

STILL VIBRANT AND ACTIVE PAST AGE EIGHTY FIVE: A LIFE STORY WHICH HAS INSPIRED MY CAREER FOCUS

Fiona M. Patterson, DSW, University of Vermont

The following narrative describes how a former social worker, now in her mid eighties, helped the author realize how important intergenerational relationships can be for those in the helping professions, both personally and professionally.

Introduction

It has been from Barbara, whom I have now known for more than twenty years, that I have learned some powerful lessons related to my present work with and advocating for elders. She taught me that age is no barrier to important and fulfilling lives; that older women often have amazing strengths gained in spite of—and perhaps through—fixed gender roles and difficult life experiences; that creativity and the arts can significantly enrich family life; and that elders are often an under appreciated resource within our communities. In addition, this special woman helped me to see the importance that intergenerational relationships can have for social workers, both professionally and personally.

Barbara's rich and full life has included a distinguished professional social work career combined with extensive family responsibilities. While she chose to work in child protection, personal circumstances extended those interests, as she has taken on responsibility for raising a second and then a third generation of children. Her lifelong caregiving has endowed her with an ageless quality, as she seems effortlessly to straddle generations. Not defeated by multiple losses and challenging circumstances, she has maintained rich cultural interests and a strong sense of the people, places, and traditions that make up her family. Among many difficult episodes, the most dramatic personal turning point in Barbara's life came when a car accident caused the death of her oldest daughter and seriously in-

jured a young grandson. Her life journey, which began in small town America during World War I, has also been touched by many of the large and defining events of 20th Century American history: the suicide of her best friend's father after the stock market crash at the beginning of the Depression; her brother going to fight in World War II; a sharing of 1960s idealism relating to the civil rights and peace movements with her husband and children; and the death of a family member to AIDS in 1988.

Methodology and Focus

Barbara has been both a friend and a professional model for me over the years. When, as part of my social work doctoral program, I took an elective course in personal life histories, it was her narrative that I requested. The way in which she recalled and constructed her life experiences gave me the chance to witness:

. . . the importance of making meaning in all human affairs. Human beings build themselves into the world, not with their meager supply of instinct, but with the capacity to construct and construe a world from symbols, images, icons, language and ultimately stories and narratives. (Saleebey, 1997, p. 243)



Barbara's life history, along with stories of my own, will be quoted here to illustrate five types of knowledge which I have gained from her. These themes or areas include: 1) the connections between gender expectations and actual activities throughout life and especially in old age; 2) the dimensions and evolution of the helping role and how it relates to the profession of social work on both micro and macro levels; 3) evolving meanings and endurance of family in terms of place and multiple relationships; 4) the lifelong enriching power of creativity and the arts, especially in forming intergenerational connections; and 5) the role of adversity and loss in building personal strength and resilience.

When I first became acquainted with Barbara in the mid 1980s, I was a hospital social work director with an MSW. The patient situations I was working with often involved elders and their families. At the time, I had no vision of continuing my education and becoming a college instructor with a commitment to focusing my teaching and writing on aging, or seeking to work with students and faculty peers to find more creative ways to understand and advocate for elders. Truthfully, I had internalized some of the dominant ageist assumptions about how interactions with old people tend to be dreary and dull because this age group is of little importance, frequently sick or disabled, losing their capacities, and not likely to live much longer. Since then, my views have changed radically, a shift for which I give Barbara much credit.

Before I actually met her, my teenage daughter Jill had described a new friend who lived with her grandparents. Gradually, I learned that Barbara was a social work supervisor at the child protection agency, and that she and her husband – another social worker – were bringing up three grandchildren whose mother had died. The first family member I actually got to know was Barbara's granddaughter Lara, a bright, lively and intense young woman who frequently spoke

lovingly of "Grandmother." She told my husband and me that our family should come over some Saturday night to meet them all for dessert and to play cards.

That's exactly what we did, and we found a warm, intellectually stimulating, fun-loving, and somewhat unorthodox family. They lived in a half house in an urban neighborhood which was beginning to go downhill. We later learned their house had been burglarized three times and they had been accustomed (though not reconciled) to the sight of drug dealers on the street corner. The immediate family consisted of Barbara, her husband, Jim, Lara, and her younger sister, Molly, with frequent visits from their brother, Jimmy, and Barbara's two remaining daughters and their families. Their house had high ceilings, a well-used fireplace, a prominent grand piano, lots of books, and framed photographs of family members on every available surface. Barbara always seemed at the heart of everything going on, enthusiastic and supportive and, when needed, a gentle but firm disciplinarian.

Gender

As a woman, I have, unavoidably, become aware of how sexism and ageism combine to limit the ways in which female elders are perceived in American society and – through internalized sexism and ageism – how they sometimes see themselves. My own assumptions, once examined, included negative stereotypes of old women as unattractive, unimportant, and often a burden. These images become etched in our psyche early on through the media, through often constraining public policies, and through the behavior of family members or friends towards their own parents or grandparents. In addition, research indicates that assumptions about female roles and experiences profoundly impact how women elders construct their own life stories. Ruth Ray, in her study of aging and life-story writing, describes this pattern of self

description by older women as outlined by feminist critic Sidonie Smith:

... she is typically self-effacing rather than self-promoting; oriented toward private rather than public life; responsive to others' needs and desires before her own; more likely to foreground relationships and subjective states over accomplishments; and anecdotal in her means of expression. (Ray, 2000, p. 77)



It is fascinating to explore how such patterns were learned for the current generation of elders and how they may connect to earlier gender restraints. Although she appears to have been a lifelong pillar of female strength, Barbara's narrative was instructive about this:

One of the things I don't really remember myself except that it was told to me so often was my father's remark when I was born which was "all this trouble just for a girl..." I did grow up thinking girls were not quite as good as boys. He made up for that remark in his feelings about me and I never felt that my dad wasn't crazy about me, but I always did sort of assume that [girls were inferior]. And that's why it was hard for me to move along with the times as far as the women's lib movement was concerned.

When her time came to have children and she produced three daughters, Barbara recalls the same kinds of feelings, especially when the second one was born. "Even in my family there was always this feeling that boys

were a little better than girls. My uncles said 'can't you have anything but girls?!'"

Yet she clearly saw strong women throughout her life, even if their success was often honed within the limitations they had been given. She tells a story about the mother of her best friend while growing up which illustrates these kinds of strengths. In this case, the family had been wealthy, lived in a large house, and owned an impressive car. When the Depression came, though, they lost everything and the father killed himself.

The mother of these six kids is one of the people I admire most in my life. She was so wonderful. She moved into a little place in town and went back to teaching school – she had a degree – and she taught 3rd grade.

Similarly, when Barbara was first married she unassumingly took on the role of providing an economic base for the family and twice worked to support Jim as he attended a seminary and then, later, an MSW program. While this kind of arrangement was common by the 1950s, Barbara emphasized that it was distinctly unusual between 1939 and 1942 when she did it. Indeed, there is a sense in which, while the moves in their married life were formally initiated by Jim's career changes, his wife was actually leading from behind. Though she never completed her degree – she began an MSW first and then worked for many years in child protection – Barbara seems to have motivated Jim to give up the ministry and go into social work as well.

I feel that Barbara is a person who has aged gracefully. She is a strong, older woman and a model for me as I age. I, too, have experienced some of the gender expectations and constraints she described but work towards her way of moving beyond them and affording them minimal importance. She has

a wonderful sense of herself as a woman with a feminine interest in looking and dressing well, but without any fixations about appearing to be different from what she really is. I remember that, in her 70s, Barbara was persuaded by one young family member or another to have her ears pierced. Afterwards she said to me, with a chuckle, that she should have done it earlier because with the arthritis in her hands it was too difficult to get the earrings through the little holes!

Helping Roles & Professions – From Individual to Community

Some time after I got to know Barbara, I was invited to join the citizen's advisory committee of the local child protection agency, of which she – now retired – was also a member. In this capacity, I was able to get a glimpse of her professional side and to understand how much she was loved and respected by the staff she had worked with. Her contributions to the board incorporated her knowledge and wisdom, as well as her excellent organizational and advocacy skills. Always with a warm sense of humor and basic humility, Barbara would be quick to speak up if she felt the conversation was not relating to supporting families and children, or was wasting everyone's time. I learned from her how to focus a meeting on the subject at hand and then move on.

Barbara's narrative includes several stories and hints of her pull towards helping others, increasingly in a professional role and clearly with a group focus and a sense of community building. Although Barbara's earliest interests centered around writing, her future husband inspired a different direction. She began in college as an English major but "no doubt from Jim's influence, I got a 'save the world' complex and changed to sociology and psychology."

Barbara's description of her time at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social

Work is a fascinating history of macro and micro professional trends of the 1930s.

I lived in a settlement house called "The House of Industry" down on Katherine Street in South Philly where I paid \$8 a week for room and board, plus I worked there. It was a very popular set-up for social work students then [1937]. At school, though, I found a great division between Freudian and Rankian theory. . . [My placement] agency was so Freudian and the supervisor scared me! She talked very softly and kept trying to analyze me.

Barbara didn't finish the graduate program for this and a number of other reasons, though she jumped right into a career in social work, first in Children's Aid in the north and then in Public Assistance and Child Welfare when they moved south. By the end of her formal career, Barbara had worked for 20 years as a foster care worker and supervisor, eventually reaching an administrative level as high – or higher – than her husband.

Her advocacy work frequently spilled over into the rest of her life. When visiting her oldest daughter and husband who were living in Jamaica, for example, a conversation with Barbara indirectly motivated them to adopt a child:

I was telling her that at that point we were having a terrible time placing bi-racial children. It was the height of this stress on difference. Blacks were feeling that they didn't want black kids adopted by whites, but whites wouldn't adopt black kids, and there were not enough black homes for them, so they would just sit in foster care waiting for something to happen in their lives.

After this conversation, her son-in-law Neal apparently called her agency because he decided that many people of mixed background lived in Jamaica and it would be all right for them to adopt a multi-racial child. Thus, Molly joined the family.

During the 1960s, Barbara and her husband chose to move into the inner city as part of a community commitment that they felt was important even though they had to help their youngest daughter through a difficult, racially mixed high school experience. Later, Barbara was to inherit the complex problems of both a handicapped grandson and an African-American granddaughter who has struggled through adolescence and single parenthood. In both cases, she drew heavily on her social work skills and experiences and, whenever possible, a sense of collaboration and community building. As writer Mary Pipher points out in a discussion of the potential roles of elders such as those with Barbara's experiences and talents:

We live in a time when community reconstruction is what will save us. If we give our elders our time and our respect, they can teach us how to do it. They can teach us about civility, accountability, and connection. Their knowledge of how to tell stories, how to live together, how to nurture children, and how to share the work will help us build better communities in the future. (Pipher, 1999, p. 85)

I have learned from this part of Barbara's story that there are always connections between the personal and the professional, individual and group goals, which give us insights and inspiration to do a better job in each kind of situation. Thus, as I now visit and care for my own elderly mother, I both learn things which can inspire my teaching and writing and bring ideas from my work which

can, I hope, improve my connections with her as she struggles with life in a nursing home community.

Family Meaning and Continuity

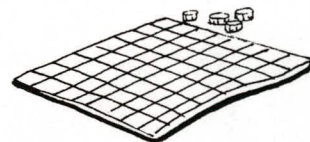
Personal stories and family relationships are mediated through the individual's voice as constructed within a qualitative interview. For elders this can include meaningful review and redefinition of events throughout the lifespan:

Language and narrative are central to human relationships and the creation of meaning; we understand ourselves and our world through interpretive frameworks we have adopted by living and interacting in specific communities at particular times in history. (Ray, 1999-2000, p. 57)

In Barbara's case, stories about relatives, caregiving, and important relationships permeated her narrative. Looking back, it is clear that the seeds of her lifelong people skills and care provision were planted early and impacted by family.

Father was raised by his grandparents. My great grandparents lived in a big old house which used to be a farm. They had twelve children of their own and Daddy was the son of the oldest boy, and his mother died when he was born. His grandparents just took him in and they did that also with the child of one of their daughters who died when she gave birth. So there were 14 kids in that house. Dad's aunts and uncles seemed like brothers and sisters.

When Barbara was first married and Jim was a minister, they took in a 15-year-old foster child from the local Orphan Home



whose mother had died and whose father was not able to care for his five children. This became a long-term relationship. "To this day she calls me every couple of months to talk on the phone. She lived with us until she was married. I stood up as the mother of the bride."

In addition to her extensive, regular parenting and grandparenting roles, Barbara has combined her professional knowledge with personal commitment during her long involvement in the care needed for her grandson Jimmy. This has required masterful advocacy in a complex and often unresponsive system. In the 4 a.m. pre-Thanksgiving accident where her oldest daughter evidently fell asleep and the car went over an embankment, Jimmy, sitting behind his mother, "was thrown, he wasn't in his seat belt and he was thrown and the car was on top of [him]. Nobody had a seat belt on." After surgery, he remained in a coma for almost a year. He was moved to Boston, which was close to one aunt and uncle but Barbara and Jim had to go home to work and to get the other two children back to school. It was an agonizing separation for her and, eventually, she managed to get Jimmy transferred to a special children's care center near their home so that more intense family involvement could do its special magic.

. . . we went to see him every day and we could just see a difference every day! You could see his eyes following you and you could almost see his expression as they took him out of the ambulance. There was recognition in his eyes, I swear there was, and I kept thinking what if we'd had him closer and could have gotten him out of the coma sooner!

Over the years since then there have been many moves for this young man to different kinds of facilities, often places with few residents his age. There have also been various struggles to get communication tools for the

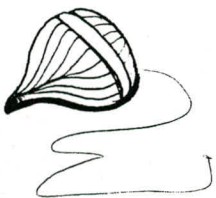
one hand he can use and to gain access to therapy, additional surgery, and more education. Jimmy evidently was an exceptionally bright and creative child and the most profound struggles by his family have been to keep his spirit going, getting him to write notes and stories, and to maintain a sense of hope for his quality of life. It has been a Herculean effort, which only someone with Barbara's professional experience and determination could oversee, especially while dealing with the other parts of her role as grandmother and family matriarch.

Her family life has long centered around the summer house near a lake and active arts community where she now lives.

In the summer we came out here from the time I was 10. . . My grandfather bought the house right after it was built which we figure was about 1922 or 23. . . It's just been a house that is so full of a lot of activities for so many years.

When I interviewed Barbara in the fall of 1995, I drove down hilly, winding country roads until I came to her quiet, leaf-strewn town. Her road is narrow and lined with quaint, wooden summer homes. Her house resembles the others with its wide porch and French doors opening into a large living room. What is different, though, is the side ramp, indispensable for Jimmy's wheelchair and helpful for Barbara, then 79, as she navigated the house quite nimbly with her quad cane. The kitchen and downstairs bathroom have various pieces of adaptive equipment for Jimmy's visits, but these devices now are also useful for his grandmother. When we made tea, I realized that a loving family who doesn't want her to climb up had organized the cupboards to put everything important within her reach.

Barbara's strength comes from her family and the traditions that she has been in-



volved in maintaining through five generations and around one particular place and house. This sense of connection and continuity is something that we are tending to lose in contemporary life and which elders can play a critical role in promoting and maintaining. While I perhaps understood this in a general way, Barbara has provided a wonderful example of how it actually happens through the efforts of one elder. I have used my learning from Barbara and her life to help students focus on grandparents as sources of ongoing learning and support, especially by encouraging the young to interview and share stories about such older family members. In addition, I was inspired to organize a multi-generational conference which focused on the critical and affirmative roles – and narrative voices - of grandparents who are currently raising grandchildren.

Creativity and the Arts

Barbara's mother was a trained musician, and creative arts have always played an important part in her life. She recalled being stage-struck as a young teen and hanging around the rehearsals at the playhouse near her summer home. She and a friend learned all the lines by the time they got to see the play and would gladly do any odd jobs that the theater people requested. Barbara also took elocution and ballroom dancing lessons, and was involved in school plays. She has played the piano – taught initially by her mother – since her childhood and still likes to play duets at family reunions, a pattern she learned from song gatherings after dinner when she was young. Similarly, as a young woman, she loved dancing and playing dance music.

As a minister's wife and a mother who stayed home with her children for about ten years, she found abundant outlets for her creative energies. There was a special room in their unfurnished attic which became the children's favorite place to play and an area where she began to write children's stories (a

few of which were published) while her daughters were in school. She talked fondly about the magic of the attic for theater:

That room was their dressing room and the rest of the attic was their stage. They had lots of fun in that room. . . I always wanted to act and so when the kids got the idea of putting on shows, I got the idea to have what was called the "Let's Pretend Club." . . . I got the plays from some of the material I had had. We used to invite friends and let them sit on suitcases or whatever in the attic to watch.

During the same period, Barbara was active with the church library committee, starting a collection, serving for a while as librarian ("which I had no training for"), and then writing a Library Line column for the local paper that, she added, continues to this day.

One vivid memory I have of a wonderful time with Barbara was when the two young friends, my daughter and her granddaughter, had an assignment to write a scene for a play. Somehow, they decided it would be fun to write a pre-act and post-act for *Macbeth*. They completed these neo-Shakespearean tragedies shortly before Thanksgiving. Jill and Lara came up with the idea that we should cast the plays with family and friends and have an all-day party to act it out, complete with an elaborate banquet scene. Our multigenerational troupe dressed in costumes, hid scripts behind tin foil shields or other props, shared an historically appropriate feast, and had a wonderful day, capturing the entire drama with the help of a bulky and unwieldy early video recorder. One highlight for me was a three-witches scene in front of our fireplace. Barbara and I were joined by a family friend who took out her front teeth dental plate to add to the atmosphere!

For Barbara, the arts have clearly been an outlet and a source of inspiration. Creating bridges between multiple generations through the arts was something she motivated for me. Recently, with Susan Perlstein from Elders Share the Arts as keynote speaker, I organized a conference to bring together students, elders, and community social workers to explore and celebrate the possibilities of intergenerational arts programs. A book on the topic, co-authored by Perlstein, describes the final preparation for a project with elder Holocaust survivors and young Asian refugees:

Now we add the chant, spoken into microphones by different readers, and music. The result is a powerful intergenerational statement about the courage we all have in ourselves; we continue on in life, no matter what the obstacle. The piece also demonstrates that if we work together we can all help one another, regardless of differences in age or culture. (Perlstein & Bliss, 1994, p. 34)

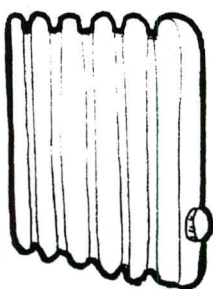
Overcoming Adversity

It seems difficult to believe that Barbara, with all her vibrant energy and determinedly positive outlook on life, has gone through a series of challenges and losses that could be utterly defeating to any of us. Not only did she lose her daughter to the incompleteness of sudden accidental death but the same event precipitated her grandson Jimmy into a life of major disability and limited functioning, physically and emotionally. A few years later the children's father, Neal, became ill with AIDS and eventually died, while Barbara's husband, Jim, suffering through the new parental responsibilities – and specifically the strain of lifting the then teen-aged Jimmy while home for a weekend visit – had a heart attack which led to his death. Another enormous and ongoing challenge has been her relationship with

her granddaughter Molly. This young woman experienced various challenges in high school and, finally, in spite of the best efforts of a counselor and her grandmother, dropped out in March before her scheduled graduation. Since then she has had two children, troubled relationships with several men, career starts and restarts, and some substance abuse problems. Barbara, by then in her late 70s, stepped forward to be Molly's coach in the delivery room during the birth of her great-grandson, an experience she found very exciting and touching. As grandmother and more, she continues, in spite of questioning the wisdom of it, to be a key support person for this granddaughter's little family, including opening up her home to them on many occasions.

I could say to her now, "You're 24 years old and you don't need to depend on me so much" – but oh those kids! She comes when she runs out of food, or money to pay her bills, and now she has a pretty steady job but I have to help out because of the kids. She's got me now because of them!

It is the larger family – with its complex relationships and celebrations – which still sustains Barbara through these challenges. As she explained at the end of her story about the time of the terrible accident, "We stayed at [our youngest daughter's house at Cape Cod] through Thanksgiving. We had Thanksgiving there and we thought it would be terrible but it wasn't. I don't know but you really get close to the rest of your family at a time like that." Her granddaughter Lara has been a special joy in her life and she sometimes refers to her as "the good that came out of the bad." They share many interests – especially in the arts. It was through music, for example, that Lara – accomplished on several instruments – met her future husband who shares her enthusiasm for church bell ringing.



Lara's completing her Ph.D. seemed to represent the graduate education that Barbara aspired to but never attained for herself. Barbara has also celebrated Lara's accomplishments as she has followed her grandmother's interests and published two novels for young readers. The two remain very, very close and visit back and forth even though Lara and her family now live in Europe.

Her other family members have similarly turned out to be vibrant and fully realized people. Barbara's remaining two daughters and their children are involved in all parts of her life and have provided amazing support as well. A celebration that I was not able to attend was organized by the whole family as a surprise 80th birthday party for her. They also visit often and are frequently in her conversation. On the days that I interviewed Barbara, several calls from one or another of them came through. Clearly, all her love, caring, fun, and sense of humor have been passed on to her entire family and have strengthened many others.

Barbara's handling of adversity taught me that there are always ways to carry on with patience, determination, and a willingness to accept the support of others. Of course, increasing age brings multiple losses that, for some, are too much to bear. But, as social workers and as people, we must remain open to ways of imagining options and advocating for the help that elders need to make the best of what they have in their lives. And, as Mary Pipher emphasizes, there is much for us to learn from how older people overcome adversity:

Being with the old, I've learned things about survival. I've come away feeling calmer, more accepting, and more grateful. I don't know if I'll be able to be as courageous and kind as many of the people I have met, but at least I'll have had good role models. I have pictures in my head

of courage and dignity under tremendous adversity. (Pipher, 1999, p. 37)

I, too, have learned through Barbara and others not to fear aging but to see the strengths and potential in learning from and moving beyond personal challenges, as well as embracing public policy advocacy for this population group. Two favorite ways in which I have done this are through teaching the wonderfully affirming narrative about two elder Alaska women who survive a harsh winter alone (Wallis, 1993), and by becoming involved, with students, in our active state advocacy organization as it heeds elder voices and lobbies for their issues (COVE).

Conclusion

It seems to me that Barbara is a quite extraordinary person for any moment in history and especially as a woman who lived through many of the social and historic changes of the 20th Century. She has moved with impressive grace from the quiet, idyllic, homogeneous, small-town America of the 1920s and her youth, into the complex, multi-cultural, contradictory, fast-paced and world-oriented culture of the early 21st Century. She has lived through years of breathtaking change – in technology and communication and attitudes, towards gender, work, ethnicity, community, America's place in the world – and she has had to deal not only with relatively routine and predictable moments of change and crisis (graduation, marriage, the death of parents and of a spouse) but with dramatic and jarring and unexpected events that have had a profound impact on the way she is able to live her life. Through them all, Barbara has maintained her dignity, humor, love of life, and strengths in relating to people. She also has exemplified strong social work skills in her personal as well as professional life and relationships.

What I personally have gained from Barbara's life, strengths, warmth, and enthu-

siasm is a determination to be a social worker, teacher, family and community member, and then an old woman who can use my caring and advocacy skills to better the life quality of all types of elders as they traverse a society not strong in awareness of or sensitivity to their needs and choices. This involves promoting – in the widest possible sense – family patterns of caring and interrelationships; working with students to motivate and excite them to connect with and find positions in which to support older people; advocating for aging policies that are equitable, financially adequate, and responsive to individual gender and cultural needs; and permeating services and service providers for elders with models of client autonomy, dignity, and respect.

References

- Community of Vermont Elders (COVE). (Founded 1981). Montpelier, Vermont.
- Perlstein, S. & Bliss, J. (1994). Inergenerational exploring. *Generating Community: Intergenerational Partnership Through the Expressive Arts*, (pp.31-38). New York: Elders Share the Arts.
- Pipher, M. (1999). *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Ray, R.E. (1999-2000). Social influences on the older woman's life story. *Generations*, xxiii(4): (pp. 56-62).
- Ray, R.E. (2000). *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Saleebey, D., ed. (1997). *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, 2nd edition. New York: Longman.
- Wallis, V. (1993). *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival*. New York: Harper Perennial.

