early Influences

Barbara Seefeldt: My mother liked traveling. We went from one coast to the other, drove every year, every summer. We took a different route every summer so we went through different states every time. I have seen the Painted Desert, the Grand Canyon at sunrise, and so many things I remember from the trips. Actually my folks were divorced when I was five. My father went to work in Albany, New York and my mom, to work in a restaurant in New Hampshire. My sister, two brothers and I were put into a home for children. They paid for us to be there. So we were treated better than the other kids. Every meal we had linen napkins in a napkin holder at our place. We had to be taught our manners, you know.

Later, Mother took care of welfare children who had been abused. She had a license for up to eight under two years old. We lived on a farm. When I was ten, she burned both her hands with hot oil. I stayed home from school and took care of her and all the kids by my own self, bandaged her hands every day, fed and clothed and took care of all the babies. So I learned how to work really young.

Amelia: My father was born in the Russian-German part of the Black Sea and had come to Canada when he was six. He lacked the skills to work at anything that would make a living for his family, so we moved into town, to the shack.

The '30s was taking its toll on farmers like my dad. Tumbleweeds were blowing and building up along the fences. War was threatening and we were in the depths of the Depression. A hopeless sense of unreality prevailed.

My story begins on January 13, 1936. I had four older siblings; the oldest was four when I was born. I grew up in a shack in the eastern part of Alberta in a little village. There were two bedrooms: one was my parents' and the other was ours, we four girls. I slept in the middle and, possibly, Audrey slept in the middle, too. Gert was on the outside. It was a spring bed where you sank in the middle. There was always a smell of pee and it wasn't until years later that I realized it was me who wet the bed. We ate potatoes every day and sauerkraut and porridge for breakfast. We did have bread that Mom made. Poverty reigned.

I believe that my parents were totally ill equipped to raise more than two children. And the children kept coming. I grew up listening to my father demand sex in the next room. I would cover my head and weep because I didn't know what was happening and didn't like it. It lived with me for many years after. I didn't hate sex; I had no idea what it was. But I hated what was going on in the next room.

I actually don't remember having any basic training in my life. I always felt ugly as a little girl. My choices seemed distorted and my circumstances beyond my control. My dad spoke to me with a holler and a whip; my mother sat in the front room or in the kitchen and sat, and sat, and sat.

Abigail: After I left school in the '30s, there wasn't much opportunity for work for women. To find anything that brought in money was very difficult. I remember the factories where we did the sewing: as soon as one closed down and had no more work, we'd go to another place asking if they had work. If they had contracts, they'd hire you. But it was always piecework. You'd get paid for what you produced and, of course, there was favouritism. Then when the war broke out, there were people going east to work in the war industries.

I got a job in Hamilton at Otis Fensom. They made elevators, but then they were making Lancaster bombers for the war. I worked as a forklift operator then they wanted a crane operator. It's not hard, if somebody wants something lifted up from one place to another, that's all it was. These were previously men's jobs. I went to Toronto and worked at Victory Aircraft as a riveter. During the war, my mother got a job at Firestone in Hamilton. She worked harder than any man all her life. She said it was the best job she had ever had. She hated to leave that job but I think they didn't want women any more. They had to have the men come back and take the jobs. She accepted that – what the heck, she knew. She was way ahead of everybody.

While I was in Hamilton, I went to the YWCA for entertainment and I met my husband there. A woman in charge of a group of girls said we had to invite service men from different stations around Hamilton to come to a dance. She said, "Now you have to go up to the fellow and invite him to dance." He took me home and I was his girl from then on. We married eventually.

Women Get Married and Live Happily Ever After

Mrs. Ruth Phillips: My parents were very strict and they may have had plans for what I was going to be. Mainly because I was Jewish, they were hoping to marry me to a Jewish gentleman. I had other ideas. I had a boyfriend that wanted to marry me so I left home and got married.

At first, I was my husband's deckhand because he worked as a fish packer skipper. I worked unloading fish boats onto the packer. I kept count so that I could send the records in to the company and they'd pay the fishermen for their catch. When I had children I stayed at home with them. It was hard work, but I taught the children to help me.

We eventually moved back to Vancouver with our family and stayed at my parents' house. My parents had cause to keep me from coming back because I'd

gone against them by marrying a non-Jew. But they didn't. They were glad to have me back because they were very fond of the children. After they went to live in Israel, they left their house to me.

My parents kept asking me to leave my husband until they realized that he was a good father and husband. But that took several years.

Beryl Cunningham: I married a Canadian and was expecting to be shipped over to Canada. So everything completely changed and here I am. Ever since we got officially engaged he was overseas and things were dreadful. We never knew whether we would see one another again. I was corresponding with my future mother-in-law. I didn't think it was fair that she have this woman descend on her doorstep she knew nothing about, so I corresponded with her. And she wrote to me very nicely.

It was a big adventure. My father said, "Now if anything goes wrong, you can always come home you know." One doesn't know what sort of situation one is coming into. But I had total faith and I realized my husband also was born into a Christian family and we had that greatly in common. And I knew he'd be a good man. And he was a good man: hard-working, generous, gregarious as could be and he wasn't afraid of hard work.

We had a great life together until he passed away very suddenly, which was a terrible shock to me. All my four children were born over here so there's no way I was going to go back to England. I was a Canadian citizen. I had my mother-in-law to look after, too, dear soul, because she used to live with us. She was a good deal older than my own mother. That was another responsibility, but you don't even think about it – just do it!

Mildred: Unfortunately, I married and was with child before I was 17 by a month; that's why we got married. I wish I hadn't, but in those days, it was the thing to do. Today, they don't care if they are married or not. I was born 30 years too soon.

I worked most of the time. My husband made things out of steel for a trucking company called Kenwood. I worked at Woodward's Store in Vancouver, off and on. Towards the end, it was mostly full-time; otherwise, it was part-time because somebody had to look after the kids. And, of course, his wages were bigger than mine.

He was not good to me at all. He drummed up accusations: How come I did? How come I didn't? Why? I didn't want to take it after so many years. He couldn't believe that I would talk back to him. So there were lots of arguments. I figured I would wait until the kids were grown up.

He died right after we separated and I became a widow before I became a divorcee. I didn't feel I'd lost a great partner. It was the kids I was more concerned about when he passed away. I'm not going to lie about how I felt about him. The kids knew: there was constant thick air when we were together.

I got a very low pension from my husband and no insurance at all. He didn't believe in that. We managed. I didn't marry for another four years. I checked out my husband-to-be and I found that he was good with my kids, and very good to me. I didn't expect the best but he was pretty darn good. I was about 37 when I met him. But it only lasted seven years because he got sick. He died from cancer.

Women are Weak

Shirley L. Mortimer: I left Woodward's and became a psychiatric nursing student at the Provincial Mental Hospital at Essondale. The female nurses weren't unionized then but the male nurses were. We worked a twelve-hour day while they worked an eight-hour day. Complaints weren't tolerated and if we complained we were dismissed! Even when we were on night shift and had to sleep during the day, we were expected to get up to attend lectures. There were no nurses' aides at that time, so the work was very hard. In addition, there were few medications or psychotropic drugs to control extreme schizophrenic or manic-depressive behaviours and we nurses had to use mechanical restraints, straight-jackets, restraint beds, hydrotherapy and convulsive shock treatments.

Gertrude: Our trip to come to Canada is a story in itself. My husband and eldest son came on The Corinthian boat because my husband did not want to fly in an airplane. They came first and I came later and I brought seven children with me. I'd never been to an airport in my life, never seen a plane on the ground before. We got to the airport and came in different cars and one of my daughters came with my mother and brother. When we got to the airport I said I couldn't get on that plane without my daughter. And they said, "No, you go on the plane and we'll get your daughter through", and I kept saying, "No, I can't", but anyway, I did. They rushed her on which was kind of a blessing for me because my sister took my mother up onto the roof of the airport and I didn't have a chance to give a close goodbye. I just kind of waved to her from the airplane and that was the best part about it; otherwise, it would have been very tearful.

Getting on a plane with seven children was quite an adventure. I sat there with my youngest who was only eleven months old fast asleep on my knee. When they brought the dinner around to give to us, they put it on the tray and then my son woke up. The dinner went flying in the air so I had to nibble on my two youngest ones' food.

It was quite an experience. Then landing in Canada we got mixed up with time of arrival. My eldest son came at five o'clock in the morning and I didn't arrive until five o'clock in the afternoon. So there was nobody there to meet me. I went to one of the buses and

they'd mentioned something about the Royal York Hotel in Toronto. I went up to the bus driver and said, "Does this bus go down to the Royal York Hotel?" and he said, "Yes Ma'am." I asked, "How much would it cost me for my luggage, my children and myself?" I think he said about ten or twelve dollars at that time so I held up an English pound note and said, "Would this get me there?" And he said, "No", but he paid my fare and I got his name and address and sent him the money.

We waited until nine o'clock and nobody came so I plucked up the courage to phone the police and said, "Would you please send somebody down to this address and tell them I'm here?" What had happened was my son David had been at the airport at five o'clock in the morning and gone back home and his father was working on the afternoon shift. My son came and picked us up at the Royal York Hotel and we got on the subway train in Toronto. A lady on it said, "Can I hold the baby for you because you look awfully tired?"

At that time it was okay, but not these days. She said she was getting off at the Lansdowne stop, the same as we were, so that was fine. We were walking up the street and she said, "Look my sister lives here, I'll go and get a buggy for the two little ones." So I stand there thinking, what is a buggy? The only thing that came to mind was the red cart that children play with, but she came out with a pushchair, see, and now we had to call them buggies.

Sandi Wingrove: I wish I had waited to get married, but we do what we do. I hadn't thought about being a wife. I had plans for being a mother but I had no plans around wifedom. All I had to go by was fairytales and Hollywood. And you know how little an actual marriage looks like that. That "lives happily ever after" thing, I would venture to say, does not happen. Our communication broke down. I always assumed that communication was a given. My parents didn't communicate but I could see that that was not the way to do it. I assumed, perhaps foolishly, that my relationship would be different because I would talk. I didn't realize that there might be people out there who wouldn't necessarily respond. And of course I married one of them. So that didn't work well.

I was desperately unhappy in my marriage but wanted to save it if I possibly could, so I asked my husband to go to counselling with me. I wanted to go do some kind of couple's counselling and he flatly refused. He said, "If you have a problem, you go and get a solution." I spent the next two or three years consciously changing my life, changing my direction, learning to live in my body and take care of myself and to say, "no." My husband had never heard, "no," from me in his life, and it did not sit well. He said, "This has to stop. Things have to go back to the way they were or we'd better separate." So I said, "Then, we'd better separate."

Women Don't Need an Education

Marjorie Drayton: I was born in the States. My parents were travelers and we traveled all over – I never lived anywhere more than two years from the time I was born until I graduated from high school. I was a very shy child so it was difficult. Because I was always meeting new people and going new places, I believe that had an interesting effect on my worldview.

After I did a year at state university, I got pregnant and that was the end of my university career. I had the baby and took my final exams late after he was born in the middle of my third year. I got married.

One of the main things that I have learned from my life is that you don't have options if you don't realize options exist. I don't know how to put it. But at the time, 1965, I never even considered having an abortion; it just was not in my consciousness. I never considered being a single mother and having a child on my own. I had to get married. It was my only option. And that turned out to be a terrible choice in the sense that I married an abusive man.

I was married for a year. I lived in Nevada so it was easy to get a divorce. I went home to my parents and called my husband on the phone and said, "I can't stand this any more." So I got divorced, went back to university for a semester, couldn't handle living with my parents, the ex-husband on the doorstep all the time, quit school, and got a job in an insurance company as a file clerk.

I remember saving my pennies for enough money to put my baby and his diapers in the wagon to go to wash his diapers. I made \$120 every two weeks and that's what I lived on. Then my ex-husband came over one night and we got drunk. We got remarried three days later. Then we had two more children. I was pregnant within two weeks. I always felt that I was fated to have his children.

Leone Konings: I graduated from high school when I was 16 years old. My birthday was at the end of December so I started school when I was five years old and then I skipped a grade which left me a lot younger than the other kids in my class. I think that created some problems socially for me because two years at that age is a huge difference.

I had wanted to be school teacher because I just believed that was what would happen. I would be a school teacher but when I was 12 years old I had to decide whether I wanted to go into a general program or a university entrance program. And my mother went to talk to the counsellor at the school and it was decided that I wasn't smart enough to take the university entrance.

It seems that nobody took into consideration that I was two years ahead of where I was supposed to be and also my mother said they couldn't afford to send me to university; although I could have worked and earned the money myself. And my

dad also said that girls don't need an education because I would just get married and my husband would look after me which I don't think is an unusual story for women at that time. So I was basically told to go into the secretarial program and the interesting thing was that when I did take a couple of the university entrance courses in high school I got A's and B's. But nobody noticed that.

Barbara Templeman: In those days, you graduated and then you decided whether you were going to be a secretary. I did that for a year, and then I decided that I'd like more education because I'd like to do something in the rehabilitation field. I wasn't sure what it was. Service men and women were coming back from the war. I went to UCLA for a year but it was interrupted by the deaths of my mother and father in an automobile accident. So I had the full support of my 14 year old sister and myself. I had to get to work right away. We went to Glendale and I started working for the city. It wasn't all easy. I worked in a legal office. I worked in various venues. I met my husband who later became my ex-husband. Within a year, I had my son.

I worked in the legal office in a rudimentary capacity. But I wanted to get out of office work because I found it boring. I tried cocktail waitressing and even the escort service which was not what it's like here – not much was expected of you – you just entertained people from out of town who were at loose ends. Both those things though, to a point were okay, but don't give up your day job. I stopped that.

When I married in '54 and had my son, then left my husband, I really had to get down to business. I took different jobs because there was no welfare, there was nobody else to rely on and I wasn't getting alimony. You can't get blood out of a turnip. I worked at various jobs to keep things going.

A Woman's Place is in the Home

Renee Spakowsky: I took my drafting background and added my interest in plants and flowers that I love. I became a landscape designer. I recreated myself from nothing. I was terrified that first year. I was terrified that I'd get writer's block, that I'd stop being creative, that I'd forget it all. I started a file of all the designs I'd drawn, in case I ever had to look back, but I never had to once because I found it was bottomless. It wells up. It was right there. It's always there – the creative flow.

I was 48 before I could start believing that I had any kind of creativity at all because no one saw it, no one, not even my own family. Even I didn't see it. How could I? Who would have told me this? My three-year depression from divorce evaporated. I started to overcome the negative voices in my head.

So when women come to me now and they say, "I'm too old" or "I'd love to do what you do." I say, "You'd love it? Put down what you're doing and go to school. Go do it and change your life!"

I would say that you're never too old, if you have the love. But it takes a little bit more than that. It takes a willingness to bet on yourself despite all the voices in your head that say that you can't do it, that you're not smart enough, you should be more practical, this, that and the other. Actually say, "I'm going to bet on myself and I'm going to give it everything I've got and I will either sink or swim. Big daddy isn't paying my way, I'm paying my way and I'm sacrificing two years of wages to do this."

I went back to school after 30 years and I got A Honours for two years running. The kids I went to school with were 18 to 20. They told me I was sleeping with the professors to get marks like that. They didn't believe in me. But I focused and I was hired before I even hit the street.

So what can I say to women my age? I did it. If I can do it, you can do it, too. Be willing to risk, simple as that. But, you should move to a town where you don't know anyone to stay focused for school work and exams. You have to cut the phone off from your friends. You have to ask them to wait for you. You have to go away and you have to focus.

To do that there has to be some kind of an inner toughness that says you're going to stick it out and you're going to do it. And I had that. I didn't know at first because it had never been tested to that degree.

Bernice Gehring: I ran for a candidate position for the provincial NDP. I wasn't successful, but that was alright. I took a shot at it. Those were lessons learned. I would never run again, but I would mentor to the end of the world any young person that was keen on going into politics if I thought they believed in the same policies and had the same political agenda. I would do that for them. I would tell them how to get through and around the system; how not to get bogged down with people's needs. It sounds simple, but how to separate the wheat from the chaff, look at what are good things to look forward to.

It's about working smoothly within the system and always maintaining your integrity and the position that you want to take and hold on to something, not to be bowled over by people that have a loud voice that think that only their opinions count, not to be afraid of anyone because you're just another person there doing a job.

A friend of mine ran for the school board and the biggest thing she needed was her house cleaned so I went down and cleaned it. I can do that for her. That, in my way, is a support system to allow that person to be freed up to do something.

Life is a spiral and when it goes there, you just hope that you've left enough of yourself behind not to influence, but to support people to feel comfortable to do the same things. I don't think of myself as an influence, but a helper. If my children thought politically different, if I thought that their views were a whole lot different and that they weren't teaching their kids, I would be quite disappointed. But they do, they're a good family. They can give themselves. As they get older they are more responsive to that, more responsive to people's needs around them.

Laura Savinkoff: I had become involved in the Doukhobor Centennial Coordinating Committee, a coordinating body which included all of the Doukhobor people--of the Orthodox Doukhobors.

It was a cross-Canada event to celebrate the destruction of weapons a hundred years ago then followed by our 100 years of coming to Canada. It was an awesome time for me because I did not realize some of the skills I had. It is hard for me to say this, but I am a good public speaker. It gave me an opportunity to develop my creative side, to write, to speak. I love people and it opened up so many doors. I got the opportunity to go to Saskatchewan to where my people came from, where my mother was born.

I got to feel some of that connection with my roots. I met people from Russia. I met and worked with people from all over the world. I was coming into my own finally. I was allowed to be who I am, not trying to fit into someone else's concept of what I should be. That gave me an opportunity.

Just before this latest Iraq war started, we formed a peace group in Grand Forks that became a member of the Canadian Peace Alliance. I am now the BC representative outside the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island. It opened the door to that group and then I joined the multicultural society and I became the assistant coordinator and I did a couple of research projects.

One was coming out of Vancouver, *Women Against Violence Against Women*. I did a research project with them. I started going to the Southern Interior Peace Coalition. I have become involved with the Boundary Museum Society; Boundary Restorative Justice; Fellowship of Reconciliation; Boundary Peace Initiative; Canadian Voice of Women for Peace and Abolition 2000. Being part of national and international associations, I feel I am beginning to live my dreams.

One of the first things I wanted to do was teach. I loved school. From the first day of school, I loved it because I loved learning. Then I wanted to travel. I wanted to see it for myself. Then I wanted to be a lawyer. Because of my activity with the Sons of Freedom, I actually had lots of contact with lawyers. I was the media person and the intervener with lawyers and judges. I housed the women that were released from prison. They lived with me and my family. We helped them recuperate after their fasts. I have learned so much and I am grateful for it all.

Bev Mill: I was a very naïve person when I went to the United States as an exchange student. Looking back, I realize I was an evolving person. Before going there, I didn't know what I believed in. All I knew was that I didn't believe the same things as my parents did, that I couldn't grow up to be like them. What really offended me was a work environment where I had to listen to racist jokes everywhere I went, simply because my skin was white, so I was reacting to that. Sometimes I wasn't sure why I was uncomfortable. I just knew that for me, it was wrong. It took me a while to realize my sense of who I was, and that I was going in a certain direction which was to speak my mind and to own my own feelings and political ideas. I learned from other people, but came to hold my own.

When I became a freedom rider I had been involved in the civil rights movement for a couple of years and I had been out demonstrating. I had helped in the boycott of Woolworths stores that refused to serve black people at their lunch counters. When we were living outside of the south in the US, hundreds and hundreds of people got together and decided to support black people in their struggle by boycotting Woolworths. Woolworths decided if they weren't going to go bankrupt, they'd better serve black people in the south and everywhere else.

The freedom rides were organized to test the laws that were on the books in the United States that said that interstate commerce facilities could not discriminate against people of colour or ethnicity. Hundreds of people in one year got on trains and buses and headed to the southern part of the US to basically sit in at the lunch counters of these facilities and to fill the jails, literally to tie up the whole system so that they would have to pay attention and realize that there was a force afoot that would bring an end to this kind of discrimination. We joined with black people in the south. They joined with us coming from other parts of the country to go to prison together. I was with the last group of freedom riders. There had been more than 400 people arrested in 1961.

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