

Title: The Last of Life for which the First was Made

Biographical essays often assume a linearity and cohesiveness that real life rarely presents. What in retrospect we may describe as rational choices often simply reflect dumb luck, good or bad timing. This essay is unlike any other of my professional writings in that it requires no research, literature search, or statistical analysis. This is both liberating and limiting. The data need only be accurate to my own life yet they must also ring true for others to have sociological meaning.

I write because I believe my story belongs to a cohort of men and women who over the past fifty years have seen enormous changes in the ways in which we think about and “do” sociology, let alone how we study and practice gender. My narrative is guided by my belief that our personal stories are always a part of what we study and how we teach sociology. While my story is told within the context of a particular cohort as we enter and engage in “retirement” (a most misleading term), it is also specific to my gender, class, race, and ethnicity/religion. And while the stories I choose to share are

hope they reflect where the particular and the universal meet, a phrase once coined by one of my favorite journalists who died several years ago, Ellen Willis. I share the following stories because I think they emphasize how the personal and the professional intersect throughout the life cycle and, how wittingly or unwittingly, they have prepared me for this stage of life.

### **Ann Arbor: The Reluctant Sociologist (1959-1963)**

When I entered the academy, both as an undergraduate and later as an assistant professor, the study of, by and for women in almost every discipline was a hotly contested issue. Women's Studies programs, as a subject and political base for women, were nascent in the academy. The battles to bring women "in" not only focused on women as subjects of study in their own right, but as writers, researchers and students in the classroom. The prestigious presses and journals were male-dominated as were the subjects studied. I remember vividly the excitement so many of us felt when Joan Acker's piece "Women and social stratification: a case of intellectual sexism" appeared in the *AJS* (January 1973) as part of a special issue aptly entitled – Changing Women in a Changing

Society. Even the cover of the journal changed from gray to red (or was it red to gray?).

Sociologists for Women in Society was in the earliest stages of development and the journal *Gender and Society* did not exist. Although many of us were already writing and teaching about sex roles (as they were called then) these were inhospitable times for women's studies and feminist leanings. While I do not know if this is accurate, I was told that the librarians at Northeastern the year before I arrived did not order *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* because any Journal whose lead article was about menstruation could not be a serious academic journal.

I was a feminist sociologist long before I understood what that meant and before I later was to write and teach about feminist methodologies and theories. I had not one female professor at Michigan. I belonged to a cohort who was expected to marry even if it disrupted our studies and/or careers (think Matina Horner, fear of success and the dire consequences for women who eschewed such roles).

In my junior year of College, Guy E Swanson, then chair of

small honors sociology cohort, he fully expected me to apply to graduate school the next year.<sup>1</sup> As typical of many women of the time, I had a “serious” boyfriend. He was applying to Rutgers for graduate work. Without missing a beat Swanson said: “Princeton and Columbia those would be good schools for you”. Soon after that visit I received a letter from Princeton inviting me to apply, but also noting that I would be among the very few women ever to do so, that there would be no housing or food accommodations for me nor was there public transportation to and from campus. Some thirty years later, I sat on the board of advisers for Princeton’s Women’s Studies Program and told my story to an almost unbelieving crowd of faculty, students and administrators.<sup>2</sup>

But as the course of true love is never straightforward, I broke up with the Rutgers boyfriend, married a University of Michigan graduate student and remained in Ann Arbor. Because at the time it was not uncommon for women to “put their husbands through” graduate and/or professional training, I went to work. After two years as a research assistant at the Survey Research Center

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<sup>1</sup> He also was the father of five daughters.

<sup>2</sup> A reference letter in my file (which I did not learn of until much later in my academic career) suggested that if

where I honed my skills as a quantitative sociologist, I found that my husband and I were out of sync. I would come home after work, ready to play, he still hard at work on his dissertation. Later his doctoral dissertation read: “And to my wife without whose help I would have finished two years earlier”.

If my marriage was going to survive I needed to be similarly occupied as my husband. Because as an undergraduate I had been part of the senior honors seminar and was required to participate in all phases of that year’s Detroit Area Study, I had already earned credit for a Master’s thesis at the U of M. When we left Michigan two years later for Mike’s first academic job in Cornell University’s English Department, I not only had a master’s degree but had completed almost all course work for a PhD in sociology. I never thought twice, at least at the time, about finishing my PhD.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ithaca Daze: The personal had no public (1966-1973)**

Our years in Ithaca proved to be a testing ground for me and similarly for those of my cohort beginning families and professional

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<sup>3</sup> The Astins’ study (1970) on educational attainment corroborated the expectation that women would often interrupt their studies to marry and follow their significant others and thereby not complete their degrees at the school from which they had been initially accepted. However, it also noted that well over a majority did

training/careers. We were reared in the fifties and entering adulthood in the sixties. Despite my life as a radical undergraduate and graduate student, I was unprepared for the shift in our lives from our equality as graduate students to becoming an academic wife and within a year, a mother. Despite my active engagement in Planned Parenthood, La Leche League and the National Childbirth Association (we brought the Lamaze Method to the local gynecological teams), I did not expect the sense of dissatisfaction my new roles would bring.

I was the woman with the “no name” problem. The birth of our first child only exacerbated my growing sense of disquiet. Years later, I realized that I had been in post-partum depression, a condition hardly recognized at the time (only one paragraph in the popular Dr. Spock book). How helpful the websites on this topic we have today would have been to me personally, to my marriage and to my cohort then. Most of us felt conflict about combining parenting and professional life; post-partum depression only solidified such feelings. To resolve some of the conflict, I made a conscious decision to lower my academic expectations and to give motherhood priority over my career. I never took a sabbatical leave away from home, applied for visiting professorships, or took advantage of any

professional opportunities that might disrupt our children's schooling or home life when they were young.<sup>4</sup>

Cornell was at the center of Ithaca's universe (although some at Ithaca College might contest that). From the mid-sixties on, students and many of the faculty were actively involved in the social justice issues of the time, symbolized for many in the takeover of the Willard Straight Student Union by black militants. As a faculty wife I felt once removed from this scene. I yearned to be a part, once again, of the public protest movement. My sense of marginality was so great that during my second pregnancy, I sought employment that would put me directly into the center of action.

I was hired by Harold Feldman, a bright, funny and kind professor in the Human Development Family Studies Department in the School of Home Economics (soon to become the College of Human Ecology) who saved the sanity and perhaps many a marriage by almost solely hiring wives of academicians, most of whom were unable to find academic employment in their fields of training within any department. At that time, nepotism rules extended even to

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, our daughter, a psycho-analytic therapist in New York City and her partner have chosen not to have children. She claims that her clients are her full-time responsibility and provide her with the nurturing and love

spouses who were not in the same departments and/or fields of study. Harold was no usual employer; he was flexible (encouraging one employee to bring her infant to work with her until she could find appropriate daycare). He engaged in research critical to women's issues, especially women in poverty. He was instrumental in forming an interdisciplinary research group on poverty composed of family sociologists, social psychologists and policy makers whose purpose was to research what was then, under Nixon, a plan to get women off welfare and into the labor market as quickly as possible.

Our data showed that Nixon's "Win" Program, while moving women off of welfare, only served as a temporary solution since it prepared women for mostly dead-end, low paying positions. With no day care provisions the plan was unfair and had no long-term feasibility. This research experience was the beginning of my interest in the structure and function of the academy, policy making, social science research and the place of each in women's lives.

I helped to prepare and write the reports that were then delivered by Harold to the various Washington committees. It was clear however that without finishing my PhD, I would spend the rest

apt words resonated clearly to me; I would be forever negotiating the real world for the men in my life. I applied to Cornell, was accepted, and I went from an associate to a graduate research assistant.

Once a graduate student again (although a bit older than most) I was reinvigorated. I threw myself into the “other” revolution going on at Cornell, the one focused on creating a women’s studies program (if not the first, but certainly among the first in the country). We lobbied for more graduate and undergraduate courses related to women’s lives. We lobbied for and brought that brilliant and daring Judith Long (Laws) to campus. <sup>5</sup>

During this time I met my longtime friend, colleague and co-author, Barbara Richardson, a smart and fierce women’s studies advocate. During our graduate days, we hatched the idea for the book we would eventually publish on achievement and women. The book was not only to be a critique of the psychological and sociological theories and methods used to measure achievement in the US (think Wisconsin Farm Boy and status attainment studies at Harvard) but a close look at the ways in which women’s everyday

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experiences, past and present, were shaped by and shaped our understanding of the meaning and measure of achievement in both the public and private spheres. Our own everyday lives gave proof to the growing documentation that women's experiences were limited and defined by men's lives. We eschewed the fear of success explanations and preferred the structural and institutional set of gender arrangements, which put women at a disadvantage in the public sphere and often confined them to the private one. It was then that I was introduced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic feminists who used the only cultural tools at their disposal to argue for the vote (on moral grounds by "cleaning up" the world). I was to later use that body of literature when I wrote of fundamentalist Jewish women who used the same moral superiority arguments to defend and bolster their status in Jewish Orthodoxy.

As I began work on my own dissertation (a network analysis of the colleague/friend relationships among female and male academicians) I saw up close and personal the lives that academic women and men lived. How far I had come into the public sphere in my own right was made clear when I began one of my papers by introducing myself, not by my married name, but by my maiden one.

When my husband did not receive tenure at Cornell (his stellar teaching and his publications on women and blacks did not help his case) he was recruited by SUNY at Albany with the implicit promise that he would receive tenure after a three-year stint. Once again I left a campus without completing my dissertation to follow my husband. However this time I was committed to becoming an academic in my own right.

### **Albany: We hardly knew you (1973-1976)**

I applied to almost every school within commuting distance of Albany for any kind of academically connected job I could find. Jobs for “captive” academic wives were scarce. I was part of a reserve labor force that could be brought in and pushed out at will. Nepotism rules were unofficially in place even if husbands and wives did not share the same disciplines. In Ithaca I had met and admired Constance Cook (the only Republican for whom I have ever voted) a former lawyer who represented women within the academy and was now a state representative. She had formed a subcommittee on academic women. When she asked me to testify as a sociologist on

the plight of academic wives before the legislature in Albany, I readily agreed.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, and quite unexpectedly, a less traditional academic route presented itself. I was hired to teach in an interdisciplinary, four year residential college wherein seniors could complete their last year of high school and first year of college simultaneously (a Carnegie Mellon initiative) on the downtown campus of SUNYA. We were predominately a left-wing faculty of fifteen (a mathematician, a philosopher, a political scientist, an historian, a psychologist, two physicists, several part-time faculty borrowed from other departments and me). Simultaneously, I taught in the fledgling women's studies program in the "uptown" campus. There I learned from a most savvy set of colleagues how to negotiate with administrators, how to mentor other faculty and students, and how to build a feminist curriculum without mentioning the "f" word.

Those were a heady three years only to be wiped out in 1976 when New York State declared bankruptcy and the entire SUNY system went into retrenchment. Both my husband and I lost our jobs

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<sup>6</sup> I knew of the work of Myrna Weissman and her colleagues and connected with them for help in my presentation before the sub-committee. See especially: "The Faculty Wife: Her Academic Interests and Qualifications", Myrna M. Weissman, Katherine Nelson, Judith Hackman, Cynthia Pincus and Brigitte Prusoff, *AAUP Bulletin* Vol. 58, No. 3

within three months of each other. He because he was in a Department whose graduate division was shut down and I because SUNYA reneged on its promise to take over the Carnegie Mellon Foundation program (although all of our syllabi were to reappear ten years later as a model for interdisciplinary work). Most severely hit were the last hired. Not unexpectedly then, of the 10% of the State University of New York system who were retrenched, 90% were women.

Because there were few openings in English Departments across the country, unlike times past, my husband and I agreed that we would go wherever I could find a job.<sup>7</sup> This time I was to leave a campus not only with dissertation in hand but with a book contract. I had five job offers and accepted what I thought would be the best fit for me: a place flexible enough to honor and reward my particular skills not only as a sociologist but also as an interdisciplinary women's studies scholar.

### **Northeastern No Regrets: (1976-2013)**

In Michigan I was at the Harvard of the Midwest, at Cornell the Harvard above the Cayuga, at Northeastern I was at Northeastern.

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<sup>7</sup> I also knew that I had entered the academy at a very particular time. Women sociologists were still a minority both in graduate school and in the profession. However, jobs were available and women were being hired proportionate to the number of PhDs produced (about 30%). A decade later, although there were substantial

Because Northeastern's upper administration was primarily oriented toward keeping the University solvent and because it was better known for its Engineering, Law and Business Schools, the faculty, especially in the Arts and Sciences, enjoyed a professional autonomy no longer evident today almost anywhere in the country. Within the first two weeks of settling into my department (noteworthy at the time for its preponderance of women, a woman chair and Blanche Geer, who was instrumental in bringing me to NU) I began to lay the foundations for a women's studies program. I literally went through all the University's course offerings and the entire faculty phone book, telephoning (before email existed) anyone who taught anything that had women, family, or sex (biological or other) in the title. I found a congenial, talented and very loose confederation of women (and a few sympathetic men) whose primary goal was to challenge pay inequities between men and women.

My earlier experiences at Cornell and Albany prepared me well. For both selfish and higher-minded reasons, I knew we needed to identify, strengthen and develop a community of scholars/teachers and students not only in Sociology and Anthropology, or in our College, but also across the University. We

committees, serve in the Senate, and serve as advisors and activists in support of women's and gender oriented research/teaching.<sup>8</sup> We pressured for new hires and within five years our department had one of the largest women's and gender course offerings (and enrollments) at both the graduate and undergraduate level, not only in our University but also in the City of Boston.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneously, I enjoyed the privilege of being a part of the growing women's contingency in the American Sociological Association, Eastern Sociological Society, Sociologists for Women in Society and local study groups. These were exhilarating times and many of the key figures in the field made themselves accessible to junior faculty in any number of ways. I am fairly certain that it was Cynthia Fuchs Epstein who nominated our book *Achievement and Women* for the C. Wright Mills Award (it received honorary mention) and I know she was the one to recommend that I write a chapter for Jo Freeman's *Women a Feminist Analysis*, at that time the most widely-read edited volume on women. In fact, I revised "Professional Women: How Real the Recent Gains" for several editions. Each

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<sup>8</sup> Note that by now gender was beginning to replace sex in sex roles.

<sup>9</sup> Any leverage I had in establishing this program and gaining the credentials necessary for tenure came from the larger reference groups, American Sociological Association, Eastern Sociological Society, Sociologists for Women in Society and the pioneering women in the field who changed the face of sociology forever. Some of the women

revision suggested that the gains professional women made were elusive. The data revealed that intra and inter professional stratification (as in the labor market in general) was as rigid, if not worse, for women by the time of the last edition as in the one I had written ten years earlier. The more things changed the more they seemed to stay the same.

Once I was tenured the necessary institutional structures for a women's study program were in place. I became its founding director and four years later, a full professor. I could now pursue subjects that had long interested me. Initially I thought my interest in Jewish studies, as both a woman and a Jew, would be just an extension of my work on gender. However, Jewish Studies turned out to be more than the lure of yet another struggling interdisciplinary program for which I would soon become a director.

My husband had come from a secular Jewish home, I from an Orthodox one. From the very beginning of our marriage he agreed that he would be supportive of what I wanted religiously for our family, but he would remain secular. While we kept a kosher home and our children were enrolled in a Jewish day school, my own identity, beliefs and practices over the years had become more

secular than sacred (as my own work and the recent PEW data suggest for many contemporary Jews).

It was my feminist cousin who became deeply orthodox (after going to Israel on an archeological dig in sympathy with the Palestinian cause) that aroused my curiosity about why women who had been involved in and/or inheritors of the radical movements of the sixties would be attracted to fundamentalist religions. Baalot Teshuvah (as they are called in Hebrew) are secular Jewish women who have never practiced Orthodoxy, who in their young adult years become Orthodox Jews. Since Orthodox Jews believe that all Jews, irrespective of their denomination or secularity, are “returning” to Jewish Orthodoxy, it was not surprising that the community believed my proposed research was a personal not a professional exploration (despite my very best professional presentation of self as researcher/academic) and openly welcomed me. Although I was no more religious at the end of the study than when I had begun, my research opened a second and unexpected turn in my career; the sociology of religion.

Although never formally trained in the field, I found many “soulmates” among those marginalized within mainstream religious

Orthodoxy its due, earlier identity conflicts about my own practice as a Jew seemed to be resolved as I found myself practicing Judaism by studying it. The more involved I got in religious research the more committed I became to my own identity as a secular Jew.

My book, *Rachel's Daughters*, about the causes and issues implicit in the "return" to fundamentalist religion among Jewish women (some who continued to call themselves feminists),<sup>10</sup> resonated among other women who chose to join and/or to remain within fundamentalist and patriarchal traditions. Like Baalot Teshuva many of them reject much of what they term male and individualistic values within the secular world, finding within their orthodoxies a moral order based on the feminine and the female. It was no surprise then that soon after my book's publication I was offered a one semester visiting scholar appointment in Brigham Young University's Sociology Department. It was a time when Mormon women were visibly struggling with their wish to remain within the religion, wanting the male authorities to recognize their claims for a female voice and vision.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> One third of the (150) women I interviewed had once been part of the counter cultural movements of the sixties and had been active participants in the women's movement. My work resonated with others interested in fundamentalism and feminism; see especially the work of Judith Stacey, Elizabeth Brusco, Rebecca Klatch, all

Several years later I received a two-year leave as a Matthews Distinguished University Professor from Northeastern which enabled me to do research on a project I was developing on post-holocaust identity narratives among contemporary young Jews in the U.S., England and Israel (not necessarily children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors). The data I collected while at Oxford University's Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies were lost in transport back to the U.S., but the Israeli data (collected while on a visiting appointment to Bar- Ilan) arrived in tact. My interest in twenty to thirty year olds was twofold: there was virtually no identity data for that age group and my children were within that age range. Indeed, my own children's often ambivalent relationship to Judaism (but never with their identities as Jews) provided the impetus to study post holocaust Jewish identities among contemporary young adults. I had now entered a new field of inquiry ripe for feminist analysis: Holocaust Studies.

As guest editor of *Contemporary Jewry* (1996) I invited several prominent academic women to join me in writing about women and Holocaust scholarship. My introductory essay "The Holocaust and Sociological Inquiry: A Feminist Analysis", emphasized

the paucity of sociological analysis and research on the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

In 2001, three NU colleagues and I organized a conference to explore the ways in which claims related to the fate of Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been made, struggled over, and fixed in the law, in historical canon and in the popular imagination based on three trial contexts (Protocols of Zion, Eichmann/Nuremburg, Holocaust Denial). We later edited a volume further exploring the ways in which the racism and anti-Semitism embedded in Holocaust denial persist despite legal verdicts, historical renunciation and "objective" reporting.<sup>13</sup>

My early training as a quantitative sociologist continues to give me both an appreciation and a wariness of abstract quantitative sociology. At the very end of my "formal" career at Northeastern I returned to my early interest in the methodological (never truly separated from the theoretical) issues and problems inherent in quantitative analyses, but this time among demographers who study contemporary Jewish identities. This resulted in another guest-

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<sup>12</sup> I was to come under fire for that edited volume by the senior editor of *Commentary* when he chastised me and others far more prominent than I in an issue derogatively entitled: Auschwitz and the Professors. He chastised us by claiming we engaged in Holocaust research for academic advantage. Seymour Martin Lipsett, in an email exchange with me, suggested that I put my talents elsewhere. The Holocaust, he contended, was a particular event in history, not subject to sociological investigation (the search for universal laws). It is better suited, he wrote, to philosophical, historical and religious analyses. Some years later I was proud to write for Judith Gerson and Diane Wolf's groundbreaking edited volume: *Sociology Confronts the Holocaust* (2007).

edited volume of *Contemporary Jewry* (2014) in which I explore some of my favorite feminist themes: reflexivity, narrative and voice in research.<sup>14</sup>

### **Retirement: What's Next?**

I live the sociology about which I read, write, and research. We all do. The personal and the professional are intimately and irrevocably intertwined across the life course. Retirement is no exception. Since at this stage of life our future is much shorter than our past, there is less time to ponder or delay. Choices about what's next are both limited and enhanced by forces within and out of our control. As I write this essay, almost three years into retirement, I find that I cannot type for more than twenty minutes at a time. My back problems limit how long I can sit in any one position (standing at a podium is only moderately better). On the upside I can type faster than a speeding bullet. I have more doctors' appointments than ever. Each day I discover that I have pains in places I didn't even know existed. I view the world with a diminished clarity, but I am told when my cataracts are removed this will improve. And while resources may limit the number of meetings and conferences I can

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<sup>14</sup> The title of my introductory essay was: Contemporary Demographic Storytelling: The Importance of Being

attend, having to choose conserves on energy, another increasingly limited resource.

Health and wealth at retirement may limit us, but they also encourage us to choose those projects that are time sensitive and which truly interest us. Although my ever-patient editor has been waiting for a book I contracted for over a decade ago, I am putting it aside yet again. Because I hope to see a woman in the White House, I am putting my energy into Hillary's campaign. I find one key to a happy retirement is focusing on what I can (and want) rather than what I cannot do.

I expect that retirement will continue to provide unanticipated twists and turns. I returned to graduate school to make life more harmonious between my husband and myself. I moved from being an interdisciplinary scholar in a very untraditional program to a more traditional sociological career when both my husband and I lost our jobs within three months of one another. I turned to qualitative sociology because, at the time, Northeastern had neither graduate students nor expertise to support large quantitative studies.

After fifty-two years of marriage my husband and I have

as equals, fully awaiting the call for the next project that takes our fancy. Who knows maybe we will write a book together about Annie Templeton, the woman for whom the farmhouse we bought over forty years ago was built, and about the life and times of mountain women from 1880-1950 in rural and rugged N.H. Or maybe I will develop a course on aging, ethnicity, gender and identity in a time when all such categories are being contested, for the Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies at MIT. I come to retirement with my interests intact and my commitments strong. Yet I truly do not know what is next. Similar to Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra, what I do know is that the best may yet to come for it is the "last of life for which the first was made".