

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 Garrett Connell on October 19, 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: Christine  
McDonnell's home, Boston,  
Massachusetts

Interviewer: Frances Garrett Connell

Date: October 19, 2015

00:02:25:02 Q: So this is Part Two of an interview with Christine McDonnell at her home in Jamaica Plain, Boston, Massachusetts, on October 19, 2015, and this is Frances Connell. So we're going to sort of pick up and fill in some things that we talked about but I didn't get properly recorded. So I guess the first thing would be if you would talk a little bit about the whole process of adopting your children, your son and your daughter.

MCDONNELL: I never had an issue with adoption, and even in my twenties I started to read up on single adoption, which was unusual then. When infertility hit, my husband and I both had a really clear, bracketed timeline in that there were so many things we weren't willing to do. This was early days, this was over thirty years ago. There wasn't much international adoption, but

somehow I had met a couple of people that had children they had adopted internationally from India and from Korea. Our classmate Marjorie Greene had an adoption agency in Maine, I can't remember the name of it. She was able to really give me a sense of how some countries—what's black market and what's gray market. Korea had a very clean process. There was no payola involved. In Central American and South America there were those situations.

So that's one reason why we went with Korea. The other reason was we were disqualified. I had this book, and I would read through and cross out all these programs that we weren't qualified for. My husband had a child, we had both been divorced. There were so many reasons why we were not qualified. I still remember the woman who ran the agency, Phyllis, saying to a group of us, "You really need to acknowledge that in the countries that you're considering, you're the ages of the grandparents." So I'm like, "Ohh, okay." And she said, "And you're definitely a third choice. The first choice is to stay within the family, the second within the culture, and you're kind of a very poor third choice. But that's who you are."

So anyway, we went through the process. We had to find pictures to find out what Koreans looked like [laughs]. It was really before the Korean groceries. I just didn't know any Koreans at all. Or if I did, I didn't know they were Korean. Anyways, so we were in line for a baby. So there's a forty-year issue. My husband was older than I was, so his age—really a toddler was probably the youngest we were being considered for. I remember the woman who ran the agency, Phyllis, saying, "Why did you wait so long?" [laughs]

So on Christmas Eve that year, my stepson was eleven, I got a call from the social worker handling the case. She said, "The paperwork has come through for a particular child, a four year old girl. And that family already had a placement. There was a misunderstanding. It was up to the

American agency, the Boston agency, to decide what to do with this placement. And we all thought of you because of the age of your stepson. But you can decide, it's really up to you.

Terry's already had a baby,"—my husband—"You had not, so it's really your choice."

Meanwhile my husband and stepson are singing, "No diapers! No diapers!" And I said to this woman—her name was Homai, this Indian woman—I said, "Homai, it's Christmas Eve. You think I'm going to turn down a child on Christmas Eve? I mean, is there no symbolism that comes through to you on this? Of course we'll be happy to accept her." She was four years old.

And the next thing that happened was that we couldn't get a visa because the people in front of us had incorrectly answered a question, so they stopped the process because they were investigating the sale of children in Central America. I don't know what this couple had said but there was something they went off-script on. So we couldn't get visas. It was January, and I was so jumpy about this child coming that I would have to walk from Boston to Brookline just to get calm enough to teach all day. I was teaching eighth graders so you don't have to be too calm when you're hanging out with eighth graders!

But anyway, what happened? Oh yeah, it was Martin Luther King's birthday and we had the day off. And, you know, before cell phones teachers didn't really have access to phones much during the day. The rule of thumb when you're teaching, especially if you're in an elementary or middle-school classroom and you're with those kids the whole day, is that if you don't go to the bathroom before those kids arrive at eight, you're going to have some kind of urinary tract infection: [laughs]you gotta make sure you take care of it all.

So anyway, I had a phone because I was home. So I stayed on the phone all day and I finally hit someone at immigration, a real person, here in Boston. I told him the situation and asked what he

needed and he said, “There needs to be proof that she was voluntarily surrendered.” I had all of her documents because the rule was, as soon as you accept the placement, you’re the one given the documents. So I had these official documents and I read to him right off it that she had been found at a particular location in Seoul, she had been kept at the police station for a certain number of days, then she was surrendered to Holt-Korea, the adoption agency in Korea. It was really very clear, signed, sealed, there was really the report from the police. I said, “Do you think that would be enough?” And he said, “Yeah.” So I called the agency to see if there was a policy about these documents and they said, “Oh yes, absolutely, you can’t show those documents.” And I didn’t tell them the whole set-up, but I just got in a cab and went down to the JFK building and showed them the document, and we had a visa, so she arrived in February. February 21<sup>st</sup>.

00:06:01:19 Q: February 21<sup>st</sup>?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, yeah. And she was technically four, but I always thought she was older. She was tiny but so dexterous, so sharp that I thought, “Gosh, I don’t know if this is a four-year-old.” Ultimately—Children’s Hospital can do some kind of bone scan for it, but it’s plus-or-minus six months. I’m like, “Christ, I can do plus-or-minus six months. That’s no big deal.” But that’s how SooAe came to us. Walked off the plane and said, “SooAe.” I said, “Fine. That’s good. We’ll call you SooAe.” So that’s how we did that one.

Then a couple of years later, two or three years later, when she was six, she kept wanting—she said, “There has to be another Korean in this family,” again and again and again, “There has to be another Korean.” So we went to this picnic with the agency, and this same Phyllis, this very powerful director cornered me and said that they were very surprised they hadn’t heard from us. Everyone else in our group had adopted again.

And I said, “Well, you’ve got an artist and a writer. I don’t think it’s a tough question.” She said, “I was wondering about that because we have a special fund, and in fact there’s a case we’d like for you to consider. It’s a three-year-old boy.” So we went out, we were hoping just to get the information. Well actually we tried to stall for about two weeks, both just kind of moping around. And so we went out to read the paperwork and see what it sounded like. And they showed us this incredible picture. It was just—oh [exasperated]! Maybe that’s when we tried to stall for a couple of weeks, but neither of us could walk away from it. It was just too sad looking. There was a doctor—we were doing renovation on the south end, so we didn’t have any tenants but we had this bed and breakfast set-up [room rental] that the architect had suggested and there was a doctor—

00:07:48:02: You were running a bed and breakfast, too?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, well, just one floor of the house. Because there were no tenants upstairs, because of the renovation. So it was really not the right time for us to be adopting anybody, obviously. And there was a doctor there, staying for one of the conferences. And the pediatrician that we had been talking to here, we didn’t know him that well—we just had him for a couple months—we didn’t know him well. And he looked at the paperwork and said, “I can’t make any sense out of this. There’s hardly anything here. I don’t know what you want me to say.” So we gave the paperwork to this very pleasant guy who was staying at our house.

We were almost exclusively used by Harvard Medical School because the hotels for their conferences were near us and they could get there easily. We were kind of their bargain alternative, which was great because they were so busy they were very undemanding. But anyway, he said, “Yeah, I’d be happy to read the paperwork.” And he gave us a list of questions

to ask, and there was an American doctor going over to the agency, to that particular adoption agency, the orphanage in Seoul. So he could get us the answers—like there was something weird, one of the things was that, one of the colors he [the child] identified with was black. And it's so interesting to think, because the doctor said, "That's either very significant, or it's not significant at all. And it's really hard to tell because there's such a cultural difference. If it's an American child who could only identify with the color black, I would be surprised. That's something very unusual." And he also said, "You know he's got an extra tooth!"[laughs]—which turned out not to be true.

And something else, I guess, I don't know whether we knew it then or what, but late in the process, we found out that there was a good possibility he had hepatitis. And that was like, "Oh, great," you know, you can't send a kid with hepatitis to daycare. There's just so many restrictions around it. So he was in our house within maybe six weeks. It was the fastest process I've ever seen. And the gut renovation was happening at the top of the house, and his name is DooWook. Because SooAe used her Korean name—they both have American names if they want to use them, but, actually I'm not sure SooAe does—but DooWook does. Sometimes he called himself Joe but not much. Just when he wanted to be under the radar. So he thought that these guys that were working on the house all lived upstairs. He just was fascinated by the whole thing. And Terry stayed home with him because someone has to stay home for six months. And we were very to-the-rule on this thing. Later we found out that very few people are [laughs]. This was extremely unusual to actually be that law-abiding about it.

But Terry was home with him and I don't remember much else that happened about it, except that all of Doo's teeth were rotten. So we had to go to Children's Hospital for this process. So in getting ready for that, the doctor at Children's Hospital, the dentist, who was doing the surgery,

Neddleman was his name, he said, “You know, it’s been a while since I’ve been in medical school, but according to my reading of these records, he has antibodies, and if he has antibodies it’s not active hepatitis.

So have them do the screening again.” So it was great. We found out that that’s exactly the case, that he was not active. But at some point he had had antibodies and as a result of that, had to be checked for microscopic blood in his urine for a long time. So he was checked regularly by a nephrologist at Children’s who followed it really only because the question was, Was it masking a more degenerative disease? He said, “If we knew when this started we could all be more relieved. But since we don’t know when it started—if it was the result of the hepatitis or whatever.”

So DooWook has really been a handful. He’s just so needy. Very, very smart. Very, very smart, and really quite crazy. Very paranoid right now. So he made it through high school, went to University of Michigan—started at NYU, stayed home for I guess a whole year after my husband died and then went back and finished at Michigan. So he’s sharp as can be but, gosh, he’s so nuts. Without medication and therapy, which has been his choice through his later years, he sees the world very darkly.

A while ago I just really wanted to tell my daughter—I really wanted to acknowledge that this had been not an easy thing for the whole family and that she had had her share of issues with DooWook, and that once you have someone in the household who’s that demanding—everyone gets less, you know? The plus side is that she had a tremendous amount of independence. And so now that she has this baby, it’s very satisfying to be, not at their beck and call but I can definitely



fill in if the baby's sick. I can take the baby for that day. It just feels like it's their time, or at least it's her time.

[00:13:36.08]Q: And she's in medicine?

MCDONNELL: She's a nurse practitioner in brain cancer.

It's interesting to think about the two of them because in some ways SooAe has quite a powerful block against the past. "Keep it on the shelf," you know, what matters is what you do with your life. And the past just does not interest her much. But a couple of years ago I did a picture book based on her arrival, the idea that this child arrives, a preschooler who doesn't speak English, to a family that speaks no Korean, and what the first week is like. And it focuses on the cat, which was very true for her. She really loved this cat we had. And so she's always said to me, "I remember nothing from before I was six years old or seven." So I showed her the first book that I was sent, the galleys, and she said, "Oh, huh, look at that. I wonder happened to Katmandu." I was like "What?!" She said, "You know, that was the cat we had then."

And I knew she was right because the name has my husband's fingerprints all over it. You know he definitely would have named a cat Katmandu. I didn't remember it at all. But I do remember that we were always losing cats in the South End. They would escape and not come back, who knows what happened to them. But when she was worried about him I remember Terry telling her that he had seen Katmandu in the cleaner's window and that he was sitting in the sun and he looked kind of fat and happy or whatever. Clearly not true!

Anyways, when I had this dinner with her about wanting to acknowledge the impact that it has on families—I mean I had it too in my family. If you're raised with someone who is mentally ill,

the whole family skews in a way. And she was so sweet. She said, “Mom, you forget, I’m the one who asked for him.”

[00:16:10.28]Q: [laughs] She sounds like a delightful person.

MCDONNELL: She’s a good kid. Yeah. She’s real solid.

16:14:58 Q: Now was there ever any connection with Korea? Did you try to—

MCDONNELL: We went on a tour. We were part of a tour of kids going home. Their called the Motherland Tours, and this is by the Mucongwa Foundation, which is a collection of Korean businessmen and politicians, both in the States and in Korea. We didn’t really understand that there was sort of political overtones to this trip. We just wrote our essays and got the funding and the five of us went. Garth was in his twenties. Soo was about nineteen and DooWook about fifteen.

And Doo had had a really tough year. He had been hospitalized the year before and he still looked just so raw. He had a duffle bag with his shoes in it. Only his shoes. And he’s meticulous about things. And at one point, the day we were supposed to meet the President, the shoes were on the wrong bus, things had switched around. And it took Terry the entire rest stop to find this damn duffle bag.

Anyway, we got to Korea and he loved it. In fact at the very end Terry had come back—he was doing a seminar at Harvard and he had to get back. And so it was myself and the three kids, and we were on this—it’s called Cheju Do, it’s an island that looks something like Hawaii. It’s off the south coast, a real resort area. So we arrive and it’s pouring rain and we have to get on buses

again, everyone's so sick of these damn buses. And I look over and here's DooWook standing. He says, "Here I am on Cheju Do, it just doesn't get better than this!"

00:17:54.04 Q: In the rain?

MCDONNELL: In the rain. He loved it. Anyway, it was quite a trip and so from that point on we were always able to find summer programs for him in Korea. So he started out in kind of culture programs for high schoolers and then he would go back and take classes. He loved Yonsei, a university in Seoul.

00:18:24.27 Q: That's quite a story. Well, going back to the other end of that, the other story we lost was your experience of Barnard. And how that all happened. [Part of the interview failed to record, including Christine's initial comments on her experience of Barnard. The interviewee repeated most of the material, as it is represented here.]

MCDONNELL: The strike and that whole crazy year.

Q: Yeah.

MCDONNELL: So I went to Barnard from a tiny Catholic boarding school.

Q: Which you told great stories about. I kept saying, "She had this really Dickensian childhood!"

MCDONNELL: It is a little! You're right about that.

Q: Just the darkness and the cold—

MCDONNELL: The first therapist I ever had, I never forgot this, she said—I was in my twenties and I couldn't stop crying. I don't remember what triggered it but I ended up seeing this woman and telling her this story, and the second time I went to see her she said, "You know, I just was

thinking about your experience about being at this boarding school when you were eleven and I see you standing at the door with your bags and it just strikes me as so sad.” And I say, “Oh no! No, it was wonderful! We got to play hockey, we played field hockey and basketball and blah blah blah.” So I just think back on that exchange like, “Well that took a little time to crack!”

00:19:38:07 Q: Yeah. Right. Exactly.

MCDONNELL: It’s funny though, I still have very positive feelings about that experience because it was so much saner than home. And also there’s something quite wonderful about being raised or educated in the last century. It was like a nineteenth century education! It’s funny because when I went to book binding school, that also was like every day I was walking into an earlier time. And especially in book binding because you use no power tools. Some people do for certain things but in general, you really are just using hand tools. I guess maybe the carpentry guys used power tools but I think the violin makers, the jewelry makers, there wasn’t a sense of a huge amount of machinery in the building. I’m sure it was there but you really had this feeling of handcraft.

And that combined with the fact that it was in the North End so you’d walk down the streets and people would be speaking Italian. There’s that element. Plus I remember one time being—I don’t remember what room I was in, but I looked up and there was a fire escape and there was a guy tuning this violin that he was finishing up. So there was something very appealing to me about an earlier time.

00:20:54.05 Q: I’m surprised you didn’t run off to live with the Amish or something!

MCDONNELL: Well you know, Vermont has a piece of that for sure. It really does.

Q: You're not that far from it.

MCDONNELL: I keep that house very spare. Very, very spare. It's less distracting to me.

Anyway, yeah I think there's something—maybe I was a Buddhist farmer, monk, at some point in my life.

Q: I could see that. Sure.

MCDONNELL: Or, maybe my manic side is stronger now. That's my other theory about this is, I've always been attracted to things that will balance out this much more manic side. And certainly people have often said to me, "Are you manic-depressive?" Not often, but every time I see a new doctor or something it will occasionally come up. And it's never been—I've never really had a crash.

Q: Which is good.

MCDONNELL: I just run a little high, that's all.

Q: Well, you get good results then.

MCDONNELL: Yeah. So when I went to Barnard it was sort of overwhelming. From my tiny high school. I went there because it was the most money I was being given. I didn't have a clue what I was doing applying to colleges. I just knew I wouldn't go to a Catholic college, that I was really tired of that.

00:22:10.26 Q: Yeah they all went to Maryville, right? Everybody from your school, you said—

MCDONNELL: Yeah, they all went to Manhattanville.

Q: I mean, not Maryville, Manhattanville. I confused the two but they're totally different!

MCDONNELL: Yeah, those are different colleges you're talking about. But religion hadn't been very important to me and it just—I have no idea why I went. It was like rolling the dice. I applied to four places and that was the place I got the most money, because it was in New York State so there was the Regents scholarship [based on New York State Regents exam scores] plus the Barnard scholarship. So when I got there I was really pretty overwhelmed by lots of things. And somewhat intimidated too. I had placed out of Freshman English because of an AP [Advanced Placement test] score. And no one said to me, "It's not a good idea to skip Freshman English even if you have placed out of it." So I was in this Shakespeare class, with all these upperclassmen. It's so crazy, the whole thing is so random, how it all happened. You know?

So I had this really serious boyfriend that I met that fall. We were both—

00:23:22.11 Q: He was at Columbia?

MCDONNELL: Columbia, right. Actually I remember sitting—remember how Chock Full O' Nuts [coffee shop] was on the corner of 116<sup>th</sup>?

Q: Oh yeah.

MCDONNELL: So I was in Chock Full O' Nuts with some friends and I'm looking across at Furnald [Columbia residence hall], I think it was Furnald. And there's George! In his tighty-whitey underpants, inching along—

Q: This was who?

MCDONNELL: My boyfriend.

Q: Stu?

MCDONNELL: George was his name.

Q: Oh, George, I'm sorry!

MCDONNELL: George. This was George, and he had locked himself out of his room and he had climbed out the bathroom window in his underpants and he was walking the ledge to get back to his room. Well, what are the chances that I'm standing in Chock Full O' Nuts? This is like a five-minute interval. So I said, "Look! It's George!" And they're all like, "Oh my god, it is George!" What a bunch of nuts we all were! How did anybody survive?

Q: Yeah, that's the question.

MCDONNELL: You know? Holy shit. So during those first couple of days, Linda Elovitz lived on my floor, and we were all supposed to get our buses for this tour downtown. And we all wanted to get posters for our rooms and stuff. And so, we stepped off the line for a little bit to buy cigarettes. Of course it's 1967. And as we're buying cigarettes we get picked up by these two older guys, these two amazingly sort of, how can I say, persuasive black guys who said, "Well, we'll take you to the best poster store."

So we end up drinking, the two of us with them in the park. And you know, things are not gonna end well with this. We're so young. And then we say, "I'm sorry, but we have to get back! It's the first mixer!" And you can just imagine, "Oh, here's a pair! Boy." They said, "Well we could take you"—Like, "Oh no, no! We have to go! It's the first mixer!" Linda and I often laugh about that story. The two of us escaping the claws of these two who were preying upon these new Barnard freshmen.

Q: Oh sure.

MCDONNELL: Yeah. Oh my goodness. So anyways, after a couple of weeks there I met George, and he was from Indiana. He's from a Quaker family. I had never met Quakers before, so I went to a Quaker meeting with him and I really loved Quaker meeting because again it's the silence [laughs]. It's like a theme in my life: the silence. So anyway, that winter I got pregnant, despite the fact that we had all gone to the birth control lectures. We thought we could beat the odds. So I had an abortion during that semester. It was a tough semester. And at first—

00:26:01:26 Q: This is your first semester?

MCDONNELL: Second. It was winter.

Q: Oh it was winter now, okay. So we're into January.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, like January, February, March. Around there. I don't know how we got the information, how *I* got it. Because I think I got both tips—it was from other students, it was from people who told, gave you this information. So the first phone number, I reached these guys and we made a date for it and they had very explicit instructions about how to get there. But I didn't realize I could only come alone. So we were both standing on the corner, with the *LIFE* Magazine turned inside out. And this car pulled up, and they were upset that George was there, so they made him wait in this diner, and I got in the backseat and the car took this kind of wildly circuitous route.

Q: And you're somewhere in New Jersey at this point?

MCDONNELL: Somewhere in New Jersey. Yeah, it was a bus from Penn Station. And we pull up at the back of the apartment house. Everything is dark. We go in this backdoor, the door opens and this doctor is wearing a full mask. And he couldn't perform it because I had a tipped uterus.



It was a kitchen table deal so—he said, “Well, I’ll just loosen the cervix, you’ll pass this.” And I said, “No! You’re not gonna do that. I’m not doing that. You’re telling me I’m going back to my dorm? No, I am not doing that.” So, he gave me his money back and they dropped me off at the diner. And I think back and it’s kind of amazing that he would give the money back. He could have pretended to do it or whatever.

So then the next tip I had—the only criteria I had was that it had to be daylight. It was like, I don’t care where we have to go, but it had to be during the day. So supposedly the second tip came Alan Goodmacher’s practice. It was a doctor practicing in Philadelphia in the Spanish section of town. Had a fully open practice. And his preference was that you go to Puerto Rico so it can be done in a hospital. But we didn’t have the time or the money for that.

00:28:07:01 Q: So abortion was legal in Pennsylvania at this time?

MCDONNELL: No. It was still illegal. But he was a practicing OBGYN, community practice downstairs, and upstairs was an operating room. So that was that. They gave me sodium pentothal [anaesthetic]. And about—how long would it have been?—maybe four to six weeks after that, I went right on the pill [oral contraceptive] right after that. And then about four to six weeks after that, right before finals, my arm was swollen. So I had a clot.

Q: Of which your father was all too attentive. As I recall you were saying.

MCDONNELL: Yeah somehow the past year or so I was remembering this and talking to my sister about this doctor saying to me, “Does your father have a preference for a surgeon? Do you think he’s going to want to have private or semi-private?” It’s like, “My father?! You know, both of us burst into gales of laughter, my sister and I. The very idea that Peter J. McDonnell would have had any, any involvement—parental was not his strength, that’s for damn sure.

00:29:12:28 Q: So did you ever discuss this with other people other than getting the tips? Were you aware of other women at Barnard—?

MCDONNELL: No, I wasn't—

Q: Because I just talked to someone the other day and she said, "They just told me this place to go get a shot and that was the end of it." Like, oh—

MCDONNELL: What?!

Q: Yeah, this was her freshman year too. I have no idea.

MCDONNELL: They gave her a shot? And then it made the pregnancy go away?

Q: Yeah, it made it abort naturally. Now that I had never heard of.

MCDONNELL: Wow. That would've scared the hell out of me. That's pretty similar to, "I'll just loosen the cervix and you'll just be able to pass it." Like, oh boy, that's not a good idea. But it's interesting, the fact that abortion is still debated in this country—just fascinates me.

Q: Fascinates or it angers you?

MCDONNELL: Well, both. What's so amazing to me is that it's so tenacious. That people are so entrenched with their belief on this. I think it's astounding. And it's funny because I will always support a woman's right to choose. Always. But the question of when does life begin? I don't know. I'm no longer clear on that. You know, babies can survive at 20 weeks. I mean, you wouldn't want to have anyone survive at 20 weeks but it can happen. So I think the whole question of life/non-life doesn't engage me. What engages me is the question that is the issue of, "Whose life is going to be changed by this the most?"

00:30:36:29 Q: Absolutely. And the conservatives, they care about the child up until the time he's born, then it's like to hell with him! Like, excuse me?

MCDONNELL: Well that's the other interesting thing. The moment I found out I was pregnant, I was on the phone. There was only one phone on our floor. What, there were twenty of us on a floor? So I was on the phone, third floor Hewitt. And the doctor gives me the news about the rabbit and he is not interested in having the further conversation with me, that's obvious. He's not giving any tips or advice or whatever, or support. And I'm just 18. But I had this moment of saying to myself, "Boy, there are two children involved in this. And I'm choosing myself. That's it."

Q: Sure.

MCDONNELL: So I had another clear moment of walking on College Walk. And it was freezing cold. That campus was cold as all get out—wind cutting through Riverside and across College Walk. It was such a bleak, bleak time. And George saying, "Well, I guess I'll have to marry you." [laughs] And I'm thinking, "Fuck you! That's not a proposal I'm going to accept." I tell ya, if I make that decision, someone's gonna really have to be enthusiastic. I said, "No we're not doing that, that much I'm sure of."

It's funny you know, these momentary—and later, after more recently, I've had these experiences where people have said, "You're so decisive." And it's like, you know, I never really knew that about myself. But I am very decisive!

Q: You learned how to survive.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, and also I don't spend a lot of time worrying over it. Indecision is definitely not part of my makeup. You know, choose a road and go, it'll all work out. It's kind of a funny philosophy: Just jump! [laughs]

But anyways, academically, I really—like almost anyone I ever meet from Barnard—people are interesting! But I was in no position to really take advantage of most of the things, I didn't know about most of the things that were going on.

32:54:15 Q: Because you were working the whole time?

MCDONNELL: Well that's part of it, was that I was working so much. Probably you were too. Anyway, that was certainly a part of it. But the stuff that I did connect with had a huge impact. I did a lot of art history and English.

And you asked about the strike. I really didn't have any interest in the politics. It was like of course we shouldn't be in the war. I was going to Quaker meeting. But it wasn't that the ideas engaged me. I had this French teacher—I was blocking one of the doors with a group of other people so people wouldn't go to class. Domna Stanton was her name, very elegant, very lovely. I was a terrible French student. I never learned how to memorize or work at anything. If I wasn't reading or writing, studying was just nothing I had ever learned how to do. So obviously my French skills were minimal. But she was lovely and elegant and very kind to us all. So she was escorting a student in past that door and she said to me, (lowers her voice) "How could you do this to another student?" And I never forgot it. It just hadn't occurred to me that I was doing something that would be painful to someone else.

So the strike. My father calls and says, "You better get out of those buildings before you lose your Regents scholarship." I said, "Dad, don't be silly. They wouldn't do that. It's a free country,

you can express yourself.” So sure enough, that summer there was a bill to revoke students’ Regents scholarships. It didn’t pass, but it was there. Like, oh, guess who was right about this being an issue? But by chance I wasn’t in the buildings that night. Oh, I know why—

00:34:50:25 Q: So you didn’t go to any of the meetings?

MCDONNELL: Oh, I did, I spent a couple of nights in the buildings but in the morning I had to go because I had this job where I would walk this four-year-old to the nursery school. And I was very diligent so I would get up and get out in time to pick him up at the nursery school, that was my job. Someone else walked him home, but I was the very early shift. I was in the architecture building and those guys were a little older than I was, and they would have me bring back coffee, as if it was an official run or whatever.

Q: And this—you’re risking your whole future to do it.

MCDONNELL: It was incredibly stupid, I know. I know! I don’t think we had a clue how risky this was. You know? So I don’t know why I wasn’t in the buildings that night. I don’t think I was in the hospital yet. I just wasn’t. Anyway.

Q: But that had to have been soon. The hospital.

MCDONNELL: It was soon after that, yeah.

00:35:48:04 Q: So you said you weren’t really engaged by the politics of it.

MCDONNELL: I remember—wasn’t there like fourteen points or something by the time we were—

Q: I don’t know.

MCDONNELL: This endless series. I remember a friend got me to go to the forty-year reunion seminars. That was a three-day thing. I remember these guys saying it was the most important moment of their lives so far. I was just like, “You gotta be kidding me!” And I remember a couple of people saying what an impact it had had, that it had changed everything. And thinking, Denial is a powerful force but I’d like to point out that Columbia has now taken over ten more complete blocks and that we’re still in war. We have never not been in war. What are the other issues? Poverty is still with us, and racism is still with us. I don’t really think it made much of a difference at all—well it’s possible that it contributed to the ending of the war. But not just because of Columbia but because that was part of that momentum of public outrage and demonstrations. The Pentagon and all those demonstrations in Chicago.

There’s a really great children’s book that came out a couple of years ago that’s set in 1968 in Berkeley. It’s about a little girl, three little girls who are sent from Brooklyn to finally meet their mother. The father or the grandmother decided that they had never known their mother and she left when the baby was born. So the girls had never spent any time with her and they arrive in Berkeley, no, Oakland, and she’s connected to the Black Panthers, it’s 1968. So I was talking about this book. It was one of many books some kids at my school were evaluating for an award and I was trying to give the context of ’68. And it’s just like talking about a foreign world to them. The idea of how much had gone on.

I mean when [Rev. Martin Luther]King was assassinated, we marched down Lenox Avenue through Harlem, that huge march. That sense that things were so out of control. You know? King’s assassination, [Robert F.Kennedy’s] assassination, the Democratic convention, “Vote with Your Feet.” What a mayhem time. And then—have you read Patti Smith’s *Just Kids*?

38:116:26 Q: I have it, I haven't read it yet.

MCDONNELL: It's the first volume of her memoir and it's '65 or '66 when she first comes to New York and she's a kid. I mean they are really young, they both are, and they're living rough. It's living in doorways and begging for food. And this city is a rough, rough place. This apartment that sophomore year, George had an apartment almost to Columbus—you ran down Amsterdam and it was almost to the Columbus corner at 109th. And it was such a scary block, I would start running from 110<sup>th</sup> and Columbus. So I would run down Columbus! And I had friends who were squatting on the next block. These guys I had known from freshman year. It was just like, who was watching us?

I really do have that feeling that there was nobody watching us. And we helped each other, and tried to make sense of it with one another. But we never talked to adults. At all. Never. The idea that there was a counselor that might have been available to me or that what I experienced was some kind of depression, just any of that—just pick it up! It's funny when I think back, that aspect of being in New York and being 18 and 19 in those days, that part of it is very negative for me.

But the academic part is in another world by itself. It's almost like it goes right down the middle. It reminds me a little of when I taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, mostly eighth. I used to think about this: if you have a really mediocre teacher on your faculty, it's not so awful if they're in seventh and eighth because very little happens that's academically solid in seventh and eighth. There's so much going on that's in turmoil. And I used to think about this, that it was "curriculum as distraction." You know, give them something that can they can kind of bite into to distract them from the pain of being thirteen, fourteen.

00:40:25:08 Q: That's a tough age, no doubt about it. For girls as much as boys?

MCDONNELL: Oh I think it's worse for girls. I think boys do it differently. I don't think the restrictions are as great. I would just say about teaching that age group: if kids have something that they are connected with—teams, music, something, swim teams, art, I don't care what it is—but something that they were passionate about during that period of time, it's like they had a log they could hang onto during the flood. And we used to always joke that the greatest gift you could give would be a long latency. Just have the maturity come later and later. Though my daughter, she was an ice hockey player. First ballet, then ice hockey. It was like, "Great, these things are completely involving you."

Q: Oh, yeah, that's very engaging. I think mine were soccer players and musicians. It's hard to remember.

MCDONNELL: Exactly! That's why I do think it's easier for boys. And I don't think the same level of judgment and self-judging was involved with boys. I mean, I think everybody feels crappy but girls are brutal on themselves.

Q: I remember not developing like the rest of the girls and having a bra. It was like a band-aid that I keep in my gym locker and I'd go in the stall and put it on—and go put on my gym suit. I was twelve or thirteen—that was the meanest—

MCDONNELL: I remember getting my period—my mother died the year I turned nine, that summer. And we stayed in the same household with my grandmother and aunt and uncle, on this block in Westchester that I had grown up on with all my friends. And then my father married and moved us all out to Long Island, to a little place that really wasn't big enough for all of us, and



there was no acknowledgment that we were going to miss these relatives that we lived with. We'd already lost our mother and he married this crazy lady.

42:39:27 Q: This was Edith?

MCDONNELL: The terrible Edith. Goodness, goodness, goodness. So we would go back to Pelham as much as we could. Anytime we could get a ride or have an excuse to get back there we would. So I had gone back and was staying on the same block with my best friend at the time, Jane, and just as we were about to leave that day, that morning, I was getting a ride back with a guest-friend of the family—he lived in that town and was driving me back—I got my period for the first time that morning, but I'm not going to tell Edith! I mean, my god. There's no way! No way I would have told Edith. So I'm sitting the whole car ride up trying to figure out what to do and as soon as we get there I make a beeline down the street for my aunt and my grandmother. My sister, she was at work, but the others were there and they cleaned me up and got me supplies, et cetera.

And then the week went on and just by chance Jane got hers the next day—you know those weird hormonal things with kids, or with women. But then, I just couldn't wait to be rid of it. So I thought it had stopped—you know how erratic it is the first time you get it—and there were a lot of us sleeping over in this apartment above their garage that probably was the maid's quarters or something. We always wanted to stay up there because no one ever knew what we were doing. Just playing cards all night. We all had fallen asleep and I woke up in the middle of the night and I thought I was bleeding again. And I got up in these little pajamas and my bare feet and got out of the house and went down the street, and rang the doorbell at my grandmother's. At the house I

had always grown up with. So they woke up, took me in, got me washed up, put me back to bed, and that was that. And no one made a great deal out of it.

And the next morning my friends came over to find out was I okay and where was I? I'm sure that they had contacted the family to tell them I was there. But I still remember, or I think I remember the walk. I don't know if I really remember the walk. But I think I remember the walk! [laughs] Those are such hard times for kids.

Q: They are. I mean, no conversation.

MCDONNELL: Yeah. No conversation. Isn't that funny?

00:45:02:20 Q: So what happened with your aunt and your uncle and your grandparents? Your grandmother that you were so close to?

MCDONNELL: Well that house was sold because my father had part of a share of it, and the three of them went to live in an apartment in the next town. It's really interesting, even more so when I think back on it now, because just by chance, I found out about my grandfather—who was dead before I was born—but that aunt would say to me, "It's not true what they say about your grandfather." So one time I was just mentioning it as kind of a funny line—

Q: So it was her father?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, her father. This guy in my adoption group was a historian and a New Yorker, he said, "What's his name?" I told him, William F. Doyle. He said, "Oh, he was a Tammany boss, they called him the Horse Doctor."

Q: A Tammany boss?

MCDONNELL: He was a Tammany boss<sup>1</sup>, right. Tammany Hall. the Horse Doctor. And I knew that was right because he was a vet. And my grandmother had told me stories about him being a vet, and about there being a farm on 100<sup>th</sup> Street and going to Chicago to train as a vet and coming back and that's the only part I remembered as kid but it rang a bell. Many years after that I was on hold on the phone for some stupid reason, and I had the computer. I put his name in: "William F. Doyle, Horse Doctor." Up comes this astounding front-page *New York Times* article: "Horse Doctor Indicted." So there were investigations into a lot of Tammany, I'm sure throughout the time, but in this particular round, they were after—my grandfather was one of several I think, because the article was a little bigger than this—but they wanted to know who he was splitting fees with.

Now, he had been the vet in charge of the fire department horses, and then when they stopped using horses, he had a position on a board that approved new zoning. And a lot of new zoning was required when cars began to be used. So these were gas stations, places to garage your car, that kind of thing. And so he figured out apparently—he created a position where he was the person that presented the cases to the board that would give the variances. It was a huge amount of money trading hands.

So at the same time that the front page comes up, I'm thinking to myself: 1931. My mother would have been maybe a freshman in college. In New York! And this is the front page of the paper.

Q: Wow.

<sup>1</sup> Tammany Hall was a New York City political organization, active until the 1960's, that controlled city and state politics and helped immigrants, especially Irish.

MCDONNELL: So then a *New Yorker* article also came up from the same time. Very, very funny. Very tongue-in-cheek. Some of the lines were things like, “Through the 1920’s, William F. Doyle managed to acquire eight children, to amass eight children and more than a million dollars.” Well, a million dollars would have been an astounding amount of money in the 1920’s. So I’m reading this thing, thinking, “This guy was a serious crook!” So as I looked at this more, because I’m really trying to weave it into a story—it’s a good story, it’s good material. And so I’ve gotten a lot more sources on it, and one of them, it’s a history of that time and it says he was one of the two worst grifters of that century. He was a serious crook! So I told my sister this story and I sent my sister and brother copies to the links of the *New Yorker* story, and my sister said that Aunt Helen used to say to her, “They had gold faucets. We never had gold faucets!”

Which brings up a whole other level of who knew what in that family. But they lived with an astounding amount of money during that era so the three of them, the finale of the family ending up in the little two-bedroom apartment in New Rochelle. And then ultimately, after my grandmother died, my aunt and uncle who were brother and sister lived in New York for a little bit and then he moved her to Queens, because of the rent I’m sure. But they died in a terrible—they really had a terrible old age. It’s funny, I don’t feel guilty about it because I didn’t know anything that was going on, but my sister does feel tremendous guilt that she should have been able to take my aunt in and she just had too much on the plate. Kids and work.

00:49:19:00 Q: It’s hard to look after the other generation, even if we feel like we’re supposed.

MCDONNELL: It is, it is. Even if you’ve got your feet on the ground and your family is a little bit older, her children were tiny when this was all happening. And, my gosh, she’s already juggling a full-time job and two little kids. Wasn’t gonna happen.

Q: I knew they had been important to you but that's a whole nother story. I'd love to see how you end up using that material, about the family roots!

MCDONNELL: Oh yeah, the grandfather, isn't that hysterical? I love that. The Horse Doctor. Such a serious crook. And it's funny because there's another thing. I don't know what happened to this. My brother was in charge of getting my aunt and uncle to nursing homes ultimately, and sold everything to estate people, which makes my older sister quite angry. There was a tube in the living room. And in the tube was this rolled photograph—

Q: I'm sorry, the tube was where?

MCDONNELL: In the house that I grew up in. And so you would unroll this thing and it was a long, long photograph, a big photograph. And it was their fiftieth wedding anniversary. And he was very austere looking, and surrounded by all their children and their grandchildren, this whole phalanx of a table. It's so crazy. Everything about them was so regal, and here they were. My parents were married secretly and I always assumed—I don't know what I assumed, but it occurred to me after I found this newspaper article that it would be my father's side of the family that objected to the marriage. Because, same grandfather, he didn't want these children to marry either. Many of them remained single. He was quite controlling.

Q: Because he wanted to keep the money to himself?

MCDONNELL: I don't know what it was because I never met him.

00:50:59:00 Q: So how did your parents meet?

MCDONNELL: Oh, at dances I think. I think they were in the same general social group. Because she was supposed to marry a guy named Hoffman, Bill Hoffman, who ended up

marrying my father's younger sister. I know. And he was the heir to some massive fortune or something. So we're all kind of laughing about it because my father was definitely not a success. And my mother had a harder life than she would have had prior to that.

But it's also kind of interesting. I don't know how—I learned it from my sister who learned it from my mother, but the sense that we were far superior for *not* having money, and that it was better to be smart and not have money than to be rich and stupid. And my sister would come home from these debuts because my cousins were more in her age group and they were brutal for her, having to go to these damn things. And she would say, "Ah, they're so stupid. They have piano legs." There was no shame in being scholarship kids, and I don't know how that was transmitted to us. It was a certain better-than-everyone—

Q: But you did mention with your father's other marriages, that you always were sort of waiting at the table to get your share but you never did—

MCDONNELL: It took me a long time to access that. Because when he died, I had always been the favorite—

Q: Because you were good with words, too.

MCDONNELL: I was the youngest. I was expected to do the eulogy. And I got this incredible cold and laryngitis. I often laugh about it—

Q: I wonder what that was about?

MCDONNELL: I know! Isn't that funny? I mean I did the eulogy but it was a killer. And it took me a while to figure out why I was so angry. I was furious. Furious. And it took me several years to figure it out.

00:52:59:09 Q: Okay, so we're jumping around a bit here. It's amazing. But it's my own fault because I lost the original sequence—

MCDONNELL: There are probably other things you wanted me to cover.

Q: There are a few more. Do you want to tell that story—about your sister? And the—

MCDONNELL: The story about the caper and the Catholic cemetery.

Q: Yes! If you would like to share that, I'll be totally silent and pretend I'm a whole audience.

MCDONNELL: About a year ago—I've known about these storytelling events.

Q: This is "The Moth," right?

MCDONNELL: Yes, well, it's a parallel to "Moth" in Boston called "Mass Mouth." And they have these events all over town, in cafés and libraries and bars and stuff. And each of these events that they would hold is like an open mic. I wasn't really that clear about the rules, but I knew that you had to tell something that connected to the topic. When I heard that the topic at Club Passim's was "Nuts," I knew that I could do a story around it about my oldest sister, who was so crazy, and the burial of her ashes.

Q: This was Mary?

MCDONNELL: Mary was her name, yeah. Well, we were both named Mary. But she was older, she used it. Christine is my middle name. It's been a pain in the neck. Yeah, Mary Christine and Margaret Regina. Regina uses—it was my mother's name, so she uses her middle name too. It's a real pain in the neck, between your passports and birth certificates and your credit cards being different names.

But anyway onto the story. I thought, Okay, I'll do it, and I practiced the story when I was up in Vermont and I came down, and I don't go to bars or cafés much but I knew Club Passim so that was a little easier. It's a great coffee house. So I show up and I find out that you put your name in, and you may or may not be selected. So I put my name in, and I'm the third or fourth teller, as it turns out, maybe the fifth—I don't know what lineup. So they do the line-up. Ten people are going to tell. So I get up and tell this story. Then I make it to the semi-finals there at another great club, Johnny D's. And then I made it to the finals, and I came in second.

Here's the story. The topic was "Nuts." Let me think of how I began it: [long pause] My older sister Mary was always a little peculiar. When we were young, she was the oldest and I was significantly younger. We knew she was nuts. She was so difficult. Not too long ago, I was moving a small chest of drawers and I realized that one of us had scrawled on the back of it, "Mary is nuts!" in black crayon. We must have been furious with her for doing something ridiculous. So, my mother was able to keep her on the straight and narrow, this side of normal.

But unfortunately my mother died when I was turning nine and Mary was twenty-one. It affected all of us obviously but the one who was most affected was Mary, because without my mother to keep her in line, she really spun out. And my father's unfortunate second marriage wasn't a help to it either. But by the time she reached her late twenties she was finally hospitalized and then diagnosed. And from that point on she always lived in sheltered situations.

So a year ago I got a call from my sister Regina saying that Mary had died. She was in her mid-to-late seventies and I think the anti-psychotic medication had taken its toll over time as well. So the question was, what would we do? I thought we should have a funeral and use the same church my father had been buried from. It's a Jesuit church on the East side that his school had



been connected to. But my brother Bill said, "I'm not giving a penny to that goddamn church!" So that kind of ruled out that idea.

They ended up having Mary cremated. My job was to contact the graveyard and figure this part out. I knew about the cemetery because the year that I was forty-five—the same age my mother had been when she died—I decided I would go to see the grave because they didn't take children to the graveyards then. And it was this incredible fall day and I was on my way to New York. And somehow—this is all pre-Internet, makes this thing—it's hard to remember how hard it was to get information back then. I had this vague memory of the name of the graveyard. So I called Gate of Heaven.

And indeed, they have a record, they know where she is buried, they give me instructions from the Saw Mill Parkway. And I'm there! It's like, wow! A beautiful fall day. It doesn't really have a huge amount of meaning for me. It's a big cross with "McDonnell" at the bottom and a couple of graves up on top. And then my mother and a brother of ours who was stillborn were buried down in this little corner here. And all the rest of it is open. There's nobody there. I'm thinking, "Where is everybody?"

Well, two of the brothers committed suicide—two of my father's brothers were direct suicides, and then my father was buried with his third wife's family. I don't know where else everybody else was. There are no practicing Catholics in the family. Everything changed so quickly through that period of time. The woman in charge said to me, "Come back and see me before you leave." So I go back and she says, "Does your family have any plans for this real estate?" I'm like, "Real estate! Wow!" I had never thought of it that way. And she said, "You know it's quite valuable." Well, I'll spread the word! I'm like, "valuable real estate," please!

So I knew the cemetery and I'm the one who's expected to call. So I call and I hit this very pleasant young man who says, "Nowadays you can bury ashes," so that that's fine, and "There's certainly room," and I already knew that, there's tons of room. And he told me the whole deal, if you're buried on the weekend, it's more expensive than during the week and blah blah blah. Okay, we make it all—oh, and there's a bit of a confusion about the deed. Do I have the deed? The deed? I hadn't even thought of a deed. I have no idea where the deed is. Well, so you can get around that with an affidavit, blah, blah, blah.

So I'm supposed to call back once we've picked a date. And I call back, we've picked this date in May and we're all going to meet there: Bill, my sister Regina and myself. I hit this really officious woman and she says, "Was there a funeral mass?" I said, "No, there wasn't." She said, "Well then, you'll have to have a letter from the priest." I said, "The priest." Now, I'm pretty sure that out of the three of us survivors, we don't know a priest. But we might know someone who knows a priest. And it's Boston: there are a lot of liberals up here, Jesuits, Paulists, I'm pretty sure somebody knows somebody that'll help us out on this. So I let that one go past and we make the arrangement and then she calls me back, and she says, "I've uncovered another obstacle. The maintenance fees for this plot have not been paid in some time and they now total over ten thousand dollars."

Q: Oh my god!

MCDONNELL: So we remember my brother's phrase: "I'm not giving a penny to that goddamn church!" So I know that this is not a route we're going to take. And I thank her and say we'll get back to her. And so Bill, all along, has had a much simpler solution. He says, "We go to the cemetery, we dig a hole next to Mom, we put the ashes in, it's done."

So now his plan becomes the number one plan, and we prepare to meet just north of the cemetery. We're going to consolidate into one car. I have brought a spade and two trowels. I brought potting soil—a half a bag of it so we can put the plastic stuff with the ashes in it in case anyone comes up while we're doing this. I've also brought three azaleas from Trader Joe's.

So we get down there and we all get into my car, and for some reason my brother knows the back entrance and how to find the plot right away. And we're all feeling pretty stealthy. My brother-in-law is with us too. Looking over our shoulder, lest we be found, and up comes this stranger. And we think it's the cemetery police. But it's not! It's our third cousin once removed!

We had no idea he existed. What is he doing running around the McDonnell plots? Well, he likes to run into people he hasn't met yet from the family. He and my sister start trading all these little pieces: "Your grandfather was my, yeah your grandfather was my uncle's favorite uncle."

Whatever, all these genealogical things going on. I just can't wait to get rid of him so we can get this thing over with. Now, the ground is very hard to dig. No one has dug there in a long time and there's a huge tree in the corner where my mother is buried so there's no way we're going to be able to get in the ground. Over there is the whole root system. But we finally chip away three little indentations in front of the big cross.

We divvy up the ashes and my brother-in-law said, "We have to put soil in here! This is just ash, these are going to die!" But, in fact, they were from Trader Joe's so they're probably going to die anyway. So we get Mary, put her in the ground. And now, we've had several months to think of something nice to say, and we cannot think of one nice thing to say. So difficult. And finally Regina said, "You know, I do have one memory. The year that Mother died, that summer it was (I remember this too) so silent and so morose in our house because it was such a shock." She

said, “I got home one afternoon and I heard someone singing in the living room of our house, and I looked around the corner and it was Mary. And she was singing to herself, her eyes were closed, her clothes were all mis-buttoned. She was dancing by herself in the living room, singing.” Regina said, “She looked happier than I ever had seen her. And I just wish she could have stayed in that place,” which was of course completely disconnected to reality. And I remember her saying, “Well, maybe she’s in that place now.”

As for us, I thought to myself, “This story doesn’t necessarily reflect so well on my family.” And my friend had said, “Well it probably took place a long time ago.” I said, “Well yeah, maybe a year.” So no, I can’t use that excuse. And then when I told it in the finals, another friend from up here was sitting next to this couple from Europe. And the husband turned to the wife after my story and said, “Could that really happen?” Yeah, I’m sure it happens all the time. So that’s the story I got my second place with. Crazy family stories.

01:04:18:16 Q: That’s a great story. Well I have to tell you, quickly, that one of my brothers who died in great poverty and my sister who lived near him was taking care of him the last year because he was in a nursing home in her tiny little town in conservative East Texas.

MCDONNELL: Wow, is that where you’re from?

Q: No, well, I was born there and the family was from there. But anyway, I won’t go into such great detail. It was a wonderful story. But he had said that his one wish was that he would be cremated. So he was cremated, which was very hard for her because she’s quite a conservative Christian. And he wanted to be in the graveyard where my mother and other siblings and people were. So she and her husband go and dig and snuck it in. Yeah! And so he’s buried on top of my mother. But he was a wonderful guy, he had nothing crazy—

MCDONNELL: My sister's good friend died last winter and the question was, Could she be buried in the plot where her husband is, near where they all are at in Cape Cod? And my brother-in-law researched it and yeah, you can put as many people as you can fit! It's your land, you bought it.

Q: And you had very valuable real estate. This is an old country graveyard. But still, it was funny.

MCDONNELL: But I wonder, what's going to happen to that graveyard? You know?

Q: Oh yeah. So have you thought about the real estate now?

MCDONNELL: I mean, who would want to be there? My goodness, it's horrible.

Q: h it's gross.

MCDONNELL: It is!

Q: I think the Buddhists have a better idea: sky burials. Anyway, that was great, thanks for sharing that. I don't think it reflects badly on your family at all, I think it speaks to family.

MCDONNELL: It speaks to this moment in time [laughs]. Our era, our disconnected era. So anyway, my sister married into a family that has very preserved, in a way—her mother-in-law even now is still alive in her nineties and they do things by the book. I remember saying something about this to Reg. Something had happened where some people had been invited, some people not invited, and I said to her, “That would never have happened in Jean Hayes' family,” because the matriarch is still alive. But we're so shattered that there's nobody running

the rulebook in our family. So things that happen—Reg will always say that she learned from Jean Hayes what it was to be a family. That we kind of needed tutorials.

Q: Well, I won't go there. I was the youngest daughter, I ended up having to take over everything for everybody.

MCDONNELL: Oh, dear. So you learned a lot.

Q: I'm retired from that now. They all died!

MCDONNELL: Well good. I'm glad, done is done.

01:07:07:29 Q: Yeah, well, let me see. So on a totally lighter notion, as a children's author, as a distinguished children's author, as a prolific children's author, what were some of your favorite children's books?

MCDONNELL: Oh, *Charlotte's Web*, for sure. I remember my mother reading me that. But I loved these books by Noel Streatfield called the "Shoe Books": *Ballet Shoes*, *Dancing Shoes*, *Theatre Shoes*, *Skating Shoes*. Want me to show you now?

Q: We'll look at them later, yeah.

MCDONNELL: I have these great editions, actually, of my three favorites. I'll show you. In a wonderful book binder's case, made for them by me! [laughs]

Q: Oh, that's right, yes, you're a book binder.

MCDONNELL: Yes, everything connected to the book. So the first and most famous is this one: *Ballet Shoes*. This is a great American edition because it's got this painted—just take a look at this fabulous cloth cover.

Q: That's gorgeous.

MCDONNELL: It's from the thirties. They never produce books like this anymore. But anyway, *Ballet Shoes*. Yeah, so this is the first American edition, 1937. In *Ballet Shoes*, there are three orphans that are all found by their uncle, who's an anthropologist, and he brings them home and gives them to his single niece, who raises the three of them as the three Fossils. They give themselves the last name of "Fossil." And it comes to a point—the economy must have been really tough—"GUM," they called him, Great Uncle-going-to-survive. And one of the boarders suggests that she come to their school, which is a school of stage and dance. So they're all trained so they can make a living. The oldest one ends up being very talented in theatre, and the youngest one an amazing ballet dancer. Her mother was a Russian ballerina, that's where she had been collected from. But the middle one, who's this kind of dark, less classically attractive child, just suffers through it all. Really what she's interested in is engines and planes, so she ends up being an early aviator when everything works out. But it's just the greatest story about kids who have to earn a living.

And the second one is *Circus Shoes*—

Q: And who is the author again?

MCDONNELL: Noel Streatfield. She was a theatre person in England—they're English. So in *Circus Shoes*, again these kids end up with an uncle through a death in the family. And he works

for the circus, and they have to decide whether they're going to make a living in it. Anyway, that ends up being different.

And the third one, this is *Theatre Shoes*, which is the sequel to *Ballet Shoes*, in which—oh look, it's falling apart. Well that's okay, I know exactly how to repair that! Anyway, I love the “Shoe books.” They were great favorites of mine. And I was responsible for bringing *Ballet Shoes* back into print in this country. I did an article about it in *Horn Book* [Magazine] in the late seventies or early eighties. And they're all back in print. I don't know if *Circus Shoes* is back, but *Theatre Shoes* and *Ballet Shoes* are in print again.

Yeah, they're terrific books. There's a quality of directness in children's literature from the thirties in particular, the thirties and forties, that I really loved. The *Saturdays* was also a great favorite of mine. Her name is Elizabeth Enright.

Q: Yes, my kids read those. I read those.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, they're still very popular. So, what else? Books that I really loved. *The Black Stallion*. I learned how to read on the *Black Stallion* series. Our little town didn't have a neighborhood library near us, but there was this place that we went by on the way home from our parochial school, called the Catholic Information Center, and it had three shelves of children's books that you could borrow. So that's where the *Black Stallions* were. The funniest book, it was called *When Jesus Comes to My House*. The plainest little picture book, just appallingly bad. I remember discovering an ad for it in early *Horn Book* when I became a children's librarian, just roaring with laughter, that it really did exist: *When Jesus Came to My House*.



Q: You didn't just make it up.

MCDONNELL: Exactly. I didn't make it up, oddly.

01:11:32:02 Q: And you said there was the whole *Dick and Jane* series that was Catholic. I had never heard of that before either.

MCDONNELL: The Catholic reading series? Oh, my goodness.

Q: I thought they were *Dick and Jane*.

MCDONNELL: That's right.

Q: It's the same family, but they did different things?

MCDONNELL: No, no, they had different names. They weren't the same family. It was a totally different series. But it's the series parochial schools would have bought. You know, because they had the right moral values.

But in boarding school, reading just saved my life. I read constantly. We had an enormous amount of quiet time. Somebody just sent me an email that he had discovered this book he had loved as a kid, *Two Years Before the Mast*, and I thought, "Oh, Richard [Henry] Dana, I'm probably one of the only people in the world who would have known that!" [laughs], who would have read that. I read a lot of Victorian stuff, after I finished all the American stuff.

Then I was in the eighth grade, I think, and the downstairs library was for the community and for the upper school. Maybe the community had its own library as well. Maybe not, I don't remember. But of course, we weren't supposed to use it in eighth. Sixth, seventh, and eighth was middle school. But I'd really run out of things to read. So these nuns would bring me stuff from

the lower school library that was kind of tame enough, that I could read. I spent a lot of time in that library. It's so funny to think that those things leave such a mark. Even now, I was thinking about making a library run before you got here, and thinking: What would I ever have done without libraries? I just think libraries are the best thing in the world. I still think that.

I took the baby to a library program on Friday, a baby program—and I actually remember being up here, I was teaching at Simmons College and doing this community outreach stuff for the Endowment for the Humanities. A friend who's a librarian in Lexington was doing these story programs for children who were under three. When I went to library school the youngest that you ever programmed for were pre-schoolers, four. And I've been going to watch Donna do this program like, Jesus Christ there are children in diapers here! And now all of that has really expanded so much. This little tiny library has programs for children under eighteen months and then it's got a toddler program and the pre-school. It's just phenomenal. It's also that there are so many babies in this part of the world right now.

Q: Another explosion, absolutely. It's fascinating.

MCDONNELL: Yeah. But the things that you're interested in at an earlier times, that become sort of seminal to your whole career—I'm fascinated by that! Who planted that? Did you ever think like, why did Ellen Futter become a college president? Because she was her father's daughter. That's one reason. That's why she went straight to law school, is that she speaks the—I don't know the full story, maybe she just told me the story—

1:14:25:01) Q: I don't know anything about Ellen. And she wouldn't let us interview her so—

MCDONNELL: She was what?

Q: She didn't want to be interviewed.

MCDONNELL: She didn't want to be interviewed? Oh. That's too bad.

Q: Maybe later.

MCDONNELL: I remember running this—it was a program on—

Q: So you were friends with her?

MCDONNELL: Not close, but we did know each other. I think she was an English major too.

Q: Yes, she was.

MCDONNELL: But it's not like, "Gee, I want to—"

Q: So wait, her father was someone big in New York?

MCDONNELL: No, but I think her father—I think there are people whose fathers have a hugely strong influence, as if they were first born boys. That's what I mean. So she went straight to law school, whereas the rest of us wandered around trying to figure out what are you going to do with your life?

01:15:14:27 Q: Or succumbed to a man—

MCDONNELL: Also I think she might have been the first undergraduate on the trustee committee. So she had a lot going on, even when—I cannot imagine having that much together at that age. I was totally—it's funny, I used to joke about this, that if I had known you could go to Children's Hospital until the age of twenty-five, I wouldn't have gotten married at twenty. I just thought we were supposed to be grown-ups. I could have avoided an entire marriage.

01:15:54.01Q: You've mentioned that before but I didn't really get the connection.

MCDONNELL: Well it's that I really—

Q: That you were considered really by society up till twenty-five a child.

MCDONNELL: Yes, exactly!

Q: And so you didn't have to make these decisions.

MCDONNELL: Yes! I could've just been a kid. That was ridiculous to—I just thought everybody else knew and I didn't know. And also, any shelter from the storm in those years of chaos.

1:16:22:20 Q: So, the guy you first married. How did that all happen? Because you said you had two boyfriends, one in Boston and one at Columbia.

MCDONNELL: My boyfriend at Columbia, after sophomore year, went to do his alternative service. And I interpreted that as the end of the relationship because I had no experience. That spring, a roommate of his had come out to see me when he was visiting someone else at Stony Brook, and also visiting them was another person from their high school. And that's the person I ended up getting involved with. So then I did come up to Boston, and then wanted to go back to Barnard. I was trying to end it, and he retaliated with a proposal.

Q: He retaliated with a proposal? And it was done the right way this time?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, it was a little more convincing. And then he was about to start medical school, and if you were married you got a larger stipend from the scholarship he had. It was this MD/PhD scholarship at ten schools in the country, with ten spots each, and he had gotten into

two of them. And he still believed that people would find out sooner or later that he was really a phony and wasn't smart at all. I know, these deep scars that people have. That evidence can't talk them out of.

01:17:43:10 Q: So how long did that last? The marriage?

MCDONNELL: Oh, god, no more than three years at the most. It was pretty fast.

Q: So it really was hard on you.

MCDONNELL: Oh, well for one thing I didn't recognize how depressed he was. And he had had this deal at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], I think anybody can do it, that he wasn't expected to go to classes. You didn't have to go to classes, you just took the final. And it was unlimited, how many things you could rack up. It was a crazy school. So he frequently would work that way, just learn this on his own, then go take the final. I mean, some people's lectures he went to or whatever, but when he got to medical school, he wanted the same thing. And because of this MD/PhD, they said, "Okay. Just sit the boards." And so he was so isolated. But also, you know how much you learn from being in classes. So in that isolation, and this kind of self-teaching, he just became much more withdrawn.

And he was very controlling. We had a truck I couldn't drive, we had a boat I didn't know how to sail. So the final straw was, we were getting a stereo system, and we're living in this tiny little cottage on City Island [New York], and I said, "Don't bring home something that looks like you can fly a jet plane with it. I want a very simple system." And he literally brought back something that looks like you could fly a jet. And that day I left. It's like, how much clearer do I have to be about this? I'm the only one working.

And I think the other thing that happened was that I had gone to library school, and then gotten hired under the table by New York Public Library. My professor was the head of Children's Services. I knew that I was a fair-haired child—I was given a tremendous amount of support and affirmation. And it's like, well how can I be competent in one thing and not competent in the other? You know? There's this tremendous mismatch that I'm handling budgets and staff at work, and you picked a bank I can't get to? So I have to wait for you to get to—I just outgrew it, is really that's what happened. I outgrew it. And we didn't have enough in common. So finally after I left and was living on my sister's couch for a while he agreed that he would go to therapy with me. So we went to see this therapist who's at Einstein [Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx], and she reminded me of Domna Stanton. You know those kind of clothes—remember when Calvin Klein's stuff first came out? There were these very tailored pants and silk blouses that were very understated and elegant, and that's the kind of clothing that Domna Stanton wore, and that's the kind of clothing this therapist, this shrink wore. And she set some really serious ground rules about how behavior had to happen during this period of weeks. And he was furious. You know, no sex, no this—and he just was furious. Also, he was not about to reveal anything to her. I doubt if he would have done it in any circumstance. But he was doing this thing under duress because I had moved out and that was that.

But I really liked her, and I really liked the whole process. I remember she said to us, “If either of you had married a Maori you would have had more culturally in common.” We were from such different worlds. Here I am, Mary Christine, the youngest of this Irish Catholic family. And here he is, the oldest in this Jewish family, the son of a dentist, doing an MD/PhD. Obviously, the family's not happy that he brings home Mary Christine. And for me, we all looked alike, we all wore denim. I didn't have any clue to ethnic or social or cultural differences. I just didn't. Also I

think I had been very lucky in my first relationship. That he was a really sweet guy. I'm still in touch with him.

Q: That was George, the photographer's son?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, the photographer's father. I don't think it would have been a successful marriage because I really don't think we're very much alike, ultimately. Also I think that sex was the huge unifier of that entire era. It's like you didn't ask any other questions. But he was a good, solid, loyal guy. And the man I married, was really not. I think he was a very limited guy. I value generosity so much, and there had been an enormous amount of generosity in my first relationship.

It's funny, I was thinking about that this week. I now run the book discussion group here at the Brookline Booksmith—they give me a gift certificate and I run the group, and handle the emails. So I have these gift certificates racking up, so I'm getting these hardcover books. I'm a librarian! You don't buy hardcovers. But Terry, my husband, was the manager of Brentano's; the minute he read a review, he went and bought hardcovers. He wasn't at the bookstore any longer when I met him, but that had been his first career. He was a bookseller. So inevitably—I loved to read Anne Tyler, and back then, as soon as a new one was out he would bring me a hardcover. There were all these lovely little surprises, and they didn't have to be tied to events. There was just a huge generosity of spirit, and it's really one of the things I admire most, and it's something I try to remind myself. Because it doesn't come naturally to me. I didn't grow up around it, but I admire it immensely.

1:24:26:20 Q: And how did you meet Terry?

MCDONNELL: Oh, that's a good story! I didn't tell you that one?

Q: Something about a conference?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, yeah, Carl Rodgers.

Q: Okay, Carl Rodgers.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, Carl Rodgers, *On Becoming a Person*. The person I was in therapy with was part of a collective called Green House, in Central Square. And Morrie Schwartz was also in that collective, from *Tuesdays with Morrie*. They were running a conference called “Urban Community,” something like that. And I had been living in these group houses and was interested in community, the possibility of community. Terry’s ex-wife, currently at that point separated wife, had given him the flyer. He wanted more trees, more garbage cans, that kind of stuff, for his block. He lived in the South End.

So two hundred strangers show up to this thing with Carl Rodgers. We all show up and there’s no mic, there’s no agenda, there’s no leader. And he, Carl Rodgers, he’s in his seventies or early eighties, he’s sitting in the corner just observing, taking notes. And that’s what he did, the whole weekend. And it turns out that was part of an experiment. Like in Brazil, I think he had five hundred random strangers together that he observed.

One thing that happened Saturday night, Carl Rodgers wasn’t there. I don’t know if the Green house people were there. But this guy I knew from the communal house circuit, he was a blustering powerhouse sort of guy, chauvinistic. So these guys kind of took over the floor and muscled in and did their whole thing. So Sunday morning, we all come back and confront that. Like, what the hell happened here? And out of it came this group talking about men and women, but I met Terry at that conference.



I think I met him on Saturday, and gave him a ride. I hung out with him on Saturday and gave him a ride to the subway and hung out with him again on Sunday. So then the conference was over and I, having never said this to anybody before, said, "I'd like to see you again." And he said, "Well, I'm really pretty busy the next couple of weekends." So I cried all the way home. I dropped him off at the subway and cried all the way back to Arlington.

And I get this phone call that night. And the next day I get a telegram. My housemates are like—this thing is delivered, this incredibly great Corita Kent card of "Life is a Dance"—in this gorgeous Corita Kent card, inside, "Thanks for the dance." So I saw him every night that week [laughs], and that was that. I remember calling my sister by Wednesday and saying, "This is it." Isn't that so funny? It is very, very funny, and I do think there is some truth in it, that sometimes there really is a very quick, powerful connection. As opposed to other things we work and work and work, and it never really fits. It's like the Dylan song, "If something's not right it's wrong."

1:27:30:20 Q: So he was an artist?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, he was an artist. Some of his stuff is here, more of it's in Vermont. He was an artist, he was a baker. He was a professional baker when he was in art school.

Q: Because you both came here, and he was working as a baker initially?

MCDONNELL: No, when I first met him—no, let's see, he was in art school and I was teaching at Simmons, and then Reagan was elected. So my grant ended like that. So I got a job teaching in Brookline. I'd never taught but I had this license. He got a job training bakers for Warburton's [Bakery]. It's just so crazy. He thought he could still get to art school at two o'clock, but he had been up since three, so it didn't work out more than once a semester. But I have all these paintings up in Vermont. He did this great series with Number Ten cans in different

configurations, where the reflection—he always was trying to find the place between abstract and realistic. Just to sit on that line and play with it as much as he could.

01:28:32:03 Q: And was he a co-editor with your work sometimes?

MCDONNELL: No.

Q: You two were totally separate in your worlds.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, we were separate except in our teaching life. When he became a teacher we would talk about that endlessly. One year, he had this really, really tough kid. Just unusual, because it was a sweet school he taught at.

Q: He wasn't in Brookline as well?

MCDONNELL: No, no he wasn't in Brookline, he was out in Concord at a private school, which ended up being the most incredibly supportive community to us when he was sick. I learned a lot from them. But anyway, he had this tough kid and I was teaching freshmen and seniors, and I had a really tough kid in freshman class, and so I said to him, "What are you doing about that kid?" He said, "Oh, I put him on my blind side. I always teach with him on my blind side so I don't bother him as much. At least I'm not on his back most of the time."

So I rearranged this freshman classroom into this big, deep square, rectangular shape, and I started teaching up at the front of that rectangle. And I put this kid back by the door so I would stop being so distracted by him. And he was the funniest boy. I mean, it was hard at first because he really was so morose and he would say things like, "Are we ever going to read anything interesting?" And the other line I loved, he said, "Ms. McDonnell, I don't suppose you'd know your colleagues' schedules so I could find a class to transfer into?" And I said, "That is the best

line I have been given in years. That is the best. Do you stay up at night to think of these lines? That is so funny! I promise, I don't know their schedules, but I'll sign any form you bring me. Any form you bring me I'll sign." [laughs] Anyway, he ended up staying in the class the whole year, and at one point towards the spring he asked me if he could write the quiz. I was doing *As I Lay Dying*, the Faulkner—it was a parody practically. It was the funniest quiz. It was a total parody of my quizzes, the same kinds of questions. They were funny: "What is on the cover? Why?" or "Chapter 12, what is the first word in Chapter 12? Explain." Just stupid, stupid stuff. But anyway, we talked shop a lot. And when I took a break to do book binding, I went on leave. I think that was very hard for him, that I wasn't interested in talking about teaching that year. I really wanted some distance from it. So I think that was hard, he felt more isolated.

(01:30:53.20) Q: Then he got sick.

MCDONELL: Then he got sick and the whole journey began.

[01:30:59:27] Q: So how long has he been gone?

MCDONNELL: Twelve years. Isn't that amazing, that it could be twelve years? I was just thinking about that this week, that I still think about him a lot. You know? There's this friend of mine who wanted me to meet someone from her town, and he sounds like a perfectly reasonable person but I just don't know how to begin to explain how I got so independent. I just don't know if I'm in the market for this in any way. And also, the stakes are very high with me. It's a tough act. A tough act to follow. It really is.

01:31:36:00 Q: So how was your house in Vermont? How did you end up finding that little farm house?

MCDONNELL: That's a good question. We knew Vermont because I used to get really crazy when summer came about getting out of the city, and getting the kids out of the city. So I would find these crazy little rentals up in Maine usually, for August. We'd go to these obscure places that I'd found, till the kids said they would never go anywhere without indoor plumbing again. That was it, never again. So I said, "Now that we both were teaching, we could take the whole summer off." Right, get out of town. These little day camps are pricey, so we could all leave for what we pay for day camp. So I said, "I'm going to find us a place in Vermont." I had gone to Vermont once when I was very young. I had an uncle who had a gentleman's farm there, we went to for a week, and I always loved it. I don't know why the others didn't like it very much, but I loved it. And it's one of the clearest memories I have of my mother, is spending time with her there. We would look for guppies and things in the brook.

So I got this idea that I could find us something in Vermont. And someone said, "You know, if you have a place in Vermont, you don't give it up in the summer." Which had not occurred to me. So we looked in the *Times* and I saw this little ad for someone who wanted to share a house for the summer in Vermont. So I called and explained a little about us. She said she had already made an arrangement, but she said, "I have friends who are thinking of renting their house for the summer. I'll give you their names." I had never heard of Mary Belenky at that point. Mary Belenky is one of the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and her husband started the psych graduate program at Goddard [College], so that's why they were up there. They're fascinating people. They went to a place even more remote, and we used their farm house in the summers.

So we first got up there, you drive up and it's a four-corners, and when you start to make the turn—the house is back here—you start to make the turn and you see this horse pasture. It was a little horse barn and it had a little heart cut out of the door, the side of it. And my daughter said, "Oh,

mom, not again.” She thought it was the outhouse. So we continued to turn, and it’s this beautiful farm house. That was how I first knew about Vermont. And as my daughter says, “Everybody liked Vermont, but you liked it best.” Which I did. I just loved it. I just think I was running very manic and trying to balance everything, and in Vermont everything was so quieted down. Terry did a lot of great art up there. Some of the stuff that’s here is from—

So anyway, Terry had died and I had found this little place. I start having this heart arrhythmia, this racing pulse. I couldn’t get anybody to pay attention to it, because every time they tested me, they didn’t find it. People seemed pretty relaxed about it, until finally, I’m continuing to complain that it’s happening. They have me on a monitor, a real old-school monitor. You have to get the read in via a landline and I don’t have a landline, I just have a cell, so I could only do the read-ins at school. And also it beeped after three entries. I said, “I can’t wear anything that’s beeping, I’m teaching!” These kids are like, “Ms. McDonnell, what is that thing beeping?” Or even when I had to send this stuff in, it goes *brrrrrrrr*. These kids were like, “Ms. McDonnell, what is that?”

Anyway, finally I’m on record with this pulse that’s flying, and the technician whose taking the call keeps saying, “Do not hang up. Could you run that again for us? Could you run that again?” Finally I said, “It’s forty-five minutes, I gotta go work. Sorry, gotta go!”—“Don’t hang up, don’t hang up!”—“Just call the doctor or something, it’s probably a drug interaction or something,” and I hang up to go to teach. What am I gonna do? These kids are outside.

I finish this class and see them out of the library and my cell phone is ringing, and my school line is ringing, and it’s these doctors. Finally my doctor reaches me and she says—I don’t remember how she started the conversation, but the line that I’ll never forget was, she said, “Do you want to

throw a clot to your brain?" Oh I know what she said to me, she said, "I want you to go to the emergency room right away." I said, "I'm not going to do that. That is ridiculous, I am not hanging out in some emergency room all afternoon, and besides it's the middle of the school day, I have kids in here." She said, "Do you want to throw a clot to your brain?" I said, "Well, you do have my attention now. But it'll take me while to get rid of these kids and I'm not going to an emergency room." She said, "Okay, well, can you get to the Kenmore Center?" which was one of the branches of this health plan. I said, "Yeah, I can do that, but it's about forty-five minutes until I can get rid of these kids. I've got to get coverage, you can't just leave kids in a school."

So I got coverage and went down there. Now by this time, my heart had been racing all day. She said, "There's a cardiologist waiting for you," so literally there was a cardiologist waiting for me. She takes the pulse and it's something crazy. I don't remember the numbers but it's really huge. And she said, "Have you ever used a beta blocker?" I said, "No." She said, "Well, we'll start one right away." And she turns to this woman she's training and she says, "This is the full fib." And at that point I thought, "I am exhausted." So it took me a while—I took this beta blocker, and the options were to go on medication, but you have to be hospitalized to start this medication. You don't have to be Einstein to say, "That's not a good idea." I'm not doing something where you to be hospitalized, I'm not interested in this medication if I have to be hospitalized for it. I'm young, give me a break. So you can be cauterized, they call it a cardio ablation, but the guys that I was seeing in that plan said that the problem for me was that I had both flutter and full fibrillation. You can knock out flutter, but most people won't treat the—they'll treat the right, but not the left, ventricle.

So I had this whole thing about Mass General because Terry had really gotten great treatment there. And this is before SooAe was there. I don't think she had come back yet. Maybe she was

still in school. I can't remember. But anyway, I had always had this mythology—I used to say, “When I get cancer, I'm going to be treated at Mass General,” and my doctor, really she's so funny, she said, “I have some problems with that sentence.” I said, “Yeah, I know but we all have our own mythologies. I think it's just a question of time.” I had to move myself out of that health plan because she wouldn't refer to Mass General. So I got a Mass General doctor, and actually it was through Martha—what is Martha's last name?—she's a classmate of ours. Martha, Martha, Martha. Doesn't matter, she's the one who got me the connection because all these guys were closed. All these practices. In fact this woman also had gone to Barnard, but maybe ten years after us. When I first went in she said, “Would you remind me how you got into this practice?” She had a closed practice. So I said “Martha,” and she said, “Oh, yeah, I remember that conversation.”

So she gave me this referral to this electro-cardiologist Dr. Heist at Mass General and he said, “Of course we're going to do both chambers. You're going to be with me a long time, about got eight hours.” So that was the summer that I had that treatment and I couldn't travel, because my pulse was so high.

1:38:52:19 Q: So wait, were you hospitalized?

MCDONNELL: No, maybe a day, a day or two. So eight hours of surgery and I had to stay overnight.

Q: And meanwhile you're on the beta blockers.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, they take you off it, but I had insisted on going off all medication before I had this because I wanted to make sure for myself that it didn't have anything to do with drug interactions. And they kept saying to me, “It is not due to drug interactions. There is no record.” I

said, “Just humor me.” So it took me most of the spring to gradually get off everything. I was not on a lot, but it’s tough to get off antidepressants. And I used the real old-school, I still do, the real old-school tri-cyclic. Great one.

But anyway, I had all this time on my hands because I wasn’t traveling anywhere, and I would just put on the computer, “Northern Vermont real estate,” and it was always these tacky places that were thirty acres in the middle of nowhere for hunting camps. Duck blinds and stuff. Or little tacky cottages all around a little lake somewhere that just didn’t appeal to me at all, in my price range, which was very low. And up comes this little charming farmhouse. Our friend, who was in Vermont, she and I drove over to see it. I just said, “I don’t see any reason not to buy this.”

Someone had been living in it. It was emptied, it had incredibly beautiful light. The day that I had decided, I went over again the next day or so, and I was standing behind the house. It looks out at the Lowell Mountains. There’s a cow pasture right behind it, a huge pond called Mud Pond and the Lowell Mountains behind the house, but it’s totally surrounded by this big hundred-acre working farm. And the cows that were in the pasture, it began to rain, and the cows kind of paraded one-by-one right in front of me—you know, all the ladies make their way back up to the barn in the rain—and I thought, “Oh, it’ll be alright.” So that’s how I found it and I bought it like this.

And then this lovely family, this grandmother had been living in it—they had sold the farm in ’99, except this one little acre and the older farm house from 1860. And that’s what the grandmother had lived in, so when she died, they were the family to sell it to me, not the people who own and run the farm. And they now have this little contracting company and that’s—I still think everybody thinks the house is theirs, including all of them. I’m just bankrolling it.



01:41:27:07 Q: That's great. How much time do you spend up there?

MCDONNELL: When I was working, I'd be up all summer. Summer break and usually April break, too, to take care of the garden and stuff. I thought I would be up a lot more than I was the first year. I stayed up through most of September but it's very quiet and, I think, unless I have a specific project. So I think, June, July, August, most of September. Sometimes later, I have friends who stayed up through October this year and it really does sound quite wonderful. I came back because I teach at the women's shelter. I still do like to do that a lot. I don't know how that's going to play out.

01:42:12:24 Q: And you said you were going to go to Guatemala?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, I'm going to Guatemala to teach in this program for Mayan university students. The ESL teaching is a lot of fun. And I'm thinking of doing an MFA—there are a couple of these in the country, MFAs for writing for children. A lot of people said to me, "Why don't you teach in it? Why would you want to do it?" But the truth is that I love school. I've always loved school. And a chance to really be reflective. It's really just a gift to myself if I choose to do it. That's the answer.

Q: So you would really enter the program?

MCDONNELL: I think I may.

Q: Although you could teach in it, with your experience?

MCDONNELL: Well maybe, maybe not. I don't have the same academic credentials on it. But it's just a chance to be reflective and be in community and have that structure and

encouragement. There's just a chance to do that. At first I wasn't going to do it. There's one in Vermont and there's one at this Hamline College in St. Paul.

Q: Hamline? In St. Paul, Minnesota?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, Hamline has this—is that where you're from?

Q: No, no, I just have a friend—I always would love to go and know better.

MCDONNELL: Aha! In St. Paul. Being in St. Paul sounds like fun too. It's so funny, I was just talking to a friend about it. She was over for dinner, and she said, "That's where Louise Erdrich's bookstore is.

Q: Yes!

MCDONNELL: My oldest, oldest, dearest friend is a woman who was a part of the Camden Twenty-Eight draft action, and married a man who was also a part of that, Frank. And ultimately, they went to South Dakota to teach in the first Indian reservation college, Santa Galesga. And she taught at the mission school. Anyway, they ended up staying in South Dakota, they were back here for a little bit when he was at the Kennedy School [Harvard University]. But one of his specialties is the Native American law. He's a tribal judge in a couple of different tribes. They were so excited to meet Louise Erdrich. They were at the bookstore, they were going to the theatre that night, and a friend who they knew from the reservation who's a jeweler came in to replenish what's being sold. So he said to them, "Have you ever met Louise?" And they said, "No." And he said, "Well, why don't you wait because she'll be here in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to meet with her." So when everyone was introduced, Louise said to my friend Frank,

“I want to thank you for the work you’ve done.” Because he has these two books that are really influential about calling for land return.

Q: Oh great.

MCDONNELL: Yeah. It’s really fun. He said to me, “Oh my god, second to meeting Bob Dylan—that was probably as good as it gets.”

Q: That’s fantastic. So they’re still in—

MCDONNELL: They’re still in South Dakota.

1:45:02:13 Q: That’s quite a history. It makes us feel like the rest of us haven’t done much with our lives. I’m teasing, you’ve done a lot.

Just one clarification. Actually, we can wait on this till you read your transcript, but I said there was a break. The break came, and I have no idea how this happens, because it says, “I’m going to change my memory now.”

MCDONNELL: Right, there was a point where we did that.

Q: But, what’s before and what’s after do not connect.

MCDONNELL: That makes sense.

Q: But anyway, there was a reference to—you had been talking about Eleanor Duckworth and what you had learned about teaching from her. And it starts again, talking about the process of writing a book without description. So can you bridge that?

MCDONNELL: Yeah, you had asked me how I got started writing children's books, and I was teaching in this program at Simmons College about children's literature. It was one of the first master's in children's literature. You know, I'm not an academic.

Q: But you like school.

MCDONNELL: I do like school, but if I ever had been given the opportunity I would have gone on. It's that there just was absolutely no one to say, "You know, you should consider this." And I went to library school because I had run into these people from New York Public [Library]. The work looked like so much fun, like why not? So they gave me a scholarship, I went. And I started work almost right away.

So I was up here at Simmons and I had gotten hired to do the part of the grant that was about community programs in children's books. I had a lot of experience with that, so that made sense. And while I was there, there was a symposium on the picture book. All the big guys were there. Maurice Sendak was there, and this wonderful guy, Uri Shulevitz, whose work I love so much. And Arnold Lobel, who unfortunately died of AIDS, and a woman named M.B. Goffstein, who kind of vanished but was so peculiar in her little work that it didn't really pertain. But the question was: What makes the best text to illustrate, if you are not writing your own text? And they all agreed, that the best text to illustrate has no description.

So that was a breakthrough to me, to say what's going to be there? I was so mired in description in anything I was working on. So I went home and did these six little vignettes, five or six, that would be possibilities for a picture book text, and I sent them all in and they said, "No, it'll be an early chapter book. We'd like to keep these three and do three more. We'll see what we can work together." And that was the first book.

I still remember, there's an element in that book—so many of the stories are based on things that had happened to me when I was little, but there's a background character that was genuinely, fully fiction. And I still remember the moment that he entered the story. He's the main character of the second book. As I did these little chapter books, they pushed me further and further into real fiction, and away from just the re-telling of your life experiences. And you always use yourself, but that no longer defined it. Then after a couple of those, instead of each chapter being self-contained, chapters were starting to run together—it would take more than one chapter to tell something—and I thought, “You should try a novel.”

I took a leave of absence for a semester, and *Count Me In* was the first novel. I didn't even know how to approach it really. I had this thing that had happened teaching eighth grade—well, two had happened, really at the same time. One was that SooAe had come, and I saw that rather than making my stepson feel that he didn't have a place, it staked out our house as always being a place that children are. So it confirmed, rather than limited.

That's one aspect of it. And then at the same time, I think I had three kids in eighth grade I was teaching that year, whose parents had one child and then divorced, just like my stepson. And then in these new families, babies were expected. So what it is like for the child of divorce? Oh, and someone else I know had remarried and was pregnant while her kids were graduating from high school and they were *appalled* that she was going to show up at this graduation pregnant. So funny! So all those things came together with this idea of exploring what's it like to be the adolescent in this situation where your mother is pregnant? With a new marriage, and your father has girlfriends in the city, and you have a stepfather. The whole reconfiguration of the family—so that's called *Count Me In*. And that was an exploration of that.

And then I did one or two of the chapter books and then had this idea for a novel, again based from my teaching, that had a child, a Vietnamese-American, a mixed-race kid, this is in the early eighties maybe, and she was attacked in the foyer of her building. And the rape was interrupted, but without an interruption, it definitely would have pushed forward. And I think that he had stripped her. She was this beautiful young thing, and she came to school—

Q: Eighth grader?

MCDONNELL: Eighth grade, yeah. I think there was a strong element of race in it. I don't know where I got that idea, but that's what I thought. And what I would watch every day was how her friends surrounded her, and how gradually she kind of reclaimed herself, and became herself again in the group. It fascinated me. So the book I did on it was *Friends First*. Because there was another thing from eighth grade, there was a kid I had who was so good at being friend with both boys and girls. And I really wanted to explore that question, Can you go through puberty and have a best friend who's a different gender?

Q: These are all very serious questions.

MCDONNELL: Well they're interesting questions. You have to have something worth pursuing. Because without it, you don't have enough. The book that I just finished, the first complete draft, it's about a boy whose father is a photographer and is taken hostage in the Middle East, doing photography in a war zone. He and the journalist he's with are taken hostage. So he is off-scene until the closing of the book, the last chapters. The book belongs to the boy, there's no question about that. And how his life is impacted, and what are his thoughts about what's going on.

1:52:10:09 Q: So this is in first-person?

MCDONNELL: No it's not. That's in third-person, but it's a singular point of view, which is pretty much what I write in, almost all the time. Occasionally I'll do first-person. I'm getting better at it, in that it doesn't feel too stilted anymore. And then for a while, I couldn't change point of view. I just couldn't figure out how to change point of view. Because I think I was so locked into the third-person—what do they call it? It's a third-person, but a singular point of view that you never break.

Anyway, in retirement, writing has become a much bigger part of my life. I did another book that I really, really love that I've been working on. When I was little, one time, we didn't have a television, but my uncle had a television. And we'd gone over to my uncle's in the same town to watch the Macy's Day Parade. One of the balloons got loose, and I was about five or six, and I was just desperate to see it, and I would go outside as much as I could to see if I could find it. I was just sure that it would come over the house. So it's called *Balloons on the Loose*, it's about a balloon that gets loose and two brothers who try to find it.

I'm making this real big transition. Last year, Viking and Random House merged to become the largest publishing company in the world, and everything is corporate. So all the game has changed.

Q: That's devastating. Oh my gosh.

MCDONNELL: I want an agent, I want a variety of publishing houses. I think I've got a couple of different directions to go in. I went to hear this guy on Saturday from the same MFA program, Gary Shultz, a spectacular writer. He just said to these kids, "In a way, it's a gift and you've got to get it out there. You've got a responsibility to get your work out there." And it was a lovely thought, like, *all right!* [laughs]

Q: Well, you can do it.

MCDONNELL: I'll do it. I'll do some more.

01:57:07.05 Q: Well that's great. Anything else you want to add? This has been really rich.

MCDONNELL: Yeah, the last thing is, I'm kind of interested in the fact that so many of us are remaining so active in our retirement. I mean, everybody I know, really. I think that's that—we have always worked. Ours was the generation that went right to work. And the idea of not working—I have a daughter-in-law who doesn't work. It's like, what do you mean she doesn't work? They don't have children—what does she do with herself? She's a smart woman. It's not enough to stay home and can your food and make quilts. Sorry, it's not enough. It doesn't cut it for me. The world needs active stuff. And didn't Hillary [Clinton] look great in the debate?

Q: Yes!

MCDONNELL: Yes!

Q: Yes! [laughs] She took it back. She made us all proud.

MCDONNELL: Oh, thank god. I was *so* relieved. I think it was such a strong showing, you would never say, "She's not leadership material, she's not presidential material." It's like, well, she just blew it away. She just looked so good, too. \_\_\_\_\_??

[End of Interview]



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