**A Memoir**

Rita A Kresha, CRNA, B.Th.

The Platte river runs from west to east through Nebraska, and many of the people that settled at the eastern end during the late 1800’s were farmers from the great migration of immigrants from Europe. I am a first-generation German American. My father came from Moravia and my mother’s father came from Germany. Like a large section of the United States prior to World War II, my world was rural and poor with a working-class ethic. For ten miles either side of the river, the farmers of the alluvial soil were primarily Roman Catholics. Up on the bluffs, where small towns were located every seven to ten miles, the town population was Lutheran and Methodist.

I was my father’s nineteenth child that lived, born in 1934 in the dust bowl in the middle o’clock the Great Depression. My earliest memory is that of joyfully falling off the edge of the dining table into the arms of my beloved sister, Amelia. As an adult, I saw the snapshot taken the day she left for the convent; my three-year-old face was contorted with angry tears with the rest of the family looking down, sad.

On the 100th anniversary of Adolf Kresha’s immigration to America, my sister Lillian organized all the family photographs and snapshots and had them published, bound into a book with pertinent genealogy. The more dated the pictures, the more frozen and sterner the pictures. Those of my immediate family were faces of self-consciousness or blank sadness. Those snapshots were to be the key, later on, of my uncovering where I came from and what my childhood was all about. As I begin writing this, I am 71 years old, the same age as Winston Churchill when he saved Western civilization.

**Adolf’s family**

Adolf’s first wife died suddenly of the results of stepping barefoot on a nail. It was probably tetanus or gram-negative septicemia. She left nine living children; the youngest was age four and the oldest, Sophia, age 22.

Adolf asked around about anyone know of an *old maid*, as he needed someone to take care of his children and do all the work.

My mother, Eva Karges, was an *old maid*, 27-years-old. She was sightless in one eye from an accident after a younger sister threw a fork at her. The prevailing wisdom at that time was that she soon would be blind in the other eye also. She had an appendectomy in her early 20’s, and again the people gossiped that any woman who had that operation would never bear children. There was some truth to that, as in the early days of anesthesia and surgery, the operation was usually performed after the appendix had ruptured and sepsis had caused adhesion throughout the pelvis.

When Adolf came to ask my grandpa if he could marry his daughter, grandpa said, “Go ask Eva.” It seemed to her that that this might be her only chance to have a home and family. They were married several months later in 1919.

Little did my mother know that my mother know that there was already a matriarch in the house, only five years younger. Sophia was Adolf’s confidant, companion, banker and chauffeur to church and to town. Eva was the child-bearer, cook, wash-and-cleaning woman, gardener, soap-quilts-clothes-maker and all-around servant. She bore 11 children. One of the twins died at age two of heat-stroke; the others lived into adulthood. Mother led the way with all of us (except Adolf) working from dawn to dark. A common axiom was such as “While you are resting, swat flies.”

We called ourselves the first family and second family. All of the first family were out of the family homeplace before I was born, and had families of their own. The second family went to school with the kids from the first family; we were their nieces and nephews. “Charlie is grandpa’s kid,” Paul told the teacher. Sophia was 48 years older than I was.

We were schooled in a one-room school house, in a one-acre plot set in the middle of the township, as prescribed by the Township Act of the mid-1800’s. We walked the two miles, as the crow flies, avoiding the bull in the pasture, checking the traps that were trapped for furs to sell and walking on snow drifts that were on top of the telephone wires. This was a time for daydreaming and fantasy, as all of us walked separately on our own. I would take a popular love song and fantasize about my girlfriend and me within that context. This was a rare time for privacy without work obligations.

We had no books at home, not even a bible. I was an adult before I ever heard of Kipling’s “Just So” stories or “Wizard of Oz,” Lewis Carroll’s imaginative “Alice in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking Glass,” or Milne’s “Winnie the Pooh.” It was when the gay community found Judy Garland singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” that we claimed it as our own, the leaving of home and making our own homes.

We had all the childhood diseases as vaccines were not in common use. Red and German measles were followed by mumps and chickenpox while one family of neighbors had diphtheria. They were quarantined for a much longer time as it could be fatal. I had recurring nightmares from about age 5 to 10 years old of walking a narrow plank over a deep pit that contained growling wolves.

**The Great Depression (1930’s)**

The dust blew relentlessly all summer for most of the 1930’s. Rags and newspapers were stuffed around the edges of the windows and outside doors, yet dust was everywhere. The WPA [Works Progress Administration, a work program] came through with trees to plant, and the farmers earned money providing the labor to plant “shelter belts,” a fourth-mile long and eight rows wide with various kinds of trees, both evergreen and deciduous. Other attempts to stop the soil erosion was planting ground covers for pasture and contouring of crop rows. Rosary’s were prayed frequently most of the year, and during the summer, the rosary was prayed nightly along with other prayers for rain.

My mother’s greatest comfort was her religious faith. We all worshipped together on Sunday and Holy Days, with Sophia driving us to church in her car. Before we left for church, she would do a white glove inspection, running her finger along the window sill to find any dirt or dust. The feeling of humiliation and its taste is still there, waiting to pop up when that memory is triggered.

One year, my sister Mary wrote:

*“Since today is Mom’s birthday, I was remembering her in my prayers. Did you ever consider all that she put up with in her lifetime? Leaving her comfort zone of the Duncan community, moving into a home with other people, some o’clock who were almost her age, but being the step-mother! Trying to clothe and feed a continuously growing family and putting up with a boozing husband. She is surely a SAINT! Her only get away was when she went to Altar Society meeting and us kids stayed home. Remember how she would bring a morsel of her lunch home in a napkin for the kids.”*

What a sweet memory! Another sweet one is recalling how Mom would softly whistle to herself as she worked along, a habit I used myself all my life.

We hauled water by buckets from the windmill near the barn to the vegetable garden. We had about a half-acre of potatoes and sweet corn with a double row of concord grapes along one end. That was a lot of trips with Mom and us children carrying buckets of water to the vegetables.

The usual weeding went to the youngest and we hand-picked potato bugs into cans with a little kerosene in the bottom, so the bugs couldn’t crawl out again. I like to set between the rows and eat the peas. “Don’t eat the peas,” Mama said, “there won’t be enough for supper!” Afterwards, when I ate raw peats, I’d get hives. We worked from dawn to dark all year round with mother leading the work force while my father was drinking home-made beer or recovering from his latest drinking bout.

Prohibition began the year my parents married, 1919. When women got the right to vote in 1920, Adolf said my mother shouldn’t vote, as her Democratic vote would cancel out his Republican one. The 21st amendment was passed in 1933 to repeal prohibition. What had been suppressed by a lack of alcohol for my father, soon grew into the full bloom of alcoholism. Its effect on the was enormous, increasing the burden and severity of poverty and fracturing the family unit.

My parents almost the farm in being unable to pay the real estate taxes. A bachelor in the county was offering second mortgages to farmers so they could pay off their back taxes and keep their land. Julius Schuster was a just and righteous man to our family.

**World War II (1942-45)**

My parent’s names were Adolf and Eva. We were not taught German nor allowed to speak a few words here and there with the German folks at the church. We got letters from European relatives begging for food, for help. For the war effort, we collected aluminum off gum wrappers, pods from the milkweed and scrap metal. Sugar was rationed. Of course, so were other foods such as meat, eggs, and dairy products, but we raised our own chicken, geese, hogs and cattle.

My tenth birthday (1944) was memorable in that I received ten candy bars from my brother Bill, who along with several other brothers, were working in a meat-packing plant in Omaha for the winter.

One summer, Adolf took the 100 pounds of our total sugar ration for the year to make wine with the concord grapes. He knew nothing about fermentation – everything blew and all was wasted.

There were three brothers and one sister in the service during WWII, and one brother later during the Korean war in the 50’s. Amelia was the sister in the Navy. She left the convent before her final vows and joined the Navy as a Navy nurse. She was stationed at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, about ten miles from my present home in Oakland, CA.

During the great war, we listened to the news on a Delco radio. Since we had not electricity, this was a system whereas a generator was run on electricity for hours and the electrical charge was stored in huge glass jars of acid. This energy was used to power the radio and a small amount of electrical light in the kitchen. This usage was under the strict control of Adolf; it was limited and precious and he was the master of what was used and when.

**Becoming Conscious**

My tenth year(1944) is easy to remember as I developed the landmarks of puberty. One day, the second-in-command sister, Lillian, told me that I had to start wearing a brassiere, or “you’ll look like Marilyn Messing!” Marilyn was a very heavy teen neighbor with huge breasts. Then menarche surprised me one hot summer day in the outside privy. I ran crying into the house, “I’m bleeding!” Mother said, “Go put on a rag.” I knew there were some bloody rags stored between the springs and the mattress on one bed; on washday, they were soaked and then washed separately. I had no knowledge of what that had to do with me.

My brothers began to ask me to go into the trees with the; I began hiding all the more. I stayed away from my brothers. The one interaction that I had with them was to polish and shine their good shoes each Saturday. I was paid with a cigarette and began smoking at age ten.

As adults, my closest sister in age, Mary, told me that we spent a lot of time hiding out – from the boys and also during parental arguments. “Just take this limb and hit me over the head to end my suffering” Adolf would say when he had no alcohol. We hid in terror.

My best loved playmates were dogs and cats. I would dress them in baby clothes and carry them to play in secret places. Each year distemper would carry off all the cats except the mother, Bessie, a gray tabby who somehow acquired immunity to the distemper bacteria. She would then have two more litters the next year.

The closest neighbors had a son that was my age. His family moved to the farm next to use when we were eight years old. He wore shorts without underwear and I would stand under the tree that he had climbed and looked up at what had made him a boy. Russell and I would dress our cats and carry them in a basked to the other’s house a quarter mile away. We climbed trees, at the wormy peaches off the peach tree and played war games among the junk pile down behind the trees. There was an auto chassis that we used as our Jeep to drive to the beach heads of Iwo Jima, springs poking through the back seat, vines growing through the floor boards; no wheels, just flat among the weeds, driving all over the battle fields.

One morning in May, Russell and his mother were in town when the Southern Pacific train came through, hitting the car and killing Russell. It was never talked about and I don’t know anything about the funeral. He was just gone. I walked to their house and his mother would send me back home. I would go to my shrine with the virgin mother statue, put fresh lilacs there and remember him.

By the time I was ten years old, I could prepare a chicken dinner. That is, I could catch, kill, pluck, draw, cut up, and pan fry the chicken for the meal. Each member of the family had their own part of the chicken, as each of us could eat most of the chicken, if allowed to. We were always hungry, and the spring chickens were about three pounds, dressed out. That wasn’t much compared to a supermarket chicken today. The boys got the meaty pieces and the girls got the ribs, backs, necks and I got the feet. We ate chicken all summer until the last one was gone except for some hens saved for ‘lay-ers.’ Then, in the winter, we had pork, beef, and geese or turkey.

Mom baked six loaves of bread every day in a wood-burning stove that held six loaf pans at a time. Frequently, the edges of the loaves next to the fire box would be burned – “it will give you curly hair, so eat your share o’clock the burned bits.” On Saturday, we would make buns with a filling of jam or fruit, “kolaches.” When mother was kneading the dough, I reached up for a first taste. “You see how the bread rises in the pan? Just think what that dough does in your stomach!” That put an end to the eating of raw dough.

My mother was long suffering, a prototype that the author Willa Cather described as settler women of the plains states. Mom’s mother died of breast cancer when she was 4 years old. The grandmother that came to care for her eventually told Eva’s father, “You need to find another mother for this child.” Mom told the story that they told her that she ran away onto the plains frequently looking for her mother. Grandfather Karges married a widow with a son about the same age as Eva, and then together they were the parents of six more children.

During the depression of the 1880’s, Grandpa Karges had to borrow money from a Jewish man to keep the farm. When Eva was in her eighties and living with me, she mentioned this fact and said with considerable passion that “the Jew charged exorbitant interest.” I was startled by her ant-Semitic sentiment, but understood her feelings that arose from poverty.

Eva bore a child a year almost every year while working unceasingly in the midst of poverty. “Use it up, wear it out, use as is, or do without.” That memory of pinched poverty stayed with me my entire life. Mother’s faith sustained and comforted her.

Eva’s step-mother was killed in an auto accident in 1939 and then grandpa Karges died two years later. From this estate, Mom received enough money to pay off the mortgage to Julius Schuster, buy fruit and sugar to can for the next winter’s food… and to buy everything for the “turkey project.” We had a little ceremony to burn the second mortgage. The sugar was lost in the wine-making fiasco. The turkeys were a great income producer until gradually some virus contaminated all the soil and killed the birds. Every few months, everything would get moved and rebuilt to another spot, medicines bought from the vet, but to no avail. Even so, those turkeys helped us through the 40’s. My, they were dumb. When it stormed, one of us would have to get them into the coop, otherwise they would look up into the rain and get respiratory “drowning,” then into the coop with them so they wouldn’t stack up in the corners and suffocate. We prayed a lot for those turkeys! In the 80’s, a common expression of exasperation was, “you turkey, you!” I knew exactly what that meant.

Another thing that the grandpa Karges estate money did was to help replace linoleum in the kitchen and one downstairs bedroom. That bedroom was in the northwest corner of the house with no access to heat in winter. To provide insulation, every now and then the wall coverings would have to be removed and then new layers of newspapers were pasted up on the walls. The paste was flour and water. After layers and layers of newspaper were applied and allowed to dry, new wallpaper was put up. One of the most significant miracles of my young life and which “proved” to me the efficacy of prayer, was the loss and finding of a $100 bill. No one knew that mother had hidden a $100 bill under the linoleum in that room. I don’t know where she was, but by the time she joined us, we had tub and bushel baskets filled with torn off wallpaper, newspaper, and torn up linoleum.

The world stopped.

We sifted through everything all that day and over again the next day, with everyone scared and praying ceaselessly. In the late afternoon of the second day, it was found! We all kneeled to pray the rosary in thanksgiving.

I followed in mother’s steps of piety with my own little altar with the Virgin Mary statue, flowers, rituals, and small icons. My story is typical of those in the same socioeconomic class prior and during World War II, with one notable kink in the center of the pattern of who I was. My sexual identity and my spiritual identity have been intimately intertwined throughout my lif with one being more changeable than the other. The changeable one was not my sexuality: that was crystal clear to me long before I even had words with which to label myself.

As I write this memoir, I am bearing witness to the history of my own community, my gay and lesbian community. History, large or small, is made with each life. After death, the aggregate of history can exist after us for a time. Our gay and lesbian history would make a stone cry.

In grade school, I had a crush on a schoolmate who was also named Rita. I had not understanding of my feeling – I just knew that it was out of sync with the world around me. The first movie that I ever saw was “The Bells of Saint Mary’s” staring Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman. While the other little girls were swooning over Bing, I was smitten with Ingrid. Somehow, I know it wouldn’t go over well if I talked about my feelings.

High school brought the pressures of conforming and I had 2-3 dates during my senior year with several very unpleasant kisses. I had fallen in love with Rosemary, whose family I boarded with as we lived ten miles from town. After the last older sibling graduated from high school, I had to live in town, working at the drugstore to pay for my room and board. Rosemary and I shared twin beds in her bedroom. My memories are of suppressed anguish and confusion with the fragrance of her Jergens hand lotion infusing me with intense longing.

Rosemary was popular and dated boys a lot. We both worked at the drugstore, but were never ‘best friends’ because of two things: my confused obsession with her made me awkward (and weird, I’m sure) and the fact that she was Lutheran. I could not pray with her or go to her church with programs and events, as dictated by the Roman Catholic church. It was a sin to step into any church other than the R.C. There was a profound otherness between us.

High school students from a neighboring town came for some sporting event, and that afternoon, several motorcycles at the town square had come to the drugstore where I worked, and ate some ice cream before their trip home. One of the girls invited me to come out to see them off, and there among all the others, she hugged and kissed me – over and over, it seems, as I recall the pleasure and rightness of the emotions. So *that* was what kissing felt like! Ummm. It was also my first and last ride on a motorcycle.

Rosemary was the top student in our class and became my role model of how to study, and how to apply myself to learning. The English teacher, the diminutive Miss Havel, was the other important person during those teen years. She was a mentor and a motivator who encouraged me to try out for public speaking contests. By my senior year, I was winning contests that provided $25 scholarships and it seemed possible to afford nurses training. The family had no funds to pay my way, and Sophia spelled it out very plainly the evening of graduation, that I should “not expect any more ‘hand outs’ from this family!”

I suppose my interest in the healing arts/healing prayer grew out of my admiration of Amelia in the convent who had trained as an RN, caring for my sick kitties, and being the “go-fer” for Adolf after he had a heart attack. His first diagnosis of heart disease was when I was eight-year-old and he was an invalid from then on until his death when I was thirteen. I would have loved to become a veterinarian, but only teaching and nursing was open to women as a career (outside of marriage). The young kittens always got purulent eye infections, which I treated with boric acid eye washes. The dogs and cats were my playmates as well as companions and solace in my aloneness. I did make paper dolls for a while as a child, until I was shamed by spending so much time playing with them during wintertime in the cold back bedroom, dressed in my overcoat, cap and mittens.

**Off the Farm, Into the City (1951)**

In the fall of my 17th year, I took the bus to Lincoln, Nebraska to begin a new life. I began a 3-year period of Nurses Training at Saint Elizabeth’s School of Nursing. I had my first vaccinations. I had all the food that I wanted. It was an exhilarating, transformative time! I grew from a country bumpkin who had only been away from home one summer, to care for Lillian’s babies.

Suddenly I was immersed in a woman’s world, everything clean, starched white uniforms. No farm and household drudgery! Everything was provided to learn, learn, learn. I was ecstatic as my world grew with leaps and bounds, opening to a great new universe. This was a time of great flourishing and bliss! The experiences of intellectual development and the practicum of nursing arts were just perfect for me.

In 1952, a polio epidemic reached Lincoln, Nebraska. About a dozen of the strongest student nurses were selected to work with the Red Cross nurses who came to Saint Elizabeth’s hospital, the designated center for polio patients. The work was physically tiring. The “Kenny Treatment” was hot packs laid upon the front and back of the torso, arms and legs three times each day. Vats of hot, steaming water held racks to hold the pleated sandbag packs. We didn’t know the means of transmission of the disease, so we used a strict isolation technique at all times. Only ten years later was the causative agent identified to be a virus and a vaccine manufactured. One of my classmates did contract a mild case of polio.

During my third year of training, I fell into a sweet little romance with Joanie, conducted in a clandestine manner in the middle of a dormitory full of women. How did I know our relationship had to be secret? Perhaps it was in the very air that I breathed that non-conforming behavior was unacceptable. How could it be that my feeling brought such joy, yet were so confusing! I felt bent by powerful forces that made me make a hard left into a professional identity and spirituality. The chaplain at Saint Elizabeth’s was a gentle, kind pastor, yet I never mentioned my love of Joanie in the weekly confessional. When I asked if he had inspirational writings that I could borrow, he loaned me the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas! So there it laid: something painful and tightly curled within.

Those three years are a rosy tinted memory, and in a sense, those memories are still tied to and describe the present. Formed when they happened, they’re also true to the moment of recall, including all that I felt, all my experiences and new values, passions and vulnerability. As it is said, one never steps into the same stream of consciousness twice. All the mischief and mayhem of a life’s influences are how one restyles a memory. That moment of recall is like Shakespeare’s Hamlet saying, “I see it in my mind’s eye, Horatio.” Neuroscientists tell us that whether we are actually living a scene or conjuring them in the mind’s eye, they engage the same part of the brain. Whether present or remembered, to the brain, it is the same experience. So it is now, as I write these words.

**Nursing Training to Anesthesia Training (1954)**

As a student nurse at Saint Elizabeth’s Hospital School of Nursing, Lincoln, Nebraska, I participated in operating room observation where I saw an amazing woman at the head of the operating table. I assumed she was a doctor because she was doing so many unique things, and she had complete command of the patient. I learned about the nursing specialty of Anesthesia from this nurse anesthetist as she was cleaning her equipment table. The sight of that first laryngoscope and it’s uses! I was smitten. Leanora provided information for the school that she graduated from, Saint John’s Hospital School of Anesthesia, Springfield, Illinois. I wanted to continue on to medical school, and as I awaited on my application for the next anesthesia class, I enrolled at the University of Nebraska in basic sciences. I passed my state Registered Nursing Boards the first time and was an RN at age 20.

Four of my Saint Elizabeth’s classmates and I rented a house. We celebrated passing our Boards with a party, and our beverage was a punch made with “Sloe Gin” liqueur. I had my first hangover the next day and that was my last alcohol for four years.

I worked the night shift full time as I carried 15 units at the University. My dream was to earn enough money as an anesthetist to put myself through medical school. However, that first semester I had a failing grade in chemistry, with the hard realization that I couldn’t do full-time school and job at the same time.

The next September, I began the two-year nurse anesthetist program at Saint John’s Hospital. The women lived in dormitories while the several males in the class had subsidized apartments.

This was my first experience of having males around me all the time, which was unsettling to me, with their flirting and putting themselves into my face. I was soon studying with Anne, one of the best students in the class. We went out on the roof to smoke during study breaks, and there began to steal kisses in the dark isolation of night. After the six months, students were rotated out to other hospitals that the nuns owned, for a period of three months.

I was sent to Washington, Missouri, where I pined away from love lost. Anne took up with another woman and I was bereft. After I returned to Saint John’s and saw the two of them always together, I made a decision to stay away from any relationship from then on. Religion was my solace.

**(1955) First Job as an Anesthetist**

After graduation and passing my national board examination, I became a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist. I took a job in Dixon, Illinois, at a state institution for the mentally retarded. I was the only anesthetist, with one surgeon who was from Iceland. All of the medical doctors there were new immigrants from Europe, new in the USA after the Hungarian Revolt from the USSR crack down in the 50’s.

The institution was outside the town of Dixon and all of the professional employees were housed in an apartment house. We had meals provided and we ate in a common dining room. This was my first experience with being the non-citizens and people speaking other than English. How amazing it was to see and hear small children speaking different languages to the German man or the Hungarian woman and English to me.

I bought my first car, a 1946 green Pontiac, in 1955, about the same time I was trying to find a new job. As a new graduate, without experience or back-up support, I felt ill at ease in this environment.

An anesthetist who was a graduate from both Saint Elizabeth’s and Saint John’s invited me to come to Albuquerque where there was a job available in the hospital where she worked. After a year at Dixon, I packed and left for New Mexico. Nora got an interview for me with her employer, a group of anesthesiologists, as well as allowing me to live with her. I began learning a lot of practical information on the conduct of safety and vigilance and the use of new equipment. This was my first experience with working with MD’s in anesthesia, and it was a good learning time as I was their employee. Later on, I would learn of the competition and tension between the Nurse Anesthetist and the Anesthesiologist vying for the same seat at the head of the operating table.

**(1956) Growing up Fast in Albuquerque**

After a few months of living in New Mexico, staying with Nora, I attended a regional Anesthesia meeting, and met many of the nurse anesthetists who lived in that state, including a redhead, Lauda B. Sims. She immediately picked me up on her “gaydar.” She ‘befriended’ me, of course, and began courting me for romance. From that first kiss, parked in her new pink Buick at the airport, watching jets land, I fell like a ton of bricks! She invited me to a weekend in Juarez, Mexico. It was then, 1957, that I had the first sexual encounter of my life. Lauda was my teacher in all things about the gay life.

She gave me a copy of *The Ladder*, the first newsletter of the “Daughters of Bilitis” by lesbians Phyllis Lyons and Del Martin, whose copies were lovingly guarded and passed between friends. This was my first recognition that there were women like us, women loving women. I felt so much conflict between my religion and how I was living, that I soon slammed the church door closed. To quote the 15th century poet William Blake:

*I went to the Garden of Love,*

*And saw what I never had seen;*

*A chapel was built in the midst,*

*Where I used to play on the green.*

*And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And “Thou shalt not” writ over the door;  
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore.*

As the thrilling gay community opened to me, a greater part of life, religion and its community was closed to me. I could not give my heart to something that my mind rejected: religion was telling me that I was a deviant and a sinner. The ‘heart’ is a metaphor for our self at its deepest level, a level below the intellect. I had to go with my heart.

I saw my first copy of the journal of the *Mattachine Society*, published in Los Angeles and sold openly on newsstands in several large cities, chronicling news of our community across the good old homophobic U.S. of A. During the 50’s, the first gay/lesbian organization, the Mattachine Society was begun in Los Angeles and the Daughters o’clock Bilitis, our first lesbian organization was formed in San Francisco.

This was the McCarthy era, when communists and homosexuals were persecuted as enemies of the country. We lived secretive, furtive lives. We felt like outcasts, condemned by society. It took courage and integrity to figure out how to live *sub-rosa* and yet have constructive lives. From 1950 to 1965, there was a genre of novels called “Lesbian Pulp Fiction.” It was a time of intrepid books to titillate men, which it would of course for two women together is beautiful. These books were everywhere – cheap paperbacks of 140-160 pages. I read them with eagerness to learn, and passed them on to other trusted lesbians. We only had these pulp books and the bar society. To us, this was the era of “The Love that dare not speak its name.” According to the American Psychological Association, I was sick. According to the law, I was a criminal. It wasn’t until the 1970’s that the American Psychiatric Association (1975) and the American Psychological Association (1976) took homosexual orientation off the books as a mental illness. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court finally decriminalized same-sex behavior.

Lauda and I got an apartment and I met her parents, who lived a few miles away. Her mother, Lena, taught me to eat and like okra, grits, and greens. At age 23, in 1957, I drank liquor for the first time since that graduation party with the sloe gin in Lincoln. Lauda drank scotch, and I learned to drink it as well. Within six months I was a alcohol dependent as she was.

It that as an overlay, I changed jobs from the group I was with to the group that Lauda worked for. We bought a house together. I bought a new car, a canary yellow Chevy Impala convertible. We made friends with a few gay men and women. The term lesbian was not in common use among use in the mid-50’s; we all called ourselves “gay” from the happiness found in our tight little closets.

During the 50’s, the vast majority of us lesbians were like isolated islands with no territory other than risky lesbian bars, and no way of finding more that a few of one another. We were in every way susceptible to accepting and even agreeing with the larger culture’s condemnation of us. The scientists tell us that internalizing homophobia is the joining and agreeing with the oppressor. Invisibility saved many of us. It is a condition of getting and keeping a job, and apartment, and being respected. Nothing in our culture offered us validation. Everything carries the message of heterosexuality: “women must have man and man must have his mate.”

Lauda had received her anesthesia training in the Navy. She impressed upon me the dangers of being gay in the military and I was dissuaded from enlisting. It was now post-Korea War, a perfect time to obtain benefits. Of course, the Vietnam war was close behind.

During the next four years of living with Lauda, who was 10 years my senior, I was mentored in the practice of anesthesia, cooking and cleaning obligations, financial responsibility, how to party and cures for the hangovers.

**(1959)**

One day, Lauda told me that she was bored with her life and wanted to move to a large city where there would be more social stimulation. Her plans included me, too, but from that time on, our relationship began to disassemble. She took trips to visit an ex-lover in Dallas. I tried two times to have sex with a male date, which confirmed my belief that I could never have a relationship with a male. Our monogamy was broken, but I still trusted Lauda as my partner and mentor. She looked for jobs for both of us and was interviewed by an anesthesiologist who practiced in the Chicago suburbs, while I located a job in a town in the other direction. We turned over the house to our best friend, a gay male couple. I think we just signed the mortgage and deed of trust over to them and then left for Illinois. I don’t even remember if my name was even on the deed.

I lasted about one year in Illinois. I had a 15-mile commute with the sun in my eyes in the morning and sun in my eyes in the late afternoon. The anesthesia department was very much behind the times in standards of practice. Many of the methods used were dangerous, yet conformity was demanded. That year in Elgin was the most miserable one of my life to that date. Our use of alcohol increase and I worried about how I could stop.

I had kept an infrequent correspondence with Virginia Reynolds, “Ren,” since my days in Lincoln, Nebraska. At this time, she lived in Sacramento, California. Our letters increased. I got a secret mailbox. We developed a romance by mail, which came to mean a lifeline for escape from my miserable situation with Lauda, the job, the weather, my dependence on alcohol, and all that was wrong with my life. Lauda was shocked when her quiescent, unquestioning partner announced that she was moving to California.

This was a tipping point in claiming my own identity. The passive ‘student’ finally had enough psychological maturity to take control of the multiple issues that were making me miserable: the standards of practice in the job I had, the winter weather (I could not go through another cold winter) and the belief that if I left Lauda, I could escape alcohol dependency. I did not view leaving Lauda as desertion of a partner. At that time, without any models or information about being in a committed relationship, it was a non-issue for me. Picture a roommate with sexual privileges moving out.

The act of taking only my personal possession, “Gayzie” the Pomeranian, and setting out west was a huge act of declaring independence. As I passed through Nebraska, the Kresha’s had a family gathering to see me. Lillian, always on the make of influence, gave me a lot of advice on the perils of a single woman traveling alone. Not even her harangue could discourage me.

This was the first of several leavings. Later on, my mature personality, or disposition, was built upon many layers of pain and sadness that started with recognizing myself as an outcast. Bent. Pervert. Alcoholic. As the song says, “Wasted all those tears, wasted all those years.”

**California, here I come (1960)**

In the 1960’s and 70’s, it was as Dickens wrote, “the best of times and the worst of times.” The United States erupted in fury against racism, the draft, the Vietnam war, organized paternalism, misogyny, and then came the sexual revolution. The second feminist movement began. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963; Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968. The country was under such duress that Lyndon B. Johnson wouldn’t/couldn’t run for reelection as president. I became awakened to politics, joined the Republican party and worked for the election of Barry Goldwater. I tried to climb the ladder away from the poor and disenfranchised. I wasn’t interested in social justice, just watching my own back.

Later in the 60’s, I learned that politics is personal, as fearless young gay men and women who were intent on changing the world joined the struggle against discrimination. In large cities, especially San Francisco, protests against anti-gay discrimination was commonplace. Protestor demanded that politicians address the issue of gay civil rights.

I was living with Ren in Sacramento, the capitol of California, 90-miles from San Francisco, where gay politics was on the front burner, boiling over. We were part of organizing, marching and asking for official status and recognition of our rights. This was the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement at the same time as the second Feminist was and liberation theology.

**Arden Community Hospital**

One of the best opportunities of my life was the timing and moving to Sacramento in 1960. A small (50 bed) proprietary hospital was just being built and I got the job to set up the anesthesia department and be the manager. There were 6-8 freelance anesthesiologists who came to do cases, but I was the one to stock, clean and cover 24-hour call, 7 days a week, week after week. I got a radio-phone installed in my station wagon which took up the entire cargo area in the rear of the vehicle. The unit was rented from the telephone company and allowed me some freedom to get out and about. Within a short time, I had won the confidence of many of the surgeons who began scheduling their cases with me, with the hospital doing the billing.

In October, 1962 our country was faced with the greatest danger, a catastrophic war: the Cuban missile crisis. Intelligence surveys from U-2 planes took pictures of Russian missiles being moved in and installed in Cuba. For 13 days the confrontation between the two big atomic powers, the USA and the USSR, brought the world to the threat of the abyss of nuclear destruction. Thank God for the Kennedy administration that performed so effectively during that critical period.

Ren had an uncle and aunt living in a Sacramento suburb who were of great support to us with their strong faith during this crisis. I went to them for solace as everyone I knew was terrified. The media screamed with panic and total coverage of the on-going crisis – chilling and terrifying. It was John F. Kennedy who saved our nation during those thirteen days in October, who stood up to Russia and negotiated the removal of the nuclear missiles from Cuba.

On the morning of November 23, 1963, I had just anesthetized a young man for the procedure of ligation of branches of the external carotids for the treatment of chronic nosebleeds [a surgery inside the head]. The Eye-Nose-Throat (ENT) doctor had just finished his scrubbing when the news came that JFK had been shot dead. Time stood still, and it was a while before we could begin the operation.

That assassination and all the events that followed until Robert Kennedy was assassinated in the kitchen of a Los Angeles hotel in 1964 stand out very bright in my memories. Our Camelot was finished, our nation impoverished.

**New Home Owner**

Ren’s aunt and uncle were realtors and encouraged us to buy a lot and build a house vs buying an older house. It was a building boom, and we joined in the excitement, as it was quite an experience of many decisions. For five years, it was a place to pour in all my money into making a household and landscaping the yards on the big lot at Del Dayo, Carmichael, CA. Ren and I met several lesbian couples, all of whom remained deeply closeted, as we eared for our jobs if anyone suspected. McCarthyism continued alive and well as the communist tensions of the cold war dragged on.

Ren had been going to a psychiatrist for about five years and was on antidepressant medications before I met her. As she medicated herself, I continued to medicate myself in the evenings with alcohol. The psychiatrist advised Ren to “get rid of that alcoholic.”

**(1964)**

That next summer, we took a car trip to Colorado with our friends Marge and Elaine. Several weeks after returning home, Ren informs me that she and Elaine are in love I still feel the emotion, thinking of that time. It is all there, waiting, in my mind’s eye.

I left. I left the pets and everything in the house and yards. I took only my personal belongings. For the second time in my life, I left everything when this relationship ended, but this time I left a huge equity in property. Ren’s dad got a lawyer who offered a settlement to sign off on the Deed of Trust. I got a check for $3000, even though I had documentation that I had paid for 100% of the real estate and all of the furnishings. This was over 40 years before State Domestic Partner legislation would afford community property rights to both parties.

I got an apartment and drank and grieved. That is when being closeted is so deadly – who could I tell my troubles to? All I could say is that I “lost my house.” It would be years before I could examine and understand why I didn’t fight for myself. I didn’t hire an attorney. With the help of many psychotherapists, at different intervals, we were able to pull apart the strands of everything that emitted from the closet, to comingle with guilt and shame at being who I was. This is what paralyzed me from speaking out and defending myself. “Are you going to settle for chicken feet all your life?”

**The Kaiser Permanente Saga**

In 1964, after five years of employment at Arden, the CEO of this small hospital sold to Kaiser Foundation Hospitals, and I went along with the equipment and the building. From then on, it was all change, progress, and growth. Within a year, the staff tripled and we were serving 10,000 Kaiser Health Plan members. Private residents were purchased and turned into clinics. Ground was broken for the new 350-bed hospital and medical center.

During those first months of being a Kaiser hospital in Sacramento, I was still on call with only one anesthetist to share the 24 hour/seven days. One afternoon, I got a call that a kid had arrived “with his neck cut wide open.” I raced the five minutes to the emergency room. He was a teenage male spewing frothy blood all over the room and everyone in it, as the surgeon attempted to compress the bleeding and not the transected trachea down his throat.

I ran for the equipment next door, slide an endotracheal tube in, cuffed it, hooked him to oxygen, plugged in an intravenous catheter and slugged him under anesthesia. The surgical repair was then possible, as the adrenaline in all of us subsided. The teenager had been illegally riding a motorcycle on the levy along the American river, when he encountered a neck-high wire stretched across the road to dissuade cyclists from wear and tear on the levies. It took hours to clean that room from floor to ceiling.

I believe my skill was spoken of far and wide after that emergency room event.

As the organization grew, those heady days of employment growth were accompanied by professional growth, as a department of nurse anesthetists and anesthesiologists combined to serve the operating room, obstetrics, and the support for inhalation therapy, intravenous therapy and Emergency department. We went from one EKG in the entire operating room to one in every room plus ventilators, C-PAP’s, exhaust evacuations, new anesthesia machines, a complete line of endotracheal tubes for every room with 4 to 5 types and sizes of laryngoscopes, precordial and esophageal monitors and you just name it, we had it!

Meanwhile, the drug companies were coming out with new agents: analgesics, antiemetics, beta-adrenergic blockers, antiarrhythmics, barbiturates, narcotic antagonists, neuromuscular blocking agents and a new battery of injectable and inhalable anesthetic agents. Every day was a constant challenge and learning process.

It almost didn’t turn out to be this fantastic professional experience. Early on, in the first half year of Kaiser when we had one anesthesiologist and four CRNA’s (Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists), the chief, Dr. Ed McMurray asked me to stock multiple dose vials for the narcotic Demerol in each anesthesia cabinet, which I knew to be a bad idea, to have a controlled substance in an open area. By law, all controlled substances had to be under lock and key, with ridged control of signing out to use for patients.

I had to go along with his request, and within several days, entire vials went missing, which I reported to the pharmacy. A few days later, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) came to my home to question me and examine my arms and pupils.

I hadn’t questioned his total authority. I was naïve and unprepared for the sociopathic evil that was in this man. Everyone in the hospital knew of my being framed and were quietly on guard.

Dr. McMurray made a rule that no elective cases could be done without him in the hospital to “supervise” the CRNA’s. Then he called in sick, and the entire operating room schedule for that day would have to be cancelled. After this had gone on, off and on for about 10 days, one of the nurses in obstetrics gave me a phone number, saying, “If that asshole calls in sick again tomorrow, have the boss call this number.”

The next day, Dr. John Mott, the Chief Executive Physician came in at 8am and asked, “Where’s Ed?” I gave him the number and waited as he dialed. It was the number of the American River Hospital operating room.

When Dr. Mott asked for Dr. McMurray, he was innocently told that, “he couldn’t come to the phone right now, he is giving an anesthetic.” The nightmare was over and we never saw McMurray again.

We heard about him, though, in the news. Dr. McMurray crashed his airplane with empty gas tanks and a high blood alcohol level, shortly after take-off. Killed along with him was the Director of Nurses from the American River Hospital. Later we read in the news that his wife had been released from a psychiatric ward, where McMurray had committed her.

**Being Aunt Rita (1965)**

After a year of apartment living and “looking for love in all the wrong places,” I went along with some women after a softball game to a lesbian bar. There I met Karen, a petite college student, 12-year my junior. It seemed that my personal life was a cycle of gaining and losing, yet I kept looking to where I could find happiness. As Karen and I got to know each other (in the biblical sense) and became friends, she decided to transfer from Chico State College to Sacramento State. Her parents lived in Sacramento in a tiny two-bedroom house with grandmother. We became family to each other, and Karen moved in with me.

That winter, I went looking for a house to purchase, and on Super Bowl Sunday I found the place. I recall the Super Bowl part because the realtor could hardly take his attention from the TV to take my offer on the house. It was a large lot (about a half-acre) with fruit trees and plenty of room for vegetable gardening. The house was a three-bedroom, 1.5 bath ranch-style house in Arden Park, Sacramento about two miles from the hospital. I took fee simple title in my own name. It would be our home for the next 21-years plus.

Karen’s parents were wonderful to me, and it was a relief to have a family again. I helped them get into a nicer home near where we lived. We rototilled, planted and harvested together. We had chickens or eggs. We had mature fruit and nut trees: almond, mission fig, Kadota fig, lemon, and plum. I planted a row of grapes, Flame red seedless and Thompsons.

We celebrated holidays together and took short trips. I bought a VW Vanowagon camper, and with the dogs, Karen and I camped all over California and the western US. We became bird watchers and joined their field trips. We bought a telescope for star gazing as well as a 22-foot Catalina sailboat for sailing and overnight camping at Lake Folsom. We took sailing lessons. I joined the Bonsai Club and learned the art of preparing and caring for miniature trees in pots and developed a nice collection.

We got a white cat named Sloopy and an Airedale named Fritz along with a mongrel, Simon, to be her companion. Karen’s first car was a sport model, an Austin-Healey; later she got a Ford pickup truck with a camper top.

Karen finished one degree after another: Physical Education, Plant Nursery Business and Computer Construction. I paid for everything, and went back to night school myself, taking subjects of interest. Karen finally got a job at Kaiser in the supply room to have an income and develop some independence. About this time, in the process of employment, it was discovered that she had a congenital spondylolisthesis and was at risk for future back dysfunction.

Karen did a lot for me, it wasn’t just give-give on my part. She kept me from drinking too much most of the time. She had a lively interest in my things that led to our traveling, identification of trees, flowers, butterflies and birds. She was the energy behind sailing in the Catalina sailboat and camping all over the western part of the country.

**Stonewall!**

The defining moment occurred at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City in the early hours of Saturday, June 28, 1969. As gay life became more visible and organizations more vocal, police harassment and repression kept pace. Police raids of gay bars had always been commonplace with beating and payoffs with very little resistance. So when the raid on the Stonewall Inn was met with violent confrontations from drag queens and other gay which lasted for two days, the police and the public felt shock waves that did not stop at the city’s boundaries. Much of the news coverage was negative, but the startling news of gay people fighting back inspired the formation of a new and radicalized “Gay Liberation” movement. Once we found each other, became visible, once we began to question the judgements made of us, our civil rights movement began.

The first Pride Parade was in New York City in 1971. There was an enormous sense of pride connected with the gay rights movement. We came together, risking our safety by protesting the injustice of heterosexists and homophobic oppression. This empowered the capacity of thousands upon thousands of us to think of ourselves in positive rather than negative terms. Stonewall gave rise to a collective consciousness that induced courage and power in individuals. We began to ‘come out of the closet’ and became part of an emerging social movement that would never again be defined and disadvantaged by an unjust dominant society. Annual Gay Pride parades came into being in big cities, not only in the USA, but all oer the world. In April of 1993, a march on Washington was held to get the attention of the government to fund the research to find the cure for AIDS. Washington had deaf ears.

Back a decade to the 1970’s, women’s liberation and gay liberation met in me to become a gay feminist. I had made a break with the past and had a chance for a new beginning. After much conflict and having an unsatisfactory state at the gut level, I came to rely increasingly on my own personal values and convictions. As my identity deepened, I became more of an individual. Being a lesbian was more my sexual identity, but [it affected] my place in life with cultural and political patterns. My growing consciousness was nurtured by insights and ideas from all the liberation movements of other oppressed peoples. Consider the loneliness and pain of participating in a culture that absolutely refuses to recognize my existence. I had been raised a heterosexual; a lot of fracturing and remolding had to be done to claim my identity and speak it out to survive.

Since I saw mainly heterosexual life all around, I took part of that system with me into my personal life: the ideal of a monogamous relationship as the only way to live respectably. The most cruel severance and oppression that I perceived in an institutional sense was in the area of religion. Rejection by churches sums up the hurt and symbolizes a severing of relationships with the human community. For some of us, being cut off from the church means being cut off from God. Even in this nonreligious age, it is hard for the individual ego to assert herself against centuries of ecclesiastical authority. I was grateful for my ability to hide, but my life was literally in pieces, leading to psyche stress and damage. Some of us would strive to be nondescript or neutral in our appearance. I would not want to appear too feminine, which would attract unwanted attention from men, and yet I did not want to appear too masculine, which seemed equally unnatural.

**National Organization for Women (NOW)**

We assumed that we were included in the Feminist cause; after all, hadn’t the first feminists worked for the right of women to control their own lives and bodies? When Women’s Liberation got underway in the mid-1960’s, attitudes about lesbians were the same as the general population. From 1968 to 1971, some of the members of NOW, the most influential women’s liberation group, moved the lesbian issue from one engendering fear and silence within the ranks to one that got NOW’s public support. Giant steps in just three years!

Betty Friedan, found and first president of NOW expressed fears, calling us lesbians the “lavender menace” that would be the death of the movement. Rita Mae Brown pointed out how discriminated against a lesbian feels and the psychic damage she aces when she cannot speak openly to her sisters.

What moved NOW so dramatically in three years? It was partly a political triumph and partly a profound attitudinal change in society. Two elements – commitment to the women’s movement and lesbianism – had to be made compatible, as they clearly existed together. Regaining a sense of solidarity was of primary importance. Feminists arrived at a turning point in their conscience raising, only to find that lesbians were already there. Daily we defied sexual roles by freely combining any human behavioral characteristics that we desired as individuals. The choice of an unauthorized love partner is only one way, often one of the last ways, in which we broke the assigned female role. Lesbians choose autonomy even in the race of incredible hostility.

There was a book published in 1974 by Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love entitled, “Sappho was a right-on woman, a liberated view of lesbianism.” They said, “Sappho could be regarded as the archetypal lesbian. She was an educated woman at a time when most women could not read or write, a political exile, a mother, and one of the finer poets who ever lived. When all women apparently lived to serve the male hierarchy and died anonymously without leaving a trace of their uniqueness, she said her name would live through history, and it has.”

**Alcohol vs Religion (the 70’s)**

Throughout the 1970’s, my alcohol intake progressed and the effect on my relationships and work became more apparent. It took a long time to get into trouble with alcohol, but alcohol is patient, it will wait for you.

Karen thought that if we went to church, it might help me control my drinking by enriching my spiritual life. She wasn’t too far amiss in that insight, as I had replaced my spiritual life with medicating myself with alcohol.

One Saturday evening, we got out the yellow pages and found the Episcopal Church closest to our home. Despite growing up in the Catholic church, I hated it for its condemnation of my gay and lesbian community. It would be 40 years before the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, in their pastoral letter, stated that a “homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.” The church finally recognized what science had been saying for many years: being gay or lesbian is not a choice. However, the Catholic church still calls us “intrinsically disordered.”

I wanted some connection to a liturgical church and knew that the Episcopalians were a bridge church between Catholic and Protestant. As this was our first foray into the enemy camp, we decided to ‘pass’ as niece and aunt. For the first year that we attended Saint Michael’s church, I sat in the back and cried through each service. The Quakers have a saying that “crying clean from the inside out” and that is what it felt like to me.

**Free from bondage (1981)**

The transition from the bondage of alcoholism to the infilling of the Spirit took about a year. During that time, on one weekend, Karen and her Dad went to Medford, Oregon to visit his brother. I began celebrating my ‘freedom’ from Karen controlling my intake. By Saturday night, I was so acutely intoxicated from about 24 hours of drinking hard liquor, I didn’t know if it was growing dark… or getting light outside. Was it 7pm or 7am? In a moment of insight, I knew that I was going to go crazy from ETOH encephalopathy [alcohol induced brain and organ damage], or, just get the gun from its rug under the mattress right now.

I found myself on the kitchen floor by my blue telephone chair, praying for help. Then I went to bed and slept until early Sunday morning, which was very unusual for a case of acute intoxication. I called Karen’s mother, asking her to come and get me and take me to their house. I sat outside in the sunshine all day reading the Readers Digest, over and over.

That day was August 19, 1981, the first day of sobriety for the rest of my life. After several months, an AA member at church intuited my “white knuckle” sobriety and invited me to AA meetings. Diane became my sponsor and we attended meetings together for a few years until she moved away and I didn’t feel the need for meetings.

Was I immediately happier, better adjusted? It was a long process – I had to work the program and carefully consider whether my years of substantial alcohol intake had affected my judgment, however subtly.

The process that was the most helpful were: *Step four*: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves and *Step ten*: Continued to take a personal inventory and when we are wrong, promptly admit it. The twelve steps and twelve traditions of Alcoholism have worked for many people since 1935, and I was one of the blessed ones, too.

By personality type, I am an ESFJ (Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory). [ESFJ stands for Extraverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judging. ESFJ indicates a person who is energized by time spent with others (Extraverted), who focuses on facts and details rather than ideas and concepts (Sensing), who makes decisions based on feelings and values (Feeling) and who prefers to be planned and organized rather than spontaneous and flexible (Judging). ESFJs are sometimes referred to as Provider personalities because of their interest in taking care of others in practical ways. – truity.com] My thinking processes are closely tied to talking and writing. By working with steps four and ten, I could process my thoughts by talking with Diane or at meetings and by reflecting on my life past and present and then writing it down.

There was a piece by Rae Turnbull that appeared in the newspapers in 1982 of which I have passed out copies, far and wide:

*“Once I get it down on paper means that I have come to terms. The things that come closes to my heart are the hardest ones to sort out and write down. The feelings so complex, that usually the joy and pain are mixed; for seldom is my life so crystal clear that I can see beyond the present plan. But as I write, it comes into focus and I can find perspective once again. I can sense direction and sometimes even purpose, in what I have to deal with at the time. The words have given form to feeling and I can understand, once I get it written down.”*

So, here I am, writing all about the past, trying to stand outside the things that have happened to me and make sense of them. I would like part of my life back, especially that part that was medicated by alcohol or sick from hangovers. There are so many levels of loneliness in being marginalized by sexual orientation and alcoholism.

No better statement of my need to balance my sober life can be found in the Serenity Prayer. It prays:

1. “God grant me the serenity…,” which means that I no longer recoil from the past doings, live in jeopardy because of my behavior now, or worry about the unknown future. I look for regular times to renew myself and avoid those times of depletion which make me vulnerable to despair and old destructive patterns. (remember H.A.L.T. – don’t get too Hungry, too Angry, too Lonely, or too Tired).

2. “accept the things I cannot change…,” accepting change means that I do not cause suffering for myself by clinging to things that don’t exist. All that I can live in is the present, and how I respond to the transforming cycles of my life of birth, growth, and death.

3. “to change the things I can…,” giving us attempts to control outcomes of things outside my boundaries and have an honest appraisal of my limits.

4. “and the wisdom to know the difference.” Based on my life experiences, the wisdom comes rom learning and recognizing new paths that open in the ever-flowing stream of living.

Amen? Amen!!

I have many regrets that I squandered so much of my life in the bondage to alcohol: 25 years. So many things I could have done, had healthier relationships, more achievements to account for in my life. I feel especially sad when I think about my death in the context of the years wasted. Freud said that a person cannot imagine her own death. Maybe that is the reason immortality has such a strong hold on our psyche.

The tippy-toe process of coming out as a recovering alcoholic would be a useful experience as a lesbian much later on. I make this status known in many little ways, for example, announcing it off-handedly or more formally by paying for the Sunday altar flowers with the notation in the church bulletin, “Given by Rita Kresha, in gratitude and thanksgiving for two years of sobriety.” (As I write this, around 2005, I have now been sober longer than I was held in ETOH addiction). This public action is one that I continue on every anniversary of both being sober and being smokeless.

After I had been sober long enough to trust myself, I took on the fierce addiction of smoking. As Ray Charles said, “It is easier to give up heroin than to stop smoking.” This is because the physiological need to use nicotine is every 30-minutes, whereas small dose heroin use can only be on the weekends. I began smoking at age 10 when my brothers paid me for polishing their shoes on Saturday with cigarettes. As a health provider, I had tried to stop many times and hated the habit. The month before my 50th birthday (February 1984), I took a week of vacation and stayed home to kick it out of my life. I went a little crazy, walked for hours, drank water by the quarts and chewed carrots and celery. By the time the vacation was over, most of the nicotine had metabolized out of my body and only the psychological habit was left to combat. By winning the struggle over alcohol and cigarettes, I was a healthier and stronger person to combat the next battle ahead.

**Acquired Immune Deficiency Disease (AIDS)**

In 1981, the first article was published about the ‘gay disease.’ AIDS was loose in the gay population. How I hoped and prayed over the next decade that the heteros would be caught up in the contagion! That’s how much we were scapegoated and hated and I wanted a level playing field! As the entire gay/lesbian community came together to deal with the crisis, my volunteer work was met with the scornful admonition – “Everyone will think you’re one of them,” yet I stayed in the closet. I was a volunteer caregiver for eight years – twenty funerals.

I was miserable at the very thought of being loathed by people who would not longer like or respect me if they knew I was a same-gender-loving person. The then President, Reagan, never mentioned the HIV-AIDS until the very end of his second term, around 1987. My brothers in the gay community died by the thousands, as there was no medication and no research to study the disease and find a mechanism to interrupt the viral load from replicating. It would be 20 years before there were specific medications to keep HIV-AIDS people alive. In the late 90’s, the cost was about $9,000 monthly for those who had insurance or could afford it. Meanwhile, the disease spread to become a worldwide pandemic. Since heterosexuals are about 90-per cent of the population, it is now a hetero disease. The virus plays no favorites.

**More Coming out (1987)**

Being an AIDS caregiver bothered Karen a lot: guilt by association, unsure of the mode of transmission, and the emotional/psychological cost of hours spent caregiving and death watching on my part, took a toll on her. She was afraid that we would be discovered as lesbians. We had both become active at Saint Michael’s Episcopal and the higher the profile, the more active the gossip became.

Finally, a woman in the Altar Guild began speaking out about us. The young radical conservative curate was known to be anti-divorce and we knew that it was only a matter of time before he heard the rumor. One day her confronted me about having a divorced priest on our Cursillo team. I immediately intuited that if he ever heard the rumors going on around us, he would make a spectacle of us. We left that church.

Karen and I looked at several other denominations, and then checked out an old run-down Episcopal parish on the poor side of town. Being the doers that we both were, we soon established ourselves as valuable members, contributing both treasure and time, but still in the closet. We continued to pose as aunt and niece, though the posing became a self-fulfilling prophecy as our relationship became more platonic.

As noted earlier, Karen like college and worked hard to excel. She completed a B.S. in Health Sciences, and A.A. in horticulture as well as computer studies, all while casting about for something to provide a career. I kept encouraging her to go into elementary school teaching, as she was so terrific with young children, but she demurred.

In the summer of 1987, Karen finally took a job in the computer industry with a company in Morgan Hill, CA and moved to Gilroy, well over 100 miles away. The Zumwalt parents and I helped her move and empowered her in any way we could to promote her independence. For the next several years, all of us took turns driving the two hours to spend the weekend, with Karen coming home, or me going to Gilroy. This long-distance relationship further thinned out the already loose, platonic relationship that had progressed over the past decade.

I became more independent myself, thinking about my future. By this time, I had been in the field of anesthesia since 1954 and experienced the field change 100% every decade. As I aged, the process of change seemed to accelerate, and it became a worry to try and keep up with the pace and the changes. I was keenly aware that I was the old woman in a department that had become over 50% young, aggressive, male anesthetists. I needed to change.

One day an incident happened which brings me shame every time I remember it. I had brought an awakening patient into the recovery room and was giving report to the kindly nurse that I liked and respected. I have no recollection of any trigger, but suddenly I was spewing out a stream of obscenities to her. She immediately went into the supervisor’s office.

When he called me in, I was intensely ashamed and thought to myself, “I need to get out of anesthesia.”

After years of reflection on this incident, I believe that something triggered a massive shame attack with disassociation, with my reaction to Peggy as the ‘enemy.’ In psychological terms, I was reacting to her as to everyone who had ever been involved in other shaming incidents, with an explosive reaction to unhealed wounds of shame. From childhood, I was raised in a shaming environment from Sophia and Lillian. Add to that the feelings of being different with being same-gender identified from adolescence on, and somehow knowing that it had to be kept hidden. Add to that the “second rate” career as a Nurse Anesthetist as compared to an Anesthesiologist! Add to that the intense feelings of shame once I had become alcohol dependent and the whole hiding in the gay closet syndrome. Layer upon layer, year after year.

As I had more years of recovery and more years of therapy, I came to realize that the depth of our pain can never be wholly share, fully understood or actually realized by anyone other than ourselves. Each of us, alone, must come to terms with our grief, despair, even guilt about what our life ha turned out to be. The suffering of being a sexual minority and being addicted to alcohol – that suffering eventually prompted the changes necessary for spiritual grown. It pushed me like no other experience to God, for understanding, for relief, for unwavering security. It isn’t easy to look on suffering a gift and I don’t think I’ll ever understand it.

**Seeking a second career (1989)**

For several years I was friendly with an elderly minister who was serving as a volunteer chaplain at Kaiser hospital. He was serving without any stipend and I sent $100 a month to the College of Chaplains for his benefit. He told me that there were 13,000 hospitals in this country that had not chaplains, as that was the first non-essential item cut from hospital budgets.

Gradually the idea formed that I could do that work, once I was financially secure enough to retire from the practice of anesthesia. I didn’t pursue the idea very energetically, but gradually found the information of what chaplaincy training consisted of and where the schools were. One was right where I lived, but somehow, I hadn’t asked the right questions and my inquiries were not taken seriously, as I was not ordained in any denomination.

From the Episcopal priest I learned that I could be ordained as a vocational deacon after attending the School For Deacons (SFD) and receiving a degree in Theological Studies. The school was a two-hour drive and classes were held on alternate weekends to accommodate persons who had jobs. To become a hospital chaplain, I would need an ecclesiastical endorsement (ordination).

I began the School for Deacons in the fall of 1989 at the same time that I was becoming acquainted with Susan Vanderburgh, whom I had met at Cursillo weekend that spring. [Cursillos are highly structured weekend retreats to become more fully Christian]. We began quite a friendship with a lot of chemistry between us, even though I was 55 and she was 45. However, she was not a lesbian, nor did I ever have any kind of relationship with a straight woman. I led a Cursillo weekend that October and asked Susan to be on the team. Karen met her, and we continued to live in our separate towns: Karen in Gilroy, Susan in El Cerrito, and Rita in Sacramento.

Susan and I began visiting each other at our homes and going on small trips for rest and relaxation. I brought Sacramento peaches one time for our lunch, and had a powerful experience in my limbic system. As we were cutting open and eating the peaches, a memory leapt out at me of eating runty peaches with Russell in childhood! [Russell was the 8-year-old boy killed in a car accident]. Scientists say that the nose sends messages straight to the limbic system, a mysterious, intensely emotional part of the brain. Few things are as memorable as a smell which can be overwhelmingly nostalgic as it triggers powerful images and emotions.

That autumn of 1989, Susan told me that she was in love with me and wanted us to share our lives together. There had been a lot of intense emotion and physical long hugging drawing us together for months.

Karen felt emotional distress as well as on-going back pain and dislike for the job that she had and made the decision to move back to Sacramento. The tension was enormous. I consulted with the Episcopal priest, who counseled that I take a vacation and get out of the state for a long period of prayer and reflection. We were both in psychological counselling.

In December, the first weekend in Advent, Susan and I spent a weekend at Monterrey, sharing our bed and committing ourselves to sharing our lives. Within a week, Karen asked if I had had sex with Susan. I said “yes,” and she immediately began to pack. I left the house for that night and the next day, going to Susan’s apartment.

When I returned home, everything about Karen had been removed. Eight months later, after the sale of the house, I sent $16,000 to her through an intermediary. That was the only contact that we ever had after the night she began to move out of the house that we had shared for twenty-one and a half years.

These many years later, Karen seldom comes to mind as an invited guest. The memory of those last few days when our relationship ended is so painful, still, that only prayer can suffice to change my thoughts. Those memories are always tainted by a feeling of being disloyal and hurtful. I pray that our relationship was more helpful than hurtful – that things done and things left undone are covered by the wideness of God’s mercy.

The greatest source of care during this crisis was other lesbians and gay men. In the life that Karen and I shared, role models for long-term lesbian couples were not easily found, not because they didn’t exist, but because gays then were mostly closeted. It was only after our relationship ended that I was able to construct a personal rationale for church participation where I could be myself as a lesbian. Essentially, it came down to this: I was created lesbian – I did not choose it. I am created as one version of God’s image and am loved by God whether or not the church understands. I will live the best Christian life that I can within a community of faithful as long as I am accepted. My bottom line is commitment and trust in the love of God, not especially the organized church. I strive to live my life as authentically as possible.

**Another Life, another persona**

New Year’s Day, 1990, stared me down with many decisions. Within the space of a month, I was living alone and having a beginning relationship with Susan. I was commuting to the School for Deacons twice a month with three others from my parish. I applied to the vestry for an application for an application for access to the ordination track to be a vocational deacon so as to qualify to be a hospital chaplain. I began investigating chaplaincy schools. A meeting was set up with 6-8 members of the parish to begin the provisions for Postulancy and Candidacy as set forth in the Canons of the church. Susan was job hunting and located a job in Phoenix, AZ. On a stress level of 300, I’m well past the top marker.

On the other hand, this was one of the rare times in my life when I could act as a free agent. I could choose to do what I wanted to do and it was exhilarating and underlined my personal freedom.

The parish had an ‘upper room’ at the rear of the nave, which used to be the crying room, the room that parents with infants and small children would use while attending worship services. I had spent many weeks cleaning out this upstairs area which had become a junk storage for many years. After scrubbing and repainting every square inch, that area was turned into a meeting room, with a beautiful large table and padded chairs, all paid for by me.

It was in this room that I had reclaimed for the parish’s use, that the committee met to hear my call for Postulancy for the Diaconate. The members had met Susan, and they knew that Karen had moved on to another parish. I knew that I must come out of the closet to them as the only way to explain why it was that I am planning to sell my house and move to Phoenix.

That moment is seared in my memory.

From then on, the committee took off without me. There is the old saw, “all the chickens flew to the top of the roost.” They cut me out of the loop from then on, having their own meetings and consultations. The pastor, who had a gay son, was neutral at best and hurtful and homophobic at worst. I was very unprepared and inarticulate with the situation. I was frightened by this exposure and their response. It was out of the closet and into the fire.

They denied me access to the ordination process, under the guidance of the “Holy Spirit.” My confidence and strength seeped out of a huge hole in my psyche. For one minute I had been a member of society of the church and with the tick of the clock and a turn of the screw, I had become an outcast. Later, as this occurred again in the Diocese of Arizona. As Charlie Schultze used to say, “Well, it’s just personal.”

Susan and I had a long-distance relationship for the first eight months of 1990. I continued with the diaconate education and was accepted at the chaplaincy training program at Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix, to begin in the fall.

I took early retirement from Kaiser-Permanente Medical group. After twenty-five years with Kaiser-Permanente, I got the gold clock for the mantel-piece. Will I have a tiny footnote in history? No. No offspring and no discoveries.

But I worked long, hard hours with being on call and working overtime. I administered safe anesthetics to hundreds of thousands of people. I saved many lives through my skill in resuscitating accident victims, heart attacks and other medical emergencies in the hospital. Of course, others were involved in the resuscitations, but without adequate ventilation, sedation and intravenous access, other techniques would be inadequate. It was always a team effort, with the anesthetist as a part of the team.

I sold the house. I sold or gave away many of my belongings. I sold the guns and the photography equipment, and threw away twelve carousels of 35mm slides never to pursue photography again. Regrets are useless, destructive even.

We bought a house in nearby Mesa, Arizona with the funds from the Sacramento sale. It was a real Taj Mahal on an artificial lake with mature palm trees. On August 1, 1990, we moved in to begin anew.

On a stress scale of 300, I was now at 1,000. It was 110 to 120 degrees every day with cooling to 100 at night. People walked their dogs at midnight, with the dogs dancing their feet off the hot sidewalk. Two air conditioner unites were on each end of our “H” shaped house. When arrived, a mushroom was growing out of the mopboard in the living room, with monsoon rain every other day until early autumn.

Susan’s employer went bankrupt at the same time she signed the contract for the house. A group of pastoral counselors re-organized and got an Interfaith Counseling Center up and running again. I began the fall semester at the school for Deacons in California, commuting by America West Airlines twice a month.

I began hospital chaplaincy training in Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix. During that year of training, I had many memorable experiences. Policeman DOA in the emergency room and mothers in hysterics over their dead children. One mother said, “I was too happy. I knew God would do something to me.”

Then there was the call to come up to attend to a Jesuit priest dying of AIDS; the Director of the Jesuit College had left the message to “just call when it is over.” I sat with him for his last two hours of this life, praying out loud from the prayers for the dying and touching his arm and holding his hand. I anointed him with the oil of gladness that he would be soon welcomed by his Lord. Not even one priest came to administer the Last Rites of the church to him.

At this time, Susan had a breast biopsy which was benign, but that was followed by a hematoma or bruise that lasted for months. She had tripped and fallen, injuring her shoulder, disabling her for months. She had earlier applied for life insurance and when the nurse came to the house for a physical intake exam, Susan’s blood pressure was found to be 230 over 100!!

We were both homesick for California and took every opportunity to go back home when we could. We went through money like rain water, and soon I was having to withdraw money from my IRA which was taxed at my current rate plus a 10% penalty for withdrawing before age 59½ (I was 56). With each year, Susan’s income diminished and we were in quite a pickle. Needless to say, the honeymoon was definitely over. We were on the road to Damascus, that road most traveled.

There were some good things, with the foremost being Susan’s ordination in the American Baptist Church. A progressive pastor of the First Baptist Church in Phoenix mentored her through the process and on April 26, 1992, the happy event occurred. Elizabeth, Jane and Jere from the Bay area, the Johnsons from Oregon and my sister Mary from Nebraska attended. It was a huge beautiful party for about 60 family, friends, clergy and Susan’s colleagues. Susan’s family saw her in a new way: a successful professional who was worthy of respect and honor. The event was recorded by video, photographs, and official certificate.

**John and David’s story**

When I moved from Sacramento to Mesa in 1990, I had enough stress with all of the changes, the new relationship, the new career change to Hospital Chaplaincy and I vowed that I wouldn’t get involved with AIDS support again.

However, at the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Phoenix, Susan and I met John State and David Ice, both HIV+ gay men who had recently moved to Arizona from Southern California. They cultivated a relationship with us, saying, very frankly, that they would like to have some good friends who would be their support when they became more ill.

We went together to see the unfolding of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the convention center. The quilt had just been shown in Washington, D.C. at the mall between the White House and the Washington Monument. There had been 32,000 colorful panels measuring three feet by six feet, the size of a human grave. Part of that group of panels came to Phoenix. David played his harp while we, the living, walked amidst the thousands of woven tombs.

John planned the design of his panel. He and David were musicians and very creative. This was an intense and brief friendship about a year before John became desperately ill. I had finished the chaplaincy training and was working as a volunteer chaplain, so I was available to spend time with John in their home with the living room set up as an intensive are hospital room.

Toward the end, David also became ill and John was moved to a Hospice unit for AIDS patients. I was with John most of the day for several days when it seemed time to call John’s elderly parents who lived in Tucson.

Two days later, with David in another hospital, John asked me for a sip of water. He had a tracheostomy in his throat and couldn’t take anything by mouth other than oral care. I thought to myself of the several passages in scripture that use the analogy of “giving a drink of water” for the act of compassion. It was the last thing that he asked of me.

I called his parents, the priest, and the hospital where David was to have him brought over by wheelchair ambulance. We stayed with him with praying and touching until he breathed his last.

At his memorial service, we watched a video of John conducting the Requiem by Fauré, with the Cathedral choir in Los Angeles. It is a lullaby really, and that is what a requiem really is. We use many anodynes but the music should be gentle…

“grant them rest, rest everlasting. May the angels lead you into paradise, may the angles receive you in your coming.”

Later on, when a person said to me that he or she never knew anyone with AIDS, I would say, “let me tell you a story.” We still have his handmade angel on the refrigerator door, a reminder to left John in prayer that he “may grow from strength to strength in the knowledge of God.”

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One of the biggest sources of injury to lesbians and gay persons was the injustice perpetrated by the culture and the church. Based on ignorance, stereotyping, fear, and hatred, along with a selective use of the bible, the onset of AIDS in the USA let loose increased oppression and exclusion. And here I thought the “good news” of the gospel was inclusivity!

Gay churches sprang up to care for those with AIDS and their caregivers. The Metropolitan Community Church, San Francisco, had 500 funerals from 1981 to 1991. Our gay and lesbian community pulled together to encourage each other that he or she is normal and has a valuable part to play in the world.

Coming out as a lesbian in our culture means breaking out of protection, and to open one’s self to internal terrors and social risks that can be deadly. We fight for understanding and acceptance of the inner meaning of our lives. We are also fighting against an external system of hatred of our core humanity and the internalized self-denigration that comes from our culture of “homo-hatred.” To affirm oneself and live openly and joyfully with it, is to lose status and launch into a perilous future. I could not face those lessons alone. In addition to personal courage, considerable social support is required from other gays and our allies: it is a lifelong process. It goes beyond simple tolerance and affirmation, coming out is a part of justice-making. Affirmation and justice interlock! Somewhere along the line I realize that people can never quite love us because they will never understand us.

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Einstein was a physicist who lived easily with the concept of a Creator. His name for God was the Old One. Yes, very old, and One, because definition of God is not only unduplicated and all-encompassing, but also without gender. After living in the 20th century, after many genocides, the holocaust, A-bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, AIDS and already six wars involving the USA, how can I seriously believe in the traditional concept of God any longer? To be logical or rational I think that I must seek God elsewhere than in the religious scriptures. I don’t even know if I am a Christian or an animist, just liking the rituals, incense, processions, colors, and charms.

Augustine said that to know God, I must long for God. The epistle of James says, “draw near to God and God will draw near to you.” I haven’t thrown out God, but a lot of Christian teaching is disgusting: ‘babies are born damned to hell unless someone sprinkles water on them.’ Oh, God, we cannot begin to count the injustices of religion towards humans! God’s love for us is compassion, suffering with us in our suffering.

In the best part parts of the Servant poems in Isaiah, especially Chapter 53, the suffering servant’s vicarious suffering restores all people to God (by his wounds we are healed). I believe that this poem is taken to describe the purpose of God’s people (the covenant community) because the servant (Christ) brings blessings to many. This redemptive power of our pain and suffering (like Christ’s suffering) is a conundrum that has bothered me for a long time. It ties in with my understanding of social justice. Somehow, suffering is the key to lead us to God. Yes, God, please explain the injustices toward humans.

Foundation of Moral Law:

Our judgements of ethical behavior or based on Moral Law, especially bioethical issues of this modern time, but for all time, these principles undergird virtually all cultures and societies that have gone before us. These include:

1. *Respect for autonomy* – the principle that a rational individual should be given freedom in personal decision-making, without undue coercion.

2. *Justice* – the requirement for fair, moral, and impartial treatment of all persons.

3. *Beneficence* – the mandate to treat others in their best interest.

4. *Non-maleficence* – “First do no harm,” as in the Hippocratic oath.

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Harry Hay and Gay Liberation

Harry Hay is honored by many as the “Father of Gay Liberation.” He was the originator of the Mattachine Society, the first substantial national homosexual rights organization that grew out of his progressive, idealistic politics at the end of the 1940’s. By 1979, he and others started the Radical Faerie Movement, local circles of gay men to explore gay consciousness and vision.

There is a story that summarizes how he taught about the work of gay liberation:

“Now, Euclid of Alexandria, the great mathematician, said to have told Ptolemy the First, “There is no royal road to geometry.” Ptolemy was the pharaoh of Egypt and felt that the privilege of his status would entitle him to know mathematics automatically. He believed that Euclid should ‘give’ it to him outright, that he shouldn’t have to work to learn it.

Euclid again told the pharaoh, “There is no royal road to mathematics. That is, you can’t simply be given knowledge. You have to do the hard work of learning it. You have to study it, which takes time and effort. There is no short cut.”

Harry then linked up that story with the work of gay liberation.

“Some people want to lead others, or push them along, or worse, to intellectualize them into their hearts. But that will never work; you can’t even teach others the steps. It takes hard work to get to the heart of any matter, and each person must do the work herself/himself. And the last part of getting there takes a leap, a leap in the dark to get to the Subject-to-Subject consciousness. The liberation comes through the heart connection.”

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**Out and About in Arizona**

We were active in Catholic Dignity and Episcopal Integrity which teamed together and worshipped together with an alternated bimonthly liturgy. At one time, Susan wrote an article of encouragement to the gay/lesbian community as being one of them, published in the American Baptist newsletter for AWAB, the gay/lesbian caucus for “welcoming and affirming” congregations. That newsletter came to the attention of a fundamentalist pastor in Phoenix, who brought it to the attention of the executive director of the Southwest Region who had approved Susan’s ordination. The great wheels of **injustice** began to grind, and within a year after we moved back to California, they renounced and withdrew her ordination.

There were two other memorable experiences while in Arizona, the kind that makes one feel that we are truly part of the universe. A lesbian couple from Florida had come to visit to celebrate their 15th anniversary and see the Grand Canyon. The month before they were to arrive, we spent a weekend at Grand Canyon to check out the facilities and get our bearings. It was near the summer equinox and we stayed at the south rim to watch the sundown, when we realized that the full moon was rising in the east, just as the sun was going down in the west. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them with palpable currents of light passing back and forth. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up.

They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, and there we were, exactly between them, which seemed amazing. Some bystanders told us to return in the morning at sunrise to see the exact opposite phenomena. We drove out to the rim in the moonlight the next morning, waiting. Just so beautiful! The next month when our friends were with us, we went to the Grand Canyon at the time of the full moon and did the same thing again. Although it was off by a few minutes, the dazzling sight was there both at night and the next morning. To this day, those are the most poignant memories of the Grand Canyon – the sight, the smell of the creosote bushes, and the cool rush of the wind coming up from the bottom of the canyon.

**Diocese of Arizona**

After being affiliated with the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Phoenix from 1990 and having graduated from the Episcopal School for Deacons in 1992, I began to try again to apply for postulancy to be an ordained deacon in order to have ecclesiastical endorsement to be a hospital chaplain. I already had one year of chaplaincy training and was working at a hospital as a student volunteer. The appointment with the bishop was set and I arrived smiling and optimistic. The meeting was over in several minutes: the bishop said “no.”

Stunned, I asked if he had any questions on anything, and the bishop again said, “no.” Recorded in the Constitution and Canons from the 1976 convention was a one-line statement that “no practicing homosexual shall be ordained.”

When we returned to California in 1994, I attended the American Baptist Church with Susan for the next six years. Little did I know that in their Episcopal General Convention of 1994, that ban was lifted and replaced with non-exclusionary statements. I was in a Diocese that was ordaining gay and lesbian people for a number of years – I could have “gone for it” again, but I was too acutely wounded to try ever again, even if I had known that the prohibitions against me had been lifted. When I did shuffle back into the Episcopal church, the parish (of convenience) that I landed in had a pastor who was “tolerant” but not especially accepting for who I am.

**Coming Out to Family**

From the Kresha Kronicle on Christmas, 1993

Christmas Letter, 1993

Dear Kresha family<

This Christmas is my fourth and last in Arizona. My life partner, Susan, and I have decided to heed the claim of California on our hearts and plan to move back there in early 1994, probably to the East Bay Area (Oakland, etc.). The heat and intense sun exposure in this lower Sonoran Desert has been very unpleasant for six months of the year, and we have promised ourselves that our next summer will be in lovely northern California.

During this past year I have finally had enough “free” tie to experience more fully the impact of all the changes in the past five years: Retirement, change of professional identity, getting a theological degree and hospital Chaplaincy training, allowing myself to come out of my lifelong living “in the closet,” and identifying myself as a lesbian woman, denial of ordination to the Episcopal Diaconate solely on the grounds of gender identity, and working as a hospital Chaplain without pay. Much of my energy has been directed toward wrestling with the hard questions, “Who am I, really, now?” and “What work is mine to do now?” As I prepared to celebrate my sixtieth birthday in several months, I am hounded by the existential questions of what leads me to healing and wholeness. I found out that the first step toward wholeness is to be truthful about who I have always been.

I hope that by sharing my gender identity and religious affiliation will be as prayerfully received as it is offered to all of you. I have chosen the sacred season of Christmas to become vulnerable to all of you. Jesus took on our humanity and became totally vulnerable to show us how much God loves us. “Let us love one another, for love comes from God.” 1 John 4:7

May the blessing of the holy time be with all of you!

Love, Rita

**California here we come (again)**

By the of 1993, we made the decision that we had to move back to the Bay area. Susan’s income dwindled down as the cases with insurance were assigned by the office coordinator to the men in the Pastoral Counseling Group. Our mental health was on the skids. We did not develop rich friendships within the gay/lesbian community. Who would want us for friends when all we talked about was hungering for California and dissing hot-as-hell red-necked Arizona?

In January of 1994 we moved to 72 Glen Eden Ave., Oakland, California. It was the week after the Northridge earthquake, so we followed the moving van on a detour to our new home. No jobs. We rented our AZ house to a neighbor at a discounted rate so that they would take good care of the property, as we couldn’t sell in the ’93 recession. We rented the house on Glen Eden, which we purchased several years later.

At age 60, I went back to work in a field that I had never worked in: Community Home Nursing. I sensed that I would have to find a niche to hold onto to keep a job, so I took on Enteral Patients. These are chronic, vegetative-state patients who cannot swallow and have nasogastric tubes of gastrostomy tubes with light nutrition. All of the aspects of chronic illness were involved: bedsores, urinary catheters, pneumonia, multiple drugs, and all within the patient’s home with the family as caregivers.

The learning curve was very steep. The territory was from 25 miles north to 25 miles south from the office, and from the San Francisco Bay to the East Bay hills.

One day, I felt a crack in my total knee replacement (done 7-8 years prior) followed by symptoms of a loose body in that joint. I had an arthroscopy to remove the loose pieces of the plastic cap under the patella. After several days, even though I had some drainage, I went back to work with clearance from the orthopedic doctor. Ten days after the surgery, I awakened at 3am with a temperature of 103 degrees and Susan took me to the emergency room.

This was the beginning of six months of fighting off a Staphylococcus Aureus infection in that total joint, involving intravenous antibiotics for 6 weeks with no cure of the infection. “Metal slime” is the term for the new bugs that grow on the surface of the metal, with the antibiotic unable to reach them to rupture their membranes. The next step was to remove the artificial joint and enclose the limb in an ankle to hip cast. I had a hospital bed in the living room. Then came another four weeks of antibiotics with a PIC line in place, then back to surgery for a replacement of another knee replacement after I was infection free. Oy vay! During this time of suffering and depression, all three of our cats would sleep with me, curling as close to me as they could to give me comfort. Misty was on one side, and Tommy and Julian together on the other side.

I was on state unemployment for one year; then at the age of 64, I resigned at the Visiting Nurses Association and began collecting Social Security benefits.

During the four years that I worked at the VNA, Susan was struggling to build a private practice and was employed as a supervisor of therapist students at Hayward State College. She was active in the Pacific Region Pastoral Counselor Association and gradually developed a profile for marketing herself for private practice.

One day I realized that the two-story building at the end of our street was housing 17 psychotherapists and psychologists. Susan followed up on that information and sublet an office for several hours, two days a week. So, in 1998, her private practice was born. Several years later, she began working with JFK University Holistic Counseling Center, supervising therapist students singly and in groups. The two jobs fit together nicely.

**Elizabeth (1997)**

Susan’s mother, Elizabeth, lived in San Francisco in an Edwardian three-story house by herself. She had housed several grandchildren while they were in college, but now in 1997, she was isolated and in declining health with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). We were driving to her house several times weekly to take her to the grocery store, other errands, and out for entertainment and dining. Susan’s sister, Jan, along with Jan’s husband Jerome, and the two of us began discussing “what to do about Mom.”

Elizabeth became acutely ill with pneumonia, was hospitalized, and then came to live with us to recuperate. Now, everything is on the “front burner, boiling over,” as the saying goes. All of us could see that she would not ever be able to return to her home without a caregiver. I see in my mind’s eye the shock in Elizabeth’s face as all of us laid out the situation in stark reality, the day the five of us sat around our dining table and had an “intervention.” Even at 78, she was in denial about her vulnerability, dyeing her hair and dressing in youthful clothing. “You have more grey hair than I do, Susan,” she said one day.

The decision was made to sell her house and build an apartment onto our home. This was accomplished within the year, and Susan and I settled into the routine of Elizabeth living with us in her own quarters, but having her meals with us and we being her caregivers. She lived with us for almost seven years until her death at 86 years. The added bedroom with full bathroom isn’t used except as a guest room, until such time that either of us need a caregiver in our old age.

**Jan (2004)**

When we lived in Arizona, Jan, Susan’s sister, had breast cancer treated with chemotherapy and radiation. She was never the victim, always jokey with a bald head regrowing fuzz after the course of chemo. She was promoted to be chief of the State of California Department of Forensic Science after years of travel to other states. She wrote papers and was well published in the forensic journals. Meanwhile, she was the matriarch of the family, the glue that held it together. Jane and Jere had a lovely home in El Dorado Hills which they opened to family every hold and provided most of the food and beverages. They held the family together.

Twelve years after the primary breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, the cancer reoccurred everywhere, manifesting mainly in the lymph systems. For the next 26 months, Jan fought the disease with Jere by her side. Still never the victim psychologically, she died September 15, 2004. Susan grieved deeply. The family didn’t come together again for over a year or more. Jere said, later on, not knowing that he was paraphrasing Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “I shall but love thee better after death” when he stated that he l loved Jan more now than he ever did.

**Osteoarthritis and other aging processes**

As we headed into the 21st century, I was active in volunteering for various things, the main ‘cook and bottlewasher’ at home and I began limping with increasing pain in both hips. Thank God for my gold-plated health insurance as a retired Kaiser-Permanente employee, and for Susan, also, as my domestic partner. The first hip replacement was done in 2001 and the other in 2002. Now I had three joint replacements, and had been on NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) for 20 years.

At about the same time, I reached the conclusion that I wasn’t going to set around and wait for breast cancer to happen, what with my strong family history: maternal grandmother and sister dying from breast cancer. I had genetic and psychological testing and counseled to wait a year. After that one year had passed, I had an understanding female surgeon perform Bilateral Mastectomies. When she came to me before I was taken to the operating room, she gave me a warm supporting hug and the last remnant of doubt was removed. What a relief not to have that fear in all my consciousness.

Just when I thought I was set for long and healthy golden years, I got a letter from Kaiser Permanente asking me to join their research group. I fumed with righteous indignation – what is the meaning of this intrusion into my life? I don’t have renal disease!!

Oh, they replied, “You have a creatine of 1.2 (top of normal range).” Now I am a part of that group and all that entails.

Next, my internist physician informs me that I have Diabetes, type II – take these pills, lose 10 pounds, and test your blood sugar at intervals. After a year, I no longer had to do the drill of random blood testing and taking pills, had lost the weight and felt well.

Even though I had no symptoms, the creatine levels kept creeping up. The PharmD recommended that I begin Lisinopril, an anti-hypertensive that is also used at times to increase renal perfusion. For the next four months, we set new records for winter rains while I got weaker and droopier with low blood pressure and a slow heart rate. Finally, my PharmD and I figured out that there was a drug interaction going on with my eye drops, a beta-blocker that hadn’t bothered me during the prior ten years that I had used them to treat glaucoma. A change of eye medication stopped the bradycardia/hypotension that was making me so ill. It took another few months to get my exercise endurance back again.

Soon, however, the replacement eye drops were making my eyes look and feel like ground hamburger. Another eye medication was prescribed to be used three times daily, whereas the others were once daily. After about ten months, I began having intermittent dizziness which was very worrisome. I finally realized cause and effect: eyedrops = dizziness. The high does, chronic use was producing central nervous system symptoms.

This led to scrutinizing every side effect from other medications. I had been having gripping leg cramps that would awaken me from sleep during the night. I stopped taking the statin drug (anti-cholesterol), and lo and behold, the muscle cramps and resultant soreness stopped. I have substituted B-complex vitamins and calcium instead, but the triglycerides skyrocketed, so I’m back on the statins again about every three days.

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Politics

Back to 2000, another tragic event happened, the presidential election was decided by the Supreme Court by one vote. How prophetic was the editorial in the London Observer that reads: “The Observer considers Bush’s election an affront to the democratic principle, with incalculable consequences for American and the world.” The bushites and neocons have ruined our country and our standing among nations. The Iraqi has made all horrified and exasperated. Most of the world hates us; we currently break numerous international as well as U.S. laws, not to mention our own values. A high percentage of our citizens live below the poverty line, our government spies on us with impunity, our president only obeys laws he agrees with, our foreign policy is in shambles, our dollars is weakening, etc. The only comforting thought is that finally 2 out of 3 citizens realize that nincompoop Bush has taken us to hell in a handbasket.

Another editor of the New York Times wrote: “Our current and future taxes, instead of supporting our health and wellbeing, have been transferred to corporations running Iraq, brought to us by the unfettered imperial machine.” It will be years before we finally find out what the secret fascists have done to our country and the world during his imperial term of government.

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**Domestic Partnerships (1998)**

Beginning in the late 1990’s, cities were granting domestic partner benefits of insurance coverage to the partners of city employees, and other corporations followed. Susan and I were registered in Oakland in 1998, and after the state of California passed legislation in 2003, we registered right away in July. Our community struggled during those years to add bits and pieces to the California Family Code to protect our relationships and our families. First came the right of visitation to a partner hospitalized. Imagine! Then came the right of second parent adoption and several other small victories. Then came the BIG one.

On January 1, 2005, California became, after Vermont, the 2nd state to give registered domestic partners most of the rights and responsibilities of married people under state law. This gave RDP’s hundreds of new rights and responsibilities, including, among others, the right to community property, mutual obligation for debts of third parties, the same rights given to spouses under state law, including the right to inherit without a will, the right of bereavement leave, and the right to make funeral arrangements. Children born to RDP’s will automatically be considered the legal child of both parents. Dissolution of an RDP will have to go through a formal court proceeding to end their relationship.

While the new law in 2005 was a tremendous step forward, it does not achieve full equality for same-gender couples and their children. We cannot file joint federal tax returns and we are not entitled to any of the 1,138 rights and obligations given to spouses under federal law. I have to pay federal income tax on the market value ($6,170) of Susan’s annual health and dental insurance, which heteros do not. Finally, we do not have the assurance that our relationship will be respected by other states.

On January 1, 2006, another gigantic victory for the gay lesbian community: real property cannot be re-assessed if title is changed by death or deed of RDP’s. Hallelujah! I have known many survivors who lost their home after a partner died and the house they had been living in for 50 years was re-assessed to where he or she couldn’t afford to keep the house. Our legal warriors continue to struggle for our basic civil rights. Each year we win another small legislative victory; in 2006, RDP’s can begin filing joint state income taxes. Big Deal!

**Tippy-toed back into the Episcopal Church**

As I mentioned before, when Susan and I moved to Oakland, the East Bay area of California, I was in the Episcopal Diocese of California, whose bishop, William Swing, had ordained more gay or lesbian persons than any other diocese in the Episcopal Church USA, but I was so spiritually wounded, that I avoided the Episcopalians for ten years.

By the time that I tippy-toed back in, it was into a church that was just across the street from Susan’s American Baptist church, just for plain convenience. As I became more active as a member, I realized that even though there were many gay and lesbian members and the parish was an “OASIS” congregation, the Rector and many of the affluent heterosexuals that were the majority, were merely tolerant. There is a big difference to a person on the margin from being tolerated, to being welcomed and affirmed for who she is.

I found that the church can come between God and her people. It is enormously difficult to leave a parish with all that is entailed, and leaving behind friends with whom you have only that parish in common. The bonds of human connection are fragile, subject to time, circumstance and the mystery of slowly altering sympathies. I left again.

I changed from a ‘high’ church to a broad church, Good Shepherd Episcopal mission, which was a refreshing change. I was warmed by the inclusive language and wide doctrinal interpretations. This little, worn mission church was truly a vehicle for the “middle way” not just the Anglican “Via Media.” It was home for many seminarians with the church sponsoring them for ordination. Almost every person did three to five jobs at a time for the community, truly an equalizer for these wounded souls that couldn’t feel at home in higher places. The clergy, who celebrated the Holy Eucharist were the ones assigned on the rota, seen in number.

The Anglican Communion, a group of 37 provinces worldwide, under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, “flew to the top of the roost,” when New Hampshire consecrated a gay priest to be bishop in 2003. Since that time, lesbian and gay people are being scapegoated again throughout this country and some of the Anglican Communion. Not in South Africa, where the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, has turned his attention to liberating and prophetic efforts on behalf of gay and lesbian people. He insured that the New Constitution of South Africa protects our community from discrimination! In 2006, South Africa joined four other nations in allowing same sex civil marriages: Spain, Canada, Netherlands, and Belgium.

In the USA, there are only three states with civil unions, one with same-gender marriage and California has Domestic Partner registry. The church may eventually follow, kicking and screaming, but not for long. Meanwhile, the G/L community is being scapegoated that we are tearing the church apart.

That was one more nail in nailing shut my box of contention with the Saint Marks congregation. Hearing all the uproar about a possible schism with the National Episcopal Church reinforced my belief that they are being merely tolerant and very elitist. In addition, with the election of a female Presiding Bishop in 2006, misogyny has again reared its head. I didn’t want all that falling down around my ears.

I chose a small mission parish a few miles farther down the road, where the very diverse members demonstrated their spirituality through their unconditional acceptance of each person just as they were. I no longer had to work in the kitchen to win acceptance from the elites. Another lesson learned, as my spirituality evolved into one of quiet acceptance of God’s unconditional love as exhibited through the community. In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast!

MLK, Jr said that the arc of justice is long.

So, now I have time to take my broken self and fashion something stronger and better. I am tasting sweet friendship, that information non-kinship relationship that provides many resources of ongoing stimulation and sustenance for wounded people. Not only is it necessary to have solidarity with other gay and lesbian people, but it is also important to have relatively protected, non-intrusive friendships with heterosexual people and families. It seems that the ultimate context of spiritual reality is when we are included in the totality of our lives, and no longer have to face the impossible choice between God and ourselves, like I had to, at age 25. Somehow, we find the Spirit among us by being in community.

**Act your age vacations**

Susan never preferred camping, and my camping, driving vacations came to an end with increasing age. How about worry-free comfort! For our 10th anniversary, 2000, Susan and I went to Kauai, Hawaii for many lovely memories.

We went with an Episcopal church group to New Zealand for a fantastical vacation in February, 2003. We marched in the first world-wide Peace March in Aukland on February 15th. Aside from its very English culture, the New Zealand we saw was very similar to California 40 years prior.

**The Vacation Cruise with Olivia**

In September, 2006, Susan and I decided that we would spend the money to take a cruise while we were healthy enough to enjoy it. The lifestyle company for lesbians is OLIVIA, which began in the late 1970’s as a women’s recording company. Now the company is travel, music, clothing, credit cards and networking with the membership with 75,000 women. The name, OLIVIA, is from the title of the book written by Dorothy Bussey in 1949 and republished in 2006.

The internet has helped the company grow. The founder says the internet was made for lesbians, yes indeed. It helps us hook all our groups together. It is a form of community, connection, visibility and empowerment!

The trip [itinerary not mentioned] was the most wonderful vacation either of us ever had, but I got a bonus: each day there were two AA meetings, “Turning it over.” I enjoyed them so very much that when I returned home, I sought to find a local all lesbian AA meeting as well as a “Lavender” meeting (both gay men and lezzies), which I have. It is filling another piece of that life design that is necessary to be authentic and emotionally empathic with others as well as for repair and restitution of damage done in the past to my neurophysiology.

A big disconnect for me is that all of the women are young enough to be grandchildren, and the mixed group is a mixed blessing – the men, as usual, take over the session. After 26 years of sobriety, I decided that I didn’t need AA meetings after all.

Another social group opened up to me in my early 70’s, OLOC, Old Lesbians Organized for Change. There is a great comfort in being with women who are in the same group, even within the same decade. However, there are no models to follow. We are still in the discussion stage, after two years, as to what we are to be about. Economic woes, aches and pains seem to fill the hours but there is community in being located within your own decade.

**The Library**

Emily Dickenson said, “There is no frigate like a book that takes us lands away.” A most convenient thing in my life, as of now, is the public library right down the street. In fact, I can walk to almost everything that I need to buy or service, except church. But the library is visited several times weekly to read the editorials in the *New York Times* or select new books. For the past 3-4 years I have been reading several books a week. I bring home a half dozen and then don’t feel compelled to read one if it doesn’t catch my attention by page 50.

For months I read mysteries and forensic fiction. Then history and biography. My favorites are geography, science and unusual books, like the history of the writing of the *Oxford English Dictionary.* There had been many dictionaries by the 1900’s, but none were complete. At a bout that time, several teams of men (all men) began working on a “complete” one, which took some 70 years to complete! It was the unrivaled uber-dictionary! That wasn’t the end of it though. With a grant from IBM, a third edition was begun, to be completed sometime during the 21st century. This third edition will take it up to an estimated 59-million words, plus a half million quotations.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we have Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, from the Hawaiian word “wiki,” meaning quick. Perhaps it will have a quick demise…

Finding authors of fiction that pleases and increases my world view are somewhat hard to find, but as of now, I have these favorites: Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, Anna Quindlen, Maeve Binchy and Alexander McCall Smith. The best lesbian writers are May Sarton, Katherine Forrest, Jane Rule, and Elanda Dykewoman.

There were some wonderful libraries in the world before books were printed. Before 600 BCE, in the city of Nineveh, there was a library with over 10-thousand “books,” tablets of baked clay with writing carved on them. Libraries in Egypt were in the temples, books written on papyrus, and some on baked clay. Ptolemy II, Pharoah of Egypt, founded the great library at Alexandria, which was one of the most famous in the ancient world with as many as 400,00 volumes. In about 394 CE, this library and a temple were destroyed, probably on the orders the Roman emperor.

Over time, I have realized my mind no longer operates in a fluid manner and at a much slower rate of comprehension. Language skills are in the decline with it harder to locate words to speak. The world is becoming more complicated and I need to keep refining my outlook about life in order not to grow cynical.

I have grown more at home with being home. The modern outer world is whirling out, further and faster. The old-fashioned manner, courtesies have been swept away, it seems, to be replaced by indifference and coolness. And yet that is not making people anymore free; in fact, the opposite is happening, as the public space becomes more frightening, more dangerous. People are more isolated with their personal phones, music, blogs and all manner of computer technology that keeps them confined away from other humans. There is a world of endless choices. Our ancestors would be overwhelmed by this orgy of options. Our brains still are. We evolved in a world where choice was limited by chronic shortage of food and limited occupations and transportation. Our minds evolved in an environment of scarcity. Now we are bombarded with choices and the anxiety that goes with it.

Volunteerism

What choices to accept for volunteering? I did some work with political activism with anti-gay measures. I worked in Representative Barbara Lee’s Oakland offices. I worked with Reading Partners at the local elementary school, being a leader at first and then gradually returning to the ranks. I still read with young students one day a week. The purpose is to encourage a child’s interest in reading by demonstrating the pleasures that reading brings. It also builds their comprehension, vocabulary and gradually increases attention span/concentration. The kids love the loving attention and I try to choose books that enhance their imagination and new insights.

I also spend a lot of time doing tasks for the church in which I attend. Having been a Nurse Anesthetist as a primary career, I am very task-oriented both through experience and personality type.

One of my volunteer projects was to work in the Recovery Room, just to be around the old environment again. After several years, I began to realize that my anesthetist instinct was too ingrained to stifle easily, so I quit. I was still thinking as a nurse anesthetist… and they saw me as an old, white-haired woman.

I never had time to watch the night sky

During childhood summers, we would sit on the porch shelling peas or snapping beans or sewing until it was too dark, then we would just watch the sky as we waited for it to cool down enough to go to bed. Mom introduced us to the big dipper, but that was the extent of it. She would say, “See the dipper is tipped down, so we’ll get plenty of rain” or “the dipper is up on its handle, so it is empty.” Rarely did I have an opportunity to be out at night during my education. Then in the practice of Anesthesia, operations began early in the morning so it was early to bed, early to rise. In addition, my nighttime self-medication with alcohol precluded a study of the night sky.

My curiosity about lunar cycles were stimulated during the dries to the hospital for emergency calls at 2am or 4M. “Oh, I’ve never seen the moon look like that before!” After sobriety was attained, I had a lot more opportunities to learn about the night sky as well as other knowledge of the natural world. Retirement opened many doors of availability for study. When living in Arizona, I began to recognize may of the ‘asterisms’ or constellations, such as Taurus, Orion, the little Pleiades and the phases of the moon.

Living in the East Bay of California, where there is a lot of summer fog and winter rain, I am always on the lookout for Venus as the evening star or then as the morning star in addition to the travels of the other planets (the wandering ones). Next to “Ursus Major,” the group most recognizable is Orion during the winter in the southern sky. Now that I have the old woman’s bladder, which necessitates several nighttime trips, I have a good look at the “wanderers” in the night sky.

Dreams and Memory

I don’t know the psychoanalytical explanation on this subject, but I regard my dreams as frayed pieces of memory; memory itself is like the fiber of one’s existence. Dreams, perhaps, are like broken strands of the past, little ragged edges that veer from the fiber but remain a part of it. Dreams are part of my memory. On the other hand, the Austrian doctor was so fond of suggesting that dreams are an abstraction of the past, symbols for our fears and desires.

As a child, I had recurring dreams of walking down a narrow plank set over a deep pit filled with roaring wild animals that lunged at me. Thereafter, I had not recall of dreams until 1989, when I met Susan.

My first insightful, life-changing dream was in July, 1989. I had begun therapy to understand the turbulence within, as I was becoming less attached to Karen and more attached to Susan. The therapist recommended that I record my dreams.

The First Dream: There was an older car that was at a levy next to an irrigation channel. Something had finished and everyone was leaving. There were two women in the front seat of the car – the was Karen, but I didn’t know the other. I asked if I could go with them and got into the back seat. The driver revved the engine and put the car in reverse, and it plunged, rear end first, into the channel full of water. Then it continued to back up, roaring through the water onto the opposite bank. However, the water level was up to within a ½ inch of the top of the back windows. The people in the front seats faded away (no struggle, talking, etc.) and the rest of the dream was focused on me.

I thought, “How am I going to get out of here?” I took of my soft-soled shore and pounded on the rear window with no results. I knew I couldn’t open the door or the windows because the weight of the water would overcome me. I noticed that the window level was above the water level a slight bit; then I knew that it would be OK because I could get air to breathe until I was rescued. Many interpretations lie therein.

I continued to dream frequently and was able to scratch out a few details as I awakened so that I could record them into my dream journal in the morning. The years 1989 to 1998 were a chaotic period of my life, which also made for a lot of dreaming.

After retirement in 1998, the character of my dreams changed to a type characterized by administering anesthetics in unlikely places, such as outside in a pasture or at weird times, such as being all alone with no one else in the operating room or intubating a patient in someone else’s upstairs bedroom. My, my, upon awakening I would feel disturbed. Even at the age of 75 I am still having “anesthetizing” dreams just beyond all imagining of times, places, and situations. I awaken with relief that I’m not in an airport terminal attending to a person that I have anesthetized!

[Some take-aways:]

1. One hard part of being an old lesbian is seeing how much hatred, ignorance and misunderstanding still exists. The best part is being in harmony with myself and accepting being lesbian as one of my many blessings.

2. Being closeted is a huge burden. People who are OUT can have more integrity and freedom. The sooner a person can come to terms with her sexuality, be proud and can come out, the better at being integrated.

**The last chapter: life is a long pattern of humility**

Life began in mystery and it will end in mystery. However, many of life’s large and small captivating principles we may explore, unpuzzle, and learn by heart, there will still be vast unknown realms closed to us. On looking back over my life, my ‘self’ changes while still staying the same. Looking at my story is like looking at a long, ghostly parade of previous selves trailing behind, as values, habits, significant persons and events with memories evolve to better reflect the current ‘me.’

The different facets of each ‘self’ seemed to have lived in a separate space that is no longer a side of me. The past has happened. It is a part of me now, an evolved, transformed part of every aspect of my ‘self.’ Life has been a good teacher, but the tuition is high.

I see now through the puzzled eyes of old age, the peevish irritation of old age. As a septuagenarian, I am counting new bizarre lab results and more ailments as well as a mellowing and a letting go. Beneath it all is gratitude, gratitude for sobriety and being smokeless. Karl Barth said that joy is the simplest form of gratitude.

I know that to be fully human in the relational fabric of life is to fulfill the destiny of humans created in the image of God. I am living proof of some leveling principle that I have pursued through the years:

According to the doctrine of creation, humans are created in the image of God for fellowship with God and neighbor. Or, as the Presbyterian catechism states, “The purpose of life is to know and enjoy God!” So, if we are reconciled to God and in love with our neighbor, sharing in partnerships and contributing to a sustainable environment beyond our own needs, then we are living as the Christian tradition teaches us that God wants us to live. Thus, the image of God is reflected and God is present among us.

So, here I am, despite the delays, the confusion, the mistakes, and the shadows en route. At last, or for the moment, where I am is where I always intended to be.

**Memoir, Two –**

**That was then, this is now, January, 2016**

We are seldom aware of the gravity of a particular choice at the time of making it. Only hindsight reveals the wisdom of an importance choice. Nevertheless, no choice is without importance in the overall picture of our lives. And at the same time, no choice is all-powerful regarding our destiny. We are offered choices again and again, for making the right choices, the ones that will contribute to the bigger picture of our lives.

I am no in my 80’s, looking back at the first part of this Memoir. I have had a most traumatic experience in my church community which will affect me for the rest of my life, including my memorial service. I have lost the faith community of my choice and decision. I was churched until I was 21-years-old; then unchurch for the next \_\_ years while I was addicted to alcohol, then churched again until age 81. I have a more academic outlook toward religion now, I suppose, reading about matters of life and my oncoming demise.

I am now attending a small Episcopal church, that I had attended before for 5 years. They have welcomed me back with love and appreciation, which has been sweet and healing.

[see eulogy below]

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Rita’s dementia developed gradually, first becoming aware in 2016, not long after writing the above Memoir Two, when she tried (and failed) to follow the cooking directions on the back of a box of tapioca. A silver lining in the cloud of her cognitive decline was that her harshness and critical “should” faded and her generous and loving spirit shone through brightly. She responded to loving kindness by giving the same, a wonderful gift as she declined.

**Rita Agnes Kresha**

**7 March 1934 – 13 August 2019**

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From www.billcountryman.com:

[Mortality and Hope](http://www.billcountryman.com/?p=912)

September 9, 2019 by [LW Countryman](http://www.billcountryman.com/?author=1) [Leave a Comment](http://www.billcountryman.com/?p=912#respond)

Preached at the memorial service for Rita Kresha, Good Shepherd Berkeley, September 7, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 56:1-5; Psalm 23; ! John 3:1-2; Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-2; Matthew 9:20-22

Rita herself chose the readings we have just heard, and I can’t imagine a more perfect array of scriptures for this gathering, this service of loss and remembrance, of farewell and trust and hope.

I knew Rita for many years in the context of the church, principally this congregation of the Good Shepherd. And I knew her as someone who had an intense attachment to the church—and also an ongoing quarrel with it and its imperfections.

She cared deeply about the message of justice that we heard from Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right; for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

She treasured every sign that the church might be moving closer to its true nature and was bitterly disappointed by every failure.

But her devotion was not simply to justice as an abstraction. It was a devotion rather to the love of God—the love that *calls* us to justice in its quest to be realized in this world. You’ll notice that Isaiah here picked out the *outsiders* as the great focus of God’s promise: the foreigner, the eunuch—every sort of person who might feel ill at ease in the church because the church is so often ill at ease with them. Isaiah’s central theme is God’s message of love and trust offered to everyone, however much they may feel pushed to the margins.

I think that message of love and trust was central for Rita. It was what kept her attached to the church even through times of quarreling with it. Or, more fundamentally, it kept her attached to the God the church tries, if haltingly at times, to worship and proclaim.

I suspect there were times in her life when Rita deeply needed to sense the presence of the Good Shepherd our Psalm speaks of. She needed encouragement to believe that struggle (and sometimes defeat) are not the whole of human life, that the love of God can and will still find us. And I could see moments when she did indeed find that presence here in our shared worship.

Perhaps, like many of us, she found some difficulty in acknowledging how deeply God loves us despite our sometimes erratic and unloving ways. God seems to have some trouble getting that idea across to us. Because we have so much trouble believing it. But it is the bedrock of all our faith, our trust, our hope. Even when we feel like the remotest of outsiders it is still there and it can be relied on. And it’s this that gives us the power to live more justly and more humanely.

This is exactly what the Wisdom of Solomon is saying, too. “The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God,” no matter how much it may seem that we have been abandoned or that the love of God has fallen short.

Our gospel reading tells the same story, pared down (in Matthew’s telling of it) to its barest elements. A woman who’s sick because of a hemorrhage that has lasted for twelve years—and ritually unclean because of it—comes up furtively behind Jesus, perhaps afraid to present herself and her problems to him face to face, afraid of being turned away. She just wants to touch the hem of his garment and get away. And Jesus turns to her, not to berate her, but tell her that her faith, her trust has made her well. It was her act of daring, however frightened she was, her act of hoping that God loved her, that brought about her new freedom.

And such a change should not surprise us. What is human life but change? And change of the most fundamental sort. A child of four cannot conceive what it is to be twenty. A person of twenty has only shadowy intimations of life at forty. At forty, we cannot know who we’ll have become at sixty or seventy. We are always entering a new world and always changing and being changed. Only God’s love for us remains the same.

In the same way, we cannot know what lies beyond death. But there is a hope—our indefinite, but strong hope in God. Because, as John says in the First Letter, we know ourselves to be children of God, graced again and again by God’s love and therefore we can move forward without fear. It is true, as John says, that “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” But the love of God for us assures us that, when all is revealed, “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

The Lady Julian, many centuries ago—in the time, indeed, of the Black Death—put the same thought in other terms: “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” I think there were times in her life when Rita found it very difficult to believe either the first letter of John or the Lady Julian. But, in the end, trust won out.

It used to be that people might say of some one that she or he “had a good death.” It’s not a current phrase. It’s not a very clear one, for that matter; it could mean many different things. But Rita, as I have learned from those nearest her, found in her last months in this life, a peace—with herself, with those around her, with the Good Shepherd—that had sometimes eluded her in the past.

Death lost its menace for her. The fear of losing God at last gave way. Her hope grew strong. And she wakens now into the light of God’s love, held in God’s hand.

--- Rev. Countryman is the pastor at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, 1001 Hearst Street at Ninth Street, Berkeley, California