Madge McQueen Papers

1930s-2023 (*Bulk:* 1975-2017)
100 linear ft.
Call no.: MS 825

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Read collection overview

Madge McQueen (1959-)

I was born in Washington, D.C., in an unwed mother's home. I spent my earliest months living with my maternal grandmother and two teenage aunts--one of whom was abusive. My mother married my step-father in 1960; I was eleven years old when I discovered he was not my biological father. My mother suffered from psychotic schizophrenia; my step-father was frequently violent in our home; my younger, half-brother struggled with a severe learning disability, early drug addiction, and later untreated paranoid schizophrenia. After years of physical and sexual abuse, I escaped my destructive, troubled family when I was fourteen--having previously run away twice. I became a ward of the state of Maryland (my family had moved into Prince George's County when I was much younger). I lived with three foster families until I was nineteen. I was determined to use education as a way out of poverty and violence. I attended Prince George's Community College, then the University of Maryland in College Park where I earned a BA in Hearing and Speech Sciences in 1982. I worked at the radical Maryland Food Collective from 1981 to 1984 which profoundly impacted my life: politically, socially, and sexually. In 1985, I moved to Plainfield, Vermont, where I attended graduate school at Goddard College, receiving an MFA in Writing and Women's Literature in 1987. After teaching for five years in Boston, at Fayerweather Street School and at the Jamaica Plain Community Centers--Adult Learning Program, I went to Massachusetts College of Art, earning a BFA in Three Dimensional Fibers in 1997. I lived for a year in Germany, 1980-1981, and in Honduras, 1997-1998, where I taught cognitively disabled adults and 8th graders, respectively. In 2002, after living in Boston for four more years, I moved to Twin Oaks Community in Louisa, Virginia. During my long membership, I left twice for extended periods. In 2006-2007, I traveled for eight months in the U.S. and in New Zealand. In 2014, I spent seven months in Amherst and in Boston working on my papers, followed by four months of travel across country and back visiting loved ones as I wrote my autobiography. In the beginning of 2015, I again made Twin Oaks my home.

My collection consists of nearly 300 journals (which include copies of my letters sent), all correspondence received since 1972, many of my artist books, as well as some of my other art work. My bequest is composed of my educational documents, my personal health records, my photographs, some family papers, Twin Oaks ephemera, a family tree, a friendship web, a few favorite books, two interviews, etc. What I have written and saved since I was twelve years old fills 84 linear feet: it is my life's work. I have given, and will continue to give, my papers to UMass Amherst for safekeeping and so that my life--as an incest and battering survivor, as someone raised working class, as a daughter of a mentally-ill mother, as a radical feminist, as a diarist, as an avid letter writer, as an artist, as a bisexual, as a woman who chose neither to be a wife nor a mother, as an attentive niece, as a communitarian, as a traveler, and as a devoted friend--will not be erased.

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Background on Madge McQueen

It's All About Going: An Autobiography

Collection during processing at SCUA, 2014.

Photo taken by Laura Wulf.

My earliest memory is running away: toddling through the grass in front of my parents' small apartment off Massachusetts Avenue in Southeast, Washington, D.C. According to my great-aunt, I was two--placing this experience in 1961. While I have no memories of fleeing my family in the early years while living in Prince George's County, Maryland--beginning in Capitol Heights and then in Palmer Park--I do know that members of my extended family in North Carolina and in Tennessee tried to help me escape my destructive home. This happened when I was five, and again when I was a pre-teen; both of these heart-wrenching attempts failed.

When I was eleven, I learned I'd been adopted as a one-year-old by my mother's new husband. I discovered this long-held secret while helping to clean my parents' bedroom after our small duplex was ransacked by local thugs. I remember phoning my maternal grandmother shortly after the robbery, asking if what I'd seen in the mint green baby book was accurate. Without hesitation she replied, "I've been waiting to tell you." Upon this hidden information coming out, my half-brother wept while my step-father quipped, "Now you know." I have no memory of my mother's reaction. I recall feeling great liberation at finding out I was not of this cruel man's blood. I believe I knew immediately that this truth would make it easier for me to escape.

My next clear memories of running away were from Suitland, Maryland, where my family moved in December 1970. The first of these three times, I escaped to my grandmother's apartment in Landover, Maryland--about nine miles away. Maybe I was twelve. The second time--taking my younger half-brother with me--I hid in the nearby basement of a school friend. Perhaps I was thirteen. The final time, I fled to the First Baptist Church of Suitland where I was taken in by the pastor, his wife, and their young, adopted daughter. I was fourteen years old when I moved into the parsonage; I lived with this welcoming family for three and a half months.

I vividly recall having to return to my parents' house on Huron Avenue for an afternoon "family conference" in mid January 1974. After this pointless meeting, the disempowered social worker (a slight man clearly intimidated by my bullying step-father) directed me to take enough clothes for a week--but instead I filled the hatchback of his lime green Chevy Vega with everything I cared about. This included the letters and cards I'd received in 1972 and 1973--which now make up the earliest correspondence within my papers at the Special Collections University Archives (SCUA). I knew I was never going back to their house, to those people, to that small and terrifying life.

In April 1974, I testified against my parents in the family court of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. I told the judge that my step-father had been abusing me both physically and sexually. My long and closely held memory is that I said to this older white man sitting above us, "If you send me home, I'll have to be chained to my bed because I'm going to run away again." But I don't know exactly what is true. I do vividly remember my skinny eleven-year-old half-brother and my almost forty-year-old mentally ill mother testifying that what I said against my thirty-eight-year-old step-father wasn't true. Of course he denied beating me, molesting me. As the judge decreed that I would be freed from my family, I recall him saying that I should get counseling once I was in foster care. This did not happen until I sought it out for myself as a young adult five years later.

I thought of this courtroom scene both as the worst and best experience of my life for a very long time. I felt angry at and hurt by my mother and half-brother for not telling the truth, for not grabbing at this opportunity to escape the ongoing violence of our lives. It wasn't until many years later that I learned my step-father had held a gun to their heads before leaving home for the courthouse. They lied because they were terrified and because they didn't want me to go, to bust up our troubled family. How it was that the judge and the social workers decided to leave my fragile, neglected and abused half-brother with a violent father and a schizophrenic mother, I do not know.

Right before I turned fifteen, I became a ward of the state in Prince George's County, Maryland. My first foster parents also lived in Suitland. I stayed with them for sixteen months in a small, two-bedroom apartment: a depressed foster mother, a bit-too-touchy foster father, and a five-year-old foster sister with whom I shared a room. This family wanted to adopt me and to have my surname--which was my step-father's--changed to theirs. (I believe I knew by then that some day I'd change my last name: neither by being subsumed into another family nor by marriage, but rather by my own choice.) I was unhappy in this foster family; I recall knowing that I hadn't escaped my own family to be in yet another untenable situation. I called my social worker (by this time a no-nonsense woman) in August 1975 and asked to be transferred. I moved into my final foster home when I was sixteen; remaining with this blessedly "normal" family until I was nineteen and left for the University of Maryland in August 1978.

Twice more I lived inside of a family. In 1980-1981, I was an exchange student in Meppen, Germany, and was housed with two host families. The first family was a poor match, and I again needed to flee. I recall my host father's rage when he saw I had packed my bags. "Du darfst nicht gehen!" he commanded in a loud and angry voice. I sat in that bedroom for a few days until I was cleared by ICYE (International Christian Youth Exchange) to move in with another--much more to my liking--host family. I lived with the first family almost four months, the second for nearly eight.

I returned to Maryland from Germany in July 1981; I was 22 years old. I never again lived within a family.

Given my choice to leave my deeply troubled childhood home, I've had to hold within me the bitter reality that I profoundly hurt my depressed, intermittently

institutionalized, Thorazine-medicated mother and my frightened, emotionally wounded, learning-disabled half-brother. Soon after I left home, my vulnerable sibling began doing drugs--this started with marijuana and soon went to harder substances. I had been my half-brother's keeper; he'd thought of me as his rock. Yet the very real burden of caring for him--in addition to witnessing my mother's psychosis and battering as well as combating the sexual predation of my violent step-father--was more than I could possibly bear. I recall thinking the night before I left my family on Sunday morning, January 6, 1974, "If I stay here I'll go insane like my mother." I desperately wanted a different life for myself. I couldn't bear the thought of living the lives of my mother, my grandmother, and some of my aunts. While I didn't know what I was going toward, I surely knew what I was escaping: the mean life of domestic violence and limited choices.

I knew that I had to get an education, that I mustn't get pregnant, or do drugs. I was terrified of becoming ensnared as I'd seen happening to so many of my white, working class peers.

Until the middle of 6th grade, I lived in predominately African American neighborhoods. In my primary schools, I was often one of a few white students. I do not recall the ways white privilege played into my childhood (this is obviously part of what privilege is), but I do remember being singled out as "poor white trash." I know now that white flight had been in effect in these Prince George's County neighborhoods, and that the remaining white families were presumably ones economically unable to move farther into the suburbs. I have no memories of racial tension in Palmer Park--even during the tumultuous mid-60s--though we were only a few miles outside of Washington, D.C. I know that my half-brother's and my closest friends at that time were the African American boy and girl who lived in the attached duplex. They were a little older than each of us; I can only remember the fun we shared and their mother's worrisome drinking.

I have sweet memories of being taught (lady-like) manners by a Black girl who was another of my neighbors. During these childhood years, there were long games of double-dutch, hours of hopscotch, and countless jacks competitions played only with super balls. I also have a sad recollection of a desperately poor African American girl and her younger siblings who were shunned by the other kids at Matthew Henson Elementary. I recall that she talked to me during our long walks home from school--yet she never spoke in class or on the playground. I have no idea why she allowed me to hear her voice.

My mother grew up in North Carolina--first in Shelby, then in Thomasville. She lived her childhood years abutted to people of color in a racially segregated time and place. Yet, somehow, she did not subscribe to the pervasive racial negativity of her youth. I recall her telling me numerous times that she respected Black people and didn't believe she was better than they were. My step-father was "quietly" racist; he did believe that he--as a white man--was better than any black, brown, yellow, or red man and certainly any woman, regardless of her skin color. He grew up in poverty in rural West Virginia, having been forced to leave school in the 8th grade due to his father's death in a coal mining accident. Nonetheless, his lack of education did not diminish his belief that he was better than those "lower" than him. In fact, he used male and white privilege to bolster himself, to crudely lift himself above those around him.

Growing up with African Americans and having been abused only by white people, made it easy for me to subscribe to my mother's way of thinking. I knew I wasn't superior to the Black people around me. I could see that their homes were in far less turmoil; I could see that their kids were decently dressed, well fed, and cared for. The African Americans in our neighborhood could have been described as "upper working class." Their modest houses were well tended; I saw little abject poverty.

When I think about how I made it out of my white trash youth, I worry about the many kids--including my half-brother--who didn't. I have to acknowledge the ways privilege made it possible for me to flee and later to excel. I've often thought about the entitlements I've had: race, intelligence, looks, body size, physical and mental health. Of course I worked hard to make a full and engaging life for myself. But what about the ways many children are unable to break free from poverty, abuse, and racism--the teenagers who are denied the opportunities which might enable them to move into a productive and satisfying adulthood because the larger culture repeatedly turns a blind eye to their early and ongoing deprivations?

I have not wanted to create a nuclear family of my own. I've had almost no desire to be a wife or a mother; and I've not felt loss being outside of these elemental female roles. Instead, friendship has been at the core of my emotional life beginning in my teens--even as I later savored intimate relationships during my adulthood. A few of these lovers wished for life-partnership or at least long-term commitment, yet this was not something I had to offer--regardless of how much I loved them.

I nearly always knew that I didn't want to have children: the principal reason being I couldn't bear getting into a relationship I couldn't get out of. There would be no healthy way to abandon my own child, and I couldn't tolerate being trapped--even in a loving relationship. I also carried within me deep-seated dread of being saddled with a mentally ill child. Because my mother and my half-brother suffer from this troubling illness, as well as the fact that I don't know who my biological father is, I was certain that I didn't want to risk birthing a child. I had a tubal ligation when I was 32 years old, nullifying this fear.

About my biological father, I know nothing. The only information my mother ever told me was: "I wanted a baby girl, and I wanted to name her Madge after my grandmother. I didn't want her to have a father. I had sex with six different men in the spring and summer of 1958. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. You were my love child. Before you could even talk, I would shake you: trying to make you say you loved me." I've sometimes called this unknown man my "mystery dad" and have thanked him for the color of my honey-blond hair. I've liked imagining he was of Norwegian Jewish descent. I have felt no longing for him although I did pen a poem, "His Unknown Child," in the summer of 1990.

As a child, I first learned about Jewish people from reading Sydney Taylor's wonderful book All of a Kind Family which I found in the warm and welcoming Palmer Park bookmobile. I adored this story, and it made me long to be Jewish because it taught me that Jewish children were well-loved, well-fed, well-educated--and not abused. (I had no idea, as a child, that Jewish families were more complicated than this.) All I knew was that I wasn't being properly cared for in my own family, and that I wished for something very different. I did not grow up around Jewish people. Even when I went to Germany in 1980, I had only a limited understanding of Judaism and of the Holocaust.

In the spring of 1982, I attended my first Liberation Seder. In the decades since, I have celebrated Passover most years and sometimes Rosh Hashanah as well as Hanukkah. While I have never wanted to convert to Judaism, being close to Jewish people has been at the center of my adult relationships--many of my friends and lovers grew up culturally Jewish.

My first true love was a man I met at Prince George's Community College in the fall of 1977. The deep care between us was strong and healthier than I'd ever known. But once we started being sexual, I began having searing flashbacks of childhood violation. I recall wrapping myself in his soft, white sheets feeling afraid and tormented. This kind twenty-year-old man bought a clay passage which he hung over his inviting double bed, "Love Grows Here." And I felt this--even as I was coming into the wretched consciousness of my childhood suffering. But though we spoke of marriage and of a shared life in Alaska, I couldn't stay with him. This wasn't about love. This was about knowing I had more of myself to uncover, to heal, to open out to.

My initial two years at the University of Maryland, 1978-1980, were full of the confusion and internal suffering of young adulthood. I wanted to figure out who I was, but I was shifting quickly in myriad ways. I felt bewildered about my sexuality, uncertain about my educational choices, and distressed about my destructive childhood. I attached myself to a young man who couldn't be present to our union. Sadly, this painful pattern repeated itself during my adulthood. Men who were--perhaps--able to love me, I shied away from. I feared emotional and sexual entrapment.

I had mostly female friends--many of whom lived in the same dorm and hall where I did: La Plata 6. I began working with disabled students in the fall of 1978 (as my work-study income), and became quite close with three of these people. I saw myself moving toward a career of service to others: first as a speech therapist, then as a recreational therapist. It took my year in Germany working with cognitively disabled adults to understand that my competence as a caretaker--which had begun so early in my life--was not a career path I could healthily follow. This was crushing. I felt deeply disappointed in myself. I had lost my way, left behind the woman I long assumed I was becoming.

I returned from my learning-rich and fittingly varied exchange year in the summer of 1981--becoming intensely involved with the radical Food Co-op at the University of Maryland straight away. I felt embraced by this community of leftists, and they certainly appreciated the progressive politics I'd become aware of in Western Europe. They were living an alternative lifestyle--one I'd only recently learned existed. I felt a part of them immediately. I realized that I could open out to the socialist feminist I'd begun to be in Germany, that there was ample room amongst them for me to explore my new self. These radicals emboldened me to move further from the constraints of my foster family's somewhat traditional beliefs about who I should be--and they certainly encouraged me to challenge the sexist assumptions of my nuclear family. At the Maryland Food Co-op, I felt surrounded by these progressive people and buffered from the larger, mainstream world.

I found my personal power during the early 1980s at the Food Co-op: verbal, sexual, intellectual, and emotional. I developed deep and lasting friendships. I had many lovers, both men and women. I started doing political organizing--particularly focused on the far-reaching impact of domestic violence. My writing became more articulate during that time too--principally because of the sage and caring tutelage of two University of Maryland English professors; these women bolstered me, believed in me.

Over the university's winter break, mid-December 1981 to mid-January 1982, I flew to California. The first and longer part of that carefully planned trip was spent visiting Fresno (in the Central Valley) where three women friends from my ICYE year lived. These two weeks together were lovingly connected and included a lively excursion to Northern California. The second and far shorter part of my trip was to Pomona (in western LA county) where my half-brother and step-father lived, separately. Much to the consternation of my loved ones back east, I was determined to confront my step-father about his years of abusive behavior, both physical and sexual. Getting directions from my half-brother (who walked me to my step-father's small home but himself hid outside), I knocked on my step-father's door. He answered, but didn't immediately recognize me--having last seen me nearly eight years previously in the southern Maryland courtroom. He was surprised, but asked me in. His Filipino partner, who had been his mistress during the last five years I lived with my family, respectfully went into their bedroom and shut the door. I sat with my step-father as he ate his mid-day meal. While he sliced his pork chop, I asked him why he had beaten me for all of those years. He blamed others for his behavior, taking no responsibility for his cruelty. A bit later, we went into their small livingroom where I confronted him about his sexual molestation. Again, he blamed everyone else for his devastating actions. While I don't believe he apologized, I do know that he admitted to his crimes against me. Armed with this knowledge, I felt immediately free of a victim's self-questioning. I knew that my memories were accurate. I knew that I was right to have left my family, to have forged a sane life for myself.

I joined a women's CR (consciousness-raising) group in early 1982, and later worked for the University of Maryland Women's Studies department as a teaching assistant. I began seeing my childhood abuse inside the larger paradigm of misogyny and patriarchy, poverty and class oppression. I felt increasingly empowered. I ardently wanted to be a lesbian--assumed it was the lifestyle for me given I'd separated from my family, didn't crave children, and had no desire to marry. Yet I was repeatedly drawn to men: sexually and emotionally. And, bewilderingly, I seemed to make better choices regarding male lovers. With men, I felt stronger within myself and within our union, while with women I felt unsteady and ungrounded: meek in surprising ways. I still don't know why this was true, but it was a pattern which repeated into my thirties.

I first fell in love with a woman in the spring of 1982. Like me, this young woman was just beginning to explore bisexuality. I was staggered by the intensity of my feelings for her; I knew neither how to hold nor how to integrate them. I felt overwhelmed, and the fact that she didn't return my devotion slayed me. In the fall of that year, I moved in with another female lover--a woman whose father had been trapped in a Nazi death camp as a teenager. Sadly, this Jewish woman and I nearly destroyed one another emotionally, the unhealed traumas of our wretched childhoods colliding and magnifying.

In January 1983, I moved into a collective: Beechwood House. This modest, four-bedroom home near the University of Maryland would be my anchor for three years, becoming such a beloved household that it would be painfully difficult for me to leave. I came into myself as a woman within its brightly adorned walls. A friend from that era labeled me a Domestic Radical Feminist--and this moniker stuck because it accurately described my disparate selves.

In early 1984, ten years after I'd left my family, my name-change became legal. I shed my step-father's surname, legally taking my great-grandmother's family name. I already had her first name, and my middle name, Roberta, was my great-great-grandmother's middle name, so each of these I kept. I'd begun musing out loud with close friends about altering my name during my exchange year in Germany--at first considering taking back my mother's family name (because my beloved uncle still carried it). But as I heard myself and my friends say my new name aloud, it became clear the name I wanted to carry was Madge Roberta McQueen. Even now, I can't bear hearing my step-father's name. Legally changing my surname was a crucial and life-affirming decision.

There were three men with whom I had sustained intimate relationships during the Maryland Food Co-op years. I recall feeling powerful in my sexuality, confident about my appearance and my slim body size. But I did feel troubling confusion about the power of body intimacy--often asking myself, my friends, and my lovers: "What does it mean to be so engaged bodily?" I had deep feelings for each of these men: love, connectedness, and fierce attraction. Yet being in a couple remained difficult: I railed against it; I cheated often; I didn't want to be "owned." I felt an overwhelming need to control my own body, to know that no one--even someone I loved--got to say what I could or couldn't do with my sexuality. I suppose I knew then that this was a reaction to being an incest survivor. Nonetheless, I couldn't stop needing to prove "who was the boss" of my body, of my sexuality.

One of these lovers was my soul mate--yet I couldn't stay with him; I had to go. For a time, I wanted this beautiful Jewish man to move north with me, but this was not something he was willing or able to do. It was very, very difficult to break the loving bond between us. Fortunately, we were able to retain a friendship and are still close.

For about two years in my early 20s, I explored taking hallucinogens: LSD and psilocybin, specifically. My most dramatic experience (as well as one of my last) was taking liquid acid in April 1984. During this trip, I saw within my chest a solid "black box" which represented my abusive past. Over the years, through public speaking, strong friendships, domestic violence activism, many forms of writing, loving intimate relationships, and various kinds of healing work, that "box" slowly became smaller. I recall in June 2002, when it was the size of a poppy seed, feeling it lift out of my chest and "watching" the final, tiny piece plant itself onto Twin Oaks property. This is when I knew for sure that that community was where I would next live.

When I was 25--still quite involved with the Maryland Food Co-op and still happily living at Beechwood House--I began considering graduate school. I recall a University of Maryland librarian telling me about Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. I remember even more vividly looking up information on microfilm about this progressive education institution. Once I read the following statement, I ceased to consider attending anywhere else.

The mission of Goddard College is to provide a learning environment for individual students from diverse populations: persons who, through the development and application of their individual and unique sensitivities, intellectual powers, and creativity, may be helped to devote themselves to the improvement of the physical, social, cultural, political, spiritual and economic condition of all people and to the restoration or creation of a healthy natural environment. In attempting to carry out this mission, the college must maintain an atmosphere of academic freedom and an experimental attitude which fosters constructive change in students and in the institution itself. Thus it continues to experiment with the forms and methods of education, seeking always to provide greater access to its programs for men and women who wish to learn. The college's relation to social problems is through intelligent, informed, sensitive, and morally responsible actions of its students, graduates, faculty, and staff, as individuals and as groups of individuals. The college's commitment is to create -- and continually create -- that learning environment which will foster in students and support in faculty and staff both the desire to be active participants in society and those characteristics which will make their participation constructive and effective.

I worked toward my MFA in Writing and Women's Literature at Goddard College from January 1985 through August 1987; this college's philosophy of education suited me perfectly, granting me permission to forge my own way. I felt entrusted to create my own educational path; I felt believed in as I opened out to what I wanted to study, to what I needed to learn. I lived on campus two semesters; one semester I moved back to Beechwood House so that I could live again with my beloved boyfriend; my final two semesters I lived with (and helped to care for) an 82-year-old Vermonter who had lived her entire life in Plainfield on Route 2.

While in Vermont, I identified as a lesbian--even though I had two affairs with men who were also Goddard students. I so desperately wanted to be a "woman-identified-woman," even if my body had heterosexual desires which would not, could not, be squelched. In graduate school, I became powerfully involved with another woman who was also an emerging writer. This brilliantly creative Jewish woman and I profoundly loved one another--yet we could not find our way sexually. We thought of ourselves as "political lesbians" because this is what we were. Her presence in my life in Plainfield helped me to become a stronger writer as well as a better person.

Writing was nearly my entire life while in graduate school. I recall a young man observing, "Everything you do is determined by how it affects your writing." He was absolutely right. Not only did my journal writing intensify, but I began writing poetry, and I also explored working in the epistolary form. My life was absolutely shaped by the determination to write well; I spent as much time as possible honing my craft. While I explored writing fiction--and surely loved reading contemporary women's novels--I was drawn nearly exclusively to personal writing. During these years, I gave many speeches about surviving battering and sexual violation. This political work took a huge toll on me; I did it until I couldn't anymore. My master's thesis focused on the long-term impact of childhood violation as well as the recalcitrant damage resulting from being raised by a mentally ill mother. Goddard College both allowed and encouraged me to record my story, to make a study of my own life.

After I completed my master's degree, I settled in Boston in the fall of 1987--where I hoped I would come more fully into the life of a lesbian. I moved into a lesbian household in Somerville; I joined the Lesbian Rap Group at the Women's Center in Cambridge; I found a lesbian girlfriend, and we hosted lesbian potlucks. And yet. And yet. I'd visit Maryland and be passionately sexual with my old boyfriends. I was bewilderingly far more satisfied with male lovers--but the life of a heterosexual woman didn't appeal to me whatsoever. I yearned to live in a different way, to be free of the restrictive and damaging lives of the women in my family. And I didn't really believe that I could find a man who wouldn't try to control me--no matter how "hip" or feminist-minded he was--even if this hadn't been my adult experience. I was convinced I'd be happier as a lesbian despite the evidence that my relationships with women proved otherwise. I was extremely determined and stubbornly hard headed.

Various times as an adult, I seriously considered killing myself. The closest I ever came to actually following through with suicide was in August 1989 when I was hiking alone on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. Just a few months earlier, I had permanently severed my relationship with my schizophrenic mother via letter. While this was surely what I needed to do, once I was alone on the gorgeous Seven Locks Trail--physically exhausted, sleep deprived, and quite filthy--I temporarily lost my will to live. But in the moments right before jumping down onto a beckoning pile of boulders, my desire to live forcefully reasserted itself. I found myself rushing down that mountain trail, literally running for my life.

Throughout my adult years, I have struggled with transference: mother, father, aunt, uncle, and brother. While I have worked incredibly hard to rid myself of these damaging echoes, the tentacles of abuse reside deep within me--sadly still affecting my intimate relationships. According to Wikipedia,

Transference is a phenomenon characterized by unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. One definition of transference is "the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship that was important in a person's childhood." Another definition is "the redirection of feelings and desires, and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object." Still another definition is "a reproduction of emotions relating to repressed experiences, especially of childhood, and the substitution of another person ... for the original object of the repressed impulses."

Each of these definitions speaks to an aspect of my lived experience. Because of the intensity and longevity of my childhood suffering, I have continued to struggle to break free completely from my past--even though I have done countless hours of healing work since 1979.

I've said many times that I've had to hold the love of my parents as well as their abuse and neglect within both of my hands. It is often the intimate love of a sexual partner which slays me most, which makes me unnecessarily frightened and reactive. What people might do in the name of love terrifies me. I did not feel unloved as a child--instead I felt "overly" loved in a desperate, thieving way. Both my mother and my step-father had painful voids in their personalities--an unsurprising consequence of their desperate childhoods. I often felt as if they were attempting to fill their emptiness with me: with my light, with my energy, with my strong spirit because they couldn't bear facing their own losses, and they were certainly unable--for cultural, class, and emotional reasons--to do the long, hard work of inner healing.

I've been fortunate to have had many years of counseling with highly skilled and caring women. These therapeutic conversations have enabled me to come into myself as a full human being--to know myself as a survivor rather than as a victim of my miserable childhood. These therapists helped me to lay claim to my skills and talents, to embrace the woman I was becoming, to accept the person I already was.

Two difficult years after my move to Boston (which I thought of as my Saturn Return), I was finally able to admit to my lifelong struggles with self-starvation. In the fall of 1989: I attended the anorexic/bulimic sub-group of Overeaters Anonymous; I began meeting weekly with a nutritionist; I joined a group for siblings of the mentally ill; and I sought out another psychotherapist.

I struggled with anorexia for many years. I believe my refusal to acknowledge my need for food started when I was a child, when our family dinner table was often engulfed by my step-father's rages. Countless times, he threw food--sometimes even lifting the dinner table so that everything fell to the floor. Hearing him repeatedly say that my mother was "fat and ugly" tore at me. Watching him make my mother cower on the floor devastated me. Witnessing his ongoing physical abuse of my blameless half-brother shattered me. I developed the erroneous belief: "If I were thinner, I would be safe." This was obviously not true.

That said, there is privilege in thinness in our culture--just as there is privilege in being considered beautiful. People were generally nice to me. Unattractive women do not, I imagine, so easily receive the kindness of strangers. Of course, I had to deal with unwanted looks/cat calls/attention, but for me this was worth being thought lovely. I knew that my "middle class appearance" (fortunately I had clear skin and straight teeth) made it easier for me to climb out of poverty, made it simpler for me to "pass," made it possible for me to leave my white trash childhood behind.

I made a promise to myself when I left my family: never again would I be beaten by anyone. Throughout my adulthood, I've held tightly to that fierce conviction. I've never been in battering relationship. I've told nearly every lover upon becoming a couple that if he hit me, I'd fight back--even if he was much bigger than me. I knew that I'd go "crazy" were I hit as an adult. After fourteen years of molestation and battering, there was no possible way I could tolerate any further violence. None of my partners have been abusive. Disturbingly, I was anally raped in college by a student in my audiology class. While I never went out again with that coercive young man, neither did I report him. Like many date-rape survivors, I felt muddled in my thinking regarding consent.

In June 1989, I took the empowering, two-week Model Mugging training course in Boston in preparation for my solo hike out west. This emotionally and physically demanding program gave me the know-how and inner strength to protect myself from further predation. I have used their intensive system to keep myself safe for the past twenty-five years.

In September 2000, I was held up at gunpoint in the South End of Boston. And even though Model Mugging does not advise saying no to a gun-toting thug, that autumn evening I did. What rose out of me on Washington Street was an absolute "NO!" to further violation. The large man tried to get both my money and my jewelry. I had only $10 in my cloth wallet and a glass bauble around my neck; I was surrendering neither--nor was I relinquishing my backpack which held my 149th journal. I refused to bow down to this criminal's violence. I planted my feet--as I was taught in Model Mugging--and loudly said no to his repeated demands. I was not thinking about the long gun barrel in my face; I was instead reacting to the powerlessness of my childhood. Just as I had begun saying no as a young teenager to my step-father's sexual abuse and had stopped crying when he beat me, I knew I would not again be a victim to any bully's terrorizing. This hooded man turned and ran. I later realized how lucky I was he didn't shoot me, but I responded to his attempted armed robbery the only way I possibly could.

My relationships with men in Boston were problematic. I wasn't an easy partner. I bristled easily and often. While I was no longer having incest flashbacks, I remained a fighter--refusing to be "de-clawed." While I longed for fierce connection--both emotionally and physically--with a man, I railed against such intimacy.

The summer before I entered Massachusetts College of Art in August 1993, I found my sexual match. Our bodily connection was the strongest I'd ever known, yet we were unable to work things out as a couple. I couldn't let go. I remained intermittently involved with this ardent and creative political activist for eleven years--much to the rightful dismay of my close friends. I couldn't understand how we could be so powerfully connected bodily yet remain unmatched emotionally and mentally. While I had other involvements during those long years, I came back repeatedly to this complex relationship because I wanted, I needed to touch that elemental aspect of myself. I felt rage that he took me somewhere bodily that I couldn't go alone or with any one else, and I was painfully hurt that he denied me his Jewish mother and his Scottish father--both of whom told me that I was their choice as their son's partner.

Even though I hadn't really imagined myself working as a teacher, I came to feel that this was--perhaps--the best way for me to earn money. During the fourteen years I lived in Boston, I taught English in three settings: in an alternative elementary school, in a community-based adult education program, and as a tutor for college students. At Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, I worked with 4th and 5th graders one year, and then a second year with the same students in 5th and 6th grades. My principal focus was teaching reading and writing; what I enjoyed most was creating books with these bright children. I then went to work at Jamaica Plain Community Centers--Adult Learning Program where I taught ABE (Adult Basic Education). My most treasured accomplishment during those three years was penning "Creating a Frame for Writing: Developing Critical Thinking Skills in ABE Students," which was based on a curriculum I developed using Rose Guy's young adult trilogy. Giving these disadvantaged women the academic support to read their first novel, The Friends, was profoundly satisfying. I wanted these adult students to believe that literature existed which spoke to their experience--that fiction wasn't only meant for educated white people; I believe I accomplished this goal. The following four years, I supported myself as a Critical Studies tutor at Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt)--tutoring learning disabled students as well as ESL (English as a Second Language) students--while working diligently to earn my BFA.

During these nine years, I was genuinely thankful for my undergraduate degree in Hearing and Speech Sciences because I found that long training quite useful as an English teacher. I thoroughly enjoyed connecting with students about their internal lives as well as helping them to put their thoughts and feelings onto paper. I felt as if I was sharing power; I sensed that I was giving these people needed tools which would enrich and liberate their lives; I understood that passing along so much of what I knew about words both invigorated and challenged me.

I had first begun musing about studying art and being an artist while finishing my MFA in Writing and Women's Literature in 1987. But it wasn't until I was temporarily unemployed in the summer of 1990, that I began making copious visual pieces--principally artist books. (My then friend and ex-girlfriend accurately jested, "You're prolific and poor.") In 1991 I took a MassArt Continuing Ed class, "Collage and Beyond," in addition to a "Beginning Quilting" class through Brookline Adult & Community Education. In the fall of 1992, I joined Cornwall Gallery--a collective comprised of emerging artists. Half a year later, I mounted my first solo show, "Passage: a Journey Through Artist Books." In that ample Jamaica Plain space, I exhibited 29 of my handmade books.

I applied, was accepted, and began attending Massachusetts College of Art in 1993. During my first two years, I assumed I would study 3D-Glass (why exactly, I'm not sure). But as I began my junior year, I transferred to the 3D-Fibers department where I felt at home, at ease--and where I excelled. Much of my art work during those demanding junior and senior years focused on creating room-sized installations. I longed to, needed to combine many forms and varied materials: fabric, glass, stone, steel, photographic images, found objects, and organic matter. I wanted my viewers to experience strong emotions--to have repeated opportunities for intense and complex feeling; I yearned to create environments which encouraged my audience to drop deeply into themselves.

I was honored with three awards during my latter two years at MassArt. Most significantly, I was chosen as one of two Outstanding Seniors in 1997 due to my academic performance, my art work, and my English tutoring.

The entire time I was in art school (as well as the year before), I lived alone in Jamaica Plain. This was the first time I lived on my own--in this case, in an ample two-room studio. I adored this small apartment, and found myself loath to leave it when I moved abroad for the second time.

During the final year of my BFA, I decided I wanted to teach English overseas post graduation. At first, I assumed I would go to Japan where I hoped to continue studying fiber arts. Instead, I was offered a teaching position in Honduras. That bio-region also interested me, particularly because I had recently studied Meso-American art history and found myself captivated by the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan near the Honduras-Guatemala boarder. This spectacular structure was built by Maya people in the 8th century CE. It seemed to express my passion for words and sculpture, to make manifest my affinity for images and stone; I knew I had to be in its presence.

Living alone (this time in a small, mother-in-law apartment) in La Lima, Honduras, while teaching 8th graders at the international K-8 school, however, proved to be profoundly difficult. I found myself lonelier than I'd ever been as an adult. I was repeatedly humbled by the struggles I faced in that small, Central American country: emotional, academic, medical, and interpersonal. During that challenging year: I was on the scene of a murder in La Ceiba; I was sexually attacked on the street in San Pedro Sula; I was frequently sick in La Lima. I did not feel supported as a teacher by the local school administration. By the end of those grueling twelve months, I was absolutely depleted. I returned to Boston exhausted, broken, confused--and found myself falling into an extended dark night of the soul. I knew I no longer wanted to teach, but I had no idea what I did want to do.

I tried one last time to "be a lesbian" during that disconcerting and shifting time. I met a wonderful woman shortly before I left for Honduras. Halfway through that challenging year, we began thinking of one another as each other's primary partners. Our warm and word-based relationship sustained me as I fulfilled my teaching contract in La Lima. Yet a month after I came home, we dissolved our relationship. Although this woman and I warmly cared for, were strongly attracted to, and truly respected one another, we could not make our way forward as a couple. Many, many tears were shed, but each of us had to accept that we were predominately heterosexual. Fortunately, we found a way to remain friends across the years since our sad and painful break-up.

I clearly needed to earn my keep, but knew I didn't want to embark on another career: I just wanted to live my own life. So, I temped for a living--signing up with a small company which paid me fairly well and in which I felt respected. I worked in various settings: bio-tech firms, numerous hospitals, a large engineering company, etc. I felt warmly received in most of my placements. These jobs allowed me to earn money while keeping my heart and mind free for my own life. I traveled internationally as much as I could during those four years, and my longstanding friendships--both in Boston and elsewhere--deepened.

By late 2001 into early 2002, I felt all-encompassing change moving through me. I ended three years of psycho-therapy; I broke off an eighteen month relationship with a soft-spoken African American man; I quit temping; I gave up my beautiful room (which I lovingly called "Cranberry Cove") in a large, South End group apartment; and the women's installation group I co-founded fell apart. I was clear that I needed to leave New England, but surprised to find myself wanting to return to the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Like many artists, I felt impacted by the gentrification of Boston. Although it was and remains a city I dearly love, I could no longer find a way to finance the alternative lifestyle I was determined to live. While I wasn't sure how I would create a home for myself in Maryland or in D.C., I felt within me an undeniable longing for the smell of autumn in the bio-region of my youth.

During the spring and summer of 2002, I participated in two three-week visitor periods at Twin Oaks in Louisa, Virginia. This intentional community was not new to me; I had also done a visitor period during the summer of 1983 when my then-lover chose to make that rural farm his home. But when I was deciding to leave Boston--and all that it had held for me over nearly a decade and a half--I didn't know that this late-60s-founded community would be where I'd plant myself for the next eleven years. That their 450 acres resided within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed sealed my decision. I began making Twin Oaks Community my home in October 2002.

The communal work life of Twin Oaks suited me perfectly. The shared labor and the reality that nearly all of it counted equally compelled me. That I could mostly work where I wished on the farm, that I could learn new skills, that I could become a manager, that I could vary my work days and hours, that all work above quota (typically 42 hours a week) was counted toward my leisure time, that generally I would not have a boss, that I could switch jobs if I wanted, that I would be encouraged to take sick time as I needed it, that I would have a say in decision making--these factors made me want to become a member, and kept me choosing Twin Oaks even when living with more than 100 adults and about 15 children had its unsurprising annoyances.

Unlike many people who move to Twin Oaks, I felt my standard of living rise as a result of choosing this shared life. As I was deciding where I wanted to live post Boston, I thought back on my work life--realizing that the happiest money-making situation I'd ever been in was at the Maryland Food Co-op, which was collectively run. Twin Oaks felt like the "adult" form of that lifestyle. I sensed, from the beginning, that I could make a sustainable life for myself on that communal farm. And this has been mostly true.

But what is also true is that sharing a home with more than 100 people can be difficult, tedious, demanding, and emotionally exhausting. Communal living makes one face oneself in ways not necessarily called upon in mainstream society. For me, the trade-offs have been worth it, and I am choosing to return to Twin Oaks in December 2014 after eleven months away on my Personal Affairs Leave. While I thought seriously about not returning--instead moving back to Massachusetts where many of my closest friends reside--I knew that I did not want, nor would I be able, to re-adjust to the economic challenges of a more mainstream life.

Given I'd neither yearned to own a home, nor even a car (since I was 20), nor did I crave many other high-ticket items, living in a "downwardly mobile" manner has not been difficult for me because what I gained was invaluable: delicious drinking water; home grown vegetables, farm-raised meat, and farm-produced dairy products; the safety of walking in the woods day or night; frequent contact with children; friendships which are not constrained by geographic distance; ample vacation time; the ongoing possibility for interaction with all kinds of people; enjoyable work; and the satisfying knowledge of being a part of a small but important movement for social change.

Not until I moved to Twin Oaks was I able to have connected relationships with children. Before my mid-40s it had been far too difficult for me to attach emotionally to young people. Being around children brought on wrenching despair because I knew viscerally how vulnerable they are to the whims of adults, to those who should love and care for them, to those who would greedily steal their light. When I was with kids, I found myself worrying about the ways they might be (or already had been) harmed. In their presence, I was painfully reminded of the abuse I suffered by one of my aunts, my mother, my step-father, two of my uncles, a babysitter, and a couple of neighborhood boys. I would not allow myself to love children because I felt painfully afraid I'd fail to protect them from predation.

But living at Twin Oaks Community altered that difficult and sad way of being in the world. While surely not utopian, our community seemed to me to be mostly quite safe for children. This allowed me to open to loving one child: a newborn baby, who soon became my goddess child. Loving this girl and feeling that she was safe transformed my earlier suffering. And after allowing myself to care for her, I was able to love other community children of various ages. Many years later, I became unexpectedly attached to a child who lives just north of Richmond (about 50 miles east of Twin Oaks). I had not known until I met this feisty girl--the daughter of a man I dated for seven months--and came to love her, how far I'd shifted from my previous distance-keeping with young people. While my close relationships with kids did not alter my desire to remain childless, I felt profoundly grateful for these connections. I especially enjoyed art making, reading, and taking hikes with them. My world--both internal and external--became larger for knowing and loving these young people.

Intimate relationships on a communal farm are complicated in ways different than coupling "on the outside." Because Twin Oaks strives to be a feminist community, I felt far less cognitive dissonance being in heterosexual relationships than I ever had while living in Maryland or in Massachusetts. That said, getting space from one's lover--or far more importantly from one's ex-lover--is exceedingly problematic, truly almost impossible.

I was intensely involved with two men at Twin Oaks. These relationships were profoundly different: emotionally, creatively, sexually, intellectually. With one of them, I felt an overpowering sexual and emotional union which absolutely compelled and continually devastated me. With the other, I felt fully seen as an artist and as a writer. This man was the most generous partner I have ever had--yet our composite issues drove us apart, repeatedly.

Sadly, I struggled with deep transference with each of these men--and came to believe that I am constitutionally unsuited to coupling. I cannot relax into intimacy. I am unable to let down my guard or in fact be happy inside of a relationship. There is simply not enough room for me when partnering with another person. I find myself feeling emotions I do not want to feel: vulnerability most significantly. Having to face my own hunger in a relationship can be searingly painful. I've sadly come to believe that what I might gain from an intimate relationship is, perhaps, not worth its price.

Even though I currently find myself in a protracted period of celibacy, it feels important to write about that once vital aspect of my bodily self, because not doing so is dishonest to the full life I have lived. I am a childhood abuse survivor who nevertheless experienced transformative and healing sexual intimacy with men as an adult. Yet writing about that no longer present aspect of my life is painfully difficult, is emotionally land-mined.

How can I tell my bodily story honestly, concisely? And how can I even bear to recall that once core part of myself when I feel so very far away from it now? And how can I possibly do this when I have no certainty that I will have or will even want to have that experience again?

Am I to skip over my years of multi-orgasmic love making, to leap past the powerful union of bodies I have shared with many men? Am I to withhold even mentioning those experiences from my autobiography? Who does this serve? If my aim is truth telling: can I, should I, bypass this central fact of my adult life?

Here in my mid-fifties, I repeatedly ask myself where that sexual intensity has gone. I find myself wondering how much of its absence is due to cultural expectations, to hormonal shifts, to my recent relationship history, to changes in my aging body and my bewildered feelings about these diminishments.

And there is, of course, my deep and abiding ambivalence regarding intimate relationships. When I was younger and my sex drive fierce, I was able to leap over, scurry around, or bust through these more complicated feelings. But now finding myself "sexless," there doesn't seem to be a reason to couple, to partner, to give of myself in that way because intimate love, intimate loving is--for me--so very, very hard.

Unlike many people, I suppose, I get my ongoing need for emotional intimacy met through friendship. But what I don't get with friends is bodily connection. I would not describe myself as a physically affectionate person in my friendships. One of the aspects of friendship which works so well for me is that there is no bodily confusion. With lovers, I am warmly affectionate. That part of me opens out--with all of its resultant confusions.

Given my early and sustained bodily violation, the linking of love and touch is extremely loaded for me. It can make me reactive, and it can lead to transference. I struggle with having bodily needs. This can make me hate the person who exposes me to those most human of emotions.

I often feel as if I've gone back to where I was in my 20s regarding heterosexuality. For me, sexism diminishes what might be sexually possible between women and men. This is profoundly sad and painful for me, tragic really. I deeply believe in equality between the sexes. And its absence harms me, often destroying what might be possible for me with a man. But given I am not a lesbian and probably not even really bisexual, how am I to envision a future for my sexuality?

And what am I to do with the reality of what oral sex has meant to me: how I often thought of it as sacred, even holy? What about when being with a man in that most elemental of ways, I felt as if I had touched the core of humanity, had felt connected with other human beings so very long dead? And how do I possibly cherish these feelings, these thoughts in the face of pornography which far too often denigrates the power of mouth-to-genital love making? Which most often diminishes and terrorizes women's bodies?

As an abuse survivor, it's a miracle that I haven't experienced what might be called "a poverty of sexuality"--surely this would be understandable given what I endured. Instead, I've been blessed with a rich, if complicated, bodily life. So here in my fifties: I know its loss, I feel its absence. And I do not know where I want now to stand.

Sometimes I feel that I don't even know--or certainly no longer know--who that intensely sexual woman was. The powerful person I felt myself to be in bed with my male lovers in my 20s, 30s, and 40s--where did she go? Do I want to retrieve her? Who is she to me now? Can I reclaim her? And, if not, who I am without her?

I grew up Pentecostal and then Southern Baptist--being a member of congregations which had painfully proscribed ideas about the place of women and girls. I remember my mother not being supported as a battered woman by the Pentecostals because she was thought to be a poor wife and an inadequate homemaker. I recall sensing--accurately, I'm sure--that I could not question what I was being taught in Sunday School and during the weekly church services: Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday prayer meetings. That said, in January 1974 it was the caring members of the First Baptist Church of Suitland who helped me to escape from my family, and it's also been that devoted congregation which has continued to care for my needy mother across these many years. She has been a member of that generous, if socially conservative, church since the early 1970s.

In my third foster home, I became active at Bethany Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Camp Springs, Maryland, starting in the fall of 1975. In that liberal congregation: I developed strong friendships, was mentored by thoughtful adults, participated in a mime troupe, became a youth leader, and gained the understanding that fundamentalism was not the totality of Christianity. It was through the support of this caring and open-minded group of people (particularly one female youth leader) that I learned about and was able to participate in the International Christian Youth Exchange program in 1980-1981.

I was first exposed to Quakerism in 1984 by a Jewish boyfriend who had been raised Unitarian. I didn't want to go to Meeting for Worship at Adelphi Friends that chilly winter Sunday morning--believing I'd had enough of organized religion. Yet once I took my seat in that silent space, I felt as if I'd found a faith practice which had room for me. But it wasn't until I moved to Boston that I began attending Meeting for Worship regularly--eventually becoming an active member of Friends Meeting at Cambridge until I moved to central Virginia in 2002.

In 2010, after years of infrequent attendance at the Charlottesville Friends Meeting, I began thinking of myself as an atheist. I took up a self-guided study of evolution which lasted more than two years. In 2012, I was taken by my then boyfriend to the welcoming UU (Unitarian Universalist) congregation in Richmond where I felt a strong sense of union, both spiritually and politically. Although that "off-the-farm" relationship was short-lived, I gained from it the sense that I could find a faith community which would feed and nurture me.

Throughout my life, I have had strong connections with older women. This way of being in the world began with my grandmother and with one of my great-aunts. I felt loved by both of these women when I was a child--even if I saw them as disempowered in relation to my step-father. Their seeming lack of bravery was difficult for me to understand, to accept, to not feel wounded by. When I was about nine, I recall having the devastating thought/feeling: "All women are stupid and all men are mean." So even if I loved these family members as a child (and on into my adulthood), I did not believe in them; I knew that they couldn't protect me from the violence of men or even the abuse of other women.

I've had a few jobs as a live-in caretaker, principally for older women. I did this intimate work while in graduate school as well as during the early months of working on my bequest at UMass Amherst. I felt comfortable in this role, at ease with domestic tasks and bodily care. I enjoyed talking with these women, learning about their lives.

At Twin Oaks, I have had strong connections with many women older than me; this type of relationship has given me deep contentment. For nearly six years, I was part of a team which cared for an ex-member's mother who lived 30 miles northwest of Twin Oaks in Gordonsville. I felt such pleasure spending weekly time with this elderly woman--helping her to live independently, hearing about her complicated childhood in Brownsville (then a poor Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York), and playing countless games of Scrabble.

Since the mid 1990s, I have spent ample time visiting two retirement communities: Brookridge (Baptist) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Friends House (Quaker) in Sandy Spring, Maryland--where my great-aunt and a beloved friend lived, respectively. I deeply enjoyed these visits and felt warmly embraced by many of the elderly women in these well-tended places. I recall raucous laughter, shared stories, and kind-hearted acceptance of my non-traditional life.

Here at fifty-five I am, of course, thinking more about aging. I find myself in the mid-life passage, bearing witness to this humbling, yet utterly human transition. I want to tell the truth about my experience, my body, and my sexuality in this somewhat melancholic time. This is so very hard, and I fear failing myself as well as my future readers--particularly other women who need one another's understanding in these middle years.

I often find myself dismayed by the changes to my "once beautiful" body, and I struggle with the reality that I can't control this unwanted metamorphosis. As someone who has considered herself a radical feminist since 1980, it doesn't feel fair to hold myself up against the judgment of mainstream culture when I have turned away from it in so many other ways. Instead of giving into body loathing, I am trying to be at peace, to find acceptance. And I know for sure that I don't want to give into socially prescribed jealousy towards younger, thinner women--because where could that take me that I in any way want to go?

More confusing still is to find myself ever at all longing for "the male gaze." Yet, how much of this is cultural, is evolutionary? Given that I have deeply mixed feelings about coupling, about sexual intimacy, about "giving up my freedom," why do I care about what others think of my appearance? And do I really want more men looking at me? Is its absence what I find unsettling--the alarming consciousness regarding the ways my sense of self has been bolstered by male approval throughout my life?

Yes, indeed, the larger culture can be cruel towards, and dismissive of, middle aged and older women, of women who are not lovely, not thin, not sexy. But do I want to act in those self-negating ways? And if so, why?

As someone who was quite thin in my 20s, finding myself with a full-figured body is uncomfortable, is embarrassing. I often feel as if there is something I should be able to do about this steady weight gain in my middle years--yet I am clearly fighting biology. Both my mother and my grandmother were obese well before the age I am now. And starving myself no longer works, nor am I able to do it.

I had a faulty kind of power as a very thin young woman. I got high off not-eating, off "not needing" food. I thought of myself as better than others. I didn't want to give in to typical human hungers, to own up to standard human needs. I yearned to be above such neediness. I thought I was above it. Here at middle age, I know that I am not.

Can I now be as gracious to my younger women friends as the older women I've loved throughout my life have been toward me? I had no idea of the cost these older women might have faced in our connection. I was under the erroneous notion that I "just wouldn't choose" for my body to fail and disappoint me. Oh the arrogance, the unknowing of youth; oh the humbling of aging.

Here in the "dark wood" of which Dante so eloquently speaks I find myself wondering, "How many years of vigor do I have left?" While I am diligent with self-care, I have no idea how the many possible indignities of aging will manifest in my body. I long to be able to face these changes with self love--to endure my own decline with grace and tenderness. It is through female friendship, I imagine, that I will find acceptance of growing old.

My cherished great-aunt had a daily practice of walking after dinner with her husband and their beloved dachshund. When I visited this family in Shelby, North Carolina, I went along on these evening strolls--finding pleasure in this way of spending time with my loved ones. As my aged aunt declined, she continued walking: making smaller and smaller loops around Brookridge Retirement Community where she lived out her final fourteen years. Shortly before she died, I sent her a postcard of a little girl in the woods. On it, I thanked her for giving me a life-long love of walking. The kind-hearted chaplain who read this card aloud at her bedside later told me of my great-aunt's wan smile at my parting words of gratitude.

I was introduced to hiking and backpacking by the three men I was involved with when I lived at Beechwood House in Maryland. These lovers enjoyed sharing their knowledge of the natural world--and these engaging, tree-filled experiences developed in me a desire to share outdoor opportunities with others, as well as engendering a need within me for solitary time in the woods. I specifically recall wonderful and challenging hikes in the George Washington National Forest in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. These adventures forever changed me.

An early 1990s Boston boyfriend helped me to understand that exercise (for him biking and for me walking) functioned as a natural anti-depressant. This knowledge has enabled me to deal with some of the more vulnerable aspects of my personality since our eight month relationship.

While living at Twin Oaks Community, I took countless walks alone as well as with children, friends, and lovers--around the farm, on and off our property. I also organized numerous hikes in the nearby Shenandoah National Park, mostly but not exclusively with others. These arboreal adventures helped me to know myself, to deepen my connections to my loved ones, to fully appreciate that beautiful and varied eco-system.

As a child, I traveled numerous times via Greyhound with my half-brother and my mother to Shelby, North Carolina, and to Knoxville, Tennessee, visiting extended family. As a pre-teen and then as a young teenager, I traveled by car with my sexually abusive step-father to St. Petersburg, Florida, where his retired mother lived. Those road trips were book-ended by molestation which happened in cheap, one-story motels. As an adult, I remain unable to stay in a motel (or even a hotel). The trauma of those long and terrifying father-daughter road trips--as well as the physical and psychological discomfort of traveling by bus with my mother and half-brother--haunt me still.

When I examine these experiences, I come to a clearer sense about the ways I have most enjoyed traveling as an adult: alone for the actual movement from place to place, and then visiting with trusted loved ones while staying put. I'd not thought specifically about why I journey the way I do--and the way I have done for so many years--until figuring out how I could possibly write the previous paragraph.

I faintly remember an early road trip to Oklahoma with one of my cousins: the two of us gleefully sitting in the back of her parents' capped pick-up truck. I happily recall the wind through the open windows and our repeated ten-year-old girl road games. (Something else we played a couple of years later--though certainly not in the company of adults--was "Husbands Gone Away to War and Wives Get Together." This was our only acknowledgement of the Vietnam War as far as I can recall.)

My first trip outside of the U.S. was in April 1976 to Quebec City with my 11th grade French class from Suitland Senior High School. My first time out of North America was in July 1980 when I moved to Germany for a year. While in Western Europe, I traveled by car in the late summer to southern Germany, Switzerland, and Austria with my first host family; in the winter I journeyed by train to France with my German lover; and then in the spring I explored a sliver of northern Germany by bike with one of my host sisters. Toward the end of my exchange year, I ventured alone internationally for the first time via train and boat--traveling to England and then on to Scotland for my 22nd birthday.

Honduras, El Salvador, Aruba, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Israel, Canada (Quebec and Nova Scotia), New Zealand, and Belgium--these are the countries I've traveled to and within since 1997. I adore "finding" myself in foreign places: walking their streets, witnessing the varied ways people live, dress, interact. I cherish experiencing different qualities of light, breathing in new smells, observing local flora and fauna. I'm fascinated hearing other languages, because I am emphatically reminded that all language is distinct sounds to which we humans have applied meaning. While I have fortunately done most of the international travel I've wanted to, I retain within me a desire to visit Eastern Europe--the Czech Republic and Hungary, specifically.

I treasure experiencing liminal spaces in solitude: recording them, living them, and later telling about them. It's not that I dislike traveling with others, but that I savor

traveling alone; I rarely find myself wishing for a travel companion. This said, I have relished sharing road adventures with others, principally close women friends.

Modes of transportation: buses, cars, trains, and bicycles (but never planes) have dominated my dream life for as long as I can remember. I am not necessarily--or even often--driving these vehicles, but they feature hugely in my nocturnal world. Perhaps I am in a wheeled conveyance, or maybe I actually am one of these vectors--I don't really know. As I have aged, I sadly remember (or even have?) fewer dreams--but of the ones I do wake to, most involve movement from one place to another.

Looking at an online definition of vehicle, I find myself fascinated:

- 1. any means in or by which someone travels or something is carried, conveyed, or transported
- 2. a conveyance moving on wheels, runners, tracks, or the like
- 3. a means of transmission or passage
- 4. a carrier, as of infection
- 5. a medium of communication, expression, or display
- 6. a role suited to the talents of and often written for a specific performer
- 7. a means of accomplishing a purpose

Most of these descriptions fit this meandering life I have lived: the ways I have moved through the world, the manner in which I see myself: the girl I once was and the woman I continue to be.

To this day, I feel warm happiness as I pack for trips: filling my "roll-cart" with all that I'll need, trying very hard to pack as lightly as I can. I pride myself on leaving whatever room I've stayed in neat. If it's my own bedroom, I leave it ordered and lovely because I get sustained pleasure from knowing I have a calm space to return to--a personal sanctuary to see in my mind's eye and to feel inside of my body as I make my way through the frequently frenetic and sometimes overwhelming world.

I glean pleasure from leave-taking and saying good-bye. I reenact this experience repeatedly--and only rarely is it tense. "Going" is enjoyable because mostly I am choosing it, rather than being forced to flee due to damaging dynamics, painful relationships, unhealthy situations.

Since leaving my family, I have watched very little television. I recall my mother praying for the characters in the soap operas throughout the 1960s and in the early 1970s. Her attention was on their fictional lives, not on the troubled reality of her two abused and neglected children, not on her battering husband whom she felt--rightly, I fear--she couldn't leave, not on trying to heal from her tragic eight years in Mills Home (a Baptist orphanage in Thomasville, North Carolina). I have abhorrent recollections of witnessing my mother masturbating on the livingroom couch while watching various TV shows. There is no way to dress up these damaging memories. And it was during those graphic episodes that I "decoded" a short ditty she sang repeatedly; this three-line song exposed her sexual violation of me as an infant.

When I was 29, I briefly watched a weekly television program with my then girlfriend. I recall realizing, "This show is forming desires in me that I know I don't have and unequivocally don't want: a husband, a house, and children--a middle class, mainstream life." I never watched it again.

There is tragically not much my mother gave me which I value, but she did teach me to write thank-you notes. This is a practice which I still keep and one whose absence in others I find baffling.

I come from women who wrote letters. In my collection are letters from my great-great-grandmother to my great-grandmother. I was told that this foremother wrote weekly letters to her eight adult children. While I never knew her, I certainly carry on her epistolary tradition.

For thirty-five years, letter writing has been at my emotional center. These missives have been the way I more deeply know who I am; they are the manner by which I increase the strength of my connection with loved ones; and they are the forum through which I continue to become fully articulate as a writer and as a woman.

While I have not fantasized about publishing my journals, I have thought seriously about publishing a book of my letters. Working on my collection at SCUA this year, I put together a large volume of my missives, Through Writing I Come Home: Selected Letters of Madge McQueen, 1978 Onward. I long to find an audience for this epistolary writing.

One of my greatest pleasures is being in a public space alone: writing in my journal or composing a hand-written letter. I think of this as creating private space in public. It's an image of myself which I want to project--not a false one, but a less standard portrayal than many depictions of women. Females are often in public with children, partners, family, or friends. There seems to be less understanding of women who choose to be alone.

Yet I came to understand how much I need the loving support of my cherished friends when I was away from all of them during the year I spent teaching in Honduras. I painfully learned that I could not be my full self without the loyalty of devoted loved ones. I felt myself as diminished during those devastating twelve months. And I sensed I was a partial self: less of a feminist, less of a radical teacher, less of a Quaker, less of an artist--far less the Madge I knew myself to be, far less the Madge I wanted to be, had worked so very hard at becoming. I was humbled by my unmet need for true friendship. After that Central American year, I could no longer minimize the loneliness of others because I had been warped by its insistence myself.

How do I write about something as fundamental to me as breathing? I can't seem to get enough distance to tell the story of what female friendship has meant and continues to mean to me. How do I gather together these loved ones and concisely tell their individual stories, expressing the profound significance of our shared experiences? These women, these friendships, are not interchangeable--yet each is absolutely essential to the meaningful and rich life I have lived and continue to live. These friends are the web around me. Their love and their care bolsters me, encourages me, and demands of me that I live my fullest self.

As with lovers, there have been "break-ups" with friends. These partings are painful and often muddy. I'm not innocent in these separations--sometimes I have chosen the ends, while other times I have not. I've had to discern the difficult and confusing path of being gracious with others' choices not to be close. And I've had to learn to be clear when I needed to end a friendship no matter how long we'd been connected.

I prefer spending one-on-one time with friends--this is about the kinds of conversations I want most to have. I yearn always to drop deep with my loved ones: to tell and to listen to the intimate stories of our lives. I want to be a support person, and I want to be supported. I strive for candor between us--truth telling which keeps our lives and our relationships to ourselves honest.

In 2001, I realized that many of my friendships were being challenged because most of my friends had begun making very different choices than the ones I was making regarding life partnership, children, and careers. I found that when a loved one has two or more of these active in her life, our time together--the slice of her available to friendship--was sorely limited. Because I didn't really make any of these choices (or at least not for very long), I often had to back up in our connections. This was quietly painful. And given that mainstream culture typically puts so much else ahead of female friendship, as well as diminishes it in comparison to family ties, I too often found myself on the outside of intimacy I didn't want and wasn't sure how to talk about.

Even when I was in intimate relationships, I rarely saw my lovers as more important than my close friends. Unlike most people, I felt my lovers and my friends to be equally significant. I would not chose one over the other. And I was repeatedly pained that so many people--nearly all people--did exactly this.

My favorite ways to spend time with my beloveds are walking and sharing food--both while telling one another the evolving stories of our lives. I've had and continue to have a wide age range of women friends: much older than me to decades younger. It's the type of relationship that matters most--one where we talk intensely, listen closely, and care deeply.

Given that one of my deepest pleasures is talking candidly to my loved ones, it can't be surprising that I delight in reading fiction--principally that written by contemporary women. I feel as if these writers' words give me another way of knowing the world, of making the world larger. (I've been unable to tolerate reading many novels by men because their portrayals of women and girls are often limited and insulting.) Reading good fiction has increased my empathy, has helped me to more fully understand my own life and the lives of others, as well as helping me to become a more thoughtful writer.

In the spring of 2012, after twenty months of frightening depression following the unexpected suicide of my cousin, a wrenchingly painful break-up, as well as numerous complicated troubles at Twin Oaks, I again felt that I didn't want to go on living. A good friend suggested that I look into psychotropic medication, which I hesitantly did. Yet after meeting with a general practitioner for not much more than ten minutes and having this respected doctor prescribe pills which he said I'd have to take for the rest of my life, I knew that I needed to find my own way of stabilizing my sometimes fragile mental health.

This journey back to wholeness began with a two-day, solo road trip along the famed Blue Ridge Parkway: driving south from Virginia into North Carolina. Along that beautiful byway, I came up with what I shortly thereafter called my "Seven Point Mental Health Plan." Since then, I have adhered to this way of keeping myself from debilitating depression--knowing that following this robust list allows me to live the life I want and need to live.

- 1. Good sleep every night; using sleep aids after only one or two nights of inadequate shut-eye.
- 2. Exercise most days--typically long walks, and lap swimming when possible.
- 3. Eating right--no anorexic behaviors with food.
- 4. Being connected to local friends.
- 5. Staying in touch with far flung loved ones via letters and email, cards and postcards, phone calls and texts.
- 6. Not over-working--respecting my own boundaries and limitations.
- 7. Always having an art project in progress.

This plan has kept me from "dropping off the rim of depression." I check in with it if I feel myself slipping into despair, into self-hatred, into suicidal ideation.

While I found my chosen genres as a writer well before attending graduate school, coming to peace about the ways I am an artist has been far more difficult. My writing life mostly comes easily to me, while my art life has to be wrenched free from my internal core. It's often as if I'm fighting against an unseen, unknowable combatant. I yearn to excavate imagery more easily from deep within me, then use it to create visual pieces which might guide me forward into greater wholeness--yet this is not always possible.

Since my productive years at MassArt, I've had an intermittent, confusing relationship to art-making. I move through phases of high output, but then feel quite separate from this core aspect. I can't seem to force myself to make things--even if this is exactly what I want to do, long to do. In the past four years, I've been quilting for a cousin's young child. This hand work has soothed and stimulated me, has fulfilled and satisfied me--but it is not enough to think of myself as a quilter. This medium simply can't manifest all that presses within me.

I have used both writing and art-making as ways of healing from my family trauma. I wrote myself out of the tangled mess of my youth, and I have created meaningful, redolent visual pieces to manifest the residual sorrow and woundedness within me. But what is on the other side? Who am I beyond being a survivor? Who am I besides someone abused the first fourteen years of her life--someone who, sadly, still carries that weighty sorrow?

I yearn for an easier relationship to my visual life. And now that my papers are safely housed on the 24th floor of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library at UMass Amherst, I find myself musing about setting up "an artist's life." Just as when I was at Goddard College in graduate school and turned my full attention to writing, I want to focus my energy, my talent, my mind, and my skill as an artist to the making of beautiful, evocative pieces.

For many years, I believed that my trinity was sexuality, spirituality, and creativity. Now that I have seemingly separated from the former two, can it be possible to put all of my available energy into the latter? And if I can, what might then make itself known? To manifest visually what lies untouched within me is my deepest hope, is my strongest desire.

Without time, I cannot make the art I yearn to make, nor can I take frequent long trips. Without time, I cannot do the internal work I need and want to do, nor can I fill the journals I must fill. Without time, I cannot share substantial experiences with my dearest friends. This is why I don't have a career and don't want one. I yearn to be in the world in my own way. Money and possessions are not very important to me. I crave only what I need. I haven't regretted not buying a home. I haven't yearned for expensive vacations. I do not long for fancy clothing, nor do I follow fashion trends. I've never had a costly haircut. I do not miss owning a car. Access to time is more important to me than almost anything else.

This year, 2014, I've had to deal with myself in life-altering ways. I found myself facing an elemental crisis:

Who is it I believe I should be? Who do I even want to be? and How are these imagined selves other than who I simply am?

These questions have pulled me up short--have challenged the ways I've been in the world for longer than I can remember. Sometimes, I've wondered if I have pushed myself so hard in countless ways because of unresolved guilt about choosing myself over my family (which I would absolutely do again). While I certainly didn't want the unending responsibility of caring for my mother and half-brother, I can feel ashamed that I put my own life--my mental, physical, emotional, and sexual health--over theirs. Survivor guilt doesn't quite encompass these messy, perhaps even ugly, feelings because I wasn't only escaping my step-father's predation, I was fleeing my mother's mental illness and my half-brother's weighty dependence. My struggles with transference--mostly with lovers, but sometimes with close friends and even others--cannot be surprising. Regardless of the decades I have spent doing healing work, there is no escaping my past. I've worked diligently to build a healthy and fulfilling life for myself, but I carry heavy stones from my childhood.

I feel myself pulled between the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and New England. I think of the mid-Atlantic as my bodily home. I think of Massachusetts and Vermont as my intellectual home. Were I able to find a Twin Oaks in Western Mass, I believe it would be where I'd next plant myself. That said, it is still the smell of Maryland and Virginia which touches me deepest.

In the late spring of 2014, I began calling myself the Vagabond Diarist because this fanciful moniker encapsulates my self-defined way of living an adult life. My choices are conscious; they are not by default. I have neither asked for permission, nor for applause. I've only wanted to be respected on my own terms. Having 84 linear feet of my papers collected by SCUA at UMass Amherst provides "justification" for the life I've already lived. My bequest gives me a way of speaking about my life's work in terms which others can more easily understand and appreciate. I've functioned well without this public acknowledgement across the years, but having it now provides me with social currency I hadn't known I was missing. I feel powerfully validated--vindicated really--in the choices I've been making throughout my life. This unforeseen gift frees me some how for the remaining years I have, encouraging me to live as I choose my "one wild and precious life" (Mary Oliver).

As I was saying good-bye to my exhausting six months at SCUA and more importantly to my journals, letters, and everything else I've saved since my youth--I found myself crying as I repeated, "I hope I've made the right choice." Finding a home for my papers is something I long envisioned (and first wrote about in journal #17), therefore it does not feel particularly hard to leave behind my papers. I knew that what I was doing all of these years was important. I understood that I was securing my voice as a part of recorded history.

I wrote this life story while traveling. The first paragraphs were wrenched from deep within on a rainy, late September afternoon in Lynn, Massachusetts. I continued writing in Jamaica Plain and West Medford, Roslindale and Cambridge--staying in the welcoming homes of beloved Boston friends. I then traveled by a Peter Pan Bus to Amherst where I worked further on my collection. Next I went to Springfield, staying with another dear friend, and a few days later in mid October caught Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited to Chicago. On that full train and then on the far less crowded and more comfortable California Zephyr, I wrote. Sitting in the beautiful viewing car watching the west come into view, I continued putting my past into words. Then for a week in the Bay Area--again in the homes of old and loving friends--I wrote. At the end of October, I boarded Amtrak's Coastal Starlight--traveling from Oakland to Los Angeles--again sitting in a viewing car; this time writing as I awaited the magnificent Pacific. Then for two weeks in early November in Redondo Beach staying with my former MassArt studio mate and her three small children, I wrote even more.

Beginning my slow return east, I next boarded a Greyhound Bus to Tucson where I visited with another old friend for nine days, spending time in the comfortable Pima County Public Libraries entering changes suggested by my thoughtful early readers. I then boarded Amtrak's Sunset Limited en route to Austin where I began to write once the sky turned dark east of El Paso, Texas--somehow finding within me the courage and stamina to carry on. In Austin, I stayed with yet another friend, her new baby, and her extended family. Deep in the middle of the Lone Star State, I continued pulling words from my weary mind/body/soul/heart. Next I boarded the Texas Eagle to Chicago, editing as the train rolled north through the open spaces of the Midwest. Then I transferred to the Capitol Limited in Chicago and headed east to my birth place, Washington, D.C.--sitting in silence as the train moved into and through the western reaches of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, crying softly as we rolled along the Potomac River, unable to touch this weighty document. After spending four days in Maryland with beloved friends, I took a Greyhound Bus to Virginia, finally heading home to Twin Oaks Community.

In the short days and long nights leading up to Winter Solstice, I re-created a space for myself on that collective farm. I set up my much loved room, and then forced myself to face the painful difficulty of completing this autobiography.

In this darkest time of the year, I yearn to move into stillness. After this exhausting fifteen months of work on my papers, I must stop. I need to allow my past to settle. I am beyond weary.

It is time now for me to move into my future.

Madge McQueen, December 2014

Scope of collection

Portals: a Guide to Madge McQueen's Series

Personal writing has been and continues to be my life's work: filled journals and copious letters, artist books and gathered pieces--literally hundreds of notebooks replete with my papers, beginning with my great-great-grandmother's letters to my great-grandmother in the mid-1930s, skipping to the mid-1960s with family letters written about me as a five-year-old, then moving with increased intensity and volume toward and into the 21st century. I want to walk with you as you follow this fierce trail of words, of feelings, of experience...

These are my series:

- I. Journals: 1977 to the present
- II. Letters Sent (original copies in individual notebooks written to specific people), 1983-present; Electronic Missives and Hand Written Tomes: Correspondence Between Sally De Angelis and Madge McQueen, 1997-1998; The Blue Letters, 1985-1989; Through Writing I Come Home: Selected Letters of Madge McQueen, 1978 Onward
- III. Correspondence Received: 1972 to the present
- IV. Educational Materials: Report Cards, 1966-1977; Papers Written in High School through Art School, 1976-1997; College Transcripts, 1976-1997; Goddard College Records, 1983-2015; Annotations, 1985-1989; Writing, Critical Thinking, and Reading Curricula (High School, 1986; Elementary School, 1988-1990; Adult Basic Education, 1990-1993; Middle School, 1997-1998); MFA thesis, 1987; Awards and Diplomas, 1987, 1996-1997; Fayerweather Street School Farewell Book, 1990; Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt) Course Work, 1996-1997

- V. Artist Books: 1990 to the present
- VI. Artwork: Works on Paper, 1990-2010; Fiber Art, 1995-1997; Art Photographs, 1994-1997; Slides, 1995-2002; Photographs of Artwork: pre-MassArt, 1990-1993, and at MassArt, 1995-1997; Art Made by Friends (both adult and child), 1977-present; Print Art
- VII. Personal and Autobiographical (1930s-present): Chronology, 1959-1994; Autobiography, "It's All About Going," 2014; Family Tree, 2014; Friendship Web, 2014; YouTube--a virtual tour of my papers at Special Collections University Archives (SCUA), April 2014; Interviews (taken by Karen Werner about my collection), April-May 2014; Desk Calendars, 1977, 1983-1997, 1999-2002; Menstrual Charts/Health Notebooks, 1983-1997, 1997-2006, 2006-2013; Personal Documents, 1976-2013; Lover List, 1967-2013; The Sweet Story of Samuel and Madge, 2000-2001; Cherished Cards and Postcards: Gathered and Received, 1990-2013; Occupational Documents, 1979-2006; File Cards (for an abandoned index), spring 1989; Family Letters, 1930s & 1960s; Clergymen and Chiefs: A Genealogy of the MacQueen and Macfarlane Families, Alexander McQueen Quattlebaum, 2002; Great-Aunt Charlotte Project, 1994-1997; Head Starts: Allen Carroll's Opening Remarks, 1992-2001; Oversized Scrapbook, fall 1981; Mini Scrapbook, May 1981; Memo Books, 1992-1997, 2007-2009, 2012-2014; A Private War: The Letters and Diaries of Madge Preston, 1862-1867 by Virginia Walcott Beauchamp; An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillsum 1941-43; Drive: Women's True Stories from the Open Road, edited by Jennie Goode 2002; Written by Herself: Autobiographies of American Women: An Anthology, editor Jill Kerr Conway 1992; "On Letter Writing" from Approaching Eye Level by Vivian Gornick, 1997; "Readers Write: Letters" from The Sun, December 2004; Art Show Guides; Maps
- VIII. Twin Oaks Community (2002-present): Notes Received, 2002-2013; Validation Cards, 2003-2014; Milk Processing Logs, 2004-2006; Calliope Harmony's Blog Posts, 2008; Labor Sheets, 2012-2013; Twin Oaks Photographs, mid-2000s; Community Documents, principally since 2003
- IX. Life Photographs: 1940s to the present

There is nothing more important to me than these notebooks. They hold my life, they claim my experience, they record how I stayed alive. I see them as a gift: once to myself, now most importantly to other survivors, but also to researchers who want to understand the meandering, messy life of one girl who was raised working class in a violent, mentally-ill family; one teenager who wrenched herself free from the entrapment of poverty and abuse; one woman who believed in herself enough to create and then continue to build a life of her own choosing. These reams of paper are my body turned into words.

As I sit with my papers on the 24th floor of the Du Bois Library, even I am amazed by all that I have written and saved, gathered and created. I honestly didn't realize I could assemble such a large "wall of words." I knew, of course, that I had numerous notebooks because my collection of storage tubs had continued to grow over the years, but I had never seen all of them together up on shelves. To realize I had amassed 84 liner feet both daunted and pleased me.

As I read my earliest journals, I was reminded how determined I was as a young woman to be a writer. And given that my chosen genre was journal and letter writing, it took me a long time to claim that identity. Even now, with moving on toward 300 journals, I can get caught within a more traditional definition of writing which isn't my own. But personal writing is how I hold my relationship to the world, to my loved ones, and to myself. I have valued recording the movements of my mind and heart throughout my adult life.

What is this thing I do called journaling? Recently, I've begun to call myself a "diarist," but this feels odd given I don't call my notebooks diaries; I've consistently called them journals--right from the beginning. My writing, though not at all strong when I began, was deeply important to me. My relationship to my own words has been fierce. From the start I knew that putting words to paper was a form of claiming power. And given that I had almost no power as a child in a deeply troubled family, nor as a white trash girl in a classist society, nor as a female in a misogynist world, it was empowering to tell my story--if only to myself. I knew since the 1980s that I wanted my collection to find a home in a library, in an archive. I very rarely thought of destroying my papers--and such thoughts only arose when I despaired of their heavy presence in my life, both mentally and physically. Even though I cherish these notebooks, I am also weighted by them: ready and needing to pass them on. UMass Amherst is the ideal place for me to bequeath my collection--not only because it is a state university and thereby serves many students who are less financially privileged--but because it resides in New England, a region I have long considered my intellectual home.

Madge McQueen, July 2014

Series descriptions

Series 1. Journals
1976-2023

While in graduate school, I put together in a grey, three-ring notebook the writing I'd done prior to keeping a bound journal. My earliest saved personal writing was a poem penned in December 1976. Beginning in 1977, I started using a desk calendar as a proto-journal in addition to writing more poetry. But it wasn't until January 4, 1978 that I wrote what I believe I can call my first true journal entry. I wrote intermittently during both 1978 and 1979. In January 1980, I began writing on the top of my more frequent journal entries, "Notes to Myself" taken from the Hugh Prather book entitled Notes to Myself: My Struggle to Become a Person (1970).

I took writing classes with Betty Perry Townsend at the University of Maryland during the spring semesters of 1980 and 1982. This instructor encouraged me to keep writing--even though my poetry, stories, and essays were embarrassingly laced with mistakes. Journal #0 (a.k.a. Journal #29) includes the writing I produced for this invaluable teacher. Betty Townsend's support and nourishment of me as a writer, as a survivor, and as a person made possible my continued efforts to hone a skill I so desperately longed for.

I began writing in a bound journal on May 16, 1980 as I was preparing to embark on a year's journey to what was then West Germany. I expected to fill only that small journal during those twelve months abroad; instead I filled four.

Journals #5-#13 are small bound notebooks--filled mostly while living in College Park, Maryland. Journal #14 marks a minor shift, but it is truly with #15 that my writing explodes: I began using three-ring notebooks. I was then at Goddard College, in Plainfield, Vermont, working toward an MFA in Writing and Women's Literature.

Journal #23 marks another shift, this time into sketchbook form. I filled seven journals of this type, the first while living in Plainfield and all of the others in Boston. With #23, I began filling two journals simultaneously, a practice I keep to this day. I typically carry a smaller, spiral-bound notebook with me everywhere; I keep a three-ring notebook at home which I principally fill with copies of my letters, cards, postcards, and email (the latter only until 2006).

In journal #24, I mark the beginning of living in Boston on September 28, 1987.

Over the next ten years, I lived in Somerville (Inman and Davis Squares) and then in Jamaica Plain. I lived in four group houses, and then I lived alone for five years. I was in therapy much of this time. I built strong friendships--many of which I have to this day. I had intimate relationships with both women and men. During this decade, I thought of myself a lesbian, then a bisexual, and finally--begrudgingly--a heterosexual. Each of these connections, with both friends and with lovers, are well documented.

While studying Three Dimensional Fibers at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, from 1993 to 1997, I filled journals #77 through #113.

I then lived for a year in La Lima, Honduras. There, as well as during my short stays in El Salvador and in Aruba, I filled journals #114 through #122.

I returned to Boston for four years, filling journals #125 through #164. The first year back from Central America, I lived with numerous friends, often for a few weeks at a time. During my final three years in Boston, I lived in the South End in a group apartment with other women. During those years, I made trips to Canada, Scandinavia, and Israel. I always kept a journal with me, documenting experiences at home as well as abroad.

I left Boston in April 2002--heading south. I felt within me a deep yearning to return to the bio-region of my youth: the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. I settled in Louisa, Virginia, living at Twin Oaks Community for eleven years. I filled journals #170 through #275 while making that intentional community my home.

While at Twin Oaks, I traveled as much as I could. Most of these journeys were within the United States--Massachusetts, Tennessee, New York, North Carolina, Maryland, California, and Georgia--but I also spent three months in New Zealand and three weeks in Belgium. All of these experiences are written about at length.

I have long considered my voluminous correspondence as a part of--yet truly different than--my journal writing. These two forms of writing are somewhat combined in my journals, although generally they are in separate notebooks due to the ways I write and store my writing. Rarely are letters a part of my spiral notebooks; generally, all copies of my correspondence are housed in my three-ring notebooks.

I began emailing in 1997 when I moved to La Lima, Honduras. From that fall through 2006, I printed most of the emails I sent as well as nearly all of the emails I received. I assumed I would continue this practice, but I did not. All of my emails starting in January 2007 have been transferred to SCUA, and are available only digitally. I continue to think of these electronic missives in "notebook" form (dated and numbered)--although this is now only virtual. I recall an old friend--whom I wrote to frequently--commenting that my hand written letters and my emails had different feels to them, that my style of writing changed with the form itself. I know that I enjoy both ways of writing (and receiving) letters; each is unique and both are deeply satisfying. Sometimes I crave writing in one form; other times I yearn to express myself in the other manner. Sometimes this is about the speed of transmission, but other times it's about the modality of thought/feeling within myself--finding the right manner of expression for a particular moment.

I arrived in Western Mass on January 14, 2014--having transported my papers from Louisa, Virginia, to UMass Amherst in a U-Haul truck. Journal #276 describes that huge transition, and the journals up to #282 document my experience of living in New England while making this daunting bequest.

Journals #284 through #286 record my autumn cross-country travels (mostly by train) during which I wrote my 46 page autobiography, "It's All About Going."

Journal #287 marks my return to Twin Oaks Community which I have decided again to make my home.

My fullest intention is to send all of my future journals, letters, etc., to UMass/SCUA as I want my collection complete. This is my life's work, and I hold it carefully within me.

Missing are journals #65 and #248. The former was a numbering error (I believe, but am not sure), and the latter is a journal that was sadly lost by the postal service. Once I began journaling in earnest, I've rarely gone long without making an entry--and when I do, I invariably write about how odd it was not to have written.

Series 2. Letters Sent
1983-2022

While most of the letters I've sent since the mid-1980s are contained within the three-ring notebook journals, there is a subset of letters which either have been returned to me (as a gift or due to death) as well as letters I never sent, and ones I made copies of and kept intact. These are principally letters to lovers/ex-lovers, but there are also a few notebooks filled with letters to friends. These twelve notebooks span the years 1983 to 2014. One set of notebooks, Electronic Missives and Hand Written Tomes: Correspondence Between Sally De Angelis and Madge McQueen, 1997-1998, contains all written material from each of us.

Early in graduate school, I began penning The Blue Letters--sixteen missives to women in my family: alive, dead, and never born. Two years after earning my MFA, I revisited this difficult project, writing six more letters. I imagined these missives someday being performed as a one-woman show; this idea never manifested.

While working on my papers at SCUA, I decided to manifest a long held dream: to put together a notebook of my letters spanning as many years as possible. Unfortunately, I have no copies of the letters I wrote pre-1978, but starting in the mid-1980s, I began making copies (not always, but more and more over time). I hadn't realized until I began putting together Through Writing I Come Home: Selected Letters of Madge McQueen, 1978 Onward that I had repeatedly gone through periods of writing a particular person more often than anyone else. It's as if I needed a certain loved one to be my audience during a specific life juncture. My aim was to include letters written to everyone who has been significant to me as well as choosing letters which clearly articulated who I was at the time of their writing. Again and again, I came upon my words regarding the extreme importance of the epistolary form to my mental and emotional well-being.

Series 3. Correspondence Received
1971-2023

Beginning in 1972, I began saving nearly all of the letters and cards I received. I have no recollection of anyone suggesting this way of being, nor do I remember thinking much about it. I simply collected these writings from my loved ones, saving them in a white plastic garbage bag and later in a cardboard box. It wasn't until after graduate school when I was living in Boston that I put all correspondence I'd received into notebooks.

From February 1986 to August 1987, I experimented with keeping everything (journal entries, letter copies, and correspondence received) in journals #17 through #22. Once I moved to Boston in the fall of 1987, I again separated out correspondence received from my journal entries and kept all of it in its own notebooks.

I have continued with this practice, saving nearly everything I receive from friends/lovers/family members/et al.--three hole punching it immediately after reading, and then putting it directly into the current correspondence notebook. I can recall ripping up only two or three letters as an adult--each of these about my nuclear family.

In most front and back pockets of my three-ring binders, I have stuffed all manner of ephemera--postcards, city maps, announcements for art openings, copies of articles, menus from favorite restaurants, photographs, a few receipts, etc. These bits of paper set me securely in a place and in a time.

As with my outgoing email correspondence, none of the emails I've received since January 2007 have been printed. All of these electronic missives are kept by SCUA and are available only in digital form.

One of my oldest friends has asked that I take out all of her correspondence and return it to her. While I am extracting it, I do not feel willing or even able to return it. I have instead put a restriction on these numerous letters/postcards/cards/emails/drawings until 2064. I have pulled everything she has written and given to me since 1984 and put all of it into three large manila envelopes which are housed inside of an archival box. While this is upsetting and makes my collection feel incomplete, I am doing the best I possibly can to respect her wishes.

Series 4. Educational Materials
1966-1997

I have put together a slim notebook which holds my report cards--starting with second grade, 1966-1967, and continuing through my senior year, 1976-1977. I attended six public schools in Prince George's County, Maryland: three elementary, one junior high, and two high schools. This county borders Washington, D.C., and has been the home to many African Americans for a very long time. I grew up with and went to school with numerous Black children; this experience profoundly shaped how I thought about race.

This series includes a large notebook of papers I wrote, starting with one written in the 11th grade at Suitland Senior High School. While it's certainly humbling to re-read my early writing, it feels important--as well as honest--to be faithful to my own process of learning to write well. What surprises me most is that any of my teachers encouraged me to keep at it. I suppose what identifies a strong educator is one who sees and supports determined effort and nascent talent. I have been blessed by many thoughtful teachers.

I have my transcripts from Prince George's Community College which I attended (the first three semesters in a concurrent enrollment program) starting the summer before my senior year of high school, 1976, through the summer of 1978. In addition, I have my transcripts from the University of Maryland which I attended from the fall of 1978 through the spring of 1980, and then again from the fall of 1981 through the fall of 1982. (The year in between, I spent in Meppen, Germany, as an exchange student working with adults who had profound cognitive disabilities.) Also in this manuscript box are my narrative transcripts from Goddard College, 1985-1987, as well as my somewhat traditional transcripts from Massachusetts College of Art, 1993-1997.

While studying women's literature, I began writing annotations of each book I read. I continued doing this after leaving Goddard; it's unclear why and exactly when I stopped this practice. This series includes one large notebook of these annotations.

During my fourth semester in graduate school, I was a student teacher at Montpelier High School in Montpelier, Vermont. Along with teaching Black Boy, The Awakening, and a women's poetry unit to 10th and 11th graders, I created a study guide for 9th graders focused on To Kill a Mockingbird. I also gave speeches about incest and domestic violence to three 12th grade psychology classes--and because of their thoughtful teacher, I have these students' responses to my lectures in a manila envelope.

I was a graduate student at Goddard College from January 1985 to June 1987, graduating with a Master of Fine Art in Writing and Women's Literature in August 1987. The Fury of this Healing Passion, a 188 page document, is my master's thesis. Its primary focus is documenting the abuse of my childhood; its secondary focus is reading and teaching African American women's literature as a working class white woman. It also includes copies of the many speeches I gave during that period.

A year after graduating from Goddard, I began my first teaching job at an alternative elementary school with progressive education ideals. With and for the 4th, 5th, and 6th graders of Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I developed writing, critical thinking, and reading curricula. We also "published" (for the class) three booklets containing these children's writings from 1988 to 1990: What Pencils Can Create, And They Said it Wasn't Possible!, and A Splash of Color. During the 1989-1990 school year, I developed a year-long tree observation project: each sixth grader created a "tree book" full of drawings, writings, bark and leaf rubbings, etc. At the year's end, I put together The Tree Project book which included samples of each child's work in addition to a detailed description of this dendrology unit. At the end of my two years at Fayerweather Street School, Isabel Eccles (one of the head teachers) and the kids in this multi-grade classroom made a farewell book for me.

In the fall of 1990, I began working with adult learners at Jamaica Plain Community Centers--Adult Learning Program where I taught Adult Basic Education (ABE). During the first of my three years in this program, I developed study guides based on the Words on the Page, The World in Your Hands series as well as using the To Kill a Mockingbird study guide I'd developed for high schoolers. During my second and third years teaching adult learners (most of whom were Hispanic, African American, Asian American, and white women on public assistance), I developed a critical thinking and grammar curriculum based on Rosa Guy's trilogy: The Friends, Ruby, and Edith Jackson. Toward the end of my tenure in this community based organization, I wrote a 15 page essay--using the epistolary form--about this experience, "Creating a Frame for Writing: Developing Critical Thinking Skills in ABE Students." My study guides, my essay, the three young-adult novels, and some of my students' work are included in this series.

Shortly after I finished my BFA at MassArt in May 1997, I moved to La Lima, Honduras, to work at Escuela Internacional La Lima (the K-8 international school outside of San Pedro Sula) where I taught 8th grade. My favorite project of that difficult school year was our Letters from La Lima. I put together a thin notebook with samples of each student's writing from our critical thinking skills and personal writing study. In addition, the 25 fourteen-year-olds and I "published" a book of their writings from across the curricula, Reflections: An Anthology of Teenage Thoughts, Feelings, and Memories.

I generally did well in school and enjoyed being a part of an academic environment. I assumed for many years that I would teach in a community college so that I could be of service to working class students. This is not where my life carried me, for multiple reasons.

Series 5. Artist Books

1990-2011

In March 1990, I began making artist books--although I didn't then call them that because I had no idea such a "genre" of art existed. By January 1993, when I mounted the solo show Passages: A Journey Through Artist Books at Cornwall Gallery in Jamaica Plain, I had created 28 artist books. In the fall of 1993, I began art school at MassArt. During the next four years, I sometimes worked in this way, but these new "books" pushed hard at the boundaries of what is typically thought of as artist books. I used dual image photography; I used glass and steel; I used wood which I charred with a blow torch. I also began creating artist book sets with friends. including Willy Bate. These books were sent back and forth in the mail, each of us adding a specified number of pages--contributing visual images as well as text. After finishing MassArt, I made three more artist book sets, including one with Kriss Wellner Sulka and one with Laura Wulf. Some of these books are a part of my collection.

It is extremely difficult and bitterly painful to write about my earliest artist books because many of them reference my wretched youth--some of them quite graphically. I cannot look at these pages without feeling searing pain. It's absolutely bewildering to me that I created so much art out of so much horror. How did I possibly do this?

It's crucial that future readers of my collection--not just of my artist books--understand that I have written explicitly about my childhood abuse. I have named my abusers, and I have recorded their crimes against my child body, against my child spirit. I have written at length about the long-term impact of childhood violation. I spent years of my life trying desperately to find wholeness. What I have recorded is not for the faint of heart; it could be painfully triggering for many people. I make no apologies. I have made every effort to tell the truth of my life to myself--in writing and in art making. There was no other way for me to survive.

While at MassArt, my artist books became less word bound, but the wounded place within me continued to rise up in my newly developing visual lexicon. For example, while at Goddard College I wrote a poem, "Dialogue with a Dead Sister #1" and then at MassArt, I created a burnt book entitled, "Dialogue with a Dead Sister #2." I had to keep creating this painful work until I had purged my miserable past from my body, my heart, my mind, and my soul.

After not creating artist books for some time, I began again in 2004 working intermittently in this manner. Most of these books have been made for friends while just two have been made for myself. When one of my cousins so tragically took his life in the summer of 2010, I made an artist book for my aunt using only rusty metal stitched to heavy paper, early in early 2011. Shortly thereafter, I made another book of this type--again it was a gift for a loved one in crisis. (Neither of these books is currently in the collection.) My best guess is that I'll return to artist book making throughout my life because it is the ideal blend of my talents and my sensibilities. I will do my best to have as many of the artist books I've given away as gifts sent to SCUA someday. I see them as the wild and colorful sisters to all of my other notebooks.

Series 6. Artwork
1977-2014

I've long had a complicated and somewhat tortured relationship to "drawing." As with writing--although it took much, much longer--I eventually came to understand that I needed to forge my own style, to find comfort and acceptance in my own "line." I recall being told that the installation artist Ann Hamilton said, "My sewing line is my drawing line." This is absolutely true for me. And once I began stitching onto paper, I felt an ease I had not previously known.

The works on paper included in my collection range from 1990 to 2010. One archival box holds many pieces which include rusty metal sewn onto paper; other boxes hold what I came to call my "sewings" (rather than drawings). In this series are many drawings--as well as other 2D work--that I created while a student at MassArt.

I have put together a large archival box of art given to me as gifts: much of this is from adult friends, but I have also saved the many drawings given to me by children. I deeply treasure these handmade presents. Also in this oversized, flat box is the print art I've collected over the years.

While in the 3D-Fibers Department at Massachusetts College of Art, I explored various processes. Contained within four small archival boxes are a few samples of the fiber work I created from the fall of 1995 through the spring of 1997.

During my studies at MassArt, I made numerous installations; I have slides and photographs of these pieces. I thought of myself as an installation artist for many years. (I think of myself now as a diarist and a fiber/book artist.) I continue to enjoy creating beautiful spaces; this has been a strong and persistent impulse since my childhood. I recall being pained that I couldn't make my family home beautiful. Creating lovely and ordered rooms has been a mainstay of my adult life.

This series includes two notebooks of photographs. One holds photographs of art I made prior to attending MassArt--including many shots of my solo show,Passage: a Journey Through Artist Books. The other notebook holds pictures of the installations I created between 1995-1997, photographs taken at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine in October 1995, and various shots of other art work made during my MassArt years.

While in art school, I studied photography for a year. In my collection are two boxes of 8" by 10" black and white photographs, one box of color 8" by 10" pictures, as well as a 12" by 16" box of color and b&w prints. I have not "gotten into" digital photography, although I clearly see its benefits. Recording my thoughts and feelings in writing has simply felt more compelling than taking photographs.

My collection includes one archival box of slides and negatives. Most of these are art related.

Many times I have wished for an easier relationship to my art life. I have often said, and it remains true, that it's as if my writing is my life partner and my art work is my recalcitrant lover. While I write almost daily, I sadly make art only intermittently. I am not sure why this is true, but I believe it's connected to the place that art making often takes me. I recall in the fall of 1998 when I was in a continuing education class at MassArt in the SIM (Studio for Interrelated Media) Department; I felt as if I had to choose between my mental health and my artistic output. While I rightfully chose the former, I felt deep loss. I yearn for a more consistent and less charged relationship with my art-making self.

Creating artist books has thankfully allowed me to manifest these disparate parts of my creativity. Perhaps, it is there that my drawing line--as well as other aspects of my visual expression--is contained: the artist books' covers forming a space that safely holds these less controlled, less controllable, aspects of me.

Since 2011, I have made many small, non-traditional quilts. All of these have been gifts, and currently none are in my collection. I someday hope to have a quilt resting amongst my papers. It may need to be the one I plan to make for myself.

Series 7. Personal and Autobiographical
ca. 1935-2023

In 1994, when I was taking down the chronology of my great-aunt Charlotte's life, I decided to write my own chronology as well. It is housed inside of a bright yellow folder. When I began working on my bequest in January 2014, I assumed I would update my chronology, filling in the intervening 20 years. Instead, I have found that I don't have that in me. The document stands as I created it in the mid-1990s.

Upon reading the earliest version of "Portals," my dear friend Laura Wulf, a graduate of Simmons College Master of Science in Library and Information Science program, suggested that I include a family tree as well as a friendship web in my collection. Laura said, "Researchers spend a lot of time trying to figure out who's who. You can provide that necessary information, and I'm willing to create both documents." These personal maps are in digital form.

My friend Derek (a.k.a. Dream) Breen made a YouTube video of me with my papers up on the 24th floor of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library where I worked on my collection during the winter, spring, and early summer of 2014. The day this virtual tour was created, April 15, 2014, I was half way into the six months I spent working on my papers, and one month into writing the document you are now reading. It pleased me to be able to share what I was doing with my far-flung loved ones and to have documented this intense but fleeting period in the archives amongst nearly all that I have written and saved, created and collected.

On April 16, 2014, Karen Werner interviewed me at length about my collection. Then on May 2, 2014, she interviewed Rob Cox (about why SCUA wanted my collection, etc.), and then Karen interviewed me for a second time. These interviews are available in audio form only.

In 1977, I began using my first desk calendar, making notes on most days. I don't know why I chose not to continue this practice once that year ended. In 1983, when I was still at the University of Maryland (although graduated), my days were full of varied shifts at the Maryland Food Collective as well as many hours working as a teaching assistant for the Women's Studies department. I imagine my very active life propelled me to use a desk calendar--a practice I continued except for the year I lived in La Lima, Honduras, and for the years I lived at Twin Oaks Community. Here in 2014, I again keep a desk calendar; it pleases me to document my life in this manner.

In 1983, I began using the "Basal Body Birth Control" method: calendar, temperature, and mucus. (The system I chose came from A Cooperative Method of Natural Birth Control by Margaret Nofziger.) I used these charts--as well as the Lunar Phases calendars created by Susan D. Baylies of Snake and Snake Productions--to record when I bled and when I ovulated; I also used them to keep track of my overall health. Even when I had a tubal ligation in 1991 and then a hysterectomy in 2007, I continued using these charts to record what was happening to my body as I aged. I use this system still. The first two notebooks are labeled Menstrual Charts; the third is labeled Health Charts.

I have put together a small notebook of personal documents, spanning the years 1976-2013. Even I am surprised by the "bits and pieces" I have saved throughout my life: passports, student IDs, a police department thumb print, legal name change documents, etc.

Because I am an ardent list keeper, it cannot be surprising that I have recorded everyone with whom I have shared my body. The "Lover List, 1967-2013" is housed in a purple folder--once written by hand and then updated to a typed page during the years I lived at Twin Oaks.

When I became involved with Samuel Weems during the summer of 2000, I began writing funny blurbs about our daily experiences. I kept up this silly practice through the first half of our eighteen month relationship. This purple notebook is entitled, The Sweet Story of Samuel and Madge.

As long as I can remember, I have adorned my living and working spaces with visual images. Most of these colorful pieces were gifts, but some I purchased for myself. The cards were often taped shut so that they would not "flap" open when attached to my walls. This fat notebook, Cherished Cards and Postcards: Gathered and Received, 1990-2013, illustrates what I have enjoyed looking at throughout my adult years--what has inspired and comforted me, what has sustained and supported me.

I have put together a slim notebook, Occupational Documents, 1979-2006. Included in it are eighteen letters of reference which span many different situations and experiences. Also in this white notebook are resumes, 1992-2002; ICYE (International Christian Youth Exchange) paperwork, 1979-1981; artist statements, 1996-1997; my educational philosophy, including two Honduran teenagers' responses to it, 1998; job hunt letters, 1988-1992; a personal statement, 1984; as well as a statement of purpose, 1993.

A year after I began living permanently in Boston in the fall of 1987, I set up my first writing room. I had filled 31 journals by that time and decided I wanted to index them. These file cards are stored within a small, plastic file box. Of course, now with nearly 300 journals as well as so much more collected and saved, I chuckle at this early endeavor. But, like so much else in my collection, I let it stand as a marker of who I once was.

In my possession are two thin notebooks of family letters. One is a small collection from the mid-1930s written in pencil by my great-great-grandmother, Susan Roberta Harden McQueen, to my great-grandmother, Madge Macfarlane McQueen Tedder. The other is a short series of letters between two of my great-aunts, one aunt, and one uncle about them trying--unsuccessfully--to extract me from my abusive family; these disturbing missives were written between September 1964 and April 1965.

While in art school, I began working with my great-aunt Charlotte on her life's chronology. At this time, she was 86 years old. In addition to telling me much of her life story, she gave me pictures spanning her life. I called this the Great-Aunt Charlotte Project. Charlotte Susan Tedder Swift lived nearly all of her 97 years in North Carolina. The writing both of us did on this project, as well as her numerous photographs, are housed in a grey manuscript box.

Clergymen and Chiefs: A Genealogy of the MacQueen and Macfarlane Families, Alexander McQueen Quattlebaum, 2002. This book was given to me by my uncle, Allen Carroll. I find it distressing that my reality of having had three different family names is not acknowledged. This leaves me feeling flattened as well as incorrectly recorded. I am reminded that all historical documents are limited by their errors--and that complete accuracy is impossible.

Head Starts: Allen Carroll's Opening Remarks, 1992-2001. My beloved uncle had a long career at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, starting in 1969. He was a full professor in English and later the English department head for nearly eleven years. This booklet of letters comprises his beginning-of-the-year talks when he led the department.

I filled an oversized scrapbook during the fall of 1981. It primarily records my participation in political actions--principally in Washington, D.C., and in College Park, Maryland. I also have a tiny scrapbook I put together while traveling solo in Great Britain in May 1981; it's filled with ticket stubs and other travel ephemera.

During the five years I lived alone in Jamaica Plain (a neighborhood of Boston), 1992-1997, I always had a small memo pad next to my phone in my studio/office. These five small spiral notebooks principally contain notes about telephone calls. The final little notebook also includes a few notes to myself while living at Twin Oaks, 2007-2009. I started yet another mini-notebook in May 2012 which I carried in my backpack through July 2014. I have left it with my collection; it contains random notes to myself.

I have included in my collection a few books and essays which speak directly to the diarist and letter writer in me. The work of Dr. Virginia Walcott Beauchamp was particularly foundational as she was my professor of English in 1982 at the University of Maryland. Her work on Madge Preston's papers from the 1860s was instrumental in showing me the importance of women's narrative writing. I recall Dr. Beauchamp imploring me to "make carbon copies" of the many letters I sent. She was one of my first teachers (Betty Perry Townsend being the other) who was clear that letter and journal writing were "real" writing and that the personal writing I was doing--and was so deeply drawn to--was important, vital even. I owe each of these women a great debt.

I've included in this series a few books--both fiction and non-fiction--which have been specifically meaningful to me across the years.

I have a smattering of art show guides which I've included in this series. Within my correspondence notebooks are numerous others as well as countless art cards announcing art shows (mostly of friends and acquaintances).

I have collected a few maps over the years. This is but a sampling of the places I've visited, of the landscapes I've traversed.

Series 8. Twin Oaks Community
2002-2023

I was a member of Twin Oaks Community from October 2002 through November 2006, and again from August 2007 through January 2014. The eight months between these two parts of my membership, I was on a PAL (Personal Affairs Leave). This is once again my status as I work on my bequest. It remains unclear whether or not I will return to making that rural community my home. I do not know where this process of bequeathing my life's work is leading me nor where it will leave me once the accession is complete.

The following is from Twin Oaks' website:

"Twin Oaks is an intentional community in rural central Virginia, made up of around 90 adult members and 15 children. Since the community's beginning in 1967, our way of life has reflected our values of cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology. We do not have a group religion; our beliefs are diverse. We do not have a central leader; we govern ourselves by a form of democracy with responsibility shared among various managers, planners, and committees. We are self-supporting economically, and partly self-sufficient. We are income-sharing."

One of the ways Twin Oakers communicate with one another is via 3 x 5 notes. Each member has a 3 x 5 slot as well as a cubby in ZK (our kitchen/dining complex, Zhankoye) where mail is delivered. I have saved nearly every note I received. Some of these are work related, others are personal; some have to do with managerships or community teams. I have done no work on these scraps of paper; nor do I wish to. I was simply unable to toss them. For the most part, they are gathered inside of bulging taped envelopes with the date range written boldly on one side; these fat envelopes fill a large archival box.

Twin Oaks has a lovely and unique way of celebrating Valentine's Day which we call Validation Day. Cards are made for each individual (unless one opts out) by a friend or a loved one. These cards are then signed by many members of the community. I have saved all of my cards from 2003 to 2014. Throughout the years, I have also made many cards for friends, lovers, and children of the community. This has long been my favorite tradition at Twin Oaks. I recall in 2012 sewing small, personalized objects into nearly everyone's validation cards instead of or in addition to writing short notes. This gave me deep pleasure and was enjoyed by many.

I worked as Twin Oaks' milk processing manager for the entirety of my first four years of membership. Given the amount of communication between me and my ever-shifting co-workers, someone (surprisingly not me) came up with the idea of having a notebook where we could write milk processing notes to one another. This worked well, and I believe it is still in practice with the milk processing crew. Three of these spiral notebooks are in my collection.

Calliope Harmony was a MTF transsexual living at Twin Oaks. We cooked community dinners together for a while and became quite close. It was during this period that Calliope was blogging about her experience in the community. She put together her blog posts for me as a gift. Even though we are now no longer friends and Calliope has returned to living as a man at Twin Oaks, I feel that these essays are an important part of the community's history. Other trans folks have also lived amongst us; Twin Oaks' understanding and acceptance of transexuality has broadened along with that of the outside culture.

I'm pretty certain that the reason I stopped buying desk calendars during the years I lived at Twin Oaks is that we use our weekly labor sheets for work as well as for social engagements. I regret that I don't have all of these sheets. (They are turned into the labor manager each week, and are retained by the community only for two years. Somehow, I never got into the practice of retrieving them come each January when the oldest year was recycled.) Thankfully, I do have my 2012 and 2013 labor sheets; they are housed in a slim notebook.

I have one small notebook of photographs taken at Twin Oaks--none of these pictures was shot by me.

With an eye to what might be of interest to future researchers, I have put together a large notebook of Twin Oaks ephemera: Community Documents, principally since 2003. Within this fat red binder are all manner of things: play bills from numerous music and theater productions, community health papers, milk processing documents, O&I (Opinion and Information) papers, random posted notes, information regarding the dying and death of Kat Kinkade (one of the community's founders), sign-up sheets, party posters, holiday menus, etc. I culled all of these documents from my correspondence notebooks.

Series 9. Life Photographs
1940s-2014

The photographs in my collection are principally of family and friends. The oldest of these begin before I was born--they are, almost exclusively, pictures of my mother's family. I also have a number of photographs of my nuclear family from the '60s and early '70s. As can be imagined, these are quite difficult for me to see and to touch.

Across the years, I have taken many photographs of trees--often shot skyward, directly underneath huge branches and thick trunks. It pleases me to come upon these photos. I recall years ago saying that trees were god; I suppose there's a bit of dryad in my soul.

While I have few photographs from my first two foster homes, I have many of my third foster family with whom I lived for three years, 1975-1978. I have one album filled with University of Maryland shots, taken during my first two years, 1978-1980. Six albums--more like scrap books--are from the year I spent in Western Europe, 1980-1981. There are many albums from my years working at the Maryland Food Co-op and living at Beechwood House, 1981-1985. There are also some pictures from my time at Goddard College, 1985-1987. In addition, there are many photographs from my early years living in Boston, 1987-1993. Once I was out of art school, I took far fewer photographs. Most of the pictures I have since 1997 were given to me by friends and family.

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Critical Essays: 6th Graders of Fayerweather Street School
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And They Said It Wasn't Possible!: Facts and Fiction by Fifth Graders
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Literature and Writing Curriculum for Harper Lee's Novel To Kill A Mockingbird Prepared by Madge McQueen for Use with Advanced ABE and GED Students as well as High School Students
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To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
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The Friends by Rosa Guy
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Ruby by Rosa Guy
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Edith Jackson by Rosa Guy
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Tree Project (Fayerweather Street School, 6th Graders)
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Writing and Literature: One-on-one with Kaya
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Includes: "Self-Identity in the Context of Friendship" (1991), Scroll: "It's Here That I Give Thanks" (1991), two Artist Books Exchanged between Willy Bate and Madge McQueen (1995)

Artist Books
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Includes: "A Mirror of Words" (1994), Poetry Drafts, "Wood and Words" (1990), "Nocturnal Musings" (1991), "Across This Waiting Page" (1990), "Passage" (1991), "Along the Forest Floor" (1989), "Birthday Book" (1991), "Book for Kriss" (1990)

Artist Books
1985-2006
Box 3

Includes: "Art and Spirituality" (2000-2006), "Spirit/Child" (1996), "Muse" (1990), Artist Book Project List (1990-1992), "Self-Starvation Book" (1990), "A Visual Journey Thru Lovers Past" (1990), "Poems of Longing" (1985-1991), two Artists Books Exchanged between Laura Wulf and Madge McQueen (2004)

Artist Books
1990-1999
Box 4

Includes: "Norway" (1999), "Transference Book" (1990-1991), "The Incest Book" (1992), "The Brother Book" (1991), "This is Sissy's Book" (1992-1993), "I Am the She Who You Are" (1990)

Artist Book
1990

"Across This Waiting Page" (poetry)

Artist Books
2008-2011
Box 5

Includes: "Kayde Birthday Book" (2011), "Book for Myself" (2008), and "What Wasn't Lost" (2011)

Artist Book
1994
Box 6

Includes: "Moving Towards Touch" (1994)

Artist Sketch Book
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Artist Book: My Mother's Final Words
undated
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Art by friends and print art
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Box 17

Contains "Moving" (1993), "Internal Landscapes" (1994), and "Bundle" (1997).

Cyanotype/vandyke rock bags from MassArt installation, "The Weight of Memory: The Dresses my Mother Wore."
1996
Box 18
Plaster cast of face: Madge McQueen
1995
Box 19
Dresses from MassArt installation, "The Weight of Memory: The Dresses my Mother Wore," "Spirit Child," and "Salt."
1996-1997
Box 20
Resist dyed cape
1996-1997
Box 21

Made at MassArt and worn to MasssArt BFA graduation

Artwork
1997-2008
Box 22
Incomplete art project: paper replica of Elona and Zack's Chuppah made out of cloth
2014
Box 23
Poster: Soviet Daughter reading at Harvard
2017 Apr
Box 24
Poster: local high school production of "In the Heights" by Lin-Manuel Miranda
2017 May
Box 25

Madge McQueen's goddaughter did backstage work on this production.

Parasomnia: comments book
2019 Dec-2020 Jan
Parasomnia: framed artist statement
2019
Studio notes
2018
Box 26
Studio notes
2019 Mar-2020 May
Studio notes
2020 May-2024 Aug
Series 7. Personal and Autobiographical
ca. 1935-2023

Madge McQueen autobiographical class lecture

2018-04-12
digital
"Pre-Journal"
1977
Vol. 1
Women Writers Calendar
1983
Vol. 2
Women Writers Calendar
1984
Vol. 3
Women Writers Calendar
1985
Vol. 4
Women Writers Calendar
1986
Vol. 5
Women Writers Desk Calendar
1987
Vol. 6
Women Writers Calendar
1988
Vol. 7
Women Writers Calendar

1989
Vol. 8
Women Artists Calendar
1990
Vol. 9
MoMA Appointment Calendar
1991
Vol. 10
Sylvia Book of Days Appointment Calendar
1993
Vol. 11
Women's Glib Cartoon Calendar
1994
Vol. 12
Georgia O'Keeffe Engagement Calendar
1995
Vol. 13
Nothing But the Truth: Activists Speak in Court, War Resisters League Peace Calendar
1996
Vol. 14
Women Artists Diary
1997
Vol. 15
Women Who Dare: Library of Congress Engagement Calendar
1999
Vol. 16
Women Who Dare: Library of Congress Engagement Calendar
2000
Vol. 17
Engagement Calendar
2001
Vol. 18
Engagement Calendar
2002
Vol. 19
Engagement Calendar: The Reading Woman
2014
Vol. 36
Calendar
2015
Vol. 37
Calendar
2016
Calendar
2019
Calendar
2022
A Private War: Letters and Diaries of Madge Preston 1862-1867
1987
Vol. 20
Personal Documents
1976-2006
Vol. 21

Includes: legal name change documents, forms of identification, passports

Work-related occupational documents
1979-2006
Vol. 22
Personal and Autobiographical
1985-2014
Vol. 23
Personal and Autobiographical
1989-2014
Vol. 24
Family Letters Regarding Getting Me Away from Jesse + Marjory
1964 Sep-1965 Apr
Vol. 25
The Sweet Story of Samuel and Madge
2000-2001
Vol. 26
Menstrual Charts
1983-1997
Vol. 27
Menstrual Charts
1997 Jun-2006 Oct
Vol. 28
Health Charts
2006 Oct-2013 Dec
Vol. 29
Cherished Cards and Postcards Gathered and Received
1990-2013
Vol. 30
Letters from Susan Roberta Harden McQueen
1930s
Vol. 31
Great Aunt Charlotte Project
1994-1997
Vol. 32
An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943
1984
Vol. 33
Index of Thoughts and Views
1980-1981
Vol. 34
My name written by many loved ones
late 1970s-early 1980s
Vol. 35
Set of X-rays
1994 Feb 25
Vol. 35
Tank top: 40th anniversary, University of Maryland Food Coop
2017
Notebook: "Important Articles of 2017"

2017
Vol. 36
Essay drafts for "More Than a Year: A White Woman Wears a Black Lives Matter Pin
2017 oct-Nov
Vol. 37
Newspapers from "Summer of Hate," Charlottesville, Virginia
2017
Vol. 38
Health Charts
2014 Jan-2018 Dec
Vol. 40
Wall calendar
2018
Vol. 41
Books

Beauchamp, Virginia Walcott, ed.: A Private War: Letters and Diaries of Madge Preston, 1862-1867
1987
Boyd, Andrew: Life's Little Deconstruction Book
1998
Charlottesville 2017: The Legacy of Race and Inequity
2018
Conway, Jill Ker, ed.: Written by Herself: Autobiographies of American Women
1992
Diehl, Huston: Dream Not of Other Worlds: Teaching in a Segregated Elementary School
1970

Book about Louisa county, Virginia, where Twin Oaks is; our community is mentioned at least once.

Goode, Jennie: Drive: Women's True Stories from the Open Road
2002
Honduras
1993

Given to Madge McQueen by a former EILL student, Hector Andrews

An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-43
1985
Kingsolver, Barbara: Prodigal Summer
2000

Madge McQueen's favorite novel

Knisley, Lucy: Pretty Little Book

Prather, Hugh: Notes to Myself
1970
Quattlebaum, Alexander McQueen: Clergymen and Chiefs: A Genealogy of the MacQueen and Macfarlane Families
1990
Rubin Lillian Breslow: Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family

Snyder, Timothy: On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

Taylor, Sydney: All-Of-A-Kind Family
1951

Madge McQueen's favorite childhood book

Van Der Kolk, M.D.: The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma
1987
Dress
undated

One of Madge McQueen's favorite dresses.

Braceley
undated

Mad for Madge by her god child, Gwen Tupelo.

Tie-dye fabric
undated

Piece of tye-die fabric made from foster brother's memorial (Andy Swindells).

Minature journal and pencil set
undated

Made by Kaya Houston.

Women's symbol
1980

Purchased in Germany.

Article: "Going it Alone: The Dignity and Challenge of Solitude" by Fenton Johnson
2015
Cast of upper teeth: Madge McQueen
2013
Box 1
Madge doll, made in Meppen, Germany, by host mother, Heidi Grundke
1981
Box 2
Hair pillow
mids 1990s
Box 2

Made with mixed hair of the two Madge McQueens.

Maps
various dates
Box 3

U.S. state maps, including many hiking maps; maps of other countries where Madge McQueen traveled (Israel, Iceland, New Zealand, and Scandinavia).

Cassette tapes
various dates
Box 4

Mostly made for Madge McQueen by friends.

CDs and DVDs
various dates
Box 5

Mostly made for Madge McQueen by friends.

Black Lives Matter articles
2016
Living the Richmond Pledge to End Racism
2016
Gwen Materials
2021-2023
Memorial "scrapbook" for Gwen
2021-2023
"Blunt Force Trauma: 19 Epistles for Gwen" (poetry)
2021-2023
Drafts and preparatory materials for "19 Epistles for Gwen"
2021-2023
Gwen Memory Book
2022

Color copy of booklet made by one of Gwen's friends

"Estuaries"
2024 May-June

First through final poem drafts.

Harris-Walz t-shirt
2024
Notebook: Adult Bereavement Support Group
ca. 2024
Silkwood 17: Bird
2024 June

Florence Poets Society annual publication, includes her poem "Estuaries."

Series 8. Twin Oaks Community
2002-2022
Twin Oaks Labor Sheets
2012-2013
Vol. 1
Transgendered at Twin Oaks: Writing by Calliope Harmony
2008
Vol. 2
Milk Processing: The Cheese Log #1
2004 Feb-4-Aug 20
Vol. 3
Cheese Log #2
2004 Aug 21-2005 May 14
Vol. 4
Milk Processing Diary #3
2005 May 15-2006 Mar 29
Vol. 5
Twin Oaks Community: All kinds of documents
2003-
Vol. 6
Photographs taken at Twin Oaks Community
2003-2007
Vol. 7
Twin Oaks oversized
2003-2013
Vol. 8
Twin Oaks 3 x 5s
2002-2013
Box 9
Twin Oaks 3 x 5s
2014-present
Box 10
Twin Oaks validation cards
2003-2014
Box 11
CDs and DVDs
2004-2006
Box 12

Contains Twin Oaks Fashion Show (shot by Jolane Flanigan), 2006; Carrol Tour (shot by Dream Breen), 2004; and Jessica Marie Quintet, mid-2000s.

Collected and Gathered: Twin Oaks Papers
2015
Vol. 13
Collected and Gathered: Twin Oaks Papers
2016
Digital Twin Oaks Policies
2015
Twin Oaks Tofu: expansion and upgrades
2010-2016
Vol.
Twin Oaks labor sheets
2015-2016
Charlottesville and Louisa Cbuses and Lbuses
2015-2016
Twin Oaks validation card
2016
Twin Oaks planner notes
2015 Aug-2016 Sept
Twin Oaks 3 x 5 notes

2016
Twin Oaks 3 x 5 notes
2017 Jan 1-Apr 6
Twin Oaks validation card
2017
Twin Oaks gathered pieces
2017
Twin Oaks Women's Gathering: selected readings regarding whit privilege and racism
2017
Twin Oaks Women's Gathering evaluations
2014-2015
Menu from Teaism
2017

Includes two dishes made with Twin Oaks tempeh.

Twin Oaks gather pieces
2018
Twin Oaks labor sheets
2017-2018
Trip sheets: Cbuses, Lbuses, Rbuses
2017-2018
Twin Oaks notes
2018 May-Dec
Twin Oaks gathered pieces
2019
Twin Oaks trip sheets: Charlottesville, RVA, Lousia
2019
Twin Oaks validation card
2019
Twin Oaks gathered pieces
2020 Jan-Aug
Twin Oaks gathered pieces
2020 Sept-Dec
Twin Oaks labor sheets
2019-2020
Twin Oaks notes
2020
Twin Oaks trip sheets
2020
Twin Oaks labor sheets
2021 Jan-May
Twin Oaks gathered pieces
2021
Open Circle gathered pieces
2018-2023
Open Circle Daily Happenings
2021 Mar-2023 Oct
Series 9. Life Photographs
1940s-2014
Family photographs
1940-1970
Vol. 1
Various pictures of me, sometimes with others
1959-2000s
Vol. 2
Photos of the Swindells Foster Family
1975 onward
Vol. 3
Photo album
mid 1970s
Vol. 4
Photo album
1977-1978
Vol. 5
Dorm Life at University of Maryland College Park, LaPlata Hall
1978-1980
Vol. 6
Photos and memorabilia from Germany
1980-1981
Vol. 8
Photos and memorabilia from Germany
1980-1981
Vol. 10
Photos and memorabilia from Germany
Vol. 11
Photos and memorabilia from Scotland and Germany
1981 May-Jul
Vol. 12
Photo album
2003-2004
Vol. 13
Photo album
2004
Vol. 14
Photo album
mid 1990s-2002
Vol. 15
Photo album
1981-1983
Vol. 16
Photo album
1984
Vol. 17
Photo album
1984 Dec-1986 Jan
Vol. 18
Photo album
1990 Nov-1991 May
Vol. 19
Photo album
1987 Oct-1990 Oct
Vol. 20
Photo Album and Journal Chart

1991 Jun-1992 May
Vol. 21
Photo album
1992 May-1993 Mar
Vol. 22
Photo album
1993-1997
Vol. 23
Photo album
1993 Apr-Sep
Vol. 24
Photo of baby Madge, Great-Grandmother Madge, Grandmother Frances, Mother Marjory
1959
Vol. 25
Photo album
1986 Feb-1987 Oct
Vol. 26
Framed photo of Madge McQueen with former EILL student, Hector Andrews
2006
Vol. 27
Photos and memorabilia
various dates
Box 1

Six books; five are mostly of German and one is of Germany and Great Britain.

CD of photos taken by Laura Wulf
2014 Apr
Vol.

Taken of Masge McQueen while she was working on her collection at SCUA.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Madge McQueen, 2014.

Processing Information

Processed by Madge McQueen, January-December 2014; assisted by Haley Chauvin, August 2014.

Language:

English

Copyright and Use (More information)

Cite as: Madge McQueen Papers (MS 825). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Search terms

Subjects

- Adult children abuse victims
- Communal living--Virginia
- Diarists
- Family violence
- McQueen, Madge
- Sexually abused children
- Twin Oaks (Louisa, Va.)
- Women artists

Contributors

- McQueen, Madge [main entry]

Genres and formats

- Artists' books (Books)
- Correspondence
- Diaries
- Journals (Accounts)
- Photographs
- Textile art (Visual works)

Link to similar SCUA collections

- Intentional communities
- Prose writing
- Women and feminism

Special Collections & University Archives
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Ph. 413-545-7282 (545-SCUA)

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