

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Ruth Stuart Bell

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ruth Stuart Bell conducted by Michelle Patrick on March 10, 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: Ruth Stuart Bell

Location: Santa Fe, New Mexico

Interviewer: Michelle Patrick

Date: March 10, 2011

Q: I am Michelle Patrick. I graduated from Barnard [College] in 1971, and I am here interviewing Ruth Stuart Bell, who also graduated from Barnard in 1971, as a part of our oral history project. It's going to be our 40th reunion in June, and I have some loose questions to ask Ruth, which she can answer or not answer, or take the interview in a completely other direction. But this is how I'm going to start. Ruth, where did you grow up, and what was your family background? How many siblings did you have? Middle class, upper-middle class, that sort of thing.

Bell: I'm from Boston, Massachusetts. And I grew up in a family that I guess the social historians would call a Brahmin family, an old Boston family. Both branches of it, my father's and my mother's, had been there for generations. I'm the oldest of four children. I have two younger sisters and a younger brother.

Q: And you went to local Boston private schools until you were thirteen? Twelve?

Bell: I went to private schools in Boston until I was fifteen, and then I went to St. Timothy's school in Stevenson, Maryland, which is right outside of Baltimore. It's a girls' boarding school. I was there for 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Graduated from there and from there went to Barnard.

Q: What was St. Tim's like?

Bell: Well, I loved it. It was a very traditional, Episcopal, girls' boarding school. When I was there, it had about 120 students. All boarding. They came from all parts of the country. It was very exciting for me to meet girls from all places, I remember especially being fascinated by the girls from the deep south. From Savannah, and New Orleans, and Virginia, places like that.

Q: And how were these girls different from the girls from Boston?

Bell: Well, they were much warmer. They were friendly. What fascinated me was that they seemed to have so much fun and I grew up in a world where fun was not really in the vocabulary. Duty, and responsibility, and obedience were the virtues that were preached to me.

Q: Puritan.

Bell: Puritan values. Yes. Absolutely.

Q: What made you select Barnard?

Bell: I knew that my parents expected me to go to a Seven Sisters school, or to something comparable to a Seven Sisters school. My father had already decided that I didn't need to look outside of the Northeast, because he didn't really see the need for paying large fees for transportation to other parts of the country. The school my parents wanted me to go to was Radcliffe [College], but I knew I couldn't get into Radcliffe, so I looked at the other ones. I knew I wanted to be in a city. After three years of boarding school in a rural atmosphere, I was ready to come back to the city. After all, I had grown up in the city, and I really wanted to come back to a big place. Barnard was really very perfect, because it was all girls, which is what I was comfortable with, but it had boys just across the street. I thought that sounded pretty interesting. I also was quite intrigued with the idea of being in New York. I had been to New York a couple of times and had always loved it. I thought I could get in. And, as it turned out, I think there were ten girls from my class who applied to Barnard, and I think we all got in.

Q: Now, I remember your saying that when you got to Barnard, you were somewhat disappointed with the caliber of the boys across the street.

Bell: Well, I was. I thought there would be more preppies. I thought there'd be more boys that were sort of like the boys I was used to. Not that I was used to boys, really, because I had only been in girls' schools. But when I got to Barnard, I was in the middle of my debutante year. So I'd had a summer of parties and all of that, and of course all the boys at those parties were definitely preppies. I would say looking back that they behaved pretty poorly, and they weren't much to write home about. But at least they were familiar.

Q: Poorly in what regard?

Bell: Well, they were heavy drinkers, and I didn't think they were terribly nice to the girls. It always seemed to me that there were more girls than there were boys. I think they knew that they were a hot commodity and much in demand. I certainly was under the impression that, as a girl, it was my duty to please them, rather than the other way around.

Q: And when you got to Columbia [University], what was the source of the disappointment?

Bell: Well, I came to college with the idea that I would probably meet my husband there and I didn't see anybody who looked like future husband potential. So I was kind of disappointed with that.

Q: What did future husband potential look like?

Bell: Well, definitely a preppie. Somebody whose family was very similar to mine, who'd gone to a prep school, who had—who was probably going to have a career as a lawyer or a doctor or be in the diplomatic service, and who would need a wife who was just like me.

Q: And there weren't any?

Bell: I didn't meet any. I don't know whether they existed or not, but I certainly didn't meet any while I was at Barnard.

Q: Whom did you meet instead?

Bell: I met lots and lots of boys who were just fascinating to me. They came from very different backgrounds. I met many Jewish boys. I had never met Jewish boys before. I met boys that were the first generation of their families to go to college and came from blue-collar backgrounds. I met solid middle class type boys. Uniformly I was impressed by how polite they were and how nice they were to me when they took me on dates.

Q: And yet they weren't the caliber of boys that you were expected to marry?

Bell: No. I would not have been allowed to marry anyone whose relation was markedly different, or who came from a different culture, or background. At the time, I don't think that would have been tolerated.

Q: Your parents would not have tolerated it?

Bell: No.

Q: Did your parents have political leanings?

Bell: Yes, very conservative. Always Republican. So I grew up thinking that that was the only thing to be. And I have to say I held on to that. I've voted Republican all my life.

Q: When you, that first beautiful—I remember, it was a beautiful September day. When you came through the gates of Barnard College, what did you bring with you? And I mean in every

respect: clothes, attitudes, aspirations, hopes, academic hope leanings, social aspirations, dating—well, we talked about the dating aspirations. Mementos from home. Do you remember any of those things?

Bell: Well, I remember the clothes that I brought. I was kind of confused about that, because after all I'd been in boarding school for three years where we all wore uniforms. So it was kind of new to me to have to be thinking about what to wear every day going to school. I didn't really have a very well-defined sense of what was in, or chic, or cool, or anything. So I remember feeling a bit at a loss with all of that. I did not bring any special mementos other than some family pictures. I had a picture of my mother. I don't really remember anything other than that. Having already been away at school for three years, it was not a novelty to come someplace and check into a dormitory. I was pretty used to that. What was a complete novelty was the freedom. I just—Barnard was the first time in my life when I was not supervised. It was just heady. I couldn't believe that I could do whatever I wanted to do. That no one was going to make me go to class. That I could do whatever I wanted to do on the weekends. There was no study hall. There were no—to me at the time it seemed that there were no rules. College was so much more liberal than boarding school had been. Boarding school had been far more liberal than my home had been.

Q: Do you remember the curfews and the parietals?

Bell: Well that didn't really have too much meaning to me. To me it just made good sense. I couldn't figure out what I'd be doing after ten o'clock anyway. And I'd never been on dates before I went to Barnard.

Q: You never had been on a date?

Bell: Not a real date, no. So I didn't have any sense, really, of what that was all about.

Q: Do you remember your first date?

Bell: Not really.

Q: Do you remember being disappointed or—

Bell: No, I was far too worried because I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't know what you were supposed to do on a date. Or how you were supposed to behave and of course I wanted to be very sophisticated, and of course I wasn't.

Q: Do you remember how you behaved? And what you said, or what you did, or what you wore?

Bell: No, no I don't.

Q: Second date? Third date?

Bell: No, because what I remember about freshman year was that I started dating two people in the spring of freshman year. And I remember them. And I remember some of the things that I did with them. But I don't remember—I know I went out before that time, but I don't really remember what I did.

Q: Do you remember having fun?

Bell: Yes, yes I do.

Q: With these dates?

Bell: Yes.

Q: Laughing?

Bell: Yes, I was always worried about the whole sexual thing. Because, being so conservative and so old fashioned, the first word in my vocabulary when that subject came up was, “No.” And I was very nervous about what was expected, what wasn’t. What was appropriate and what wasn’t, because I had so little experience with boys, period. I didn’t really know how they acted. All I remember feeling is that I thought boys had to be sort of flattered. I thought they had to be cajoled. I thought they had to be pleased. And how in the world did you please them without compromising your own beliefs? That was always a dilemma for me.

Q: And when you say your own beliefs, had you been influenced at all by the sexual revolution?

Bell: Well, I was appalled by it. Because I’d been brought up so adamantly that this was something for marriage only. And I’d been threatened by my father that I was never, ever, ever to consider having any kind of sexual relationship before marriage. That this was to be avoided at all costs. And as I noticed the people around me having them, I just remember feeling bewildered and thinking, they must be going somewhere to get birth control. But I could never picture myself doing something like that. One of my most vivid memories of our orientation at Barnard

was that session we had with Dr. [Alan F.] Guttmacher when he explained birth control. I mean, today it sort of horrifies me that that was part of orientation. But I'll never forget sitting in that auditorium with the boys from Columbia up in that glassed in balcony, hooting and hollering, and cheering. As we, the girls, were being indoctrinated.

Q: I don't remember. I must not have attended that.

Bell: Well, it made an indelible impression on me.

Q: And did it tell you what you had to do, and where you had to go?

Bell: It explained how the various means of birth control worked.

Q: And do you remember at what point in a date or in a relationship you made it clear that you had no intention of having sexual relations with anyone that you were not going to marry?

Bell: I don't think I ever said it explicitly. It was more in what I was comfortable doing.

Q: And you made that clear.

Bell: Yes.

Q: In a non-verbal way?

Bell: Yes.

Q: What about academically and socially? What had you expected, and to what extent were your expectations met? Or not met?

Bell: Well, I expected to have to work at Barnard, and I was amazed to find out how easy it was. I did nothing the first two years. I did have to work a little bit my junior and senior years, but I just had a ball the first two years. I didn't have to work hard at all. It was very easy and I didn't really care anymore about getting good grades, because there wasn't anything else that I had to get into, after Barnard. I was not expecting to go to graduate school, and so I could just relax and have fun. My parents didn't care anymore, about my grades. As long as I passed.

Q: Were you then not expecting to have a career?

Bell: No, no. I was expecting, if I did not meet my husband in college, I was expecting to have some sort of cute, fun, nice job until my husband came along. And then I absolutely expected to be the traditional wife and mother and volunteer. And I was.

Q: Tell me about how you met your husband, and how he conformed or didn't conform with what your parents had wanted for you, if you don't mind.

Bell: No, I don't mind. I love telling this story. I met Kelly Bell at Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, which was a brokerage firm on Wall Street. And I had gotten a job there as a receptionist in the fall of 1971. It was a fabulous job. It paid a great deal of money, and I didn't have to type. And they had hired me because they wanted a nice young girl, nice-looking, well-spoken, to greet their clients. I think I would say today that I was hired to be window-dressing. And I adored being window-dressing. To me this was just the dream of a lifetime. Because after the years at Columbia, with all those people who were dirty and confused and on drugs, and all the rest of it, all of a sudden, here came the three piece suits. And they were clean, they were motivated, they were moving ahead in the world. There were just streams of them, every day. I had a wonderful time. I just loved it. I met all kinds of fascinating people, had all kinds of dates.

Then on November 2nd, I remember meeting Kelly Bell. The secretaries in the office had been talking about him, and saying that he was coming. I was told that he was a Texas oilman, and that he came periodically to do business with the senior partners of the firm and everybody sort of twittered about him. I heard that he was very handsome, that he was this, that he was that. And I wasn't terribly interested. I had a busy social life at that point. I was having such a good time. I had a little apartment of my own. I just thought I was the most glamorous, sophisticated, young, New York woman and the world was my oyster. Then he came walking down the hall on a fall evening and here was this wonderful looking man, about 6'2" with grayish-whitish hair, lots of it and the most wonderful smile, with twinkling eyes and bushy eyebrows. And he was tanned. Now, this was before the days of tanning salons. So anybody who had a tan in the off-season was considered rather glamorous.

I thought, "Oh, what a wonderful looking man. That's who they've all been talking about." And I just thought, "He has the nicest face." Then I didn't think anything more about it until we happened to get on the elevator together at the same time. Somewhere between the 35th floor and the 1st floor, he asked me out for a drink and I said, "No thank you." Because I had heard talk of his children. I figured, where there were children there was a wife and that of course was totally out of the question. He smiled, when I said no thank you, and said, "Well, I've got to take the subway uptown. Do you mind if I ride with you on the subway?" I said, "Oh, no, Mr. Bell. Certainly not." And we chatted on the subway, and he kind of, very sweetly, let it be known that he was a widower. Was there any way that I might change my mind? Well, I changed my mind right away! And so we went out for a drink.

He took me to the Plaza, which I thought was lovely. And then we went out—I found out later he cancelled the dinner date that he did have in order to take me to dinner. Then we went to a wonderful place in The Pierre called La [unclear] to dance, afterwards and I came home walking on a cloud. I just thought that this is the most wonderful evening I've ever had in my whole life. I called my mother the next day to tell her, and she said, "Well, don't go getting any ideas about going out with anyone that much older than you are." And I said, "Oh, Mommy, don't be silly. He's a client of the firm and that's that." But that wasn't that, and a few days later, he came back, and he asked me out again. And that's how it started. It was a whirlwind romance. As I said, we met November the second at '71, and we got engaged two months later. Then we were married about two and a half months after that.

Q: And your parents reacted?

Bell: They were horrified. Kelly was thirty-seven years older than I, a widower, and a Roman Catholic. This was not in the plan. But I knew that this was what was right for me. I will always feel that he was, he really was, the knight in shining armor for me. He did sweep me off my feet and he took me off to Midland, Texas. As I said when I was telling someone the other day, my mother's reaction to the whole thing could be summed up in one statement. She said, "Darling, we don't know anyone whose zip code starts with seven." [Laughter]

Q: Well, that just rules him completely out!

Bell: And we had a very happy marriage. We were married for twenty years before he was killed in a car accident in 1992, and we had two terrific children. Today those two children are grown and happily married, and I have four irresistible, perfect grandchildren.

[Interruption]

Q: Did you come to Barnard with an attitude toward the war, or toward the Vietnamese?

Bell: No.

Q: OK. Did you develop one during Barnard?

Bell: Well, I felt very concerned. I remember the night when they read off the birthdays, and I was very concerned that the boy I was dating at the time would have a birthday that was in the

danger zone. I can remember sitting with him in his dormitory in Columbia as we listened, and he did not. He was safe.

Q: That was good. Did you know other people who were living in dread—

Bell: Yes.

Q: Or who were actually drafted?

Bell: Yes, yes, I did.

Q: Did you follow their progress?

Bell: No, they were friends of friends. Rather than my own personal friends.

Q: So, you don't know what happened to them.

Bell: No, I don't.

Q: What was your understanding of what the '68 strike was about?

Bell: I thought it was a bunch of really unattractive people behaving very, very badly.

Q: About?

Bell: And I didn't really know what they were so upset about. I mean, I did and I didn't. I read the [*Columbia Daily*] *Spectator* every day, and—but to me, they were just so far from anything that I could countenance. They just seemed disgusting to me. They were screaming and yelling obscenities. They were trashing the buildings. I just thought it was the pinnacle of unattractive behavior. That's the only way that I can describe it now.

Q: And you didn't really have a sense of the issues, or—

Bell: I think I knew at the time what the issues were; I just didn't think they had any validity. I just thought it was just people who were out of control. And—but I was very concerned about it.

I can remember, at some point during the time when the buildings were occupied, leaving the campus to go, probably to go visit my aunt who lived on the East Side, to have lunch with her. I remember thinking, “I don’t understand why everyone isn’t consumed with this.” Because we all were consumed with it, while it was going on. I was on the outside, so—but every morning I woke up and my first thought was, “Are the people still in the buildings? Has anything happened?” And in the hours that we spent, just waiting outside those buildings for something to happen, there was a sense that something awful was going to happen. And the morning when it did—I’ll never forget that. I’ll never forget waking in the night and hearing the screams! People were being clubbed and beaten. And the next morning—it was a cold grey morning, that next morning and going onto the campus, meaning Columbia, and the feeling that something or somebody had died. It was just that feeling. It was just this cold, heavy, grey emptiness, a sense of sadness and desolation that all of that ugliness had occurred.

Q: Did you know anyone in the buildings?

Bell: I had no friends in the buildings. I knew of people, but I didn’t have any friends in the building.

Q: Casual acquaintances? Perhaps on your floor?

Bell: I knew who Josie Duke was. But she wasn't a friend.

Q: Did she live on your floor?

Bell: I don't think she did, but I'm not sure. I remember her leaning out a window, screaming for someone to get her birth control pills.

Q: I guess under the circumstances it might have been necessary. Did you take part in any political activity after the 1968 strike?

Bell: Well, I was part of something called Students for Columbia University, which was a conservative organization that was formed as kind of a reaction to SDS [Students for a Democratic Society].

Q: And what sort of things did you do?

Bell: I can't really remember because it was so tiny and it was never really effective. I think it was sort of a joke in a way. It was looked at as a joke by many people that I knew. I was part of

that, and I was part of the Young Republican Club. I was very conscious of what a minority we were.

Q: Did you have any participation in or against the second strike, which was against the war in Vietnam? That was '70.

Bell: No.

Q: No. Did you remember the first Earth Day?

Bell: Yes.

Q: What was your recollection of that?

Bell: Oh, just that it was silly.

Q: Was it fun?

Bell: No. It was just silly. It was just one more—I grew to think of spring at Columbia as, “Okay, pretty soon its time to quit going to classes and there won’t be any final exams. They’ll be some kind of chicanery going on in the Spring.” It was sort of almost like instead of a Maypole and May dances, there was unrest. And I remember being really kind of annoyed our senior year, but that was the only year that it was quiet, and we had to take exams. I remember thinking that was really unfair, as seniors.

Q: [Laughs] For the first time.

Bell: For the first time, we had to take final exams!

Q: Did you have any experience with drugs?

Bell: No.

Q: Did you have any experience with anybody who did have experience with drugs?

Bell: I think we all did. What I remember people doing mostly was marijuana.

Q: And did you note any change in their behavior during these marijuana experiences? Did you find them more or less cogent, more or less civil, more or less easy to get along with?

Bell: I don't really remember because the boys I dated didn't really do that. Or if they did, I was unaware of it.

Q: So you really couldn't tell.

Bell: No, I just—anytime you went to a party you could always smell it. But it was illegal, so it was really very clear to me that it was not anything that I needed to be doing.

Q: Did you do much drinking?

Bell: Well, I never got drunk. I can remember always drinking on dates, always having a glass of wine before we were—if I was being taken to dinner. I did not drink beer. I've never thought beer was anything I wanted. I can remember feeling tipsy, on occasion. But I learned at Barnard

that I couldn't drink very much because it made me feel so nauseated. I had to be very careful that I didn't drink more than two drinks, because otherwise I would feel nauseated. Sometimes I did, and I would feel nauseated, and think, "Oh why did I do that." But never drunk. I've never been drunk in my life.

Q: Never?

Bell: Never, no.

[Crosstalk]

Q: Would you say your anticipation of what your adult life would be pretty much conformed to what your adult life was, post-Barnard, except for the age of your husband?

Bell: Yes, it looked exactly like what I always thought it would look like. The only thing that was different was having a much older husband and the fact that I got moved to Texas. I never, ever in a million years expected that I would live anywhere except the Northeast. I fully expected to live in either New York or Boston. I thought it was going to be New York. Really, the biggest

surprise of my life, forty years later, is to find I've lived all my adult life in the Southwest. Either in Midland, Texas, or here in Santa Fe.

Q: Aside from raising children, what did you do in Midland, Texas? What activities?

Bell: Well, I did an enormous amount of volunteer work, which I absolutely loved. I was president of the Planned Parenthood there; I was president of the United Way. I was president of the Junior League. I was on the boards of the Pastoral Counseling Center and very involved with my children's school; board member there for many, many years. Gosh, you know, I'm sure there are many more that I've forgotten now.

Q: What was the most fulfilling?

Bell: Well, I loved everything I did for my children's school. And in later years, I served on the board of my own boarding school. I've always enjoyed schoolwork. I really believe in independent education, and I've always been impressed with the people I've met in my board service for the various institutions that I've been involved with. One of the things I enjoyed the most was through the junior league. One year we had a project that concerned women and sobriety. And it focused on the problems that female alcoholics have. We brought Betty Ford to Midland and I was in charge of that. It was a night I will never, ever forget. We had her speaking

in the biggest auditorium in town, which was our convention center. The place was packed. And it was a night when it rained. It almost never rains in Midland, but it poured rain that night. When she got up to speak, you could literally have heard a pin drop. Everybody was silent. People had brought their children, their grandchildren. Everyone had come to hear her. And there was this figure. She was so much smaller than I was expecting her to be, and she looked very frail. This would have been in—I think it was 1985. And her story touched everybody. I'll never forget it.

Q: What about her story was particularly compelling?

Bell: The fact that the First Lady of the land had had the same disease which had wrecked havoc in the lives of everybody. No matter where they were in the social spectrum or the economic spectrum. That this really is a disease that touches us all. And I watched the faces of the people. I knew some of the alcoholics that were there. And I watched them cry because it meant so much to them that she had come to tell her story to say that we are all one in this. I will always feel that that was one of the best things that I ever was part of. I also was part of a founding program for the battered women's center there. It was supposed to be an enrichment program for the women who were staying there. I had to figure out what we were going to do every night for the nine months out of the year. And sometimes I got it right, and sometimes I didn't.

Q: Can you give me an example?

Bell: Well, getting it really right was, one Monday night I brought in a team of makeup people and hair stylists, and everyone got a makeover. Huge hit. Absolutely huge hit.

Q: Big hit.

Bell: Big hit. And then one night I brought in an interior designer. That bombed. Because, of course, they had no homes. And they didn't know what kind of home they were going to have when they left the shelter. And I felt very badly about that, afterwards, that I had not thought that one through. I think I was just desperate to find a program for that evening, and I thought that might be interesting.

Q: How long did you work with that group?

Bell: Just for a year. And then in the Junior League, we had our volunteer jobs just for one year. And then we did something else the next year.

Q: You experienced a religious conversion too during your years in Midland.

Bell: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about that a little bit?

Bell: Yes. I had been brought up a nominal Episcopalian. Which meant that as a small child I was only taken to church—well, really, as a very, small child—for weddings. I knew all the words to the wedding service before I knew anything else. And then sometimes we would go on Christmas or Easter. But it wasn't until I got to St. Tim's that I began to have any formal religious training. As an Episcopalian I was confirmed there. And it really meant a great deal to me. I enjoyed the classes. The minister came to our school to teach us. And it really meant something to me. So when I got to Barnard, that was one of the things I really wanted to look into. I wanted to look into, well, where was I going to go to church, and what that might be about. So, during the first week, I take myself to St. Paul's Chapel. And what is happening in St. Paul's Chapel? Somebody is doing an interpretive dance on the altar. I took one horrified look at that and thought, "This just isn't going to work for me!" So, I really didn't do much about going to church while I was at Barnard. Occasionally I would go to [The Cathedral Church of] St. John the Divine. But I remember that I felt badly that that wasn't really part of my life. My husband, Kelly Bell, was a very devout Catholic and he never pressured me to become Catholic. But his

example, and some of the issues that we faced in our marriage, drew me to it. When I realized that this was where I was being called, I was pretty horrified. Because I thought I had a deal with God. I had agreed to raise our children Catholic, as long as I didn't have to be one. And then when I realized, in—it was right at the beginning of 1990—that this was the direction that I was going in, I was really frightened. I thought, I'm going to have to give up who I've always been to become something else, and I don't think the something else is going to be as good as what I've always been. And yet it was inexorable. I just kept getting drawn closer and closer. And of course, it turned out to be the greatest blessing of my life. And today, twenty-one years later, I am a very devout and practicing Catholic. And it is the cornerstone of my life.

Q: The person that you have become, is of course, a much better person. Or at least as good a person.

Bell: Well, I finally felt, when I became a Catholic, that I had reached home. That I was safely home. I had finally come into the harbor. I knew—

Q: Can you expand on that?

Bell: What I never—I felt so—my life was so punctuated by fear. And of course if you don't have faith, you are far more susceptible to fear because you have only yourself to depend on.

And I was very well aware of how limited I was. So, my life was constantly colored by fear. And then, slowly but surely, my husband, halfway into our marriage, became an alcoholic and was abusing prescription drugs. And when that happened, I went into Al-Anon. And that was the beginning of my spiritual awareness, I would say. They introduced me to the concept of a spiritual presence in life, but not a religion per say. And for a long time Al-Anon was enough for me. But after my husband became sober, this great miracle, that the one I had prayed for and wanted more than anything else in my life, and it happened, I was filled with a tremendous sense of gratitude. Suddenly, Al-Anon wasn't enough anymore. I wanted a more defined, positive something to express it with. So that was Catholicism. Catholicism is the great adventure and journey of my life. One that I will never get to the bottom of. One that I will continue to delve into. And when Kelly died so suddenly and tragically, that was what held me together.

Q: Now, would you, if you had been a Catholic, have been a part of Planned Parenthood?

Bell: No.

Q: So that was—

Bell: That was way before I became a Catholic. And that was a problem for me, becoming a Catholic, because I did not agree with the church's stand on abortion. I did not agree with many

things about Catholicism. And the priest that was helping me was a very wise man. He said, “Ruth,” he said, “I want you to do this for me. The things you don’t agree with, put them in parenthesis. And then read what you can about these issues. Maintain an open mind, and pray, and wait and see what happens.” He said, “One of two things will happen. In time, the parenthesis will simply fade away as you incorporate these things into your belief system. Or you may find that you really don’t agree. And there is room in the church for you.” He said, “We do not exclude people for not agreeing with us. We ask that they have an informed conscience. And as long as you have informed your conscience, your conclusions will be respected.”

Q: And which was it, for you?

Bell: Well, it was very interesting because some time after that I was asked to go and help an unwed mother who was in the hospital having her first baby. And the person who had been assigned to go and be with her during her labor at the last minute couldn’t go. So I was summoned. I’d never met this girl before. But I’d never forget that April day. Leaning over her in her bed and hanging on to her and trying to help her. She was trying to have natural childbirth, and I had had that when I had my children. So, looking at her, she was the same age as my daughter at that time. And I couldn’t imagine my daughter having to go through this, to have her first child without anyone near her who loved her. And that baby was born. And it changed my view about abortion.

Q: Any other views that Catholicism changed?

Bell: I think that what Catholicism has done for me is to challenge me constantly to be a better person. It's very difficult to be a Catholic. Because so many of the basic philosophy goes against the current norms of the world. But the standard is a very high one, and I find that in striving to meet it, I develop more as a person. It asks me to be compassionate. It asks me to be open-minded. It asks me to be constantly aware of those less fortunate: the needs of the poor, the needs of the disadvantaged, the needs of those in prison. People that I might not come in contact with on a daily basis. I have an obligation to. I have an obligation to be there. For people who are in need, of any kind: emotional, spiritual, financial, whatever. And that has certainly enriched and broadened my life, tremendously. It's a fascinating way to live. It's not easy. I'm not anywhere near where the church would like me to be, on many of its social justice issues. But I'm trying.

Q: If you could go back to Barnard on that first September day in 1967 and give that girl who used to be Ruth Stuart a bit of advice, what would it be?

Bell: I don't think I'd give her advice. I think I'd go back and tell her, "Well done." Because this girl who came from such a conservative, restrictive in many ways, background, really made the most of her four years there. I really did meet all kinds of people. I took classes in things that I would never have thought of if I had been in a more traditional academic setting.

Q: Such as?

Bell: Well, I can remember a class—it must have been something to do with women’s issues or something, because I remember we dealt with the whole question of unemployment, and how women were treated in the unemployment office. Well, of course I didn’t know anything about that, but somebody in the class was on unemployment and described for us what it was like, and how the social worker talked to her and how demeaned she felt by the entire process. I’ll never forget that. I majored in Sociology, and so many of the courses I took formed the foundation for my volunteer work later. At the time, a degree in Sociology was considered just sort of a waste of time because you couldn’t make any money at it, except be a social worker. And who wanted to do that forever?

I took a course on criminal justice, and today one of the things I do is monitor sexual assault cases in the district court here. I mean, without that course I wouldn’t have known anything about a criminal justice system. I learned about Chicanos. Well, to me, back in Barnard in those days, a Chicano was as exotic as a Mongolian would have been. But I’ve lived my whole life in the Southwest, surrounded by that. So Barnard really was the launching pad for me, although I didn’t know it at the time. But I would tell the girl that I was that she did a good job. That she really did incorporate a lot of new things. That she stretched. And I would tell her, “Well done for sticking to who you really were and not compromising.” It was lonely, and it was hard, and I got

a fair amount of teasing for the way I thought. And I certainly never felt that I was ever supported, in any way, by the administration. For where I stood and for what I thought. I thought they catered entirely to all the misbehaving people. But—and that's why I never contributed financially, to be honest. That's why I haven't. I gave some money to the Annette Baxter Fund. I loved her.

Q: She was a wonderful lady.

Bell: She was. But that's the reason I haven't really contributed over the years. My dollar goes to my boarding school. But I think being part of this, reconnecting with you, Shelley, and remembering those years that I really haven't thought about in such a long time, it has made me rethink it, and I will contribute now. I will be giving a gift for our reunion. And I've never given one before.

Q: Well, that's really wonderful to hear. Is there anything I haven't covered that you feel strongly about?

Bell: I guess I'd like to say that I'm really glad that we went to college when we did. I don't think it was easy. I don't think it was particularly pleasant. And I think many of us feel a little regret that it couldn't be a little more the way we thought it would be. But I think we all are

fortunate that we were touched by one of the great social upheaval movements, whatever you want to call it, of the times. For me, being confronted with all of that really helped me to define what I really thought and what I really felt. It was hard to realize that I was the minority, and that not much of anybody was going to agree with me, but in the end, being true to myself meant that I married a wonderful man, and we had two children that I'm very, very proud of. And I consider that my finest achievement. I'm proudest of that.

Q: Anything else?

Bell: I don't think so.

Q: This has gone very well.

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