BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Christine McDonnell

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Christine McDonnell conducted by Frances Connell on September 17, 2015. 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 Alumni Class of 1971 Oral History Project	
Interviewee: Christine McDonnell	Location: Boston, MA
Interviewer: Frances Connell	Date: September 17, 2015

00:00:01 Q: This is an interview taking place Christine McDonnell at her home in Jamaica Plain, Boston, on September 17, 2015, and the interviewer is Frances Connell. This is for the Barnard College Voices Oral History Project Class of '71. First of all, Christine, thank you for agreeing to be part of this, and I'm sure you'll have some interesting things to tell us that you'll want to share. We usually begin by asking about your childhood, your family, special relationships.

00:00:41 McDonnell: I'm the youngest in a family of four, and I sort of—most of my early time—was spent in a town outside of New York, Pelham, and there were tons of kids. You came home from school, change your clothes and you had to be home when the street lights came on. People didn't know where we were most of the time. It was a really delightful place. And then my mother died when I was nine, and my father remarried. And when I was eleven, I then went to school at a boarding school where my mother had attended, and my grandmother, and my sister was going to the same order. The same order had given her a scholarship for college. I had a scholarship for—whatever you call it—eleventh through eighteen, sixth grade through high school. So I came home on vacations, but we really weren't part of that family, really by choice because it was a very chaotic situation. And also my father had moved us from living with my grandmother and aunt and uncle, so I don't think we ever really thought of—certainly my sister and I didn't think of the next family and location, that new grouping, as family. So I call it the Great Diaspora, of what happened after my mother had died.

00:01:59 Q: And you were still in Pelham?

00:02:00 McDonnell: Well, no, because he had moved us when he remarried. So it was the ending of that whole household, really, which was the only place that I'd ever lived. I'd always lived with those people, my aunt, my uncle, and my grandmother. There were a lot of changes right away. My mother died very suddenly. There was a party and she died on the dance floor, of an aneurism. She was forty-five. So it was a shock. I mean, obviously, no one expected it. So that's pretty much what happened.

I would always go back to that town because I had a wonderful friend there, and her family kind of took in my brother and myself as much as possible. We were always over at their place and in the summers would always be at the beach. So I would come home from boarding school and spend a token number of days in my father's new family—with the stepmother, the Evil Edith. She'd like to have public scenes, and we never even heard an argument before that, so we were like, "Holy moley. Wow. This is pretty intense." So I would then go back to Pelham where my aunt and uncle still had an apartment, and I then would just always stay with my friends. And that continued, really, for a long time. Really it continued until I was old enough to get mother's helper jobs. I would come home from school, read the *New York Times*, read the domestic section, make the phone calls, go to New York and interview, and end up at Fire Island. So there were ways of dealing with it. But, I mean, Pelham is really my idea of childhood, and those big houses and those huge trees, and just having that sort of freedom.

When we had children, my daughter and my son—who are both Koreans—when they were with us, we lived in the South End. We had a wonderful place, but there were hardly any kids, and they had to be fixed at the hip with us. All I could think of was how much I loved the fact that nobody knew where we were. We had bikes and we were just all over the town. So we moved to Brookline, and that's where my daughter—my daughter was old enough to have a lot of freedom, which was great. I taught in Brookline, so the kids were already there in school as faculty kids. But it just seemed such an idyllic situation that kids could just come over and dump their bikes on the front yard, and hang out on the porches and go play hoop, you know. It really is kind of the town that time forgot. There's a wonderful author, a Brookline author, called Edith Pearlman, she's a fabulous short story writer, and she calls it that "leafy wedge of Boston." [Laughs] And I still remember the first time I went to interview out there.

So after—just to jump a little bit ahead—after library school at Columbia I went to work for New York Public Library—and I'll say a little bit about that later because it's really formative—but, um, after the big layoffs in New York and the city went belly-up in the mid-'70s, I came to Boston and I was at Simmons [College] teaching—there's a program there. Anyway, I ended up in Brookline right after Reagan was elected, because my grant was ended. Just, boom. The election was in November and we hit the streets. Terry, my husband, was at the Museum School, and boy, we really got jobs fast. He got a job as a baker, and I got a job teaching eighth grade in Brookline. I still remember going for this interview and saying, "Wow, this is a lot like Pelham." It's the same vintage. The kind of houses and the spacing of them and the kind of trees. "This is amazing. I didn't even know this place is out here." [Laughs] It's not far. I could walk to it from here.

So anyway, that's kind of a capsule on childhood. My best friend was—is still one of my dearest friends. Her name is Anne. It's so funny. I've been working on a middle-grade novel, and I sent her the chapters that are based in their summer house, which was this kind of rickety old farm house in Westhampton, and not at all the fancy end of Westhampton. It was really not a house that you would preserve in any way [laughs], but, boy, we loved it. They brought us down every weekend, and it was great.

00:06:12 Q: So you're using that material in the book?

00:06:13 McDonnell: Oh, yeah.

00:06:14 Q: And she's recognizing her home?

00:06:15 McDonnell: Initially I set almost all my books in Pelham, and there were specific, almost, locations—I'm trying to think if that's true anymore. It definitely isn't. I have a little place way up in northern Vermont, which I know—I'm really out of touch. I have no internet, no cell phone—I have a landline. I go online at the library. But it's an old farmhouse surrounded by a working dairy farm. I happened to find it on the internet. I knew the town already. Anyway, I was using that setting in a middle grade novel—the child moves from the city to a town that his grandfather lives in, and it's got a lot of—it's kind of a mix, in a way. I've sort of blended the two towns.

00:07:02 Q: That's lovely. So tell me a little bit about—so who was probably the most significant in your life when you were growing up?

00:07:05 McDonnell: Oh, well, the person who became the most significant after my mother died was my sister. Um, she is seven years older than I. I was nine, and she would have been turning sixteen when our mother died. I had just turned nine, so she was just shy of turning sixteen. And we were both huge readers. Our mother had been a tremendous reader, and so that had been very encouraged. But the real turning point after my mother died—when Regina turned sixteen she got her license. And the little town we lived in did not have a good library, but the bigger town next door, called New Rochelle, had a bigger library. So as soon as she had her license, she would let me tag along, and we would go to the library. She could drive.

And then she really was the one who took a look at the household that my father and his second wife had established on Long Island, and just—it really was so far from what we had been raised with. I don't mean in terms of material things—I don't think that was the issue—but just the amount of emotional craziness. My sister was only seventeen when she did it, but she convinced my father that I should be sent to Kenwood where my mother had gone to school. We had aunts in this order, and cousins in the order—Madames of the Sacred Heart. They are like Jesuits, you know, they run colleges. They're smart. They use their own names. There's, you know, it's not a little local place. But I still don't really know why he agreed to it. But there I went in September. And I've asked her, "How did you do that? We were kids. You were just as much of a kid as I was." And she said, "I just knew that Mother would have hated to have that woman raise you." So, from that point on, we were kind of united in our exile.

She's always been the closest person to me in my family. In fact, I'm going to see her later today. So she was older, as I said, so she kind of stumbled through children's book publishing through a temp job, but it was a great fit. So I didn't go into publishing. She was already in publishing. So I went to library school instead. But we both ended up in children's books. And then when I started writing, I thought I was writing picture book texts, and, uh—so I just sent them to her, partly because if I didn't give her a shot it—I don't know if she'd want them or not, but I couldn't bypass her. So she didn't vote on them. Usually the department has a group meeting that makes the decisions. But, um, so they took that and turned that into a chapter book, a very young chapter book. And she and I have worked together ever since. As one writing colleague of mine said, "Boy, you've only got yourself to blame for that mess." But in fact, it has worked to our advantage more often than not. It's possible I'll start using an agent because she has stepped down from being the head of her department and, uh, I have more—I'm generating more stuff now that I'm not teaching so much.

Anyway, she has always had a huge impact, and has very much—I'll just tell you one story about it. So my freshman year at Barnard, I ended the year with a blood clot in my arm. I was playing a lot of tennis to make up all my gym hours after the strike and all. So I woke up and my arm was just stiff. It was full, it didn't have any give to it. I thought, "That's really strange," so I went to see Large Marge—if you recall, our horrific doctor. And she said, "Well, I'm sure you slept on it." But my boarding school was freezing. It was this old Victorian building. You could hear the winds rattling and we were up in the top floor of the dorms. And I had developed this sleeping technique of crossing my arms and having my blanket in both arms and sleeping on my

stomach, so I knew that wasn't the case. It's like, "I always sleep on my arms. That's not it." So the second day, I went back and she finally sent me over to the infirmary at St. Luke's, and the doctors at St. Luke's. So this doctor, first he dragged me to see a zillion people, and they're all looking at it and measuring it. Finally, he says, "Does your father have a preference for a surgeon. Do you think he'll want you to have private or semi-private?" I said, "My father? My father doesn't have much to do with this situation at all." So there you could see he was a little shocked. And there, looking back it was a perfectly logical question, but—

[INTERRUPTION]

00:12:25 McDonnell: So I was in the hospital, and then when the insurance ran out for in the hospital, they moved me upstairs to the infirmary which was pretty much empty. It was now mid-May, end of May. And then finally, when the school closed, which would have been the beginning of June, they said, "Well, the school's closing, so you better go and pack up your dorm room." But I was still on anticoagulants, and this doctor had said, "Come and see me when you get released." I didn't know what else to do, so I went to see him. And he said, "We'll do the blood work at the blood bank, and I'll handle the prescription." And that continued for a week or so, and maybe longer, and I had a job. I was going up to New Hampshire to waitress on the coast, and the restaurant, the hotel, used these big trays that you loaded and hoisted them on your shoulder, and then you came out and put your tray on this stand and gave it out. So these two doctors—I still remember this—I must have lost a lot of weight during that time because my pants were really hanging down and my stomach was all black and blue from the shots. They said, "What happened to you?" as if I'd been mugged or something. Four shots a day, you know.

So, anyway, it was just a wild little moment. And they both said to me—these doctors—"Do you think you could possibly think of doing something else this summer than carrying these trays?" And I said, "No! This is my job. I have to. I need the money. I'm leaving. I leave in a week to New Hampshire." So they got me off anticoagulants and off I went, and that was that.

00:14:02 Q: Oh my gosh. And what had caused this? What had caused the clot?

00:14:05 McDonnell: Well, it was in this arm, and I had had an abortion. They knocked me out with an injection to that arm, so I always figured it was that. And also, I'd then gone right on birth control pills, and it was exactly the time—in fact, it was on the cover of *TIME* magazine. Because this doctor was really intense about it, the doctor at St. Luke's—it was just when they came out with the connection between birth control pills and clotting. My mother had died of an aneurism, so it was like this for me.

00:14:38 Q: Oh, that's awful.

00:14:40 McDonnell: Yeah, it was. It was really—but anyway, the gist of the—the other thing to mention about that, is that my sister came to see me every day, and brought me books every day from the library. My sister and my boyfriend. I don't think my father visited more than twice. [Laughs] He was so absent for us, you know. Our job was to be funny and smart and not ask for anything, so that's the way that was. That kind of set the tone for me. I really do feel that I was operating without a lot of adult involvement and advice. I used to go to Quaker meeting a lot because my boyfriend was Quaker. You know, they're called birthright Quakers, his whole

family. And, um, those adults were very lovely. But we didn't talk with them about anything personal. So I don't think it never occurred to me that there was anyone to talk to about anything personal. And I am positive that most adults on that campus did not have a clue about how radically life had changed for us. So I do feel that there's this element of just trying to figure it out. So I got married pretty quickly before I graduated, and uh—

00:16:03 Q: Senior year? Junior year? Your senior year, this was?

00:16:07 McDonnell: Well, I'd left. I was coming and going, so—I think it was right towards the end of what would have been Class of '71, but I still had a semester to make up. So it was that June, and there was really no reason to do it, but my ex-husband's—I think it was this little starter marriage. We were so young. He had a grant. He was doing an M.D. Ph.D., and his grant had a higher stipend if you were married. So it was like, "Yeah, sure." So we get in the truck, go upstate, find a campground. My father—this is actually funny—my father said, "You know, if it's within a day's drive, would you let me know where it is?" And I said, "Yeah, but why?" And he said, "I would like to be there. I think your sister and brother would like to come too." I was like, "Really? Why?" I had so little concept of what I was doing. And later, I remember discovering that you could go to children's hospital her until you're twenty-five. I was like, Crap, if I had known that, I could have avoided a lot of mistakes. I just thought we were supposed to be adults. You know? So there was this sort of acting as if. That's what that was like.

00:17:26 Q: Now what did your father do?

00:17:27 McDonnell: He was a public relations guy, and a speech writer.

00:17:32 Q: Oh, so the gilded word was there from the beginning, huh?

00:17:35 McDonnell: Yeah, it's interesting. It's funny because he was very proud of my writing, and at some point, somebody—I think my second stepmother—gave me this packet of a lot of his work. And, um, I have friends like this, too. You know how you meet people who are not willing to revise a lot, to reimagine, to push it further? I have one friend who now he just publishes his novels on his website. Like, are you crazy? Anyway, I just felt that way about my father's work, that he didn't push it hard enough. He didn't do what I now think of as the real guts of the craft. [Laughs] But he did love the word, that's for sure.

00:18:29 Q: So let's just go a little bit further back now. I want to cover more of Barnard and obviously your life since then. What do you remember about elementary school? You said you were a great reader, so you must have been—

00:18:40 McDonnell: I have a couple things that I remember. First of all, I lived in a primarily Irish Catholic neighborhood.

00:18:49 Q: And you were Irish Catholic? You've never changed your name have you?

00:18:51 McDonnell: Yeah, yeah. Isn't that funny? I just realized that—really, within the last couple of years—it's one of those things where you think, "Really?" I just realized that Christine

is a very obviously a very Christian name. [Laughs] I had never made that connection. But, you know Vickie Taylor Robertson? When we were both teaching high school, she would say—she was interviewing in Jersey for Barnard—and she said, "Yeah, when I'm interviewing these kids, I tell them there's this very large Jewish population at Barnard." And I said, "What? What are you talking about?" She said, "Chris, think of your friends." She starts to name all these people that we were friendly with. I was like, "I never noticed that." The only thing I knew was that Lindsay Ralph lived on my floor and we were friendly freshman year, and we used to say that we were both brought into the fold on religious distribution, you know. I was Catholic and she was a Mormon from Salt Lake. And friends would visit, and she would be like, "Are they really Catholics?" [Laughs] We're like another tribe.

Yeah, so I grew up in a Catholic household and went to a Catholic elementary school. This little school. It wasn't so little, but the classes were enormous. There were so many of us. So I thought the number of kids in the class had to be the same number as the year. So it was 1957—there were 57. And it would be on the board, "Fifty seven, minus five absent. Fifty three present." I wish I kept those photos. My friend Anne was in the same school, too, and we had these little uniforms, these little white blouses. So when they took the class photograph, there would be six rows—seven rows of eight, we were jammed in there with just these little rows of desks. And we'd all be standing up—I think we all stood next to our desk. You could not have told—seen one face from the other. Our faces were tiny, and we all looked so much alike. These round little faces up and down the rows. It was such a funny thing.

00:20:57 Q: Was it coed?

00:20:58 McDonnell: Oh, yeah. Definitely, our brothers were all there and we'd walk home from lunch.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:21:23 McDonnell: Anyway, back to elementary school. So when I first went to elementary school, I hadn't gone to kindergarten because I had—first of all, this is ridiculous—just leave it at that. So when I went to first grade, I really didn't care for it all. You know? And so for a while my aunt had to walk me there and back because I was really so unhappy, and she would come and pick me up. But then—so we just played, and it was by height. I was in the back of the room. We played all morning. We'd walk home for lunch, get new toys to share, walk back in, in our little group. We just played and played and played. I never learned a thing. The front of the room seemed like it was a mile away, but one day—at the end of the year—this boy stood up, and he went to the board, and he wrote, and I was astounded. I didn't know how to do that. Where did he learn how to do that? He wrote on the board! [Laughs] So my mother found out I couldn't read after first grade, so she taught me that summer, and I went back to school as a superstar. And from that point on—we were just talking about it, my friend Anne and I. You'd get the reader. And there were catholic versions of *Dick and Jane*. Catholic readers. Did you go to catholic school?

00:22:37 Q: No.

00:22:38 McDonnell: Oh, every once in a while, I'll see one, in a used book store. Me and Anne used to think they were so funny. They were primers, but they always had a little religious edge to them. So we would read it the first night. We would just bring it home and read the whole thing. You were supposed to cover your books in those brown paper bags. So we would have read it the first night. So then you had to pay attention to where people were reading in the line, so—

00:23:04 Q: All fifty-seven of you.

00:23:06 McDonnell: It was a long time [laughs].

00:23:11 Q: Five books later—

00:23:12 McDonnell: Right. I remember that very clearly. In third grade—I do remember this very clearly. I think you were allowed to take your book out, maybe not, if you'd finished something. So I'd finished something, and I was reading *Toby Tyler Ten Weeks With the Circus*. It was a library book form New Rochelle, and I was so involved in the book I had no idea they'd gone onto another subject. But the monkey dies, and I start to cry in third grade from this book. And I'm not supposed to be reading it anyway at this point, so that's one of my memorable moments.

And in fourth grade, we had a lay-teacher name Mrs.Sheeran, and you were really lucky if you got her, because she had a back door—it was a basement classroom. You went up these little

steps and down this alley. And she took us out every morning to play kick ball. We always believed we were being smuggled out, but obviously you can't get fifty-eight kids out of a building without people knowing about it. But she was the only person who ever gave a break during the middle of the day. So you'd go out and play kickball for a half hour, and then go in. And that was the year—my mother had died that year in July. And we seemed to be incredibly prone to accidents. I broke my ankle on one leg on Columbus Day, and I had a walking cast, and then it was taken off after four weeks. And then I had an Ace bandage and everything was cleared up. And the day everything was cleared up, I was roller skating and I got hit by a car, [laughs] broke an identical fracture on the other side. So I spent a lot of time in Mrs. Sheeran's fourth grade being the rope turner [laughs] because my casts, you know. Anyway, she was a great teacher.

When I started teaching sixth grade, which was in the '90s, I'd always been positioning for, "What's the oldest group I can get?" And it was outside my license actually, but what grade could I have all day long. I was just so tired of the clock. It's like I had to get away from the tyranny of the clock. So sixth grade—at that time—was the answer. It's no longer the case. Everything's very fragmented. But if lunch was early—some years you'd get an early lunch, some years a later lunch—so if lunch was early, like ten forty-five, then when they come back in, we'd take a break in the later session. If lunch was late, we'd take our break at ten. And I, like Mrs. Sheeran, I was fairly close to an outside door and it entered onto this little courtyard, that wasn't meant to be a recreation space at all, but it was ideal for one class, because there were enough of these—the sidewalk squares were big, so there were at least one, but sometimes two versions of foursquare could go on. And it faced a brick wall. There was a grassy area and

windows on this side, but a flat brick wall that they would play this insane game on with these hard rubber balls. And I never could quite figure out the rules, but it had a huge rotating group going through it. But I always thought, I do this in honor of Mrs. Sheeran, take my class out and read aloud.

It's funny because I left that position to take a position as a librarian in the largest school in Brookline for my last nine years of working there, and for the people who followed me—the people in charge—very quickly put a nix on that. But the principal would never have told me that. She would never have told me. I don't think she would have dared [laughs]. I was like, "That's too bad. That was a really good tradition." Of course, not everybody got to do it. Well, so what? Not everybody gets to do everything. If you're sane enough, you get those kids outside. And this May or August—a friend of mine is working at the same kind of school that we had gone to with the order of nuns. It's in Newton. They needed a middle school librarian, so she called me and said, "Why don't you come over and talk to these people?" I knew pretty quickly I wasn't going to take it for lots of good reasons. But when I was talking to the head of the middle school—some of those children are there until six o'clock at night. He must have thought I obsessed, but I kept saying, "But when are they fed?" [Laughs] You can't keep children until six o'clock at night and not feed them. "When do they go outside, and when do you feed them?" It turns out there is a perfectly good plan for it, but he wasn't in charge of it. I must have brought it up three or four times. I just couldn't imagine it—you have children here until six o'clock at night and you haven't fed them since lunch? That's insane, you know [laughs].

00:27:48 Q: Okay, well that sounds like a pretty—so was there a lot of discipline in the school to manage that many kids at once?

00:27:52 McDonnell: Oh, in elementary? It was just—there was just zillions of us.

00:27:59 Q: The nuns weren't hitting you with rulers or anything.

00:28:01 McDonnell: No, not me. I was always really smart, so that wasn't an issue for me. They hit boys more than they hit girls, and they didn't hit much. My brother was really in terrible shape after my mother died, so he was under the gun a lot. He was not in great shape. He was twelve.

But the more formative stuff—that education—was trivial, really. We just read all the time. The school was doing long division—and my uncle was a math person, and one time—I think it was in third grade, I was sick with something for a while. And, you know, you stayed home when you were sick. First of all, your mother and your grandmother, everybody was home and you just stayed home. They didn't give us a lot of drugs, so you went to bed. But they were doing long division, and he showed me a different way to think about it and do it. So when I went back to school, I showed that, and I just remember this silly nun saying, "A mathematical genius!" Like, what an idiot. You think I made this up? I'm nine years old. I didn't make this up. My uncle taught me. Just silly stuff.

So when I was then leaving that kind of parochial school education—you know, my friends from there are certainly well-educated. School didn't really get serious until high school if you were in one of these elementary schools. And so when I went to boarding school, it was very academic, and tiny. My graduating class—the entire school when I graduated was probably 200, 210. The whole school, kindergarten through twelfth grade. So our classes were never over twenty, twenty-one. But when we were younger, they were smaller than that. And we wrote all the time. It's funny, because in fifth grade, we had writing on Friday afternoons. It was the first time that we had writing of any kind of level. So I remember, I would be walking back from lunch—we had a ten or fifteen minute walk. So we walked home for lunch, had lunch, and walked back. Usually, I'd walk with my friends, but I just remember when we started having this Friday afternoon writing, I would start composing on the way back to school. You know, it was really a highlight for me. And I still remember pieces that I wrote. It was just. I can't believe that we didn't have more writing.

00:30:30 Q: This is fiction?

00:30:31 McDonnell: No, I think they were little essays. I wrote one about our house. But they were incredibly short. Teeny, teeny things. Things that you would do in first or second grade here in terms of length or content. And so when I went to boarding school, at Kenwood [Academy]—is what it was called. It was the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Albany. So when I went to Kenwood, there was a lot of focus on writing all the way through, all seven years that I was there, and it would grow in complexity. But I still remember this exercise we would do when we were eleven. It was called "The View from the Brownstone Steps." It was a very

simple paragraph description, but it was really about how you describe things, what order you describe things and in what sequence, and what's going to begin it and end it. But they weren't formulaic. And we did know how to do the five-paragraph essay, whatever that crap is, but it wasn't something that beaten into us. That was like something you had in your back pocket for a fast essay answer. But what you were really writing was based on a lot of, um, samples of great writing. So interesting. And every year, there was an essay contest for all these kinds of schools in North America.

Where I was in school was the motherhouse for North America, so the people who ran the order were there, and we would come into—so when I first went—I'll talk about writing in a minute—the very first year we were there, we were in silence until—you go down to mass in silence. You were in silence going to breakfast in the refectory. And then in breakfast, you were supposed to speak only French. We all took French; there was no other choice. And Ma Mere, the French nun, would be there. And then after breakfast you could do whatever you wanted to. I don't really think that continued, or if it did continue, it didn't have the magnitude of lining up with our veils and going down these stairs. We were always in size lines, like Madeline, and going down the stairs, and then you walk in—and the community had been in prayer for probably two hours by the time we came. And they had done their chanting and stuff. And they had these side carols where the bench folded up and they had a little kneeler, so they were all on the sides of us in these incredible carved rows, and we were in the center ones, and then the chapel was up front. But it was very dim when we first came in, and very quiet. It was quite austere. And it was also freezing [laughs]. I have to say, the school was freezing. So you were literally wearing your

knee socks and your grey wool skirt, and your shirt, your vest, your sweater, and your blazer. And you wanted every inch of it. It was freezing.

And I never—I never had any religious connection to what was going on. I remember this pretty clearly. I was pretty young. It was two months a year that we had to go again in the afternoon, it was at five or five-thirty. It was called benediction, and it was very beautiful in that the light coming into the chapel was very gorgeous. And it was chanting, you know, it's just a prayer chanting of the rosary in May, and there was something else—I don't remember what it was—in October. Probably the rosary again. The light was great. I would watch that, and watch how the sky changed. The other thing I would do was, I would make up what I was going to daydream about when I went in there, because it was boring as all hell.

So religion had not made a huge inroad with me, and when I was a senior—the person who was in charge of North America, that area, she was the reverend mother, I think they called her. Fitzgerald was her name. She was very smart. She had been in charge of the school when my mother had been there, so every once in a while, she would tap me and pull me aside into one of these parlors where the community met their guests, and she would tell me some outrageous story of, you know, my mother sneaking out with her friends to go sledding on refectory trays, and how she was waiting for them when they came back up the hill. You know? I remember another story of my uncle coming with the instructions—he was in college—to take my mother out to dinner but Fitzgerald couldn't let her go because she was in solitary confinement for some other terrible offense. She was in the infirmary and couldn't go out. It was funny. She would tell me these stories. I was a good student, but I wasn't an ideal member of the community at all.

00:35:08 Q: So you're totally immersed in this religious—and it's not all connected to anything.

00:35:10 McDonnell: Isn't it amazing? And I had a lot of respect for it. I mean, there were contemplatives. I knew which ones were contemplatives. When one nun in the order died, I remember the quietness of it. And these incredible ceremonies when people joined the order. They would come in in bridal gowns. And then go out, their hair would be cut, and they would go out, and when they come back they wore white, when they were novices, and then they would wear black. I knew how smart they were. There was no question in my mind that it wasn't authentic for them, and certainly it's authentic for lots of people, but it wasn't ever for me. So my senior year—so the woman who was in charge of the school, the principal, Sister Anna Boyle was her name, she had been both at that school and at Manhattanville with my mother. So there were people at the order who'd known her. They'd known her all through high school and college. And every once in a while, they would mention it, you know.

I don't know what I was doing—I was probably twelve or thirteen and being a jerk in the hall or something, and she pulls me in the office and says, "If there was one thing your mother had, it was sincerity, and you had better start cultivating it." I didn't even know what she was talking about. It was like a zen kōan to me. What was I doing that was insincere? I mean, I knew I was an idiot, but I was just fooling around. Just doing something stupid in the hall. But obviously I never forgot it.

So fall of my senior year, my roommate had—I think it was tonsillectomy or appendectomy—I don't remember which.

00:36:42 Q: [Laughs] This really does sound like Madeline.

00:35:44 McDonnell: Oh you should have seen the building. The building was incredibly like it. It was really very interesting. I was in a writing group one time and I had situated a story there that wasn't working very well, and this woman who was really cool said, "If you have that body of knowledge that people don't have, just savor that." Know that someday—don't waste that. It's a very powerful tool.

So anyway, the way you had to do it—the principal—she would come in at the end of dinner, and if you had a special request you lined up during dinner. First of all, I was watching Pat sleep in because she had late sleep because she was recovering from an operation. So I thought, "This really stinks that I'm getting up and you're not." So after about a week of it, I got in line, and when it was my turn, I asked for year-long—usually when you asked for late sleep it was for one night, you know, you weren't feeling well, you had a sore throat or something—I asked for year-long late sleep. The principal said, "Well, I'll think about it." And the next day she gave it to me. And when I wouldn't apply to catholic colleges, nobody argued with me. And my closest friend the year before, ended up going to Bryn Mawr. She had had to go to the mat. I mean, there was blood on the floor by the time she could get references out of them. Because we were all expected to go to Manhattanville. That was sort of the jewel of their—so we did not. There you go. So, boarding school. Wow.

00:38:16 Q: Wow. That's really incredible.

00:38:18 McDonnell: We just read all the time. We had so much silent study. So much of the day was spent in silence. I don't think we had ever had—I know this for my brother as well—there was never any grieving for my mother.

00:38:35 Q: That's what I was going to ask.

00:38:6 McDonnell: Nada. In fact, we were sent to stay with people down the road, a couple houses away, that had children that we were friendly with. I remember being in their back yard and thinking, "What am I doing here?" And so we went home and said, "We don't want to stay at the Cronins" Our house was full of relatives. You can imagine. I mean, this is incredible. Forty-five, she drops dead. So it was—so the house, um, the living room is what I remember, because you would come in from outside where it was so bright, and the living room was just full of aunts and uncles. They were in black mostly, and they were all smoking. There was this layer of smoke. There was smoking and there were cocktails, you know. This was a really Irish family. That's for damn sure. And they had been arriving all day, so I had been playing badminton and watching them come up the path. I didn't know most of them well at all. I was only nine.

So, what a crazy time. We wanted to come home. We were taken to the funeral, but never the grave. So when I was her age exactly, forty-five—so I had both of my adopted kids were here

then—and I was going—actually it was my friend Anne, it was a wake for one of her parents that I had to go to. And, I thought—you know, I don't know why I knew this, but I knew the name of the graveyard. And this is before the internet. And I thought, "I bet you it's in Westchester." I knew the area code because that's where we had lived. So I call information. Oh yeah, there's a phone number. I call the phone number. "Oh, yes. Absolutely. We know where exactly where it is. Here's how to get here." So I stopped on my way to New York by myself. It was a gorgeous fall day. They gave me a map and showed me how to go find this plot. And it was a huge family plot with this big cross, "McDonnell." Then our cousins were on—there were several other—these were huge plots. So they must have all bought them together. They were all kind of Irish lace, you know, it was Stephen [G.] Birmingham's book. Several of these families, including my father's were in there. Lot's of—my father said—he didn't really get it right.

00:40:54 Q I'm sorry—who's book was this?

00:40:53 McDonnell: Stephen Birmingham. He did this, um—it was called *Real Lace*—it was about what they called "lace curtain Irish," whatever it was about. So I'm up at this plot, and the leaves are gorgeous. There's nobody around and my mother's grave is down here, and I had forgotten that there was an older brother who had crib death, so those two little graves were down here.

00:41:18 Q: So you lost an older brother, too? Or her older brother?

00:41:20 McDonnell: Well, it was before. He was the second—there were five originally. There was a sister, the brother who died, then the sister who's really important to me, then my brother, and I'm the youngest. So I never knew him. He had my father's name, though. So, that was—so there was Peter's grave, and then there was all this room. And [laughs] I was trying to figure out who was who. And all I could think of is who is not here. So in my father's side, there were two suicides, among his brothers. So I think there were seven boys and one girl. I think there were eight in the whole family. And so those men are not buried there. They're not allowed to be. So my father wasn't buried there because my second step-mother—his third wife—had him buried in their family plot, which was in Queens. So we're in limos and it's going over the wrong bridge out of New York. I say, "Why are we going over this bridge?" And my brother said, "Didn't you know she's burying him with her people?" We get there, it's raining, it's very crowded. And my brother keeps saying, "He would not like it here. He shouldn't be here. He should be next to Mother." And it's like, "I could care less at this point."

00:42:32 Q: And how old were you when your father died?

00:42:33 McDonnell: In my thirties. I was trying to think—my daughter was five, so thirty-four, thirty-five. And he'd been sick for quite a while with this kind of escalating heart and lung combination from alcohol and smoking and not taking care of himself. And, uh, when he'd had the first of these many declining situations, one heart attack, and he was intensive care—he was at a hospital in New York, Lenox Hill—and an old friend of mine was an anesthesiologist there. So Nigel came to talk to him and to talk us through some of the choices, just to explain why he wasn't a candidate for—the family had such fragmented pieces of information. But what Nigel

said to me was, “It’s a downward spiral he’s on. There’s no recovering right now. It’s going to be a downward spiral. This is what you can expect.” But the rest of the family never bought that image. They always thought there could be a recovery, so it was drawn out way too long. Probably seven years of these kinds of crisis. Anyway—

00:43:48 Q: So you finally go to see your mother’s grave and you realize there are absent people.

00:43:51 McDonnell: There’s not a whole lot of emotion, it was just who’s not here. So I go back down to the office, and they ask me to stop by, and they say, “Does your family have plans for this real estate? It’s quite valuable.” I’m like, “Real estate. Well, I’ll spread the word.” [Laughs] The Great Diaspora had already happened. But what was funny about it was that last year, there’s something called the Moth here in Boston called Massmouth. I don’t know if you know it, but it happens all over town. So they give you this setting—Monday night, Johnny D’s, the topic is such and such. So I had never heard a topic that appealed to me much, but in September last year, the topic at Passim’s, the coffee house, was nuts. And I knew I had a really good story because my older sister was very, very crazy and spun out after my mother died, and ended up always living in sheltered housing after a period of great chaos until they could finally get her settled. So when she died, which was in the winter, my sister Regina, who I’m closest to, called me to say that Mary had died and to make a decision of what we were going to do. There are several iterations on what we ended up doing, and it ends up in this cemetery for the rogue burial.

It was such a crazy story—so I had this great story. Also, Mary had been nuts throughout our childhood. There was this little dresser—it was part of my parent's bedroom set, but it was perfect size for a little kid. It came to me before my daughter was coming from Korea, and when I went to paint it—I went to pick it up—someone had scrawled in crayon on the back, "Mary is nuts." Obviously in fury over something. She was difficult. So I end up telling the story in Massmouth, and I make it the semifinals. I make it to the finals. It's four hundred people—it's sold out at Coolidge Corner Theater. And it's all videoed. All of them are on video. I come in second. It's a great story. [Laughs] My one friend is sitting next to a couple from Europe, and the man turns to the wife and says, "Could that really happen?" [Laughs] And about a week or two before I said to a friend, "I don't know if this really reflects so well on me and my family." And she said, "Well, it probably happened a long time ago." I said, "Yeah, last May." [Laughs] Maybe not even a year.

00:46:29 Q: Was your sister ever diagnosed?

00:46:30 McDonnell: Well, let's see. When my mother was alive, she could keep her inside of the straight and narrow, and she was also in schools run by the same order of nuns. But after she died, she really spun out. She did finish this junior college, and then it was very clear she couldn't hold a job. I don't think there was a diagnosis until it got so bad that she ended up being hospitalized, and then there was a diagnosis and anti-psychotics and stuff like that. It was a sad life, but that's the life it was. I really kind of cut her out in a way, in that she was so difficult and I wasn't living in New York. She would be at family events and [laughs]—I used to joke about

it. We should just have a pool. Do you think the explosion would happen before dinner, during dinner? Let's figure it out.

00:47:29 Q: Painful. This is so much like my family. We had three suicides.

00:47:31 McDonnell: Oh, there you go. Are you Irish? [Laughs]

00:47:36 Q: Enough Irish to be crazy.

00:47:37 McDonnell: Enough Irish to be crazy. Right.

00:47:38 Q: The German and Czech as well [laughs].

00:47:39 McDonnell: So, anyway. Barnard [laughs]. So I come to Barnard from a tiny, tiny convent boarding school. I come to New York.

00:47:55 Q: What was your decision? Why did you choose Barnard?

00:47:56 McDonnell: Money. It was the first of a gazillion decisions in my life that I made around money.

00:47:49 Q: So they gave you a scholarship.

00:48:00 McDonnell: Yeah, it was all about where I got the most money. And it's also funny that—same as this doctor saying, "Does your father have preference for a surgeon?" I knew that there was not going to be any money from Peter J. McDonnell, and that I wasn't supposed to ask for it. That's the interesting piece that I'd been so well taught not to ask for anything. Regina, my older sister, she would get angry about that. And she was angry at him when he was alive. I did not. I'm telling you—he died, people said, "Oh, how are you doing?" I'd say, "Oh, I'm angry." I thought I was angry at him for dying. That's not what I was angry about. I was angry about the fact that I'd been at the table waiting a long time, and never being invited to sit down. You know? And it was over. It was like, bam, it's done. It's never going to be your turn. It's not going to happen.

So there are lots of positive things to say about what it taught us. We are thrifty, we are independent. You could either be smart or crazy in my family, so you better be smart. You better be funny, or else don't bother coming to the dinner table.

00:49:01 Q: Entertain us. Yeah.

00:49:02 McDonnell: You were meant to be entertaining. And at his wake, I was standing with my sister Regina, and all these business associates—because both my step-mother and my father—he made a happy third marriage after this craziness of the peril of my teenage years.

00:49:18 Q: The evil lady.

00:49:19 McDonnell: Evil Edith. Explosive Edith. Poor woman. She thought she was marrying into some luxury. Anything but. He was a gambler—what a story. But anyway, I'm standing at the wake, and all of these business associates were coming in, and friends. I thought, "Crap. Here we are again. We're supposed to be funny and charming. Is this the last gig we have to do?" It's just outrageous. Really, what a character. So I sort of little by little—I wouldn't have told these stories this way when I was younger.

I remember the first time I went into any kind of counseling, it was here in Cambridge. Mary Owen was the name of the therapist. It was a therapy collective called Green House. So she takes the history—the first time we were all sitting on pillows. The next time, I come in and she says, "You know, I was thinking a lot about the image that I have of you at the front door of this school with your suitcase. It's such a sad image to me." And I remember saying—I said, "Oh, no. It was a lot of fun. We played field hockey, we had—" [Laughs] You think back—I mean it took me so long, even now, to acknowledge what it was to grow up without a mother. And now I will often, kind of jokingly will say, "Well, we have a lot of rough edges. We motherless children, we didn't quite get the lessons," especially about tact, and equanimity, [laughs] and grace. You know? It's c'est la vie. You do what you can.

00:51:09 Q: So let's go back to Barnard. You arrive at Barnard.

00:51:10 McDonnell: So I'm there. I'm there at Barnard in '67.

00:51:14 Q: And what do you remember when you first arrived?

00:51:16 McDonnell: I remember that I had my desk facing Broadway. I was in the back of the courtyard—Hewitt? I don't remember what the name of it was. It's the one, of the three dorms, the one—the door you went in, and the connecting one. The connecting one was Brooks. I think it was Hewitt. I was in three Hewitt. So I had my desk facing out the window, and it faced across the courtyard onto Broadway, and it took me a couple of weeks before I had to take my desk away from the window. It was mesmerizing. I could stare at that movement all the time. So I moved my desk, put my chair there, um.

I was way over my head in some things, but the most memorable experience from my freshman year academically was Barbara Novak's introduction to art history. And I base so much of my teaching on the methods that she used. The first—I'd say the first full two months at least, there was no chronology, there was nothing about, "Who was this artist? Identify this painter." It was at two in the afternoon, and I can sleep any time between one and three.

00:52:31 Q: You finally got to sleep in.

00:51:33 McDonnell: That's right. I did. It was funny too. So the lights would go down. That was the problem. The slides came up and the lights would go down. But she would bombard you with many, many contrasting slides, and you were developing this kind of a vocabulary for depth and composition and three dimensions and two dimensions. Is there space? Can you stand in the red studio in [Henri] Matisse? How much room is there in the back of the [Jan] van Eyck. Where's the space there? What's the external—it was magical.

And then, I had wanted to take it because there was this studio attached to it. And the very first day of the studio there was somebody who's—some graduate student—she had us fold this piece of paper up. Sixteen squares, or so, eight squares or something, and then you were supposed to draw an abstract figure in each of the squares. I didn't know what she was talking about—an abstract figure. I never went back. It was optional. It was many of those moments at Barnard where, you know, it wasn't—I wasn't to the manner born. I was easily dissuaded. Also, I didn't really know how to access what was available. It was my senior year before I realized that people were taking writing classes. And by then you couldn't get in. Yeah, senior year. Because I had come and gone.

I left Barnard at the middle of my sophomore year. I did what I think of as the East Coast Tour. I'd gone home with this friend, my boyfriend, to Indiana. His father taught at Earlham [College], and it was just so powerful to be out of the city. And we went one day to these people who were on the faculty, and help them—It's amazing that I remember this, but they had goats, and we helped trim the hooves of the goats. I had these mittens that his sister had knit for me, these wonderful mittens, and they stank of goat when we got back to the city. I loved the way it smelled. It was like, "I just can't stay here." January in New York. I wasn't in the dorm. In loco parentis had ended. So I was staying with my sister. What a mess, so I decided I would leave. Bam. One of many quick decisions. So people were like, "What are you going to do? It's winter. It's not like you can go to the beach. You got to do something." And someone said, "Well, Stony Brook [University] is starting. It's pretty new and they're looking for students. Why don't you give them a call?" So I don't know how this all fell into place, but I ended up being at Stony

Brook and taking care of kids for this British couple. I was there in a matter of weeks, and stranded my sister with this apartment.

Just being out of the city was so powerful to me. It was very easy. I mean, I did a 4.0 semester easily, because I wasn't waitressing and swimming and being lonely and crazy. But I didn't stay. It wasn't a sense that I could stay there. I moved to Boston to live with this guy that I'd met. That I ended up being my first baby starter marriage. And then I was up there for a year, and I was at home for Easter. There was a blizzard, a shock blizzard, and I went with—my sister and brother-in-law lived in the West End then, so he and I went up to the West End Bar in the snow, because I couldn't get back to Boston. And over some beers he said, "What are you going to do with yourself? You can't just be someone that somebody lives with. You got to figure this out. What do you want to do?" And I said, "I want to go back to Barnard." I had so much shame about having left. And also, I really knew that these places—I mean this was serious. In both of those schools, I did straight 4.0s and it wasn't that I was wildly different in applying myself. Barnard was a tough school. And it was like, Well, I'm going to do it there.

00:56:36 Q: So what was the second school? I missed that.

00:56:37 McDonnell: Oh, BU. And that was interesting, too, because by going to BU for a semester, I blew my Regent's New York State Scholarship. So when I came back—I don't know if you left during that crisis time—they would do anything to help you. I mean, one phone call and, "Absolutely. There's a spot for you." I had heard from somebody that over half the class had left by the end of sophomore year.

00:57:00 Q: I'm beginning to believe it because so many transfers came in.

00:57:02 McDonnell: Exactly. And they had to get that number down because it's a terrible figure to have. From friends who work in academia now, I tell the story, "I'll tell you why they helped you out." Anyway, they were very good to me. And the guy at financial aid—it was being done at Columbia then—he tried a couple of different ruses to get the Reagent's back, and when he couldn't, he said, "You have to declare yourself independent. You have to become an independent minor." And you know, I hadn't gotten any money from home in two or three years. So he told me what I had to do. I had to tell my father he couldn't declare me on his taxes, and it was really difficult, but I did that and that was that. And I got a little more aid.

00:57:43 Q: So this was your junior year now?

00:57:44 McDonnell: Yeah, so I was there for three semesters, gone for two, and back for three. But I was always commuting up to Boston. I never really got my feet back on the ground again.

00:57:56 Q: This is the boyfriend in Boston.

00:57:57 McDonnell: Yes. I had two really serious—I had a serious boyfriend at Columbia, and he went to do his alternative service after I went out to Stony Brook. I thought that by him saying he had to go do that, that he was ending the relationship, so I ended the relationship. I still see him—I'm still in touch with him. Actually, I have this book of his son. Let me show you this.

Did you know George Alexander? George Alexander was my boyfriend, and this is his son's work. He's a really impressive photographer, Chris. Um, anyways, so I still keep in touch with George. I went to see him when Vicky Taylor was getting married, which is six years ago. She lives in a town not far from his, so I went to see George and his wife. And I always thought that he was going to have this really adventurous life, because he had gone to Africa and Germany, and he would hitchhike home from Mount Herman to Indiana. I just thought his life was going to be so exciting. And in retrospect, his life has been pretty parochial, and my life has been so much more [laughs] interesting. It's just funny. And so when I went to see them, I just couldn't believe how narrow their life was.

00:59:25 Q: Now did they stay around Earlham?

00:59:27 McDonnell: He graduated from Earlham.

00:59:29 Q: Because my son went there, so I know it a little bit.

00:59:31 McDonnell: His father was a math professor there. The family, I think stayed there. But then I think he and the woman he married I think finished at the University at Bloomington [Indiana University Bloomington]. Um, he may have finished at Earlham, because guys who had done a renovation for us in the South End were Earlham guys, and it just came out. It's like—who are these guys? It was a collective from Cambridge. It's like, these are really unusual contractors.

Terry, the man I married, when Reagan was elected and we didn't have my grant and he left museum school, he became someone who taught baking at Warburtons. If you remember, they were a hot bread bakeries. And, uh, why did this come up? Oh, it was Earlham. So he was unhappy and at that time, probably still—when you adopt—so my daughter was four when she came. And they ask you to take six months off. Someone should be home with the child for six months. And later we found out nobody else did it. But we were scrupulous and we did it. So the second time, Terry took the leave, because DooWook, my son—he really wasn't that interested in having a father. He wanted a mother. So Terry was, "What am I? Chopped beef?" It was terrible. He was just waiting for me to come home.

But Terry was a baker so he would bake every day for the contractors, and he would serve them a hot tea at breakfast. For their morning break, there were fresh scones. They were very happy, the contractors were. And DooWook thought they lived in the house. He thought that Harvey and the other guy, they lived upstairs. He never really got straight what was going on with these guys in and out of the building. But we found out they were Earlham guys. So I told them I had this boy friend, and he graduated from Earlham. So they bring in their yearbook. It's the same year because he had taken time off, and it's this really dorky picture. So they're teasing me about how dorky he is, "Are you kidding me? This is him?" [Laughs] Anyway, they ended up living in Pennsylvania, George and his wife.

But it was funny seeing him—I spent the first part of the morning just talking with George, and then we met his wife for lunch, and it's a little very conservatively done house, and there was

this plastic runner that you were supposed to step on going through the living room. I was astounded. It's like, "You've got to be kidding me. That's astounding."

01:02:05 Q: That's not very adventurous at all.

01:02:07 McDonnell: [Laughs] No, not adventurous at all, right. Very narrow, very stable life.

So I went back and I finished at Barnard and I—I really had a couple of people that I thought were really spectacular, but the most important thing that happened was, when I went back, I discovered that there was this little ed. program, that there was an education program that Pat [Patricia A.] Graham was running, who later was the dean up here at Harvard. It was just such a powerful fit for me. I do think that I was always mean to teach, and that was—I had done a lot of teaching in high school, tutoring, and working in a community where the school had been a pretty poor neighborhood done at one end of the grounds. So I had that experience. But I really loved those classes. I loved it. It wasn't a major; it was a minor. But I was a real star. Vickie was in it, too. So we ended up teaching together at Brandeis High School on 84th Street. We would get up and take the bus at seven A.M. while all of our roommates were fast asleep. Brandeis was an almost completely black school on 84th and Columbus. And we were young, and the students were old. That's the other thing. There were a lot of kids in the class who were older.

01:03:28 Q: Repeats.

01:03:29 McDonnell: And also because they were immigrants. Huge classes—forty, forty-five.

01:03:34 Q: Well, you knew about that already.

01:03:35 McDonnell: Yeah, but it's funny because when I came to Brookline, I had found out the natural cap is like twenty, twenty-five. They were big classes. And in terms of training, it was very slipshod. The person who was responsible for training me didn't know much herself. She was young.

01:03:54 Q: What were you teaching?

01:03:55 McDonnell: I was teaching English. Vickie was teaching biology, and—what is her name? Harriet was the third person teaching with us. And what was she teaching? Social studies, maybe. I can't remember her name. She became a superintendent. But this is the other thing I remember—a group of us had Pat Graham to lunch, when we were seniors, the end of senior year—and we made some horrific food as I recall. None of us knew how to cook. And we were in the Ed. program. Vickie was there and myself—and what was her name? Anyway, there was a room full of us, and Pat Graham said to us, "Well, I predict and hope that none of you will be in the classroom more than five years. You're far too smart to stay in the classroom." And Vickie and I always stayed in the classroom. She took a few more administrative stuff, I never did. I took my dodge into libraries instead because I hated administration. And it's always struck me as being amazing.

I have friends from Brookline who teach at the ed. school now, and have these kind of teacher-based research projects and stuff. And Pat Graham was the Dean for my friends, and when I told this story, they're like, "Nothing has changed." [Laughs] You know? Nothing has changed. I mean, Eleanor [R.] Duckworth is—she's retired now at Harvard, but she was [Jean] Piaget's American translator. She's Canadian. She worked in Geneva for a long time. She was a very good friend of a man who I dated in my twenties at UMass [University of Massachusetts] Amherst and he was also a Piaget person so I knew of her. And I knew because Klaus would work with her when he went to Geneva. And then I hadn't thought of her at all, and I was on a plane sitting next to somebody who was at the ed school doing grad work, and she had Eleanor's book with her. It's called *The Having of Wonderful Ideas.* And I had this great conversation about Eleanor's work, and it just lodged in my mind. It was like, I just have to get there.

There was an era in Brookline where there were a lot of Harvard graduate students who were coming over—in administration ironically—doing their whatever, you know, practicums. But administrators at Brookline in general didn't need to take more courses. And if you had a grad student working with you you would receive a voucher. It was yours to give away. So I was like a maniac collecting these vouchers. You know? So I used a lot of Harvard ed. school vouchers. I did a lot of work over there during my forties. And I did a lot of work with Eleanor Duckworth. It didn't really transform what I was doing. What it did was that it gave me a language to explain what I was doing, and it also, um—what can I say? It supported what I had been believing intuitively. It supported it with research, about experiential learning and project-based work and activity. Just engagement. That's the bottom line with Eleanor's work, is to see if you can get people to re-engage and to go deeper each time. There's not a finishing point that you're trying

to get to. You're just trying to complicate people's thinking and just push it. Just push it. Not that there's any one place that they're going to get to, but that they get back into the pool again.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:07:36 McDonnell: [I started writing in my twenties. Then I went to a conference on picture books. Arnold Lobel, Uri Shulevitz and Maurice Sendak were there. The question was posed: what makes the ideal text for a picture book? Their answer was, No description.] And this made complete sense. Of course then they had carte blanche, but I had never thought about, "What would you be writing if you didn't write description?" So I went home to do this, and I did a whole series of what I felt were picture book texts about quite a young child. If you don't have description, then you have to have dialog and action. It's a great exercise, for children's writing in particular. Especially if you're writing for younger—because people don't have it to wade through. The characterization has to be embedded in the action and the language.

Um, so I sent to my sister these six or so stories, thinking that maybe they'd pick one as a picture book text. And we were on vacation—we were hiking in Bar Harbor—and I called her and she said, "Well, we're going to take the book. The head of the department went through them. They want to do it as a chapter book. We want to do these three, and we want you to do two more. These three we're not going to take." And it was interesting in that—well, a couple of things were interesting. For one thing, I thought I was incredibly rich right away—it was like a $5,000 advance. I had no idea that you didn't get paid it right away, that you have to do half and then half at publication. That was pretty funny. But the second part was that I think being asked to

revise to that extent was a tremendous gift, in that that's what you have to do. In retrospect it felt kind of like a test. There are plenty of people who won't revise, and who don't revise significantly, or see it as an affront.

There's this great story of my sister. So my sister's a big shot editor. Many award-winning books, head of Viking for thirty years. I know, just coincidentally. She wasn't that when I first started writing. So our careers just kind of were funny. Also, I was on the Caldecott [Award Selection] Committee, and the next year I was supposed to be the chair. And they made a rule that you couldn't do it if you were related to somebody in publishing, which ironically when all your friends are all in publishing. A little bizarre. So our careers—

01:09:44 Q: So you weren't eligible for the Caldecott?

01:09:45 McDonnell: To be on the committee. I'd already served on the committee, so I was going to be the chair the second year. Also the National Book Award also came up with a—so I couldn't serve on that. But it was fine. I don't—and I've done a lot of criticism and articles and I had a column for a long time. But I don't consider myself—I don't think being a critic was my strong card. When I use books with kids is really when I discover them. I never get it as fully by myself. I really need to use it and use it and use it. Then it's like, "Jesus, this is a tremendous text." Or "This is just phenomenal." Or "Look what's going on. I didn't see the humor in that."

So that's the first book. It was called *Don't Be Mad Ivy*.

01:10:29 Q: Don't be what?

01:10:30 McDonnell: *Don't Be Mad Ivy*. It's the title that we came up with. A sweet little chapter book at a time where they weren't doing that many of these early little chapter books. And then the illustrations came and I thought, "That's not what she looks like." [Laughs] So it's a good thing to learn. In the first couple of books there's a background character who becomes the main character of the second book, and then a background character—so here's Ivy. The background character is Leo. Then Leo becomes the main character in the second book. There's a background character in the second book named Emily. She becomes a main character in the next book. There's a main character named Julia. She's the main character in the fourth book. But by this point, they were no longer episodic. It was one continuous book.

So when that happened to me, when I outgrew the episodic format and things were connecting through the whole book, I thought it's time to try a novel. So this is the first novel that I did. And this is in the '80s, I think. Called *Count Me In*. Anyway, this would no longer be considered a young adult book. There's very little publishing for what this book was, which is kind of a ten to fourteen, or twelve to fifteen kind of age group. Now, young adult books are dominated by what is sometimes called the new adult, and it's really aimed at fifteen to twenty-five. And there's just no place for these gentler books.

So after I did that—I had a good time with that. I then I went back to—let me think. I did *It's A Deal, Dog Boy*. They got Brian Karas, who I really like very much, to illustrate it. And it's a lot funnier and edgier. It's Leo again. And so then they reissued *Toad Food* [*and Measle Soup*] as a

companion, and Brian did that one also, which is very sweet. He did a fabulous job on a book called *Today and Today*, which are—it's a year in Bashō, haiku.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:13:23 McDonnell: Anyway, one book leads to another, but I had asked that Brian Karas be considered for this, *Goyangi Means Cat*. And my sister called me back and she said, "There are a couple of problems. Number one: he wants a huge advance." He'd gotten much more popular over the years. "The second problem is: his waitlist is ridiculous. He's not going to get to it for two years. Third problem is: he doesn't sell." I'm like, "What? He doesn't sell? Forget it. You pick!" So they picked Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher. They did a really lovely job on it. Nice tone.

I'm trying to push the to bring out the sequel to this. It's really funny about it, though. They're definitely artists, and they use Hangul as a decorative element, Korean writing, and they use these papers as collage elements. In no place do they mention that this decorative paper is very Korean. Korea is one of the places you can find it, and they never tell you what the words mean. I'm like, "You can't write a book for kids, and then there's writing it, and you don't tell them what it means." So the concession, after I made a big fuss, is this tiny paragraph. It's like, "Oh great. They're really going to notice that that."

But before *Goyangi* came out, I had these author studies with first graders. And there's a great writer—maybe you know her—she's an Australian called Mem Fox. Brilliant picture book text.

In this author study, what would come up, what they would notice is that there was always repetition. There were animals, there was repetition, things rhyme. And then, what they wouldn't get, but I knew they were so successful, is that there's pattern and predictability. They would often forget pattern because that's what all what new, immerging readers need. Mem Fox is a genius.

So I'm in a yoga class, and I'm thinking, Pattern predictability. This is not rocket science. And so I did this text for *Dog Wants to Play*, and it came out as a bigger picture book. I thought was going to be for older kids—like kindergarten, first grade—but we heard constantly that it was toddlers that liked it. People would send me little videos of their toddler being able to recite it. And so I said to Viking and to my sister, "We should do it as a board book." You don't make a penny on a board book because they're expensive to produce and the shelf for a lot less, but it's quite a successful board book. It's a really great book for the format. And you don't get to pick your illustrator usually, but I had found this guy. His name is Jeff Mack. And he had done a book with Eve [Evelyn] Bolton called *Hurry! Hurry!* with great farm animals. So I said to Viking, "Have you looked at him?" And they hadn't. He was very young and out in Easthampton, and they liked him. So we did this book, and *Dog Wants to Play*. It's got all those elements.

So that's where we are. And the book I'm working on now—I had a student in Brookline in the '80s and '90s, and we stayed in touch. He's a documentary photographer and part of a collective called NOOR out of the Netherlands. He's a Guggenheim [Fellowship] winner and a TED Fellow, and this year's Dorothea Lange [Fellowship] winner. He's huge in many ways, but he lives on the south side of Chicago and documents the violence in that neighborhood. He's a

white kid from Brookline, kind of living in exile in a way. He's a very powerful guy. I had an independent writing study with him—or he with me, rather. And he sends me his writing, as well as some pictures. But anyway, it was on my mind that when I look at the NOOR website, it just chills me, the danger that these people are putting themselves in to do this documentation.

And so I had this thought of a book in which the mother would assumed—the father, the photographer, has been taken hostage, he's missing. So the mother believes that he's dead, and used the past tense when she would speak of him. And the child would never do that. That was the original thought. That idea of past tense / present tense turned out to be not helpful at all. But that's the theme, that's the score of the book. The book begins with the news of the father being missing, and the book ends with the father's return. But we're always with the child. We're never with the father, except there's a time when a video is sent, and the child begs to be allowed to see it. So we do see that one video, but that's the only time, that we do have an image of where he might be. And the question of was he alive or not is kind of an ongoing question that some people in the family will voice and others believe is sort of bad luck to voice it. That's the book that I'm just finishing.

01:18:18 Q: And that's geared to what ages?

01:18:19 McDonnell: Middle grade. I would say—what do you say with middle grade? Yeah, fourth to eighth, fifth to eighth.

01:18:32 Q: But they're so much more sophisticated than they used to be.

01:18:31 McDonnell: I know, they are. But loss is loss.

01:18:34 Q: Does that made it harder?

01:18:35 McDonnell: No, I don't think so. I think story is story. I don't think kids—I was talking about this with a friend yesterday, who's a big children's book expert, about how books I had been able to teach cross-grade in the '80s. Robert Cormier, eighth grade, cross-grade, everybody on deck. I would really hesitate to try to do Cormier with eighth grade now. There are kids at the top who still have that level of skill, but there's been a true loss of reading skills because of—I think that there's just—you have to spend time at it, and this screen time is competing. We just can't win that one. And it's not that they're not literate. It's not that they're not bright, or not thinking. But in terms of being able to handle a more complex, longer text, they don't have the chops. And there's a subgroup in each class that can do it, and who really continue to read for pleasure, but they're the odd man out now, even in a good system. That's one reason I was talking to the school about being their middle school librarian because they're all readers. It's this very fun select group of girls. It'd be fun to get your hands on some readers. I had real issues with extreme wealth, and I heard what the tuition was and I said, "I just can't do it."

01:20:00 Q: One of my nephews is a librarian out in San Francisco, in Oakland.

01:20:03 McDonnell: Oh, neat. A school library or public library?

01:20:04 Q: No, it's a private school. The Chinese immersion school. But he said the books are gone. Everything's changed to tablets now. Is that true everywhere?

01:20:16 McDonnell: Well, I think it's in transition. Private schools—some private schools have made that move faster. We don't have that kind of money in public schools to get people up to that level of equipment. But I did get a tablet this summer to take to Alaska, and I got a good one. I got a really good back-lit—I got a Kindle with the good backlighting, whatever it is. I got to say, it's amazingly convenient. When I was trying to read on my iPad, I really hated it. And really felt that I could not focus as well. But I got to say, this little guy, it was more successful. I thought I've got to concede. I don't think the loss is as great. But if you're a book binder, you're in love with paper, so you know, the idea of not having paper is just too sad.

01:21:10 Q: And how did you get into book binding as well?

01:21:10 McDonnell: Well, I had taken a book binding class in the bowels of Columbia Library when I was at New York Public Library. It was a one-semester—I loved it. I didn't continue with it. It didn't really get to a place where there was a lot you would continue, but it had been really lots and lots of fun. So I had a student at the high school, and I kept running into her. She went to Bryn Mawr [College]. I was running into her after she graduated. She'd come back home. And I said, "What are you doing?" She says, "Oh, I'm at North Bennet Street School. I'm doing book binding." I didn't really know it was a full program. So it stayed in my mind, you know. And I thought that'd be fun. I get itchy pretty quickly, so I need a change every couple of years.

I went down and talked to them, and they were quite excited because I had a library degree. So that means that degree-wise, if I had their courses as well, I could run a conservation lab. Well that may be true degree-wise, but I hate administration. So there's no way I would ever run a lab. But that was why they were interested in me. That wasn't why I was interested in them. So I thought, "Well I won't get in. They take six people, and it's international. And even if I did get in, Brookline has a policy: one year leaves only. So that won't work." I didn't know who was in—those HR guys change a lot. So this guy, I went to see him about it, and he said, "Oh, North Bennet Street School! I always wanted to go to North Bennet Street. My roommate was in the furniture program, and we lived right up the block. I always wanted to go. Oh! I'm going to make sure you get this leave."

So I get in, I get the leave, and then it's like, "How am I going to pay for this?" But my daughter was in college and we had already run out of tuition money for her. So that was when I found out they'll loan you anything you want, so I go in for a nickel, and in for the dime. The hell with it—let's go for broke. So I took a two-year leave and borrowed the money. And then in the middle of the second year, Terry got sick. So I technically finished, but I really didn't finish. All of the work on tooling and fine-French binding, I sort of limped through that, not being there that much. And also that level of binding never appealed to me. I was working at The [American] Antiquarian Society, in Worcester, with a really fabulous conservator, finishing up a grant with her and doing a lot of repair. I liked it, but it's exhausting, and it's extremely repetitive. It's very tedious work. And if Terry's illness hadn't stopped me in my tracks, I might have gone ahead and not returned to Brookline after the leave.

He had a great line, he said to me, "You must've researched this a really long time. It takes an incredibly smart woman to find something that pays worse than teaching." [Laughs] I mean, it pays like a pittance. So I was thinking about it. I was thinking about having some of a pension and putting these pieces together. But it was like being in another century every day. I'd go in to the North End on the train, and then we were in the basement, and then preservation carpentry, and then violin making, and then jewelry making, and then the furniture guys. And you'd be using the bathroom, and there's a violin guy tuning upstairs on the fire escape. It's the 19th century. It's craft. I had a wonderful time, I had great friends I'm still in touch with.

I was on the end of the year boat trip, and the guy who was the assistant director—I really liked him, he's a funny guy—and he said to me, "You know, it's pretty amazing that you came into this program with no hand skills at all." It's true, I didn't. Whereas people who come in have done a lot of hand stuff, or they're just especially good at it. That was another interesting thing—to not be good at it. It was a—it's really the first time in my life that I wasn't automatically toward the top of the group. And something that I'd chosen to stay in, that I wasn't avoiding. And it was about—I remember writing to Eleanor Duckworth about this—it took me at least a couple of months to realize that if I didn't start showing my mistakes, I really wasn't learning what I need to learn. And that idea that you would come and go public with a mistake is totally alien to being an achiever. You know what I mean? You only show success. So it was so fascinating. It turned everything upside down for me.

I tried to—when I went back to teaching sixth grade, which I then did for many years, I was trying to figure out how to incorporate that piece of knowledge, that people need to be allowed to not do well. That is really alien to our definition of success.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:27:03 McDonnell: Anyway, so Barnard. I think the most important thing about Barnard, for me, was being part of a group of very smart women, and that that was acknowledged. Even to this day, if I go back to New York, "Where'd you go to school?" "Well, I went to Barnard." "Oh, wow okay." There's a tremendous pedigree to it within our era. I hope that continues. I imagine it does. And I think there's a kind of fierce independence to it. The other thing to it is that I never felt judged according to traditional standards, how I looked or—and there were no expectations about what you wore. It was just kind of wild. People were themselves. And you'd think there would be that whole thing about "Barnyard" and girls not being attractive, a lot of that bullshit. I never felt that that was—never had any kind of impact on me at all.

It's interesting to think how we're all aging. I think that's another interesting thing to see. How do you age having had that perspective? And does it change the way that you age or think about aging?

01:28:19 Q: Does it change you?

01:28:20 McDonnell: Well, I think that being comfortable not dying my hair has a lot of its roots in that. It's more this sense of knowledge that if you aren't true to yourself, things will go awry. More than anything else, you need to acknowledge who you are and be true to that. There's not a putting on of another face. You know?

There was a period when I thought that I wasn't enough of an achiever. You know? And I knew that I was good in the classroom, and that I valued my work—but even around the books. I chose a field, I'm very good at it, but it's a very tiny space in the world. This is what I'm good at. I'm comfortable with that, but there was a time when all you ever heard about was Ellen [V.] Futter is the president of the Museum of Natural History, and so-and-so is made partner, and so-and-so blah, blah, blah. I guess I think that quality of life had a bigger import for me, and also, you just have to do what you're good at. And this is what you're good at. So you go back to Pat Graham saying, "None of you should be in the classroom longer than five years. You're too smart." And it's like well, that's one way to look at it. On the other hand, there's a need for—it's really important to have smart people in classrooms.

01:30:01 Q: So how did you carve out time to do all this writing?

01:30:02 McDonnell: People ask me that a lot. I wrote in the summers. And I think that they're all—I'm not uncomfortable with them—but I would say that what I'm doing and I'm envisioning now is so much fuller because I have so much more time. I'm not trying to get a draft finished by September so that I'm going to get on the shelf and tweak it through year. In fact I was saying to this guy at—GrubStreet is a writing center here in Boston, and I was in a novel in progress group

last spring, which was great. I think I increased the age difference by like thirty years by walking in the door. And I have all these publications, so that's a little embarrassing in that the person running the group had one book by Picador, you know. It's just so—one of the important things was that both of us were very comfortable through the class, and thank God, because that would have been very uncomfortable otherwise. Tim would occasionally say to me, he'd ask me to talk on something that that he had just talked about. What's it like from your perspective. And I was pretty careful to—I finally said to him, "I just have a feeling that most of what I've published has been line edited first draft. A little tweaking here and there. A little cutting, a little shaping. But not reimagined, not a revisiting, not a genuine, How I'm going to play with the text."

But my dilemma is that if you go that other route and you do that other work, you don't want things to be too writerly when you're working in children's books. You want these things to be accessible, and you don't want them to be precious. So I feel like I'm straddling this. But my sister's still my editor and she doesn't hold back, so I know that she'll save me from that. In fact, he would be talking about setting the stage and these excerpts or whatever, and I could hear my sister thinking, "Pick it up, pick it up, pick it up." Or, "Hey you know, I cut chapter four, and chapter three and five met without a ripple." [Laughs] Stuff like that. She's really a little blunt with me. You should soft pedal this more, I tease. I don't think you speak that way to Elizabeth George and Mildred [D.] Taylor. You could be a little kinder, but that's all right. It's fun.

01:32:27 Q: That's fantastic. I know you've also traveled. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

01:32:31 McDonnell: Yeah. Since I've retired. So I retired a year ago, in the spring. And I call these my graduation presents [laughs]. So I rented a house in Ireland for ten days, and some friends came. We had a wonderful time on the Burren in West Ireland. We'd been reading these mysteries set on the Burren in the 1500s. Landscape is so important, and I didn't even know where it was. I'd been Googling around. I found the Burren—all these awful brand-new houses built during the bubble. And then I found this really old place right on the trails. So that was fun.

01:33:09 Q: Where in Ireland is that?

01:33:10 McDonnell: It's a town called Fanore, and it's just south of Ballyvaughan, it's on the west coast, just below Galway, on the Burren. So the Burren is this huge limestone granite—it ends in the cliffs of Moher, but it's this rocky, rocky ledge that extends for quite a long place. And these amazing wildflowers are there in the crevices and all these standing stone burial sites. It's really old. It's incredibly beautiful. Very stark, very beautiful. I never have gone anywhere near but that west. Next year, I want to go to Connemara, and stay longer if I figure that out. And the next thing I did, I went to Bhutan in December. That had a huge appeal to me, and Road Scholar offered a group that there was no extra single charge. So I thought they'd probably select for an interesting group, and it did. It was a great group. It was a terrific job. We had a really great time. And we met the head of the monastic order, we met the chief bureaucrat who handles the—what is the group thing? The national happiness—Gross National Happiness. So that was explained wonderfully.

I may go back to teach. I've now made connections with people who have a connection to a girl's school. I would go for a semester in a nanosecond. It's very alien, but it's very beautiful. My neighbors right across the street, he teaches at Wheaton. So they were going for a semester, and he said that Wheaton had a project in Bhutan. I said, "Your little college has a project in Bhutan? How did that happen?" He said, "The king was in my class." [Laughs] He'd been in there for a semester between being at [Phillips] Exeter [Academy] and going to [University of] Oxford. That's how he got to do that.

And then I just recently went to Alaska and figured out I really need to be more active than that. You know? It's a small boat—only thirty of us. But I wanted to kayak every day, and it didn't—you were on the boat more than that. I'm glad I saw it, but I realized that any kind of boat travel like that is just too claustrophobic for me. It's just too enclosed. You're sitting all the time. And there are three meals. Who sits all day and eats three meals?

01:35:58 Q: You'd be surprised.

01:35:59 McDonnell: [Laughs] That's true. Maybe more people than I know. So, I'm going to go to Guatemala to teach in December. There's a group of people who go to offer a two-week immersion English conversation class for Maya university students, scholarship students who've been chosen for this Maya cultural group. So I'm really looking forward to it. The teaching that I do at the women's shelter at Rosie's Place is very similar to that, in that you can't predict how much spoken language people have.

01:36:32 Q: A lot of Guatemalan and Salvadorians there or?

01:36:33 McDonnell: No, not that much, but the women—I like the literacy ESL [English as a Second Language] level where people have not learned to read or write yet. In my class there are some people from Somalia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Guatemala. It's just an interesting mix of people and languages, but in general, people don't read or write well. Especially older Haitian women, where they have to pay for everything, so they haven't been educated.

01:37:05 Q: So what do you do with them?

01:37:06 McDonnell: I teach in that program, so I have one class Monday and Wednesday mornings, and one class Tuesday and Thursday nights. It's interesting because there's a different population day and night. They're all poor women, but—and there's no one in my classes that are homeless. I know there are homeless people in the classes, but just probably not on my very low literacy, which are more ESL. I don't know about that, why I haven't had that, but I haven't. The people that come at night tend to be the working poor, ESL. Many people have been here for a long time, raised families here, but it's just now getting to the time when they have energy to do that kind of work.

Some people will never learn to read or write. My very favorite person, Louise, I'm so glad—I'll see her Monday. She's also—she has this wonderful smile. Haitian women often wear scarves, these wonderful kinds of wraps, whereas the Somalians wear full head veils. Not veil this way,

but veiled this way. So Louise sits by the window. She always comes early. There's no way Louise is going to read or write—she just gets a little bit of it. But she loves to be there, and she thinks I'm funnier than Letterman. So last spring, [laughs] there was some announcement about the summer schedule, and she couldn't follow it. So she hands me the phone and it's her son. They all have sons or daughters who are in community colleges and stuff. So I say, "I'm a huge fan of your mother." He said, "We hear about that class every night." [Laughs] So she has a good time.

There are new directors there, and they just mentioned at orientation that the goal was five units, and I thought, "You shouldn't say that. That's not a good idea. Why don't you wait until you meet the population?" I mean, what's important is that people are welcomed, they learn a little, they get some confidence. I think to set a goal of a particular number of units is just the wrong way to think about it.

Q: Basic letters.

McDonnell: Most of all, you learn from the people in the room. They're so funny and it's such a good time. It's such a beautifully run place. I think that the philosophy of the—that there's an open door philosophy of it.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:40:27 McDonnell: Anyway, so Rosie's does everything quite well, very clear limits, boundaries, goals. So they'll get with it, these people. They're new. It's fun, though.

01:40:36 Q: Okay. So let's just—we better wind down. I know you have other things to do too. Um, any advice—? I guess, three questions. One, about your spirituality. You said how you became involved with Buddhism?

01:40:52 McDonnell: Yeah. That's actually a really good story, so I'll tell you. When I was teaching sixth grade at Brookline, my social studies curriculum was 500 to 1500 in three continents, so the Middle Ages from the West African kingdoms to China. Well, in China, you're doing Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, and kids love it. You just can't believe what a good fit it is to have big ideas in eleven and twelve year olds. You know? So they all want to be Daoist. But I would always show the little Buddha as part of that unit. And there are these Lamas—remember Lama Dorche. Every year Lama Dorche in the film is speaking to me. So I just wanted to know more about it, and I didn't really know how to go about that.

Then Terry got sick, and I was in a bookstore—we were in D.C. for something connected to his illness—I was in a bookstore there, and I see this book called *One Dharma*, by Joseph Goldstein. And Goldstein's idea—I know, there had been some Tibetan monks that you could go, and it was open. I went a couple of times, and it's like, "I can't learn Tibetan. This doesn't make any sense to me." So, but there's a wonderful quality about these guys all the time. So I found this *One Dharma*, and Joseph Goldstein's idea is that there are enough people who have returned from studying in the east now that it's time—we can have an American Buddhism. The language of

the English, the teachings would be the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, and the practice would be meditation.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:42:43 McDonnell: So I read this book, this great book, and I say, "Wow, who is this guy, and where is this?" Well, they're in Massachusetts. They're in Barre. And it's insight meditation. So I have this piece of information—Terry's really sick at this point—so I'm on leave from school. And I've said to myself, "When this is all over—this whole nightmare—I'm going to learn letterpress printing, and I'm going to learn about Buddhism." Because I'd heard about letterpress in book binding school. And so, it ends, and I've heard that Barre Mass. is where the main insight medication center is, their biggest center. But there's a Cambridge center called Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, CIMC. I start going to their sitting classes to see if I could ever learn to sit still.

And Terry and I—at this place where we met—this crazy weekend with no agenda—included Morrie [Morris S.] Schwartz. So I've known Morrie Schwartz from *Tuesdays With Morrie* from then. And also, Terry had done therapy with Morrie, and Morrie was in our wedding. So we knew Morrie. When *Tuesdays With Morrie* had come up, we had read it. And then when Terry was sick, he said, "I'd really like to read Morrie's books again," so we read them together. And there's the place where Morrie says that his meditation teacher suggested that he have a different image for death. And he says, "You mean instead of the deep ravine between the two mountain

peaks, maybe there's a bridge over a small stream." That image was unbelievably important to us. I mean, it was just central.

And, uh, so I'm at this place, I'm taking these little classes, and I see they're going to have this bereavement service, and everyone's invited. So a friend who'd also been in the same support groups as me, we're there. And, uh, we're still crying all the time. I guess Terry had been dead a couple of months, and her husband, had been dead a little longer but not much. And people are grieving for cats and relatives they've lost years ago, and everything's fine. We go around the circle, blah, blah, blah. And at the end, the woman who was running it, whose name is Narayan said, "We'd like to remember now members of community, yogis who have passed away who we miss and feel close to." And she names Morrie among them. I said to her afterwards, "I didn't know Morrie was a member of this community," and I tell her the story about the bridge over the small stream. She smiles and she says, "Yes, I was his teacher." So obviously this is where I'm supposed to be. So that's where I am.

I would say that it's certainly the strongest spiritual tradition I have. And I've practiced metta, and I practice some meditation. I'm not a great daily sitter, but it's still a goal. Still a goal. And it's a place of great truth. People say things there that I really can move forward with. There's a group of experienced practitioners, or better known as the Old Yogis group, and I've really learned a lot in that group. There was a whole practice of renunciation. Now in Catholicism renunciation is as negative as it can get. I renounce the devil and all his sinful ways. So the idea that you would renounce things and it would be liberating was—again, 180 degrees. We

renounced worrying, hurrying. [Laughs] I renounced regret. It's such a great practice to think of renunciation as freeing.

And I usually do a retreat every year out at Barre. And there were people like Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg and some of the people who started—Jack Kornfield—that started Barre. When they're in town, I make sure that I hear them when it seems like a good choice. I'm just reading a lot of Jack Kornfield recently and thinking that I should get out to—his center is in California now. It's Spirit Rock.

I like American Buddhists. They tend to be pretty sane, very accepting. You know, a lot of different traditions come together in it. It resonates. And also, the other that happened to me after reading the Goldstein book—I was in another book store. I live in bookstores a lot.

01:47:30 Q: Good places.

01:47:31 McDonnell: I know they're so wonderful, and I found this—

[INTERRUPTION]

01:47:59 McDonnell: So I found this book by Salzburg called *Faith*. And in Catholicism, and especially in my school, it was always framed as the gift of faith. The gift of faith, and I didn't have it. And I was very clear about that. I had not been included in the gift of faith, and I always had a certain element of shame about it. I could never stay in student government—I'm fairly

sure that—one of DooWook's doctors said to me, "You know, it could have been mood shifts. It could be related to the grieving. It could have been mood shifting." And adolescence.

01:48:34 Q: Or the lack of being able to grieve.

01:48:36 McDonnell: That's right. It could have been all those things. But also, I just could never stay inside that good little girl box. So I would be elected the captain of the team and then I'd have to resign, or I'd be the head of the class and I'd have to resign. Student government wore these ribbons. Depending on what grade you were in, what color they were. Very obvious, and there's something called "losing your ribbon." I always lost—if I ever got it, I lost it. That's just the way it was. It was a place that was too confining for me in many, many ways. And yet, because it was too confining, I did so much reading and thinking that there's—and I still feel that I have this real need for quiet, which is why Vermont is such a necessary balance in my life. And I knew also that there's this kind of manic quality, that the city sets off, that Vermont balances for me. That's just the way it is. And Buddhism balances it too. And that's obvious. That goes with it. So that's the spirituality piece.

01:49:42 Q: That's huge. Um, okay, in closing, I would just ask you maybe things you are looking forward to in the future.

01:49:49 McDonnell: Huh, looking forward to. To be honest, just having been with my father-in-law through his nineties, I really hope I don't live that long. That's one element. And I'd like to continue to do meaningful work. I think that working is kind of necessary for my health. So I

don't really care about the payment scale as much as I do about the work scale. Um, so I expect to be able to continue with the things that I do well. What else can I say? I have this grandson—that's exciting. But it's not like, "Oh, I have to live for Henry" or "I hope the world will be okay for Henry." I don't worry. I have friends who worry so much about their grandchildren. That's fortunately not on my radar. He has perfectly adequate parents. There's another additional thing about this that I'm really been alienated by the virtual world. I really dislike it. I find that it repels me, and I distrust it. I don't think it breeds a healthy community or relationships.

01:51:16 Q: There's no relationships. [Laughs] There's not talking.

01:51:18 McDonnell: There aren't. And also, I don't know about you, but I think the virtual world as a huge commodity broker. It's like this consumerism that gets fed by it. It's very, very distressing to me. So it's possible that I will end up spending more time in Vermont and less time here. I have good friendships, but it's still a little alien to me, and as it gets—as I feel older, and they feel younger—the greater that I feel that rift becoming, the less interested I am in being in the city. I just have no desire to learn those. Friends who are more involved in their own publishing, their own books swear that they have to have all these accounts. That is not going to happen. I just won't do that. It doesn't connect for me. So as the world moves further in that direction, I feel more alienated.

01:52:15 Q: Yeah. I can see that.

01:52:16 McDonnell: So thank you so much.

01:52:21 Q: Just one last thing. Was there anything we didn't cover that you feel you'd like to cover? And any advice you would have given to yourself as an eighteen-year-old?

01:52:30 McDonnell: Oh, one thing. My book—I'm in several book groups—but my oldest one, my longest-running one is in a neighborhood in Brookline. They were really smart women. And we've been together over twenty-five years now. They're involved in politics and one's a city planner. Anyway, there's an interesting range in people there. And it happened to come up, and I don't remember why—oh, it had to do with the younger people in the group, their children are just graduating or partway through college. I don't know what we were talking about, but women's colleges came up as a topic. And people in my age group in general had been in women's colleges, because those were the elite schools when we were picking schools in the '60s. If you were smart, and you were a woman, and you were on the coast, you went to a women's college. I mean, I think if you were in the Midwest, that wasn't true. No, you went to the great universities. That's my sense. But anyway, what we were talking about, which really surprised me, was that everyone in the group would choose a women's college if we had to advise someone, if we had children to advise. And none of us had succeeded with our daughters in going to a women's college. That's another interesting point. Whereas my friends in Vermont have had more success with that. Isn't that funny? But anyway, it was just neat. It came up spontaneously, and I was so intrigued that we all had that agreement, that it was really important to us. Maybe we may all—now that I I think about it we may all have been from women's colleges, now that I think about it.

So advice? Advice. Huh. One piece of advice is that if the city is too overwhelming, there are other places you can be. I don't think that the city is the best environment. I don't think it was the

best environment for me. And I would have—and it's funny, because I had an uncle who said to me, basically, "You are crazy to go to New York. The best kind of environment is a beautiful campus where you can have peace and quiet and study." And I was like, "Yeah, right. Not me." But I was so distracted by the city, and felt so tiny in comparison to the city, and really so overwhelmed that everyone else seemed to know what they were doing and I didn't.

01:54:57 Q: They didn't [laughs].

01:54:58 McDonnell: I know, but there was this illusion that the city—I don't think it's just Barnard—that the city suggests, that everyone else knows what they're doing. And I was such a lost little soul. And I think that I would have become independent sooner had I been in an environment that was less overwhelming, or that I would have discovered my independence. But I was really under the shadow of the men I was involved with. It's like, "Boy, am I glad that ended." [Laughs] I mean, I out grew and I was really conscious about growing out of it in my early twenties, and ending this marriage that was really stifling. It's just so interesting to me that—the city, I think, is exactly the right place for some people, and not the right place for some people. So, that's it. I think that small is good, and Barnard was small, so that was good.

01:55:56 Q: Well good.

01:55:57 McDonnell: Thanks.

01:55:58 Q: Thank you. It's be fascinating and I appreciate, so much, you doing this. We all do.

[END OF INTERVIEW]