RECOLLECTIONS OF A WRINKLED RADICAL

Mary MacFarlane

Deux des sources de données historiques sur les femmes sont la correspondence personelle et le journal intime. Cependant, ces sources ne nous parviennent que rarement des femmes de classe ouvrière. Les données personnelles de celles-ci peuvent s'obtenir à partir d'entrevues avec des personnes plus agées ou avec ceux et celles qui se souviennent des histoires racontées par leurs mères ou grand-mères. Rien ne peut remplacer cette technique pour former une impression générale d'une période historique et pour trouver des descriptions de conditions de vie et d'attitudes contemporaines. Dans cet article autobiographique, l'auteure raconte son vécu, devenant adulte et vieillissant dans une grande ville pendant les années 1930, la deuxième guerre mondiale, les convulsions sociales suivant la guerre, et l'ère post-industrielle d'exploration spatiale que nous traversons aujourd'hui.

Like all human beings, I live in an historical period that I did not choose. I also live within predetermined boundaries. Philosophers recognize such limitations, and refer to them as "destiny." Rollo May, in his recent book *Freedom and Destiny*, reminds us that "Destiny sets limits for us physically, psychologically, culturally, and equips us with certain talents."[1] He counsels that destiny cannot be escaped, but must be confronted. Although we are encompassed by undeniable limits, he argues, in human life there *are* options and we do have the freedom to choose how we will act or react or even not act at all, in all situations. Our personal history, then, is shaped by the impact on us of world events over which we have little or no control, by the choices we make at crucial turning points in our lives, and by the way in which we confront our destiny.

Gerontologists acknowledge the value of reminiscence as a way of discerning a pattern in one's life, a connection with world events and social experiences that provides a coherent picture of how individual lives are woven into the universal design and are not isolated incidents of no intrinsic value. While doing a "life review" recently, attempting to discover a meaningful pattern and explanation for my present existential position, I examined the events over which I had no control and the choices I had made throughout the years.

Predominant world events that undoubtedly affected me, directly and indirectly, were World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Baby Boom, Women's Liberation, the relative prosperity of the post-war years, and the Recession of the 1980s. When I applied for my Old Age Security cheque in 1983 and joined the ranks of the (socially created) dependent females whose personal income is well below the poverty level, my life appeared to have come full circle. I had been born poor, and it seemed I would die poor. What, I asked myself, could I have done to prevent this?

Early History

My story begins in Toronto in 1918, eight months before the end of World War I. Two events over which I had no control were that I was born female, and that my parents were working-class and WASP. When the war was over and the returning veterans faced massive unemployment, my parents' financial status was unexpectedly difficult, so I began life in a family that was economically unsound.

My father (an Englishman by birth) was a cavalryman in one of Canada's finest regiments, the Royal Canadian Dragoons. At the time of his discharge he knew how to ride a horse, shoot straight, use a sabre effectively, play polo, and perfrom in the spectacular Musical Ride at the Canadian National Exhibition: none of these skills enabled him to earn a living as a civilian. My mother (a Scot) was a graduate pharmacist, but female pharmacists were anathema in Toronto (and elsewhere) in 1918. For many people, the Roaring Twenties didn't roar. They didn't roar for us.

By the time I was ten, I had a sister and two brothers – a small family for those days. Even so, my parents' financial resources were strained by each additional child. Many humiliations are endured by the chronically poor, but what bothered me most as a child was that we moved around a great deal – mostly because we got behind in the rent and were evicted. I hated moving, and I still do. I seemed to be always the new kid in the school, the new kid on the street, the new kid at church, the new kid everywhere. There was no sense of belonging, except to one's own family.

Because of a feeling of rootlessness in the outside world, the family became a source of comfort, of shared experiences, of solidarity, a fortress against what often seemed like a hostile environment. Any threat of separation from the family aroused feelings of anxiety. When I was eleven years old, I became aware for the first time that *my own actions* could result in separation from my family or origin, and it was a sobering prospect for a child. This insight occurred when I was surprised by menarche.

The Facts of Life

There was no pain, but I was obviously bleeding to death. I tried to remember what I had been doing that might have caused such an injury, and finally recalled sliding for first base while playing baseball in the schoolyard. I felt fine, but I decided I'd better ask my mother's opinion. She was busy with the baby when I mumbled that I wanted to show her something. Impatiently, she followed me into the bathroom, where my show-and-tell act made her grow pale and tight-lipped. Finally, she asked me if I felt all right. Being reassured on this point, she went to the cupboard where she kept the baby's diapers and brought one to me. She instructed me to fold it several times and pin the ends to my undershirt (people concerned with satisfying basic needs like food and shelter could not afford the luxury of store-bought sanitary protection).

My mother's explanation of this strange and mysterious physical function was brief, "This means you are no longer a child, you're now a woman. It will happen every month, unless you're going to have a baby, and if you ever have a baby, my girl, just get as far away from here as you can and don't come back to disgrace us." She said no more. We never spoke of the subject again.

My initiation into womanhood was not cause for celebration and did nothing to enhance my self-image. I felt tarnished and apprehensive. The threat of complete exile from my family if I ever became a mother (at that time I had no idea how this might happen) haunted me and, incidentally, modified my behaviour for many years. The immediate problem of avoiding the trauma of separation from the only secure world I knew engaged my mind, and led to intensive library research.

As a child I was a bookaholic. Reading provided an escape from the harsh reality of life in the Cabbagetown slums, a glimpse of future possibilities, a pleasure almost sensual, and a source of information. In an attempt to discover the facts of life, searching for details unavailable to me from parents or teachers, I stealthily invaded the adult section of the public library, sniffing out taboo novels. I learned very little from them. It appeared that if a man leaned across me and turned out the light, *something* would occur. Most books were not explicit. They evaded in-depth descriptions of what that *something* was and ended the paragraph with a row of asterisks. In the next chapter, the heroine was screaming in agony and a doctor was ordering everyone in sight to bring plenty of boiling water. Eventually and infant appeared, wrapped in a blanket.

Movies, another passion of mine that I financed by selling junk to the 'rag-and-bone' man and by cashing in empty pop-bottles collected from construction sites, failed to yield much useful information. Torrid scenes of lovemaking ended in fadeouts. In the next act, there was moaning and bloodcurdling screaming behind a closed bedroom door, and frantic demands for boiling water. Screams and boiling water seemed to be a common denominator. I concluded some sort of hideous and unspeakable torture was involved. This type of sex education certainly acted as a deterrent to wanton experiments with the opposite sex!

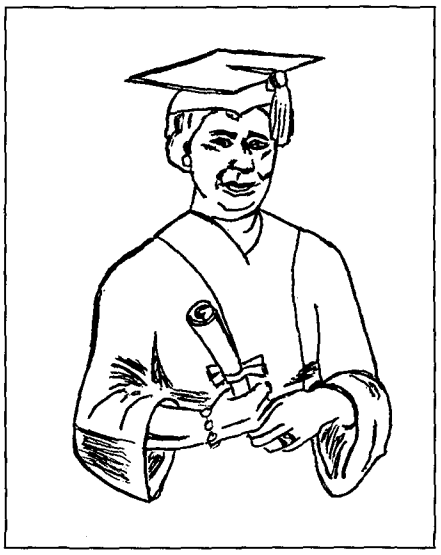

Illustration by Bill Mac

Miraculously, I eventually developed a healthy interest in the pleasures of the flesh, but I learned at a relatively early age how to avoid pregnancy. My diaphragm, and knowledge of my own anatomy imparted by a wise and compassionate woman doctor, allowed me to take responsibility for my own sexual activity and delay motherhood until my early forties.

Education of Females

During the 1930s, only the children of the wealthy could expect to attend university. For the moderately well-to-do, a high school diploma was considered a good education. Opportunities for females were limited to nursing or teaching (requiring an extra year or so of training), or a few months at a business college learning typing, shorthand, and simple bookkeeping. Working class families expected children to leave school after fulfilling the minimum requirements. Boys *and girls* were taught to be self-sufficient and tough-minded, and to be able to compete for personal rights and privileges as soon as possible. My graduation from Grade VIII (Senior Fourth, it was called then) created a family crisis. My parents had hoped that their financial situation would have improved by the time I was ready for high school. It was expensive to educate a child beyond public school. In fact, public schools (especially inner-city schools) did not encourage unrealistic ambitions involving advanced learning. Household management was stressed for female students; manual skills for males.

School leaving age was set at sixteen during the 1930s, in an attempt to slow down the entry of young people into the labour force during a period of unprecedented unemployment. A child could leave school at fourteen if a letter could be produced from a prospective employer offering a position. I was only twelve, so it was required by law that I attend classes. My father applied to the Department of Veterans Affairs for assistance. They arranged that I be issued 'chits' to pay for books. 'Frills' such as equipment for gym classes, swim suits, art supplies, musical instruments, and transportation – were not provided. A locker was considered unnecessary. In the winter months I staggered through the hallways loaded down with books and heavy outdoor clothing. During the classes from which I was exempt because I lacked equipment, I studied in the cafeteria. Scholastically, I did very well. At sixteen I graduated from Grade XII. It was 1934, possibly the worst year of the Dirty Thirties, and I was about to enter the world of work.

Protestant Work Ethic

Unemployment was equated with personal inadequacy. Most people unable to find work blamed *themselves* for their misfortune, and the fear of having to ask for public assistance (known as welfare, or the pogey) was almost the fear of Hell itself. Very little has been written about the years before World War II, and most of the existing literature concentrates on how these destructive times affected men. Women were affected too. Young women, seeking their first job and without previous experience, were exploited financially, and often sexually as well.

With my brand new high school diploma, plus a six-month secretarial course financed by an aunt, I thought I'd be able to get a position with no trouble at all. Answering the few advertisements appearing in the daily newspapers, I routinely joined the incredibly long lines of applicants for jobs in offices, stores, and factories, and sometimes managed to get hired. I also was quite frequently 'let go,' because the last one hired was the first one 'let go' when business was slow. On two occasions I was fired (much more disgraceful then being 'let go').

One stint as a waitresss in an off-campus restaurant near the University of

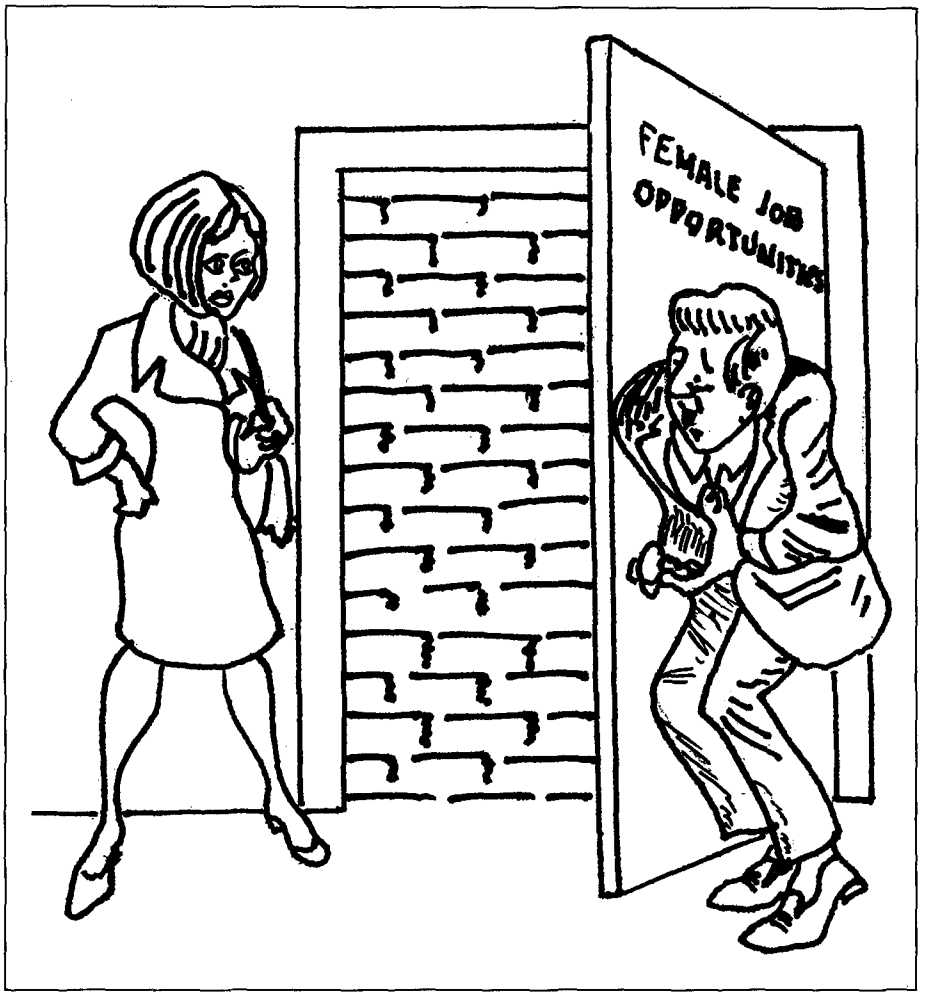

Illustration by Bill Mac

Toronto lasted all of seven days. I was congratulating myself on my ablity to take the customers' orders in shorthand and serve tables without errors – until a male student customer slipped his hand up my skirt while I was serving his soup and, in my involuntary leap with accompanying yelp, I spilled the hot liquid down his neck. I was fired on the spot. Another job, in a factory that bottled hand lotion, lasted a day. I was hired to work on the production line. My task was to put labels on bottles as they travelled past me on a constantly moving rubber belt. By the end of the day, close to one hundred bottles had escaped my labels and crashed to the cement floor. The damage was deducted from my pay and I was told not to return. I was afraid to go home and admit to my parents that I had failed again. They were depending on my earnings to add to my father's meagre income and to keep the family off the dreaded pogey. Heading home on the streetcar, I met my former English teacher and managed to make the story of my recent disasters amusing. Later that week I received a letter from her suggesting I contact a college friend of hers who was the editor of the Women's Page of a morning newspaper and also the director of the Women's Building at the Canadian National Exhibition. This rather formidable lady hired me (proving that, in those days, as well as today, it's *who* you know, not *what* you know that counts).

At first, I did nothing more than retype articles and list who attended charity balls and social functions and what they wore. During the C.N.E. I was allowed to write short human interest pieces, and report on the results of various contests in the Women's Building featuring sewing, baking, and handcrafts. But I was launched! My foot was firmly planted in the door of the business world, on the bottom rung of the ladder. I didn't know that the ladder led to brick walls and dead-ends *because I was female.*

World War II

World War II ended the years of poverty for most Canadians, and made available to young women positions they might not otherwise have managed to get. But those of us with ambition had to avoid being seduced by appeals to patriotism and the high wages offered for war-related employment. Anyone with any sense knew that war work would end when the war ended, and the search for a permanent position would start all over again. It was essential for young single women to evade the compulsory registration (National Selective Service) program. It was necessary to ignore Rosie the Riveter and glamorous Armed Forces posters and advertisements in streetcars, in store windows, in theatre lobbies, and in the daily papers. It was important to remember that childcare facilities, mushrooming during the war years, would close immediately when the war was over, as they had after World War I. The ideology had not changed (women's place was still believed to be in the home) and inducements to enter the labour force would end when the cease-fire was announced.

Because the role of women had not changed fundamentally, the many apparent gains made during World War II were easily lost. In the post-war years, there was a concerted push to return women to the home and the raising of children,[3] with the resulting phenomenon of the Baby Boom, which significantly affected society and the economy and still continues to do so.

Marriage and Motherhood vs. Career Plans

During the war I married and, after an extremely short honeymoon, wished the departing warrior good luck as I waved him goodbye. I did not inform my employer of my change in marital status, and I was very careful not to become pregnant. For me, personal freedom was inextricably bound to financial independence. My intention was to be gainfully employed all of my life. To admit to married status often meant dismissal, and pregnancy usually automatically resulted in a request for resignation: there was no such thing as maternity leave and subsequent return to work. The choice I made was to be secretive about my personal life and to lie if necessary,

in order to continue a lifestyle I found very agreeable. The role of full-time homemaker did not appeal to me.

My accumulated work experience was diverse (including varying periods of time as a newspaper reporter, elevator operator, switchboard receptionist, bank teller, secretary, and demonstrator of a new office machine, the Dictaphone). Eventually I was supervisor of the Dicta Pool in the medical department of one of Canada's largest insurance companies. When my husband returned from overseas, I financed his return to university to complete his architectural studies with my earnings – and then admitted the marriage was a failure and ended it in divorce court. Great numbers of WW II marriages ended there.

Somewhere during these hectic years I became involved with another man, and after he liberated himself from his marital bonds we started a new life together. Neither of us planned that I retreat to the home. Indeed, it was vital that we both remain financially productive to manage alimony payments and our recently-purchased house. Our life was carefully planned, everything under control (we thought). Then the unforeseen occurred, and my biological time clock asserted itself. I was "with child."

Throughout my life, guiding my choices and assisting me in maintaining my freedom to "do my own thing," was my ability to thwart nature. I resented this turn of events. Abortion was not only illegal, but not readily available. My spouse was *not* pleased, and I felt terribly guilty. I also felt the same separation anxiety that I had experienced as a child when my mother told me that I must leave home if I ever became a mother. Horrified, I realized that I had been obeying that ancient parental injunction for decades. I had no doubt been attracted only to men who preferred that I remain childless. It's shattering to discover that one's seemingly autonomous decisions have in reality been blind conformity to the expectations of others. Motherhood was a significant turning point in my life – a growth experience in more ways than one.

There is no use pretending that this Gestalt created instant and joyous acceptance of the little stranger heading our way. I hated watching my body become swollen, stretched, deformed. I felt ugly and disgusting, and I was certain my husband found me very unattractive. He tried to ignore my pregnancy and would never touch my stomach to feel the baby kicking. I had grave doubts about my ability to be a good parent and, as the day of delivery inexorably approached, I found myself having lengthy internal dialogues with the unseen creature leaping and diving within me, whom I now called 'Thumper.' I continued to work until a few weeks before the birth of our son, and then devoted the next seven years to childrearing.

There was much I heartily disliked about parenting – dirty diapers, runny noses, vomit, messy mealtimes, no money of my own, sleepless nights. Mothers are supposed to feel this great surge of satisfaction from rearing their kids, but I never felt that way. At the time I was convinced there was something weirdly wrong with me, but I have since found that my reaction is not unusual. By the time the baby was six months old, I felt very close to him (delayed bonding, no doubt) and all my energy – previously directed into career activities and self-indulgent recreation – now zeroed in on this tiny infant. For some years, our relationship was far too intense: as he got older, it became suffocating for both of us. We manipulated each other. There were no daycare centres, which would have provided a break for both of us; however, the resurrected feminist movement was addressing this issue, among others, and I became involved in their activities in an effort to solve my own problems. Consciousness-raising groups and human growth movements, as well as limited success in establishing much needed daycare centres in Etobicoke where I lived, restored my flagging confidence in myself.

My return to gainful employment when our child was in school all day was like being released from a cage. Nevertheless, I imposed certain restrictions on myself. I accepted only employment in close proximity to my home and the school. This limited my earning power and, combined with my seven years' absence from the labour force, would seriously affect my retirement income. Significantly, my years at home and my association with the feminists of that time had altered some of my values. I felt restless. I wanted to try something new. I wanted to grow.

Adult Education: Illuminating Interlude

When our son was in his final year of high school, and I was fifty-eight, I had saved enough money to finance four years of university – *for myself.* This had been a long-postponed dream. It was also (I felt) a positive method of dealing with my restlessness, with menopause, and with the impending "empty nest." I applied for admission to York University in Toronto and was accepted.

The next four years were the most satisfying in my entire existence. I lived in a state of euphoria. Oh, I had difficulties at first learning effective study habits and how to prepare essays and finding my way around the campus, but I felt charged with energy. I was never tired. Life in the 'real world' went on without me, while I immersed myself in books and soaked up knowledge like a sponge. I could have happily remained within the ivory tower forever.

When I graduated, I was offered an administrative position in a newly-found research centre on campus, where I stayed until my retirement three years later.

Retirement

The few studies available on the effects of retirement on women indicate that we experience more problems than men and take much longer to adapt to retirement. This certainly applies to me. I found retirement a very disruptive period, exacerbated by a move from the stimulating environment of Toronto to a quiet rural area ninety miles east of the city. I was a most reluctant transplant and was convinced that my life was over. I was wrong.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung points out that we cannot live the second half of life according to the standards and values of the first. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), Jung wrote: "A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. . .We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning." When I first moved to this rural area, I made frantic (and futile) attempts to re-enter the work force. In a period of recession and widespread de-hiring and unemployment, at my age these efforts were doomed to failure. Volunteer activi-

ties undertaken merely to avoid boredom gave no glow of accomplishment, and hobbies or weekly socializing at the local senior citizens centre proved unsatisfying. Eventually I realized that pursit of the usual materialistic goals and superficial values, Jung's "program of life's morning," was unfulfilling and unsuitable for this stage of my life journey.

There are several stages in adjusting to life changes of any kind. I plodded through them all when I retired. For almost three years I wasted physical, mental, and emotional energy trying to find an escape from what I perceived as a trap. Only when I re-framed the situation and saw the trap as an opportunity being presented to me by fate – whether I wanted it or not – was I able to once again take control of my own life.

The quiet of the countryside is no longer an enemy to be battled; it has become my ally. It provides me with a pleasant setting in which to write, to study, to prepare a geneological record for the younger family members, to learn a musical instrument and perform in a local concert band and, best of all, to meditate and steadfastly seek the wisdom it is the business of mature individuals to acquire and preserve. Within the very real limitations imposed by my present life situation, I am able to *choose* what I will do or not do. Finally, I am able to accept that I am probably where I'm *supposed* to be, doing what I'm supposed to do, in working out my personal destiny.

Like Phoenix rising from the ashes or Ulysses setting out on yet another odyssey, I continue to seek, to explore, to experiment, and to believe in my inherent value as a unique human being whose personal history is worth recording.

[1]Rollo May, *Freedom and Destiny* (New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1981), p.127.
[2]Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years: 1929-1939* (Markham, Ont.: PaperJacks, 1975).
[3]Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963).

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AU COEUR DE L'INSTANT

une blancheur d'oie
un gris de perle et un noir
de loup font l'hiver

de la mer
la clameur du chant des hommes
aux lèvres des flots

bruit ravissant d'eau
l'hiver au bout des glaçons
coule goutte à goutte

tragique triangle
toujours entre l'un en soi
il y aura l'autre

pays de l'enfance
abrite l'herbe foulée
dur chemin de femme

nul n'avance s'il
ne laisse des pas derrière
lui et son chemin

mille fois ma vie
s'évaille à couvrir le jour
d'un temps incertain

il n'y aura rien
rien qu'un ciel bleu et du vent
pour taire ta peine

le corps immobile
rougit à vue de soleil
comme fruit d'été

je suis bien là-haut
mais je suis mal en dedans
me manquent des ailes

Célyne Fortin
Montréal, Québec

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