

“An Older Woman Always has a Story...”

The Role of the Mature Woman in an Evolving Patriarchal Society

By Vanessa Valentino, PsyD¹

Recently a former supervisor of mine, Doris Bersing, Ph.D (2007), wrote an article entitled *From Crone to Mentor*, posing questions about the aging baby boomer women who are now moving into the role of mentor for the younger generations of women. In it, she ponders the role of the woman outside of childbearing years, and tries to redefine the negative stereotype of the aging woman into a positive role model for those who can learn from them. I feel this issue is vital to continue feminist work, as it impacts those in the third wave of feminism. I began to think of the negative labels placed on women, which she argues against in her paper, and how instead we should be honoring these “elders” who are so valuable to our developing society. We are moving away from patriarchy, thanks to the first and second wave of feminism, and now slowly the third.

Being 27 years old, I began to think how these women have impacted my life, especially as a woman early in her career, unmarried, and a budding psychologist. At the time of this discussion I was visiting my maternal grandmother, who has always been a role model and mentor to me in her own right, although our life paths are quite different. She encouraged me to be independent, not marry, focus on my career, and find happiness without men before even considering having one in my life. Even in my darkest times, she is strong with an inspiring word of advice to keep me going. She kept me motivated during the hurdles of undergraduate school, graduate school, and then working in state mental hospital (which she also has done).

She, who we will call Rosie, has a group of friends she sees fairly regularly dubbed, “The Wild Bunch.” I’ve always known these women and of their adventures after retirement. I thought who better to interview than these independent feminist souls who are mentors for so many? But, I also thought, I bet they don’t even know they are doing it, or may not even call themselves feminists. These are not women that were advocates during the movement but through living their lives and making the choices they did and they have helped empower and guide many women, and more to come.

So I asked to interview a few of her friends to represent the “older” generations, including her. I proposed to do a collection of stories regarding women aging, attempting to capture how women 50 and up feel about themselves and their sex in general. It would include 3 women’s stories: one 54, one 68, and one 84 years old, all living in New York. It will look at how they view the concept of “older” women, and I will look to see if they notice or believe in a movement from the typical negative stereotype of a “crone” to a “mentor.” Further, the questions will look at how women view themselves in an evolving patriarchal culture, especially with regards to aging, and what they believe their influence is on the younger generations of women. I will also ask if they believe they are feminists, and if they thought they were part of the feminist movement. In the end, they will be asked how the interview has impacted their views, if at all. They all agreed.



¹ A post-doctoral fellow at Pacific Institute Gerontological Wellness program in San Francisco, CA. 2008

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Their stories follow and I am honored to share them, and thank these women for doing so. Read them, and experience their lives as they tell it. “Every woman has a story” Ann had commented, and here they are.

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Ann, age 54.

“Art is calling for me...”

To meet Ann you wouldn't be sure of her age – she looks to be in her 40's, but her personality is so large and bubbly you would wonder if she were younger. She is tall, blonde, and pretty, and she is almost always smiling from ear to ear, It's clear the world is her audience... which makes sense, because she is a performer.

Anne was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, the younger of two children. She reports having a decent relationship with her mother, but her father suffered from bipolar disorder and was very unstable. She has one older sister.

Ann comes from a very educated family, with her mother holding a degree from Vassar, and her father held a degree in business. Her sister also went to college, but Ann just didn't enjoy school. She said she had to study to get good grades, and she would then “over study to attempt to overachieve and ended up very stressed” – but would be the best of the class. While in school, she was involved in opera and musical theatre, and chose musical theatre because “it would be more fun.” Looking back, she said she would feel “elated and proud,” but she also looks back and sees what she was giving up to live her life that way. She began as a voice major, and then switched over to biology (which she says was not right for her personality), and says, “I'm a performer, which is where I should have stayed!”

She then dropped out and married a man she had known only 6 weeks to escape her turbulent home life. She remained married for 10 years. In this first marriage she was married to an Irish Catholic, and stated there was a great deal of pressure to have children. But she had other plans. He was physically abusive, and she was not happy with the life she was leading. She divorced him in 1986.

She then moved to NYC and was in musical theatre for 6 years, touring and performing, as she always wanted. When she talks about this period of her life you can see her face light up, and you can see the joy it brings her. For monetary reasons she eventually switched to publishing, but due to her lack of a degree couldn't move up further and then went into sales.

She still looked for parts in musical theatre, but men began to play a role in her life decisions again. She had one fiancé who gave her an ultimatum- theatre or me. She chose theatre. Then another man she was involved with, a married man, took care of her financially for several years (five), but was physically and emotionally abusive. He convinced her to move to Long Island, and she said after realizing how little art was on the Island she just “died.” He argued with her when she needed to tour, and the relationship became very complicated. She hated the Island and the domesticated trap this man created for her, saying things like “look at this kitchen!” as if she should be in awe of what she had, but she didn't have the least interest in making a meal. To describe her life then, she repeated the Mother Goose rhyme, “Peter Peter pumpkin eater, had a wife but couldn't keep her. He put her in a pumpkin shell, and there he kept her very well!” She wanted to make music, and no longer to be in the shell a man created for her.

She commented during the interview, “I always had men attracted to me and I learned men are dominant – you have to do what they want or they have a fit. I made so many bad choices because of men.” While living in the suburbs she had befriended a man who would not only help her leave this man, but also would become her husband in the future. She said “we ran for our lives, literally... because he was very violent.... I literally grabbed my stuff from the

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apartment and was homeless for a day because I hadn't found a place yet. [My current husband] said “of all the things you made me do this was the scariest!”

Now on her own again, she went back to work in retail and does opera as a hobby in local venues. She said, looking back, “I see everything now. I gave up theatre for these men! I thought I needed a man. You have to choose, life is choices, and I wanted a man, but I wanted to perform.” Living independently she enjoyed her freedom, and said she wanted to be single...but there was “something wonderful about [her current husband].” Now married 5 years, she says he is supportive of her performing, but he “has a big problem with me going out overnight – its ok with other people – and in that way I let him dominate me. I don't want to deal with his anxiety and angst. Mostly he is supportive of my choices.”

Since she has gone back to school first as a business major, then as horticulture major that is part of the business program. She said she went back because she felt “everyone I know has a degree, everyone in my circle has a degree... I felt inadequate... I felt inadequate like a failure.” She thought it would enable her to get a good paying job, and was doing quite well until she was diagnosed with stage three cancer of the colon. She said she fully intended to go back (after recovery), but realized “it's expensive. Costly with time, money, and giving up on other things I would rather be doing. And at my age, for what? What am I going back to school for? At my age, a four year degree won't help me.” Instead, she seeks things that will make her happy, like opera, musical theatre, and other hobbies that are enjoyable. She also does advocacy work for cancer survivors, and feels her life is now full.

Ann never had children, and plainly states she never wanted them. She said she once asked her mother, who after Vassar gave up her career for children, how she felt about having kids and she told her, “although I would never get rid of you and your sister now, but if I knew then how much I would give up I would never have done it.” Ann said it seemed like “a lot of work, a lot of money, and kind of boring. In fact very boring!” She explained she wrote an article on it once, which she never published, where she interviewed women with kids who said they “really wouldn't do it again.” She said, “...and I got the feeling the people who said they would were really trying to spare their children's feelings. I looked around at people of child rearing age and saw them yelling and disciplining.” She consciously chose not to have children, and noted how she has repeatedly heard how selfish this choice was. But she is just fine with it, and does not regret her decision.

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Ann’s views on women, aging, and patriarchy:

Interviewer: How do you define a woman?

Ann: Oh...how do I define a woman? That a great question! Oh man... A woman... ok first the obvious. A physically mature female human.

Interviewer: Could you explain how it *feels* to be a woman?

Ann: You mean the essence? Oh ok... shoot this is hard. I know what you mean. I would say sexual attraction towards other humans...that’s all. [laughs]

Interviewer: How do you define an “older” woman?

Ann: Ok, an older woman always has a story. She is experienced... she will always have something interesting, pertinent and enlightening to show you. She will have bitterness, prejudices, but also keen insights... and uh, I see how crazy I am! Yea... she will have some leadership quality by that point, she will be able to guide, lead, share... but she will have been burned, so she will see it differently than at 16. Yea. That’s it.

[While answering this, Ann seemed to slip into her own world looking afar, and you could see the pain of her past rising to aid in her answer.]

Interviewer: What age do you consider to be an “older woman”?

Ann: Older than me! [laughs] I think an older woman is 70 and up.

Interviewer: What do you think a woman’s, age 50 or older, role in society is?

Ann: My role is I can see so many mistakes from envy and jealousy. I’m more able to be generous and encouraging- that’s a major goal. [To] be encouraging to people, cut them more slack, and have a more complete view of life. To be more relaxed in my letting people be people and – I used to be - well I am -- very competitive, [and I felt] if someone had something it would detract from me... other peoples happiness only adds to happiness to the picture, it doesn’t take away from me .

One thing I have definitely seen in the last couple years is my friends have empty nest syndrome. It must be very disabling. They spent their lives raising kids and this empty nest devastates them and I can’t relate to that. I see it across the board- it must be devastating and they are looking for things to fill this hole. They are very bright, many went back to school –

I think all of them. I was just telling [my husband] they can’t do anything by themselves (dinner, movies, trips)- because they’ve always been in this family unit. They don’t have the skill of *aloneness*. They are searching, grasping... it must be a huge, huge job because suddenly they are just devastated.

One pet peeve [with the older woman stereotype] is that the cancer patient is an older women saying “it gave me time to see my grandchildren”— there should more to a woman’s life than grandchildren. Women who are mature, wise, they should be going out doing productive interesting things with their lives, but I’m afraid that some any are sitting there going Johnny isn’t here and go see their grandchildren. Now they have money and can go do interesting cool things! They are stuck in that mindset of waiting for the grandkids to come over.

Interviewer: What should an older woman be called?

Ann: Teacher... or maybe Guide.

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Interviewer: Has your view on marriage and children have changed over the years?

Ann: [with a smile] Well, I never wanted children. Once in a great while I think it would be cool to adopt a child in need but I always felt that way. Yeah... oh yeah... marriage. I was afraid it would be drudgery. Cooking 3 meals a day, cleaning, supporting the husband emotionally- I thought that I would be tied to the house. Like I feel bad, this is a mess! But I'm having a great life. And my husband! [said happily] I'm able to pursue things. I was caught in that “wife” who cooks and cleans. [Acting like] “the help.” I think when I thought I was a goner [from cancer] it was the real clincher- I thought if I didn't who's going to do it. Then I thought oh man I could die tomorrow, I better get going and do some stuff I want to do. I'm also reading history – women have been so insignificant and have been taken so unseriously and now we have the ability to have these wonderful lives and wonderful things. Don't sit home and watch daytime TV – you can have it and you can do it!”

Interviewer: Would you change anything in your past if you could?

Ann: [*responding quickly*] Oh yeah. I wouldn't have married my first husband.... And I... that's probably about it. And I would have stayed in college. And lowered my expectations of myself. Get lower grades, but get the degree! It was just so hard- I was science major, and married, and he had his degree, and I wanted to go home and have fun with my husband and not study. His parents were appalled. His parents offered to pay and I should have done it. I was wild and unfocused and wasted time.

Interviewer: What are your greatest accomplishment(s)?

Ann: That I know. Leaving my dysfunctional marriage and coming to NYC to pursue theatre. I was *so glad* I did that *SO GLAD*. Uh!!

Interviewer: If you could be a man for a day, what would she do?

Ann: I would get a great job. I have worked pretty much my whole life – I would get in theatre singing. There are a million sopranos. I would go audition in the city and get a part.

Interviewer: Do you feel your life was influenced by a patriarchal culture?

Ann: [*Very serious tone*] Oh yea. Definitely. [*laughs*] Well men just have so many advantages and so much power and so many different ways and I've said before women have to have a husband or a boss to survive. If we like to admit or not we are dependent on men. We would like to believe that's not true...

Interviewer: Is your current boss a man?

Ann: Well a woman, but it's the boss' wife. It's owned by a man. Some of my best bosses were women, but their bosses were always men – men are always at the top.

Interviewer: Has it improved over the years?

Ann: Well, yeah of course I have. Because I was born in the 50's. My mother wore high heels and dresses. But although you wonder if it's just superficial – if it's just the clothes and makes up that changed – if they are still having the kids and cleaning. I guess it's crazy to say I haven't seen it change for the better, of course I have.”

[*She seemed a bit conflicted on this point, but struggled to find the improvements.*]

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Interviewer: How do you feel about how the younger generations of women live their lives?

Ann: I work at the museum with kids at 16 and 17 they are bright and informed and curious and un...unscathed yet by life's disappointments. They are alert alive – all these hopes and dreams...

Interviewer: What about women in their 20's and 30's?

Ann: They are so untied to the stove. The one's I know are so educated. Careers. That's what I see- I don't see anyone who wants to stay home and have kids- I mean none. That's interesting. None.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Ann: I would like to see people have more fun. You make me think we have shifted from all that cooking, cleaning, and baking to learning – the fabulous meal has become a fabulous paper – but neither have a kayak. Are we leaving out that vital piece of doing *nothing*, and doing something *fun*? [It's as if they feel] I have to, I have to create, and I have to prove myself.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a mentor to them?

Ann: Yeah, definitely very much I do. The girls at the museum- high school students.

Interviewer: Have you influenced a younger woman?

Ann: Yeah, by... oh gosh... I think by not being a typical... I'm goofy, I'm fun, I'm very much out of the box and showing you don't have to be a grown up 55 years old and do the standard things and be silly and have fun. As I said before, I want to encourage kindness. People's feelings are very important.

Interviewer: Did you have a mentor?

Ann: My sister and my mother. I looked up to both of them. They were very cool and wonderful and perfect.

Interviewer: Did you have one in your career?

Ann: I always felt women are threatened by me. I don't know exactly why and I don't understand. Women are scary to me sometimes.

Also my grandmother. She was uneducated, 8th grade if that. She had outhouses and stuff. She was the direct opposite of my mom. My dad's mom. She wasn't really able to guide me in education and careers. But she told me “Always wear a night gown to bed instead of PJs in case your husband gets an erection during the night. It's easier. His penis will get as hard as a broom handle.” She liked it! She was so opposite of my mother. And my other grandmother, who was a college graduate, which was rare for that time, and majored in voice/music. She had a successful operatic career in NYC and later taught music at Wells College in upstate NY.

Interviewer: How do you define a feminist?

Ann: Oh shit. My first contact with a feminist was very bad [circa 1985]. I was with my friend... and we were coming from church and all feminine in our dresses walking and there was, you may know her, probably a les[bian] I realize now, she has a booth set up in the city, she has a picture of women going into meat grinders, she has a box for money and wants you to sign a

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petition... she’s very vocal, and wants us to sign... and I forget why I wouldn’t sign it, but she started verbally attack me. She yelled “I hope you get raped because we won’t be there to help you.” Feminists are male hating, bitter, blaming their problems on external situations.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

Ann: Well yeah, I think I do, but not a radical feminist.

Interviewer: Well, the standard definition is the notion of women and men having political, economic, and social equality.

Ann: Then definitely yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: Have you ever studied feminism?

Ann: I never formally studied feminism, but I love to read about cool women like Cleopatra and Ayn Rand but not formal classes.

Interviewer: Do you feel you were part of the feminist movement?

Ann: Uh...yeah. I think by trying to empower other women, by setting – by trying, maybe not achieving – by being a good role model or example and going forth and sucking the juice out of life and not just sitting home and just, doing you know, unfun, unengaging things. Showing other women there is other stuff you can just do. I’m trying to work on lifting up other women, rather than competing with them so I can be better.

Interviewer: What advice she would give to younger women?

Ann: Have more fun! Nobody’s having fun! Everybody’s working so hard. Nobody’s having fun. Have some fun that’s my advice.

Interviewer: Looking back, what do you wish you “knew then?”

Ann: I never thought I was good enough- I wish I knew no one was good enough. I wish I knew I was more confident than I realize. I was the youngest of super achievers, and my mother would say Ann is little and cute and a mouse and your sister is the rat and big and smart. I knew I was smart, but wasn’t until I got the good grades recently. My sister recently said that she was the smartest, then dad, then me. Our mother and sister were tied. My mother was disappointed I wasn’t a boy – and my sister was 4 years old and said we’ll make her a penis out of cotton and tape it on with scotch tape.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add?

Ann: No... [laughing] I’m done. I’m so confused now! I was so confused... now I’m so confused....

When I left she was obviously running the interview over in her head. Before leaving, she told me she had planned to sing for me before I left. She then sang, and acted out, “Art is Calling for Me”, also known as “The Prima Donna Song” by Harry B. Smith and Victor Herbert from the musical “The Enchantress.” She had chosen it before I came, but I am not aware if she sees herself in the song...

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She later told me that she thought about this interview for several days, pondering the questions and her answers. I went to a performance of hers at a local venue, where she sang this song as a few other numbers. While there, the other amateur performers were in awe, especially a voice major from a local college who certainly did not possess the same stage presence. But I don't think she noticed, she was lost in the performance.

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Rosie, age 68.

“Do what you want to do! Finally! You’ve been unlocked!”

Rosie is a very active, attractive woman who looks younger than her age. But, her style is old-fashioned with short curled hair that had been set in rollers, and neat slacks and a long sleeved fitted shirt. She comes off as confident and sure of herself, although she didn’t have pre-thought opinions on all the questions asked. She is polite, curt at times, and presents as very genuine and together.

Rosie grew up on Long Island with one brother, and was the older of the two children. Her parents had an unstable relationship where they each had affairs on the side that the other had knowledge of. Her mother was an alcoholic and she said her father was “extremely cruel” and physically and emotionally abusive. Rosie said he almost killed her brother twice by choking him. “He was like Hitler. All the bad things about Hitler reminded me of him.” She was left home alone with her brother from as young as 7 (he was 6). She reported he was also cruel to the patients at the Veteran’s Administration Hospital he worked at, and her mother worked at the state mental hospital. Neither was educated beyond high school. Her parents were always fighting, and her home life was miserable.

She had dropped out of high school at the end of her sophomore year, and married her first husband in 1956 at age 16. She said she probably wouldn’t have gotten married if her home life was better. He was a first generation Catholic (Rosie is atheist) of half Irish and half Italian decent. The majority of his extended family lived on the same road, and the women were not to go out alone (and that was only to the laundry mat, doctor, or grocery store) especially without men, wear makeup, dress as they pleased, or drive. She would go out with one of his sisters if needed. She said, “I wore size 12 house dresses – not even nice dresses – and I weighed 108 lbs! They were hand me downs from his sisters. No makeup and no setting your hair.”

She described him as an “alcoholic who couldn’t keep a job” and was physically and verbally abusive. He would demand the children be in bed at an early hour, just so he wouldn’t have to deal with them. She had three children; a girl at age 16, a boy at age 18, and another girl at age 22. Her husband came from a large family of 8 children (13 were born, 8 survived) and he expected her to have just as many children. Birth control was not an option.

Looking back, she says she was “living under the Italian thumb. It was a miserable time of my life... the worst 9 years of my life... I finally left when they foreclosed on the house and the bank would take it over in two weeks. He came home drunk, beat me up, and my brother picked up me at 4am. That was exciting,” she said with sarcasm, “and the kids had the measles and I didn’t know and then my brother’s kids got the measles. That was fun.” Despite the abuse and horrible living situation, she said she probably would have stayed if it wasn’t for the foreclosure because it was “a place to live... I didn’t want to go home. First I went to my brother’s, then my aunt’s, then [to my parents] all in two weeks.” Her youngest child was only two years old at the time.

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Now on her own again, she did not have an income, or any way to get around. She first had to obtain a driver's because she “wasn't allowed” to drive before. She said, “I was only making thirty-three dollars every two weeks! So I went to the state hospitals so I had benefits. I left him in July and got my license in August. I thought that was pretty good, I was determined; I had to learn how to drive. Fortunately my father had extra cars. He always had plenty of cars.” She first worked the night shift at a nursing home so she could watch the kids during the day, and her mother watched them while she worked. This was not enough, as when her father passed and she had to stay home for three days to make funeral arrangements they docked her pay. Soon after she quit and she began to work for the state mental hospital for better hours, better benefits, and better pay. She eventually went back to school for her General Education Diploma at night school, and then took two college courses in adult education also while working. She wanted to be a nurse. One was algebra, and she needed a tutor to pass the course. Her tutor is now her second husband. Looking back she did not say she would have pursued a degree if she could, but stated women “should have every right a man has...every opportunity.” She eventually stopped pursuing her goal of being a nurse because her ulcers were too much for her to continue working and going to school.

After marrying her second husband she began to have a life of her own. She eventually quit the hospital, and began pursuing things that were enjoyable to her. She was in a garden club, and also joined Meals on Wheels (an organization that delivers meals to the elderly and homebound). At one point she was one of two women who organized the logistic for the area as a Meal Site Coordinator. She still delivers meals twice a week, but has since quit the garden club but continues to love gardening in her own yard which is always full of flowers and well kept. Rosie and her husband have traveled quit a bit, although she prefers to be at home where she enjoys keeping up the house and “digging in the dirt” (gardening).

In her 30's she took care of her husbands ailing mother, and then in her 50's she cared for her mother and father in law who were both very ill. All have since passed away. She has nine grandchildren, two of which are female. She is now very happy with her life, loves her husband very much, and feels this is the best time of her life.

Rosie's views on women, aging, and patriarchy:

Interviewer: How do you define a woman?

Rosie: I don't know how, do you define a woman? She takes care of a house, she has a job, she takes care of children, a taxi driver, she's a doctor... she's everything! Chef, cook and bottle washer, bill payer, she's everything! Maintains the household... chauffeur. Takes care of children. Women have all kinds of jobs. That's a woman of today... actually my mother worked too but she left us alone though.

Interviewer: Could you explain how it feels to be a woman?

Rosie: I love it! I love my gardening, my volunteer job, my peace and quiet [*laughing*], I love my friends. I have a good life now. I don't have the burdens I had years ago. There are all kinds of women though... self sufficient, well most... caring....it depends on the woman.

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Interviewer: What about you specifically?

Rosie: Me? I’m caring. What else can I say? Housewife, chauffeur, gardener, I pay bills... I don’t know, what am I? I can’t put gas in the car by myself, I get my husband to do it! I’m afraid of anything new.

Interviewer: Were you that way when you were younger too?

Rosie: Those days you had to do what you had to do... You couldn’t have any identity other than that. I had to find someone to take care of kids when I was at work.

Interviewer: How do you define an “older” woman?

Rosie: [Names a friend in her early 80’s.] They’re great! In better shape than I am. They do more, they travel, they play bridge, they are not afraid to try new things... they go to the theatre by themselves, they do things by themselves as well as together. They stay very active – I’m very active but not like that. I’m not into the beauty thing. I believe in growing old...everything gets old. I don’t have problems with age, or wrinkles- I only had problems with zits [when I was younger].

Interviewer: What age do you consider to be an “older woman”?

Rosie: 80’s... mid 80’s. 80’s aren’t that old anymore.

Interviewer: What do you think a woman’s, age 50 or older, role in society is?

Rosie: By that time if they want a job they should pursue a career if they wanted one and couldn’t because of kids. Some crafts, or music, if they couldn’t. [She then shows me a picture of an 84-year-old friend on safari with a giraffe.] She loves giraffes! She’s a woman! When her husband died, she always wanted to go so she and her 86-year-old friend went. One jumped out with a parachute, one went hot air ballooning. They’re no longer in the grandmother role, do what you want to do! If you want to go out horseback riding or dancing, you should do it. You want to go with the girls you should do it. You should make time for yourself now, that’s it really.

Interviewer: Do you do that?

Rosie: Yeah, sure. If I want to go anywhere I go, I’m just too lazy I don’t go. I don’t enjoy getting dressed anymore I like being comfortable.

Interviewer: What should an older woman be called?

Rosie: Most of the women I know aren’t like that... they should be called the wild bunch! Not the wild bunch, let’s see... I don’t know... what word would you give someone who finally has the time to do what she wants without obligations? Free spirit? That’s good. Do what you want to do! Finally! You’ve been unlocked.

Interviewer: Has your view on marriage and children have changed over the years?

Rosie: Oh yeah definitely. Every woman should be married twice so they can make the mistakes the first time and do it right the second time. And if I had to have children over again I’m not so sure I would. I didn’t enjoy life then... I guess I needed something to love so I had kids... well, I had them anyway. They *happened*. Well, I shouldn’t say I didn’t want them, I changed after I

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had them, and I loved kids then. I loved babysitting, I loved being around them – until I had my own. Until they were teenagers. Then I wanted to strangle them. But then I wouldn't have grandchildren then would I? But I don't want great-grandchildren! Twice around is enough!

Interviewer: Would you change anything in your past if you could?

Rosie: Oh yea. I wouldn't have gotten married the first time, as I said before. But then there are things you have to do because it's your obligation like taking care of parents – that sandwiching in era. Taking care of parents and grandchildren. Disputes with adult children. You're really bogged down, it's nice to be free.

Interviewer: When was this?

Rosie: I was in my 50's. That was the second worst time in my life. First it was taking care of my husband's mother in my 30's for ten weeks, then his father, and then my mother – it was like being at the doctor every day of the week between the two of them. I had to give up volunteer work to take care of the two of them. Cook and clean and take care of two houses – I wouldn't want to do that again. Especially my mother, she was very demanding.

Interviewer: Was your husband supportive?

Rosie: Oh yeah, definitely. Sure. I don't think I'd be this far without him. I know I wouldn't.

Interviewer: What are your greatest accomplishment(s)?

Rosie: Finding a second husband. I swore I would never get married again, I was single 10 years. He is caring, he's... helpful, very helpful, and he listens. (Most of the time, he tunes me out now!) But god where would any of the family be without him? No where *Her husband provides familial support to her family*. I'd still be working. It's like I got a second chance at life. []

Interviewer: If you could be a man for a day, what would she do?

Rosie: If I had a penis I would slam it in the door!

Interviewer: To clarify, you are a man... for a day. It would be attached to you [laughs]

Rosie: If I could *have a man* for a day I would put him to all kinds of work. If I was a man I would do the same – I would do a lot of heavy work around here.

Interviewer: Do you feel your life was influenced by a patriarchal culture?

Rosie: I don't feel lesser than my husband – I'm equal to him. I don't feel stifled at all. To trade places with him – I wouldn't want to. Yeah sure – whatever they said goes, you have no say.

Interviewer: Whom are you referring to?

Rosie: Men in general. My father, my first husband- whatever they said went – you didn't question it. If they said “get in there and make dinner” you didn't question it – you were... you didn't question it. Now it's different, you can question things. Now I say “the honeymoons over get it yourself.”

It was mostly male supervisors at the hospital too. I don't think men should make more than women.

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Interviewer: Has it improved over the years?

Rosie: Oh yeah. I think generally most women’s lives have improved over the years, it’s not like it used to be. I think the fact that women... I think husbands realize that women work hard at home – grocery shopping, cooking cleaning. I don’t think they looked at it that way before. It was only if you got paid for it. I think that came to light in a news report one time, showing how many hours women put in and what it would cost to pay them – and it showed men and women – and women said, “hey we are worth something!” And men stopped taking it for granted.

Interviewer: How do you feel about how the younger generations of women live their lives?

Rosie: [*eyes roll*] Outrageously. They spend more than they earn. They think money grows on trees. Most young women do this. I think they are used to having, and their parents always gave to them, and we didn’t have it – they just ask for it and get it. And now they are on their own and they can’t get it that easy. So they spend more than they earn.

I’m glad they have their careers. I think they should. They shouldn’t feel, “I’m out of high school and I should get married and have kids.” Women are getting older and can have kids later. You aren’t old at 40 anymore.

I agree with living with someone before marrying them so there are less divorces, to find out if you are going to stay with them or not. Because if you don’t you get married and say “oh god what did I get myself into” and then it’s a big financial thing... well you get that living together is too... but it’s better. When you are dating you always look nice, and smell nice, and on your best behavior... all the bathroom sounds are hidden, the bad breath, the bad hair. None of that happens when you are dating.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Rosie: I don’t think you should sleep with every Tom, Dick and Harry, but I do think you should live with them first.

I think they are in for a rude awaking for how things are now. I feel sorry for the younger generations. We aren’t leaving them very much in the way of ecology, peace... and the world is getting over crowded/over populated, that’s not a good thing... Pollution. It’s not a nice world like it used to be.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a mentor to them?

Rosie: Yes, my granddaughter. The brat she is today. [*laughing*] Not the influence I had hoped, but yes I did. I’m very proud of what she’s done, her accomplishments, but she spends a lot! And I’m glad she could talk to me about things— I just wish I had the answers she always wanted to hear (but I don’t – I tell her what I think). I think you are a mentor forever as long as they look up to you. My other granddaughter too, in a way. Let’s face it no one wants to be like their mother, so you may as well be like your grandmother. You don’t want to happen to them what happened to you.

Interviewer: Did you have a mentor?

Rosie: No. Maybe [*names older friend again*]. I’ve known her since my 30’s, and she’s been a big inspiration to me... like a mentor. I had no one to talk to. Just my friend Barbara, but we didn’t agree – and she didn’t like my first husband, so then I had no one to talk to.

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My mother at one point. The sun rose and set in her! She worked 6 days a week, and was an alcoholic. I stopped having the bond with her in my 50’s [when she became ill] – I was like an extension of her. It made me bitter. I resented her. I resented the time she took out of my life. I had no life.

My Aunt Bernie was positive, saying “it’s just another stage in life” and I thought this is a great outlook. She wasn’t really a mentor... I didn’t have that much contact with her.

Interviewer: Did you have one in your career?

Rosie: No.

Interviewer: How do you define a feminist?

Rosie: I feel it’s somebody who has a lot of self worth, self confidence... um... looking for women’s rights where she feels they’re not equal to a man’s. I don’t have anything against feminists I think it’s a good thing.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

Rosie: No, do you think I am? I’m not out there saying you don’t pay your employees enough.

Interviewer: Well, the standard definition is the notion of women and men having political, economic, and social equality.

Rosie: Maybe I am. [*Looks it up in the dictionary herself.*] Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: Have you ever studied feminism?

Rosie: No.

Interviewer: Do you feel you were part of the feminist movement?

Rosie: No.

Interviewer: What advice she would give to younger women?

Rosie: Follow your dreams, do what you want to do, without hurting other people. Think of what you really want to do out of life, and do it without hurting other people on the way.

Interviewer: Looking back, what do you wish you “knew then?”

Rosie: If I knew what my first marriage would be like I wouldn’t have done it- I would have looked for [my husband] sooner.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add?

Rosie: Nothing. Just that after 35 [when I remarried] my life certainly improved.

After the interview Rosie explained she doesn’t like to talk about her past very much, and had become very emotional at times. She said she hadn’t really thought about many of the questions I asked, and I feel she walked away from the experience enlightened about the feminist in her, which she doesn’t typically focus on. She was humble to admit it, and resisted seeing it, but I also think she realized that she has been a mentor to other women, and how very important that is.

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Joan, Age 84.

“The Backbone of the Country...”

Joan is a well-dressed woman who also appears younger than her age. She has dyed black hair, neatly applied makeup, and a perfectly coordinated outfit. She is polite and courteous, and it is clear she is well educated.

She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and was an only child. She said, “My dad was very demanding of me to be scholarly and do well. If I didn’t get all A’s in High School he didn’t talk to me for months. To me that was abuse. The minute I graduated I left home. I went to [live in] a YWCA in Manhattan and I loved it. Then when his mother died he apologized and I went home and took care of him for the rest of his life. I wasn’t going to put up with that he was so unfair.” She said her mother did not defend her against him, and she was independent from then on.

Joan then worked at New York University’s (NYU) as a writer and also wrote as a college correspondent for the New York Times in order to put herself through NYU. There she obtained her Bachelor’s degree, and met her husband whose job she was doing while he was fighting in World War II. She said it was “love at first sight.” She married him at age 22 in 1947.

They married and she continued to work as a publicist for the American Nurses Association and for John Wiley Publishers. She then began to have children at age 27 after years of trying, and quit work. She said being an only child she always wished she had siblings, and wanted to have many children. She had four children at age 27, 29, 31, and 33, one of which is female. Once the youngest was seven years old, she went back to work as a teacher of special education courses for high school students. She said, “The school district called me because there was no such thing as special education at the time, and because they knew I was a writer and knew English they offered me a job to be the first special education teacher and another lady. I didn’t even ask my husband and said yes because I was ready to get back to work!” She said the work was “very tough” and the students had various issues that were not just educational. “One boy had epileptic fits and it was very difficult for me, but they gave me a shortened day so I could be home for my youngest child... so I could meet the bus.” Although she found the experience very rewarding, after a year she quit and went back to school to get a Master’s degree in education. She then went back to teaching for 12 more years, but taught younger mainstream children. She said she still hears from some of them.

Joan and her husband highly value education and she said regarding her children, “There is no way that any of them could not go, my husband and I were very adamant, and they wanted to.” Her daughter became a special education teacher.

After retirement she began volunteering for Meals on Wheels of Long Island, with Rosie. She did that for twenty-seven years, and eventually stopped when she got “the worst kind of lung cancer in my 70’s (about 9 years ago). And the chances to beat it were unbelievable small – I was very lucky. I then knew I didn’t believe [in God] because I never prayed – I never thought of it! I had a 7% chance. I was just lucky.” Joan identifies as an atheist.

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She and her husband enjoyed their retirement together, “traveling all over the world... We didn’t care what we ate or what hotels we stayed in – we just wanted to see everything. The only thing I didn’t see I wanted to see was the Taj Mahal in India because it’s so dirty and the disease.” Her doctor’s don’t feel that India would be a good trip, due to her prior health issues and age, but she said, “I will. With my daughter. We went to China. We walked the wall. My husband and I went to Russia, Egypt- all over. Everywhere except India.”

Sadly she is now widowed as of three years ago. Her husband suffered from Alzheimer’s disease from about age 55 (she couldn’t remember) exactly and was in a nursing home for the last 5 years of his life. She said, “My doctor put him in because he saw it was killing me.” She said despite his illness, it was a “happy ending” and she loved him very much.

When asked if she is in a relationship now, she replied with a smile, “no, unfortunately!”

Joan’s views on women, aging, and patriarchy:

Interviewer: How do you define a woman?

Joan: The second half the equation of men is women. She’s a loyal wife and the bearer of children and an individual in her own right.

Interviewer: Could you explain how it *feels* to be a woman?

Joan: I find it great to be a woman. When I was younger I was molested a lot- not by family, but if I would go on the train... everybody talks about the good old days... but men would press against me. I had to take a train to high school and college – a crowded train – I found that very trying.

Interviewer: Did you confront them?

Joan: I couldn’t, I was too horrified. I would just move away. It happened all the time. One time [my father] sent me in the city in a cab so it wouldn’t happen. I’m sure every woman had this. Things were really bad in that way. Never heard that did you? Men exposing themselves or touching! We went upstate and across the lake a man was exposing himself to my daughter. It was horrifying. We were more sexually ambivalent then. We were afraid to show our feelings and we didn’t talk about sex.

Once when I was 10 a man tried to pull me in a cellar and I got away. I’m sure there was other people it happened to, but no one told.

I worry about my 5 granddaughters, but they are very liberated. They are much more sophisticated than I was.

Interviewer: How do you define an “older” woman?

Joan: Somebody over 55.

Interviewer: What do you think a woman’s, age 50 or older, role in society is?

Joan: The leader in her family, a role model for her children and grandchildren, and being active politically, and demanding that her family all get as much education as they can.

Interviewer: What should an older woman be called?

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Rosie: The Backbone of the Country.

Interviewer: Has your view on marriage and children have changed over the years?

Rosie: No. I loved having children, if I would have been able to get pregnant earlier I would have, and I loved being a woman... and I still do! We may have had 6.

Interviewer: Would you change anything in your past if you could?

Rosie: Do I sound very conceited if I say nothing?

Interviewer: Not at all. What are your greatest accomplishment(s)?

Joan: I think one was putting myself through college that was unbelievably difficult. One was being a good special education teacher... And really trying to be the best mother and wife I could be.

Interviewer: If you could be a man for a day, what would she do?

Joan: Well, had I been a man I would have loved to gone to war in WWII. I would have been in the service, and I would have learned to fly an airplane.

Interviewer: Isn't that what your husband did?

Joan: I thought of my husband when you asked. He was wonderful. I tried to go into the service and changed my birth certificate at 17 and he said forget it lady. But once I was in college I gave up on it.

Interviewer: Do you feel your life was influenced by a patriarchal culture?

Joan: Not really. I was given – I sort of grabbed every opportunity – but I was given it too. I mean if I could have been drafted into the service... that is the one thing I felt badly about. When we were attacked by Japan and got in the war with Germany it killed me I couldn't fight.

Interviewer: Has it improved over the years?

Joan: Yes. There is no comparison. I probably should have said when I was a girl you could have been a teacher, nurse, or stenographer. And some teachers weren't aloud to get married. Did you know that? In the west and in other parts of the country. And then the war came and then we could get into other fields.

Interviewer: So the timing was good for you to go into your profession?

Joan: Yes it was.

Interviewer: How do you feel about how the younger generations of women live their lives?

Joan: I have a lot to go by because I have 5 granddaughters. Certainly more liberated than we were. Sexually... no question about that. More opportunity. Otherwise I admire them.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Joan: I'm fine with it! The thought that we might have a woman president blows your mind! [referring to the possibility of Hillary Clinton in the presidential race]

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Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a mentor to them?

Joan: [*answering quickly*] Yes.

Interviewer: Have you influenced a younger woman?

Joan: Certainly in my family. My daughter and my granddaughters. And possibly daughters of friends. They may have gotten some ideas from talking to me.

Interviewer: Did you have a mentor?

Joan: [*With a stern and sad look*] No. There was one woman in my husband’s family, cousin Eddy, she liberalized me. She had a house on Fire Island. She was a mother to the gay community. She was the mother to me after I lost mine. [*Her mother passed away when she was 38*] I didn’t agree with everything she symbolized, but I learned a lot from her. My mother was miserable and didn’t understand independence. She married to get out of house.

Interviewer: Did you have one in your career?

Joan: Yes, [*man’s name*]. He was the head of publishing at NYU. I was an aspiring writer. I had a part time job while attending NYU, that was mostly clerical at first, but I was a good writer and he took me under his wing. He helped me write speeches and articles, and got me on my way. He did the same for my husband as well as another young man. Both did very well in the field. Then I was a college correspondent for the New York Times, so my future was set as a writer. [*laughs*] That sounds conceited doesn’t it, but it was true. Anytime someone heard I worked for the New York Time I got the job.

Interviewer: How do you define a feminist?

Joan: A feminist is someone who wants equal rights for women, the same as men, and who abhors how they were treated until recently.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

Joan: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, the standard definition is the notion of women and men having political, economic, and social equality.

Joan: I am.

Interviewer: Have you ever studied feminism?

Joan: No.

Interviewer: Do you feel you were part of the feminist movement?

Joan: Yes.... Not radically so but oh definitely. By living my life, voting the way I vote, definitely. But I don’t belong to any groups or anything. I read widely and I’m pretty aware of what’s going on I think.

Interviewer: What advice she would give to younger women?

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Joan: To get as much education as you can, to be ambitious and go as far as you can in your chosen field, and get married and have children... or maybe not get married, but have children because that's the greatest joy.

Interviewer: **How do you feel about career women having children when they are older then?**

Joan: Sure absolutely. Women are having children much later. You don't need a husband but it's great to have child.

Interviewer: **Looking back, what do you wish you “knew then?”**

Joan: I don't want to sound conceited... maybe how far women could go... because... that was unknown territory. How life would change. And one thing I feel women my age talk about, the “good old days”, that is such a crock- there was no penicillin, women had no rights, men ruled the roost 100%...really when you think, these are the good old days in my mind, these are the good days in my mind.

Interviewer: **Is there anything you would like to add?**

Joan: Just that I admire you for what you are doing. Let me think.

Just that life is wonderful... that in this country that everyone can go as far as they are able to go... I just think it's great to be alive at this time.

After the interview Joan very politely excused herself to take care of some errands. She did say before leaving she enjoyed participating in the study, and that it made her think about things she never thought about. Again, I think reviewing who she is and the contributions she made, consciously or not, became apparent as the interview progresses.

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Discussion

Listening to these women’s stories, it became apparent that even if they knew on some level they were mentors, when you lay it out for them, I saw a glimmer of pride. I realized how important it is that women know they are not only feminists, but part of the movement, and contributing to such very important societal changes.

It’s interesting to watch the progression. Ann is a free spirit that had to come full circle to fully claim her independence and dreams, and has mastered being alone. Rosie, although independent emotionally, prefers the comfort of married life, and really began living at 59, yet she deemphasizes marriage and children, as a result of a negative past. Lastly, Joan cherishes both marriage and children (especially children), but also had a fruitful career.

They all acknowledge though the patriarchal culture that has tried to stifle them, and the dominance males often try to assert. But, they also tell stories of the “good guys” who have supported and nurtured their personal growth. They also want young women to learn from their mistakes, feeling time was lost. They are survivors, and want to empower others – true feminists, and I hope this paper helped them realize that. They took the clay of being a woman, wife, mother, sister, daughter, worker, boss, caretaker, etc, and essentially said, “make what you want! It’s your life.”

Thanks to them, women are able to have the rights mentioned by the participants: domestic violence shelters, acknowledgement of abuse in the home, the epidemic of rape, sexual harassment, child care options, the right to vote, the right to have or not have children with far less judgment, and in many other more subtle ways.

But, speaking for myself, why do we younger women still struggle with the stereotypes cast upon us, including being alone? The third wave of feminism began around the mid-80’s, and is focused on where second wave feminists left off or didn’t quite complete. We are now sex positive – fully embracing our sexuality – an area that was so hard to liberate for women. The focus is on activism to maintain what we’ve achieved, keep abortion legal, reclaim derogatory terms, and for racial and social equality. There is also a focus on the media, which can be quite misogynist promoting the extremely thin woman, sexualization of a woman as if they are for men’s enjoyment only, and the notion that women are not as intelligent as men. Current pop culture icons display such images, and it’s an issue that is everywhere – and therefore a constant battle against a message we are trying to take down.

Yet to be fair, the culture is evolving as I stated from the beginning. Although the women in the media are still predominately not what we want as role models for a woman (think Paris Hilton, Brittany Spears and Jessica Simpson), I must comment that for many women in my age group shows like *Sex in the City*, which began to air in 1998 (ending in 2004), has helped us speak freely about the taboo things that only come out during private female to female conversations, and shows that we do have a sex life, our own careers, and kids are not the center of the female universe. The show focuses on four successful women in their 30’s and 40’s living in Manhattan: a corporate lawyer, a public relations firm owner, an art curator, and a sex column

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writer. It focuses on the “politically incorrect” notion that we like our independence well into our 40’s, may be perfectly happy without children or a man (ever), we may like and sleep with many men over time, and the bond between females is like no other.

But they also bring up the sticking points that make this feminist and free lifestyle hard to enjoy... In a recent syndicated episode, the following dialogue took place after Carrie (the writer and main character) announces she was stood up on a blind date and will not be dating again for some time:

Charlotte: Well you have to take some risks so you don’t end up an old maid!

Carrie: Ohhhhhhhh that’s right. Must not wind up old maid, must not wind up old maid... [tapping her forehead] how am I going to remember that? Does anybody have a pen?

Miranda: Why do we get stuck with old maid and spinster, and men get to be bachelors and playboys?

In the same episode, Charlotte, for her 36th birthday (which she decides to make her second 35th because men are more interested in 35 year olds) is given a pack of *Old Maid* cards which she does not find amusing. Carrie remarks, “I remember her looking older...now she looks our age” and Samantha quickly replies, “Oh, she’s had work done.”

Later in the episode, Samantha tells her ever cheating boyfriend, “I love you too Richard, but I love me more” and leaves him, showing her loyalty to her self-respect outweighs any man. In another episode Miranda goes back to work as a high-powered lawyer after maternity leave, and the narrator, Carrie, remarks how she was “politically incorrectly happy to be back at work.” She later tells a man whom she was formerly with, “I had a baby, but I’m still aloud to have sex!”

In yet another episode, the perfectly captured thought of every young professional woman. Carrie says with regards to the rescue fantasy, “Later that day I got to thinking about fairy tales. What if Prince Charming had never shown up? Would Snow White have laid in that glass box forever? Or would she have gotten up, spit out the apple, gotten a job and a health care plan and moved on with her life?” But has that job taken over everything else, trying to fill the void that Prince Charming left? (King et al., 2007)

These stories demonstrate in the fictional version, that we may have our independence, we may have our rights, but we haven’t quite found how to be comfortable with them or deal with the judgments placed upon us for enjoying them. The more we can do to normalize these very real behaviors the more freedom we will truly have. The average woman my age pays her own bills, has multiple sexual partners, enjoys sex, and demands respect. And they should.

In her book *On My Own*, Florence Falk (2007) looks at the woman living alone, and just how uncomfortable, and even miserable, that can make her. She talks about how society grooms us to feel that we must not become a spinster from an early age, and remembers a woman at

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summer camp when she was seven who she thought was the very definition of a spinster; a woman “old as one can be and still *be*,” who was “stone deaf,” and of course single and childless. She comments on society’s view:

“In a society that still portrayed marriage and family as every woman’s goal, being a spinster was the ultimate booby prize, like finding a thimble in your slice of birthday cake instead of the gold ring. It meant that your fate was to be sad and lonely, that you had somehow fallen short of the mark, and that no one wanted to marry you.” (p. 40)

She also discusses the game *Old Maid*, and how no one wants to have her, reinforcing the view that you must not get stuck being this unwanted woman. The history of the word spinster, according to Falk, originated as simply a woman who spun thread, as it was usually a young unmarried woman. It then appeared in English legal documents dating from as early as the 1600’s as a term to represent an unmarried woman. By the next century it was used to describe any “woman still unmarred and beyond the usual age for it” (p.40).

Then Falk takes it one step further, entering the psychological realm of the term, naming “*The Spinster* as a female archetype of the once luscious woman gone to seed, also known by such various synonyms as “thornback, “ stale maid,” “old maid,” and “antique virgin.”” (p.40). She further comments that this archetype “is still alive in our unconscious: she has simply morphed into her present incarnation as the *woman alone* – that is to say, into the stoic, sometimes quietly mournful woman who has missed out on the possibility of finding a partner and carries some shame and guilt about it” (p.43).

Some feminist’s suggest changing the meaning of a sexist word rather than change it. Do we reclaim spinster? Is the notion of moving from crone to mentor a fruitless one? Do we go back to using crone, despite my inability to find Bersing’s connection of the word to crone (instead I found dead and putrefying flesh linked to the word carrion), simply because we can turn it around and make it something better? We’ve worked on reclaiming bitch, spinster, whore, and cunt – why not derogatory “older woman” terms?

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Conclusion

Carrie: There is one day, even the most *cynical* New York woman dreams of all her life...

Anthony (event planner): “It’ll be fabulous. Everything will be white. White tables, white flowers, white *food*, everything will be W-H-I-T-E, WHITE!”

Carrie: She imagines what she’ll wear, the photographers, the toasts...everybody celebrating the fact that she finally found... a publisher. It’s her book release party.” (King et al., 2007)

Although Joan was very feminist in her own right she still had a traditional family, we see Rosie’s escape from domestic violence and then reinventing herself and her beliefs after having children, and Ann simply choosing to wait to get married and not have kids at all. We are becoming more able to break free of the stereotypes and pre-planned lives we were suffocated in for so long... but, to what expense as Ann pointed out? Are we just making our careers our babies?

The words these women came up with for older women were; Teacher, Guide, Wild Bunch, Free Spirit, and the Backbone of the Country. All imply strength and independence. It shows a level of growth a maturity I can say I don’t have yet. Falk says, “To have such choices feels like freedom. But “free” is also a state of mind. Young women I’ve talked with tend to be too preoccupied with establishing themselves in the world to spend much time exploring their private selves” (pg. 127). And Ann’s comment about younger women, “a great meal has become a great paper” really stuck with me... am I constraining myself to my career and establishing my identity – which is causing me to lose my very self? That is a topic for another paper, but I have learned a great deal in interviewing these women as well. They truly are mentors.

The beauty is, regardless of what we do, the movement is going away from men defining females – we are defining ourselves and demanded people listen. We are gaining power. During Ann’s performance *Man of La Mancha (I, Don Quixote)* and *The Impossible Dream* from the musical *Man of La Mancha* were sung by a woman, something I have noticed is growing in frequency by popular vocalists. The songs are about perseverance, strength, dying for what you believe in, and how the world will be a better place for it. Despite the positive message, he is often referred to as a “mad” knight, but as the saying goes, “Women who behave well rarely make history” (to quote Laurel Thatcher Ulrich), and it’s not much fun anyway!

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