

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Varja Alison Kilgour

2014

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Varja Alison Kilgour conducted by Michelle Patrick and Robert Solomon on February 26, 2011. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection      Session One  
Interviewee: Vajra Alison Kilgour      Location: New York, New York  
Interviewer: Michelle Patrick & Robert Solomon      Date: February 26, 2011

Kilgour: My name is Vajra Alison Kilgour. I grew up in Hamden, Connecticut. I was a university brat; my father was the chief medical librarian at Yale [University], and I originally began at Barnard [College] in the class of 1970, and ultimately graduated in 1971, because there was a year-long gap in my Barnard career as a result of the strike.

Q: What was your family background like? How many children? Your parents' political leanings? Your lifestyle growing up?

Kilgour: I had a brother and two sisters, and my parents were more or less liberal Democrats, which was unusual in that place and time.

Q: Was it?

Kilgour: It was unusual. Most people were Republicans in that town. As I was growing up, the civil rights movement, of course, was happening, and the antiwar movement was beginning, and I got involved in both at a pretty early age. I was marching in civil rights demonstrations when I was thirteen and started in antiwar demonstrations when I was fourteen, when they were still banning the bomb, before the war in Vietnam got big enough—

[Interruption]

Q: So when you were marching in the civil rights marches and the antiwar marches, were your parents also marching alongside you?

Kilgour: No, they were not.

Q: Then how did you come to be marching?

Kilgour: Well, I was hanging out with some older kids, and there was a group of kids who went to Hamden High School with me, who went to public high school, who mostly had parents at Yale, who were mostly fairly somewhat liberal lefty, and so we had our own little support system among ourselves to do these things.

Q: What was your parents' attitude toward your doing these things?

Kilgour: It made them nervous.

Q: Nervous? They worried for your safety?

Kilgour: Yes, they worried for my safety.

Q: Why Barnard? Why did you choose Barnard?

Kilgour: I chose Barnard because the minute I learned that there was a Seven Sisters school in New York City, I knew that was where I was going to go.

Q: Did your parents bring you to school?

Kilgour: Bring me to Barnard?

Q: Yes.

Kilgour: Yes, they did.

Q: So when your parents drove up or got out of the taxi and you walked through those gates, can you kind of give a little thumbnail sketch of what that girl was like, what she looked like, what she wore, what she was looking most forward to, how she felt about leaving home?

Kilgour: I can't remember what she was wearing, although I was more into clothes in those days than I am now, but I was looking forward to being in New York. I was looking forward to making new friends. I was looking forward to more freedom than I had ever had.

Q: Can you speak to the freedom? It was somewhat curtailed.

Kilgour: At Barnard?

Q: Yes.

Kilgour: It was somewhat curtailed, but it was New York City, so you had to be in by a certain hour.

Q: What was the first fun thing you ever did in New York City?

Kilgour: First fun thing I ever did in New York City. That is a good question, and I don't remember.

Q: One of the first.

Kilgour: One of the first. I think probably just going to the West End.

Q: The West End bar.

Kilgour: Going to the West End bar.

Q: And sitting there talking?

Kilgour: Yes, with an old buddy from New Haven.

Q: Had you ever been to a bar before?

Kilgour: No.

Q: So it was your first time?

Kilgour: Yes, because you could drink at eighteen in New York City. You couldn't do that in New Haven.

Q: Did you have a roommate that first year?

Kilgour: I was in a suite, and there was a middle room that was supposed to be set up with four study areas, and then two rooms on either side that were supposed to have two people each in them, but people decided that they would like to have singles or share off having singles. So at first I got to have a single, and then the study room was made into another single. And then by the mid-semester, another single opened up in another building, and I went there.

Q: So you didn't love the experience of having roommates?

Kilgour: I was not wild about the experience of having roommates. I had had three siblings already, thank you very much.

Q: Your first friend, you were saying you fell into a group of friends. Can you talk about that?

Kilgour: Well, the group of friends were people on my same floor, and most of them were in a class ahead of me, although there were about seven of us altogether, I would say, although often you'd see six of us dining together or having lunch together. And we were the United Nations of Barnard College, because two of us were white, two were black, and two were Asian.

Q: Had you ever been in a group like that before?

Kilgour: Oh, yes, frequently. I had two friends in New Haven that we used to call ourselves the United Nations, because one was black, one was white, and one was Asian.

Q: So you were most comfortable in a very integrated—very mixed setting.

Kilgour: Most comfortable, yes.



Q: In terms of—and you can answer this in any order that you want—academically, socially, in terms of friends, and then romantically, in terms of dating and courtship rituals, what were you looking forward to? What were you hoping for?

Kilgour: Well, obviously I was hoping to meet the guy I would marry, and I mention that first, don't I? I wanted to get a good, all-around education, because I wanted to be a writer, so basically I wanted to have a very good general education with some knowledge in many fields; and socially I wanted to be with people who were very smart and very different. When I was growing up in New Haven, I noticed that all the people who were, say, above a certain IQ level and within marriageable age who were single, they all knew each other. In the entire New Haven area, they all already knew each other, and I did not want to be in that kind of situation.

Q: Because it was too monochromatic?

Kilgour: Too limited. It was fairly monochromatic, but it was just too limited, and I wanted to be somewhere where there would be all kinds of smart people I could meet all over the place, from many different backgrounds.

Q: Do you remember your first date at Barnard?

Kilgour: Well, I had a date the night I arrived. I had made a date with a friend of mine from New Haven, which was the first fun thing; we went to the West End bar.

Q: Do you remember the first non-platonic date that you had at Barnard?

Kilgour: No. I remember going to mixers and being disappointed.

Q: Why?

Kilgour: The man of my dreams never seemed to be in the room.

Q: What was the man of your dreams? What did he look like? What did he think like? Who was the man of your dreams?

Kilgour: I guess I didn't have a very clear picture, but I did know who he wasn't.

Q: Who wasn't he?

Kilgour: The guys that were in the room at the mixers.

Q: What was it about the guys in the room at the mixers that you didn't like?

Kilgour: I don't know. I think they just didn't seem deep enough.

Q: Not deep enough.

Kilgour: Yes.

Q: Perhaps the guy of your dreams might have been an older guy?

Kilgour: Yes, he might have been. In fact, for a while when I was at Barnard, I did live with an older man. I lived with a guy who was ten years older than I was, whom I'd met at work.

Q: Shall we talk about that now while we're on that subject?

Kilgour: We may as well.

Q: So the big romance of your life, yes?

Kilgour: No, but one of them. As I'm thinking about this, before we did the interview, I'm thinking, "Well, I had my fair share of crazy love affairs, or maybe I didn't have my fair share," but I had a fair number of them. And I did live for a year and a half with a man that I met at *Newsweek*, who was ten years older than I was.

Q: Tell us about him.

Kilgour: Well, he was a complicated and difficult guy who drank too much. It was not a very happy relationship, actually, but I hung in there.

Q: Why did you?

Kilgour: Very loyal person, and I could see who he was apart from as a person who was drunk and having no idea what he really wanted to do in his life.

Q: Who was he beneath that?

Kilgour: He was very, very smart. He was handsome. He was thoughtful. He cared a great deal about social change and social events that were going on around him. He had a good grasp of history. He had a tremendous knowledge of music and the arts.

Q: He had some challenges, didn't he, that went beyond his drinking, or might have been related to his drinking?

Kilgour: Such as? We should acknowledge that you knew him.

Q: Yes, I knew him. I would think that being who he was at the time he was, there might have been quite a bit of racial tension.

Kilgour: He had actually gone to Howard University, so where he went to college, racial tension was not especially an issue, but he had worked at the *New York Post*, where there were very few black reporters, and he worked at *Newsweek*, where there were hardly any black reporters. And so he was kind of continually having to be on kind of a cutting edge. But coming from a family that came from the West Indies, in a certain sense he was able in his own mind to hold himself a bit apart from the experience of other African Americans whose ancestors came from the South, or whose parents or grandparents came from the south as opposed to from Trinidad, where he came from.

Q: So there was a certain hauteur, perhaps?

Kilgour: Perhaps. There was a certain hauteur, yes.

Q: Talk about the relationship and the high and the low of it.

Kilgour: Well, the high of it was, as I say, that experience of enjoying New York City together and everything that New York City had to offer culturally, and to make friends who ultimately became lifelong friends. The low of it obviously was his drinking, which I was so naïve at the time; I had no idea that he was an alcoholic. I was like *The Country Wife*. I knew something was the matter, but until I understood what alcoholism was, I had no idea that he actually was an alcoholic.

Q: What was it that finally convinced you that he was an alcoholic?

Kilgour: It's the strangest thing. After we had broken up, I came across a pamphlet about alcoholism, and I opened it up, and there was a list of symptoms, and it went check, check, check, check, check.

Q: And that was the first that you knew?

Kilgour: That was the first that I realized.

Q: And any other major love affairs at Barnard?

Kilgour: I had a fair number of love affairs at Barnard. We will not go into those in depth.

Q: Were they, by and large, enjoyable?

Kilgour: Yes, they were, generally—short-lived but enjoyable, on the whole.

Q: So they weren't, in particular, downers.

Kilgour: No.

Q: Now, because I know you, I know there was a guy who you avoided because he had a reputation as a rapist.

Kilgour: You heard that story. There was a guy, whose name now escapes me, who preyed upon Barnard girls, and I actually had a date with him. Luckily, for me, I had a babysitting job that same night, so I went to his house for dinner, and when he began to try to keep me there, I had to keep telling him, “People are expecting me elsewhere. I have to go. I have a job. People are expecting me elsewhere.” So I basically got away with bruised ribs, which I understand was the experience of other girls—the one other girl I ever heard of who actually got away. And, as I said, I had friends who were upperclassmen, and they knew about this guy, so when they heard that I had had a date with him, and then that he called me again, one of them said to me, “If I have to beat you with your hands tied behind your back, you are not going out with him again.”

Q: Were you contemplating going out with him again?

Kilgour: Well, I was—this was before we got way feminist, and it was hard for me to say no, but once she had said that, it was easy to say no. I didn’t want to go out with him again. The question was how was I going to get around to saying no?

Q: It was hard, wasn’t it?

Kilgour: Yes, and once my friend, Stephanie, gave me basically orders to say no, it got easy.

Q: I like that story.

Kilgour: He was a piece of work, and I have no idea how many girls he may actually have raped, and that was before we understood about date rape. I had actually been out with him once before he invited me to his house. We'd been at the West End. He seemed very charming, and then he invited me over for dinner. So you could easily say, "Well, so, what was the problem? She went out to dinner with him. She went to his apartment. She asked for it." Right? And I'm sure that was the case with the other girls, because I never heard of anybody actually charging him, or I never heard of anybody bringing any charges. But since he had the reputation—

Q: That was good that he had the reputation. Do you remember when or where you were when you experienced your first culture shock at Barnard?

Kilgour: First culture shock. Actually I think my first culture shock at Barnard had to do with the woman who was supposed to be my roommate, who was an Orthodox Jewish girl, and I had many friends from Hamden who were Jewish, but they were all Reform, and they were all left-wing, and I had never met a person who was Orthodox before.

Q: What was she like?



Kilgour: As people will, I had certain expectations; and then I was meeting somebody who had to recruit me to buy food for her on a day when she couldn't handle money, and who didn't really want to have anything to do with people who were not—I mean, she didn't want to have anything to do with people who were not Jewish, which is not to say that there was no prejudice against Gentiles where I grew up, because people would draw the line, as they often do. They might draw the line at dating, for example. They might draw the line at, “Well, we're having a family gathering,” but I had never met anyone who culturally was so different.

Q: How did this make you feel?

Kilgour: Occasionally I was resentful, but at other times I felt, “If this is your situation, then why wouldn't I help you out?”

Q: But you didn't become close friends.

Kilgour: No, we didn't become close friends.

Q: Had you been sexually active before you went to Barnard?

Kilgour: Did you ask everybody this question?

Q: Yes.

Kilgour: Yes, I had.

Q: And had it been a big romance or a casual situation?

Kilgour: It was somewhere in between.

Q: But not a big—

Kilgour: No, it was not a big deal.

Q: I think you may have answered this, but did you expect that you would meet the man you would marry at Barnard?

Kilgour: I hoped I would. That would take care of it, right, then it would be all taken care of before I graduated.

Q: Right, settled.

Kilgour: Yes, it would be settled.

Q: Academically, were you comfortable? Were you not challenged? Were you challenged just enough? Did you not pay any attention at all? [Laughs]

Kilgour: I was challenged. Especially the first semester was difficult, and, in those days, you weren't allowed to get a job during the first semester, and I had been working while I was in high school, so I was used to working and going to school already. I'd been working for at least a couple of years, not only in the summertime, but during the school year. So I taught myself Spanish and read *The Remembrance of Things Past* to fill the time, but when it came time for exams, I really kind of panicked and decided that I was ill and went to bed during reading week, and stayed there until some of the upperclassmen, who were my friends from down the hall, decided that this could not go on. And, at the time, I didn't even understand how serious exams were at Barnard and how serious exam week was, so I really have to give them props for saving my academic life, because they took time out of their own studying to come into my room, when I had gotten up to go to the bathroom or something. They came into my room. I came back. There were two people lying in my bed, and they would not get up and leave until I was sitting up in a chair studying. And then they came into the room every half hour and checked to make sure that I was sitting up in a chair studying. Once I got into a rhythm of studying, they didn't have to come back and do that anymore, but they really saved my life, because you had to study. You had to study if you were going to do at all well.

So I liked it, actually. I liked the intellectual challenge at Barnard. There were some courses—Physics for Poets, that was not exactly truth in advertising, and I really did not like it. I should

have taken some other science course that would not have been so seriously scientific, but, on the whole, I really enjoyed my classes. I felt as if I learned a lot. I feel as if, to this very day in my life frequently as an editor, that what I learned in college is still standing me in good stead. Not only that, but after 1968, of course, there was a shift academically in the school, and we began to be able to take courses in African American history and African history, and the courses that I took in African American history and African history also have stood with me in good stead, because actually not very many people know very much about this. And so I'm in a position to be able to say, "Excuse me, but—" which not a whole lot of people are to this day, and it was extraordinarily valuable to be able to take those courses, and the wide range of courses that we could take at Columbia [University].

But also I have to say what I liked about being at Barnard was that because there were usually no boys in the classroom to either compete with or whatever, that dynamic was not there, so the participation of the girls was unfettered, and I liked that expectations of us were so high. And it was also very important to me, ultimately when I got there, to learn that there were girls there who were not hoping to meet their husband. They wanted ultimately to get a Master's degree in French, or they wanted to be a doctor, or they wanted to be a lawyer, who had very high expectations of themselves. So many of the professors, the deans, were women. The president was a woman. The expectations of women were so high that that made a shift in my own thinking about myself and what I might be capable of, or what I should think about being capable of.

Q: Had you thought early on that you would be a stay-at-home mom? Did you think you'd have a career? Or did you think you'd somehow combine the two?

Kilgour: I was sure I'd somehow be able to combine the two by being a writer and a mom, none of which happened. Well, I have written. I have done some writing.

Q: You've been a surrogate mom.

Kilgour: Yes, I have been a surrogate mom to a fair number of children.

Q: Talk about, if there was such a thing, the character of the people who came in in the fall of '67 as compared to those who had come in with you or before you? Was there a palpable difference in that cadre of students, or did you not notice the difference right away?

Kilgour: It's difficult to make a generalization, and I have to say this is based on hearsay, but I had applied for early admission. The year that I was applying, so were also the girls who would be in the class ahead of me, and I heard that a decision was made that year that they wanted to have Barnard girls who were a little more colorful and outgoing or extroverted rather than very studious and serious, that they were going to look for girls who were a little more—I don't know—sociable or flamboyant or whatever. So I arrived at my interview in a bright orange and yellow suit and fit right in there in that pattern, but apparently some of those girls were not doing so well

by the time they were admitting the class of 1970. So there was another class of very serious people, and so I didn't feel that I ever really quite fit in in the class of 1970.

Q: Nineteen-seventy was the serious class?

Kilgour: They were a serious class.

Q: Sixty-nine was the flamboyant class.

Kilgour: Well, that's what they said.

Q: The class of 1970, could you describe it, just in general terms?

Kilgour: Serious people, and, as we know, many of those people went on to achieve quite a lot, actually. They were serious people.

Q: Would you not characterize yourself as a serious person?

Kilgour: I would characterize myself more as one of those if I can't dance, I don't want your revolution. There's no point in going through life with a long face. I would characterize—I try to be a sincere person, and when the situation calls for seriousness, I can certainly be serious, but I see no point in being serious for its own sake, no.

Q: So fall of '67 hits.

Kilgour: No, I want to say something else. There was a wonderful documentary about the communists who were active and young in the 1930s, and they were interviewing someone who—they showed a picture of him playing the guitar at a party, and they said, “Weren’t you known as the guy who put the party in the Communist Party?” And he said, “Well, it was always my opinion that all work and no play not only made Jack a dull boy, but it made him grim,” and he said, “and I had no intentions of being grim,” and that speaks to me. I never had any intentions of being grim, and still less now.

Q: So class of '71 comes in, and they enter. You look around at them, and they seem what?

Kilgour: Like kids.

Q: Babies?

Kilgour: Like babies. Ah, the freshmen. I’m a sophomore.

Q: At any point, did you begin to think of them as other than kids?

Kilgour: Yes. I began to think of them as other than kids after the spring of 1968, because that threw all of us together into a very serious situation where people really showed what they were made of. So you either could take people seriously or figured that they were just college kids, from that point forward.

Q: Give me an example of somebody who could be taken seriously. What would they have done during the strike?

Kilgour: Well, you, for example, and Karla [Evans] and Dona [Carter] and many other people who actually went and put their bodies on the line, who went into Hamilton Hall, who stayed in Hamilton Hall, other girls that I knew who were in Low Library—I ultimately was in Fayerweather [Hall]. It forged a lot of bonds there. You knew that if somebody had gone to that length that that was a serious person.

Q: Talk about life in Fayerweather, how it was organized, whether it was organized. To a certain extent, there had to be some organization to continue life.

Kilgour: Yes, but Fayerweather was an interesting building, because it was a kind of catch-all for everybody who was not affiliated in some other way. So in Hamilton Hall were black students. In Low Library was mostly SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. Mathematics was, I believe, anarchists. Avery was actually the art and architecture students, and everybody else was in Fayerweather, including high-school students from the area. So it was a very, very wide group



of people. There was a fair amount of conflict that had to be worked out. I remember, at one point, somebody was playing the Beatles song “We Can Work It Out” over a loudspeaker system over and over. It was the building where the wedding took place. It was an open building, so that you didn’t have to be in it all the time. I, in fact, would climb out of a window, cross the street, put on my going-to-work clothes, go downtown to my job, because I had a job again by then, at *Newsweek*, and work, and come back uptown and put back on my jeans and my old raggedy coat and go back in through the window.

Q: That’s amazing.

Kilgour: So on the night before we got arrested, actually, or the day before—we knew, we saw it coming down the road—I called my boss at *Newsweek*, and I told her that I probably would be arrested that night and wouldn’t be in the next day, so she said, “Well, okay. If you get hurt, just let us know, and we’ll organize a delegation to come to your bedside.” [Laughs]

Q: A good boss.

Kilgour: It was wonderful. She was a wonderful boss, and it was a great group of people that I was working with there. They were in a kind of marginal department, and it was like a welfare office for intellectuals who needed a job, and maybe not to work too hard.

Q: Tell us what your job was.

Kilgour: I started working there as the proofreader in the letters department where they answered the letters that didn't get published, and in those days you worked on a typewriter, so everything had to be typed. Everything had to be proofread. And then, at a certain point, it was discovered that I could write letters, so then I began to write letters back to people. Ultimately, I became the letters editor for the letters that were published in the magazine. So that was my job there, and I worked there part-time and had kind of grown out of a job I'd had at Time-Life Books over the summer, and then became a proofreader there, so I was working. I was a working student, and I was in and out of that building, as were other people, but it also meant that it was the building where the army spy was, and it also meant that it was the building—

Q: The army spy?

Kilgour: There was an army spy who ultimately was unmasked by the Young Lords, and who, incidentally, was a very good organizer.

Q: Tell me how you discovered that he was an army spy.

Kilgour: I learned about it when the Young Lords unmasked him several years later.

Q: It was years later?

Kilgour: Yes. We did not know at the time.

Q: And what was his—

Kilgour: He was organizing for the Peace and Freedom party—which was an outgrowth of the Independent Socialists and worked with the Black Panthers—he was within that group.

Q: And what was his goal?

Kilgour: Well, who knows? But, as I say, he was a very good organizer. He was a persuasive talker. He organized people. He went out and organized people.

Q: So in what sense did he subvert the goals that people had?

Kilgour: That's a good question.

Q: So what?

Kilgour: He doesn't seem to have subverted very much. I don't know what he did.

Q: Then is it conceivable that, in fact, he was not a double agent?

Kilgour: No, he was probably reporting, but most double agents have very conflicted loyalties.

Q: Do you know what eventually happened to him?

Kilgour: No, I did not, I did not learn.

Q: Tell us about the wedding that took place.

Kilgour: The wedding was beautiful.

Q: Talk about it.

Kilgour: Our Reverend [Bill] Starr officiated, and people scurried around and found something old and something new and something borrowed and something blue. It was great. Actually, I would have to say that was a high point of my experience at Barnard, that wedding, because it symbolized that we were revolutionaries with heart, that we looked upon ourselves as people who would make lives, making the world better, that we would make families, that we were not going to be sort of crazy, isolated people in this, that we were all in it together, and that we could celebrate one another's love in this context. It was a very beautiful moment.

Q: Did you know the couple before?

Kilgour: I did not know them before.

Q: Did you get to know them very well?

Kilgour: No, I never did.

Q: What were they like? Were they graduate students? Undergraduates?

Kilgour: They may have been graduate students. As I say, Fayerweather was from high school to graduate school. It was every color of person. Everybody who, in one way or another, either didn't fit a category or couldn't stay overnight, couldn't stay constantly in one place, for whatever reason. So it was interesting working out the organization of it, as I say, and working out, trying to keep things fairly clean and neat, fairly respectable, and organizing food. Food became a problem, because people got hungry, and oftentimes people who donated food were giving us cookies and fruit, all sugar all the time. It wasn't very good. These are things that people need to think about when they're organizing a revolution.

Q: The night of the bust, what was Fayerweather's posture? Did people go quietly? Did they go limp? Did they fight back?

Kilgour: It was Fayerweather, and in the same way that Fayerweather had made an accommodation for everybody all along, there was an accommodation for everybody the night of

the bust. So if you wanted to leave without getting arrested, you went with a group that was going to leave without getting arrested. If you wanted to go quietly to get arrested, you went with that group. If you were going to resist, then you went with that group. So you could do—it was a good thing that we had to work all these things out and that we allowed one another the freedom to do whatever we felt comfortable to do.

Q: Was anyone hurt?

Kilgour: Yes.

Q: Many people?

Kilgour: I'm not sure how very many, but people could have been seriously hurt, because those of us who were resisting were in a room in the back with furniture piled up as a barricade, and I think I heard later that they might even have overlooked us if we hadn't been singing. If we hadn't been singing "We Shall Overcome" in our tremulous voices, they might have left us for a few hours, but, as it was, when the police came, they dismantled the barricade by throwing the furniture at us.

Q: So were you hurt?

Kilgour: I was only hurt later. At that point, I was with a friend who was a bit older, who was going to the School of General Studies. The decision we made in that moment was “better a live revolutionary than a dead martyr,” and we got up and began to walk out at that point. We sat down again when we got outside, so I was picked up by cops, one on each hand, one on each foot. I went limp, carried to the paddy wagon. When they got to the sidewalk, they just lowered me enough to take the skin off my backbone. That was not nice.

Q: So did you receive medical attention?

Kilgour: I didn’t really need it. It wasn’t a serious injury. They skinned my backbone, basically.

Q: Can you speak to changes in the atmosphere and general attitude on campus post-strike? Was there a palpable difference?

Kilgour: Yes. There was certainly a palpable difference in me, and there was a palpable difference in other people. Barnard was tremendously ladylike until the spring of 1968. There was a tea every Friday afternoon. There were Greek Games. And because I was hanging out with a great many black students, I was subject to, “You are a representative of our group, and you will behave yourself extremely well, so you will go and serve tea, and you will be in Greek Games, and you will behave yourself, and you will be in by curfew, and you will be discreet.” So all those things applied, and, “You will do well in school.” All those things applied, and I had even come to the point of making a resolve that I was not going to curse anymore, so you can

imagine. There I was being as ladylike as I could possibly be, and still pretty well-dressed, and within hours or within weeks, there we all were, yelling, “Up against the wall, motherfucker!” That went out the window. I can mind my tongue when I’m around somebody that I know doesn’t like it, but I’m a New Yorker.

Q: Did you experience racial polarization?

Kilgour: Only later at Barnard, I would say, in my senior year—so when would that have been? By my senior year, when I came to Barnard, I believe that there were—how did it go?—maybe a couple of seniors who were black, maybe four, maybe six juniors, or maybe it was two seniors, four juniors, or maybe it was twice that many sophomores, but we’re talking about a very, very small number of black students, very, very small number of black students. So small that they all knew each other, and they all knew each other’s business. It was almost stifling. And then with my class, with the class of 1970, there was a big jump. There were maybe seventeen girls who were black. And then, of course, as the years went by, there were more and more black students, and so then the Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters [BOSS] formed, and, of course, as a reflection of what was going on in the wider society, there was more nationalism. But that was not really happening until my senior year, so that was 1971, and up until then, occasionally there were dating situations.

See, when people talk about racial polarization, they forget that the default position of white people is essentially racially polarized, so if I didn’t notice a whole lot of racial polarization



previously, it was because I was only being mindful of it out of the corner of my eye as sort of the background white racism that I had been aware of all my life, or maybe not aware until I got into my teens, but then became—that there it is. But I was not friendly with girls who may have had those attitudes.

Q: You had a fair number of black friends all the way through.

Kilgour: Yes, and I had had black friends in high school.

Q: Now, I seem to recall that at some point, and I don't know whether it was early on or later on, but you had a theory that you were, in fact, black, because you were related to—tell about it.

Kilgour: Down back through the Perrys, the seagoing Perrys, Oliver and his—who's the other one? They were one-eighth black, and I knew I was descended from the Perrys. That doesn't make a person black, obviously, and there are sort of enough people that crop up in the family; in every family there's kind of a range of color and a range of characteristics, and you look at the family photographs, and I look and I think probably there's some African ancestry there, which is sort of no big deal, because this is also true of, quite possibly, the majority of white people in America. But at the time—now I have a theory that, when we're young, we look for identity in our ancestry, because we're not quite fully formed yet, our personalities—which are a work of art that we're engaged on all our lives, if we're conscious of it—our personalities are not fully formed. We don't have a whole lot of history as a person, so what do we have? We have our

ancestors, and we have our ancestry, and I've noticed not only in myself, but also in other people, that there's a tendency to build one's identity out of one's ancestry when we're young. And then as we get older, we build our identity out of what we do, and all the other myriad things that go into our personalities. We build them more out of our personalities than out of our biological ancestry. So the way I look upon it now is, well, yes, there's always been talk in my family of American Indian ancestry and of African ancestry, but, to me, this is just—at this point it's a big so what, because there is only a single human race. We're all so closely related it can hardly make a difference, and also I think there's a temptation among many white people to claim the ancestry as a way of positing that we don't have any prejudice and that we should not be held to account for the way that white people behave, neither of which I think is valid. I think that if I have that ancestry, if those are my ancestors, then what I have is not a claim but a responsibility.

So I hold myself responsible to those ancestors, and I hold myself responsible to my brothers and sisters who are alive now. I hold myself responsible to the human race, and I hold myself responsible to those ancestors. But, as a claim, it's worthless because none of us can even claim to be free of prejudice; we can only claim to be working on it. So I can claim to be working on it, and I can claim to be trying to become more enlightened. Claiming to be free of prejudice is actually like claiming to be fully enlightened, which none of us can claim. We can only claim to say, "I'm doing my best."

Q: And when you say we, you mean all people?

Kilgour: I mean all people.

Q: Talk about how that extra year became necessary.

Kilgour: Well, the extra year became necessary because my parents, who, as I say, were essentially liberal Democrats, really freaked out when I got arrested, and laid down some conditions that were not possible to live with.

Q: What were those conditions?

Kilgour: The conditions were that I would never get arrested again, never set foot on the Columbia campus, and something else I can't remember anymore, which is possibly just as well. So I said fine, and because I was working, and I had mostly saved my money, I was actually able to get through one more year of school without them paying any money. Barnard gave me money, which was very kind of them, and tuition was nothing like what it is now, so I was actually able as a working student to pay my way with some help from Barnard. But by the end of that year, I think that the emotional impact of them cutting me off like that was much more devastating than I was consciously aware of, but I certainly went into a tailspin. It was rough. That was a rough year for me.

Q: Did they refuse to see you?

Kilgour: No. They still felt perfectly entitled to be worried about me, for example. They were worried about me, but they weren't going to do anything to assist me in my situation. So then I dropped out, basically, and was considering that maybe I didn't have to go back. I was by then living with Eddie. Eddie had not finished college. He was a professional. In those days, especially in journalism, nobody went to journalism school. That was so unserious. That meant that you didn't have any talent. If you had talent, you could go practically from high school into a reporter's job, or some job in a newspaper, and work your way up. So things were kind of like that until my brother reminded our parents that they had always promised us that they would pay for us to go through college, so they paid my tuition my last year, and I paid everything else. So I went back. I went back under a bit of an academic cloud, because I hadn't done well my last semester of my junior year; so I had gone from the Dean's List to academic probation, but they let me back in. This was another example of the generosity of Barnard. There I was on academic probation. They said, "We'll let you in, but we'll let you in on academic probation," and there were two courses I had failed that I had to make up somehow, my last semester of senior year, but they allowed me to do all of that, and ultimately I graduated cum laude, so it worked out nicely.

Q: At what point did you become aware of the women's movement?

Kilgour: Actually I was still in high school. I was still in New Haven when Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. There was a young couple living up the street from us who were

graduate students at Yale, and I used to babysit for them, and so the wife was reading this. It was kind of the thing that younger women were more interested in, although my grandmother was a suffragette, so there was that history in my family, that my grandmother had been a suffragette and a feminist, a lifelong feminist, so I was hearing about it, even when I was still in high school. And then we'd hear a little more about it in college, but it did not really impact my life until the women at *Newsweek* sued *Newsweek* management because the glass ceiling at *Newsweek* was incredibly low. There were no men researchers, and there were no women writers.

Q: And what year would this have been, roughly?

Kilgour: Roughly, I think it may have been 1970 actually.

Q: So you were still at Barnard. It was at that point that you began to identify personally?

Kilgour: I think I was already somewhat identified personally, because the way that things sort of seep into your consciousness, about essentially it beginning to dawn on a person, that we deserve better treatment, that I should not be having to hem and haw about trying to say no, that I don't want to go out with a known rapist, right? So, yes, that we actually deserve better treatment, that we may actually be—again, it's like the issue around race: it's kind of a long haul. There's so many layers of the onion to peel away.

Q: Do you want to expand on that?

Kilgour: Well, it's just that over time coming to realize that—I was saying to somebody recently, why certain expressions don't make sense, and somebody had said to me, "You drive like a man, and I mean that as a compliment," and I had to say, "No, I don't drive like a man, I drive like a good driver." There are good men drivers and good women drivers. "She thinks like a man." No, she thinks like a smart person. There are smart women and smart men, and there are stupid women and stupid men. That's how that works. So all that stuff that is just so deeply ingrained—but I think that as we peel these things away and come to a stronger and stronger sense of the worth of every human being, and the necessity essentially of—what I always say is if you're not actively engaged in dismantling the patriarchal hierarchy of abuse, then you're just scrambling for a better position within it, which has been a weakness of the women's movement, and which has been a weakness of other movements where it's like, "We want a better position for ourselves in the patriarchal hierarchy of abuse, but, by the way, you belong below us." So it doesn't work that way. We cannot be valued as human beings in the way we want to be valued if everybody is not valued that way. If we're not actively dismantling the patriarchal hierarchy of abuse, then we are not doing the work.

Q: One question I haven't asked you: at what point did you become aware that there were gay people in the world?

Kilgour: Well, it was always this sort of bizarre insult that I knew from childhood, but I never actually connected the insults with a sexual activity. You just knew it was an insult until later on

you learned that it was—that there was a sexual activity at all. I don't think I realized it until I got to Barnard, and there did begin to be—there was a gay rights organization, and that people went to it, and the gay rights movement was growing up, and then I began to meet people who were gay also, obviously, working in publishing.

Q: Who were openly gay?

Kilgour: Yes, who were openly gay, so that was kind of an opening up. Also I had read James Baldwin. What was I thinking? By high school, or even earlier, I knew because I was reading James Baldwin. I was reading *Giovanni's Room*. He was one of the first, or perhaps the first, adult writer that I ever read.

Q: But was it not much later that you realized that people that you knew might be gay?

Kilgour: Yes, it was much later. In hindsight, I can look at people that I knew in high school and say, "What was I thinking? Of course, he was gay," but also I had a cousin. He, unfortunately, is no longer with us. He didn't come out of the closet until years later, but I had a cousin who was gay. In hindsight, could I? No. Actually, he was well closeted until he came out of the closet, so I can't say in hindsight that I knew, but in hindsight I realize that, yes, that teacher, yes, that kid. But, at the time—

Q: There was something that I forgot to ask you about Eddie. Was the fact that Eddie was black and you're white, did that have any impact on your relationship? Did it make things difficult? Did people comment, or was it relatively a non-issue?

Kilgour: It was relatively a non-issue.

Q: Among the people that you knew.

Kilgour: Among the people that I knew, yes. It was relatively a non-issue, which was nice. One of the reasons I came to New York was to live in a place where what you looked like or what who you were dating looked like or what who you were with looked like was a non-issue. Now little did I know that New York was much more bigoted than I imagined before I came here, but that was one of the reasons why I came here, was to be able to hang out with people who were smart enough so that it would be a non-issue.

Q: At what point did you realize that New York was more bigoted than you had anticipated? Was there a particular incident?

Kilgour: Well, I think that in work situations where there were not as many black people as I would have anticipated, or maybe even as many Italian Americans as I would have anticipated, or as many Jewish people as I might have anticipated, that was something, but really where it



began to get evil and ugly, I think, was during the Koch administration, where it began to seem that people were deliberately being pitted against one another.

Q: Racial groups.

Kilgour: Yes, because I remember some friends who had left New York in the mid to late-'60s and come back early in the Koch administration before it began to get like that, and the one thing that they noticed, they said, "Gee, there's sort of this whole absence of racial tension." Obviously there was tension during '68, and there would have been tension before we got to Barnard because of the rioting that had occurred, and there was certainly tension around the death of Martin Luther King, which was just prior to the campus, what happened at Columbia, but this was white people who had left the city and came back and said, "You even notice a marked decrease of racial tension." And then there was this discovery that it could be used to political advantage, and that was just tragic.

Q: Was that the little boy being hit by the [station wagon]?

Kilgour: That was later.

Q: That was later? Was there an incident, do you know? Was there a polarizing incident?

Kilgour: No particular incident. It was just a constant appealing to a certain sensibility, shall we say.

Q: Sensibility.

Kilgour: Yes.

Q: When you left Barnard, graduated in '71, what kind of adult life had you painted for yourself? What did you think you were going to do?

Kilgour: Well, I still thought I was going to meet a guy and raise a family and write when I left, and I went on working at *Newsweek*, because, interestingly, jobs were harder to come by by the time I graduated, and there I was, lucky me, I already had one, so I stayed with it for a good long time.

Q: For how long?

Kilgour: Until 1984.

Q: Long time.

Kilgour: I left *Newsweek* in 1984, and I have not had a regular full-time job since.

Q: Talk about some of the major things that you have done.

Kilgour: Well, one thing that I did do that I'm very proud of is that I wrote for *The New Yorker* for a while. I published "Talk of the Town" pieces and short book reviews back in the day before they were signed, which means back in the day before Tina Brown, which means when *The New Yorker* was *The New Yorker*. That was the fulfillment of an adolescent fantasy, I have to say, and so that was very satisfying. I worked a great deal as a freelance editor. I still do that. I now also work as a freelance translator. After having been not so politically active, I got a little disillusioned with left-wing politics from being maybe perhaps too immersed in it in 1968-69, and so I kind of withdrew from politics and became more interested in spiritual pursuits, and was initiated into a Sufi Order, and was dragged back into political activism kicking and screaming by my then landlord, the Jewish Theological Seminary, which was trying to do an empty-out in my building and the building next door.

Q: Explain that to people who might not know what that means.

Kilgour: Well, what that means basically is that owing to a loophole in the rent-regulation laws, the seminary was trying to evict people who had moved in past a certain date in order to convert the buildings into dormitories. [Which is] interesting because the chief counsel for the seminary is a Barnard graduate, and our lawyer, Catharine Grad, the brilliant Catharine Grad, is also a Barnard graduate, and we were able, in fact, to defeat the seminary in court, although some

families did have to move out, but that struggle was really consuming. That, I would say—the buildings became like the child I had never had, and more than a child, like the one-year-old that clings to your leg and shrieks whenever you turn your attention anywhere else. It was just constant. It was a constant, constant battle, and it went on for so long that I was able to sort of fold into it the battle over Pacifica radio that then began in 2001 over a coup that occurred at that time, and become more involved in the radio station. So I became, once again, a housing activist. I had actually been drawn into what happened at Columbia because of the depredations Columbia was making in the neighborhood, and the people who lived in the neighborhood. They were emptying out buildings. In those days, people didn't have the protections that they have now, and so Columbia was just emptying out the neighborhood around them, which had been a very vibrant, totally integrated working-class neighborhood, to convert it into company housing. And I loved the neighborhood and wanted to live there after I graduated, so that kind of pulled me into that struggle; and then years later I was pulled back into the housing struggle. So I'm now on the board of the Metropolitan Council on Housing, and, as you can see from my T-shirt, very active in—a housing activist and do the radio show for Met Council on WBAI as a substitute host.

Q: Talk about your radio show.

[Interruption]

Q: What were we talking about just before we went off?

Solomon: The radio show.

Kilgour: So once that coup at Pacifica had resolved itself, some of us felt that we should learn how to engineer, that we should know how to actually be able to do radio and run a radio station, just in case. And so I went to learn how to engineer, and then, for a while, worked on the “Community Bulletin Board,” pulling together announcements, but also became the substitute host for “Housing Notebook,” which is the Metropolitan Council on Housing’s radio show, and associate producer for that program. I’m occasionally on the air and more often behind the scenes.

Q: Is that something that surprised you, the affinity that you felt for radio?

Kilgour: No, I wanted to do it. We never had a television in our house when I was a kid, so I listened to the radio, and I was a bit of a musical kid; so I was the kid with the ear glued to the radio. I loved the radio, always listened to the radio, listened to the radio through college. Once I left *Newsweek*, I felt I could begin to listen to WBAI without being enraged by the way that *Newsweek* was reporting the news as opposed to what was really going on. I had kind of formulated a bit of an ambition to be on the radio one day.

Q: Sounds like you fulfilled that.

Kilgour: Yes.

Q: I have not asked you about the war when you were in college. First of all, did you take part in the second strike in 1970, around the time of Kent State?

Kilgour: I was out of school that year.

Q: You were out of the school that year. Did you know people who were affected by either being drafted or fear of being drafted?

Kilgour: All the young men I knew were terrified of being drafted, and I only knew one guy who really wanted to go, and this was a kid that I knew in high school. Because we lived on the same block, we would walk back and forth from high school, and he would carry on about how he wanted to grow up to be a mercenary, and then he didn't have to, because the war in Vietnam was in full swing by the time he graduated from high school. So he volunteered, and actually was killed there.

Q: How old was he?

Kilgour: He couldn't have been more than twenty—could not have been much more than twenty.

Q: Did you know other people who were drafted?

Kilgour: If they were, I don't know. People that I knew in high school may have been drafted, but I've always been somewhat hesitant about going to read the Vietnam [Veterans] Memorial for fear of finding people that I knew on it, or wondering if there were people that I know on that wall because I really did lose touch with most of the people from my hometown.

Q: In your life after Barnard, when has been the happiest time?

Kilgour: There have been a lot of them. You can't ask a Gemini what was the one single—

Q: The happiest times.

Kilgour: I would say that I've tended to get happier as I get older, interestingly. I was very happy when I was writing for *The New Yorker*. That was deeply satisfying. It was very, very deeply satisfying. Another thing that I've done as an adult is to go back to music, so I learned how to play old-timey country music on the fiddle, so I'm always very happy when I'm playing the fiddle. I think my default setting is essentially fairly happy.

Q: And when you say your default setting, what do you mean?

Kilgour: That generally as I go through life I'm a reasonably cheerful person, which is not to say that I'm not a hell of a fighter or that I don't get angry and that I don't—I generally feel that most

of the time I'm a reasonably nice person. I'm trying not to bother anybody. I'm trying to do some good in this world. I'm trying to help people out. If there's no reason for you to mess with me, don't mess with me. If you mess with me, then, yes, as a friend of mine said, "I'm perfectly willing to be friends with anybody, and I think I'm a pretty good friend, but if you want war, then the only thing that concerns me is who wins." This is another interesting thing in my life. When I moved, I moved quite close to Barnard. I'm on 122nd Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, and that block when I moved to it was about half black, and many of the white people were young people, but a bit older than me, who had been active in Mississippi Freedom Summer, for example, so that quote comes from somebody who was active in Mississippi Freedom Summer, and they were the housing organizers when I got there. They were the building organizers, and the organizers of a food co-op. There was a kind of continuity that happened there.

Q: When have you been least happy?

Kilgour: I would have to say after breakups.

Q: If you could go back and give some advice to the girl that walked through those Barnard gates in the fall and September of 1966, what would those words be?

Kilgour: Be strong.

Q: Be strong.



Kilgour: Be strong. I wanted to touch on one other thing, though, before we do that. Another thing that I've done as I've gotten older is that I have kept moving or learning, so a couple of years ago I went back to school to study to be a medical interpreter in Spanish, having started to teach myself Spanish in college, and then began to teach myself more in earnest in the '90s, and then took this course at York College, and I'm now working as a volunteer at Harlem Hospital as a volunteer Spanish-language interpreter. So the work that I do for a living, which is fairly mindless, I'm not devoting very many hours to it. I lead a life of voluntary poverty and complexity so that I have time to work for Met Council and time to volunteer at Harlem and time to work at the radio station, and some time for myself. So, in that sense, it's worked out well.

Q: The work that you do for a living is copyediting?

Kilgour: No. I do some freelance copyediting and some freelance translating, and I very much enjoy translating; maybe not as much as writing, but perhaps one day I'll get back to writing. Actually, I often say that if I were doing what I think I'm supposed to be doing, I would be reading tarot cards in a restaurant and writing, but then if I were supposed to be doing it, I assume I would be doing it, so who knows? No, I actually do mindless computer database scutwork at the publicity department of a publishing house, which is like being paid to listen to the radio, and it mostly pays the bills, together with the freelance work. I find the interpreting, for example, very satisfying, a very satisfying kind of Zen activity in which I'm just sort of a

conduit, helping two people to communicate with one another over issues that are of great importance to them both.

Q: If you could paint a picture of your ideal future, what would it consist of?

Kilgour: I think that ideally I would prefer to just remain open to what might come next or what might become apparent as the next thing to do, rather than to try to limit it with thinking about how it would be best; so that's a departure certainly from when we're young, and we want to plan everything out in advance. I think, at this point, I would be very happy if I could remain really open to all the possibilities that might come along.

Q: Do you have fears about the future?

Kilgour: Not generally, but, as I say, my default position is generally cheerful and optimistic, as a matter of temperament, which we have to say that we're born with. My parents used to say that the director of the nursery school I went to used to tell them that she thought I gave the other children strength, and to a great extent that has been an avocation, if not a vocation. I can't say that my childhood was wonderful; it was difficult, and, like everybody else, I needed to work to get over it.

Q: Talk about your childhood and how it was difficult.

Kilgour: Well, my parents were hot-tempered. They were hot-tempered. They'd hit a kid in a minute, and they had too many kids for their emotional resources, and they fought a lot with their kids. When I walked through the gates of Barnard, I was a little on the shy and subdued side, shall we say, or at least cautious, which might not have been the worst thing for a young girl arriving in New York City at the tender age of eighteen. But as time has gone by, as I say, my default settings have come back more into play, and so I'm more that confident, outgoing person that I was when I was three. Not that I don't love to have my quiet moments, but that's where it is, which is why I say I would like to stay open to what might come next, because we don't know. I've tried to take good care of myself so that I don't have to worry about my health, and I try to remain alert with regard to what's going on in the world so that developments don't catch me by surprise. There it is.

Q: Is there anything that I haven't touched on that you feel strongly about?

Kilgour: Yes, there is. I wanted to say that with regard to having set out on a spiritual path, there were a lot of people who were hippies, who then moved onto a spiritual path, and not so many people who were politically engaged who moved onto a spiritual path, but I did. I, for whatever reason, found that I wanted to find a spiritual path.

Q: When you talk about a spiritual path, could you be more specific about how you moved onto a spiritual path, what you did to do that?

Kilgour: I did a lot of reading. I went shopping. I went to a lot of different groups and organizations, this one and that one and the other one, and I found a Sufi Order that really seemed to be just tailor-made for me, and latched onto it. So there I was with the spiritual discipline, and I have found, which I still practice—I've broadened out from there, because the Sufis are very tolerant. I've broadened out from there. I've pursued shamanic practices and been somewhat involved in Santería, which is also a shamanic practice, and I have found that it has made a huge difference in my political activism, because whereas when I was younger, and less disciplined, I would be tremendously upset by injustices that were going down and scream and yell and jump up and down, but not necessarily be as effective as I've been able to be by having a spiritual discipline, by being able to calm myself, by being able to kind of withdraw from the details of a situation into a more cosmic feeling of balance and—how can I put this?—a feeling of much greater expansiveness and balance, of being more within that in which we live and move and have our being, that sort of over-arching love.

And so it gives me actually much more strength and much more courage for the struggle, and much more sense of balance, and it actually just made me, in a paradoxical way, a much more formidable foe, because I don't necessarily lose my temper and go off. I can actually sit calmly and think about the next step and understand that the best way not to get so angry is actually to act. So that when tenants have come to me all desperate and shrieking and carrying on I say, "I don't get angry because every single day I do something that I know will hurt them, so I don't have to be angry." So really that whole engagement has been, apart from helping me to become more of who I am, has been key to being more effective in the political sphere, to not falling into

the trap of becoming dogmatically political, for example, because Sufis and dogma don't go together—of any kind, dogma of any kind.

But also, something else I wanted to say about that, Che Guevara is supposed to have said that a true revolutionary is motivated by love, so there's that aspect of coming at it from a more spiritual point of view, but without a spiritual point of view to impose on anyone, something coming out of where I feel it. And occasionally there are rumblings within the Sufi Order. People think they would like the Sufi Order to take a political stance with regard to something, the way a church might, and I, as a political activist, always speak against it, because I am there to gain the spiritual wisdom and discipline and the practices to become more effective as a political person, and to gain the courage and the strength to know what's right and to stand up for it, and I don't need an organization to speak for me. I don't want the organization to speak for me. I want the organization to provide me with the tools to become as strong and clear a person as I can be to make my own decisions as to what I will do in that sphere. So it's been interesting. It's been fun.

Solomon: Can I ask something?

Kilgour: Of course.

Solomon: The spiritual thing—this all has to do with the spiritual thing and the future, beyond the cusp of our middle age. I work with a lot of young people, twenty-something people, and I

hear them talking to themselves about making decisions about what they're going to do, and I'm realizing they can make mistakes now, they can afford to make mistakes. They can have a million other choices. They're just starting.

Q: They've got a lot to learn.

Solomon: As I get older, me personally, I get less spiritual.

Kilgour: Less spiritual?

Solomon: Yes. In other words, I see the soul as a biochemical process.

Kilgour: [Laughs] That's fair enough. It may actually be more accurate.

Solomon: I don't know, but I've eliminated God and the afterlife completely from my frame of reference, but now a twenty-year-old has an exponentially longer future than I do, and unless you have God or some sense of some ongoing life or presence, you have to come to grips with that. It changes your fearing about going into the future.

Kilgour: Right. Okay. Yes.

Solomon: Do you understand what I mean?

Kilgour: Yes, and one thing that I find I think causes life to become sort of better is the feeling that, “Look, life is short, and every day mine gets shorter, and I don’t have time; there’s certain things that I don’t have time for, so I’m not going to waste my time with them.” So I feel more entitled, to use a certain word, not to waste my time with certain things, because I don’t have that much time. But with regard to what comes after this life, I have no idea, and as James Baldwin said, “Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go there now,” and neither do I. I feel as if I still have work to do in this world that I would like to do, that I would like to get done.

At one point, I designed and even gave once a workshop on spiritual healing of racism, which really nobody really wants to take, because when I was starting to design it, and I was working with somebody who designs workshops and he said, “But you have to do a needs assessment of your constituency, and what do they need?” And so I thought about it and I said, “Well, I think that my constituency for this workshop, that their greatest need is the need to be perceived as not needing this workshop.” I would like to either be able to find the time somewhere or the space somewhere to develop that anew and to find other people to collaborate with, and to be able to pass it on to somebody so that it can be there for the next generation, and begin to think in terms more of your legacy than of what you’re going to get in life, more of your legacy. So I still have work to do, and I still look forward to being here, but I do know that the time is short, and so I try to use it wisely, and I don’t know what’s coming next. I have no idea. I do shamanic work that involves working with people who have passed on, so I sort of see them in the place where

they've passed on, if that's what I'm seeing, in nonordinary reality, but that's their place that they passed on to, not mine.

Q: Talk about what shamanic work is. I don't think everybody's going to know what that means.

Kilgour: It basically arises from what we might call the ur-religion, or the original religion of all human beings, that in all societies there have been people who could move from one reality to another, who were healers, who may know about herbs but may also know about moving within different—whether we want to call them mental or spiritual realms, who knows; but into other realities, either by, say, journeying in a trance state to another reality or, as in the case of Santería, inviting a spirit to take possession. It's either you go to their house or they come to yours. These are traditions that are universal. They have existed in every single human group. There's not a human being in the world whose ancestry does not include a shamanic society. So in modern times, these traditions are now being taught—they were kind of brought back into the West by anthropologists who studied shamanic traditions in other cultures, and who then shared what they had learned, and then stripped the practices of their cultural appurtenances to come to what they call core shamanism. One thing they decided to eliminate was drugs, that there are many cultures in which people take very strong drugs in order to—what did we do, trip? I didn't actually take those drugs. I didn't take LSD [lysergic acid diethylamide]. So there are people who use very strong drugs, and there are other people who use drumming. So they said, "Well, let's use drumming, because drumming is less toxic and easier to control." But if there's a culture that says, "You know, when you make the drum, it has to have this certain kind of shells on it. It



has to have a certain kind of feathers. It has to have a certain painting.” And they said, “Well, yes, but what this all boils down to is you have to have a drum.” So in the tradition that I’m working in, we use drumming, and, of course, in Santería they use drumming also. They use drumming to bring somebody in. So it’s a universal tradition.

Q: Of healing.

Kilgour: Of healing, of divination, a whole range of things which actually, even if you look at nursery tales and fairy stories in the European tradition, obviously these things have been preserved in other cultures. They have continued to live all the way through. It was suppressed in Europe in a fairly early time, except among the people who were very isolated, like way out in Ireland or way out in the Hebrides, isolated parts of Scotland and Ireland, but still actually kind of kept alive, but they remained alive in children’s stories.

Q: Give me an example.

Kilgour: Well, just any story like the witch flew up the chimney or a witch riding on a broom.

We’re talking about somebody making a shamanic journey, right? So those kinds of stories.

Alice in Wonderland is even a little bit—she goes into the lower world. She drops through, out of ordinary reality into a nonordinary reality. Because these are universal traditions, those of us who have any kind of propensity to be able to do the work, it’s kind of in the marrow of our bones.

When people go to do workshops about this, they'll usually find that ninety percent of the people who come to the workshop can journey.

Q: When you say journey?

Kilgour: That means that when drumming starts, they will journey to nonordinary reality, and when they come back, they will not say, "I seemed to see or I thought I saw or I dreamed." They will describe it exactly as if it was something real. "And then he said, and then we went here, and then we did this—." That's why it's called nonordinary reality, because it's experienced as real. But ninety percent of a self-selected group, in other words, people who choose to go to a workshop, usually can journey, and people who have worked in situations where people were not self-selected, like prisons, where there are shamans going to work with prisoners. Or gangs, there's a shaman who works with both prisoners and inner-city gangs out in the Midwest. He has found that about ten percent of people can journey in a general population, so you're looking at ten percent of the world's population that has some ability to do this work, which I think is a pretty big ratio; a one-to-ten ratio would be great for shamans to work for the rest of the people, but it's a knowledge that we carry in the marrow of our bones. It's so basic to the human being, so that's been very interesting for me, that practice. And the Sufi traditions often preserve shamanic traditions of the cultures that they arose in.

Q: We didn't talk about the role of drugs and how much of an impact they had on your life, either by your taking them or being around other people.

Kilgour: Well, I pretty much stuck to alcohol and grass. Something told me I had better not take LSD. I took mescaline a couple of times, and liked it very much, but that was enough. I think I tried cocaine a couple of times, and that didn't do much for me, luckily since it was so expensive. Past a certain point—and I had also smoked cigarettes; we shouldn't leave out nicotine; that's also a form of self-medication. I smoked pretty heavily. I began to smoke kind of heavily in 1968, and stopped in 1972, which was kind of a turning point in my life. I moved into the apartment I'm living in now. I quit smoking. I broke up with my boyfriend. I moved into the apartment, quit smoking, and quit drinking, because I had been drinking quite a fair amount, smoking quite a fair amount of marijuana. And then a few years later I quit smoking marijuana, so became a fairly sober person. Of course, the meditative techniques and various practices, spiritual practices, do tend to make a person kind of high, so there's that. But the impact of drugs, I think marijuana was a good thing for me, as long as I was smoking it. It's definitely a euphoriant. It takes the edge off your pain and keeps you going forward. It certainly helped me to quit smoking cigarettes. Then it wasn't useful anymore, because I needed my entire brain to be functioning.

Q: I miss that marinara sauce.

Kilgour: [Laughs] That famous marinara sauce with the oregano and the marijuana, that was good.

Q: The more you ate, the more delicious it became.

Kilgour: Oh, yes.

Q: We were going to ask you if looking back over your sexual history you would have conducted yourself differently, or would you have done the same things?

Kilgour: It's hard to say, because I wasn't going to be more sensible. Would I have done the same things? I think I was lucky actually, because that was the day of the pill. It was before AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome]. We weren't being so careful, so I was very lucky that I didn't get sick.

Q: For example, did you find yourself in a position where, out of politeness, you—

Kilgour: Oh, no. I'm not polite in that sense. If I went to bed with a guy, I went to bed with a guy expecting to have a good time, but if I didn't have a good time, then I was no longer interested in him. But this is an interesting point that you raise, though, because I grew up really believing, without being the least bit consciously aware of it, that good girls did not have a sex drive, and my sex drive was ferocious.

Q: So you were not a good girl.

Kilgour: I was not a good girl. Please. Nowadays it would be something to boast about. Maybe. I don't know. It was not even—it was like, "What is wrong with me?"

Q: You thought something was wrong.

Kilgour: Yes. This was not how women were supposed to be.

Q: When did that stop?

Kilgour: Last week. [Laughs] Hard to say. Quite possibly relatively recently. I managed to struggle along and live with myself and have a good time, but still it's a shame, it's really a shame, that female sexuality is not more honored.

Q: Especially back then.

Kilgour: And especially back then.

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