THE RAGING GRANNIES: PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF OLDER WOMEN INVOLVED IN POPULAR EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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DEDICATION

This piece of work is dedicated to women in my life who have always supported me. To my mother, Pearl, and to my real-life 'grannies', Dorothy and Berte.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the Raging Grannies who participated in this research and so freely shared their lives and work with me. I am most indebted to Raging Granny, Betsy Carr, for taking me under her wings and opening the door for me to meet others in the movement. My thesis supervisor, J. Gary Knowles, made an enormous contribution to this thesis by critiquing the work and by encouraging me to consider creative ways of representing Grannies through their songs and words. Thank you Budd Hall for introducing me to the concept of 'popular education' and for reviewing this work as a member of my thesis committee. Finally, to my partner, Ken, and children, Kevin and Emily, thanks for being there for me and not being there when I needed time alone to work on my studies.

Our texts must always return to and reflect the words persons speak as they attempt to give meaning and shape to lives they lead.

- Norman Denzin (1989)
ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I explore the lives and personal attributes of older women who are active members of the Raging Grannies movement. Qualitative methods of researching were utilized, including participant observation, focus groups, archival collection and a survey. An understanding of the ‘Granny psyche’ was gained through observing their pedagogy and recording life stories. A total of nine women completed a written survey and an additional 17 Grannies were involved in focus group meetings. I was in contact with over 100 Grannies through larger gatherings including a National Unconvention and Ontario meeting of Grannies for Good Government. Archival data collected included newsletters, brochures, 130 original songs and 144 newspaper articles. Information gathered was analysed to identify common characteristics and values which are descriptive of women who participated in the research. These Grannies held strong feminist values which were influential in forming a common curriculum for their popular education which focussed on peace, social justice and environmentalism. Other common attributes descriptive of Grannies included being creative, rebellious, empathetic, risk-takers, spiritual and humourous. Without exception, all Grannies involved in the study demonstrated a high degree of generativity, or concern for future generations. Findings are reported through Grannies’ songs, pictures, stories and my reflections on the inquiry process.
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A gaggle of grannies sing outside the Pickering Nuclear Power Plant, September 1997. "Oh, we're just a gaggle of grannies, urging you off of your fannies."
The Raging Grannies: Personal Attributes of Older Women Involved in Popular Education for Social Change

CHAPTER ONE:
A GAGGLE OF GRANNIES

FIRST ENCOUNTER

The audience began to arrive, en masse, about an hour before 'show time': quite typical for events planned at this seniors' residence in Toronto. A row of about twenty green walkers are parked neatly against the back wall of the meeting room; some are labelled with names from days gone-by, like "Gladys", "Edna" and "Gertrude", while others are decorated with coloured tags or plastic flowers. From the back of the room, there is a sea of grey heads looking forward or bobbing up and down in conversation. By my estimation, this is a good turn out of about one hundred people. I'm told the free food helps attract a crowd that may otherwise be napping or out and about this time of day.

The gathering is not at all unusual. 'Entertainers' of various sorts, from choirs to instrumentalists to public health nurses speaking about diabetes or healthy aging, grace the stage regularly at the residence. Today, a group called the Raging Grannies has been invited to 'sing'. Sounds to me, and probably to the majority of those attending, like an ordinary afternoon of sing-a-long and tea. That was the intent, I understand, from the social worker who made the arrangements. However, what the organizer did not fully comprehend was the fact that the Raging Grannies are no run-of-the-mill singing troupe. Au contraire, the Grannies are a group of aging feminists who are hell-bent on saving the planet, eradicating war and overcoming patriarchal oppression.
As the afternoon unfolded I wondered if the audience, consisting primarily of women over the age of eighty with traditional, conservative backgrounds, would ever recover from the Grannies’ rendition of “I Slept with McKenzie King.” When the Grannies belted out “we’re the women who did the work so men could get the credit,” I could see some smiles on the faces in the audience. The Grannies had struck a chord that resonated with at least a handful of listeners that afternoon. I was one of the intrigued, curious onlookers.

*I Slept with McKenzie King*
(Sung to the tune of Clementine)

*With so many women telling*
How Bill Clinton dropped his jeans,
After fifty years of silence
*We’re about to spill the beans.*
*It was chilling, it was thrilling*
*It was such a romantic fling.*
*Though we blush when we confess it –*
*We slept with McKenzie King.*

This is where my story begins: one fine day, the Raging Grannies came singing into my life and from that moment on I knew I wanted to learn more about the movement and women ‘under the granny hats’. Who were these women who refused to give in to social expectations of a disengaged lifestyle? I was certain most of these Grannies did not have rocking chairs! What life journey had led each to this calling of activist. What fuelled their passion and energy so late in life? How did they manage to maintain such spark and enthusiasm in the face of so much adversity and complacency? Would they be willing to share the secrets of their sisterhood with me?
EARLY BEGINNINGS

I could see Betsy from across the room, eating cake and chatting with audience members. Her hair was white and all one length cut above her ears which showed off a pair of dangling fake pearl earrings. She wore a colourful scarf tied in a bow under her chin. A most peculiar arrangement of plastic flowers was ‘planted’ firmly on her head. A matronly shawl with black tassels was draped around her shoulders and thick bi-focal glasses sat upon her nose. She looked ‘old’; probably over 80 years of age. As I crossed the room, I began to focus my eyes on several buttons Betsy was wearing on her shawl. Like a slap in the face, the words leapt out and struck me as such a contrast to a woman ‘impersonating’ a granny. They read: “Without consent it’s sexual assault”; “Behind every successful woman is herself”; “Wife assault -- no man has the right.”

I approached Betsy rather sheepishly, unsure of the response I would receive from this singing dynamo. My anxiety quickly melted away as Betsy smiled and firmly shook my hand. She listened intently between bites of vanilla cake about my graduate work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She nodded approvingly when I spoke of my interest in older women involved in social action. I saw a hint of encouragement in her eyes when I suggested that perhaps I could phone her and talk to her further about the Grannies and maybe even pursue a research project centred around women in the movement. Over the next couple of years I would come to know Betsy as an assertive woman with strong beliefs and a determination to make a difference in this world. Most importantly to me, I came to know Betsy as an encourager; a woman who found time in her busy schedule to speak with a graduate student and to facilitate my learning in ways that I can not fully express with words.
Dearest Betsy,

Thank you for distributing my survey to Grannies in the Toronto group. I had an excellent response with nine Grannies completing the survey. I realize that the information I collected is only the beginning of my journey into understanding women in the movement. The songs you forwarded to me and the time you have taken to talk with me about the Toronto group have been extremely helpful in providing me with background information on the Granny movement. Here is what I have learned in a nut-shell along with a few of your songs that sum it all up for me:

Onward Raging Grannies
(Sung to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers)

Onward Raging Grannies
Singing without cease:
Songs of love and justice
Songs of hope and peace.
Songs to heal this country
Hurt by fear and greed.
Songs to feed the children
And all those in need.

Onward Raging Grannies
Singing without cease:
Songs of love and justice
Songs of hope and peace.

Onward Raging Grannies
Make your voices go
Where our rulers gather
Ottawa, Toronto.
Sing out against the greedy
Who stoop to rob the poor
Who victimize the needy
Red in tooth and claw.
Onward Raging Grannies
Singing without cease:
Songs of love and justice
Songs of hope and peace.

I learned early on in observing Grannies that if something needs to be said the Grannies are going to say it, or at least sing it. No subject is taboo and no issue too big to tackle. Thanks for the historical information, Betsy! I wasn't at all surprised when you explained that the first Raging Grannies group was founded by a concerned number of eight grandmothers from Victoria, British Columbia who got together in 1986 to protest nuclear warships. I can just imagine their horror when they found out that a fire aboard a ship could release plutonium and make a city uninhabitable for months. You indicated that this knowledge led these women to undertake activities that would draw public attention to vessels carrying nuclear arms. How ingenious to set themselves afloat around warships, paddling canoes in Victoria Harbour singing songs about peace and disarmament! I also think the Grannies' trademark of dressing-up in stereotypical, flamboyant granny clothing and singing satirical songs is extremely effective. As you noted, such bold and creative approaches to protest, enabled the original Victoria group to gain much fame, including being portrayed in a glossy airline travel brochure as a 'site to see' in Victoria.  

It was interesting to learn that other Raging Grannies groups have developed across the country with members mentoring others and helping new groups get started. It must be extremely gratifying to know you are part of a growing movement that has roots in such places as Victoria, London, Ottawa, Toronto, Guelph, Montreal and Halifax.  

You suggest that the proliferation of Granny groups across the country can be attributed to
a network of older women involved in advocacy and social action organizations. Thanks for explaining to me how The Voice of Women, a peace group which began back in the early 1960s, was the 'joining place' for the Raging Grannies group in Toronto. I love your story about the time that the Voice of Women were hosting a conference and the Victoria Grannies were invited to come East to attend the event. Voice of Women members opened their homes to the Victoria Grannies and it was through this fellowship that several Voice of Women members became persuaded to start their own Raging Grannies group in Toronto. I guess there are no feelings of possessiveness when the Victoria mentors so freely 'gave up' some of their songs to help the Toronto group get started.\textsuperscript{10}

I can't imagine what obstacles you must have overcome in getting started. You recall that your first "gig" was a poor performance with excellent results. As you so aptly put it:

\begin{quote}
We didn't always sing in tune and sometimes we mixed the words up, but the Toronto Star newspaper was there and put together a feature article on the Raging Grannies. My name appeared in the article along with my phone number and the rest is history. The response was overwhelming. We started getting all kinds of invitations to come and perform.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

I see from your busy schedule that the Toronto Raging Grannies group continues to thrive and there is no shortage of issues to pursue. You certainly get around, singing at peace and environmental rallies, in schools, older adult centres and almost any place in which the public congregates. Thanks for sharing with me the fact that you and fellow Grannies also show up where you are not wanted to draw attention to your message.\textsuperscript{12} What was it like being escorted out of the Legislature and being barred from the Pickering Nuclear Power Plant? I read in a recent Granny
Grapevine Newsletter publication that Grannies participation in the 1999 APEC Summit protests, resulted in Raging Grannies being placed on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s “threat list” and labelled as anti-Canadian.13

Figure 1: Humour in the midst of a crisis.14

I think another important point I have learned from you, Betsy, is that the Grannies’ pedagogy is vibrant and fun, but also serious work dealing with serious subject matter. The theatrical singing and flamboyant attire are used to get people interested in what you, as Grannies,
have to say and not meant to frame Grannies in the context of entertainers. Thank you for reminding me that “we don’t do birthday parties!” On the contrary, I have come to realize that “gigs” are a form of popular education that include a critical analysis of social structures and injustices.

**Grannies Are Not Entertainment**
(Sung to the tune of Dumbarton’s Drums Scottish Folk)

The Grannies are not entertainment
We sing out of a deep commitment
To justice, peace and equal treatment
For all of those who cannot speak.
Our social programs they are cutting
To give more money to the rich man
Instead, if there were fair taxation
Our nation’s pain would soon be healed.
We sing about the poor and helpless
How government has grown so callous
Our grandkids’ faxes rise before us
We stand and sing, to give them peace.16

Thank you, Betsy, for inviting me to your annual Unconvention. Yes, I will be there and I am grateful that you are willing to get a group of Grannies together for me to facilitate a focus group.

I know this will be a great opportunity to learn about the women who are Grannies.

Sincerely Yours,

LINDA

P.S. Carol Roy, a graduate student at the University of Toronto, has just completed a research paper on the Victoria Raging Grannies which offers a good historical picture of the movement.17 I thought you might find it interesting reading.
Woodstock Grannies surprise the audience at the 1997 Unconvention; during their rendition of "Topless" the group reveal fake granny breasts.
CHAPTER TWO:
GRANDMA IS A FEMINIST
(FEMINISM)

TTTT Topless
(Sung to the tune of KKKKatie)

We're gonna go topless
It's the modern thing to do in Ontario
You know it will cost less
If we all go bare breast
No more bras or T-shirts
That's the way to go.

It seems that a Guelph Miss
Took a stroll shirtless
Said if men can do it so can all of us
She went to court where
a fun loving judge there
Decided its okay
And won't cause any fuss.

We've been given our rights, dude
To walk around half nude
It's a big step forward for all women now
So straighten your shoulder
Be a little bit bolder
Got to strut your stuff
And let it all hang out. ¹⁹

By all accounts, their breasts sagged low enough to suggest that perhaps many did engage
in bra burning activities during the 1960s. But, why should that be at all surprising? Founders of the
feminist movement began exploring women's roles and marginalization back in the early 1900s. Ground breaking work in the women's movement can be attributed to women who, if still alive, are well over the age of seventy years. So while the general public may regard Granny's sagging breasts as a testament to the force of gravity on the aging female body, I learned that another variable may have intervened; Granny burned her bra!

These are some of the intimate details I would be privy to at the Raging Grannies Unconvention; details that would enable me to see the strong link between feminism and women in the movement. As I drove my car to the east end of Toronto on that Friday evening I couldn't help feeling a little anxious. Betsy had encouraged me to attend the annual gathering of Raging Grannies from across Canada irrespective of the fact that I was nine and a half months pregnant. Besty had assured me there were a few retired nurses and mid-wives among those in attendance so if 'push came to shove' I would be in good hands! I knew it would be an excellent opportunity to spend the weekend emerged in Granny culture and a way to gain access to women in the movement.

I parked my car behind a vehicle plastered in bumper stickers supporting the environment, gun control and Mother's Against Drunk Driving. One sticker read: "Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important you do it." I didn't need to look at the address on the crumpled paper in my hand; I knew I was in the right place.
I entered the main meeting area and found a seat near the back of the room. There was a lively discussion taking place regarding lyrics to a song the group would sing tomorrow at the Pickering Nuclear Power Plant. One woman voiced concerns about the wording being too difficult to fit with the lyrics. Another woman disagreed and felt the song was fine the way it was written. The group appeared to be divided and the facilitator had a difficult time keeping order as people began to support one side or the other. My anxiety quickly dissipated as I realized that nobody seemed to notice that a ‘non-Granny’ had entered the room. I melted into my seat to observe the interactions.

There were about one hundred Grannies filling the seats. Without their flamboyant Granny
costumes, I observed that the group appeared quite eclectic in street clothing; most wore casual attire and many sported buttons with slogans supporting their passions. Women stood up when addressing the group and eloquently presented their point of view. Nods of agreement or disagreement did not seem to dissuade people from speaking their mind. After about thirty minutes I wondered if there would ever be a resolution. Amidst some very strong language there was the odd interjection of humour which everyone seemed to ‘get’. Laughter in the midst of disagreement struck me as odd, but I grew to understand this much later as a Granny strategy for fostering comradeship and good feelings towards each other even when viewpoints were polarized. In the end, a decision was reached. Later, I discovered the process was called decision making by consensus. From my point of view, the process translated into presenting one’s own views strongly, respecting the other person enough to listen to her view and both compromising just enough to gain agreement, but not too much as to lose one’s central beliefs.

**Figure 2:** A Granny illustrates decision making Granny style.
Reflecting on the information I was collecting about the Grannies, I began to realize how pervasive feminist values are in Granny methods of organizing. Decision making by consensus, a strong opposition to any leadership or hierarchal structure, and the use of consciousness raising to understand social and justice issues are all intertwined in the group dynamics established within the movement. Shifting from the group to the individual, I wondered if feminism was a belief system shared by all Grannies. If yes, this would certainly be one characteristic that may lead women in later life to pursue social activism.

Dearest Betsy,

I received the Granny songs that you forwarded to me. Many of the lyrics supported my 'inkling' that Raging Grannies share a common value system centred around feminist perspectives. There certainly is a clear message being sent by Raging Granny groups about patriarchy and the oppression of women in society.

Not An Easy Ride
(tune unknown)

Get your kids up make the lunches tidy-up the house get an early start
Hurry now watch out for traffic get to work on time this is the easy part
She has to do her work while all the while distracted
by school the shopping lists and getting shafted
Then home to wash and iron and help with homework on the side
It's not an easy ride.

Women and Work
(Sung to the tune of: I 'se the B'y)

We're the women who did the work
So men could get the credit
We said leave it all to us
And wish we'd never said it.

Leave the dishes in the sink
You sit down and rest dear
I can do the clearing up
I can do it best, dear

No, I don't mind staying late
I'll type another stencil
Can I get your coffee now?
Let me sharpen your pencil!

I'm sorry the baby cried
I'm sorry that she wet you
I'm sorry she threw up on you
I'm sorry she upset you.

Poverty keeps women down
Cannot feed their kids right
Have to take a work fare job
Have to pull the belt tight.

Politics were not for us
We left that to our spouses
But now we know a woman's place
Is in Parliamentary houses.

For we have learned it wasn't good
For a boss, a son or daughter
To treat men like a master race
Now changes are in order

We're prepared to share the work
But we want more than credit
Equal pay for equal work
We'll sing until we get it!\textsuperscript{28}

Betsy, you mentioned to me after the last focus group meeting how much you learned about the other women who attended. I learned a great deal about the lives of older women who grew up in the first part of the twentieth century. Some referred to their 'hope chest', commonly cherished among young women during this historical period, being filled with important keepsakes and articles that represented hopes and dreams for their future. Buried deep below treasures of dishware, lace doilies and hand sewn quilts some dared to hide dreams of higher education and vocations that would utilize their skills and intellect. Over time, the cedar containers were re-named 'hopeless chests'; romantic, idealized notions of domesticity evolved into a mundane, and isolating existence. Oh yes, the good china dishes were used on occasion, but the lace yellowed over time and aspirations remained buried with hopes of one day being recovered. Elaine spoke so vividly about her enthusiasm and desire of becoming a nurse and how her goals as a young woman were quickly deflated by her father. Remember when she recalled:

\begin{quote}
I think my grandmother – my mother's mother – was a big force in my life although I didn't realize it till years later. She was a midwife; sort of learned on her own. She was able to speak up for herself and so I learned a lot of feminism from her. I took up nursing and felt that I really needed to go to University and I went to my father for money. He said, girls don't go to university and that was a real blow to me 'cause I didn't think that.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Did you notice how Phyllis suddenly lost her radiant smile and replaced it with a serious
look while listening intently to Elaine's story. I sensed she was far away perhaps remembering her own experiences as a young woman. Could you feel her pain and anger when she told her story?

My father had on his hands someone who had won every scholarship in town and he was determined I would stay at home and be a housewife. I could have been a musician but my father was determined that I would not be because it was my mother's capacity to play the piano that got her out of the home and gave her a new life. When my father couldn't get a job she said I'll teach people piano. That was demeaning to him. She told me she had to use her hands to wash floors: that was alright. I know there is a genetic line for music in my family so if you find me hard to take sometimes, some of it is frustration. There are gifts there that were never allowed to flourish the way I wished they had.30

I think I was surprised by the number of early life experiences with gender discrimination that were shared and the intensity of these experiences for individuals. Recently, I received a handwritten life story from a Seattle Granny. This excerpt from the letter resounds what many Grannies spoke about:

I had four children and each time I got pregnant I was fired and had to be hired all over again when I returned to teaching. Just before my mother died she told me about the discrimination she, herself, had experienced because she was a woman in public office. This shocking revelation took place just as I was beginning to be awakened to the
women’s movement and was reading Betty Friedman’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*. All hell broke loose and I began my years of work for equal opportunity for women.\textsuperscript{11}

Did you notice Betsy that, even those with more supportive parental figures like yourself, recognized the impact patriarchal oppression had on the types of choices and opportunities available to them as women. Those who did have opportunities for higher education early in life, still encountered ongoing struggles with inequities. I felt that Phyllis’ story clarified this point so well:

*I went straight to University when I was 17 years old. The trouble was when I finished who wanted to do anything with a bright woman? I got a scholarship for a year through a sympathetic French Professor who realized I had great gifts but others didn’t want to have anything to do with me. They really didn’t want women in the Academy.*\textsuperscript{32}

Around the focus group tables I noticed there were ‘nods and winks’ and general agreement that for every story of gender discrimination recounted there were many more of a similar nature; each as poignant and painful. Betsy, here is what I concluded from these stories: early experiences with gender discrimination appeared to unveil the hegemony of patriarchy and result in the development of feminist perspectives among Raging Grannies. It is clear that women who are Raging Grannies identify themselves as ‘feminist’ which impacts on their message (analysis) and method (collective popular education).\textsuperscript{33}

However, I think another important point in this whole discussion is that Grannies are as diverse as younger feminists in their values and perspectives; some are radical and others are
Interestingly, I observed that differences in politics were generally not divisive; on the contrary, feminist paradigms appear to strengthen Grannies’ genuine respect for each other. I suppose too that feminist values are translated into a genuine love for other women and, at some level a bond that is related to women’s specificity. By this, I am referring to a recognition that women are uniquely different from men and have something to offer humankind that is important and worth pursuing.

Remember the discussion at the last focus group meeting about the natural order of life and how women are at the centre? The following words of wisdom from a Granny helped me to make the connection between feminism and all of the passions pursued by Raging Grannies: concerns about peace, the environment and social justice are each an extension of feminist values.

Nurturing, it is the life force behind all animals ... that is why it is called mother earth and mother nature. The earth would not be here today without the desire to create and nurture.

I was excited to find literature that identified nature and ecology as essential components of women-defined social change. Ecological principles and social justice are inherent in feminism itself. I found this passage in some Raging Granny material you forwarded to me:

As older women, we constantly find we need to act and stand strong. We also know that, in every country of the world, women as healers are in the forefront of peace movements, the struggle to save the environment, and in all social justice issues. We need to act to save Mother Earth.

Thank you for showing me the interconnectedness of your ‘curriculum’. I also appreciate
you forwarding to me the song ‘Women Shoulder Half the Burdens’. It is one of my favourites and I think summarizes my conclusions in this area.

Sincerely Yours,

LINDA

P.S. Thank you for the invitation to attend the ‘Grannies for Good Government’ gathering. Yes, I will go and look forward to observing a day of strategizing.

*Women Shoulder Half the Burdens*
(Sung to the tune of Coming Through the Rye)

Women shoulder half the burdens
Hold up half the sky
Yet our voices have been muted
Makes you wonder why

Can’t you hear the voice of women
Calling you and me
A peaceful world is one of justice
Love, the golden key.

Women working, women sighing
Trying to survive
Now we fear the Earth is dying
Must keep her alive

Can’t you hear the voice of women
Calling you and me
A peaceful world is one of justice
Love, the golden key.
Creative costumes and innovative pedagogy keep the Grannies in demand. Above, Toronto Raging Grannies sing at an awards banquet hosted at Metro Hall.
CHAPTER THREE:
QUAKER HOUSE ROCKS
(CREATIVITY)

Damn. It’s 11:00 a.m. and I’m suppose to be at the Quaker House to participate in the ‘Grannies for Good Government’ meeting attended by Raging Granny groups from across Ontario. Instead, I’m standing in a foot of snow staring at a vacant lot. Where is number 41? I walk the street a couple of times counting the numbers: 37, 39, 43, 45. There is no 41. I ask a passerby if he knows where number 41 is and he just shrugs his shoulders. I call out that I’m looking for the Quaker House. The man responds that he thinks it’s number 14 at the other end of the street. I can tell I’m off on another Granny adventure where I never quite know what to expect or where I might end up. Yes, number 14 is the Quaker House.

I pick up a pamphlet on Quakers as I enter through the main doors. The section on worship indicates that Quaker church services are conducted in total silence. Every soul is given the opportunity to meditate and find personal meaning in each gathering.42 As I descend the staircase I am overtaken by loud voices and sounds of laughter. How strange, in such a quiet and serene setting, to happen upon a group of about 40 Raging Grannies planning ways of over-throwing Premier Mike Harris in the upcoming Ontario Provincial election.

I enter the room and sit near the back. Immediately, heads turn to look at me and I realize that I may not be as welcome as I had anticipated. A woman turns and asks me loudly what my name is and what newspaper I represent. At that point, I realize that I have been mistaken for a media person out to get a scoop on Grannies’ tactics for beating the Conservatives. Betsy immediately comes to my rescue and reassures everyone that I am ‘the student’ who is studying Raging Grannies and she
asks me to introduce myself. The room turns from cold to pleasantly warm and the discussion turns to more pressing items.

The group identifies issues and concerns about current government policies and directives that they want the general public to hear. A lengthy discussion of ways to get media and public attention yield some interesting and creative approaches that include: giving out fortune cookies with messages foretelling the future under a re-elected Conservative government; distributing ‘granny cook books’ that include Tory recipes for disaster; and, issuing the ‘Mike Harris report card’ highlighting cutbacks in education and other areas in which government is failing miserably.

Many have brought along songs that they are willing to share with others planning election campaign gigs. The room is alive with excitement as different Granny groups lift their voices in song. Satirical lyrics are met with outbursts of laughter and loud cheers of solidarity. The creative energy is incredible. Ideas are being tossed about and spark new trains of thought. Old songs are improved or updated and pencils race furiously across paper as Grannies capture the words for future reference.

**BAH! BAH! BAH!**
*(Sung to the tune of Wiffenproof Song)*

>To the Tories who have taught us
>To forget about the poor
>To Queen’s park and offices we can’t get in
>See the grannies all assembled
>Glasses bright on every nose
>And the magic of our singing will begin
>But there’s sorrow as we’re listing
>Tory crimes we know so well
>Towards disabled, schools, homeless
>What a mess!
>We won’t have two-tiered anything
We will make this issue clear
Not let it pass and be forgotten with the rest
We are poor little grannies
Who have to say
BAH! BAH! BAH!
Ontario's losing so much today
BAH! BAH! BAH!
Unloading costs means they're tearing down
Municipal programs in every town
Sick, poor and homeless are all around
BAH! BAH! BAH!^1

Dearest Betsy,

As always I am in your debt. Thank you for paving the way for me to attend the 'Grannies for Good Government' meeting. What I gained from this gathering was a deeper appreciation for the level of creativity and innovative thought that goes into planning Granny gigs.

I wanted to tell you that I have found 144 newspaper articles on Raging Grannies' antics dating from 1987 to the present." Innovative approaches to pedagogy highlighted in many of the articles support my belief that Grannies are creative thinkers.

For example, one article on Raging Grannies from British Columbia describes some of the group's creative initiatives, including: occupying a Canadian Armed Forces recruiting centre prior to the Gulf War, calling the action a 'knit-in'; taking their best china teacups aboard the nuclear-powered USS Texas in Esquimalt harbor; and, presenting their 'briefs' to the British Columbia legislature in the form of an assortment of undies pegged to a cloths-line." Another article on the Montreal Raging Grannies describes how Grannies put on a 'sweat shop fashion show' as part of Fair Trade Awareness day at Concordia University. The same group held up white plaster sculptures of breasts and pregnant bellies to demonstrate at a United Nations Conference on the effect of toxins
on women and the unborn.46

Time and time again Grannies attract media coverage because of their innovative way of educating the public. This finding led me to examine literature on creativity and aging. I found several different ways of measuring and defining creativity in old age. Most congruent with my observations of Grannies is a definition of creativity which refers to "a type of personal expression."47 This body of literature reported that older adults demonstrate creative behaviour when provided opportunities for creative expression.48 One researcher, Butler, found that the most creative older adults are persons who are self-teachers. Betsy, when I read this research I felt like the participants must have been Raging Grannies. It indicates that creative seniors "take charge of their own learning; they transform their world in response to their own concerns, and in the process create something new."49

I thought about Grannies who participated in focus groups you helped me set up. So many times the discussion was diverted to world and local issues and I was always in awe of the breadth of knowledge and insight demonstrated by participants about a range of global and social issues. At every Granny gathering I have attended there was factual information distributed on issues. Grannies are definitely self-teachers which feeds into their ability to be creative educators.

Granny pedagogy is a model of creative work in and of itself. Innovative costumes, lyric writing, singing and street theatre are combined to powerfully deliver curriculum. Women in the movement appear to thrive off of creative energy.

Betsy, I know we spoke about how interesting it was to hear life stories shared in focus group meetings. I was particularly struck by the creative elements woven through the lives of Grannies.

I was thinking of Phyllis and how much joy she gets out of creating new songs and venues
for the Toronto group. I would describe her as an ‘artful’ person. She sings soprano for the Anglican church of St. Philip the Apostle and is on the Board of Project Ploughshares and Science for Peace. Phyllis belongs to the Conservation Council of Ontario and works part-time as translations editor for the Dictionary of Canadian Bibliography. Is there anything this woman can’t do?

Jean, a witch from Gabriola Island, told us how she put her creative energy to work and managed to raise the money she required to get to the 1997 Unconvention. Remember, Betsy, when she spoke about wanting to attend the meeting in spite of financial barriers that barred her way? She didn’t give up. Instead, she advertised her need for money within her local community. She designed signs describing the Unconvention in Toronto and outlined how her learning would be returned to the community and used to promote environmental and neighbourhood health. She raised all the money she needed.

I’m signing off with a quote from one of the Grannies who attended our last focus group. These words capture some of the elements of creativity that I have been attempting to express in this letter. As always, no one can say it (or sing it) like a Granny:

As songwriters we have a lot of intuition and a lot of trust in our abilities; in the ability of our intuition. That’s the creative part. You have to let it happen and then stand back and then let others work on it to see what we have here. You have to have that impulse, that courage, that imagination. It’s like jumping in water.50

Yours Sincerely,

LINDA
Picture 5: The determined face of a Granny on a mission.
CHAPTER FOUR:
AGING GRACEFULLY ... TOO DAMN BORING
(REBELLION)

The water surrounds me like a blanket. I toss and turn and feel the wetness upon my skin. Suddenly, I am on a large shipping boat. How I got here I do not know, but I have now become an observer. My senses are accosted by smells and sights of the sea. There is an oily fishing scent mixed with salt air and a dampness that hangs heavy all around. The sound of waves crashing and the rolling of water beneath the hull becomes rhythmic and soothing.

All around there are men at work. The ship seems to have a mind of her own, but I see that a lot of hands are needed to keep her clean and on course. My eye catches a young woman mopping up the deck area. She has dark hair and broad shoulders. She looks capable and able to do her share on this ship of men voyaging across the sea. She turns and I see it is Joan. What is Joan doing on this boat? She is supposed to be singing at Kay MacPherson’s Memorial service tonight. What am I doing on this boat? Where is this voyage taking me?

Of course, now I remember this place from Joan’s story. Her words flow back to me from my focus group meeting with Toronto Grannies:

Someone said to me once, you’ve been a ‘libber’ all of your life. You just never had to say anything about it; it was obvious. I spent 18 years of my life, up to the age of 40, hitchhiking and working all over the world. I would have joined the navy had they allowed girls to travel on ships. We couldn’t have that! I said fine. I’ll do it my way and I did. I hitchhiked on more than forty ships.52
Joan’s words are suddenly interrupted by the loud bellow of the ship’s horn. It rings on and on and I jolt realizing the noise is my alarm clock. I’ve been dreaming a lot about Grannies lately. Maybe I should stop reading transcript notes from focus groups before I go to bed. I smile thinking about Joan and how rebellious she was as a younger person and still is as a Granny.

It is October 28, 1999, and I have written in my day book ‘Kay MacPherson’s memorial service at seven o’clock in the evening, Trinity St. Paul’s Centre’. It seems a bit odd that I am attending a remembrance service for someone I have never met. Betsy called to tell me about Kay, a Raging Granny and activist, who had recently passed away. Kay’s friends and family planned to celebrate her life through reflections and performances. The Raging Grannies would be singing.

That evening I drove through downtown traffic to St. Paul’s Centre. It was a pleasant evening and the leaves were in their glory; red, orange and brilliant yellow hues. It reminded me of an analogy I had read about aging: “how beautiful the leaves grow old, how full of light and colour are their final days.”

In the church, I examined pictures of Kay and was struck by the fact that she looked like an old woman. Her physical presence was frail, but as I listened to the stories of her life work I realized that her body housed a strong and rebellious spirit that was out to change the world. Her story was so similar to other Granny tales of walking always to the left. Civic involvement and left-wing political views appeared to be lifelong patterns for most older activists with whom I had spoken. Kay exemplified Grannies’ sense of urgency about saving the planet and making the world a kinder and gentler place devoid of violence, poverty and suffering. Rather than viewing ‘retirement’ as a time for self-indulgence and retreat from the world, Raging Grannies took hold of the opportunity of more free time to tirelessly pursue their passions and causes.
Kay chronicled this life work in a book she wrote entitled *When in Doubt, Do Both*. She writes:

In the Association of Women Electors, we had specific objectives and tasks. We observed, studied and recommended and we were listened to. Voice of Women’s agenda seemed to be boundless, its activities unconventional and without precedent, and often it was not listened to by governments. During meetings, the president although knowledgeable about rules of procedure, was not always interested in following them. However, I did get used to operating with a world perspective; indeed, I think it was the enormity of the task before us and the world figures involved which made it daunting.$^{54}$

_Dearest Betsy,_

_You were right; Kay MacPherson’s memorial service was worthwhile attending. As always, the Grannies sang from the heart and I could see that your songs were appreciated by friends and family. I wanted to write you about my latest ‘revelation’ that I attribute to listening to Kay’s life journey._

_I reviewed transcripts from my focus groups and realized that Grannies possess left-wing political views that can be described as rebellious or counter to the mainstream. I was curious to see how these views developed and whether they were recent transformations or life-long patterns of living. I’m sure you will recall a lot of the stories since you attended both meetings. I found that the majority of Grannies I have spoken with went through early life experiences that formed their anti-hegemonic thinking as younger people._
Inger and Dini, for example, both shared stories of being children in war-torn Europe and what that meant to them. Living with uncertainty and fear and seeing so much horror at such a young age strengthened their anti-war stance. Inger remembered:

One of the worst things as a child was the announcement on the radio (that Germany was invading) and people began to cry and that is so much for a child to see when adults were always so in control.  

Both women spoke about the influence of socialist ideologies in their households growing up and were able to recall solidarity songs from their past. Dini recalled:

Socialism was very active in Holland. So we had people coming through our place singing a lot of socialist sayings and there was theatre and singing about war and nature and working together for change. I think these experiences gave me an awareness of justice that everyone should have a certain amount of income to live decently that covers more than your roof and food.

I realized, Betsy, that these older activists sitting around the table were at one time younger activists. Evelyn summed this up for me when she said:

We demonstrated against the war in Vietnam and against the missiles and I think even my young son wore a gas mask during the demonstrations against war.  

Jean’s words concur:

I’ve been a political activist for 49 years I guess. When my daughter was first born, I just felt nuclear weapons were the thing that I did
not want to have in this world and I’ve been a strong peace and
political activist ever since.  

I was absolutely captivated by Grannies from the Western Provinces and their stories of life
on the Prairies. Do you recall, Betsy, all the recollections about growing up in ‘union’ families and
being black listed in communities? One Granny noted:

My father was a founder of the CCF and he was a rebel and an
outcast all his life. So, from my family’s perspective, I would be a
rebel to go mainstream!  

Another Granny piped up:

My father was a welsh miner, and welsh miners are not known as
shrinking violets. He was very much involved in unions and in fact
after the big strike he couldn’t get a job in any of the mines in that
area cause he was black-listed.  

Jean confided:

My grandfather was a member of the communist party. One thing I
remember vividly is an interrogation by the Royal Canadian Mounted
Police and we were very small (children). The RCMP went so far as
to try and get the information from us as to where grandpa had his
books. Subversive books. Hidden in the house. They searched it and
they couldn’t find them and we knew where they were. We had a
stairway going upstairs that they didn’t use and there was one board
loose and that’s where grandpa hid his books so they wouldn’t be
confiscated.60

These are powerful examples of how life views are formed by lived experiences. Most
Grannies have weathered faces; lined by years of living the human existence. It is this life
experience that draws them together at some level to fight for the same causes and to be passionate
about similar things. At some point along life’s journey, it seems to me that Grannies have been
privy to ‘truths’ that many others ignore or dismiss. They have learned to dissect social and power
structures and to look at the world through critical eyes. They have all taken courageous steps to
apply their knowledge and rebel against the ‘norms’ of society that are destructive to earth and life.
It is this rebellious nature that all Grannies seem to exhibit.

Betsy, thanks for helping me uncover this finding. Yes. I would love to meet with the
Grannies for lunch after one of your weekly planning meetings. I’ll be in touch. I dug up a few
quotes from Grannies. I thought you might appreciate their relevance to this letter. One Granny
writes:

I guess I am what could be called a rebel. I identify strongly with
the underdog partly from personal experience. I am a doer and an
idealist who dreams of a perfect world. Impossible. I know. But, I
want to help make it better.61

Another survey has scribbled in the ‘other comments’ section the following words:

We see something that maybe other people don’t see and try to do
something about it. Other people don’t want to see or don’t see.
There is no shortage of issues that we can take action on.62
Yours Sincerely,

LINDA

P.S. Did you see this cartoon in the last issue of the Granny Grapevine Newsletter? I think it illustrates how Grannies rebel against societal expectations and norms in pursuit of their own passions.

"I STARTED to age gracefully, too, but it was too damn boring!"

Figure 3: Cartoon reprinted from Granny Grapevine Newsletter illustrates Grannies rebellion against ageist stereotypes and social expectations.⁶³
A concern for children and future generations motivates Grannies to do everything within their power to make the world a better place for all.\textsuperscript{64}
CHAPTER FIVE:
GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT GRANDCHILDREN
(GENERATIVITY)

There is a lot of choice: salad, soup, assorted sandwiches and entrees. Normally, I would just select whatever I felt like eating. But not today. I have to be careful about my selection. I know there are a lot of 'issues' connected to food and I don't want to turn the moment sour by making a foolish choice.

*Food Song*
*(Sung to the tune of Grandfather Clock)*

*We'll care for the soil as it cares for us*  
*Giving food through all our life long*  
*We'll care for the worms and waters as they work*  
*In harmony like a song.*

*No toxic chemicals poisoning the land*  
*No erosion from water and wind*  
*But stop, look, and daily give thanks*  
*To all creatures on Earth -- our Kin.*

Sitting down to lunch with the Grannies, I am reminded about the importance of their message for the continuance of the human race. Joan was eating strictly vegetarian items from the menu. Thank goodness I selected the garden salad! I would learn later on in the day that Joan's choice is connected to her commitment to animal rights. She would share:

I've been a vegetarian now for 26 years. One of my uncles was a veterinarian. I've always thought that every creature on the planet no
matter how many legs it has, skin or feathers or fins has an equal right to be here and I know its not a commonly held philosophy but I feel it very strongly. If you start looking after the tiniest most helpless creature, it goes from the ground up.66

Lunch with the Grannies is a real ‘treat’. The conversation moves from issue to issue as a river; free-flowing yet twisting and turning along the way. Pleasantries about the weather lead to a discussion about acid rain, holes in the ozone and global warming. A waitress brings out some sandwiches and there is talk about the working poor, work-fare and the role of women in society. Someone comments on how good and cold the milk tastes. This sparks comments on BST in milk, hormones used to pump up meat and bio-engineering of foods. Betsy says, “Oh stop, you’re ruining my appetite” and everyone laughs.

Underlying all of these diverse issues, is a desire that I found all Grannies possess; the desire to make the world a better place for future generations. I remembered Eric Erikson’s well respected framework of human psychological development involving life stages and transition points. Erickson uses the term ‘generativity’ to refer to a unique virtue in later adulthood whereby concerns about self-preservation evolve into a desire to ensure future generations thrive. He speaks of generativity as a desire to care for others and the world around as a way of coming to terms with personal mortality.67

According to this theory, if one is unable to achieve generativity, the individual slips into stagnation.68 Images of frail elders housed in nursing homes flood to my consciousness. I have seen the Grannies perform at such a venue and the contrast between activists (the Grannies) and older audience members is striking. As the Grannies belt out tunes with passion and power, I see some in the audience stare blankly into space or even doze off. Is this the fate of the uninvolved, the retired,
the soul that has lost its purpose in life? I think I have uncovered one of the strongest characteristics shared by all Grannies – generativity.

Takes A Long Time
(Sung to the tune of It's a Long Way to Tipperary)

Takes a long time to clean up waters
Takes a long time you know
Our great lakes really need it
It's the only way to go
Goodbye to the toxins
Farewell PCBs
Takes a long, long, time to clean up waters
So get started please.

Takes a long time to grow a forest
Takes a long time you know
So protect our old growth forest
For the trees are slow to grow
Goodbye to clear cutting
Farewell burn and slash
Takes a long, long time to grow a forest
So put down that axe.

Takes a long time to save the planet
Takes a long time you know
But we have to save our planet
We have no where else to go.69

Dearest Betsy,

My mind has been whirling around this concept of generativity which I spoke to you about recently. I know the desire to see future generations thrive may be linked to a bond with children and grandchildren. Phyllis said clearly, “I have an affinity for activism, of course, with four children
and five grandchildren I’ve got every motivation in the world.” Many Grannies expressed similar views that the work they did was on behalf of their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

However, I am aware that there are Grannies who never bore children of their own. Look at Joan who had “no use for a man” and Gerry who confided, “I’m the oldest of seven kids and I didn’t want any of my own because I already raised three of them!” This deep caring for earth and humanity goes beyond physical motherhood and encompasses a much broader caring for humanity. My thoughts are leading back to feminism and the fact that women specificity can be found in nurturing and life sustaining work.

Similar to feminist paradigms, I am thinking that the concept of generativity explains the core of Grannies’ passion for environmentalism and social justice. It seems evident that caring for future generations would include a safe and healthy living ‘space’ which can be defined by social structures or be planet based.

Do you recall that I put up a big sheet of paper at the Unconvention and wrote on the top: ‘Why did you become a Raging Granny’? I looked at that sheet of paper last night and was surprised how much my thoughts were validated. Here are a few quotes: “As a concerned mother and grandmother, I am concerned about what my children and grandchildren will face in the future”; “As a grandmother, I recognize the need to speak out to make the world a better, more beautiful place for children”; “To see if I could make a difference for the world in a peaceful way.”

It’s comforting to know that the Grannies are out there tirelessly pursuing important issues that will impact on our world today and into the future.
Yours Sincerely.

LINDA

P.S. I found this song written by the Peterborough Raging Grannies. I think it highlights Grannies' concerns about the future and their ability to think ahead for the sake of the next generation.

Environment Song
(Sung to the tune of Little Boxes)

Our blue boxes, little boxes.
We fill them with great delight,
with our plastics, glass and pop-cans and aluminum foil so light
In goes paper and our cardboard,
And our junk mail and receipts and such
On the sidewalk, by our boxes
So we've done our bit, we're alright!

We keep our furnace clean, and our chimney clean
And the air in our houses clean.
So the toxins in the air are as few as can be.
Unleaded fuel and a car pool,
Ask our children to walk to school.
On the sidewalk, past our boxes
So we've done our bit, we're alright!

We compost our weeds, plant bulbs and seeds.
And the city chips bits of trees
Our old clothes are recycled, go to help those in need
Insulate our homes, rarely water lawns,
Keep our pleasures within our means, (mostly)
City council sort of supports us.

We've done our bit, we're O.K.

But environment's lost at consumption's cost!

Global warming threatens all of us,

Cars make carbon di-oxide, Mike Harris cuts the bus

We need a government with a vision,

Long term planning is reality.

For the whole world.

We must do our bit, or we won't be O.K."
Picture 7: Toronto Raging Grannies are empowered to make a difference in this world and speak out for those who are marginalized by society.
CHAPTER SIX:
BENP THERE, DONE THAT
(EMPATHY)

‘But for the grace of God, there go I.’ It is an expression that I have heard from several
different Grannies usually connected to a personal story of adversity. I have been looking at black and
white photos that I have taken of Grannies. Devoid of colour, the pictures highlight deep furrows and
lines etched on smooth skin by time and experiences. Was it fear or sadness or anger that caused the
downward curve beside the mouth? Eyes. Piercing eyes still contain a glitter of youth although they
have receded into eye sockets and are framed by crows feet. What have these eyes seen to make them
so knowing, so able to see the suffering of others and to do something about it?

Stories of endured hardships are shared in the focus group. One Granny recalled:

I think during the depression as a kid, I remember being poor. I mean,
there was a fish and chip shop around the corner from us. We lived in
a rooming house across the street and it always smelled so good. And
I’d say to my dad: ‘gee, that smells good; couldn’t I get some;
couldn’t I have some chips?’ My dad would say: ‘No. Now my dear.
you’ve got to stand outside the door, eat a piece of bread and you’ll
think that you’re eating fish and chips!’ I didn’t believe it and he knew
I didn’t.’

Many Grannies have lived through the Great Depression and World War II. Some have
stories of being in Europe as children and suffering terrible uncertainty and fear at a time when they
should be living carefree. One Granny shares:
In 1943 the bombing started. You were bombed and terrified but at the same time you were hoping you were bombed because it would mean our liberation would come sooner from the Germans.\footnote{78}

It was not uncommon to be uprooted in childhood and to face adversity in many forms. Another Granny shared her story:

We couldn’t stand the situation. A lot of people were against the Germans but a lot had collaborated with the Nazis. My parents got divorced and my mother and I went to Canada. We were considered D.P.’s or displaced persons because we had lost all of our belongings in Belgium. We were always the underdog. We were always outsiders.\footnote{79}

I pick up my transcripts and find this passage, again. I read further and I find what I am looking for:

My childhood was a challenge but I lived several aspects of how people live, being an underdog, being a new comer, being a refugee, being this and that. You can start to relate to a lot of the problems that apply this day.\footnote{80}

I check the definition of ‘empathy’ and read the words aloud several times: “the capacity for participation in another’s feelings or ideas.”\footnote{81} From the volume of information I have collected on the Grannies, this quality of empathy is a point of commonality that is closely linked to social concern. It is the ability to walk in another person’s shoes and in doing so wanting for that person what you would want for yourself. Inevitably, this quality of empathy is essential for activists involved in social...
justice. How else can one come from a position of relative privilege and gain some understanding of those living on the margins?

The pictures in my hand reveal faces that I have come to learn as being mostly white, middle class, and educated. I’ve often wondered what insanity must have overcome these women to forsake the ignorant bliss of mainstream middle class and venture into the realms of poverty, violence and corruption. Certainly empathy, a genuine concern and understanding of the human condition, are motivators for their Granny work.

But, it also goes without saying that in some aspects of their lives they have ‘been there and done that’ which contributes to their empathetic powers. Stories are different, but the message is essentially the same: ‘I have experienced that and therefore I understand what it means to others and I am passionate about it.’

In focus group meetings Grannies recalled events in their lives that they identified as significant in influencing their values and choices in life. Many were able to map out their journey to Granny work by referring to epiphanies. Phyllis recalled:

It was when I had a doctor that botched how I had my first child that I became an activist in natural child birth education. I have a mentally ill daughter who lives with me off and on and I have an unemployed son who has been looking for work for years. It could happen to any one of us. That’s the nature of this society.

Joan remembered the impact her travelling experiences had on the formation of her social conscience.

She shared:

I got another kind of experience first hand when I travelled. I could
live on a dollar a week. I would live on bread, oranges and peanuts.

I carried a sleeping bag and slept wherever I could. I saw the poor in Calcutta. I saw poverty and I lived with the poor.83

One Granny was brave enough to share some darker sides of her life that she felt led her to explore social justice issues and feminism. She confided:

My step-mother was very abusive to me and she hit me all the time.

I took a lot of psychological abuse from my husband. I finally left him after he beat me up.84

Certainly empathy appeared to grow out of direct exposure to historical events and periods of time that challenged Grannies basic belief systems. Commenting on her anti-war stance, one Granny noted: “I was living in London during the second World War and if that didn’t make you determined that there was not going to be another war. I don’t know what would.85 Many spoke about living during periods when residual welfare was an accepted way of dealing with poverty. Many focus group participants supported this Granny’s thoughts: “Why do we fight so hard for universal medicare? Because we lived at a time when there wasn’t any and we know what that was like.”86

The Other Night Dear
(Sung to the tune of You Are My Sunshine)

The other night dear
As I lay sleeping
I dreamt there were no hungry kids
I dreamt we all lived in decent houses
But when I woke my dream
was shreds.  

**Women Bleeding, Women Crying**  
*(Sung to the tune of Ode to Joy)*

Women bleeding, women crying  
Women punched and stabbed and shot.  
Women raped and women dying,  
Doesn’t seem to mean a lot.  
Cut the programs, cut the shelters.  
Cut the time we let them stay.  
Do these MPs have no mothers?  
Have they sold their souls away?  
Children crying, children hungry.  
Children cold and on the street.  
Children raised in third world squalor  
While our MPs are replete.  
Cut assistance, cut the programs.  
Don’t mind what the voters say.  
Do these MPs have no children?  
Have they sold their souls away?  

Dearest Betsy,  

I was reading over my notes from the very first telephone conversation I had with you way back in 1997. I’m sure it was not as monumental to you as it was for me! Anyways, at one point you spoke quite passionately about your work as a Social Worker and the lives you had been witness to through this work. Do you remember telling me the story about the young mother who visited your office and the epiphany you had at that time? Here are my notes:  

One day I was helping this young mother on welfare who was going through a tremendous amount of difficulty and it struck me that I
could easily be in that woman's situation if not for some luck in life.  

Well, it is precisely this story and other similar ones from Grannies that led me to see how life experiences enabled Grannies to develop empathy for others which in turn supported a social conscience in these women. I don't think it is coincidental that of the nine Grannies who completed a written survey seven were professional helpers (three nurses, two teachers, one social worker and one occupational therapist). These professions are inclined to work closely with individuals in distress, facing difficult situations that may not be in their control. Joan noted at the focus group: "With people who have a background like in banking, how can you expect them to relate to social problems? They are miles away from the welfare lines."  

I know you have lived a relatively 'privileged' life, even as a child living through the Depression you were never in want of food or any basic necessities. Do you think your ability to empathize with the 'underdog' in society is related to your social work experiences? Perhaps, you don't realize how eloquent your insights are into the lives of the impoverished. I found this passage from the focus group you attended at the Unconvention. This is what you said which seems to me so in tune with the 'other person':

I have a feeling that if you're really worried about where your next meal is coming from or where your winter boots are coming from and you can't go out unless you have them; if your life is circumscribed by those very basic needs, that you don't have the privilege of looking at other ways for your life to go. And I think that I was in a position where those things weren't my concern, I never had to worry about enough to eat or a nice home to live in, or good treatment from my
family, and a sympathetic ear when I had ambition. But the poor
don't always get that, simply because of poverty. The poverty is so
grinding in their lives, that they may have ambitions; they may think
they'd like to go on with their education, there's no way. They've got
to get out and work. They don't have confidence in themselves. It is
this grinding poverty that takes away opportunities and initiative; the
very things that help people develop themselves.92

Thanks for sharing your empathy with me!

Regards,

LINDA
Picture 8: Two Grannies exchange last minute words before a gig at Metro Hall.
I never thought there would be pre-'gig' jitters, but as I looked around the table and observed the dressing rituals I could sense the nervousness. Phyllis fiddled with slogan buttons that were pinned to her shawl. She reviewed song lyrics scribbled on paper with an intensity that seemed to block out what was happening around her.

Betsy and Inga whispered back and forth about what words they would emphasize in a certain song. They straightened their hats and fussed through notes. Joan inquired once again about which songs they would sing and in what order. I watched in amazement as my dinner companions transformed themselves from a group of elderly women into a gaggle of Grannies. They primped and straightened and applied bright lipstick. They put on shawls and hats and bows and scarves; all the while quietly mouthing and rehearsing songs. When the commentator finally introduced the Grannies over the loud speaker I was so nervous I could hardly contain myself. I could see each one take in a final deep breath much like an athlete draws in oxygen prior to the starting pistol's explosion. They were all about to take 'the plunge' and I sat in my comfortable chair watching it unfold. It was at that moment that I realized what a risk it was to be a Granny; how it must feel to get up in front of a large crowd with the possibility of facing ridicule, rejection or even anger.

This night, in October of 1998 at Metro Hall, the Grannies are preaching to the converted and the audience response is positive. I know, however, that this is not always the case. There are lots of stories of being escorted out of places where their message is not welcome. Elaine speaks about the time they were invited to sing to a group of fundamental, conservative, Christian men.
You could have heard a pin drop when we sang ‘No Nuclear Power’ to the tune of ‘Jesus Loves Me’. It was extremely uncomfortable, but we got through it and we got a chance to sing our message out loud and strong.⁹⁴

During the second focus group that I hosted, Phyllis spoke at length about going to the Haig during the Kosovo crisis for an international conference on peace and disarmament. At one point she talks of her outrage and her decision to speak out when others could not find their voice. Another Granny concurred:

We were outraged sitting a few seats from the front of that prestigious theatre in the Haig with so many dignitaries sitting on the stage and the Dutch Prime Minister being so complacent about bodies in Kosovo and Phyllis and I both yelled out, ‘NO! NO!’ and the people outside watching things on the screen said to us afterwards thank God somebody spoke what we all thought.⁹⁵

Combing through archival information I have collected on Grannies I come across two pictorials that illustrate for me the real risks associated with doing Granny work. The first, is a Toronto Star article entitled, Grannies Mock Nuclear Plant⁹⁶ which contains a series of photographs. Directly under a colourful picture of Grannies gathered to protest nuclear power at the Pickering site are menacing photos of security guards in blue and one of a man in uniform who is videotaping their protest. A close look at the guards reveals an intimidating group of men standing in front of the entrance way, barring uninvited guests. The caption under the guards reads in bold capital letters: NOT AMUSED.
A second article on the APEC hearings in Vancouver that took place in 1999 is very sobering. It shows the weathered and tired face of Raging Granny, Jean McLaren who has been arrested nine times during the past decade for speaking her mind. The article talks about Raging Grannies as one of the threats to be watched at the summit conference. After the APEC crisis when pepper spray was used to squelch protestors, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police issued a statement indicating that they regarded the Grannies as ‘anti-Canadian’. To be a Granny is risky work that could easily result in public backlash and labelling that is hurtful to the group and individual reputations.

_The Grannies are A Low Level Threat_
*(Sung to the tune of The Yellow Rose of Texas)*

_We’re a menace to society_
_A terrible bunch are we_
_A danger to security_
_Of Canada you see_

_We do such things as work for peace_
_And health care for schools_
**but all these things we do declare**
_Must be against the rules_
_But it’s low level, low level_
_Low level naughtiness_

_We sing about bad things they do_
_To the environment_
_To get your rapt attention_
_Ah that is our intent_

_We work against all violence_
_Now is that really bad_
_We guess it is ‘cause_

_It has made ol’ CSIS really mad_
_But it’s low level, low level,_
_Low level naughtiness*²*
Dearest Betsy,

Did you notice the consensus in the focus group when I suggested Grannies might be characterized as risk-takers? I guess it might appear obvious from the work that you do: after all, dressing-up in outrageous costumes and singing in public places certainly, in my view, qualifies as taking a personal risk. Wouldn't you agree?!

In reviewing notes from the focus group, I liked how Kay defined risk-taker as a person who shows "a willingness to try new things." At the beginning of the Edmonton Raging Grannies Song Book there is a saying from Zimbabwe quoted as follows: "If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing." How true it is that the majority of people go through life walking and talking, but a much smaller number take the risk to dance and sing. I think Grannies fall into this latter group and have done so all of their lives.

Think, for example, of all the stories we heard from Grannies about pursuing higher education later in life. One Granny shared:

I had finished high school but women didn't consider going on further to University or anything like that so, I waited till my children finished university and then I went back. I graduated just after my 50th birthday.

Another Granny concurred:

I started travelling around the world when I was 25 years old and I was 42 years old when I finished. Then, I decided I would start University and get the formal education.
This late life return to academia speaks to the risk taking nature of Grannies. Research on aging has shown that a very small percentage of persons over the age of 40 undertake formal post-secondary education because of barriers. For persons to return to school after being out of the formal education system for many years is a real personal risk with most older learners fearing failure.

Betsy, I have found in my focus group notes so many other examples of risk taking in Grannies lives that this is a character theme about which I feel very confident. Think, for example, of the Grannies from the Western provinces. Many were involved in the CCF and assumed leadership positions in labour unions, taking the risk of being outcasts. Many even lived in exile from local communities for periods of time. Look at Joan who chose a counter-culture lifestyle, travelling abroad for years. Remember Kay’s poignant tale of having a vision for helping mentally ill patients cope outside of hospital walls? She had the courage to try something new and risked her reputation by setting up a program called ‘Company for Two’. Her strong belief that many persons with mental illness had just experienced some bad knocks in life led her to propose a not very popular or well regarded intervention. She felt strongly that what was needed was not a medical model of treatment, but rather a social approach such as “a retreat for mental patients to be cared for by kind and supportive persons in a community setting.”

It is precisely this type of willingness to explore new ways and alternative points of view that make Grannies different from mainstream elders. Society has basically discarded older women as dependent and useless citizens. Commonly held stereotypes like ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ and ‘old age is a time to retire and disengage’ are believed and lived out by many older adults. In true form, however, Grannies see through these myths and view old age as a point in
the life cycle when extra ‘leisure time’ can be used to pursue important work. I think the risk-taking element occurs when Grannies go beyond knowing they can make a difference to actually making a difference by acting and doing. It is the choice to leave the ‘rocking chair’ and do something that society says you should not be doing at your age that demonstrates risk-taking behavior.

Interestingly to me, Betsy, is that risk-taking is not a new modus operandi. On the contrary, you women have been doing this all of your lives! Should it have been any surprise to me that so many Grannies were involved in the peace movement as younger women in the 1960s?

Does it ever get discouraging to look back and see that 40 years ago you were marching for peace and disarmament and you are still seeking resolution to these issues today? I was really interested in the perception of some Grannies that it is easier to take risks in old age because the consequences are not as serious as when you had families to support and when your actions impacted on others like your children.

We don’t have much power anymore so we don’t have that much to lose for us than to trust our intuition and call it like it is and say ‘hey, there are no clothes on the emperor’. It’s not such a big deal for us to make fools of ourselves in order to touch the heart of the matter.”

Betsy, I found this quote in the Edmonton Journal from 1995 spoken by a Granny named Helen Melnychuk. I really thought it summed-up my hunch about risk-taking:

We were never the type of people who bothered too much about the social pressure to conform. We haven’t exactly been inhibited by being out of step with our neighbours.”

Regards,

LINDA
Picture 9: Kay MacPherson at work\textsuperscript{110}
CHAPTER EIGHT:  
JE IS US LOVES GRANNIES  
(SPIRITUALITY) 

She dances beautifully. Her body is hard and sculpted like a Michelangelo piece in motion. In contrast, her hair and costume are soft and flow freely around her. There is so much emotion evoked; joy, exuberance, triumph, pain and deep sadness. She dances for her mother, but mostly she dances for herself and for the gathering of mourners who are present. A person who happened upon this scene may easily mistake the event as a performance of a ballerina on stage. This is, however, no performance and the woman is not a dancer; at this moment she is simply ‘daughter’ who finds inspiration in her grief. Through her movement, she reaches deep inside herself and resurrects the spirit of her mother; a woman of courage and vision.

As I sat through the memorial service for former Raging Granny, Kay MacPherson, I couldn’t help but sense her presence. As I entered the church, I was handed information on nuclear policies and at the top of the paper was written: ‘If Kay MacPherson were here she would have given this to you and she would have wanted you to respond’. How comforting that, even in death, her work goes on.

This encounter reminded me of what I term the ‘spiritual’ connection many Grannies link to their work. A written survey completed by Toronto Raging Grannies revealed a high level of participation in church groups.

Most of us have a religious conviction that Social Action is our way of expressing our faith – but we have Our Sister of Providence, our Catholic members and those Anglican, United and Unitarian – and
across the country, others, but this religious conviction encourages us
to act.\textsuperscript{111}

With this piece of knowledge, I began to have conversations with Grannies to see if they
considered themselves to be religious. I learned that many Grannies, while having connections with
organized religious groups, did not consider themselves to be religious and were even adverse to this
terminology.

I realized that the cohort of women who are Grannies were more likely to have early exposure
with religious groups because the church was more central in family life during the time period in
which Grannies grew up.\textsuperscript{112} Therefore, I felt religiousness was very likely a cohort phenomenon
rather than a defining attribute of Grannies.

As was usually the case, Grannies were most helpful in refining my initial thinking. The term
‘religious’ was broadened to ‘spiritual’ as this was viewed by Grannies in focus groups as a much
more acceptable and accurate descriptor. We agreed together that the word ‘spiritual’ captured
several core values shared by Grannies. These values included: a strong connection with nature; a
belief in the uniqueness and importance of every human life; a sense that humanity is a family; the
notion that the earth was created to be beautiful; and, a belief in the interconnectedness of life or the
existence of a web of life.

\textit{Dearest Betsy,

I was surprised to find a possible link between spirituality and the Granny psyche. The focus
group meetings were so helpful in allowing me to explore this concept further. What emerged from
discussions with a wider group of Grannies was a broadening of the concept of ‘religious
convictions’ to ‘a sense of spirituality’.}
I thought Phyllis, a devout Anglican, was typical of many Grannies who spoke about having core religious beliefs that value human life and call them to walk with the poor and needy. Phyllis explained:

*Jesus Christ is what has constantly led me out into new fields wherever there is human hurt and injustice. I guess I have a very strong sense that earth was meant to be beautiful and humanity was meant to be a family and that gives you such a huge agenda – environmental, peace, all kinds of justice issues and the more you are on the path of faith the more you feel the calling in different ways.*

I think Phyllis’ story speaks to the fact that there is a strong social conscience among certain organized religions. I did, for example, come across a number of Grannies who were affiliated with Anglican and United Churches and who did a lot of community outreach through these organizations.

In contrast, I’m sure you will recall other Grannies who did not view themselves as ‘religious’ at all and these conversations are what led me to discard the word ‘religious’ and replace it with the term ‘spiritual’. Remember Jean, for example, from the first focus group; she was a practising white witch or wicken. I had never met a witch before and was fascinated to learn from her that “the wicken convictions are to care for the earth and to care for others.”

Even Inga, who defined herself as an agnostic, verbalized having a sense of spirituality which equated to a connection with the earth and appreciation for the uniqueness and importance of each individual. She notes:

*I remember being in this church and everyone was praying 'please*
don't let the bombs fall'. But, the bombs did fall. The war did not stop. I did not feel God was on our side that's for sure. Our whole town was bombed. What did that teach me about God? Then we saw all the photographs and I thought all those Jewish people must have prayed to God. But, where was God? Deep down I feel there is likely a creator and I think that God is in people and in the good things that people do.\textsuperscript{115}

In my dealings with Grannies, I am constantly reminded of their collective belief in the goodness of the human spirit; their unwavering conviction that it is possible to build a global society free of violence and to transform the world as we know it. As one Granny noted, "we may not all have religious concerns, per se. but we all have ethical and moral concerns that lead us to humanitarianism."\textsuperscript{116}

\textit{Justice Song for Everyone}
(Sung to the tune of I've got Peace like a River)

\begin{verbatim}
Oh come along my sister
Come along my brother
We'll work for justice in this land
Caring for our neighbour
Caring for our neighbour
Caring for our neighbour in this land
Caring for our Earth-home
Caring for our Earth-home
Caring for our Earth-home
Caring for our Earth-home in this land
We've got strength like a mountain
We've got joy like a fountain
\end{verbatim}
We've got love like the sunshine
Oh come along my sister
Oh come along my brother
We'll work for justice in this land

Betsy, thanks for agreeing to read my work. I have almost completed the first draft and I am looking forward to your comments. Keep well.

Regards,

LINDA
Picture 10: The final (end) page of the Edmonton Grannies’ Songbook literally pictures the Grannies’ ‘ends’. \textsuperscript{118}
CHAPTER NINE:
DID I EVER TELL YOU THE ONE ABOUT ...
(HUMOUR)

I listen intently to the story being told. I’m not sure where the story-line is going, but I am certain that I do not want to miss any tidbits of profound knowledge that may be dispersed. A Granny continues recalling the details about four older activist friends who are travelling together on an airplane. Being of the feminist persuasion, one of the women notices that there are no stewards on the plane. Curious, she asks one of the stewardesses why there are no men serving meals. The stewardess says, “Oh, we are an all female crew. Even the pilot and copilot are women.” The activist is now very intrigued and asks if it would be possible for her and her travelling companions to visit the cockpit. The stewardess looks rather serious and replies, “Oh, we don’t call it the 

cock pit on this flight.”

The room erupts into fits of hysterical laughter. It is the way Grannies laugh and the frequency of their laughter that makes the researching so easy and fun. I noticed very early on in my work with the Raging Grannies that they possess a good sense of humour and a willingness to see the irony of life. Betsy shared these thoughts:

To be a Granny you need a sense of humour. Oh yes, a great sense of humour. Jack and I have now been married for 56 years and we look at each other and say is there anyone else who laughs as much as we do. We have all kinds of laughs.

Phyllis piped up, “You can’t do this work and be in it for the long haul without being able to laugh; you would go crazy otherwise with the weight of all the problems.” Jean agreed:
Well, all the women I know in the Raging Grannies have done a lot of political work all their lives, or most of their lives and it’s been a grind. I mean we’ve been to the meetings twice, three times a week. We’ve been taking minutes. I was born in a meeting. But, to me, the Grannies give more; we have fun and it’s much more relaxing, it’s a lot of laughs and fun and damn it all I think it’s more effective than a lot of work.\textsuperscript{122}

I found that it is precisely the ability to laugh and to not take one’s self too seriously that gives the Grannies strength to put on ridiculous outfits and to do really outlandish things in order to educate others about serious social issues. It is also, I believe, part of the endearing quality about Grannies that keeps them popular and attracts people to listen to their message when they are ‘raging’. An article written by the Lethbridge Raging Grannies illustrates how humour prevails even in difficult situations:

Little did we think when gathering in a mall on a Saturday before Christmas, that protesting war toys would arouse such a flurry of local, national (CBC) and even international interest. Shopping malls are private property. What are the implications when “public” meeting spaces inside malls can weed out “undesirables” – in our case, adult educators – on the whim of security agents? We were treated in a manner which, elsewhere, would raise issues of human rights. How to respond to such treatment threatened to split our group. Was it a ‘war toys’ issue or a civil rights issue or both? A few days reflection
showed us that humour, graciousness and reconciliation with the mall management and the private security company was the best course.123

"She may look like somebody's granny to you, but she was instrumental in putting a $4-billion nuclear power plant in the deep freeze."

Figure 4: Reprinted from Raging Granny brochure. The Grannies always find ways to use humour in their pedagogy.124
Dearest Betsy,

I was reading through some issues of the 'Granny Grapevine' the other day and, of course, I kept chuckling and smiling to myself. My husband curiously asked what I was reading. I replied, "Just some information about world poverty, environmental destruction and nuclear weapons." You can well imagine that he thinks I have finally 'gone over the edge' writing this thesis. However, the statement wasn't so far from the truth in that Grannies are masters at using ironic and sarcastic humour to get people to look at issues from different angles. The laughter of the audience, is often followed by a resounding 'Ah - Ha' as people 'get it' or see the real intent of the humour.

I'm confident you would agree that humour is a well thought out Granny strategy for gaining access to certain forums and for getting your message across without being silenced. The Edmonton Journal notes:

When people accuse the grannies of perpetuating the stereotype of the empty-headed old lady, they reply that they are turning an insult inside out, and exposing it as a joke, for their own purposes. They take advantage of the stereotype – play up the image for all it's worth – to get into inaccessible political offices and deliver their message.123

The other point about humour, Betsy, that I have come to appreciate is how you and your fellow Grannies find humour in yourselves. In a recent Grapevine you write:

Also noteworthy was billed as 'three choirs' Christmas presentation at the Church of the Holy Trinity, where we warble at our weekly practice. It was two 'real choirs', then the Grannies. Other current activities helped a Voice
of Women potluck, a seniors' multi-residence program, the Hiroshima Peace exhibit at Metro Hall, an MAI protest, and most surprisingly, the 'Aging Gracefully' conference by the Rehabilitation Institute of Toronto. We, aging gracefully? It turned into a real love-in.

I smiled when I read this update from the Victoria Grannies which appeared in the 1998 Grapevine:

Renovating the Granny Navy? New year brought back illusions of grandeur. Since the Victoria Raging Granny Armada has been stranded for some time (due to decay of both kayaks and Grannies), Betty responded to a newspaper contest calling for suggestions of new uses for the Vesuvious Queen, once a proud member of the B.C. Ferries fleet. We're not sure if the winner gets to keep the ferry; we'll worry about that when we win.

I'll try to keep your infectious energy and good sense of humour in mind as I embark on the final section of this thesis which essentially involves pulling together all of my findings about Granny psyche into a coherent conclusion. I feel that I have been living with this research long enough to confidently talk about common characteristics shared by women who are Grannies. I will write shortly with some final reflections on my work. Until then, take care.

Regards,

LINDA
Picture 11: Betsy and 'the gals' belt out a tune.
CHAPTER TEN:
WOMEN UNDER THE HATS

I hang up the phone and am overwhelmed by a sense of urgency. Betsy shared with me that she has started to use a cane to get around. She indicated that Elaine, one of the participants in my Toronto Raging Grannies focus group, died suddenly. It has also been a tough year for a number of Grannies who have lost lifetime partners.

The larger-than-life, invincible, energetic, vivacious Grannies seem suddenly frail to me. I realize that time is more limited for Grannies than for myself and that it is important to forge ahead if I am to share the work with them in a tangible form.

When I started this research, my goal was to find out about the women under the Granny hats. I wanted to see if there were some common attributes descriptive of women who are Raging Grannies that, in turn, impact on the presentation of their pedagogy. I discovered that each Granny I spoke with had a unique life story filled with people and events that were often serendipitous in nature and resulted in meaningful choices. Many could look back over their lives and identify epiphanies and significant people and events that impacted on their personal development and decision to do Granny work.

I found in my archival information, two original illustrations drawn by Grannies to represent themselves. I think these images project for me the core attributes that I found to be in all of the women with whom I spoke. The first illustration is commonly seen on Granny literature and could be described as the Granny logo. It is a picture of three Granny faces raging. The central figure is wearing peace symbol earrings. To me, this picture represents the rebellious, risk-taking side of Grannies who are deeply concerned about future generations.
Most Grannies I spoke with were rebels all of their lives. Having experienced wars, economic hardships and gender discrimination, they were influenced to fight for social justice. Some joined radical organizations like the C.C.F., Voice of Women and Communist party. Many Grannies came from ‘union’ families. They were exposed, early in life, to left-wing political views and most had role models who questioned the establishment. In the 1960s they protested against the Vietnam war and marched for women’s liberation. Throughout, they developed friendships with like minded people and joined peace groups and feminist circles.

Risk-taking appeared to be a natural expression of rebellious attitudes. Many Grannies were ‘out of step’ with their neighbours and faced ridicule or rejection for speaking out and being different. In their current lives as Grannies, they put themselves constantly at risk by speaking out against the cornerstones of Canadian life – capitalism and patriarchy. They seek out opportunities to make their popular education accessible to people who are indifferent or hostile to their message. Many Grannies enjoyed and continue to enjoy challenges and are not afraid to take chances in order to get results. Some Grannies returned to school later in life and obtained university degrees. All Grannies involve themselves in community life and refuse to give in to social expectations of disengagement or
retirement.

This second illustration is also action oriented, but is more fluid and focussed on movement. This drawing captures for me the creative, spiritual, feminist, and funny side of Grannies.

![Illustration of Grannies]

**Figure 6:** Grannies portrayal of themselves as activists

How Grannies developed their amazing sense of humour is unclear. But, all Grannies that I spoke with have an affinity for satire and the ability to see humour in life and in themselves. Perhaps it is this ability to laugh and not take oneself too seriously that has enabled Grannies to continue their activism well into advanced age.

Being creative is also a prerequisite for Granny work. I found Grannies to be extremely creative women. They write their own material, design their own costumes and create gimmicks that attract media attention. Throughout their lives, Grannies tended to be self-teachers. They take charge of their own learning and keep abreast of social and environmental issues. In later life, they are afforded the opportunity for creative expression in their work as Grannies. They choose to use their
creative energy to educate others about issues that they see as important for the continuance of life.

The Grannies respect for life and love of life is clear. They have a strong sense of generativity, or desire to see future generations thrive. They value every life and see the interconnectedness between people and nature. There is a spiritual side to Grannies that is difficult to put into words, but is easily seen in their pedagogy. It includes a genuine love and respect for others, a desire to keep earth beautiful and a belief in the goodness of the human spirit.

In retrospect, I see the life stories and attributes of Grannies played out and represented in their pedagogy. What they do is what they are. The popular education undertaken by Grannies is vibrant, creative, witty and fun. Lyrics they write and sing tell of the breadth of their understanding of social issues and their untiring commitment to justice, peace and the environment. I also believe that strong feminist values run as an undercurrent throughout their lives and work. They have a genuine respect for each other and operate in a non-hierarchal, truly democratic way. Their work is all about sustaining life; about nature and nurture. It is ‘mother’ work in the deepest sense of the word. It is about growth and renewal and caring. Their vision is definitely transformative. They are seeking more than a better world; they want a different world.

Dearest Betsy,

I have come to the end of my journey with this researching endeavour. However, in many ways, I feel I have come full circle back to where I began: contemplating how to reflect in words the lived lives and thoughts of Grannies. What I have learned, most poignantly, is that life stories are so much more than a regurgitation of events and facts. They are the organization of experiences that connect us to a certain identity. In the final analysis, I believe this research opened the door for Grannies to sit down together and explore their lives from different angles; to analyse who they are
as individuals and who they are as Raging Grannies.

I have attempted through this work to highlight parallels between individual traits and Granny identity. What I found was a number of similarities among Grannies in core beliefs, values and personal characteristics. I also found great diversity in experiences that is a testament to the uniqueness of each person and her story. I am also keenly aware that my work captures a snapshot of Grannies at a certain point in time; their work and views of self are continually evolving. As one Granny so poignantly noted: “Each of us is a cube eternal. We have many sides. The light reflects a different way each time you look.”[^1]

Betsy, it is my hope that this piece of work will resonate with Grannies who read it; that persons who participated in the research will find a part of themselves in the words. I felt compelled to avoid a traditional form of thesis writing in order to represent the unconventional lives of women who are Grannies. Please keep in touch. I am deeply indebted to you and to all who patiently worked with me to advance my knowledge of what you do so well. I have come to realize, through the Grannies, the words of adult educators Myles Horton and Paulo Freire: “We make the road by walking.”[^2] Keep walking and singing and raging.

Regards,

LINDA
APPENDIX ONE:
BACKGROUND ON RESEARCH AND APPROACH

Several years ago, the Raging Grannies came singing into my life. The Grannies, a group of older women who use popular education strategies to spread their message of peace, social justice and environmentalism, came to do a presentation at the supportive housing project where I was working. I was instantly fascinated with the Grannies method and message. I knew almost immediately that this was a group of women I wanted to learn more about. Their eyebrow raising antics, sense of humour and strong words were in stark contrast to the silent audience: an audience consisting of ‘mainstream’ elders who were content living out their final days ‘retired’ and mute about important societal issues.

After the presentation, I approached the founder of the group, Ms. Betsy Carr, and was encouraged to hear that she was open to having a conversation with me about the “Granny movement”. This was the beginning of a journey that would lead me over the next two years to consider how I might not only study these women but represent them in a manner that would do justice to who they are and what they do. This path seemed natural to take; it fit with my desire to study older adults and my interest in seniors’ activism. When I began graduate studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, my intentions were to explore issues that were relevant to my life and my work. My interest in seniors’ activism increased when I embarked on project work with the Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens’ Organizations. My commitment to the study of aging was based on the influence of elders in my life and 14 years spent working with older people. But, after meeting the ‘larger-than-life’ Grannies, the question loomed in the back of my mind: where do I begin?
FINDING A RESEARCH APPROACH

Aesthetics plays a role in the sense that each researcher possesses a unique set of skills, gifts and sensibilities that resonate better with certain styles of inquiry and/or paradigms. Research is a way to celebrate these differences. 

The way we research is a reflection of how we orient ourselves – our epistemological and ontological assumptions. We need to understand those assumptions before we begin and we need to use that self-awareness as a guide throughout the research process.

My days as an undergraduate student at the University of Guelph were filled with graded papers and examinations. There were right and wrong answers. Reality was knowable. I learned to critically review research for ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’. Complex sociological phenomena were dissected to find, if not cause and effect, as least correlations that were statistically significant. My papers were written exclusively in the ‘third person’ and included literature reviews that spouted the ideas of ‘experts’.

Four years of studying in the positivistic paradigm had a major impact on the way I viewed the world and approached inquiry. If this was the end of my journey, the approach to this thesis on older women and social action would certainly look much different; inadvertently it would read like a piece of traditional research. Thankfully, it was only the beginning of my ‘inquiry into inquiry’.

Upon completion of my undergraduate studies, I began working for a large non-profit community support agency. Although much of my work was ‘people’ based, when it came time to write about a program or develop a project proposal, the text was full of statistics. I expressed client needs in quantitative terms like ‘x’ number of persons required assistance with personal care, or ‘y’ number of clients had mobility limitations with ‘z’ number using a wheelchair. I never considered
telling people's stories as a means of validating what I did or demonstrating why the government should fund a program. I did know, however, that for myself, life stories were powerful.

In 1988, I was asked to work on a six month research project at my place of employment. The project was funded by the Provincial Government and was to be a study of devices family caregivers use in caring for a dependent relative with Alzheimer's Disease. My role was to develop a survey tool with input from a professor of psychology at a local university and then locate forty caregivers to interview.

The survey tool I ended up with was extremely rigid and included a series of questions with accompanying responses which were checked off. A computer analysis was undertaken to determine correlations between technologies used and caregiver stress/burnout. However, as was my style, I spent a tremendous amount of time after asking the formal questions listening to people's stories and trying to be empathetic. I felt I owed each person the courtesy of listening.

Part way into the study, I began to have a very uneasy feeling. I started to think about all of the caregivers who were giving up their time to share their knowledge and stories with me. Almost inevitably, at the end of each interview, the caregiver would ask me what I was going to do with the information I was gathering. The truth was, I knew the information was likely to be written-up in an unimaginative, dull format and shelved somewhere in the Ministry. I began to doubt the usefulness of the study and my role in perpetuating research with little practical applicability to the real world.

As luck would have it, at regular project meetings, I had the opportunity to share life stories that caregivers recalled during interviews. To my delight, our meetings began focussing more and more on the stories and less on empirical data collected. Excitement grew out of what people said rather than how many said something that fit into a particular category. Somewhere in the middle of
the project there came a turning point. It became crystal clear that the logical outcome of the study was not a scientific paper outlining statistically significant correlations between device usage and caregiver burden; on the contrary, the merits of this research were captured in the stories told by caregivers. At that point, the project group decided to report the findings in the form of a user friendly guide which highlighted key findings using stories and specific ideas presented by caregivers. The final product was called, *My House is Not My Home* and began with a quote from Ulysses which was recited by a husband in the study who provided constant care to his wife diagnosed with Alzheimers Disease: “though much is lost, still much abides.” The guidebook was distributed to caregivers across the Province via social service agencies and through public announcements. Many persons who had participated in the study expressed to me how good it felt to help others facing similar adversity. The end result of the project for me, as novice researcher, was extremely rewarding and validated my own inner need to contribute to the wellness of others. I believe it was this researching experience that led me to consider, or at least to be open to, qualitative methods of inquiry.

The next ten years of my work life focussed on community based programs for frail elders. I had the opportunity to work on several projects that inevitably had a research component. I became more confident in interviewing and facilitating focus groups. My reports included a balance of statistics and stories from participants. I found that adding a human dimension to a project through recounting stories was the best way to highlight an issue or concern.

One such example that remains quite vivid to me occurred during the developmental phase of a newsletter I was writing for a seniors’ advocacy group. The funding, provided by the Ontario Women’s Directorate, was to be used to write a newsletter about sexual assault and older women.
Initially, the advisory group had considered studying the phenomenon trying to determine the extent of the problem and then report the findings in a newsletter format. Over several meetings, the group decided that the funding would best be used by highlighting the issue, but the question remained how best to accomplish this. Finally, the group decided to talk directly with people who worked with older women who had been assaulted and to speak to the women themselves.

A public announcement was printed in the Toronto Star newspaper asking older women who had been sexually assaulted to write their story. The letters moved the committee to tears and segments of stories were printed, with permission from the authors. The final product, I felt, was enhanced by using the words of victims and helpers. I was hooked. From that point on I began contemplating how I might incorporate ‘story-telling’ into my research work. I knew enough to identify the term ‘qualitative’ as the direction I should move towards.

I undertook an introductory qualitative research course at the academy which opened my eyes to new possibilities. Words like, ‘ethnography’, ‘participatory research’, ‘grounded theory’, ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘heuristic research’, crept into my vocabulary and I learned about the diverse approaches, methods and forms of qualitative research. The course requirements included the development and implementation of a small scale research project. I chose to examine racism and front line care-giving because it was a topic I was interested in, given my work with visible minority women employed as personal support workers.

The study enabled me to gain deeper insight into my own value system and needs as ‘researcher’. I realized that research is really about relationship building. In order to gain insight into the experiences of others, I needed to develop trust and a safe environment for sharing. I found that I was most comfortable facilitating conversation rather than directing it. This required me to take
risks and resist the temptation to follow a pre-determined script of questions. I found in this study, and through other interviewing in which I had been involved, that the participants are ultimately the ‘experts’ about the topic under study. After all, as a white, middle-class, educated woman, what understanding could I possibly possess about the lives of the women I interviewed who were completely and totally marginalized. Valuing participants’ knowledge and insights, logically led me to assume the role of ‘listener’ and to interject questions that flowed naturally from the conversation. I began to see good interviewing as an art form; a dance between interviewer and interviewee. This is, in my view, one of the greatest rewards of researching: to be able to connect with people and to facilitate their exploration of self.

What resonated with me through this research project was the power of stories and the realization that data or information analysis was not about crunching numbers, but about ‘living with’ data. It was absolutely fascinating to see how the act of pondering and reviewing field notes and transcripts could result in the emergence of codes and abstract categories. Relationships between categories became apparent and provided a theoretical framework for an emerging theory. Most exciting for me, was the prospect of writing the report using excerpts from interviews to substantiate my analysis. I felt the representation of ideas through reflection of participants’ own words was extremely successful in capturing the essence of individuals.

As I began to meet with and talk with Raging Grannies it was clear that the key to understanding the ‘Granny psyche’ lay in observing their pedagogy and hearing their stories and life experiences. During one conversation with a group of Grannies, a woman recounted an emotional story about the impact her father had on her life. This opened the door for others to speak about their parents and families. Inevitably, historical events such as the Great Depression and World War II
seeped into the conversation. Later, I began to consider the value of life stories and context and the convergence of the two in my understanding of the Grannies.140

RESEARCH PLAN

As researchers we have to be passionate about what we do; research questions have to come out of our own curiosities, our own passion to know.”141

Research Goals

At the outset of my inquiry work with the Grannies, I decided that I would focus on keeping several goals paramount. First, I wanted to gain some understanding of the type of women who become involved in the Raging Granny movement. Second, I hoped that I could identify common traits shared by Grannies and yet still maintain an appreciation for the uniqueness of individuals and their life stories. Third, I wanted to represent the lives of Grannies in a meaningful way that captured their spirit and personhood through their words and songs.

Research Questions

My inquiry was guided by a number of research questions each possessing as a caveat the desire to gain an intimate portrait of Grannies. Questions included:

- Who are these women? What are their unique attributes, personalities and value systems?
- What sets Grannies apart from the majority of ‘mainstream others’ of this age cohort?
- What are their family histories? How did family relationships impact on the development of their psyche?
Research Assumptions and Methodology

In approaching this study, I have made several assumptions. I believe that reality is not knowable and that, as researcher, I can never fully understand the lived experiences and context of another person. However, with this stated, I do believe that recounted stories can be comprised of common threads that when woven together have the potential to explain a sociological phenomenon.

Lives are, by nature, lived in context. This assumption has led me to go beyond the individual and examine the broader context in which Grannies have lived their lives. My study of Raging Grannies could not focus completely on their work as Grannies, but by necessity needed to incorporate an understanding of other aspects of their lives.

My approach to this thesis is best described as ‘qualitative’ and within the constructivist camp. I have attempted to depict the storied nature of lives while integrating contextual elements such as historical, familial and political spheres of influences on retold experiences. I would, therefore, describe my epistemological orientation as a form of life history research.

Data was collected using several methods which, together, helped in identifying common pieces that formed the rich mosaic of Grannies’ lives. The methodology evolved over time, reflecting my own personal learning about qualitative forms of researching. I began with, of all things, a written survey (see Appendix 2) which was completed by nine members of the Toronto Raging Grannies Group. The survey included some basic demographic questions about age, marital status, education...
level and occupation. Questions relating to individual value systems included self-disclosure about connections with feminism, activism and environmentalism. Open-ended questions were asked about each participant's involvement in the Granny movement. The final question on the survey provided the most information about participants' life stories and included a self-analysis of what makes Grannies different from other older women who are not involved in activism. I selected questions for the survey that I thought would be helpful in identifying some common themes or shared characteristics among Grannies.

The survey, although limited in scope, provided a spring board for me to jump into the centre of Granny culture. I was able to make myself known to a core group of women in the movement and results from the survey were distributed to over 100 Grannies from across Canada at their aptly named annual “Unconvention”. The survey helped me to develop some preliminary ideas about older women involved in social action. It was these ideas which provoked discussion among Grannies about my work and elicited enough excitement to entice nine Grannies from Provinces in Western Canada and eight Grannies from the Toronto area to participate in focus groups.

I consider these focus group meetings to be central in illuminating my understanding of shared Granny traits. Feminist paradigms of group facilitation were utilized to promote open sharing and to validate life experiences of participants. I discovered that peer support within each focus group encouraged discussion of issues in a more meaningful way as persons often validated each other’s stories. Comments from one woman sparked others to respond or moved the discussion in a different direction. Valuing participants’ knowledge and insights, logically led me to assume the role of ‘listener’ and to interject questions that flowed naturally from conversation. The focus group became a free-flowing discussion of poignant life stories which had impacted on the journey each woman took
to find her way to ‘this place’; a place where she defined herself as Raging Granny.

My decision to have conversations with Grannies in groups rather than employing individual interviews was determined through seeing the merits of what researcher Lori Neilsen calls “the traffic accident model” of knowledge development.\(^\text{146}\) Inevitably, recounting life experiences in a group setting with other Grannies, helped participants to reconstruct elements of their lives that were congruent with their shared identities as Raging Grannies. Neilsen notes:

\[\text{A move from the ‘one truth’ model to the ‘traffic accident’ model: ask enough witnesses, vary your detective work as necessary, and you will find out what really happened. The truth will be a construction among all participants.}^{\text{147}}\]

Considering for a moment the analogy of researcher as ‘detective’, in addition to facilitating focus groups and listening to participants, it would be important to observe the Grannies in different settings. For the purpose of this thesis, participant observation was undertaken in several different contexts. I observed the Grannies at four different events where they were engaged in popular education activities. In addition, I mingled with Grannies from across Canada at a weekend Unconvention; I attended a Mini-Unconvention of Ontario groups which was focussed on effective strategies for ‘beating Premier Harris’ in the 1998 Provincial election and had the opportunity to listen to informal ‘bantering’ over lunch after one of their weekly planning meetings.

The collection of archival data was also extremely useful in gaining an understanding of common values and passions shared among women in the movement. Archival data included: 130 songs written by Grannies from across Canada; 144 newspaper articles published between January 1985 - August 2000 in major Canadian papers; copies of the official Granny newsletter (the
INFORMATION ANALYSIS

Information analysis was approached in a purely qualitative manner. By this, I am referring to the fact that I, as researcher, became the main instrument for analysing information. The process was both creative and intuitive. Field notes, participant observations, focus group transcripts, surveys and archival information were organized in a meaningful way. Initially, I used a basic system of organizing materials by type of information.\(^{148}\)

Over time, as I started ‘living with the data’, a more sophisticated system of organizing the information emerged that was linked to my original research goals of focusing on traits or characteristics that were descriptive of women in the Granny movement.

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and open coding was utilized. The continual pondering and reviewing of data and transcripts was essential in the development of emergent categories that, when saturated, provided clearly defined themes across the lives of participants.\(^{149}\) Common threads across the lives of Grannies were useful in piecing together the patchwork of life experiences into a quilt of knowledge about older women involved in social action.

The process I used to analyse my data was the most creative component of the research. It is best described by Plummer as the “brooding and reflecting upon mounds of data for long periods of time until it ‘makes sense’ and ‘feels right’, and key ideas and themes flow from it.”\(^{150}\)

REPRESENTING THEIR STORIES

It took me a very long time to put ‘pen to paper’ because of the fear that I could not do justice to the unconventional lives of Grannies by subscribing to a traditional form of thesis writing.
I felt it was important to reflect in the representation of data, the ‘personhood’ of those involved in my inquiry. I wanted to recapture in this piece of work the women who are Raging Grannies; their humour, insightfulness, tenacity, values and convictions.

I included at the start of each chapter, a personal account of an experience I had while researching the Grannies. My intent was to give the reader a sense of my interactions, as researcher, with the research participants. It seemed imperative to remind the reader that I, as researcher in a purely qualitative framework, was in actuality the ‘instrument’ used to ‘make sense’ out of all I was told. Presenting my findings as fabricated letters to Betsy seemed a good way of acknowledging the importance of research participants and highlighting the centrality of their thoughts and feedback on the final representation. In the end, what developed was a smattering of my insights into the women who are Grannies supported by their own poetry, songs, pictures, stories and words.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Grannies who participated in my inquiry were fully informed about my research questions and goals. Participation was completely voluntary. Persons were asked to identify themselves by first name only or by a pseudo-name if they felt more comfortable remaining completely anonymous. Grannies were encouraged to review and comment on my findings. Part way through the study, a summary of my inquiry was made available to Grannies who attended the 1999 Unconvention meeting. As researcher, I felt an obligation to present information about Grannies in a way that most accurately and honestly reflected the attributes of women with whom I interacted.
Thank you for taking the time to complete this brief questionnaire. I am writing a paper as part of my M.A. Program in Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Your participation will be helpful in assisting me to learn more about the women who become involved in social activism.

1. How old are you? __________________

2. What is your marital status? □ Married □ Widowed □ Divorced □ Single

3. How would you classify yourself politically? ______________________

4. What is the highest level of education you achieved? ______________________

5. What is (or was) your occupation? ______________________

6. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? □ Yes □ No

7. Do you consider yourself to be a social activist? □ Yes □ No

8. Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist? □ Yes □ No

9. Were you involved in other volunteer activities or social action groups prior to joining the Raging Grannies? □ No □ Yes (If yes, approximately how many? ______)

10. How did you get involved in the Raging Grannies?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

11. What motivated you to become a member of the Raging Grannies?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
12. What impact do you think the Raging Grannies have on their audiences?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

13. What do you see as the most important issues you’d like to bring across to others?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

14. What makes you different from the vast majority of older women who do not get involved in social activism? (Some brief background information about yourself would be helpful)

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

15. Other Comments:
APPENDIX THREE:
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS*

1. How did you get involved in the Raging Grannies movement?

2. What issues are important to you and why?

3. At what point in your life did you begin to identify yourself as an 'activist'?

4. Who have been the most influential people in your life? How and why did these individuals have an impact on the development of your personhood?

5. What historical events shaped your current world view?

6. List five words to describe yourself. Talk about each of these descriptors.

7. What sets you apart from other women of your generation who choose not to be involved in social action?

*NOTE: The above questions were used to guide the discussion. Additional questions were used by the researcher which evolved from the discourse and flowed naturally with the conversations within each focus group.
APPENDIX FOUR: 
FUTURE RESEARCH

At the outset of my inquiry, I searched the literature to see if other researchers had worked with the Raging Grannies. As I expected, there was little written about the Grannies outside of mainstream media publications. A paper completed by Carol Roy offered a good historical overview of the Granny movement, focussing on the original Victoria group.¹⁵¹ Gifford in his writings on seniors’ advocacy provided a brief description of Granny pedagogy, but did not focus on women in the movement.¹⁵²

A broader look at research literature was helpful in connecting my findings with the work of other researchers. Initial readings in the field of gerontology, for example, identified two classic theories of aging and life satisfaction that appeared to fit with Grannies. The first, termed Activity Theory, suggests that persons with the highest life satisfaction in old age are those who remain active and involved in society.¹⁵³ The second theory of aging called Continuity Theory indicates that people feel most satisfied in old age if they continue the roles and activities of their younger years.¹⁵⁴

I found that Grannies, in general, appeared to be highly motivated, enthusiastic and fun loving individuals who gained a great deal of satisfaction from their activist work. They certainly were active and involved in society and I found, almost without exception, that Grannies were active and involved citizens as younger women also. Life-long patterns of civic behaviour have been identified by other researchers who suggest that old age offers an opportunity for acting on lifelong personal values and contributions.¹⁵⁵

There are a few autobiographical books written by older women activists that, in many ways,
parallel the lives of Raging Grannies with whom I spoke. Leader of the Grey Panther movement, Maggie Kuhn, talks about experiences in her life that led her to become an activist and explores ageism and other stereotypes that keep older women away from social change work. Betty Friedman explores feminism from the perspective of an older woman and looks at how feminist values influenced her life work and choices. Kay MacPherson, a well known Canadian feminist and former Raging Granny chronicles her life and work in the book, If In Doubt, Do Both.

Attributes identified in Raging Grannies through my work are validated in the writings of Kuhn, Friedman and MacPherson. Similar to Grannies I interviewed, these women activists are vibrant, rebellious, risk-takers who incorporate creativity, humour, empathy and generativity into their pedagogy. All of these women are extremely effective in reaching out to people with their message.

Apart from these texts, educational gerontology literature is sadly lacking in studies that focus on older women activists. Much of the educational gerontology literature is dedicated to the needs of older learners. Literature focuses primarily on: memory, information retention, and age related declines that impact on learning.

Certainly, a more in depth look at the lives of Raging Grannies is warranted. A life-history approach involving a handful of Raging Grannies has the potential to answer questions that were not addressed through my inquiry. My research has identified core attributes of Grannies, but does not address why these attributes are not characteristic of more older people. For example, Grannies are very vibrant women with a lot of energy and interest in others. But, what makes them vibrant and why are they able to maintain a high level of energy and motivation well into advanced years? The correlations between lived experiences and attributes is not clear and would be interesting to explore. Unlocking the secrets to the Granny psyche may very well open the door for others to become involved in meaningful work.
END NOTES:


6. See Appendix Two for copy of written survey completed by members of the Toronto Raging Grannies in March. 1997.


9. Raging Grannies, Seattle group. Website (www.raginggrannies.com)


11. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


27. Raging Grannies. “Not an Easy Ride.” Song sung at September, 1997 Unconvention and was originally written for take back the night celebrations.


30. Ibid.


39. Handwritten note from a Raging Granny given to author at September, 1997 Unconvention.


41. Photograph taken by author at 1999 Awards Ceremony held at Metro Hall in Toronto.


44. The following is a list of newspaper articles written about Raging Grannies that were collected and reviewed for my inquiry:

Spectator (1992). “Raging granny: this woman isn’t afraid to attempt the absurd.”


51. Photograph taken by author at 1999 awards ceremony held at Metro Hall in Toronto.


56. Ibid.


58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.


61. Response on written survey completed by a Toronto Raging Granny


64. Picture reprinted from Raging Grannies Edmonton Song Book, No. 2.


68. Ibid.

69. Song sheet collected at 1997 Unconvention meeting. The lyrics were written in 1991 by two Raging Grannies, L. Gannon and H. Riley.


71. Ibid.


74. Comments gathered at Unconvention, September, 1997 using wall poster.

75. Raging Grannies, Peterborough group. Song sheet collected at 1999 Granny’s for Good Government meeting.


77. Focus group facilitated by L. Hill, September, 1997. Toronto: Unconvention

78. Focus group facilitated by L. Hill, July, 1999. Toronto: Church of the Holy Trinity:

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.


84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
88. Raging Grannies, Brantford group. Song sheet given to author by Betsy Carr in 1999.
90. Response on written survey completed by a Toronto Raging Granny
93. Picture taken by author during awards ceremony at Metro Hall, 1999.
95. Ibid.
98. Jean McLaren, Raging Granny from Gabriola Island, wrote the lyrics to this song after the 1998 APEC crisis.
102. Ibid


127. Ibid. p. 2.

128. Picture taken by author during awards banquet at Metro Hall.


140. Ibid.


147. Ibid, p.38


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