

Chapter 8. Lifetime Stories

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My Mother's Daughter

Bobbie Steinhart

I was a red diaper baby, raised in a fairly traditional working-class Jewish family. My parents treasured family ties and imbued me with a deep sense of commitment to social justice, values that influence me to this day.

My mother, a homemaker, transmitted conflicting messages about women's roles and hopes for my future. Thirteen years younger than my immigrant father, she deferred to his judgment about "important" issues. She insisted I do well academically, attend a good college, meet an educated man and "marry well" so I, too, could be a homemaker.

On the other hand, she was a social justice activist. As the librarian for my elementary school PTA, she instituted an annual "Negro History Month" display. Together, we walked precincts for "progressive" candidates and I joined my parents to protest a cross-burning on a "Negro" neighbor's lawn.

In 1959, when she was forty-seven years old, my mother died from metastatic breast cancer. During her final two years, I was her primary caregiver. My father also had health problems, exacerbated by a subpoena to appear before a Congressional committee investigating suspected Communists. Ironically, he predeceased my mother by two weeks. Shortly after, I turned twenty.

In January 1961, I relocated to Berkeley. I enrolled at San Francisco State and, that same year, met and married my husband. In the fall, he started the Masters in Social Work program at UC Berkeley. An indifferent student without direction, I was relieved to drop out of school to be a working wife. I was a secretary at UC's Boalt School of Law until, pregnant with our daughter, I left in 1964. Our son was born sixteen months later, and I happily immersed myself in the domestic arts and parenting.

Fast forward to 1969. Most of the women I knew had college degrees. I was an accomplished cook, sewed skillfully, *and* believed I was just as smart as those women. Yet, I felt deficient. I came to appreciate my mother's reason for encouraging me to go to college was contextual for her generation; for my generation, the '60s promoted quite different roles for women. Though I wasn't active in the feminist movement, the prevailing messages profoundly affected my thinking.

In 1972, I had surgery for malignant melanoma and decided I'd be embarrassed to die without a college degree. While my kids were young, I took UC Extension classes. Ultimately, in 1977, I received a BA in Social Work from UC Berkeley.

During those years and until 1981, I was the director of parent cooperative preschools. In 1981, encouraged by my husband, I enrolled in the MSW program at UC Berkeley. Two years later, and forty-three years old, I graduated. In 2003, after a twenty-year career in the Hematology-Oncology Department at Children's Hospital Oakland, I retired.

Family still comes first. Yet, like my mother, I'm involved in diverse volunteer activities. For nine years, I assisted first-grade teachers in Berkeley Public Schools; during the run-up to elections, I recruit volunteers and coordinate voter registration efforts; until recently, I was the longtime editor of a newsletter for a retired women's network; and I selectively campaign for political candidates.

Since 2013, my personal circumstances have changed. Though I'm in excellent health, my husband has had health issues. And, he doesn't drive. Previously, he took primary responsibility for many domestic chores. Now, even though I have less discretionary time, I regularly walk, make quilts for family members and close friends, have lunch dates with female friends, am a member of the Grandparents Club at the school of one of my granddaughters, remain committed to social justice causes, and was the House Party Coordinator for the successful 2014 campaign to elect Tony Thurmond to represent my California 15th Assembly District.

I've always thought my life diverged from my mother's. In retrospect, it probably hasn't differed that much. For her, family came first. Yet, she actively engaged in her community. It's the same for me. She died so very young and, so, I have no way of knowing whether she, too, would have been a "Late Bloomer." Writing this essay, leaves me thinking, maybe so!

In addition to her husband, Bobbie Steinhart cherishes her two children and their families, including three granddaughters and several grand dogs. Bobbie's stunned to realize her "kids" are forty-eight and about-to-be fifty! The family is fortunate to genuinely like one another, live geographically close enough to be mutually supportive, attend many of the grandchildren's events, celebrate most of life's milestones together and share progressive values in support of social justice causes.



Bobbie, her parents Rose and Joe Klein, and sister, Monica (1953)
[Photo by permission]



Bobbie Steinhart in 2014
[Photo credit: Nancy Rubin]

LOL (Little Old Lady)

Dionny Sunn

Returning to my small mountain hometown, Dunsmuir, California, for my brother's funeral in 2004, I met several former classmates whom I had not seen for fifty years. They told me "You always marched to a different drum." This revelation really surprised me. My class had twenty-seven students - seventeen with whom I had gone all through school. (Most of them are still there.) As soon as I graduated from high school, I left Dunsmuir for the city of my dreams, San Francisco. I wanted sophistication, art, music, and other freethinking people, but I didn't realize that I viewed life differently than most of my classmates. I loved that I had been thought of as eccentric in 1954 before I knew it myself.

When I was about seven years old, my Catholic mother called me a pagan because I had seen a movie about Tahiti and asked her why we didn't move, as life seemed much better there. I looked it up in the dictionary and was puzzled with its definition, idol worshiper. (What on earth did that mean in relation to me?) I now realize that I had "bohemian tendencies" when I was in my teens that soon morphed to artistic beatnik. In my mid-twenties, I "withdrew from 'normal' society and dropped out" to live a simpler, more meaningful life. I heard a Bob Dylan recording at a suburban cocktail party and was amazed at what I heard. There were others who thought like I did. He saved my life with his poetic words. I became an early flower child living freely and naked in nature, loving every moment of it.

When I became pregnant with my fourth child, I was determined to deliver my baby myself in a clean, quiet natural setting -- and I did. In a remote property in the redwoods, I began to see

that the other creatures around me were communicating with one another. I wanted to communicate with them. By the end of my stay, huge rattlers were walking down the dirt road with me as my baby and I enjoyed the sunset. Subsequently I became a rural, non-medical midwife dedicated to the idea that birth is not a medical situation. For the next thirty-five years, I helped determined mothers deliver their babies, wherever and however they desired. These experiences, along with the births of my own five children, are the highlights of my life.

In my early thirties, my girlfriend and I took our babies to Guatemala, where we lived for a year and a half in a remote Indian village. It was a magical, wondrous time. Later I moved to Mau'i where for 20 years I kept a women and children's center. My goal was to help women regain their power and self-esteem. We spent much time in the massive volcanic crater, exploring and savoring the immense primitive wilderness. We learned to ride horseback, eventually riding up the mountain to camp in the crater -- a trip of a lifetime. Moving to the Big Island in my fifties I took up spelunking lava tubes and walking on hot lava to observe the goddess at work.

At sixty, I trained as a beekeeper. I was the oldest person in the program and one of two women. It reaffirmed my knowledge that all creatures will communicate with me if I am open. When I was seventy, the bees became too much work, and because I needed money, I started my own bee seasoning business. I am the only woman in my family to have her own business. Now in my late seventies, the exciting things I can accomplish are physically limited, but my son, knowing I love adventure, tries to give me one every birthday. I've swum with dolphins in the natural setting of open ocean after my son towed me out on a boogie board. The next year he took me into the ocean on a jet ski. Recently, I traveled to northern Thailand where, in the midst of monsoon and the worst flooding in sixty years, I stayed for seven weeks having dental work done.

I am sorry I never met or had the joy of living with my "dream man", if he exists, or if even such a situation truly exists, but with five children by three different fathers and five grandchildren, my life is full.

My children's book, written for my grandchildren, was just published and soon my long-worked-on cookbook will also be published. What's next?

Aloha nui loa.

Dionny Sunn is seventy-seven years old. She has lived on her small coastal farm in rural Hawai'i for twenty-six beautiful years. The first thirteen years she camped in her jungle until she could afford to build. Her home is now mostly finished but she still has no phone service or cable TV. She lives with her Rhodesian ridgeback dog and wild Bengal cat for company, love and entertainment.



Dionny Sunn in 2014. [Photo by permission]

Little Old Ladies Shouldn't Do This

Bella Comelo

I grew up in Mumbai, India. Though it is a cosmopolitan city, there were always restrictions on what girls could do. Arranged marriages were still the norm in the 1950s.

Parents and the community frowned upon dating. When I worked, I had to be careful not to get friendly with young men who were not acceptable to my parents. At age 24, I had an arranged marriage. The good thing was that my parents were a bit liberal; they left the final choice to me. Fortunately, my husband was liberal too and encouraged me to go to graduate school.

Within a few years, we were blessed with four beautiful children. We worked hard to provide a good home for them and in 1983, we migrated to the United States.

At work I was drawn, by fluke, into the labor movement. I felt the need to be active as I observed that workers, especially immigrants, were exploited in certain areas. I joined the union and held many important positions. I joined picket lines and chanted "*Si se puede*" and "No justice, no peace." My friends from back home would have been shocked to see me. I was involved officially in the union for about 15 years. I was one of the founding members of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, which today has chapters in many U.S. cities. As a national board member, I attended many leadership conferences and workshops, and at age 76, I still participate in picket lines and rallies.

Battling worker exploitation and pursuing the cause of social justice have become dear to me. I have worked on getting living wage ordinances passed in many cities in the San Francisco Bay Area, especially in San Leandro.

I am also on the committee of the Faith Alliance for Moral Economy in the Bay Area, which permits me to remain involved in social justice activities.

As they say, one thing leads to another. For the last 12 years, I have served on the Ethnic Pastoral Council of the Oakland Diocese. This council was formed to make sure that all ethnic Catholics were welcomed and to make sure that all ethnic groups assimilate well in the church. Almost every year the council sponsors an ethnic festival called Chautauqua at which ethnic groups come together to share their cultures and forms of worship. At this festival, which honors St. Mary, the liturgy is conducted in Spanish, Tagalog, Hindi, Kumuu, Portuguese, Fijian, Korean, Polish and other languages.

In 2007, I learned that I have kidney disease. This unnerved me a bit, so I started working on my bucket list. I had always wanted to publish a children's book, so I hurried to publish my first, *Raju and the Snake Charmer*, which is dedicated to my first grandchild, Milan Ferus Comelo.

One thing that keeps me going and gives me zest for life is my love for my family and my grandkids. A friend thinks I should de-clutter my house, throw out the old photos and live a serene homebound life since I am old and have health issues.

No. My books and the old photos and artefacts from my travels give me comfort and pleasure. So, old folks like me, keep doing whatever makes you happy and comfortable. Forget about negative folks. Would some of my friends or my mom do some of the things I do at 76? I doubt it.

Since 2008, I have served on the Commission of Aging in San Leandro. In this capacity, I encourage our seniors to attend the senior center and take care of their bodies and minds.

The city presented me with a leadership award in 2013. Though it is good to be recognized, my involvement in causes has given me more pleasure and happiness than I can express. I feel fulfilled.

I can say with some confidence what Little Old Ladies shouldn't do: Do not sit on your butts; keep moving.

Bella Comelo, who holds Bachelor of Education and Master of Arts degrees, lives in San Leandro with her husband of 52 years, Ernest. She has written for several publications, including Eve's Weekly in Bombay, Catholic Voice, India West newspaper, Goanet-Femnet and the San Leandro Times. Her new hobby is learning to grow organic vegetables.



Bella Comelo in 2016 [Photo by permission]

At Home in Bolivia

Nancy Connor

I grew up in Philadelphia in a Catholic ghetto, the third child in a family of nine. Not surprisingly, after twelve years in Catholic schools, I decided to become a nun.

We Maryknoll Sisters minister to make God's love visible in twenty-two countries, and I was happy to go to Bolivia in 1967. Language school and a brief stint in a parish in northeastern Bolivia initiated me into a culture dramatically different from Philadelphia.

I moved on to La Paz, Bolivia's largest city, where I joined another sister, both of us working in different factories. Eventually and fortunately, through work we received health insurance - in 1970 I contracted hepatitis and spent six weeks in the workers' hospital.

In the factory I worked in a team of three, rotating positions as we packaged medicinal cotton. Other teams in the same section meant that seven of us conversed, usually about social or political problems.

Although I did not tell them, my companions realized that I had something to do with the Church. Once the factory owner arranged to have a Mass, and I left work before the Mass. My pay was reduced for having left early, and people thought I would object. I retorted that "Anyone who pays their workers so little for an hour-and-a half of work should not go to Mass himself." Perhaps my ministering at work was to make it known that justice should be on

everyone's agenda, rich and poor alike.

After several years, I was fired. I was sorry to move from being a producer in the economy to providing service. The latter may give more satisfaction, but I had felt immersed in a mystique attached to being a member of the working class and the struggle for survival that this implies during a military dictatorship – Bolivia's government at the time.

Subsequently, I wrote up the injustices that I had witnessed over the years and presented them to the company. Apparently that was too much for the factory owner who denounced me to the authorities.

One day two agents of the Ministry of the Interior stopped me on the street. Luckily, I was with two friends, and they observed what was happening. The agents asked me to help them with the case of a friend of mine who was in jail. I knew it was a trick, because they expect you to go quietly, and they never say that you are under arrest. To go quietly meant friends might not find you until you have been tortured. Anyway, I was arrested and held for a week in a convent with armed guards outside. However, the church prevented my being mistreated or held in an ordinary prison where the goons might get me. The bishop demanded to know the charges, which were: I had circulated leftist literature at work; I had helped a labor leader escape from Bolivia; and I was a link between the factory workers and the miners. Nothing could be proven, and I was free to return to my regular activities.

At that time I was studying to become a nurse's aide at the School of Public Health in La Paz and I returned to solidarity work with the political prisoners and my studies as if nothing had happened.

My six-month crash course as a nurse's aide offered much information, including a focus on never giving anyone a shot without a doctor's written order. That became difficult, particularly in my first job on the Bolivian/Peruvian/Chilean frontier, where no doctor had probably ever set foot. Tuberculosis was a challenge there, and of course the treatment required that I give numerous shots. My Bible became the book "Where There is no Doctor."

Eighteen months later, I joined a non-governmental organization that fostered leadership and provided health services in Altiplano communities around La Paz. Here again I met TB patients, one of whom later provided a joyful moment.

A few years after I was again in La Paz, I met a young man, obviously from a remote community. He looked much healthier than when I had known him, and when I finally recognized him, we embraced. Tears came to my eyes. Gregorio had been a difficult patient to cure. When he had attacks of coughing up blood during the night, I encouraged him not to be afraid, although I myself was afraid for his survival. Here he was, fine and several kilos heavier! Just that one

person made those months of ministry worth the isolation and hardships of the rural community.

Today I live in the same neighborhood where I lived as a factory worker, and sometimes I meet friends from those days on the street. I combine my concern for health issues with my ministry as a participant in a basic Christian community. In my spare time I tend the garden in the parish. The people have taught me that if you plant a flower, you are responsible for that flower, and I try to assume that responsibility.

Nancy Connor's story in Bolivia goes back to 1967, a few months before the assassination of Che Guevara. Now, some forty-seven years later, she realizes that she has lived in Bolivia, where she feels at home, more than she has lived in the U.S. In 2010, she celebrated her Golden Jubilee at Maryknoll. She wrote this narrative while visiting the U.S. in 2014, her first trip back since the Golden Jubilee. She was looking forward to getting to know her eight siblings better since she sees them so infrequently and was happy to meet her six new grand-nephews and nieces, all born since her last visit.



Nancy Connor in 2014. [Photo by permission]

A Life in the Movement

Heather Booth

Since I was a teenager I have been part of the movement to build a more just and democratic society. I joined the movement in 1960 during the protests at Woolworth's in support of African-American students sitting-in at Southern lunch counters to win the right to be served. I learned that if we organize, we could change the world. Now people cannot be denied service because of race. We still have much further to go to ensure that those working at the counter have decent wages and can afford to eat. But we can make progress when we organize and work

together.

When I first joined the movement, I often was the youngest person in the room. I worked for Civil Rights, Women's Rights, against the war in Vietnam, and for rights on the job as a union organizer.

Now, at sixty-eight, I am often the oldest person in the room.

I am incredibly heartened by the energy and insights of so many young organizers – working on immigration reform, marriage equality and other LGBTQ rights, the environment, and climate change – and using creative approaches online and on the ground as well as the tried and true methods.

Recently I was with 100 women who were fasting for immigration reform with a group called We Belong Together. It was inspiring to be in a shared space where women told their stories. Some of the women were Dreamers, those young people brought to the USA by their parents when they were young children and still in limbo. Because they organized, they can remain in the U.S., but they are not yet on a pathway to citizenship. Often, however, their parents and grandparents do face deportation and their families can be ripped apart. The youngest woman in the group spoke about how she valued being with those who had been in the movement for a long time and how we can learn from each other. Then I spoke, as one of the oldest women in the group, about how I valued those who are younger -- who truly are the future and will carry on the important struggle in their own way for their own times. The older ones are learning from those who are younger. How do we Tweet and post on Facebook? What courageous action can we take? The young Dreamers are fearless; they carry on the struggle with such energy. We are all learning from each other and building something stronger together.

Tactics and issues change and evolve over time; values and commitments endure across the ages.

And I have changed. I have learned to be bolder and to act with more confidence. Young women often are overcome by self-doubt -- "Am I good enough?" "Am I smart enough?" The lack of confidence can undermine us, especially when we are younger, even though we know we are fighting so that all of us can be treated with dignity and respect. Even with creaky bones, there are joys in aging and gaining more confidence in who we are.

We know that together we can build a better world if we organize across the generations and over time. I hope others continue this organizing until they also are women of a certain age, carrying on.

Heather Booth is one of the leading strategists about progressive issue campaigns and in U.S. elections. She was the founding Director and is now President of the Midwest Academy, training social change leaders and organizers. She has been a consultant to a variety of social change and political groups that have included the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare and the National Council of La Raza. She is now strategic advisor to the Alliance for Citizenship (the leading coalition of the immigration reform campaign). Heather lives in Washington, DC with her husband, Paul. She is a partner in Democracy Partners, www.democracypartners.com.



Heather Booth (1964)
Photo credit: Wally Roberts



Heather Booth in 2009
[Photo by permission]