



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Susa Silvermarie**

An Interview
Conducted by
Nayiree Roubinian
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Nayiree Roubinian 00:04

Hello, welcome, and thank you for joining us. Today is August 1, 2021 and we are recording an oral herstory with me, Nayiree Roubinian, talking to Susa Silvermarie about her life herstory. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Hestory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives and we are recording from Ajijic, Mexico and Oakland, California. Susa, thank you so much for taking part. It is great to have you here for this oral herstory. I thought we would start just by learning a little bit about your childhood and upbringing. Can you first start by telling us when and where you were born, where you grew up, and what your family life was like?

Susa Silvermarie 00:57

Well, I'm honored to be here. Thank you Nayiree. I am Susa, daughter of Marie who's the daughter of Elizabeth, who was the daughter of Margaret, who was the daughter of Ellen— a descendant of women all the way back to the first woman. I am a woman born in the body of a woman. And it was in 1947 in a small Midwestern town. I was the fourth of nine children. It was a Catholic hierarchical family— highly nuclear— they didn't want us to join anything outside the clan. My parents were very intelligent, creative people. They were strong personalities. Of course, my mother's creativity was much more stymied than his. He was first generation born of Italian immigrants. She was fourth generation born of Irish and Norwegian immigrants. They were both funny and flinty, and they were both brilliant and carved by all the constrictions of their class, their times, and their race. So it was the 1950s— you got a picture of me in the den watching this new thing called television. Nine kids, remember, and we're crowded in there. We're already in this configuration of looking outwards at what the corporate media wants us to watch. And it was programs like *Father Knows Best*— one of the most popular programs. And then we were also seeing all these ads that shoved women back into the constriction of their homes after World War II— Rosie the Riveter kind of experiences. I'm the one who sneaks out of the den, and goes outside to be in a lightning storm [note: instead of watching Father Knows Best] because I'm attracted to lightning.

Nayiree Roubinian 03:01

That sounds amazing. Speaking of that time, is there a favorite memory from your childhood that you have to share?

Susa Silvermarie 03:10

Climbing. Climbing the mulberry tree in the backyard, climbing the maple tree in my neighbor's yard, climbing the neighbor's garage, where me and my girlfriend would pea shoot at all the other kids going by below. But mostly, climbing up from the second floor porch on the very steep roof on my own house, especially at night, to get away, to see stars. To be alone.

Nayiree Roubinian 03:42

Did you have any goals or dreams for when you grew up in terms of the future at that age?

Susa Silvermarie 03:50

Well, the one that your question makes me think of— it seems so funny now. I wanted to be a Maryknoll missionary doctor, a nun, in Africa. And of course, this dream took the colonial shape, the religiously hierarchical shape of my environment. I didn't have any interest really in medicine or healing in that sense, but what attracted me was the offering of a women's community, adventure and travel, and doing something meaningful. That was the one dream I remember.

Nayiree Roubinian 04:33

And in terms of occupations that you did end up working in, can you talk a little bit about your work and your career paths?

Susa Silvermarie 04:42

Yeah, this is a larger question. I had such a wildly varied job life. The longest running job gigs were the Post Office and social work with elders. I started out as a letter sorting machine operator on a night shift. 60 letters a minute going by and the supervisor could check in the back of the machine on your accuracy. You could get fired if you didn't have 85% accuracy. A little stress there. Then I was a rural clerk, and they called me the postmar'm, in Appalachia. When my boss was gone to lunch, they called me the postmar. Later, I was one of the first female Letter Carriers in the city in the early eighties. But in between, I did all kinds of jobs. I often worked with little children in preschools. I was a tofu maker in a hippie operation. I was a human rights monitor in [note: a Mayan refugee village] in Guatemala. One summer, I had a gig at a spiritualist camp as a Medium. And I got certified along the way as a Certified Poetry Therapist from the National Association of Poetry Therapy. I was a massage therapist, certified by the American Massage Therapy Association. That has a story I need to tell.

It was around 1979 that I opened my own practice as a massage therapist in my rental home. I had my operator's license on the wall, [note: a license that had to be applied for] from the Police Department in those days. I wore a white uniform because, you know, just to be very clear about what I was doing, and what I was not doing. My work was popular enough that it gave competition to this nearby religious community center that had [note: a large massage therapy operation] nearby. And the massage therapist there complained about me— called the Vice Squad. And they sent an undercover cop as a client. She made an appointment, I had her on the table. Then she [note: suddenly sat up and] busted me for not having a shop license, as well as an operator's license. In order to have a shop license, you were supposed [correction: required] to have a window in the door of your therapy room. I couldn't do that as a renter; I couldn't modify my place. But when the undercover cop sat up on the table and gave the signal, two vice squad officers who'd been waiting down in the car outside my house, unbeknownst to me, thundered up

the steps yelling with cameras saying, “Where's the bed.” My little boy was home. We were both traumatized. My girlfriend at the time was working in a battered women's shelter and she knew the DA, so the charges were eventually dropped. But that trauma of being— having my healing work treated as something dirty, which is a common woman's experience under patriarchy, that was a great wounding for me at that time.

But you know, always in the background of these paid jobs, there was my real work. And that's how I really want to answer this question. My unpaid vocation was as a writer. When I say it's always in the background, I'm going to give an example. In 1987, when I was working as a letter carrier, I collected my work poems that I was writing into a chapbook. It was called "Look Mama, the Mailman is a Girl." I got a Wisconsin Arts Board grant to produce a video [note: of the same name], called "Look Mama the Mailman is a Girl." I was filmed in my uniform, which I loved, [note: by my feminist filmmaker friends] delivering mail and being chased by a dog as I was reciting the poems from the book. [Note: as I was one of the first female letter carriers in Wisconsin, I endured plenty of on-the-job harassment those early mornings “casing” mail in the PO before going out on the route.]

But my growing boy was eating everything [note: I could put on the table and still hungry]. I was a single mother; and I had to keep my job even when they forced overtime, 60 hours a week. I lost track of his schooling [note: and experienced tons of single mother guilt]. So that's just an example of how writing work often came out of paid positions.

Another example of writing work coming out of job work was my decade-long eliciting of storypoems, from elders in nursing homes where I had regular Social Work positions. I wore these hats of Social Worker, Certified Poetry Therapist and poet at the same time. I wanted to preserve the resident herstories. They were mostly all women in these nursing homes and I pioneered an oral method of collecting stories from memory-impaired people. This was a long time ago. I transcribed the creations they made and offered the collections back to families in written legacy [note: collections]. My method was written up in the professional *Journal of National Association for Poetry Therapy* in 1996. So that's something, you know, that was the writing thing on the side. But writing was really my main thing. My whole adult life really has been, I'd say, continuously and fully occupied by writing— mostly poetry, but I've written four young adult novels, journalism articles, book reviews, and nonfiction for children. And for the last 20 years, blogging online. A list of my publication credits. It's a lot of pages and it reads like a herstory of the women's movement over time— really a chronology. I've been pretty widely anthologized as well. And the ones [note: anthologies] I'm really proud [note: to be published in] are the lesbian anthologies like *Sapphic Touch* in the eighties. I was in that one. There was a book called *We Are Everywhere: Writings about Lesbian Parents* from Crossing Press in '88.; and *Sacred Sexuality* by Marcelina Martin in 1995. And then there was an essay and a poem of mine that was excerpted by my hero, Adrienne Rich, in her book in '76, *Of Woman Born*. So as a poet,

I consider myself a channel really, for spirit. And so that's why sometimes I describe my poetry as shamanic. I see my writing as my contribution to the women's movement, and as my best way of offering my gifts to life. And I'm proud to have been a lesbian feminist author for over 50 years.

Nayiree Roubinian 12:05

Amazing. Speaking of your lesbian feminism, it really sounds like it's very closely connected to your creative work, especially your writing. I would love to just start that part of our interview, you know, to get a sense of your lesbian feminist identity. When were you first aware of your sexual identity?

Susa Silvermarie 12:30

Well, we have to back up to sexual awareness, [note: prior to sexual identity awareness], because Catholic background delays that quite considerably. Without the framework to reflect on it, I accepted myself as heterosexual. It was the only thing I saw, was the only thing I heard, it was the only thing I read at the time. That's where I was stuck. At 19 though, I felt proud of choosing who to lose my virginity with, and where, and when. And my girlfriend [note: best friend Marianne] and I giggled about it on the phone. We called it [note: *getting laid away for Christmas*, the next chore to be done]. But oh my goodness, disappointing! Was that it?

Yeah, at 21, I was date raped. It was in Brazil. I had quit college to go with some missionary nuns who wanted a nice Catholic girl to teach English so they could keep proselytizing in a village near an Amazon tributary in Brazil. And when they went to the Motherhouse for a week in Goiania. I stayed with a family and accepted a date from a man they knew. I was laughing at their suggestion that I have a chaperone. But you know [at that time], I never called it date rape, because there was no concept of date rape. I was alone in a foreign country. I was given a lot of drinks, and it happened on the night the men landed on the moon. We were parked in a car and he didn't ask. I didn't say yes. And I had no concept, no image, no example of a woman saying No. You've got to remember there were times when this idea of even saying no wasn't there! I got pregnant from that one date. Yeah, in Brazil on the night the men landed on the moon. My son's 51. [Later], I romanticized the story. Why not? I pretended that it was some exotic adventure. I denied the wounding of date rape, because I could not formulate what did not yet exist as a perspective, as a frame. This is how badly we needed the movement. I also [romanticized it] because I could not bear to connect the violence with my beautiful boy, the child that it had produced. So later, a few years later, there were public speaker [note: and feminist writings] on date rape, because I — that began around 1971. But it really wasn't until the eighties that the concept was in public health parlance. It just wasn't there [before that]. And this is going to be a theme in my story, what isn't there, and how the women's movement allows something invisible to be seen and framed. So anyway, I recently returned to the United States,

knew I was pregnant even though no way to test— rural Brazil [note: in 1969]. I never told the nuns why I left.

But after that I grew up fast. I'm tossed out of my family of origin by a letter from my mother. [note: "I will remember you the way you were"]. So I began to make my own way. Got on welfare. I got connected to a home for unwed mothers. That's what we were called then: "UMs." To my great good fortune, Rosalie Manor had no room for me though at that time. So I didn't undergo that particular, additional pressure to give my baby away for adoption. Keeping a baby was not an option for a Catholic middle class background. Nothing in my background ever led me to imagine— this is about imagining, what you can imagine and how you have to gather to [imagine] bigger. But I had a best friend who was a Mexican immigrant, Lupita Bejar, who supported my choice. Bless her heart. So instead, I interviewed and I was accepted at a Catholic Radical community house. There were a lot of those in the early seventies. And still imagining that I was heterosexual, in that community house I fell in love with a brilliant anti-war activist. He happened to be a priest. He'd been placed on sabbatical by the Archbishop who wanted to stop [Father Bill's] fiery sermons against the [note: Viet Nam] war. I married this rather famous priest in a front-page, hippie park wedding. He adopted my son and has been a father to him all these years. I did real good finding David a good daddy. So we'll leave it at that.

Nayiree Roubinian 17:38

So, at what point then, after all of those experiences, did you come out and what was your experience of that? What was the social and political climate like when you came out?

Susa Silvermarie 17:55

The climate, that's the most exciting part of the question! It was only in 1971, when the gay liberation movement and the women's movement made me aware of orientation options, that I came out. I realized that I loved another woman in the community house. And so I told her right away. Told the man who was my spouse and neither one was happy with me, with my news. This is when I moved out and started my life as a single lesbian mother— 1972. My first love I met at a women's dance. The social climate [sighs]— you know, I've taught writing at a Framingham women's prison, but I've never been incarcerated. But to me, the only way I could describe [the social climate] is what I think it would feel like to walk out of a penitentiary! To walk into sunshine and freedom. That's what the climate was like.

All the lesbians looked butch in those days. It seemed like a natural radical response to the pressure to be femme, feminine— the heterosexual pressure to be feminine. As for orientation, I started out as a butch attracted to butches, I'd say. These days, the way the spectrum of gender is perceived— probably I feel more like an intersex attracted to handsome women anywhere [laughs] — volcans. But I do have a further answer to the question, from a poem that I wrote

called "Forty Years Out" And I'd like to be able to read it, as the rest of the answer to that question. Does that—

Nayiree Roubinian 19:46

Absolutely, that'd be great. Yes, thank you.

Susa Silvermarie 19:48

It's from my book "Poems For Flourishing." So this pastor came to dinner and she said, "Do you have any images for coming out?" Well, I had a crush on her, so of course I sat right down and wrote this poem that each stanza has an image for coming out. Now I've been out for over 50 years, but this was [at only] 40 years out.

[Forty Years Out (edited and formatted by Susa Silvermarie)]

Birth

From between my own lips I deliver
consciousness of who I am.
Daddy's not in power anymore.
Coming out is a virgin birth, like Mary's—
partheno, partheno partheno
Genesis!
Discovery of myself
emerged as sudden as a baby's head.
Acceptance within
emerges second, like the placenta.
Revealing to others
emerges, emerges.

Initiation

The Dyke crucified by family and culture
hangs on the tree hungry
for illumination.
Descending into the cave
the deep heart underworld,
Inanna quests her vision,
seeks her own gifts.
Initiation
hauls wisdom in
over timeless on the days of decades,
and with its sacrifice,

changes
everything.
Coming out
inaugurates me
to the power
coming in.

Breaking Ground

The ground always there, nothing to notice,
the expected orientation, the way it is.
Everything groomed and neat,
a she with a he.
And in the rows between
where upstarts might disrupt:
a thick black sheet of plastic.
It takes a movement
to push us through.
We the fragile seedlings
break ground crazy
crazy with the joy of germination,
pulsing with impossible love.
We grant the garden precious chaos.

Eruption

From the core comes eruption.
Its catalyst: desire named.
Fire flows upward
from the root, through the crown.
Kundalini, as it rises,
kills every lie;
cascades back down in cleansing flame.
remains: volcanic ash,
the nitrogen of miracles.
This quantum leap
cannot be predicted.
As Ruth follows Naomi,
I attend to the body's wisdom.
I follow only
that furnace of burning truth.
Pele, Bride,

Shakti and Kali!
In the electric garden,
they keep me grounded.
Each time I climax,
they show me: there are no others,
only one.

Passage

Coming out is crossing,
not knowing how,
the line, the road, the tracks;
the river, the channel, the chasm, the canyon.
Crossing the chasm by sheer grace.
A pilgrimage I learn I am on
only when labor is done
and I gain my name.
Crossing the culture
causes me wounds.
But that view from the other side,
oh, expanse, of compassion.
Disclosure
envelops the suffering of others.
I am a woman wearing a burqa,
The shroud that allows
only a patch of mesh to see and breathe.
I am a woman who rips it off.
I will never take for granted
peripheral vision
or sunlights revelation.
Coming out I become
fully human.

Transformation

When a caterpillar
calls itself a butterfly,
fresh perception from its airy outlook
shrinks the milkweed cradle.
When the daily body
becomes the sacred body,
the lesson of evanescence

requires new bearings.
culture shock.
But the North Star appears in my heart.
Freedom's song calls
all the lost girls
to name their splendor.

Blossoming

We nudge one another to ask,
'Does she go to our church?'
When I admit myself
to full membership in the garden,
the strength of confirmation
comes upon me.
An outward sign, a sacrament.
I am awakened, illumined, enlightened.
What is revealed to me,
I must reveal.
Petals in a whorl
that spiral inward without end.
A midnight moon
filled with Kuan Yin,
with benevolence that is boundless.
Celebration
of self as She,
flower in full glory and
smiling gardener.
With this blossoming,
I do
commence.

Homecoming

After being forbidden the image,
to see in the mirror!
No reunion is deeper.
After the prison of division,
I marry my true self.
I return to the kernel,
to the way I was made
by the Great Creator.

I restore my original language.
I mend
the rent fabric of my body.
Whole with every healing story
of every holy book. I am, in coming out,
an exile coming home.

Rebirth

The nightmare's bridle:
loosed!
Out
of what is dark and female
comes
all that is. Bold
is the resurrection of Persephone
from her winter cave.
To greet her,
the whole world greens.
At 40 years out,
this step in the dance
dips me clean
in mother's waters;
baptizes me back,
all the way back
to original joy.

Nayiree Roubinian 28:11

That was amazing. Did the woman who inspired the poem ever read or hear you share the poem? I mean, it's—I can imagine being like, wow, that was quite an answer.

Susa Silvermarie 28:29

No. I mean, she inspired me with the question when she came to dinner. I don't know what happened after that. I just ran with her question. The poem was published, and she may have seen it somewhere.

Nayiree Roubinian 28:44

Right. Thank you so much for sharing it. It's absolutely powerful. So in terms of community and meeting other lesbian women, how did you find them? What types of social and community gatherings and events did you take part in at that time?

Susa Silvermarie 29:07

Oh, we met at meetings at the Women's Center, at women's bars, at bookstores, at dances. It was the music, the poetry, and the periodicals in the bookstores that really forged us into a ferocious tribe. And this creation that we were doing of new forms of culture was manifesting like crazy all around us. Whatever we thought of, [we created] whether it was a children's coop, health centers, magazines, Take Back the Night, women's shelters, land trusts, record companies. It was our own artists who catalyzed the movement, and I got to become one of them. It was like we're— in this crucible of our art, we burned ourselves into new beings. We really did. Our concerts, our poetry in the bookstores, our theories in the magazines— they were like cocoons. Everything that we were, dissolved, and we emerged as Amazon.

I want to try to convey the wonder of it. This time of lesbian transformation. When we had our dances— it felt to me like joining with elemental energies, drumming with the female heart of the planet. It was our joy, it was our power, our liberated energy, this coming out of the penitentiary. Our liberated energy rose up and made each lesbian into this powerhouse that she didn't really know she was, that she didn't know she was capable of being. It was like the best in each. Each lesbian could finally come forth: her desires, her strength, her unbreakable tenderness for the earth, her gifts. And the sense of union, Nayiree. At that time, it was palpable. It was a primitive feeling. It was encompassing, and it was, for me, paramount. It was sisterhood, and sisterhood was no cliché. There wasn't a drop of cliché in sisterhood. It was a force that we felt in our bodies. It was a force that rooted us and it was a force whose roots made a network of kinship. And we wrote, and we sang, and we organized, and we marched, and we loved ourselves. Our power was really sourced in seeing the magnificence in each other. Finally believing our own beauty. It was the lesbians who could see that first, because we could see it in each other.

In 1974, I wrote an essay for the New Woman's Survival Sourcebook [note: published by Knopf], collecting perspectives from all new feminist publishers about what our new— where our new poetry was steering us. There was no [internet then], So this collecting meant that I did a road trip all over the US. And in the intro to my essay, I remember saying that womankind was like a great sleeping beauty that was awakening from a dream of herself so handsome that the sleep spell was broken forever. And it was our poets, and it was our singers and theorists that kept peeling away layers, layers, layers, and showing us more of ourselves. It was a group phenomenon. It was as real as the movement of a tide.

But it did not include all of us. I couldn't see the racism. I couldn't see the absence of anti-racist work. Just as I couldn't conceptualize date-rape. The framework wasn't there for me. Looking back, I see how un-diverse we were. How much richer the movement would have been if it had been multiracial. But I was swept up, still I was swept up in this amazing movement, as a white woman in this mostly white wave of the women's movement of the seventies. I had writer and

music heroes and models. And I want to name some of them: Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Meridel Le Sueur, Judy Grahn, Holly Near— she's still doing it. Rachel Carson, Merlyn Stone, Shulamith Firestone, Mary Oliver— didn't know she was a lesbian then. Rigoberta Menchu, Marge Piercy. And the periodicals too— the women's movement periodicals nourished me and gave me venues for my writing. I want to name some of them: *The Amazon Quarterly*, *Off Our Backs*, *Lesbian Connection*— still going,— *Majority Report*, *Women a Journal of Liberation*, *Feminary*, *Sinister Wisdom's* still going. And later in the category but all by itself, *We'Moon*. One [publication] I was especially proud of was in a periodical in Islamabad Pakistan in 1999. RAWA is their publication. RAWA is the *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, [note: still going], and they published three of my poems about women under the Taliban in '99. I want to thank every single woman who ever worked on any of these venues, as they were crucial for all of us. It was a spinning time. It was a stimulating time to be coming of age. In 1971, I came out, and really, that's when my life began. In the last 30 years or so, the women's movement has faded from public view, and lesbians, you know, began to be mainstreamed. The years and the places blurred together a little more for me, but my writing and performing have continued to be informed by my feminism.

Nayiree Roubinian 35:53

Thank you. So it sounds like you certainly were sharing a lot of the figures in terms of writers, theorists, activists, you know, on that kind of political and community level. Can you talk more personally about who have been some of the significant relationships in your personal life?

Susa Silvermarie 36:16

Sure. Well, my relationship with my son has been the longest and most important relationship in my lifetime. I had to defy my whole world to stand up for him from the start. Later, I had to stand up to my own tribe of lesbian separatists. During the parenting years, I experienced— I don't know if I should say occasional or regular periods of depression and panic attacks over having total responsibility for another human being. I was a kid myself. But the motherbond taught me really profound lessons and started me on this road to seeing a larger picture— always a larger picture, and then an even larger picture. In fact, it was my essay called “The Mother Bond,” published in a *Woman of Journal of Liberation* that got me that breathtaking phone call from my hero, Adrienne Rich, in 1976, asking me permission to quote me in her book *Of Woman Born*. But the story of peer relationships in my life, that's the story of finding my way through women.

I would say that I was a devoted lover, with each of the six women who were my partners. I don't think we said serial monogamy then, but that's what it was. Each relationship taught me how to love better, how to receive love better, and I consider that a deep spiritual purpose of life as an earthling. That's no small thing. By the time I could have had a marriage that was legally recognized, my then partner seemed pretty set in the solo pattern in which we had been molded

by lack of recognition of our unions. So I lost her, and returned to my sovereign solo status. I do enjoy being a party of one but I also believe that I have one more marriage in me. Last month, I reconnected with my longest love and learned she has to sell the 50 acre farm where we lived because she received an Alzheimer's Disease diagnosis. I [first] lived with her when I was working [on Nursing Home dementia units] with people with Alzheimer's. She can no longer live alone and this heartbreaking news is really tearing me apart. At this time in my life, I value more deeply than ever, every one of my relationships [note: and friendships]. After all these years, she and I are returned to present tense telephone connection, and that means the world to me. But relationships in my life were always always central. My love life was always sex and spirit fused, into the divine passion that they always were before patriarchy tore them apart.

I want to share a poem that I wrote in my fifties that's a dialogue between Age and Sensuality, as if they were characters— as if Age was a character and Sensuality was a character— because I think it illustrates the answer to this question and because I think it illustrates my vision of a path for lesbian aging and wisdom. It's called

["An Intimate Conversation" (edited and formatted by Susa Silvermarie)]

AGE:

At these years of the body and now
I begin to understand
How they've tried to keep us apart,
aging against me, quelling you
dear Sensuality,
with religion with shame.
Green Lady in your robe of yellow silk
You've plucked a purple weed
as if it were a jeweled comb
to set in my whitened hair.
Take my experienced hand.
Here on the tips of my fingers,
kiss each brimming decade.

SENSUALITY:

You enrapture me, beloved Age,
with the depths of your adventures.
You sway upon the branch of time,
a perfect ripened fruit.
As priestess, I receive your offering.
As priestess, raise it high.

Oh, Age, our union electrifies the air.
We dance get the body aging.

AGE:

Companion of the dance,
Let us leave behind the liars,
the frightened ones, the cruel fools
who do not grant the gold of age
I see you blazing naked.
I show you everything I am.
Yes, sensuality.

SENSUALITY:

Only you, oh Age,
have known me long enough.
At the close of the circle,
it is only you
with the sense to get off the wheel of the mind.
I thrill to your earned furrows,
to your every weathered crevice and ravine.

AGE:

Each being at birth accepts
the invitation, Sensuality.
In the sunflower's glory time,
it bends to earth heavy with seed.
Why oh why do humans want to trade
those fertile kernels of experience
for the barren face of youth?
They resist my accruing gift.
But none can shun me!

SENSUALITY:

Neither can they stop me
from calling their flesh,
from blooming in their blood.
I brighten their eyes from the start.
I keep them on to the end.
Yet they see me as a circumstance.
They see you as my enemy.

AGE:

Sensuality my sweet,
we know only seasoned wood
can carry the flame
all the way to ash.
Those to bout to the peddlers of fear
consent to their own dwindling.
but to those who dare embrace
the prize of years
to those my dear,
we promise pungent pleasure.

SENSUALITY:

Are we not splendid!
May humans at last
open their eyes to your luster.
May they give ear
to my musical language.
And when they welcome us as one,
Dearest Age, oh then,
we shall together
ripen so in them.

Nayiree Roubinian 44:35

Another brilliant poem. I'm ready to embrace the process here. That's actually such a powerful message, to model and to share the positive and powerful part of our aging in a culture that really tries to minimize and have us resist our aging. So, thank you for providing a really powerful and beautiful counter to a lot of the messages that are, unfortunately, very ageist and not in touch with what is really powerful and inevitable about our body's aging. So, my next question kind of goes back to some of the political and social work and activism of the time. I'm curious to know if you were involved in political activism, specifically in the social movements of the 1960s and 70s? Were you a member of any specific social, cultural, or political organizations of that time? And what were your experiences of them if you can share a few highlights?

Susa Silvermarie 46:05

I'd say my lifelong form of political and social and spiritual activism has primarily been my writing. But my earliest— okay, I'll keep going. My earliest activism was in the NAACP Open Housing marches in Milwaukee when I was 20. There were 200 nights of those marches, [note:

led by Father Jim Groppi and the NAACP youth], in winter in Milwaukee. Later I remember picketing the Draft Induction center during the Vietnam War draft. But here are some of the women's organizations that I worked in [note: the WRO], Welfare Rights, there was a wonderful welfare rights organization. In fact, this interview is making me remember something that I haven't thought of for years. I'll tell a quick story.

That one year, [note: maybe 1971], Welfare was going to cut the Winter Clothing Allowance for us in Milwaukee. I was a welfare mother and I was the Welfare Rights Activist. And so we went [correction: marched] to Boston Store downtown, and charged [warm winter clothing]. A big line of women. We just charged clothes, we kept charging and charging [note: everything to welfare]. All the counters were full of welfare mothers charging clothes and we said charge it to welfare and we piled up the counters and then left the store, [note: hundreds of us]. And then we walked [correction: marched] to the welfare building. At that point, there were people throwing things and I was too near a plate glass door. A piece of flying plate glass landed in my calf. And the next thing I knew was that the Emergency Room with a doc yelling at me because I was so pregnant and it narrowly missed my belly, this flying glass. [Note: I still have that scar and I am proud of it.]

Then I was involved as a founding mother of the [East Side] Children's Coop, which is a mostly lesbian parents outfit [correction: cooperative] in '72. Also I founded the Milwaukee chapter of the National Feminist Writers Guild in 1978, which stayed active and through 1987. I was a Women's Crisis Line [WCL] counselor for a couple years. I taught a feminist approach to psychic skills [course]. It was called Womancraft. In '76, I taught a course called *Getting Clear: Body Work for Women* at one of our Women's Health Centers. I remember I was a member of TV panel with Sally Gearhart, called "The New wave of Feminist Writing in the Eighties." I taught Work Poetry as a [new] genre to revalue women's work. I would organize citywide storytelling programs on International Women's days [note: every March 8]. And at the first conference on Dianic Wiccans in 1986, which was put on by the, the Reformed Congregation of the Goddess [RCG], I opened for them with [a poetry] performance. And then things like the National Conference of Women in the Law, I facilitated workshops called "Spiritualizing the Political" for law students and feminist attorneys. And I did Artreach [note: Milwaukee] residencies with elders, nearly almost always female. I considered Artreach a kind of a women's organization in a variety of community settings. And then I was a founding mother of [WWLC], the Wisconsin Womyn's Land Cooperative in 1976, which has a story that I should tell as well. It's a story that probably needs telling.

It's [sadly] one of separatism and marginalization within the [wom]movement itself. [Note: WWLC was the legal name for the land trust] for [a farm of] 80 acres we named it DOE farm, Daughters of Earth, [note: my own suggestion]. And DOE farm is still going. It gave me the first sense in my whole young life at that time, of having enough room! So when WWLC voted to

disallow boy children, as mother of a boy child, I was prevented from accessing that freedom that DOE farm had given me. I came away from that, understanding, more deeply than ever, what marginalization felt like. But I knew also in my heart, that had I not been [David] a boy's mother, separatism might have likely been my choice too.

Nayiree Roubinian 51:06

In terms of spirituality playing an important part in your life, can you talk a little bit about that and how it's influenced you and your work?

Susa Silvermarie 51:18

Yeah, I'm glad you said spirituality, because religion definitely not. Even though I came out of that [the catholic religion], spirituality was really the root and the ground for me. And for the rest of the answer— I answered this once in an essay published in *Matrifocus* in 2004. I'd like to read some excerpts from that, to say it better. The essay is called "Remembering My Mother Tongue." And let me say that [the word] "pagan" comes from the Latin *paganu*, of the country, of the land. So these are excerpts:

(edited and formatted by Susa Silvermarie)

I was initiated as a witch on Candlemas in 1976, in my two-room apartment in Boston, with my five-year-old son bearing witness. My whole women's circle initiated itself as a coven that night. We had been meeting on full moons since the previous spring, when the first National Women's Spirituality Conference, *Through the Looking Glass*, had galvanized us to drum together. Drumming was our way in, our trance induction method of choice. And in the fall, musician and priestess Kay Gardner had visited our circle at my house and named us witches. She planted the seed we bought the books that she recommended. We taught ourselves the rudiments of the Craft and planned our Candlemas initiation. I took a witch's name. I began to live my life in accord with seasonal ceremony. I learned to make words *do* what they say. I devoted myself to the principle embodied in the Charge of the Goddess: *All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.*” As a lesbian feminist poet, I was already coming to understand that my body was the truth by which to measure the world. Wicca confirmed incarnation, and all the sensory world, as treasure. Not something to transcend, but to treasure. Being a witch felt like belonging to Gaia and remembering her mother tongue. I became part of an ongoing Spiral, an open and non-hierarchical women's circle, based on spontaneous rituals, which we structured only by casting the circle at the beginning and grounding the energy at the end. And though we created and invoked the container of the energy in the same way each time, how energy was raised within it, and for what purpose, depended entirely on who showed up.

So I carried that form of the craft with me to where I lived on a farm for a decade, and I hosted periodic rituals, and over many years and many moves, I found or created circles where I could. Wherever I couldn't, I practiced solo, and my eco-feminist politics is deeply rooted in the Pagan craft. These days, I might not often think of myself as a witch, but I'm convinced that the transformation demanded of our species at this time demands that I act like one.

Environmental abuse rips away whole species from the embrace of Gaia. Sexual abuse of the women and children of our own species rips away parts of ourselves. And now at the twilight of patriarchy, we all sense life at stake. Yet, our fears of being called angry are still visceral. And you know why? Because witch burning went on for 400 years. That's 20 generations that witch burning went on. I only stopped 300 years ago. Witchburning is a visceral fear for us to overcome. We're called to rise up from these fears, to rise up with the power of love.

In the past epochs, oneness with the world didn't need to be deliberated. But today our sense of oneness is a conscious return, because science acknowledges there are no closed systems, there's no rim that separates realities. Scientists finally agree with the visions of ancient priestesses and poets, and we finally have the technology to actualize that primordial spiritual vision of a world family. So today my life appears less communal than when I was a young mother, but I know that living congruently and gently on the planet adds to the world cup of harmony, full as much as does any so-called political action that I might undertake. I believe that, and the deep joy for me is that loving the world and nurturing my personal growth are not two separate poles anymore. They're aligned into a single focus. And with this fresh perspective, I come to understand the early mantra of feminism: *the personal is the political!*

My Pagan love for the material world deepens as I age. Wicca reminds me that I belong on the planet at this time, and I have to contribute my gifts. And whether I celebrate life in a coven or as a party of one, I am grateful to be a Pagan, a devotee of the great mother, a daughter of Earth, and to remember that my country is the world.

So that essay— those excerpts were published in 2004. But starting in '93, and 17 times so far since then, I've had the honor of my work being published in *We-Moon*. And I consider *We-Moon*— the staff, the writers, and the readers— to be my current lesbian feminist tribe [spiritual community], the international community of *We-Moon*. It continues to remind me that

spirituality and politics are intrinsically entwined, and they're no more separate than body and mind.

I have one more thing I want to say about experiencing spirituality in my lesbian life. A couple years ago, I had the privilege of, and it was a privilege for sure, going on one of Carol Christ's Goddess Tours of Crete in Greece. Carol passed away in July [2021], just this past month, after following in the footsteps of the great scholar Marija Gimbutas, and a life dedicated to unearthing ancient ways of times of ages when God was a woman to everyone and the difference that made in women's lives. On this tour of Crete, our circle of women pilgrims not only learned about our spiritual ancestors, but we did ritual together in the same caves and mountains and temples, where women raised power in the ancient world. And this gives lie to the patriarchal reversal —

That's Mary Oliver's [correction: Daly's] wonderful term— the patriarchal reversal that peace is a pipe dream. It gives lie to that because there's archaeological proof that there were peaceful civilizations that lasted for many millennia in old Europe.

Nayiree Roubinian 59:57

Thank you so much for sharing that, Susa. I did want to circle back, because I know your spirituality is closely intertwined with your creative work and your poetry. I was curious about when you wrote your first poem and what that poem was about. And, in general, I want to hear a little bit about the themes and issues that are central to your creative work, as well as what your favorite part is about being a performance artist.

Susa Silvermarie 1:00:29

Oh, you always save the best part for last. I like that. When I was pregnant in 1969, I began a series of poems to my unborn baby. My early work, I think my themes were motherhood, sexuality, and spirituality. Now, I am pretty much on the same page. Now, I would say sensuality, aging, and the spiritual evolution of humanity led by women, especially Indigenous women. My first chapbook "Excavations" in 1972 was described by one reviewer as, quote "lesbianism handled as a mystical initiation into a defined plane." I think I'm still on that page too. In 1985, I published my second collection, it was called "Imagine Her Satisfaction". "Tales from My Teachers on the Alzheimer's Unit," followed in '96. And "Guatemala I a Poem in 2000. My new book is *Poems, For Flourishing* is this one and along the way, I edited lots of collections of elders' storypoems.

And for a while, around 2000 to 2012, maybe I focused on writing for children. I published a few stories in children's magazines. In 2010, at the age of 63, I got an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at the prestigious Vermont College of Fine Arts. I wrote a pretty radical thesis at that school on gender fluidity in young adult novels. Now remember, this was a long time ago. My advisor described my thesis as a 'groundbreaking contribution to the field of writing for

children. But after too many years of unsuccessful marketing, my thing of my four young adult novels, I gladly returned my focus to poetry.

As to being a spoken word artist, I never feel so alive as when I'm delivering my work aloud, giving it away with my voice. I mean that— you can tell I like that. There's three professional videos of my poetry performances, they're all recent ones, on my website and on YouTube that showcase [note: my spoken word performances]. . My favorite performances were long before at the Lesbian Variety Shows [note: back in Madison WI in the early 90's. We had permission, you know, to do anything. I created this female preacher woman character named Suellenalen from Appalachia, and I wore a bonnet and I gave feminist tent revival sermons. Crazy stuff, it was wonderful. But that's also one of the things that's lost, a video [note: of Suellen preaching]. That's somewhere. My favorite part of spoken word— I'd have to say that performing the work gives me the sense that I'm making love with everybody in the room at the same time. So that's a high.

Nayiree Roubinian 1:03:56

[Sigh]— now, I want to connect some of our questions to the Archives, to the Lesbian Herstory Archives who are initiating, you know, collecting these oral herstories of lesbian elders. I want to hear about what your experience with the Lesbian Herstory Archives has been and how has the work of LHA impacted you and your life?

Susa Silvermarie 1:04:29

It was 15 years ago that I set up my own LHA special collection. I don't know if I had involvement before that. I was 59. It's kind of a joke to me now. I thought I was old. I [thought] I was getting old and I was thrilled that my work could be saved somewhere you know and not completely lost, like the work, records of so many women [artists]. I think to feel that one's life matters is so essential, especially to lesbians, because we're disappeared on a regular basis by patriarchy. And around 2007 maybe, I visited the Archives in person with my son who was then living in New York City. I'll never forget the experience of standing in front of the archive drawers, and finding my own material. My 37 year old son David at that time, opened the drawer, pulls something out, proudly read me a poem that I had written about my vision when he turned 12 of how his hands were growing larger than mine at that point.

And I think, you know, at the time that I set up the collection, I sent everything I had to the Archives. Early poems, chapbooks, published materials— everything I had in my physical possession. But it was 40 years after I began writing. And as a renter, I moved every couple of years if not more often, so much [note: of my writing material] was lost. And there was no internet for the first two and a half decades of my writing path— that's 25 years— so none of it was preserved online either. For example, I created an erotic poetry collection, called "Menopausal Lust" that I remember recording and producing and selling at festivals as cassette, audio tape, and it came out in 1993. It was funded in part by Kissing Girls Productions in

Madison WI. It included music by Linda Kanter and cover art by Sudi Rakusin and 60 minutes of erotic poetry by yours truly. Those were heady, sexy days. If anyone hearing this interview has a copy of that cassette, I would love to hear it again, to be able to send it to the Archives converted to digital. So much was lost, you know, but for what has been saved, I want to say Blessed Be and thank the Goddess for the Lesbian Herstory Archives!

Now a couple times a year I make up a package [for LHA] I send a personal journal, or news clippings, whatever I got to the Archives. And every time that I prepare that package, I just once again feel immensely grateful that LHA is there to receive it, to receive me, to gather me up, you know, like a mother. That's how I feel about the Archives. And I would also want to take this opportunity to say thank you to the volunteers that are doing *this* project, the Lesbian [Elders] Oral Herstory project— all of you. I know it's a lot of work. I am honored, so honored and grateful, and particularly to you Nayiree, for your kind and your welcome listening today, [note: and to Julia and Minda and all the women behind the scenes whose names I don't know]. I've really tried in my own work to preserve the legacy and stories of other elder women, and now, I get this sweet pleasure of LEOHP preserving mine. So thank you.

Nayiree Roubinian 1:08:31

You are absolutely welcome. And it's an honor to be able to speak with you and to record this with you. In terms of winding down our interview, is there anything that we haven't covered that you want to share with those who are watching?

Susa Silvermarie 1:08:48

Well, two things come to mind briefly, one is geographical residence. You know, I started out in Wisconsin, but [my residences] spanned Boston, rural West Virginia, Asheville, North Carolina, Brazil, Guatemala, [and now] Mexico. And I want to say that early exposure, for me it was age 20, to other cultures, to kinder cultures, really enabled me to see the sharp contrast with the colonial mindset: make your own way on your own, pull yourself up by your bootstraps— the approach to life that had been my only example growing up. It's about the imagination again. So this intercultural experience exposes lies and so much prejudice and it really brings countless gifts. So I would say to anybody listening, travel however you can; whether it's across your own town, across your city to foreign neighborhoods that are foreign to you, or whether it's across the globe. My own website is called "Revisionary's View: A Woman's Country is the World". Because it is.

And the second thing we didn't touch on is that many of us old dykes have changed our names, which makes it hard to do research. It makes it hard to keep your records— well, I was born Suellen Therese Sartori, Sar-tor-i so my earliest work is listed under Sue Silvermarie. I started using Silvermarie as a writer's name because I was public and writing about lesbian sexuality. And in the late seventies, my best friend Martha was taken to court by her ex[husband] cause of

her lesbianism. She lost custody of her four year old, who was my son's best friend. After that I changed my name legally [note: to Silvermarie. Later I changed Sue to Susa legally as well]. We have to keep in mind [note: the necessity for confidentiality in those days when we do research on lesbian elders artists].

Nayiree Roubinian 1:11:10

My last question for you, Susa, is if there's anything that you would like to say to future generations who are watching this oral history?

Susa Silvermarie 1:11:25

Oh, good. It's never too late to change anything in your life! I got a MSW at 40 and my MFA at 63. My Irish grandma graduated from Marquette University when she was 79. Don't let age or anything else stop you. I would just say listen to your heart's guidance and don't let anyone stop you from acting on what it tells you, because WE NEED YOUR GIFTS. That's what I would say to future generations.

And lastly, we in the West are told that growing up means individuating, separating out from the mother. Now, we're finally learning from what the indigenous grandmothers have always been trying to tell us: maturity and spiritual evolution means opening our eyes to the network of humanity that makes us a species family. We don't have to like all the members of the family. We have to recognize and nurture our tendrils of connection, so that our human family can grow up to wisdom fast, quick as a crocus. And I would say just lastly know that you're from an old tribe. You are from an old, old tribe! As much as you're a single individual, you're a link between ancestors and descendants. What you're given in your lifetime comes through your ancestors. What you offer the world in your lifetime, you offer your descendants. One of my great teachers, Jean Houston, says it this way, "You are the front of a great ship of ancestors who have enriched you, but there are descendants ahead and they are depending on you. Hear them calling." Thank you.

Nayiree Roubinian 1:13:36

Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing your oral herstory with our tribe and it's definitely been an honor to share this process with you.