

GRANDMOTHER'S CIRCLE

Standing on Sacred Ground

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

The cultural myth of the Western World prior to World War II

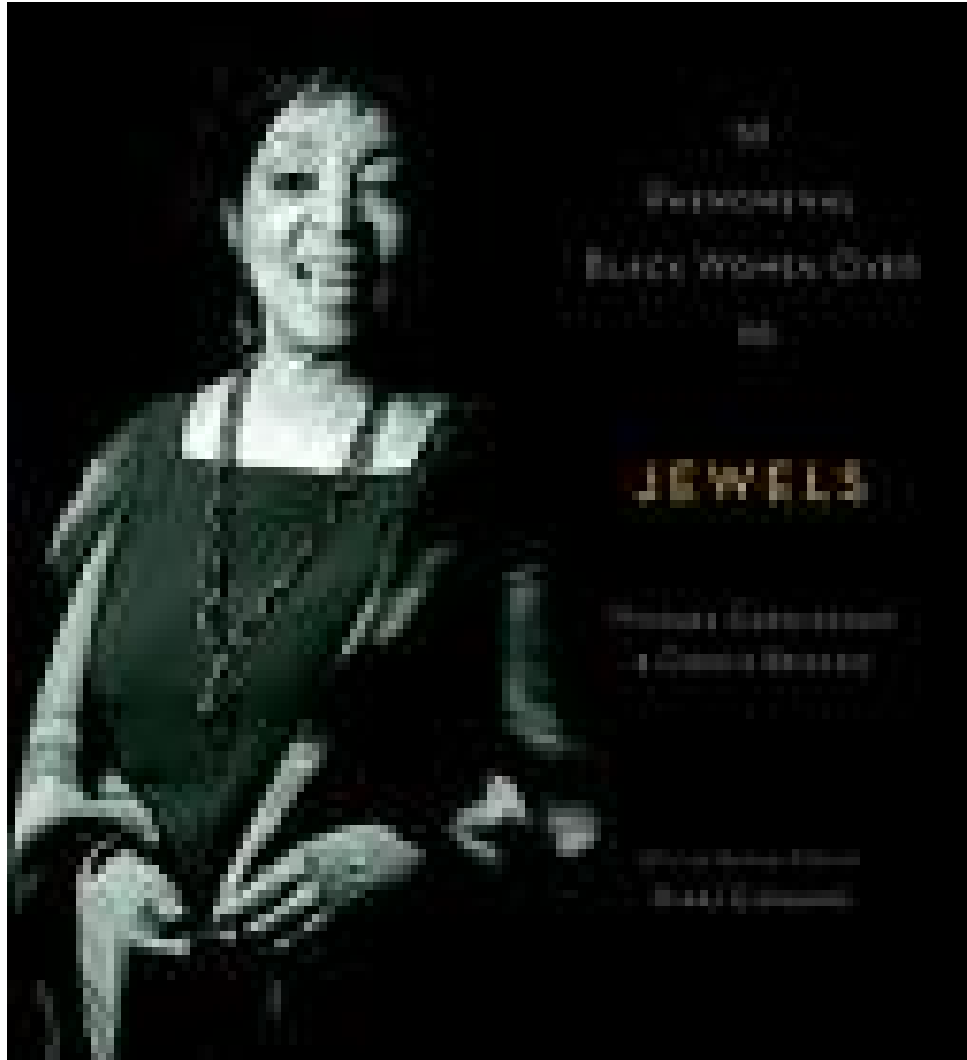
- Women not financially or socially independent
- Regulated to the duties of the home and family
- Single women were spinsters or old maids



I Remember, I Believe

- **I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down**
- **I don't know how my father stood his ground**
- **I don't know how my people survived slavery**
- **I do remember, that's why I believe.**

Sweet Honey in the Rock



Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

What happened to women as spiritual wisdom keepers

Confined to family/childrearing/nurturing/ relationships

Examples of Conscious Legacy

- I hope to share with you all the joy and contentment of having a relationship with a loving God; harmony and peace start with oneself.
- Be willing to be kind, considerate, compassionate, loving and understanding.
- Realize that happiness is yours right now. There is no "way to happiness".

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

Feminism challenged that myth

- Created a cultural conversation
- Women active contributors in all areas of life
- Ageing process will be a part of that conversation
- Conscious legacy



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Conscious legacy

- Women have traditionally not held the financial ability to leave a financial legacy
- Did not own property
- Did not earn as much money as men
- Were not financially independent enough to leave a financial legacy

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Women have traditionally left another kind of legacy

- Legacy of spiritual wisdom
- Legacy of relationships
- Legacy that considers the 7 generations to come
- Legacy of a vision of peace as we will see in the results of the research



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Simultaneously the Baby Boomer Generation is impacting our understanding of ageing

- Refirement not retirement
- Second career
- Conscious legacy/ living legacy
- The definition of senior or 'old' has moved back on the life line from 60-65 to 80-85
- We actually have not agreed upon what to call this period of the life cycle from 50-75 or 80
- Some attempts pre elder/ post midlife/ refirement/pre-senior/second adulthood

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- Be curious, be very curious! Life and this universe hold so many wondrous things, including you.
- Learn about them all! Try them all! Keep growing and learning forever.
- Be brutally honest with yourself. Welcome feedback and be willing to change
- Listen to others and then decide for yourself what to believe.

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Stories

- Women who was traveling overseas – discussion with her mother
- Dudley Clendinen - woman friend 72 who works full time which she started doing after she got her Master's Degree in her 40's, when her children were grown.
- Her husband of 76 is volunteering full time and they keep in touch with their mother's 96 and 102 respectively.



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Dr Elliott Jaques at 83 who has studied ageing for 45 years has suggested a new name for old age, the third stage.

- First 18-40
- Second 40-62
- Third 62-85



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I think that I would re order these to

- First 18-50
- Second 50-70
- Third 70-90

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Review of the Research

- November 2002 – National Center on Women and Ageing
- National poll of 1001 women 50 and over
- 8% over 80

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- Their findings "The aging of America is greatly influenced by decades of change in roles and expectations of women – changes that affect workforce participation, family structure, informal care giving, and even how women age." They go on to say, "If the current trends continue they will produce a new generation of elders quite different from their mothers and grandmothers. But to date this new generation of aging women – those 50 and older – have largely been ignored or been treated as a 'problem' that burdens, or threatens to burden, the younger population."



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Over 50% of the women surveyed say;

- The experience of aging is better than they expected it would be.
- Older women are no more likely than younger women to report they have a disability. Women 80 and over are significantly more likely to report that they are in good health than are younger women.
- Overwhelmingly they report that their mental health is good.
- Working women are healthier and have a more optimistic reaction to aging and their financial future than their non-working 'sisters'.
- Women 50 and over feel strongly that many public policy issues are of importance to them including those that affect improving conditions for all ages of Americans.

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- National Council on Aging in 2002 designed as a follow up on a study done 25 years prior in 1977.
- Study the perceptions of ageing held by Americans
- 1155 men and women over age 65
- 3048 over 18
- 58% happy to live to an older age
- 67% say that spiritual life made life vital for them (second to friends, family, health)



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- We have not yet realigned ourselves with the need for a new language and construct for ageing, other Modern Pop Culture literature is focused on staying young (recognizing that indeed we are young and healthy physically and mentally in ways we have never been before).

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- The idea of spiritual legacy is not new... what is new is the sheer magnitude of women and men that are entering this new stage of life which demands the development of a paradigm that allows for the vibrancy/ creativity and contribution of this generation.

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- Numerous traditions acknowledge the return to a spiritual awareness.
- Rabbi Zalmon Schacter-Shalomi, founder of B'nai or Religious Fellowship in Philadelphia, has developed a program that he calls Spiritual Eldering based in his own tradition.
- Marion Woodman, the Jungian author, believes the soul's journey voice and urgings become imperative as we get older. She says "I 'm talking about the small voice that says: I want, before I die, to find out who I am in my soul and who that soul is in relation to the divine.'" (Leap, Davidson, Sara, Ballantine Books, 2007, p249).

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- Betty Friedan says...” there is a sense that the mystery and the meaning of life is one’s ultimate quest – to be achieved somehow by a wholeness, an integration of the self, a naming and atonement of sin, an accounting of the use of one’s talents, and some achievement of ‘amazing grace’ that does not imply religion or stained glass.” (Friedan, Betty, *The fountain of Age*, Simon and Schuster, 1993, p.625)
- Marianne Williamson speaks of this stage in *The Age of Miracles, Embracing the New Midlife* when she says...”you finally come to realize that your crisis was in fact your initiation into the fullness of your self... This is not the fire of destruction but of your victory.

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- My research:
- Baby Boomer Women
- Largest number of women coming 'of age' than any other generation
- Face of ageing will change dramatically
- Have more financial power
- More Education
- More self awareness
- Better health
- Greater Intention than any other previous generation

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- The subject of this study was designed to explore the beliefs that women hold presently about their aging and what they see as different, if anything, from the aging process of their mothers and grandmothers. I was interested in whether or not women would consciously re-write that myth including not only our physical and emotional concerns but also our spiritual generative needs. How do we come to hold and deepen the understanding of our spiritual wisdom and through what vehicles do we then pass that understanding on to those coming after us.

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- Betty Freidan
- We broke through the feminine mystique and mythos of our early years through consciousness raising groups where we discussed our own experiences as women, we now have to “face this new, unprecedented, and uncharted territory of age. She says we need to talk with one another about how it really is for us to grow older and “help each other name the possibilities we hardly recognize or dare to put a name to when we sense them in ourselves.”

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- Equally inspired by the meeting of the indigenous grandmothers in South Dakota
- From North/ South and Central America
- Grandmothers Circle
- Offering respect and homage to them as wisdom keepers

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- Survey of 20 questions
- Interviews of 32 women ages 45-75 from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe
- Asked a series of questions concluding with a bequeathing statement written by the participants. The study took place over the past year (2007-2008) and included women from a range of economic and personal circumstances.

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- 12 Housewives or stay at home moms
- 12 Career women
- 17 Married
- 3 Widowed
- 12 Single or divorced

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- The questions included the following:
- As a child what was your understanding of aging or elderly women?
- Who were your role models and how did they impact your life choices and your understanding of aging
- How do you see yourself now as you are aging? Do you find others, family, culture, media, responds to you differently as you are aging?
- How are you a role model for younger women
- What is the myth or story of aging you would like younger generations to understand from your aging process?

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

Question One: As a child what was your understanding of aging or elderly women

- Overall the women agreed upon the mythos of women and aging that they were exposed to as children for the larger society. They saw aging women as generally more dependent than they themselves are and more likely to stay in marriages even if they were unhappy. The coping strategies that women developed as they aged, in their view, were not healthy or positive. Aging meant no fun and no money – appearance meant everything to mom at 78
- When their mothers or Grandmothers did not meet that myth they tended to see them as the exception rather than the norm. The tendency of the participants to see globally that aging women and men are more concerned about money, health loneliness and crime than they actually are is congruent to the data gathered by the National Center on Aging in the United States. .

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- **Question Two:** Who were your role models and how did they impact your life choices and your understanding of aging
- Career women indentified fathers as role models citing their personal and financial independence, work away from the home which gave the appearance as more interesting and mysterious as the role their mother played. They also admired father's ability to interact with people and sense of mastery over his life. These women developed careers in what had previously been considered 'men's fields' and found affirmative action to be supportive to their attaining these positions.

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- In addition they found the limitations placed on their mothers to be a negative role model and expressed clearly 'they did not want to be like them'. One woman described her mother as having "taught me women are powerless – perpetual good girl". Other role models were movie stars, single aunts who demonstrated financial independence, teachers, the Catholic nuns, and older women who were very accomplished in there industry.
- There were exceptions. One woman described her mother's involvement in the civil rights movement; another told a story of her grandmother traveling to China in the 1920's which set a precedent for women to be independent. Another said that she "saw transformation of women kind in 20 years with my mother – she changed."
- One woman described leaving London when she as 2.5 during WWII with her Grandmother who cared for her until the war was over 3 years later. When they returned to England her Grandmother who had been very strong and independent suddenly became more invisible and meek.

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- **Question Three:** How do you see yourself now as you are aging? Do you find others, family, culture, media, responds to you differently as you are aging?
- All of the women were very comfortable with the understanding that the feminist movement of which they had been a part in some way had and would continue to impact how they themselves saw themselves as they aged. All expressed a period of loss of identity and purpose as they found themselves ‘looking in the mirror and not knowing the person who was looking back at them’.
- One woman said that “Other people respond to me different at the gym – step back a little – now I am the other not one of them.” Another woman said ‘my view of aging is not pleasant, women become more powerless as they get older what shocked me is becoming so invisible... that is the hardest for me. They no longer notice me; people assume I should be invisible. But all of the women agreed that they were very visible to their friends and that their friends made the aging process exciting and supportive

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- Single women more than married women expressed a sense of being 'invisible' knowing as one said that "when the clerk at the grocery store is giving me attention I know that he is seeing his mother or grandmother". Some expressed that they could go for several days and not see anyone. Retirement meant loneliness for these women where as for married women it meant the usual adjustments of spending more time with there husbands. Married women tended to continue to feel sexually attractive whereas single women often did not. Most of the women, married or single, expressed a loss of feeling valued by the larger society particularly in regards to beauty and sexual appeal. One woman commented "I don't see myself in the media".

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- **Question Four:** How are you a role model for younger women?
- This was the most difficult question for the groups to answer. Many did not initially see themselves as actively being a role model for younger women. The conclusion they came to was that simply by being who they were as strong, independent women influenced greatly by the feminism they entered adulthood with that they were modeling a way of coming to aging that younger women could benefit from. Some specific ways to contribute were to support the efforts for political interests such as global warming, that they are still growing and learning and having fun. One woman told a story of having had a birthday party at 60 to let the younger women know what turning 60 or 70 really looked like.

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- **Question Five:** What is the myth or story of aging you would like younger generations to understand from your aging process?
- For all of the women this question brought forth the spiritual dimension. Though few mentioned their mothers or grandmothers as having modeled a spiritual wisdom, many of them saw themselves as 'passing on a spiritual torch filled with the wisdom of having lived and grown and made mistakes and picked themselves up'. The story of aging really became a blessing they bestowed upon the generations to come after them. Here are some examples:

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- Love yourself, be confident, know what you want to do and be happy doing it., embrace age as a vibrant stage of life, appreciate wisdom for we all have wisdom.
- Know the value of women, of yourself as a woman, live *your* life and don't give it away.
- Maintain your integrity and honesty, don't sell out
- Take on new challenges; do not put yourself on hold
- Trust your intuition, regardless what others may say or believe, and keep an open mind; the answers may not be revealed right away, hopefully eventually they will; but if not, trust your gut, because more than likely, if your being honest with yourself, so is your intuition

Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- I hope to share with you all the joy and contentment of having a relationship with a loving God; harmony and peace start with oneself. Be willing to be kind, considerate, compassionate, loving and understanding. Realize that happiness is yours right now. There is no "way to happiness". Love your neighbor as you love yourself and don't forget to love yourself as God loves you.
- Always, always believe that you are a good and worthy child of God. You are perfect just as you are. Don't hang out with people who tell you otherwise

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- Happiness arises when you have a grateful heart, not from the “stuff” you amass or the position you hold.
- Take the leap. Divine protection is always by your side.
- Take the love of God and my love with you wherever your path leads you.
- Know that we have each been placed on this earth to discover and recognize the truth of this universe and of our own being.

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- Know that we are meant to know our essential nature which is pure and infinite love, compassion and joy.
- Know that we are, each of us, a perfect, beautiful, and loving embodiment of the divine



Re-writing the Myth of Women and Aging

- **We are our grandmother's prayers**
- **We are our grandfathers dreaming**
- **We are the breath of the ancestors**
- **We are the spirit of God**

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