

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **GLORIA STEINEM**

Interviewed by

EVELYN C. WHITE

September 28 and 30, 2007  
Northampton, MA

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## Narrator

Gloria Steinem, born on March 25, 1934 in Toledo, Ohio, is a feminist activist, organizer and writer whose commitment to progressive issues and ideals spans five decades. A leading figure in the women's liberation movement, Steinem earned a BA in 1956 from Smith College. After graduation, she was awarded a travel fellowship to India. Upon her return to the U.S. in 1958, Steinem settled in New York City where she wrote articles on politics and culture for numerous publications including *Esquire*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *New York*, *Show* and *McCall's*. In 1972, she helped to found the still published landmark feminist journal, *Ms.* magazine. An influential international voice on the status of women and other marginalized groups, Steinem is the author of *The Beach Book* (1963), *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983), *Marilyn: Norma Jeane* (1986), *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (1992) and *Moving Beyond Words* (1993).

## Interviewer

Evelyn C. White (b.1954) is a writer and reporter. She holds an MPA from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, an MS from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and a BA from Wellesley College.

## Abstract

In this oral history Steinem discusses her upbringing in a loving but unstable home with an emotionally ill mother and a carefree traveling antiques dealer father. She cites her years at Smith and experiences in India as pivotal in shaping her views on race, class and gender. Steinem also describes her journalism career and the role her work as a writer and speaker played in raising her consciousness about women and society. The interview focuses on Steinem's critical involvement in the founding of *Ms.* magazine and the emergence of the women's liberation movement. She speaks with candor about various feuds, conflicts and misunderstandings within the feminist movement and their impact on her life. She also discusses strategies for building and sustaining personal and political alliances. The interview is especially noteworthy for Steinem's reflections on her childhood, grief, and the rewards and challenges of her status as an iconic figure.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded by Kate Geis on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Six 63-minute tapes.

### Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka, November 2007. Edited by Sheila Flaherty-Jones, January 2008. Transcript has been reviewed and edited by Evelyn C. White. (Transcript 106 pp).

### Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

#### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Steinem, Gloria. Interview by Evelyn C. White. Video recording, September 28 and 30, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote sample:** Gloria Steinem, interview by Evelyn C. White, video recording, September 30, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 5.

#### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Steinem, Gloria. Interview by Evelyn C. White. Transcript of video recording, September 28 and 30, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote sample:** Gloria Steinem, interview by Evelyn C. White, transcript of video recording, September 30, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 82-3.

Transcript of interview conducted September 28 and 30, 2007, with:

GLORIA STEINEM

by: EVELYN WHITE

September 28, 2007

WHITE:

Well, Gloria, I came here via Vancouver and Montreal, and as mentioned, there was a little bit of panic in Montreal. I had about an hour between flights. You have to go through customs in Montreal coming from Canada, and so they thought that they might not have my bag. I had to wait there about 30 minutes. Then finally the guy dispatched me, saying, "You've got to get to the gate because it's the last plane to [Hartford]." I said, "Okay, it's the last plane to [Hartford]." So I took a deep breath and was like, Okay, it's out of my control. If I don't have clothes, I'll have to deal with that when I get there. I arrived at the gate, and then the woman said, "Oh, there's a message for you: your bag is on the plane." And I was like, Hallelujah.

1:14

Then I got to the plane. There was not one but two women pilots who flew me from Montreal to [Hartford]. And so when I saw that, I thought, How fitting, you know, that I would be flying to Smith to interview Gloria Steinem, and be taken there by not one but two women pilots. I mean, for me it was just an absolute symbol of the impact of your work and then others from the second-wave feminist movement.

So I asked the women to sign my boarding pass. Daphne and Carla J., who were flying the Beech 1900D from Air Canada. So here's my boarding pass with their signatures, and I'm going to present that to you. I put a little note on it this morning.

STEINEM: Oh, that's so great. All right. I'm definitely going to frame this. And the great thing is that when you saw two women pilots, you didn't think, Oh my God.

WHITE: Oh no, I didn't.

STEINEM: You thought, Good!

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: And that's the transformation.

WHITE: Exactly. And I looked around. It was a small, 20-seater plane, and it wasn't completely full, but it was almost full. And it was about 50-50, you know, women and men flying from Montreal to [Hartford]. I looked around at the men to see if they were, like, flipped out about having these two women pilots, and they were completely, from what I could tell, fine with it. You know, it was very clear to me that they thought

that this was completely normal, not at all out of the routine, to have these two women pilots. And it was just a wonderful experience.

STEINEM: Yeah, it is wonderful. I've never been on a plane with two, and rarely with one. So this and your bag were a message.

WHITE: Exactly. I thought so. So yeah, I'd like you to have that.

STEINEM: Oh, thank you for this. All right, definitely I'm framing it.

WHITE: Okay. Also, as I mentioned, part of my duties here was to talk to the athletic department about black women in sport — you know, the ways in which we've been included and excluded — and share some about my own journey as a young girl who really liked to play softball but sort of abandoned it at 12 or 13 when I got the message that only lesbians played softball and, God forbid, didn't want anyone to know that I might be a lesbian. And so I stopped playing softball. So I shared that story with them.

And I also shared with them — because it had such an impact on me when I interviewed you early on about Alice [Walker] — when you said that you had been the only white lifeguard at this pool in Washington, D.C. And when I said that about you, everybody in the room went, Really? Has she written about that? I said, "Well, I don't know." And they said, We want to know more about that. So if you could share some about, you know, that experience. How you came to have that job, how old you were then, and just what you took from that experience.

5:00

STEINEM: I should write about it, really.

WHITE: Well, everybody was just fascinated by it.

STEINEM: And actually, Alice and I were once going to do an essay like that, just our own early experiences of race, of being the only — or just, you know, as a kind of parallel.

I came to that job just because I needed a job. I think it was the summer between my freshman and sophomore year at Smith, I'm pretty sure. There were two pools in Washington, D.C. One was in Georgetown, all white, and one was in the southeast section of D.C., all black. They put me in the all black, because I guess I was late. I don't know why they did it, but I'm very grateful. I'm so grateful to them that they did, and I'm also grateful to all my co-workers, because they could see that I was self-conscious and they just ignored it in a wonderful way. You know, they just sort of waited until I got to be okay. Meanwhile, they taught me how to play bid whist and cooncan, which is kind of like gin rummy, I think.

WHITE: Oh really?

STEINEM: Yeah. You know, they just were themselves and made jokes and sort of just waited until I got to feeling less awkward, I think. I never really asked them about it, but I think that was really what was going on. And it was such a good experience for me — to be the only white person — in every way, because they didn't care about my presence either. I mean, I wasn't — there weren't that many of me and I wasn't threatening.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: You know, they kind of continued life, I think, as they would have otherwise. It gave me some idea of what it is like to be the one and the only, and also how important it is to feel included. And they made me feel included, even when we would go out after work for a beer or something like that. And if other white people, especially some — It was a totally black neighborhood, but occasionally there would be a group of white guys — because I think there was a baseball field nearby or something — and they would look at us askance. A group of white guys, young guys, objected and said, What's that white girl doing with all of you? One of my co-workers, who was a very big guy himself, went over to them, which I think scared them, and he said, "You see that girl? That girl is just one big recessive gene walking around on two legs." (laughter)

WHITE: One big recessive gene.

STEINEM: I mean, you know, so it was a recognition of the real world, but it was taking it with kind of humor and transforming it. I'm very glad that I had that experience.

And the kids were wonderful, because I was teaching kids to swim. A lot of them had never seen that much water in one place, and they were fearless, you know, fearless. You would see this little person walking around, but, you know, they just plunge in, and they're thin and they go to the bottom, and you'd have to plunge in.

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: It was a really, really good experience. Also I think that plus living in India helped. Nothing helps completely, of course, because we have this terrible consciousness of color, which is crazy, but it helped a lot. It really helped a lot.

WHITE: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Toledo and what the community was like there. I remember you once talking about a black girl in dancing school that was sort of one of your role models. What was your experience with color and race like there?

STEINEM: Well, in my high school there were quite a few black students, Negro students, as we would have said. I don't remember that there was a lot of tension, but there wasn't any mixing either. It was a very kind of midwestern, you might say, situation, where there were kind of two separate societies. The football team had black players — who were very good players, so they were very valued. But I would say the most liberal thing that happened in that school was an effort to have the football banquet someplace where everyone could go.

10:00

WHITE: Oh. This would be in the '40s?

STEINEM: This was from — Let's see, I graduated from high school in '52, so this was the end of the '40s and the beginning of the '50s. But there was no socializing together, and I don't think I ever questioned it either.

WHITE: Really?

STEINEM: Yeah. However, in my ballet class there was one black dancer who was very elegant and had aunties. I remember her aunties brought her. She was, I would say, several class levels above me in the sense that I was coming from this working-class factory kind of neighborhood. So that was good too, in retrospect, because it made me understand that class and race were not the same thing; that there were upper-class and upper-middle-class black people and working-class white people.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: I remember her saying that she liked blue eye shadow, she said, because she thought it was better for her complexion.

WHITE: And how old was she, at that age saying that?

STEINEM: I don't know, 15 or 16 perhaps. Because I remember the word *complexion*, and I thought, Well, of course, that's what it is.

WHITE: Right, exactly.

STEINEM: Hello? Right, right.

WHITE: Exactly. And coming from your working-class roots, as you know, there can be this sense of divisions, and blue-collar people do this and upper-class people do this.

Tell me about your sort of path to dance — ballet and other dance. Those of us who know you [know you] to be a wonderful dancer. So, how did you get — Yeah, you're a good dancer, you are. I saw those programs over in the archives, with you in all these dance recitals.

STEINEM: I was not exactly, I would say, a working-class person in the way everybody else was, because I was like a middle-class person on the way down, and everybody else was working class on the way up. My father hadn't graduated from college, but he had gone for a while, and my mother had graduated, and they had lived a different life before I was living with my mother, who was a single mother. So, I mean, we had descended economically, but we had books in the house and we had things. We had a tradition of speaking English. A lot of the other families didn't. They were Polish and Hungarian families, where the parents of my friends didn't speak English at home. You know, it was a mix. Sorry, is it all right if I stop?

(pause)

WHITE: So where were we?

STEINEM: Oh, about how I got to taking ballet.

WHITE: Yes, dance and ballet and all that, books in the house.

STEINEM: I started dancing because my father had a little summer resort in southern Michigan. The cigarette girl, whose name was Ruby, taught me how to tap dance. I liked it, and so then my parents got me tap dance lessons nearby. I used to do all kinds of routines. I remember doing the Minuet in G in a hoop skirt. I don't know, I did kind of crazy things at the age of six or seven or something.

15:00

Then I went through a big shy period, so I wouldn't do it anymore. But when my mother and I were living by ourselves in east Toledo, I started to take dancing again because I liked it, and also it was a way to earn money. You could dance at supermarket openings and for the Lions.

WHITE: The Lions Club.

STEINEM: The Lions Club, yeah, which is kind of the slightly lower-class Elks. The foreman on the line there might belong to the Elks, and the guys on the line belong to the Lions. So we got ten dollars a night for dancing in a — I don't know what it was, it wasn't a nightclub, I don't know — a social hall. But I remember that later on in the evening, things must have got pretty rough, because they had chicken wire (laughs) covering the bandstand, from the bottom to the top, because people threw each other through the drum.

WHITE: Oh, I see. Wow.

STEINEM: So we were only there early in the evening, as the entertainment, with a wind-up Victrola and stuff like that.

So I went from that to also dancing in the chorus line of the operettas, which were in the park. I've forgotten what it's called, but there's a big park with a zoo in it in Toledo, and it has a stage, a summer stage kind of thing. They would get the principals of *Naughty Marietta*, *The Vagabond King*, all these classic operettas, from someplace else, but they would hire the dancing chorus and the singing chorus locally. So I did that, having lied about my age a lot. I may be 13 to 18 or something, but I was this tall then anyway, so —

But it made me realize that I was having to fake ballet all the time, because the other dancers had had ballet. So I started to take ballet. That was my little route to ballet. And then I totally fell in love with it, and I went to all the movies that had Cyd Charisse. But I was never very good. My ankles were much too weak, and I'd started much too late, but it was my dream. You know, I was going to dance my way out of this working-class neighborhood. I do think that show business, in general, is to little girls in poor neighborhoods kind of what sports is to boys in poor neighborhoods. You know, it's the only way you see of getting out, because you see somebody who looks like you who did it. So that was my great dream.

WHITE: So for other kids like myself, we'd maybe have a periodic babysitting job to earn extra money, and my brothers would mow lawns and stuff, and you did dancing.

STEINEM: Well, I did dancing. I mean I liked that the best, but I also did work as a salesgirl. That was a much more reliable source of income.

WHITE: It is.

STEINEM: So I worked after school.

WHITE: Where did you work?

STEINEM: In a women's clothing store. It wasn't a department store, it was smaller, and I worked there after school and on Saturdays.

WHITE: Tell me a little bit about your mom, whose maiden last name — I want to get the pronunciation right. I know it's Ruth.

STEINEM: It's Nuneviller, which is the anglicized version of a French Huguenot name. It's N-U-N-E-V-I-L-L-E-R. So I'm sure, obviously, in French it's *Nunville*, or something else, but to her and her family it was Nuneviller.

WHITE: Nuneviller. And she was a journalist?

STEINEM: She had been a journalist before I was born. I kind of knew that growing up, but it wasn't all that real to me until I got older and learned

more about it. She and my father had met each other at the University of Toledo, working on the *News Bee*, which was the campus newspaper. She then — I guess after her graduation, she went to work as a journalist, but under a man's name, because she couldn't get published under her own name.

WHITE: So she had a fake byline? What was her byline?

STEINEM: You know, I know it, wait a minute. It will come to me. She used a man's name. Then she later on got a job on one of the larger news — there were two large newspapers then. Ultimately, over time, she became the society editor first, and then the Sunday editor, which must have been quite unusual for a woman.

20:00

WHITE: Yeah, that's a big deal.

STEINEM: Yeah. By that time, of course, she and my father were married, and she had my sister. So it became very hard for her, I think, in a wide variety of ways, to be everything to everyone, especially since my father was not Mr. Financially Responsible. A lovely, terrific, imaginative, entertaining man, but not — I mean, he had come from a more, I would say, upper-middle-class background, so he was not worried about money at all. And my mother, having come from a working-class background, was desperately worried about money every minute. He would borrow money and not tell her and, you know, there were a lot of hard times there, I think. Plus looking after my sister. Plus my mother, I think, fell in love with someone else at the newspaper office, who probably was better suited to her, but to her, divorce was unthinkable, completely unthinkable. Just — there were many stresses and strains on her.

WHITE: And your sister, your older sister Suzanne, who you followed here to Smith. Tell me a little bit what it was like to have a big sister and, you know, your relationship with her.

STEINEM: Well, she's nine years older, which is almost like having another mother, which was great. She was always very generous about looking after me and letting me tag along, perhaps because I had been her idea. She wanted a little sister. There had been a boy born first, who was stillborn, and my mother had had a couple of miscarriages besides that. So I doubt that she would have had another child if it hadn't been that my sister was nagging her for a little sister. And she named me. She named me after her doll, (laughs) because my parents couldn't agree on a name, so they said, Well, you name her.

WHITE: So Suzanne had a doll named Gloria?

STEINEM: Yeah, a big baby doll named Gloria, right. So she was always very, very important in my life. She also, given her age difference, was away pretty soon, not just going to college, but also, in order to go to high school, she had to be away during the week in Michigan.

WHITE: Why was that?

STEINEM: Because we didn't have a very good school. It was a rural area, and the first school had one row of seats for each grade, all in one room, and then there was another school. But anyway, to go to a proper high school, I guess, and because my mother wanted her to be able to go to college, she needed to go live in the YWCA during the week, in Jackson, Michigan. So she was very important in my life, but also not able to be present, I would say, after I was about nine.

WHITE: It sort of reminds me a little bit of me and my younger sister Phyllis. I'm nine years older than Phyllis, and we're the only girls. I'm the eldest of five, and I was desperate for a little sister, because it was me and then my three brothers. I remember when my sister was born, on December 4, and my mother called from the hospital and said, "You have a sister, and you can name her." So I named her Phyllis Denise, because I was in love with a patrol girl in grade school named Phyllis.

STEINEM: That's great.

WHITE: But yes, it is true. And then, you know, I was off to college, and so we don't have that very close relationship, my sister and I, because of the age difference. You know, I was sort of on my way out, like Suzanne, when Phyllis came along, so I understand.

STEINEM: But I'm sure that Phyllis feels about you the way I did. My sister seemed to hold all the secrets of the adult universe to me, perhaps more so because my mother was, by then, kind of an invalid, so she wasn't as functioning as I'm sure your mom was. Nonetheless, she was very important.

WHITE: And so both you and Suzanne end up at Smith. Tell me how you heard about the college.

STEINEM: My maternal grandmother, she married what I think she thought was beneath her. She married a railroad engineer who went to work in overalls, and she was a schoolteacher. She was determined that her two daughters were going to go to college, and they did. They then became determined that — well, my aunt didn't have children — but they became determined that my sister and I go to college too. And I think it was more through my aunt, who was a public high school teacher. She taught English in a high school that was in a very middle-class

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neighborhood, so most of the kids went to college. So she knew a lot about college.

WHITE: This world.

STEINEM: I suspect it was mostly through her that my sister knew about Smith and went to Smith. And then of course I, because of my sister, knew about Smith. I don't think I'd heard of Vassar, for instance, maybe Wellesley. I remember applying to Cornell and Stanford, neither of which accepted me. (chuckles)

Smith — partly perhaps because I was a legacy, as they say, and partly because maybe they were curious. They try to have a distribution of students, and I'm pretty sure that nobody had ever come from my high school in Toledo before, though I did go to high school, finished one year, in Washington[, D.C.]. And also because there was a wonderful vocational advisor at that school in Washington who recommended me, and I think they trusted her. Certainly not because of my college boards or the quality of most of my high school.

WHITE: Exactly. Yeah, I was looking at some of your high school report cards, or was it your —

STEINEM: Really?

WHITE: No, no. Maybe it was here at Smith, where there was like the D, a D minus in Algebra.

STEINEM: No, that must have been high school.

WHITE: Waite? Waite High School? [in Toledo]

STEINEM: Yes.

WHITE: Okay. So I could relate to that, definitely.

STEINEM: It's interesting that they have them. I didn't know they had them.

WHITE: Well, you must have given them to them.

STEINEM: I guess, but things just went in boxes, you know. I don't even know what's there.

WHITE: Yeah, they were there. It's fabulous to look at, yeah.

STEINEM: Well, I also got a D my first year at Smith, in geology, I believe, because I had taken geology. I thought it sounded like the easiest science, but it wasn't that easy.

WHITE: Like my F in biology at Wellesley, exactly. Had you come to visit Smith when Suzanne was here? Or when you arrived as a student, was that your first time here?

STEINEM: I had certainly come here for my sister's graduation.

WHITE: What year did she graduate?

STEINEM: In '46, because she, even though it was nine years, it turned out to be an academic year, and it was ten years.

Certainly I had come here, because when my sister was a junior, before we lived in Toledo, we lived in Amherst for a year. When my mother and father first separated, my mother and I came and lived in a house in Amherst, which was just a wonderful year. We lived in a real house that I could have friends to, and I went to a real school. It must have been the fifth grade.

WHITE: Ten years old or so.

STEINEM: So, you know, that's quite nearby. So certainly, as a child, I had seen the campus, and then when my sister graduated, I had.

WHITE: And so what was it like when you arrived as a student? I mean, you had some familiarity with it, you'd visited Suzanne, you'd lived in Amherst. But was there still any big sort of transition for you, having come from –

STEINEM: Oh, it was a huge, big deal. I mean, it was. And also it was a refuge. I was so happy to be here, because I had been taking care of my mother, who really was not able to live in the real world and was often in her own world, which unfortunately was not a happy world either. It was hard because she would wake up in the middle of the day and wonder where I was and not remember and call the police to find me. I would be, as a teenager, so embarrassed to have the police coming to find me wherever I was, in my salesgirl thing or in high school or whatever.

There'd been very tough times, living together in Toledo, but by then my sister was taking care of my mother. So Smith was an enormous refuge. It was the first time that I felt free. You know, I didn't have to worry about what I was going to find when I'd come home. I think, in talking to children of alcoholics, we can finish each others' sentences. You know, that kind of worry about, What am I going to find when I come home? And it was the first time I was free of that, so I thought it was seventh heaven.

30:00

WHITE: Exactly. And there was no real discussion, open talk about mental illness, the sort of psychological struggles your mother was having. So what about other family members? She had a sister, right? Was there anybody to provide support for you?

STEINEM: The problem was, I think, that my family, like so many, just accept whatever is, and even blame the person for it. So her younger sister, my mother's younger sister, I think thought my mother was irresponsible because she couldn't keep her house clean and had married the wrong person. I don't know. I think she was always slightly ashamed of this whole crew that lived in a house trailer much of the time. She tried to be helpful; she bought me clothes. I mean, that was one thing she definitely did. But there was a lot of tension between the two of them, and she was always also looking after her mother, so I think she may well have felt that she was already, you know, doing family duty.

As for my mother's mental illness or whatever it was, people just accepted it as part of her. In fact, I, as a child — I mean, I'm maybe, I don't know how old I was, 13 or 14 — took her to the doctor she had gone to before I was born. When my sister was little, my mother had had a nervous breakdown and been in a sanatorium for a year or more. So I knew she needed something, so I took — and this was the only person she would go to. So I took her back to that doctor, who was by then a very old man with his pants held together with safety pins. I mean, he was probably not in such great shape either. He talked to her and said yes, definitely she should be in a mental hospital. By that time, I had seen pictures in *Life* magazine of what mental hospitals looked like and all the people nude and on the floor. So I thought that was the only alternative. I never tried again after that.

However, after I was in college and my sister was trying to work and take care of my mother, and it was impossible, because she would come home — as I did but it was different, because, you know — and find my mother wandering around in her nightgown in the street. She couldn't handle that, fortunately, and found a good hospital, a good mental hospital, Shepherd and Pratt, near Baltimore. So at last my mother got some help, which she should have got years before that.

WHITE: Of course, of course. And how hard it must have been for you, as a teenager, to try to shepherd your mom. I assume you weren't driving then, so I had this image of you taking your mom on the bus, you know, to this doctor. It's just a heavily poignant image.

STEINEM: If I put myself back there — I realize that I have disproportionate reactions to things sometimes now. For instance, this summer, when I was at a women's writers colony for two months, Amy Richards, who has been working with me for a long time — since she herself was a college student — got tired of the fact that everything came into my apartment, and hardly anything goes out. It hadn't really been properly redone and painted in twenty years. And so while I was gone, she undertook to do this.

WHITE: Without telling you?

35:00

STEINEM: Well, she told me she was doing it, but she didn't tell me the extent to which she was doing it, really, but I totally trust her. She knows more about what to do than I do. But the point was, I don't think she can understand how grateful I am. I keep telling her how grateful I am. And I realize that in my childhood, I had come to the conclusion that if I didn't do something, no one would do it. And that was deep, deeply ingrained inside me. So the idea that she would clean and paint and put a whole new floor in — I mean she probably thought, well, she might as well do it now because she would have to do it after I was dead anyway. (laughter)

WHITE: A little bit ahead of the game. Right, exactly. Before all the mourners arrive for the fundraiser when you can ask if your funeral is going to be a fundraiser.

STEINEM: But I feel so grateful to her because it's the first time in my life that somebody has done what I suppose is a motherly thing.  
And once, when I first — belatedly in my life, after 50 — went to a therapist, because finally everything had got to be too much — breast cancer, everything. So I did actually go to a therapist, which up to then I thought was great for everyone else but not for me.

WHITE: And why was that? Why was it great for everyone else but not for you?

STEINEM: I had this kind of midwestern, Well, I should do something practical with my money. Also, I was a survivor, so I didn't think I needed it.

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: I understood that it helped other people a lot, but I just didn't think it was for me.

WHITE: So you finally went.

STEINEM: I finally went. And I hug everybody. Not everybody, but I mean, I feel I like to be able to hug friends, and so on. But I could not hug her. She's older than I am, and she was perhaps the first person, because of being a therapist and being older, in a kind of mother relationship to me, you might say. I could not hug her. I thought I would just dissolve if I hugged her. I just couldn't. It took me a long time to be able to hug her, and that was my first glimpse, I think, of how much I had missed having a competent mother. I loved my mother, but she wasn't able to be a mother. So I think I only realize it when something contrasts with it.

WHITE: Wow, that's wonderful. I'm sure your mom is just incredibly proud of you.

STEINEM: She taught me so much whenever she could. She taught me how to open books and run my finger down the spine so I wouldn't break the spine. She recited — she knew by heart a lot of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dorothy Parker, and she used to recite (inaudible) I still know. She also had studied — She was a mathematician and interested in physics and so on, as a student.

WHITE: Why the D minus in algebra?

STEINEM: Yeah, that's a good question. (laughs) It wasn't hereditary.

WHITE: She had other things that she was contending with, as you've made very, very clear, but wow, a mathematician.

STEINEM: And she was a Theosophist.

WHITE: Explain Theosophy to those of us who don't fully get it.

STEINEM: Theosophy was a very important, influential movement of the 1800s, and well into the 1900s, 1920s and '30s, which presented itself as a combination of all the world's great religions but was, I think, heavily influenced by Hinduism and Eastern religion, because it believed in reincarnation. It was a very humane, gentle way of thinking. It was more of a philosophy, like Buddhism is a philosophy, than a religion. There are still Theosophical lodges, I think, in most U.S. cities, if you look for them, but it doesn't have the same influence it did then.

In retrospect, I realize that I was so lucky that it was my mother's child-rearing philosophy, because if you believe in reincarnation, you don't think children are your possessions. She used to say that to me. She used to say children are little strangers who come into your home, and you have the duty and the joy of caring for them and loving them, but they don't belong to you. What could be a better philosophy than that? Because it allows you to be your individual self, at the same time that you have this security.

WHITE: Exactly, wow.

STEINEM: Her mother-in-law — she adored her mother-in-law.

WHITE: Your father's mother.

STEINEM: My father's mother also became a Theosophist out of a Jewish background; and eventually, my mother's mother also became a Theosophist out of a Christian background. So though the two families had disapproved of this marriage — it was the Jewish-Christian, kind of mixed marriage of its era, and they had to get married secretly, and everybody disapproved.

40:00
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WHITE: Oh really?

STEINEM: Yeah, which I'm sure increased the appeal. (laughs)

WHITE: Of course, sure, right, right.

STEINEM: But my mother — by focusing on her hard times and her illness, I don't want to give the impression that she was not an extraordinary person. She really was.

WHITE: I think that's clear, you know, from what I've read. Wow. And your father — tell us a little bit about Leo Steinem.

STEINEM: Well, he came from this family which was a German Jewish family. His father had gone back to Germany to find a bride and brought my grandmother, who was probably rare, too, because she had gone to, I guess, a normal school. She had trained to be a schoolteacher. She was quite a cultured person, I think. He was in real estate, and I think he owned a brewery, and she made him sell the brewery, because she didn't approve of drinking, before she would marry him, even though she was only 17 or so.

WHITE: Wow. There you go.

STEINEM: She was a very interesting woman, who became, as I realize now — I didn't realize at the time — a suffragist in the era, and was the first woman in the state of Ohio to be elected, I think, to the school board, even before women had the vote nationally.

WHITE: And her name was?

STEINEM: Pauline Perlmutter Steinem.

WHITE: Great.

STEINEM: She got elected by organizing women to go to vote together. Women were kept away from the polls by gangs of men and boys who would harass them sexually, basically, if they came to vote. So she organized women to go in a group, and that was what allowed her to win.

WHITE: Take your posse and go vote.

STEINEM: Right. And she ran on a coalition ticket with the Socialists and the Anarchists. (laughter)

WHITE: That's good, that's good.

STEINEM: But I didn't know this about her until a feminist in Toledo, a historian, wrote a monograph about her. Because what survived as admirable in the family history was that she was a great cook, that she had four sons, that she kept a kosher table, that she was an educator. She was a pioneer of vocational education. Not the more rebellious parts.

WHITE: The radical activism.

STEINEM: Right. It wasn't that they concealed it. They just didn't talk about it.

WHITE: So when you arrived at Smith in 1952, correct?

STEINEM: Mm hmm.

WHITE: What was your aspiration for yourself? Did you have any set notion of what kind of career you would have? You've already said that this was a refuge for you, based on the circumstances you'd come from when you got here. You know, what was your dream for yourself?

STEINEM: That's a good question. Well, my dream for myself was mainly just to hang in here and not — stay in this wonderful place that gave me food and books to read. Because I fell in love with it, I think I wanted to work for a couple of years after college, and then marry a professor so I could live here forever.

WHITE: That's how I felt when I left Wellesley. When I graduated, I said, "I can't believe I have to leave this place." I really didn't want to go.

STEINEM: Right. I could imagine living in one of the old houses around here with dogs, and he would be a professor and I would have children.

WHITE: With bookstores, everything.

STEINEM: Well, that I did — There was a bookstore here. I thought it would be great to own a bookstore. I did have that little vocational dream.

WHITE: Right, small business notion even then.

STEINEM: I didn't think in terms of a career. I thought in terms of having an interesting job for a few years after graduation. So much later, when I was a senior, I interviewed to be a researcher at *Time Magazine*. Then, women were researchers. Men wrote, but you could get a job as a researcher.

45:00

WHITE: Now, is it true, as I've read in some book somewhere, that one of your boyfriends, who was, I guess, a pilot or in a plane, wrote *Gloria* in smoke in the sky over Smith when you were here?

STEINEM: He used to fly me back to Smith from weekends. By that time I was a senior, and I had already spent a year in Geneva on my junior year, and so on. He was about nine years older than I. I was introduced to him by one of my classmates, who married one of his friends. He was a kind of free spirit.

WHITE: And his name is?

STEINEM: Blair Chotzinoff. He had never gone to college because his father was a kind of famous conductor, his uncle was [violinist] Jascha Heifetz. He had all these famous relatives, and I think he was wanting to become as famous as they were more quickly, so he became a Hollywood gossip columnist.

WHITE: I see, the fast track.

STEINEM: Fast track, yeah, right.

WHITE: The fast track to fame.

STEINEM: He was Leonard Lyons's assistant or something.

WHITE: And who was Leonard Lyons?

STEINEM: He was a columnist for many years — his son is still on television — in the *New York Post*. Blair, I think, was a restaurant critic or something for quite a while. So he led this very dramatic, interesting life, and was incredibly handsome. I mean, just staggeringly handsome. He looked like kind of a mogul prince. He had kind of this very straight, interesting nose and kind of dusky skin and green eyes. He was —

WHITE: Exotic.

STEINEM: Exotic, right. His family were Russian Jews, so who knows what heritage he had, but he was incredibly handsome, and didn't give a damn about being incredibly handsome. He was a real — you know, he liked to hunt and he liked to ski, he was that kind of person. He liked to fly. So when I started going out with him and going to spend weekends with his family, then he would fly me back in this little, completely unsafe plane.

WHITE: And where were the weekends with his family? They were where?

STEINEM: They had a little house in the country in Connecticut, and then they had an apartment in New York. They were kind of an aristocracy of talent. They didn't have a lot of money, but because his father had created the NBC Symphony for — oh gosh. Well, anyway, and because the

mother's brother was Jascha Heifetz. So it was just incredible talent and

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WHITE: Verve and glamour.

STEINEM: Glamour. I was just — I felt utterly inferior to it and utterly, you know, my nose pressed to the glass.

WHITE: Wow. So were you scared to get in this little plane and come back with him? Where would he land it? So there must be an airfield somewhere around here.

STEINEM: Yeah, there was an airfield here. Actually, Smith had a course in which they taught women to fly.

WHITE: Really?

STEINEM: But then the Navy had borrowed their plane and burned it up or something, I don't know. But there was a small airfield near here. I don't even know if it still exists. No, I wasn't afraid, and I should have been, because he was completely going by the seat of his pants. He hardly had any instruments. He was always flicking his cigarette at where the instruments were supposed to be.

WHITE: Wow, what adventure.

STEINEM: It was adventure, it was adventure. And I remember my house mother at [Smith dormitory] Laura Scales, who probably is no longer with us so it's okay to say this, thought he was just — she just adored him, so she let me get away with lots of things in terms of not quite coming in on time and coming to rescue us when his car broke down.

WHITE: Do you think you were maybe living the life that she might have wished to have led, so sort of a vicarious thrill?

STEINEM: Yeah. I think she was a little in love with him, too. Yeah, I think so.

WHITE: Wow. Well that sounds like big fun.

STEINEM: It was. And because he was trying to have a little film company, we were working on films together at the same time that I was a senior. He was in the National Guard because of being a pilot, and we were supposed to be making a film called "Weekend Warriors."

50:00

WHITE: "Weekend Warriors."

STEINEM: That's right. (laughs) I have a distinct memory of trying to film a three-minute alert.

WHITE: A three-minute alert?

STEINEM: You know, where there are pilots in bunk beds, and then you were supposed to film how they immediately — But unfortunately, two of them got their parachute strings attached to the bed, and it just rebounded off the —

WHITE: It's like *The Three Stooges*.

STEINEM: Yeah. We could easily have made a comedy film out of it.

WHITE: And it was supposed to be serious?

STEINEM: It was supposed to be serious. Inside the plane, they were demonstrating the jettison procedures, you know, and unfortunately, all the jettison procedures were on the canopy, and the first step was to jettison the canopy. I mean it was — I don't think this film ever got made but we had —

WHITE: Fun doing it, which is the point.

STEINEM: We had fun doing it. We tried to talk the admissions people here into letting us make a film that would make young women want to come to Smith. (laughter)

WHITE: A recruitment film.

STEINEM: A recruitment film, but I think they were much too wise to give us this assignment.

WHITE: I see. Very energetic and creative, you know, out of the bounds.

STEINEM: Well, and I should credit not only Blair but my father for that. I didn't describe my father, except to say he came from this family, but he went to the University of Toledo, where he seems to have been much more interested in promoting dances and running the student newspaper than going to class, which is how he met my mother. I believe before he was married he had a job or two, but in my memory his two big points of pride were that he never had a job, and he never wore a hat. Now in his generation, men were supposed to wear hats, so it meant something. And he was very proud of those two things. What he meant was that he had always worked for himself.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: He did two things in my memory. One was to run this little summer resort, which he had built on a lake in southern Michigan; and in the

wintertime, he bought and sold antiques. He would buy them at auctions and sell them to roadside dealers, often on the way to or from Florida or California, because he didn't like the cold weather. So at a certain moment in time, it would get just too cold for him, and he would put us in this house trailer, sometimes with four frying pans and two plates. You know, it was always a very rushed exit.

WHITE: Right. The snow's coming, the snow's coming. Got to beat the snow.

STEINEM: I think he was afraid that if we got too comfortable there, we would not leave, and so therefore, he never put in central heating. Even when it did get cold, his system of heating the house had to do with putting the end of a log into the fireplace and sort of kind of kicking in as it –

WHITE: Slowly.

STEINEM: Yeah, right.

WHITE: As it burned. One log? One single log?

STEINEM: Right, because otherwise, he'd have to chop wood, which he was not about to do. Anyway, he always had a dream, and he always had some great idea that was going to really work and make a lot of money. Whether it was a formula for an orange drink or the Suntana motels (laughs) which had roofs that, you know, you could crank back.

WHITE: Retractable.

STEINEM: Yeah, so you could get a suntan.

WHITE: And not leave your room.

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: You don't have to go outside, you just retract the roof.

STEINEM: Right. Or slogans for products that he was always sending off in registered letters. I mean, he always had a dream. And Blair was like that too, to some extent, so this was familiar to me, and I loved it.

WHITE: That sense of the excitement.

STEINEM: What if.

WHITE: What if, and sort of the world as it is doesn't have to be where we stay; that we can create a different world. More magic. It sounds very magical to me.

55:00
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STEINEM: I mean, it helped me personally, in the sense of learning to live with insecurity. I don't know that I would have had the courage to become a freelance writer with no guaranteed source of income if it hadn't been for my being brought up that way. It, I'm sure, has its downside in terms of planning and saving money, so I didn't do that either. That still feels like home.

WHITE: So you learned, on some level, that instability and spontaneity is okay. You know, that that's an okay place to stand on, which I think a lot of people get really rattled.

STEINEM: At the same time, of course, it was not always okay. It meant that my father had to park the car very far away because the finance company was going to repossess it. Or that I, as a child, would go to the door — because what can they do about a child? — to say, "Daddy isn't home," when the bill collectors came. So I mean, I had both heritages — both my mother's legitimate worries about money and security, and my father's spontaneity and irresponsibility. It was a combination of both.

WHITE: So you graduate from Smith and proceed to India on a fellowship? Is that the correct chronology? And how did that come about?

STEINEM: Well, I had been interested in India partly, I think, because of the Theosophical background, and as a little girl I remember going to Theosophical lodge meetings. I must have absorbed something there. Also, I had had a course here from a professor named Vera Michaels Dean, who was a wonderful teacher — a course in India, which had fascinated me. The fellowship itself was the result of Chester Bowles having come here to do a lecture, and he donated the proceeds, which was, I think, only a thousand dollars or something — you know, not a lot — but to a possible fellowship.

WHITE: And tell people who Chester Bowles was.

STEINEM: Chester Bowles had been the ambassador from the U.S. to India. So all of that was kind of present. But what was also present was that I was engaged to Blair, and I knew that this was not a good idea for either one of us. As romantic and funny and kind and as good a person as he was, we really didn't share interests. I mean, I do not hunt, I do not ski. (chuckles) And I also, at the time, thought that marriage was the only way women could really change their destiny; that once you were married you had no more choices. Therefore, marriage seemed a little like death.

WHITE: So you moved from the sense of you would, you know, maybe stay here, marry a professor, and own the bookstore in town, to understanding that marriage sort of ended your choices?

STEINEM: Well, I thought that, too. I was looking for a man who would make the choices I wanted. And because I was in love with Smith and academia, I thought if I found someone who was doing that. So it's like wanting someone to extend your own desires, which is certainly not fair to the person you marry either, but that's what I thought. In any case, I thought that it was his career that would dictate the future.

WHITE: And what was Blair's career going to be?

STEINEM: Well, that's a good question. (laughs) He was trying to make films at that point.

WHITE: Oh yeah, that's right. "Weekend Warrior."

STEINEM: "Weekend Warrior," right. For a while he was writing liner notes for CBS Records. I don't know whether that had happened yet, perhaps not. But I was in love with him, and he was a wonderful man, but I knew that it was really not a good idea. So I broke the engagement in a fairly dramatic way.

WHITE: Meaning what? Would you like –

STEINEM: Well, I think I left my engagement ring under the pillow, I believe. (laughs)

WHITE: (inaudible)

STEINEM: Left a note.

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: So that summer, I was working and getting ready to go to India on this fellowship. Shortly before I was to leave — because I had a very hard time getting a visa. It wasn't a known fellowship, so it was hard to get a visa. I saw Blair again and got pregnant. Or rather I learned later on that I had got pregnant.

WHITE: Did he try to talk you out of breaking up with him? Or was he okay with that, or what was his response?

STEINEM: I didn't do it in a kind way. I didn't know how to do it in a kind way, because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it, so I really just left. He did try to get in touch with me, and his father had a friend who was a physician in Washington, who would take me out to dinner and try to suggest that maybe we should get back together. So this is what was going on all summer. But I realized that I had to go very far away not to get married, because his life was so much more interesting than mine, to put it mildly, that I felt that I –

60:00
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WHITE:                   You needed some distance.

STEINEM:                I needed some distance. So that contributed to my going to India.

VIDEOGRAPHER:        Evelyn, I need to change the tape.

WHITE:                   Okay.

STEINEM:                This is kind of all over the lot, do you think it's –

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

STEINEM: His [Blair Chotzinoff's] daughter, Robin Chotzinoff, wrote a book called *People with Dirty Hands*, about gardening. It is so wonderful.

WHITE: Oh, really? I'll have to get that for Joanne, because she's a big-time gardener.

STEINEM: You should, because what she did was she interviewed obsessed gardeners. One is a woman who lives in a house trailer next to her husband, but she won't live with him in the same house trailer, and they plant things in rubber tires, and they have this amazing garden. Then there's a whole group of people who are rose hustlers, who steal slips of real roses, as opposed to the kinds we have now, from graveyards. She's just found these such interesting –

WHITE: And there are these cactus thieves. Joanne and I were visiting a friend in Oakland with beautiful cactus just all over, you know, in this front yard in Oakland. She was telling us how she went out one morning and there was a woman, like, digging up this cactus. I forget the woman's name now — Shelly! Shelly was like, What are you doing? And the woman was like, Oh, I just thought it would be nice to have. So she was stealing the cactus. So yeah, cactus rustlers. Joanne's at home now. I said, "Do you want to come to Northampton?" "Nope, nope, got to put the garden to bed."

STEINEM: I didn't know that about her.

WHITE: Oh yeah, digging up the tomato plants, digging up the cucumber plants. She puts the straw in it and the fava beans or whatever, the cover crop. She's totally into it. It's ritualistic for her.

STEINEM: It must be wonderful. I mean, I never got into it, but it must be just a great –

WHITE: I said, you know, "I'll contribute for the seeds, for the plants. I will water every once in a while." For me, it's just, it's like a little too close to slavery. It's just like this genetic thing that I have, completely different from Alice, who loves it. But for me, when I'm out there — Maybe I was, you know, a slave that really had a hard time on one of the plantations. I get really resentful. I mean, I understand it, I appreciate it. It's wonderful to see the plants grow.

STEINEM: Is that an aspect of your feeling about the country altogether? I mean, it's not that it's dangerous, it's that it is work.

WHITE: No, no. I don't feel threatened about it, about being in the country. I love where we live. I'm not leaving at any time. But it's something

about that particular process of tilling the land that makes me start feeling resentful.

STEINEM: That's interesting. Yeah, I feel it a little bit because of the migrant workers, because of the stooping. I got so hooked on how hard it was physically.

WHITE: Yeah. I think that's part of it, you know, and so I just started getting attitude. So I've learned that what I do like to do, where the resentment doesn't come up, is to go out early in the morning and water. Like the watering, I really, really can relate to it, it's meditative. I think the Buddhist thing kicks in with the watering.

STEINEM: Right, I can see that.

WHITE: But the weeding, which Joanne would tell you, "You must weed." Of course her garden's organic, there's not one pesticide, so you have to weed. When I'm doing that stooping thing and weeding, I'm like, I'm not being a slave. So she gets all upset, "Are you calling me a slave master?" I said, "I'm not calling you a slave master." I just have to be really honest and true. I don't like doing this part of gardening, so I don't.

STEINEM: Well, you know, part of what I'm writing this chapter about — it's called "Wheels Over Indian Trails," because that was a graffiti in New York which captured me for years. Somewhere near here, there are still examples of the old Indian ways of planting, which are called milpa. Instead of having straight plowed rows — or anything straight — as all the original cultures had, everything was round. So the whole field looks kind of like a bathmat, do you know what I mean, with those things around?

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: It's all worked out so you don't have to weed. I should send this to you. They had corn, for corn, of course, and then beans — the beans climb up the corn — and squash. And the beans add nitrogen to the soil, and the squash do something else, and so on. And then around each cluster they had marigolds and other things that were natural pesticides and things that are now called weeds, but actually are — The way of doing this was so replenishing of the earth that there are fields like this in Central America, where people were too poor to change them to this new —

5:00

WHITE: New quote-unquote advantage style.

STEINEM: Right. That have been just fine for 4,000 years, that just keeps replenishing the earth.

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: And it sounds like it's much less work. I don't know.

WHITE: They figured out a way for everything to work together.

STEINEM: Together, exactly.

WHITE: In benefit of each other.

STEINEM: Right. I'll have to send it to Joanne because she would understand it. I don't quite understand it. I, then, was researching it.

WHITE: She knows, like, you put the fava beans in because they do this for the soil the next spring. She's just really, really into it, and it's a joy to witness, after the twenty years she spent in the dotcom world, to see how devoted she is to gardening, what it does for her. So yeah, I'm sure she'd love it. Great.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Okay, do you want to start?

WHITE: Oh, okay. So you find yourself pregnant and the engagement is off.

STEINEM: Yes. (laughs)

WHITE: What year was this, more or less?

STEINEM: It was — well, let's see. It was the end of 1956, I guess, because then I went to London and there — I still didn't have a visa, so I was waiting for a visa, so I was living with a friend who had been in Geneva with me. She didn't go to Smith, but she had been in that group with Smith students.

WHITE: The junior year abroad.

STEINEM: Junior year abroad. She gave so generously, let me live there for a long time, and I was working as a waitress in order to survive there. I was such a terrible waitress. They had old money then, you know, they had the shillings and the pence, which I never understood. (laughs) I used to just put all of it my hand and say, "Here, you make the change."

WHITE: So, working as a waitress, waiting for your visa.

STEINEM: And gradually realizing that I really was indeed pregnant, and I could not —

WHITE: You tried to talk yourself out of it at some point.

STEINEM: Yeah, I kept hoping it would go away. I kept reading books and thinking I could ride horseback or throw myself down a stair, you know, all these kind of magical thinking, ridiculous notions one has. I went to a doctor whose name I found just in the phone book in London, who said yes, probably I was pregnant, and gave me pills which would induce a period if I were not pregnant, and of course they didn't. I was at my wits' end. I knew I couldn't tell Blair, because then this would be a reason we had to get married. I certainly couldn't tell my family. They couldn't do anything about it anyway. I was quite desperate. I would never, ever, under any circumstances kill myself. If you've ever heard I've killed myself, I've done that, look for my murderer.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: But nonetheless, it kind of crossed my mind at that point, because I was so desperate. Fortunately, my notion that I could go to Paris and find an abortion — I had some feeling that France was, like, this liberated country, forgetting that it was a Catholic country, and it would have been even more difficult there. Fortunately, just moments, probably, before it was too late, I happened to meet an American playwright at some gathering, who was quite an awful man as I remember, and was talking about he had had to get two of his actresses abortions, because otherwise they couldn't do his production. I said to him, "How did you do that?" He said, "Oh, well, you know, here it's against the law, but if you get two doctors to say that" — I've forgotten whether it was two or three physicians — "to say that it's against the health or mental health of the woman, you can get permission." Later on, there was a film made about this period of English history, and it was exactly that.

10:00

So I went back to the first doctor and did not tell him the truth about it. I told him that the man who was the father did not want to marry me — I didn't want to admit that it was my doing — and could he help me? He thought for a long time, and he said all right. He said, "I will do this, but you have to promise me two things. You have to never tell anyone my name, and you have to do what you want to do with your life." He was really a wonderful man, who turned out to be the physician for the Sitwell family, Edith Sitwell and her kin. He sent me to a woman physician, because he had given — signed the magic document.

WHITE: The consent.

STEINEM: Whatever it was. He sent me to a woman surgeon who actually did the abortion. I never told anyone, no one — not the woman I was staying with, not anyone — for many, many years, until the women's movement came along and women began to tell the truth about our lives. But I kept it a secret all that time.

WHITE: In hindsight now, was the secret connected, do you think, to the doctor who said, "Don't tell my name," or just the quote-unquote shame of it all?

STEINEM: Well, it made me a bad person in the eyes of society, I thought. So as self-protection, I didn't want to admit that I had done this. I mean, this was a day in which you were still supposed to be a virgin before you were married, much less have had an abortion, so I just didn't tell anyone.

I used to also, on the anniversary of this abortion, I used to try to sit and think how old the child would be. I tried so hard to make myself feel guilty, because I was supposed to feel guilty.

WHITE: That was the message you received.

STEINEM: Right. I never could. I absolutely, no matter all — I never could. And to this day I would celebrate and raise flags on all public buildings, you know, because it was such a release and such a liberation to be able to have an abortion.

WHITE: So when you finally did speak publicly about it, share some about the circumstances that prompted you to finally come to voice about it.

STEINEM: The first thing that happened was that many years later when I was living in New York, and I had become a freelance writer working for *New York* magazine, which was then new, I was doing a column called "The City Politic." There was a hearing — that is, an informal event conducted by an early feminist group in a church basement downtown in the Village — speaking about what it was like to go out and have to seek an illegal abortion, in protest against a hearing that had just been held in the New York State legislature on the question of whether New York's law should be liberalized or not. This was before *Roe v. Wade*. They had invited fourteen men and one nun to testify.

WHITE: About abortion?

STEINEM: About abortion.

WHITE: Fourteen men and one nun.

STEINEM: Right. So this early feminist group said no, let's hear from women who have had this experience, and they had an alternate hearing. I went to cover it as a reporter for *New York* magazine. It was the first time in my life I had ever heard women in public stand up and tell the truth about their lives, parts of their lives that were unacceptable, and just telling the stories, the individual true stories of what it had been like to go out and try to enter a criminal underworld, to endanger yourself, to seek an illegal abortion, all the particular circumstances of each woman. I was

just so transformed by that, that what happened only to women could be taken seriously even though it only happened to women; that there were other women who were telling the truth about this.

WHITE:

Do you think in some way as a journalist that you were maybe drawn psychically to cover this gathering because you wanted to be free yourself? You know?

15:00

STEINEM:

I'm sure, in the way that we write what we need to know and are drawn by what we need to learn. I'm sure I was, absolutely. I wrote about it without writing about my own experience, because I was still in the journalistic mode where you don't necessarily say *I* when you write. But it transformed me, and I began to seek out all the individuals and books and meetings and everything I could find, of what was then the burgeoning women's movement.

The piece I wrote — I think as a result of that — was essentially saying that if these new, small radical groups of women could come together in some way with the larger, more conservative groups like NOW — as NOW then was a more conservative group — that there could be a crucial movement. That piece won a journalism prize later on because it was viewed as the first above-ground report on what became the women's movement.

I'm sure that after that I spoke to friends about this, but I didn't actually speak publicly about it until a few years later when we had started *Ms.* magazine. In the first issue we did a petition, patterned after a petition that women had done in France, of prominent or accomplished women saying, I have had an abortion and I demand the repeal of all laws criminalizing abortion. They had done this very successfully. And so we decided we should do it in the first issue, and we went out to try to find large numbers of women who could do this, who could say this publicly. I obviously couldn't ask someone else to do that unless I was doing it myself. So I added my name to the list, which meant that I had to speak to my mother and my sister, which was very difficult. It was difficult, but it was important. My sister said that she had not believed — she thought I was not having sex all this time. I said, "But what about all these men I brought home?" (chuckles) She had been a virgin at 30 when she married, so she assumed that that was my path as well.

WHITE:

Baby sister Gloria was following in her path.

STEINEM:

Right. My mother was hurt by it, I think. Not because she thought it was immoral or she thought it should be illegal, but because it felt threatening to her. It made me vulnerable; it made her vulnerable. She, I think, to try to hurt me in return — because I had hurt her — said, "Oh, well, it's not true, you're probably just saying it. Every starlet says that to get publicity," she said, because she was hurt and she was lashing back.

WHITE: Exactly. So it was — Well, people, as we know, often act out of their own wounds. That must not have made you feel too good, to have your mom say that about what for you, what was a life-saving decision.

STEINEM: No, it didn't, but it was also true that because I had been my mother's caretaker more than the other way around, I was not so concerned about her approval. I could always see the difference with my sister, who was very concerned about her approval. And I was not, because in a way I was the parent, so it wasn't as hurtful in the sense of judgment. Also, it was so clear why she was saying it.

WHITE: Wow. What a transforming experience for you, a profound moment.

STEINEM: And, you know, of course then in later years in the movement and ever since, we've been able to be much more open. And I had written about this, and so it was out there. I sort of assumed — I never wanted to say to Blair, who was now living at the other end of the country. I assumed that he had figured it out, and I didn't want to force him to talk about it if he didn't want to. I wasn't seeing him that often anyway, but I assumed that he knew, based on the timing, but apparently he didn't. So when Carolyn Heilbrun wanted to interview him —

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WHITE: Lo, those many years later?

STEINEM: Lo, those many years later. It was his first understanding that these two things were connected.

WHITE: So I take it you heard from him.

STEINEM: Yes. He had the most wonderful response. He called me up and he said, you know, "This makes me feel so much closer to you." There was no blame, there was no —

WHITE: Right, exactly. Wow, what a wonderful comment.

STEINEM: It really was.

WHITE: It says a lot about how extraordinary he was, and why you two were together during that time in your life.

STEINEM: It's such a sequence of events, all of which is unpredictable. I hope now, when students are able to plan their lives more and to say, Here's what I want to do ten years from now — which is wonderful, but sometimes the problem with that is you think you have to. You know, you think you have to be in control of your life, and that you have to know what's going to happen in ten years. So I hope they understand how unpredictable life really is.

- WHITE: Was it John Lennon that said, “Life is what happens while you’re making other plans”? Isn’t that the truth of it?  
So your magazine career. Not very many women doing it when you started it. What was it like, the resistance you met?
- VIDEOGRAPHER: I just want to –
- WHITE: All right. That tends to happen.
- STEINEM: Always, yeah.  
  
(break in recording)
- STEINEM: It produces such chaos and violence.
- WHITE: So that’s one little book.
- STEINEM: That’s one little book.
- WHITE: Now there’s the big book, and what’s the other little book?
- STEINEM: And the other one I would do on my own, because I can’t ask anybody else to get into trouble, especially people who have this expertise, which is to do the politics of heaven.
- WHITE: Oh, right. That’s evocative.
- STEINEM: I think it’s pretty clear that the whole idea — these older languages don’t even have a word for heaven or for men and women, or rather they don’t have gender. That all these diverse kinds of patriarchal systems having controlled women and birth to a large extent. Still, the power of giving birth is huge.
- WHITE: Right.
- STEINEM: So the idea that you’re born of woman, you’re born of sin, and so on, came into it, but also that men could give you everlasting life. They could go one better and give you everlasting life if you obey a certain set of rules and all of that. I mean, I don’t think the idea of a literal heaven of reward and punishment was present until then.
- WHITE: Probably not.
- STEINEM: The ancestors, yes, but it’s not the same thing.

WHITE: No, that's not the same as going to heaven and everything's going to be paradise there. Suffer now and then you'll go there and it will all be blissful.

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: That's not what the ancestors is about.

STEINEM: Right, right. Because now the use of heaven has become so sinister.

WHITE: Totally. You know that essay that Alice [Walker] read there at, you know, St. John the Divine or whatever, that big church where we all were? The only reason you're going to get to heaven is if you (inaudible).

STEINEM: Had driven you out of your mind.

WHITE: Driven you out of your mind, taken your land, stolen your lover. I remember sitting there thinking, I cannot believe she's going to read this, but then again, of course that was (inaudible).

STEINEM: It's a control mechanism.

WHITE: Completely.

STEINEM: And it's a way of taking over the power of giving birth. So I thought it would be fun to write the politics of heaven.

WHITE: That's a lot of work you've got lined up for yourself, huh, Gloria?

STEINEM: Wilma [Mankiller], Alice [Walker], and I did this thing at the 92nd Street Y, and I raised it then, just to see if it would get a response or if I was just crazy about this, and people seemed quite taken with it.

WHITE: It's very evocative.

STEINEM: Alice was talking about, as she always does, but I think she's evolved a bigger way of talking about the necessity of silence, of doing nothing, of taking interludes of doing, you know. And that really captured people there too.

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WHITE: Sure. That makes a lot of sense.

So there you are in New York, starting your journalism career. Who were your models? Did you have models? I mean, your mom had been a journalist, you know. Did you have models?

STEINEM: I didn't really think of my mother as having been a journalist, because I hadn't experienced her as a competent person. I'm sure I'd absorbed

her interest in journalism, and my father's too. But when I first moved to New York, I was looking for a way to make a living, and I had known Harold Hayes and Susan Hayes. Harold was an editor then at *Esquire*. He recommended me as an assistant to Harvey Kurtzman, who was the inventor of *Mad* magazine — had lost *Mad* magazine because technically it was owned by someone else, even though he invented it. So he was starting a magazine called *Help!*, which was a magazine of political satire.

WHITE: *Help*, H-E-L-P?

STEINEM: *Help*, H-E-L-P. *Help! For Tired Minds*, or something like that. (laughs)

WHITE: *Help! For Tired Minds*, okay.

STEINEM: And he was essentially doing this by himself, so he needed an assistant, so he hired me. That was my entry into the magazine world, which was very useful in retrospect because there were only two of us, so you would get to see the whole process.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: My job was to — whatever. To get in touch with the cartoonists — he was using all the *New Yorker* cartoonists, wonderful artists, and so on — to do a particular assignment; or to get someone to be photographed for the cover of this unknown magazine. And he would send me off, like, with a blue rose, you know, to get this famous person to sit for the cover of a magazine they've never heard of. So it was a very good training experience.

At the same time, I was trying to — wanting to freelance, but not knowing exactly how to do that. I did some unsigned pieces for *Esquire*, just little editorial features with no signature.

My first real assignment came from *Esquire*, where Clay Felker was an editor then. The contraceptive pill had just been invented. Its original purpose was to increase fertility by suppressing it for a while, so then ovulation would be stronger. So it had actually been invented by two Catholic doctors, but its other purpose had just become clear. He assigned me the task of writing an article for *Esquire*, my first signed article, about the contraceptive pill. I worked so hard, and I just, you know, interviewed everyone in the world. I turned in this article, and Clay said, "You know, you've performed the incredible feat of making sex dull." (laughter)

WHITE: Thorough, you know.

STEINEM: Right. So it was my big lesson in rewriting, the importance of rewriting. So I went out to interview women and men, and tried to humanize this otherwise entirely technical article. The women's

movement was nowhere in sight, of course, at this point. It was '62 maybe. I'm not sure, '61, '62. Nonetheless, I noticed that at the end of the article, I said something like, This will help to liberate women, but the problem may be that there aren't enough liberated men to go around, or something like that. So it was a little preface, I suppose. But having published one article in a big magazine allows you to at least pretend you're an actual freelance writer.

WHITE: A solid clip and you can get other assignments.

STEINEM: So then I began to freelance for *Glamour* quite a lot; for *Show* magazine, which was a big glossy, flossy, gorgeous arts magazine of the era; for the Sunday *New York Times*, though the only assignments they would give me were pretty stereotypical, you know, about textured stockings, and they would only let me interview the wives of politicians, not the politicians. But nonetheless, I began to make at least a slender living as a freelance writer.

30:00

WHITE: Did you ever have any doubts about your ability? I read in the archives a dispatch from — I think it was “Smith Girl Has Fun in India,” or something like that. I think 1957 it was, and I was so taken by your mastery and command of language and your ability to weave this narrative. I thought, Oh my God, here's a natural.

STEINEM: No, no. Every time I faced a blank piece of paper, I thought, Oh, now they're going to find out I can't do this. I had all the — what's it called? There's a word for it. The pretender. You know, you feel like —

WHITE: Poseur?

STEINEM: — you don't really know how you do it, so that each time you do it, you have to prove yourself over again. I knew that I had a talent for writing, because it had gotten me through exams at Smith even when I didn't know it too well. I realized I could write my way out. I had taken a creative writing course here, where the professor wrote on one of my papers, he said something like, You know, you write so easily and so well, you should really do something with it. And I remember going to him and saying, “What do you mean easily? It's not easy.” He said, “You're definitely a writer if you're already complaining.”

So I knew that it was a gift in a way, but it felt more like something that got me out of scrapes and got me out of tight places than something that could be really directed by me. I responded to assignments rather than doing what I think male writers of my same age were doing, which was saying, I'm going to do X or Y. So I was a little passive about it.

WHITE: But still, it seems to me that it was clearly something you were destined to do, because in my reading of it, the facility and ability and the touch

is there. I know you rewrote and tried to make it perfect, but there's an ease in the narrative, and what I think of, as a journalist, as a leap into sharing. Your writing is very generous and you include the reader from a very, very generous place. And that's a quality that I think is very distinctive in your writing.

STEINEM: It would have been wonderful if I could have heard that at the time, because I certainly was not at all clear about it. I mean, I love to read and I'd spent my whole life escaping into books. That was my big escape when we were living in the house trailer, wherever I was. My idea of reading a book was I read the whole book at one time, especially if it was a novel. So I would sit up all night and just enter into the world of the book.

WHITE: What were some of your favorite novels? What were some of the worlds you would enter into?

STEINEM: Well, what I remember doing at the time and now see as a little bananas, was that every year I — because the books were like friends. They were the stable parts of my life.

WHITE: And were these books from your family's home? These were books that your mother had, or you would get them from the library?

STEINEM: Both.

WHITE: Where did the books come from?

STEINEM: Yeah, both. My father — among his antique dealings were also books. He would buy a whole library to get four first editions, and then he would dump the rest of the library in the garage. So I would go out there and find heaven knows what. Then my mother, of course, had favorite books. But also, when my mother and I were living alone in Toledo, there was a little branch library nearby, and I would go to this library and read down the shelves, I mean, without any discrimination. I remember reading like this (gestures indicating up and down diagonally), because I thought it was boring to read like this (gestures straight across).

WHITE: Put a little zigzag in it.

STEINEM: I would take three books a week, and I just read all kinds of things. But the ones I repeated, from when I was about nine forward, I think, were *Little Women* and *Gone with the Wind*.

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WHITE: Go figure.

STEINEM: Yeah, go figure, but they were like friends to me, so I would read them over again every year. When I was quite little, I was reading tons of horse books. I went through the horse period that many girls do. *Heads Up, Heels Down* by C. W. Anderson. *Spurs for Antonia* [by Katherine Wigmore Eyre], all these books. Then I read dance books too, and, of course, books about women who were dancers, about dancing.

WHITE: Margot Fonteyn and all that sort of thing.

STEINEM: Before her, but yeah. I read a whole series of novels, the *Whiteoaks of Jolna*[?]. Actually, Robin Morgan recently found one of them for me.

WHITE: Oh really?

STEINEM: Yeah. I read odd things. There would be a 40-volume history of the Civil War. I would read one volume, and every tree stump was in there but, you know. It's too bad somebody didn't get a hold of me to direct me a little more.

And of course once I was here at Smith, I fell in love with all kinds of reading that I had not known about. I took a course in Russian authors. I read *War and Peace* and Dostoevsky. I remember sitting in the library, crying over the scene in *Crime and Punishment*. There's a scene in which a mare is beaten to death by a gang of men and boys, just surrounding this horse and laughing and beating this horse to death. I can remember sitting in the library there and crying over that. I still have that book. Not so long ago, I was cleaning my bookshelves or something, and I opened it, and I opened to exactly that page.

WHITE: Wow.

STEINEM: I also read — because I was a government major, so I was taking, reading political philosophers. I remember reading Plato and being so knocked out that I could understand Plato. I thought, Gosh, you know, here I am reading Plato. (laughter)

WHITE: I've got it going on, right?

STEINEM: Yeah, right. I was so impressed.

WHITE: So impressed with yourself?

STEINEM: Yes, right. I felt really like a grownup, gosh. But I did also realize that what makes things last, for posterity, is that they don't refer to other things. They don't have footnotes; they're complete in themselves. And Plato, of course, did that. He didn't bother to prove anything either.

WHITE: Just spill it out there.

STEINEM: Right. So it's quite eclectic, I would say, my reading and my knowledge altogether. I sometimes still feel as though I'm standing in a dark room with a penlight flashlight saying, "Yes, I know that and I know that, but I don't know the two connective things."

This library at Smith was a great gift because it's open stack, so you don't have to fill out a little piece of paper. You can wander and find things. I remember finding a book of correspondence between an officer in Alexander's army and a philosopher in the court of Ashoka in India, because Alexander had conquered that northern part of India and replaced Ashoka, I believe — or anyway, whoever was the emperor then on the throne. But people had come to know each other, and they continued to correspond. The philosopher in the court of Ashoka is saying, "Send me a sophist," you know, "I'm really having a" — It was such a wonderful, alive ancient conversation between two people.

WHITE: Well, speaking of conversation, I had a brief chat with Clay Felker in Berkeley a few years back, and he told me how you, on April 4, 1968 — the day, of course, that Martin Luther King was assassinated — he said, "Gloria, of course, had already headed to Harlem," he said, "on principle." Because where else would anyone be in the United States if you were in New York on the day or evening that Martin Luther King was assassinated other than Harlem? So I wonder if you care to share your memories.

40:00

STEINEM: I'd like to say that that's true, but that's not my memory of what happened. My memory of what happened was that I was in my apartment, where I'm still living. I had seen on television what had happened, and I was just immobilized. I mean, I was standing there in shock about what that meant. I had also just seen Martin Luther King for one of the few times in my life that I saw him up close, because Harry Belafonte had had a very small gathering at his apartment. We had all waited hours and hours for Dr. King to come. He had been in New Jersey, and I think — and he was just very late and very tired. You could just see he was bone tired. That's the feeling I remember. And what I remember is Clay called me up and yelled and me and said, "You call yourself a reporter? You know you should be out talking to people." And that's why I went to Harlem.

WHITE: Well, he told me that you had said, "I'm going on principle." Regardless, you were there. So what was that like for you, to be in Harlem on that evening and doing your work as a journalist and, I'm sure, having this incredible emotional response, as we all did, to that? I was 14, I believe, and I can still see my mother's face. I was in the back bedroom and saw it on TV, and my mother was on the phone, and I went and said, "They killed Martin Luther King." And I can still see this look of horror on her face.

STEINEM: What I remember is walking around. I took the subway to 125th Street, and then I just got out and walked around. There were already warnings on television and radio and so on, that there were going to be riots. I don't know what the news reporters were saying. It could not have possibly been more opposite. People were quiet. People were standing in big groups on the corners, just in shock and sorrow and wanting to be together. You know, maybe those other news people thought people were coming out in the street to riot, but no, on the contrary. I think people just wanted the comfort of being together.

I think I talked mostly to groups of women because it was somehow — I don't know whether they were more okay with speaking to me, or whether I felt more comfortable. I don't know, but anyway, I ended up just wandering around all night, just talking to people.

The article that appeared was a combination of my wandering around and Addison Gayle, who is an African American journalist who was also freelancing, I think. And then both of these things were put together into an account of that evening in the city. He, I think, knew that Lindsay had been in the theater, for instance, when he heard this.

WHITE: John Lindsay, the mayor of New York?

STEINEM: Yes, right. It really is an example of how life saving journalism can be, because it does get you out into a communal experience in what otherwise is a moment of just isolated despair. And what you imagine, of course — as was the case, probably, with the journalists who were saying there were going to be riots, because they were sitting in their control rooms — that the imagination of what is happening is very different from the reality. And in this case, the reality was far more moving and unifying than what they were imagining.

And I remember Robert Kennedy especially, and his courage. He was campaigning. I've forgotten what city he was in now.

WHITE: I think he was in Indianapolis. So somewhere in the Midwest, as I recall.

STEINEM: I think that the law enforcement people, and perhaps some of his own campaign people, had tried to keep him from going to speak to this crowd, which was essentially a black crowd, and he had refused and said no, this is — of all the times, this is the time, and had talked about his own — What was it he said?

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WHITE: The experience with his brother.

STEINEM: Yes. "My brother was also shot by a white man," he said. He was the Kennedy I miss the most.

WHITE: Intense times, really intense. Were there times during that tumultuous era when you wondered, you know, if the United States was, in fact,

going to just fall apart? I mean there were really wonderful things happening, but at the same time, such incredible violence and disruption. How did you keep a positive perspective in the midst of it all?

STEINEM: I'm trying to think my way back into that.

WHITE: Did you ever despair?

STEINEM: Perhaps it's just that the despair that's closest to you feels the most powerful, but I have had more moments of despair with [George W.] Bush in the White House and Iraq than I did with [Richard] Nixon and Vietnam. Now perhaps that's my age too; I'm not sure. But there was enough outrage and sense that it could be different and it would be different.

I did feel a little bit, from time to time, as if I'd gone literally crazy because what I was feeling was so distant from what was going on. Because I had happened to live in South Asia, I knew that Ho Chi Minh was a much admired man, who had, for one thing, during World War II, saved U.S. pilots downed in the jungle; and who had a great admiration for this country as an early democracy; you know, was a poet, was a very different person. I remember making a sign for my bulletin board that said something like, Alienation is when your country is at war and you want the other side to win. So for me personally, because I just happened to have had those experiences, that was perhaps the maximum moment of feeling totally at odds, as if this was not my country at all.

When *New York* magazine first started, the article I wrote for the very first issue, only a small portion of which survived and got published, was called "Ho Chi Minh in New York," because I was trying to express who he was. It was so different from his demonization during the Vietnam era. I knew that he had come to this country when he was the cabin boy on a French freighter. He had such a love for this country in its democratic roots that clearly he had got off the freighter and he had been in New York. So I spent a whole lot of time trying to figure out where in 1909 –

WHITE: Retracing his steps.

STEINEM: Yeah. Of course, he talks about what you might think is Harlem but isn't, because then it was Sugar Hill. The black neighborhood was not Harlem, which was still a middle-class, white, Dutch burgher kind of place, that was almost like a suburb. You had to take a streetcar to it.

WHITE: In the boonies.

STEINEM: In the boonies. And the black neighborhood and the center of culture and music and so on, was Sugar Hill. So I was trying to figure out what

he would have seen and where he would have gone, to account for what he observed. And I sent him a telegram. (laughs)

WHITE: Jump right in. Why not, right?

STEINEM: To try to check this out.

WHITE: Letter to Ho Chi Minh.

STEINEM: It's probably somewhere in the FBI. I remember the wonderful Western Union operator saying, "Do you have a street address?" "No, I think you just say *the palace*." Needless to say, I never got a response. I was just trying to confirm what his experiences in New York had been.

WHITE: So, incredible times. Talk a little bit, if you will. You said, you know, sometimes the imagination is worse than reality. In the case of your story about the Playboy Club, I guess the imagination was as bad as reality.

50:00

STEINEM: No, reality was worse than the imagination.

WHITE: So talk a little bit about how that assignment came to be.

STEINEM: I was freelancing for *Show*, which was a very beautiful magazine of the arts. Henry Wolf was the art director. It was very beautiful — probably each one cost a whole tree, each issue. I was going to editorial meetings, and the Playboy Club was about to open in New York, the first one. So they were talking about that in the editorial meeting, and I said, "Why don't we send Lillian Ross to be a Bunny?" Lillian Ross is a *New Yorker* writer, a brilliant writer of observation. Of course by then she was a middle-aged woman. So there was this little silence and they said, "You do it." I said, "No, no, I don't want to do it."

WHITE: And how old were you at the time, more or less?

STEINEM: I was already too old to be a Bunny. (laughs) I think you had to be under — I've forgotten — say, 24, and I was maybe 26 or — yeah, I must have been 28, I think. And so I said, "Okay, I'll just go through the auditions for it and write about that," because clearly they couldn't hire me. I had no legal identification, and to serve liquor in New York State —

So I invented a background as a secretary, and I read all the ads: that you were supposed to get \$300 a week and it was this wonderful, glamorous job and so on. So I had made up all of this background and used my grandmother's name, my maternal grandmother's name, Marie Ochs, because I still had her social security card — why, I don't know, but anyway — and I thought I could at least remember it. (laughs)

So when I was interviewed by the Bunny mother, who herself was, like, 21, I gave her my background and she said, “Honey, you don’t want to work here. If you can type, you don’t want to work here.” Right then I should have known it wasn’t as glamorous. But I said no, no, that was boring and I wanted to do this.

WHITE: Excitement.

STEINEM: So I went through the kind of interviewing and audition process. You have to go and put on a leotard and do all of this. I was hired, but I had to go through the training course, which is, of course, at your own expense, which means you have to learn the names of drinks and all the phrases that you’re supposed to say — you know, “I’m your Bunny, Marie, what can I —” and all this, to study the Bunny bible.

WHITE: The Bunny bible?

STEINEM: Yes, there was a Bunny bible.

WHITE: Did you have to pay for that at your own expense?

STEINEM: No, I think they gave out the bible, but you had to rent your costumes. You had to pay for your costumes.

WHITE: The cuffs and the ears.

STEINEM: And this terrible bodice thing, which is — first of all, it’s cut up very high so your kind of bones are showing. It’s so tight that if you sneeze you break it.

WHITE: And then you’ve got to pay for it.

STEINEM: And then you have to get somebody else to lace you up. They also stuffed your bosom with gym socks (laughs) and dry cleaning bags. The dry cleaning bags were a problem because they were plastic and they made you sweat. So, you know, to my amazement, they didn’t require any real legal identification. They did require that you go to have a gynecological exam.

WHITE: Really? To what end, to what purpose? To prove you were what?

STEINEM: Well, I think, in real life, to prove that you didn’t have some kind of sexually transmitted disease.

WHITE: VD, as it was called then.

STEINEM: Yes, VD, exactly. Even though, theoretically, the Bunnies didn’t go out with the customers, but actually, in my observation, who they went out

55:00

with, if they wanted good assignments, was the guy who distributed whiskey. You know, people who could do the club some good, people who wrote publicity columns, or something like that. So I actually did go through that. I don't know if I would do it again, but I sort of didn't know what I was getting into. There was some doctor who had the Bunny franchise or something, and you had to go to him.

WHITE: To get the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval — clean, basically.

STEINEM: Right. They must have done a blood test — And anyway, I wrote about all of that. They were so desperate for employees that they kept letting me work even though they shouldn't have. So I did it for a couple of weeks, I think, and then my feet were killing me. So I told them my mother was ill or something, and then I didn't work for a while, and then I went back, just to see if anything had changed, and then I wrote this article.

WHITE: And the response to the article?

STEINEM: The response to the article was amazing, because the club was new then, and it was kind of blowing the whistle on the glamour of the club, which — it certainly wasn't glamorous as far as I could see. I mean, we were serving roast beef, the main instruction of which was, Just ask them do they want rare, medium or well done, but it's all the same.

WHITE: No matter.

STEINEM: Just tell them, Oh this is —

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: The other was, Watch out if you see anything green on the roast beef. And then the dishes and glasses weren't washed. And the young women who were working there were mainly just desperate. They were supporting their kids, or they really believed the promise of glamour — you know, many different reasons. And there was quite a clear racial hierarchy, so the garbage men were black, the busboys were Puerto Rican, the bunnies were all white except for a few women of color, who were referred to as chocolate bunnies. I mean, it was pretty awful.

WHITE: So you wrote an exposé. Any letters to the editor or a call from Hugh Hefner?

STEINEM: I think what happened is, I remember that Hugh Hefner said it was fine, he didn't mind at all, and then sued me, I believe, something like that. Because I did get sued for that, and it went on for a long time.

WHITE: Sued for what? For false hiring or pretenses or a made-up identity?

STEINEM: I don't remember, because there were two legal proceedings going on at the same time. One was that the State Liquor Authority had brought an action against the Playboy Club for bribing to get its liquor license. What the Playboy Club did was to get a bribe, get the license, and then say they would be witnesses against the people in the State Liquor Authority if they got their money back. So they won both ways, which I think worked. So the State Liquor Authority then came to me and asked me if I would serve as a witness to say that certain instructions had been given to me at a certain time so that they could be entered in as evidence. Because they were presenting themselves as a private club and getting people to pay for keys, but had a license as a public club, and they were going after them because of this. So I said sure, you know, I thought justice, and all of that.

It turned out to be a nightmare actually. There was not a jury trial. I was the witness for the State Liquor Authority. The lawyer for the Playboy Club kept trying to imply that I was a prostitute and incredible, put in various ways. I should have known something bad was going to happen, because the State Liquor Authority lawyer kept reading into the record that I had a roommate. I didn't understand why that was relevant. But the sad thing was the lawyer, the elderly lawyer for the State Liquor Authority, who had been given this political hot potato and who had never tried a case in his life and was about to retire, forgot to enter into evidence what had been marked in evidence as valid because of my testimony. So I might as well not have testified.

WHITE: Not do it at all.

STEINEM: And it was just a nightmare, really, really a nightmare. The man who was the lawyer for the Playboy Club, who had been so hostile and so on, later became a judge, and he was the judge who sentenced Jane Alpert, who was part of the Weather Underground. When she came above ground — this was many years later — and her lawyers went to see him to try to make a deal, he regaled them with a story of how he had humiliated me on the stand. So he really remembered and took pleasure in it.

It was very — I used to have nightmares about it actually, you know, just being on the stand and being, you know, submitting to these questions. However, in retrospect, even though at the time — Well, I should say, at the time, the response — there was a lot of publicity around this, for every reason. It came to be regarded as if I had sort of been born as a journalist at this moment by doing this piece.

60:00
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WHITE: It made you.

STEINEM: In real fact, I regretted for many years having done it — or for several years anyway — because it made me unserious. It was already hard enough to be a girl journalist, but to be somebody who had been a

Bunny was much worse. I was about to get an assignment from *Show* on the politics of the U.S. Information Agency, because I was interested in that from having lived in India. That somehow disappeared, and the suggestions were more that I go and pretend to be a hooker here, or — I don't know.

WHITE: No, I understand. You were being stereotyped and stigmatized.

STEINEM: It was a career error at the time. But as feminism began to dawn on my brain belatedly in life, you know, in the — I don't know — in the late '60s, a few years — maybe five years, six years — after that, I realized that. Wait a minute. In real life, I'm glad I did this, because these are the working conditions of these women. And actually, I felt more in common with those women than I did with the editors of *Show* who assigned me in the first place in a kind of smart-ass way. So I became glad I did it. But there were a lot of years where I was sorry.

VIDEOGRAPHER: We're running out of tape, so it would be a good place to stop here.

WHITE: Okay, that's fine.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

VIDEOGRAPHER: Any time you're ready.

WHITE: Let's see.

STEINEM: It's so nice not to have to be the questioner.

WHITE: Why don't you talk a little bit about — Since we were talking about magazines and publishing, let's talk about the evolution of *Ms.* magazine. So you're a freelancer, you know; you're writing for *New York* magazine, *New York Times*, *Esquire*; had done this big thing for *Show* magazine, with the Playboy Bunny situation. So how did the idea, and from whence did the idea of *Ms.* come? And what was the landscape in terms of quote-unquote women's magazines at the time?

STEINEM: I was still working for women's magazines, but it was clear to me that it was more in line with my interest to work for *New York* magazine because I could write about politics and issues within New York and national issues. But once I had gone to that abortion hearing, and the realization of the feminist politics that had been dictating my life, even though I hadn't fully recognized it — once that came to me, I wanted to write all kinds of things that weren't acceptable either to *New York* magazine or to the women's magazines, who regarded the women's movement as a kind of odd event; that if you published something about it, you probably should publish something opposite it, to be objective.

WHITE: Pro and con.

STEINEM: Yes, right.

WHITE: Pro and con, equality.

STEINEM: Yes, right, exactly. So it became more and more clear to me that I couldn't really publish what I wanted to publish in the magazines that were existing.

I don't think, though, that I would have quite had the nerve to think about starting another magazine if it hadn't been for two things. One was that we started to go around to speak. And the whole idea that there was only interest in the women's movement among a few crazy people in New York and California turned out to be quite the opposite of the case. There was a great hunger and interest everywhere we went. I never would have done that either, since I was afraid to speak in public, if I had been able to publish in magazines. It was an alternative to publishing, and because I was afraid to do it by myself, I asked a friend who was not afraid to do much of anything by herself, Dorothy Pitman Hughes, who — I had written about her childcare center.

WHITE: An African American woman.

STEINEM: An African American woman, who had started what may have been the first kind of multiracial, multi-everything, non-sexist childcare center in a storefront. I mean, it was a very simple one. I had written about that for *New York* magazine, and then we became friends. I asked her if she wanted to come with me, because I was thinking, Okay, I don't have any children, and perhaps women will find my life experience too distant, and this is her specialty. I'm sure I was thinking about the fact that we were a white woman and a black woman together, but I didn't fully understand how important that was in audiences. It was so clear, the moment we started, that we both got audiences together that neither one of us would have got separately; that it became even more of an advantage than either one of us had thought about.

WHITE: And where would these invitations to speak come from, and how did they get to you? Was it in the context of being a journalist or had you joined a group at this juncture? Where would these invitations come from?

STEINEM: No, it was in the context of being a journalist and the women's movement. I think our first invitation came from NYU, and we were all in a basement someplace on folding chairs. Then other invitations would come from places, especially in the South. We were kind of trying to focus on the South anyway, where there weren't speakers available about the women's movement, and there was curiosity at least about the women's movement.

WHITE: What is it?

STEINEM: Yeah, and we had a lecture agency who would book us. But because I did that, I could see that there was this enormous interest in places like Wichita, Kansas, which stands out in my mind because there were, like, 5,000 people there.

And then the second event was that we had started the Women's Action Alliance, which was an effort to answer questions that came — about how to start a childcare center, all kinds of questions — from women who didn't have time or the ability or the desire, perhaps, to join an organization like NOW. They just wanted a question answered. So the Women's Action Alliance started as a kind of information source.

Therefore, the first thing we thought about was starting a newsletter in order to make money for the Women's Action Alliance. But it was soon apparent that newsletters really didn't make money unless they were giving out stock tips or something. Others who saw this better than I — like Brenda Feigen Fasteau and others — said no, it really should be a magazine. I invited — or we all invited — You know, all of us who were writing for *New York* or other magazines, began to meet and to try to invite other women editors and lots of

5:00

people, to see if people wanted another — you know, did they feel the need for another place to publish? And overwhelmingly they did. So that was really the start of the magazine. We did a dummy, a mockup of it, and we went around trying to raise money, which was impossible. You know, the idea of a feminist magazine seemed crazy to people, but especially one that was controlled by its staff, because that — (chuckles)

WHITE: What a concept.

STEINEM: Yes. That wasn't true for the other magazines either. I mean, to this day, there's no women's magazine that's owned by women, really.

WHITE: Is *O*? No, it isn't really owned by Oprah, no.

STEINEM: No. It's owned by the Hearst Corporation. I mean, she has an enormous amount of power, but it's still not owned completely.

WHITE: Exactly.

STEINEM: Then Clay Felker at *New York* magazine, who always did a special issue at the end of the year, a big double issue, wanted a special feature for that issue. And he recognized, from a news point of view, the women's movement was news. So he said that if we did — this little group, this hearty little band of people— did an issue of this new magazine and gave him 30 pages of it as a sample to bind into his year-end issue, he would pay for the production of the other hundred pages, and we would have a sample issue. And that's really how it happened. So there was one preview issue of *Ms*.

WHITE: And when did that come out?

STEINEM: That came out at the very end of '71. We cover-dated it spring, because we were afraid it was just going to not sell and be an embarrassment to the movement. So we didn't even call it January, we called it spring, in the tried-and-true newsstand method of dating everything forward. But it sold out. It sold out hugely in just about a week. It was supposed to be on the newsstands for three months, and it sold out in a week.

WHITE: And the name *Ms*. — what's the background on that? Were there other names that were considered? How did you come to the name of *Ms*.? What's the history of it, you know, the background story about the title *Ms*.?

STEINEM: In trying to think of a title for the magazine, we thought of many others. *Sojourner* was one, after Sojourner Truth, but we discovered people thought it was a travel magazine. *Sisters* was another, but then they thought it was Catholic. (laughs) The virtue of *Ms*. was also that it was short as a logo, so it left more room for cover lines. At the time, I had

only ever seen Ms. in secretarial handbooks from the 1950s, where it was recommended as a way of dealing with the unfortunate situation in which you didn't know the marital status of the person you were writing to.

WHITE: Unfortunate.

STEINEM: Unfortunate circumstance, right. But clearly it was the exact parallel of Mr., and it had a great, an obvious political use. Much later, I discovered that it had been in use in the 1400s and the 1500s, as an abbreviation for mistress, which could even be applied to a child. You know, children might be addressed as master or mistress.

WHITE: Oh yeah, exactly.

STEINEM: So it didn't have a marital status attached to it. And I think the first uses in this country that we know of were on tombstones in the 1700s. So it's definitely an old term. We didn't invent it; we just brought it back into usage. Bella Abzug then introduced a bill into Congress to allow the government to use this as a form of address as well, in government dealings and publications, and so it began to take root. We never intended that everyone should use it. It was always a choice if you — whatever — if you wished to have it used.

10:00

But in the *New York Times*, for instance, it took 15 years to get it accepted at all. We wrote letters and petitioned and demonstrated and did all kinds of things, and the women inside would ask, but it still took 15 years. I mean they had changed Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali, and transsexual and all the pronouns of transsexual. You know, they changed everything before they changed Ms. I remained "Miss Steinem of Ms. magazine" for 15 years in the *New York Times*. But ultimately they did.

It's useful in ways I wouldn't have anticipated. For instance, if people registered to vote with Ms., regardless of which party they belonged to — if any — you could be pretty sure they're your voter, and you could get them out of the computer that way.

WHITE: Right, exactly.

STEINEM: So it has interesting, unanticipated uses.

WHITE: It provides a clue to a person's leaning. And so, what was the environment like at Ms. magazine in the early days?

STEINEM: Well, in the very early days, when we were doing the preview issue, we had one office with two little cubicles off it. We had orange crates as desks or furniture. Even after we moved into a real office, after we began regular publication, we had the castoff desks from the old *Herald*

*Tribune*, which had gone under, painted by the children from Dorothy Pitman Hughes's childcare center.

WHITE: Oh my goodness.

STEINEM: Purple and red. So it was always a hodgepodge, and always a place of great vitality. I think it was one of the few places I know about where, when people went off on vacation, they would call up while they were on vacation to say, What's happening?

WHITE: It was a happening place.

STEINEM: It was chaotic and scary because we were afraid that we would not succeed and we would disgrace the movement. Or that we couldn't properly represent the movement because we were the only national feminist publication at the time, so we were a forum, and it wasn't as if everybody in the same issue felt the same way. They didn't. So there was always criticism of a stance on a particular issue, so we would always be publishing, in the next issue, something that was another opinion on something in the previous issue. It wasn't easy, and sometimes it was quite scary. When I go past 41st and Lexington, which was where our office was for many years, I feel kind of sad and anxious because I remember all the hard times there.

And yet they were the best times too, because we were a community. We were kind of very different people, but we all cared about similar things. We laughed at each others' jokes, by and large. The editorial meetings were full of vitality and fun, and everybody came. Editor or receptionist or whatever, you know — everybody could come, and we often invited people who weren't at the magazine to come to the editorial meetings too. The only person who just didn't like the editorial meetings, because she doesn't like meetings, was Alice [Walker], and that was fine too, because she wanted to participate in a different way, which she did.

WHITE: Talk about how Alice came to *Ms.* magazine: her journey there, how you first learned of her work, and why you and others at *Ms.* thought it would be good to invite her to join the staff.

STEINEM: I owe my first acquaintance with her work to Joanne Edgar, who grew up in Mississippi and was more, I think, aware of southern publications. If I can think of this short story that was the first story that we published of Alice's— but it was one that Joanne had seen elsewhere and brought to us. Of course, once you start to read Alice, you just hear that voice. I'm pretty sure that she was moving to New York anyway, because of Mel's [former husband Mel Leventhal]—

15:00

WHITE: She had given him an ultimatum. You know, Our marriage or Mississippi. We've got to leave, get out of Mississippi.

STEINEM: So she came to live in Brooklyn, and when we knew that she was coming, then obviously it was an opportunity to have her as a contributing editor, and so that was the beginning of her coming to the office. You know it was not — She always worked in a slightly different way from everybody else, and really was like a one-woman editorial meeting herself. It was because of her that we got stories from Bessie Head and all kinds of African authors we probably would not have otherwise known about. She was of huge, huge importance to the magazine.

WHITE: And some of the other women of color who were at *Ms.* in the early days — who were they and how did they come to the magazine?

STEINEM: Well, there was Susan McHenry, who was there as a regular editor. She had worked for *Sojourner*, which was a — and may still be — no, I don't think so — feminist publication in Cambridge. So she came and was a full-time editor. Marcia Gillespie came later as a contributing editor. She must have already, by then, been the editor of *Essence*, I assume, right?

WHITE: Right, yeah.

STEINEM: Gosh, my memory for names is failing me, but anyway, people came in all kinds of different ways. We never had a Hispanic editor or an Asian American editor. We should have, and somehow we couldn't quite make it happen. We talked about trying to do a Spanish language version of *Ms.*, but we were kind of hanging on by our nails with the English version, and we couldn't quite make that happen either.

WHITE: So did you, at this juncture, devote all of your writing energy to *Ms.*, or did you continue to do other freelance work?

STEINEM: No. If I managed to write anything, I'm pretty sure it was always for *Ms.* But I was traveling a lot at the same time — traveling, lecturing, organizing. So in many ways, Suzanne Levine was really the main managing editor. I was not. People think I was, but I wasn't.

WHITE: Right. And she had been at *McCall's*, is that correct?

STEINEM: No, that was Patricia Carbine who had been at *McCall's*. Suzanne had been in Seattle editing a magazine on sexuality, I think, before she became — And she's a brilliant managing editor because people trust her. She was much better at it than I would have been.

So the structure — it wasn't what people imagine: that is, all of us sitting cross-legged on the floor voting on everything. It wasn't a collective — nobody had time for a collective — but it was also very free and open. So I would say, in general, if two or three people on the

staff thought something should happen, it happened. Then Suzanne was in charge, as managing editor, of trying to balance each issue. So there was something about women in the workforce, something about kids, something about political issues. Because a magazine has to be — unlike a single book, it has to be diverse, and it has to be kind of a smorgasbord itself: one fiction piece at least, poetry. She did that balancing.

WHITE: And *Ms.* is a monthly at this juncture right?

STEINEM: That's right.

WHITE: What was it like to work on that kind of schedule? I mean the magazine, the lead times. It had to be crazy at times, wouldn't it have been?

STEINEM: Yes, it was. Sometimes we would get — Especially in the beginning, we got so behind the deadlines that we would end up going to the printer and literally sitting in the printer's office, doing the page proofing there, which then you had to do by hand. So we were always kind of on the edge of our chairs: Were we going to make it or not? Because we had to pay the presses anyway. You had to reserve them for a certain amount of time. So the prospect of \$400 an hour, or whatever it was, kept us worried and kept us on our toes, I would say.

20:00
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WHITE: And most of the finances for the magazine, at this juncture, are the subscription, right? Because you said the ads are shaky.

STEINEM: Well, I should say that, in order to start at all, we figured in budgetary terms that we needed about \$4 million to start a national monthly. We never did get \$4 million, but we did get \$1 million from Warner Communications. At that point, they had just come together as that company, and they were wanting to send a signal that they were open to many new media ideas. So in a sense, we were kind of a public relations effort, I think. Otherwise, we couldn't find anybody who would give us money and still allow the staff to be in charge, because normally the investors own the majority of the stock. This was not the case. They owned a third of the stock. So we were just very lucky to find that particular situation. So we started out with a \$1 million investment.

WHITE: And so what did the launching of *Ms.*, combined with your experience of having had the abortion and ending up at that meeting that you covered, how is your sense — and now you're traveling, you're speaking, you're organizing. How is your sense of self developing? Because in my memory, what's beginning to happen is that you are emerging as the face of feminism.

STEINEM: I certainly didn't think of it that way. First of all, I thought of the magazine as temporary. I kept saying, I'll do this for two years and that's it, because I thought of myself as a freelancer and not as somebody in a structural kind of –

WHITE: Even a woman on feminist terms.

STEINEM: No. Also, the punishment for being perceived as the face of feminism in that era — because it was — I mean, partly with very good reason, because, after all, it's a movement that is against hierarchy. "Let's not create another hierarchy. It is a diverse movement." I'm white, I can't represent diversity. So partly for good, solid reasons, and partly for kind of internalized reasons that aren't so good — you know, that cause us, say, to resent if another woman is successful. "Well, how dare she do that, that's just another woman like —" You know, there's kind of the crabs-in-the-basket phenomenon. There were large amounts of criticism of anybody who emerged as an individual. Lots of groups were just using first names, no last names. It was not great in a lot of ways.

*Newsweek* did an article on the women's movement and wanted to use me on the cover, and I said no. Just out of simple self-preservation, I said no, I didn't want to do that. They did it anyway, with some photograph they took with a long lens, so it happened anyway, but it was not —

It was a kind of scary experience because on the one hand, I felt responsible for fulfilling a kind of function; and on the other hand, I felt I would be blamed for it. So if, in those days, I had had an option of just opting out and keeping the magazine going in some other way, I probably would have. Maybe it was cowardly on my part too, I don't know. Maybe it was wanting too much approval and being unable to deal with necessary criticism. I don't know, but it was difficult.

WHITE: And how did you cope with it, the sort of conflict of understanding your motive and your intention is good, get the word out, discuss the issues. People will listen to me, they will look at me, they will hear me, but at the same time, I know that I'm not the whole story. So how would you —

STEINEM: I'm not sure. I mean, I evolved certain common sense guidelines, like, basically I would never appear by myself, which I still — You know, if there's a photograph and it's all white folks, I won't do it. I would always speak with at least one other woman, and we split the fee equally and whatever, and sometimes it's more than just the two of us. I must have done that for about a dozen years at least. After Dorothy Pitman Hughes had the baby, and we traveled with the baby for quite a while — which was hysterical, because I know they thought that we had this baby together. I know it. (laughter)

25:00

- WHITE: Lesbian moms, here they are. The baby is all black though.
- STEINEM: I know, but I'm sure that they thought that we'd figured out how to do it by –
- WHITE: Sorcery.
- STEINEM: Yeah. The possibilities weren't there then.
- WHITE: Right, exactly.
- STEINEM: And I would hold the baby while she spoke, and she would nurse the baby while I spoke. Ultimately it got to be a lot of travel, so her gigs were finished out by Flo Kennedy — Florynce Kennedy — who was a friend and was one of the founders of the National Women's Political Caucus and was a fabulous speaker, fabulous. I mean there's no way to be afraid if you were traveling with Flo. Just I had to make sure I spoke first.
- WHITE: Otherwise forget it.
- STEINEM: Otherwise forget it, I'd be an anticlimax, no question. And she was just great to travel with, and so instructive and kind and generous. She was such a help to me because I was still into being too — I felt I had to prove everything with lots of statistics. As I have written, she said this memorable thing to me one day. She took me off in the corner and she said, "Honey, if you're lying in the ditch with a truck on your ankle, you do not send somebody to the library to find out how much the truck weighs. You get it off." (laughs)
- WHITE: Right.
- STEINEM: So we had a very good time traveling. Jane Galvin Lewis and I also did, and of course Margaret Sloan. Actually, Margaret Sloan really was before Jane. Jane had been involved in the Women's Action Alliance, Jane Galvin Lewis. So we had evolved this tradition over a dozen years or so, I don't know how long, of what Flo called little Eva, pairs. Something for everyone. (chuckles) And every once in a while we would do it bigger than that, so we would add a Chicana woman, an Asian woman. I'm trying to think. I remember once doing it with Alice, and who was there? Maybe Dolores (inaudible). I don't know, but we would end up with a whole group, but mostly it was just two of us traveling. If you just refuse to ever show up by yourself, then at least you can introduce someone else who might not otherwise have been there.
- Sometimes the gimmicks were tiny, but kind of useful in a way. I mean, when people started to ask me for autographs, I felt like a jerk. I

felt like I'd suddenly turned into Debbie — I mean, there's nothing wrong with Debbie Reynolds, but still.

WHITE: Yeah. Right.

STEINEM: Out of that I realized that if — because first I would say no, you don't really — but then it was saying no, so I would ask them for their autograph — just trade — and that kind of worked. So you kind of evolve little ways of trying to change the traditional way of doing business.

I remember Robin Morgan and I sitting one day at breakfast. We were trying to write about what made someone a trustworthy leader. One of the things we came up with, I think was accidentally true of me — I would never have thought of it — and that is that a trustworthy leader has something else they'd rather do. (laughs) Because if this is the only thing you want to do, you may end up hanging on to it too much. Since, at any given moment, I would have been kind of completely content to do my writing.

WHITE: That would have been your preferred activity if you had your choice to do something else.

STEINEM: I was not at home as a public speaker. I am now because I realize that things can happen in a room together that couldn't happen on paper. But at the time, it seemed to me more of a hierarchy, and writing seemed more important.

30:00

WHITE: So what would you learn from going out and doing these speaking engagements? From being in this environment, as you said, in the room? If you can recall any specific sort of moments when something extra extraordinary happened.

STEINEM: Well, first I learned just the interest, the enormous pressure of interest in women, and some men too, hearing life described in a way that it wasn't being described. That was a surprise.

Then, because I wasn't very crazy about speaking, and probably also because there were two of us, we ended up having long discussion times afterwards that would just go on and on and on and on, and from that you learn how interesting audiences are. God, it's not about Q&A, it's about the audience getting empowered to realize they don't need you. So if you do it for a little while, ultimately somebody over here asks a question, and somebody over there answers it, and it's magic. Our job is just to create a place where that can happen and send out a signal that caused this kind of response. People were generally very surprised to see the response. They thought they would be the only people who were interested.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: Then they see somebody from their Laundromat, and somebody from their math class, and they're just surprised. The kind of magic of that, the things that people say. I remember enough, so I think I'm going to be able to put quite a few in this book, but I wish that I had kept better track of the amazing audience responses.

WHITE: Right. The revelations.

STEINEM: Yes. And funny and wonderful and outrageous. I remember being really worried about — because this discussion had gone on and on, and there was one young, very conservatively dressed Asian woman in the front who didn't say a word. The discussion had got quite raucous about sex and how do you divide the housework and — I don't know. And I thought we were offending this woman. She got up finally and she said, "Well, when my husband leaves his underwear on the floor," which is what somebody had just said, "I find it quite useful to nail it to the floor." (laughter) I've never forgot this woman.

WHITE: No, how could you?

STEINEM: I was someplace speaking, where I had been six months before, and often, in those days, I used to end lectures — because the whole point was to get off our asses, Flo would say — by asking people to do at least one outrageous thing in this next 24 hours. And if they did, I would, and then that meant the world would be better. So they were telling me what they'd done six months before. One woman got up and said, "Well, you know, I was just about to have a baby when you were here before. After I had the baby, even though my husband wanted to be an equal parent, I realized that he wouldn't unless he had to," in the same way that she had to. You know it's scary but you learn how. So, she said, "I went away for a week and left my husband with the new baby." The whole audience went (gasps).

WHITE: Gaspd, ah huh.

STEINEM: She said, "And you know, when I came home, they had bonded, and now he wakes up when the baby cries." It's necessity that does it. I don't know, there are just tons of examples, amazing things that people say.

WHITE: Did you ever get tired, weary? Would you ask yourself, Why am I doing this, away from the writing? How did you keep some sense of —

STEINEM: No, I definitely — before I left on any given trip, I would pray that I would break a leg, or something would happen that wasn't my fault, they couldn't blame me. But just the prospect of what could happen or what could be helped. Usually, we tried to do a paid speech and then

build unpaid things around it. So once I got there, it was so worthwhile and interesting that I didn't regret it. But I did often profoundly wish that there would be a snowstorm or something to keep me from going.

WHITE: Incredible. So what would be the impact in terms of the letters? I've read the collection, *Letters to "Ms." [1972-1987]* [edited by Mary Thom], that would come in to you all. I know that you got a bunch of mail, that you called the crazy mail, from people who were sending you I don't know what. But in terms of the response that would come into the magazine, what did that teach you?

STEINEM: The response taught us collectively the same thing as going out to speak: the intensity of the interest and the caring, and the incredible number of important stories that were out there. We, from the beginning, as a very small magazine — I guess we started out at maybe 300,000 [subscribers] at the most — were getting much more mail, say, than *McCall's* or some much bigger magazine. We were always hooked on the letters. You couldn't stop reading them. We printed as many as we could. We finally invited Radcliffe to come and look at the letters, and they did, I think, take the first couple of years of letters as the best record — populist record of women's lives and the changes that were taking place.

And I notice now — because these boxes of unsorted archives that arrived at Smith were sorted by kindly, patient folks here. The woman who was looking at the letters also fell in love with the letters to me that were to me individually, in addition to the ones that were to the magazine, although they may have been to me just symbolically, but at least they were addressed to me. She's now doing a book called "Dear Gloria" or "Letters to " — because she also fell in love with the letters. They're women's stories so they're just irresistible. I mean, you couldn't make it up.

WHITE: Did you ever find yourself in the sort of place of thinking, How did this happen to me? Why did it happen to me? How and why has my life taken this turn? Or did it make perfect sense to you?

STEINEM: It was mostly so rewarding that I was astounded that it happened to me. But I felt enormously lucky and blessed that all of those things had happened to me. Sometimes, however, when criticism — or when it was difficult or when I was just exhausted or whatever, was when I got into the other side of, Why did this happen to me?

I used to sometimes feel my image — for it was that I was two people. I was my real self here, and then there was a big string; and up on top there was a balloon that everybody thought was me. People were shooting arrows at the balloon. And even if I, on the other end of the string, went to some other country for ten years, they would go right on. It was a kind of feeling of helplessness.

But I would say that I don't feel sorry for myself for one minute. It was a small percentage of what was mostly rewarding.

WHITE: And what were they sniping at the balloon for?

STEINEM: Well, from an internal movement point of view, that we don't want stars, we don't want — you know, this is a mass movement. The magazine is either not radical enough or too radical. That we, in the very first issue, had a lesbian article, was not happily regarded by women who, you know, really sincerely felt that we would damage the chance to get the equal rights amendment, or to get, you know.

WHITE: Because of lesbian (inaudible)?

STEINEM: Yeah, because of the whole idea that we were all lesbians. I mean, lesbianism was not really agreed upon — or discrimination against lesbians — as a feminist issue until 1977 and the National Women's Conference at Houston. Then, everybody did vote and say, Okay, this is a feminist issue.

WHITE: And why did they think it was not a feminist issue prior to that? Did they think it was a deviant issue or what —

STEINEM: Betty Friedan and others. Didn't she coin the term *lavender herring*, or something like that?

40:00
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WHITE: *Lavender menace*.

STEINEM: *Lavender menace*. It just — it was unpopular, not relevant, dangerous, and going to keep women from gaining the goals of equal pay and other goals that affected everybody; that if we segmented out in this way, that it would endanger the overall goals.

I think there was also some feeling about welfare — that that would too. You know, if we talked about welfare, that we would be regarded as socialists. That went away earlier, but the lesbian issue was serious. And though I wasn't involved in NOW in New York, I believe that lesbians were purged from membership in NOW, and that at least one woman may have committed suicide partly because of this. You know, that wasn't a part of history I was part of, but it was real.

On the other hand, there were — well, and also probably in our classified ads, because you don't need to have a small magazine in a classified ad unless you're a small group. So we probably ended up with a disproportionate number of lesbian poetry magazines, and so on. But from the lesbian community itself, we were not doing enough. There should have been, always, many more magazines. There should have been a feminist health magazine. There should have been a lesbian feminist magazine per se. There should have been a fiction and poetry

magazine, with everybody writing. So there were a lot of pressures because there was just one publication.

WHITE: An answer to every woman's need for voice and visibility and understanding and acceptance.

STEINEM: And the fact that we, in the beginning, had ads at all. I mean, some people resented that we had ads at all. And some people thought we would do much better if we weren't so controversial and had more ads, and could therefore be more commercially successful and have a bigger readership. So there were always these kinds of problems going on at the same time.

Maybe we just, in that female way, focused on the criticisms too much, or on trying to please everybody too much, I don't know. The various people on the staff were always extraordinarily hard working and smart and funny and devoted. Probably, if we were to go back and interview people who have been on the staff, I'd bet it was one of, and perhaps the high point, in everybody's life. So it was the joy of working in a group that supported each other. It was a real community and a changing community.

WHITE: Did you ever have to answer to anybody's questions, queries, suspicions about your sexuality? Were you lesbian-baited?

STEINEM: Oh yeah. Yes. I remember there was an editor at *Show* magazine, a very nice guy who, when I started to write these articles and everything, called up a mutual friend of ours and said, "I didn't know Gloria was a lesbian." (laughs) He just couldn't conceive of — Margaret Sloan, who was a lesbian — we were traveling together, so, naturally.

I remember it most with Flo, because Flo was so funny about it. Because the idea that a black woman and a white woman were traveling together was, you know, it was kind of assumed we must be lesbians because why else were we traveling together? Every once in a while you would get a guy who was actually brave enough to stand up and ask — or hostile enough. He would say, "Are you a lesbian?" Flo would say, "Are you my alternative?" She had the perfect answer, which didn't say yes or no, didn't betray anybody, but just made everybody laugh.

WHITE: Exactly. Quiet him down. All right.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Do you want to pause here?

WHITE: I think so. Is that okay?

STEINEM: Sure.

44:45

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4: September 30, 2007

VIDEOGRAPHER: We'll just wait for this airplane to pass, and then you can start.

WHITE: Maybe that's the bus.

VIDEOGRAPHER: We had a bus yesterday too.

STEINEM: I wonder what happened to that woman in the portrait. There's a portrait here [in Steinem's papers at the Sophia Smith Collection] that somebody — this wonderful Chinese portrait painter who was living downstairs when it was being redone and everything, because he didn't have a place. So as rent, he made this portrait. It also looks like it is made of marzipan. I mean, I had to get rid of it. It's better than that one, but not that great.

WHITE: Now you've got a crop plane. The spirit of Blair.

STEINEM: Yeah, right. He didn't write my name, I'm sure, but he did — because he was in jets on the weekend because of the National Guard, he would go break the sound barrier. (laughs)

WHITE: Isn't that how it is, when you're looking for quiet, you just hear all of these things that otherwise just pass your attention?

STEINEM: I was thinking when the young woman was saying, you know, Didn't this interfere with relationships with men, and so on? Which it really did. I wanted to go on and try to say to her that, from this age, what happens is your old lovers become your family. But then I thought, Well, maybe she doesn't want to know that. But it's true. [reference to audience question to Steinem following public presentation, Friday, September 28, 2007]

WHITE: Well, not all of them.

STEINEM: Not all of them. There's one big mistake there. You have to concede the mistakes. But if they weren't mistakes, you know. You cared about each other in some way anyway. It takes a little while. It takes about a three-year transition period, and then they become like family.

VIDEOGRAPHER: Okay. Whenever you're ready.

WHITE: Okay. Gloria, good to see you today.

STEINEM: Good to see you today.

WHITE: You said last night, amongst many other things, that you're utterly devoted to not looking back. So I'm wondering, how has this process

been for you, to be involved in this oral history and to be talking about your life? So what's it been like thus far, to look back?

STEINEM: I delayed it a really long time. That's why, in my case, the project of looking at my archives, which I really hadn't looked at since they were unsorted, was thrust upon me by friends like Wilma Mankiller and Bob Friedman, who really got me into this. I didn't want to do it.

What's made it work for me is because I found things in the past that are useful for the future. I occasionally have got into that wonderful place where you sit and laugh or cry, and remember some whole incident that reconstructs itself in your brain cells because you see this piece of paper. There have been moments of real remembered emotion of all kinds, that are helpful, that are kind of a completion in some way.

The part that really gives me pleasure is to find some woman in the Iron Range of Minnesota who's lurking there in my papers, who should have her papers sought after, because then it seems connected. And I'm sure it's utterly connected to my childhood. It's a habit of mind, not wanting to look back.

5:00

WHITE: What's your fear that what might happen if you look back? Because I know that this isn't unique to you. A lot of people who had trauma and wounds in their past are hesitant to look at it. But as you also said last night, the thing that those who have been wounded can do, you know, after they look at it, is provide a way to help others. I know that you know that, but the visceral resistance is connected to what? If you look back, what will happen?

STEINEM: You'll just dissolve into it again. It's just that it's a fear of literally dissolving, I think. I mean, I always used to fear, for instance, that if I started to cry, I would not be able to stop. And therefore, although I felt emotion and I would tear up, I would resist crying.

What totally got me over that was David's long illness and protracted dying [David Bale, Gloria Steinem's husband]. Then I was crying so much that it purged that feeling, and that's gone, and I'm grateful for that. And I'm sure I will be grateful for this, too. I realize that any avoidance is a problem.

WHITE: Right. And on the subject of the beloved David, how did you meet him? And the decision to get married — after you had been defined by outsiders, not yourself, as someone who didn't believe in marriage and was never going to get married. If you could share a little bit about that journey.

STEINEM: We were at a benefit, of course — where else? — in California, in Beverly Hills. Someone had kindly lent us a very nice backyard for a benefit for Voters for Choice, which is a pro-choice political action fund. And I, because I don't like California very much, had done my

thing of flying in in the morning and then flying out on a red-eye. I've forgotten. I think Al Gore was there. You know, we had guests in an effort to attract people to this fundraiser.

I remember seeing a kind of tall, gray-haired man in black jeans and a black shirt, standing over there somewhere. I talked to him briefly. And what stood out in my memory was that he was explaining that, as a little boy, he had lived on Guernsey, I think, one of the French English islands in the Channel, and it was quite deserted, and he was kind of alone during the summer. And that he imagined that God was a woman, because it was his contention that if you're left alone totally and you don't know better, you imagine God is — What else would God be? And I remember writing on his card, God is a woman, so I would remember him among all the cards I was collecting, but I didn't think anything more than that.

He began to call the office in New York. Amy had put him off endlessly.

WHITE: The *Ms.* office?

STEINEM: Yeah. Well, *Ms.* magazine was no longer there by then, it was in California. So it was calling my office. She did her job, which is to sort of put him off, and he kept calling. He was coming to New York with his son, Christian, who is an actor, for a film benefit. Not a film of Christian's, but another benefit. So he asked me to go to the film, and I did. And then I saw him in California briefly, also on my day trips.

WHITE: Day trips to California?

STEINEM: Yeah. It had been at least a dozen years since I and my hormones had been interested in that way that one is in the center of life. You know, I just wasn't. But he was so intense and so — Talk about living in the past. I mean, he lived more in the present than any human being I have ever met in my life. He was intensely, constantly alive in the present. If we were walking on the beach and intensely talking about something, nonetheless he would see that there was a ladybug on the sand that needed to be picked up and put on a leaf, and he would do that. It was just totally in the present. If he was driving on the freeway and saw an animal — he didn't know whether dead or alive — by the side of the freeway, he would stop at all — you know — no matter what danger, a crowded freeway. If the animal was dead, he'd say a few words over it and put it aside. And if not, he would take it to a hospital. He just lived utterly in the present.

I met a man after he died who told me that he had had an appointment for dinner with David, and David was a half hour late, an hour late, and finally, this guy was just going to leave. Finally David arrived. He had given a homeless guy a lift, taken him home to have a shower and change his clothes, because he brought him to dinner.

10:00
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WHITE: Of course.

STEINEM: So, you know, he kind of traveled the world with just his couple pairs of jeans and his black Converse sneakers. He was kind of an irresistible force, and he forced me to live in the present. Being with him made me live in the present, and I think that was a lot of the magnetism for me.

Later on, we spent a month driving along — We spent a whole month together. Part of it was driving along the California coast, because I had been speaking in northern California, so we drove to Southern California, just stopping along the way. It was with the dog.

WHITE: And homeless people you picked up along the way.

STEINEM: (laughs) No. But it was the first time in my life, I think, since being a child, that I had been totally, utterly in the present.

That is also the way we decided to get married. I mean, it wasn't planned. I didn't tell anyone, no single human being. I didn't ask anyone except Wilma, because we were going anyway to the Cherokee reunion, which is every year at Labor Day in Oklahoma.

I actually don't think we would have got legally married if it had not been for his visa problems. He was very worried. There was a long series of problems. His particular kind of visa had been canceled.

WHITE: Because he is South African?

STEINEM: He was born in South Africa, but he had a British passport. He was, because of his childhood, very afraid of authority, so he was sure that there was going to be a knock at the door any moment, and they were going to come and deport him and take him away. He was really worried about it. We had consulted with lawyers, and actually, I had tried to see if one of the members of the Senate whom I knew could get a bill through the Senate for him, for his citizenship, but that was a long process and it wasn't certain. The most certain way of getting citizenship is marriage, because then it becomes part of your right as a U.S. citizen to marry whom you wish, so it's easier. The lawyers all told us that. We would have been together anyway, but the legal part I'm sure we wouldn't have done otherwise.

So I called up Wilma and said to her, "Do you think I should do this?" She didn't know David, but I explained everything, including the intensity, and she said, "Well, I'll think about it, and I'll call you back in the morning." So she went out in her yard, in Wilma's wonderful way, under the stars, and thought about it until late at night, and called me in the morning, and she said, "Yeah, I think you should." So she arranged to have a judge, a woman judge, come to her house at 6:00 on a Sunday morning, without knowing why she was coming.

WHITE: Oh really?

15:00

STEINEM: We had got a license at this tiny little courthouse, which was with, like, six people in it, and Wilma's husband, Charlie Soap, who is a traditional Cherokee. I mean, he has even more knowledge than Wilma does. So he did the ceremony around a fire made of sage and other things, and it was in Cherokee. And it happened that my dear friend Kristina Kiehl was there with her husband, Bob Friedman, because they were there for the Cherokee reunion. And we did invite David's daughter, who actually was in New York visiting, and therefore was at my apartment and could bring me my birth certificate, which I needed. But that was it.

And David said, "Well, we don't need to tell anyone." And I said, "It's my experience that everybody finds out everything. So I think we have about a week probably, you know, of being able to tell everybody ourselves."

But the very next day, *People* magazine called this tiny little courthouse where the Cherokee went after the Trail of Tears in order to hide. Nonetheless, somehow, somebody in that — I don't know how it happened, but anyway, by the next day — and we were not prepared at all.

WHITE: So how did you deal with it, with this sort of media onslaught? "Gloria Steinem's gotten married, Gloria Steinem's gotten married!" You know, how did that make you feel, and how did you and David deal with it?

STEINEM: I think we wrote out a statement and people — should we wait?

WHITE: It's Joyce. (interruption)

FOLLET: I'm so sorry.

WHITE: No problem. Come in, have a seat.

STEINEM: Okay. (door closes) I asked friends to help, to kind of field the calls. I didn't want to do interviews. I just did a little statement from both of us and said, "Later on, perhaps we'll talk about this, but not at this moment," and just put out a statement.

The hard part was that people behaved as if marriage was one thing. You know, after all, the women's movement in general, and I, too, had been working for 30 years to change the laws, so no longer did I have to give up my name, my credit rating, my legal domicile, all those civil rights that marriage would have made — did make — women sacrifice. And yet, the press in general, I think, behaved as if marriage was a small furry animal that was always the same. That was a little hard.

If the laws had been as bad as they had been in the first place, I'm not sure I could have got myself to sign it. As it is, it is a pretty equal partnership until children are born. Then, women obviously have

disproportionate responsibility and problems, but that wasn't going to happen in my case.

I mean, even though we did it because of the visa, really, and wouldn't have done it otherwise, I'm very grateful that we did do it because it meant that he was on my insurance. And since he was sick for a whole year, it would have destroyed me and his kids and everyone, you know, if that hadn't been the case. So I'm grateful. It also made me realize more deeply what a penalty there is for there not to be gay marriage. You know, I'd been marching around all those years for yes, gay marriage, but I didn't understand, until I experienced it, how important it was.

WHITE: To have a legal connection.

STEINEM: Yes, right, that how many privileges still go with it.

WHITE: So what do you think David Bale liked about you? He lived, as you said, utterly in the present, and you were always looking to the future and had more discomfort with the present. So what did David like about you?

STEINEM: Well, that's interesting. I wish he were here to answer. He was a bit younger — what, seven years younger or something. He had been a hippie with a painted Volkswagen, in England though, and anyway, lived a very transient life. I think that most people his age made him feel irresponsible or not grown up or whatever, and here I was, with all these crazy beliefs and no job. (laughs)

20:00

So, you know, I think in a way, he felt — And also, he'd been taking more care of his children than most men, for a series of reasons, because he was separated and whatever. He had brought his two kids, when they were teenagers, to New York, and had been the only parent. It was sort of as if I'd been doing everything women weren't supposed to do, and he'd been doing what men weren't supposed to do, so we ended up in somewhat the same place.

Also, I suspect he was just so grateful to find somebody who was as idealistic and crazy as he was. I don't know. I think that was a big part of it. Also, he was at a place in his own life where he wasn't — you know, he was in a transition place, too, because his children were now grown up and had moved away from home, and he was a little bit like a woman whose children have grown up and, you know, is looking for the next stage of life.

WHITE: The empty nest thing, is that what you call it?

STEINEM: I think so. He loved coming around to speak with me, which we didn't anticipate, but of course, that's what I do. So, you know. And we were sort of feeling, Well, we spent this whole life without each other, so we ought to be together now. He would come with me traveling, and I

discovered, to my surprise, that — but I should have known it — that, as last night, when the young woman said, “How do men respond to you?”

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: – that the women, especially on campuses, were so overjoyed to see that even I could (laughs) –

WHITE: Even you.

STEINEM: – could have a relationship with a man; that they were fascinated with him. So he would end up with this large circle of students, mostly girls, young women, for an hour or two hours or something, and he loved that. He loved encouraging young people. He loved Smith. He would walk around the campus and he would say, “Which one of them is going to be president, do you think?” He just loved it.

WHITE: How do you think that message got out, that love and a personal life is incompatible with being a feminist? You know, I think the young woman last night who said, you know, “We have everything. We are the generation that didn’t have the struggles, and we’re lost.” I think they’re struggling with, Can I have a family? Can I have a real intimate life? What do you say to them about this sort of sense that I think many of them have, that if you’re a feminist, you will have no love?

STEINEM: Yes. Now that’s a really, really deep and important question. I think that we have so internalized the idea that a male-female, at least, a male-female relationship has to be subject-object, or has to be 60-40 or 70-30 — has to be uneven. We’ve so internalized that, that if you were talking about equality, it’s assumed that you can’t have a relationship. It’s the level of expectation, or the nature of the expectation coming in that I think makes it seem impossible. That also makes sense because we’ve hardly ever seen it. We do what we see, not what we’re told. If you’ve never seen a deer, you can’t see a deer.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: And how many really equal-partnership kinds of relationships have you seen between a male and a female? Not that many. I haven’t either. So it’s a very deep assumption.

Sometimes, with some young women — not with me, I was lucky in this regard — it also comes from her childhood, because she has got the message from her father that if she isn’t subordinate in a certain way, she’ll pay the price of not being loved, and that’s deep. I didn’t have that. My father was a very loving person, and he certainly let me be my own self, so I was lucky. I think that’s much harder to overcome, but that’s pretty prevalent in society too.

25:00

But the really prevalent thing is that a romantic relationship just can't be equal, a love relationship between a man and a woman.

WHITE: So that's — in addition to your personal loss — that's all the more reason to feel sadness that we can't see you and David Bale together as the two free spirits out there loving each other, having fun, and being encouraging.

STEINEM: Yeah, it's true, it's true.

WHITE: So how have you dealt with your grief and that loss? Where have you gotten solace and comfort, and has it triggered other losses?

STEINEM: Well, when you say that to me, what first comes to mind is not the question you asked, but it's the opposite, which is what it did for me, which is that I realize in retrospect — I knew a little bit, I think, at the time. Let's see, where did this start? I think that kids who are neglected, which I was, through no fault of my parents, really. Kids who are not focused on come to feel deeply that they're not as real as other people, that they're kind of invisible. And I certainly felt that. I thought that everybody else was more visible than I was. So the way I made myself visible was to be useful or, you know, to — I don't know, but it was a tumult. It wasn't just being. If I just was, I didn't feel as real. I had to do something in order to be as real as other people. That was present in my life even after I was older and began to recognize it and recognize why and where it came from. Still, it was present.

David's long illness and death was so 100 percent compelling, and just so poignant and so awful and so full of emotion, that I realized after his death that he had made me real. I have never felt it again, actually. I don't anymore feel that if I'm by myself, I'm not just as real, without doing anything, as if I was playing a part in something, trying to be useful. I never would have anticipated that, but I think the emotion was so long and so real and so present. He certainly made me live in the present.

The disease that he had, which was lymphoma — restricted to the brain, only in the brain — is so gradual and awful. You lose coordination, but then you blame yourself for that. You lose memory a little bit. In retrospect, I remember he used to say, in the middle of the afternoon, he would say, "Well, what do we do now?" You know, he kind of lost — And you just gradually lose coordination, lose control of your functions, you can't eat. I mean it was just so debilitating. It became so difficult to know what he was thinking and what he was feeling that I may well have imagined things that were even more tragic than what was happening. I feared that he'd return to his childhood, which was pretty bad.

I remember once, before he had the brain biopsy that let us know what it really was, but he'd been in the hospital for quite a while. He was very grouchy and difficult and erratic. But I came back into the

room and he was — I sat down on the bed, and he was just sobbing and he said, “I’ve ruined your life.” Of course, I was trying to say back no, you’ve made my life. You haven’t ruined my life. But it was full of such intensity like that all the time.

He was in the ICU for, I don’t know, a month. I mean, incredible. Not conscious mostly, semiconscious. You know, what was he feeling? What was he — And I was probably projecting into that.

It’s hard to imagine a more poignant death. You know, when I hear that people have died suddenly, I feel almost envious. But all of that turmoil and suffering and imagining, just, really, as it turned out for me — I guess now I understand, you know, when people say, about something terrible that’s happened, “But I wouldn’t change it.” Now I understand what they mean by that. I never understood before.

WHITE: The lesson. The gift of suffering.

STEINEM: And my friends were wonderful, absolutely wonderful. They would come and spell me at the hospital. Also, a wonderful thing happened, which was that a group of friends formed a little fairy godsister fund, and just sent me checks without being asked really. Well, maybe they were asking each other.

WHITE: So you didn’t have to worry about money.

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: Because there was a presumption that you have a lot of money, you know, money’s rolling in.

STEINEM: I’m lucky, I’m really lucky that I can make my living doing what I love, which is organizing and lecturing and so on, but if I stop lecturing, I don’t get paid. And of course, I couldn’t do that for more than a year, and they knew that.

WHITE: Wow. On that whole concept of invisibility and visibility, which you describe in such an eloquent, evocative way, I understand that you have said that as an organizer, two-thirds of what you do is invisible. I’m wondering what that is, to help us see it, and if you think that that’s the way organizing should be done, with this component of invisibility. Do you think that your way of organizing — two-thirds invisible, one-third visible — is particular to you, Gloria Steinem? Or do you think that that’s a transferable skill in this vision of an organizing school, which I think is wonderful. Is it a transferable skill that others can use, or is it particular to you? Is it your particular style? First of all, if you could talk about what is the two-thirds of it that’s invisible?

STEINEM: Well, you know, when you say that — I think that when I said that, what I meant was — I think your question is smarter than I was when I

said it. I think that when I said it, I was being more simple minded about it, because I was just explaining that people, if they think of what I do, they might think of the magazine [*Ms.*], or they might think of the foundation [Ms. Foundation for Women], or hopefully some writing, but not what I do most of the time, which is organizing. So I just meant, literally, that wandering around the country, which is the way I've spent most of my last 35 years, is the least visible. I didn't mean that organizing per se is invisible.

However, it is really. A lot of it is invisible, because you're going from community to community, from school gym to church basement. If the media takes notice, it's the little local paper or something. It's certainly not a big national event of any kind, or even a very big state event or anything. So it's true. It is kind of — it's sort of a Lone Ranger, you know, Who is that masked man? Because you're going from one place to the next, so the satisfaction of it is not its breadth, it's its depth. It's what happens in the room, with people fully present, with all five senses, that you can make a place to happen. You can never predict, but you get to witness and be part of. And that's infinitely rewarding. It's evanescent too.

35:00

That's why I wanted to write a book about 35 years of being on the road, because I can't make it visible even to my friends, really. I'm always coming back to New York or wherever, and they make fun of me. I have little pieces of paper that I'm always distributing, "Oh, here's this and that," and "Do this," and networking. I'm always saying to them, "No, no, it's not like it says in the press. I mean, here's what's happening here, and here's what's happening there, and there are all these interesting things going on." And that's what made me feel I had to finally write about it, because I couldn't even successfully — You know, I was like somebody coming back from vacation with my slides.

You can't anyway. You can't really re-create it, but you can at least try, in writing, to give an idea of what the process is like, and the rewards, and how amazing any group of people is if they just have a place where they can respond and initiate what they think should happen.

I wish I had written down everything that audiences say. It's never predictable and it's always amazing. In any one group of people, there's just some big aha!, or something that's very moving, or something that's very funny or awful, or somebody who does it for you when you can't.

This is a bizarre example, but I remember speaking to a particularly smart-ass group of law students. They were all these smart young guys — they were mostly guys — and they were so into uniform rules, you know, because they're in law school, right? They kept saying, Well, you can't make an exception because you can't do that, it's the slippery slope. And I could not get out of it. I absolutely could not get out of it. And some young woman in the back stood up and she said, "Well, I have a boa constrictor." Silence. And she said, "I have to

feed the boa constrictor frozen mice once a month.” So she’d been going to the biology lab to get frozen mice, and the last time she went there was a new professor who said to her, “I can’t give you frozen mice. If I give you frozen mice, everyone will want —” (laughs)

WHITE: There you go, down the slippery slope.

STEINEM: And everybody just laughed, and it broke the — Because they realized not everybody wants the same thing, you can make exceptions. If the law were completely uniform, you could administer it by computer. I mean, that’s why we have judges, to make exceptions.

WHITE: So name a couple of courses, you know, sort of introductory courses for the organizing school. What would you hope that the organizers would study? Wandering around? Traveling, like you have?

STEINEM: I think the most important part of it is the kind of apprenticeship part. You know, that they have the opportunity to go around with someone who is doing it on the issues and in the area and in the communities that they want to do it in, and just experience it, because there’s no substitute for that. It would also be helpful for them to look at the issues or the situation, whatever it is that they want to be helpful with, and practice talking about it in a way that’s understandable. It’s kind of the opposite of academia in a way. In a way that connects to people’s lives. I think that would be a good course to take

In fact, besides the issues one oneself might be interested in, take a wide range of issues and find the way that they express themselves in everyday life. So if you take — what’s an obvious example? — the Clean Water Act. This is something that administrations have supported for a very long time; this administration [the George W. Bush administration] has weakened it. What does that mean? Well, it means we’re drinking bottled water because there’s more arsenic in the water. And how much are we paying for that water? You know, just however it is that it’s expressing itself.

You can read about Bush’s policies towards the banking industry, but if you realize that part of the reason you’re graduating in more debt than the average family has, and that tuition has gone up 30 percent while he’s been in office, is because he’s giving them more interest on your student loan. It’s just some way of , of –

WHITE: Making the connection.

STEINEM: Of making the connection, right. So you see your stake in changing the structure, and you see that it can make your life better and the lives of other people. I think that’s a big missing link, and organizers do that.

WHITE: So an apprentice organizer — for example on this issue of clean water — would apprentice her- or himself to someone that is working directly

40:00
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in that area, bear witness, shadow, as they call it, hang out, see what that person is doing, and then learn how to make the connection.

STEINEM: I was thinking that's something that could be taught in the classroom, actually, just the art of making that connection, of seeing the expression of a big issue in the lives of a community or a particular person. I think that could be taught in the classroom. But it's more the group dynamics and how it happens that you need to travel and apprentice for.

WHITE: As you well know, organizing brings forth controversy and conflict. And as you said earlier, if you had known that the conflicts were going to come, you would have perhaps kept dancing. Could you talk some about, you know, what is perceived to be a longstanding, not totally understandable — at least to those of us on the outside — conflict with you and Betty Friedan? What was that about?

STEINEM: I think, actually, in that case, people outside know as much about it as I do, because we so rarely saw each other. I mean, she would barely speak to me. So it isn't as if I have — I can imagine what the problems were, because they weren't directed only at me but at Bella Abzug and lots of other people.

I think — You know, I didn't actually know her, so I think other people can address this. I think that in a general way, women, in the beginning of the movement, entered the movement with a lot of damage that was not their fault, you know, from the world out there. The older women like Betty, who felt they had not been able to have what they wanted — the movement was theirs, 100 percent theirs, and anybody else who came up and raised their heads was a challenge.

WHITE: And the age difference between you and Betty Friedan was — ?

STEINEM: About ten years.

WHITE: Okay.

STEINEM: I think younger women — younger, more radical women — who came out of the civil rights movement and the peace movement and so on, later than Betty, responded differently to it by saying, I've never had credit. Nobody else is going to have credit either. No last names, communal everything, and so on. But in Betty's case, really, anybody who threatened her ownership of the movement came in for this. So I never thought it was all that personal, because we hadn't had much exchange. But it was quite lethal, I must say.

The most awful thing for me was that she — because my mother was very fragile, to put it mildly, and I would occasionally get her to come to a women's event of some kind in Washington, where she was living with my sister. Someone introduced — Millie Jeffrey, I think — introduced my mother to Betty and said, you know, "This is Ruth."

45:00

And then, as Betty was shaking hands with her, she heard the words, “This is Gloria Steinem’s mother,” and she threw her hand down and said, “I will not — !” and walked away. And my mother was devastated, absolutely devastated, because she didn’t understand where this was coming from.

But mostly, Betty just wouldn’t speak to me. One of the few times I ever saw her by myself was when we happened to be on the same plane coming from someplace in North Carolina, and the flight attendant — Betty was in first class, I was in economy, and the flight attendant kindly moved me up, because she thought certainly we would want to sit next to each other. I didn’t want to disillusion the flight attendant, so I said okay. But she didn’t speak to me, essentially. She did say hello that time, but she really didn’t speak to me the whole time. So that gives you the tenor of the relationship. What she was thinking and feeling is something I don’t know.

WHITE: Well, what do you imagine? You said you can imagine what it was, the source of it.

STEINEM: Well, that’s what I’m imagining, that because this was hers, the movement was hers, she was the mother of the movement.

Also, I think that the movement was something that was going to allow women to move forward in the world and be integrated with, you know, everything. But then to turn around and find all these people trailing along — and there’s lesbians coming along, and women on welfare coming along. She didn’t really identify down, she identified up. And since I was part, in her view, of the group that was advocating this other — identifying down — I’m sure that I was not welcome in that, or what I was saying was not welcome. Also, other people would kind of use me to solve the problem with her.

WHITE: What do you mean by that?

STEINEM: And I went along with it because I thought the end was a good end. Well, the whole star problem — that only well-known women, already well-known women, were getting covered by the press or were speaking at a particular meeting. If I took myself out, then Betty had to take herself out, if you see what I mean. So I would stand up and say, “Well, you don’t need to hear from me; you already know.” You know, “Let’s hear from —” I remember it happened at a meeting of lawyers in New York. “Let’s hear from the lawyers who are actually experiencing this. Let’s hear from the flight attendants.” Then Betty didn’t get to talk either.

WHITE: So it was a tactic.

STEINEM: Yeah.

WHITE: She doesn't seem to me like the kind of person that would have gone for that all the time. I mean, maybe — did she not say, "Well," you know, "Gloria's not speaking. Good! Now I have more time"?

STEINEM: No, because then it made her look bad. Once I had gotten up and given a whole thing about how the women affected by this particular problem ought to be speaking, it was very difficult for her. I mean, she was sensible enough, I guess, to know that it would, you know —

WHITE: Make her look bad.

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: Did her sister not send you a letter at one point?

STEINEM: She did. Yeah, she did. Actually, Carolyn Heilbrun, who wrote a biography of me, asked the sister if she could use this letter, and I'm pretty sure the sister said no, because she said she was afraid of Betty. So now that Betty's dead, maybe it's okay if I say what was in the letter. I guess it is.

WHITE: I think so, yes.

STEINEM: That's interesting, because this letter has not been used before. It was a great kindness on her part, and she wrote me twice. I think the first one went astray somehow, and she wrote again. So she really was being thoughtful about this and wanting me to know.

The letter essentially said, When something very bad is happening to you, I think it's less painful if you know why it's happening. And I want to tell you that I think part of the problem for Betty is that you — I — have replaced me — the sister — in her life. The sister was the pretty one, and Betty was the smart one. Now the pretty one was also smart and —

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WHITE: That can happen.

STEINEM: — Betty looked great. You know, it was the world's fault. It wasn't accurate, but she grew up with that, and grew up also not liking her mother. I think it's hard for women who don't like their mothers to have good relationships with other women anyway. But she was talking specifically about herself as the sister.

She was also saying that she was happily married and really loved and enjoyed the life she was living, which was a kind of suburban life. And that she felt that Betty had trashed that life in *The Feminine Mystique* because it was her sister's life, not because it was her own. I have no idea, but it was very kindhearted of the sister, I thought, to write to me, and it did help.

WHITE: So this notion of the penalty for being the pretty one. How have you dealt with that in the various forms that it has come to you? As you've just said, Betty Friedan's sister says, "Well," you know, "I'm pretty and you're pretty, and so Betty's taken out after you because she had to deal with this pretty issue with me." So how –

STEINEM: It wasn't the pretty alone with Betty, it was the prominence in the movement or somebody else, because Bella came in for this. I mean, she screamed and yelled at Bella. So it was more about the movement than it was about the pretty part. Betty dressed very provocatively and very, you know. I don't think she thought of herself as a not attractive person. I lost my train of thought.

WHITE: Well, you and the pretty part.

STEINEM: The pretty part. I tried to look at it as something that was useful, because we all have to use whatever it is we have to be helpful in some way. I could understand that in other ways. I mean, I could understand using, say, that I was afraid to speak, but it turned out to be good because then I got to speak with another woman, and then I had more discussion time than I otherwise would. So you just use whatever it is you have.

But the hard part about the pretty part was that it made me feel that people didn't think I'd worked. I came to feel that no matter how long and how hard I worked, it would be attributed to my looks. It made me feel helpless and aggrieved. (laughs) I kept thinking that age would fix it, but I'm 73 years old right now and people still do it.

WHITE: Still think that you don't work because of the pretty part.

STEINEM: Also, women in the movement who had worked hard and not gotten enough recognition — which in the beginning was practically everybody because we were being ridiculed and all of that — if I got any recognition, they would feel that it was because of the way I looked, because they had worked as hard or harder. Some of that is true, and some of that is because I actually was in the media already. I was a little older and a media worker, as they said in the 1930s. It's different from being an engineer or something else. So some of it was true, and some of it wasn't, but whatever it was, was painful when it wasn't just regarded as something useful.

WHITE: So how does it feel right now to be able to say, "Goddammit, I worked!"?

STEINEM: (laughter) Yes, absolutely. Absolutely, I work my ass off. The other end of it, sometimes — It's interesting. It's not positive in either way, because sometimes people say to me, You've sacrificed your whole life. Now, I think the undertone of that is, because I wasn't married, really,

55:00

until I was 66, and I don't have children, they think that that's a sacrifice, and actually, it's not a sacrifice. I mean, I'm happy. I did what I wanted to do.

So I think the overall problem is whether you feel misunderstood or understood, whichever the reason is. By and large, now, I'm lucky enough to feel understood. But there were a lot of years in my late thirties and forties when I definitely didn't feel understood.

WHITE: Well, you worked so hard, I know, that your family, or some members of your family, wanted to disown you for being the treasurer for the Legal Defense Fund for Angela Davis.

STEINEM: I was proud of that.

WHITE: Can you talk a little bit about that, and that framed letter that you have in your apartment? What was that about?

STEINEM: Part of my family is Protestant, part is Jewish. In the Jewish part, there's a conservative part and a liberal part. My paternal grandmother was the liberal part, but I think the conservative part did various things, including trying to have her declared incompetent, or something, after her husband had died, because she was buying Jews out of Germany. I mean, we're talking serious conservatives here. When I graduated from high school in Washington, where I had lived for a year with my sister — Western High School — the president of the board of education, who gave me my diploma, was a man I had never met in my life, named Albert Steinem. He was part of the conservative part.

WHITE: Oh, wow.

STEINEM: There were Albert and Lester Steinem, who were lawyers, brothers, I don't know what — second cousins, third cousins? But anyway, I knew Lester, and he was quite kind, actually, to me and my sister, and would invite us to dinner, and all of that. But by the time I was beginning a kind of movement life, he had retired and lived with his non-Jewish wife in Florida.

So apparently, when he saw that I was listed as the treasurer of the Angela Davis Defense Fund — I don't think he took the women's movement seriously enough to care that much about that — but Angela Davis as a Communist, this was serious. So their Christmas letter, the kind of letter that people write at the holidays — We went deep sea fishing, and we did that — the Christmas letter says all that, all this nice stuff, and then it gets down to a little paragraph that says, "Now about this woman who has this same name, unfortunately has the same name. We don't understand how she can be such a traitor to her country. Why, her uncle gave his life in World War I." Died of the flu, never left Washington. I mean the flu was serious, but still. You know, "We don't know how she could have become such a traitor and so

unpatriotic, but because of this, we are formally disowning our cousinship.” I mean, they explained the part about Angela Davis. So I was so proud of it. (laughs) That’s the first time that I really felt effective here. So I framed it and I put it on the wall. But it did hurt my mother’s feelings, because my mother was very conflict averse, and it did hurt her feelings.

WHITE:

All right, so you have some component of your family being sad and upset that you’re a traitoress and a betrayal for supporting Angela Davis, this Communist. And then, as I understand it — and the point is in need of clarification here — there’s a component of the women’s movement, the Redstockings, who implied that you were being a traitoress, that you were a CIA agent. Could you give us some light on what that was all about?

VIDEOGRAPHER: I’m just going to change tapes here.

STEINEM: Okay, all right.

59:35

## TAPE 5

WHITE: The Redstockings controversy.

STEINEM: The Redstockings, right.

WHITE: Who were they and –

STEINEM: The Redstockings were a very important early feminist group. Some of the Redstockings supported these accusations, and some opposed these accusations, so I don't now how fair it is to attribute it to the Redstockings.

Let's see, the first I heard of it was, I came home — that is, to the *Ms.* magazine office — after a lunch, and there was a big sign over the door that said “CIA.”

WHITE: And what year are we talking about, more or less?

STEINEM: You know, I'd have to figure it out. It was in the mid '70s. Which they put up as a joke, because there had been an anonymous press release distributed at a MORE conference, which was a kind of conference of underground press folks, and so on. This anonymous press release accused me of being a CIA agent, subverting the movement, and everything. Nobody took it very seriously, which is why somebody had put up a big sign over the door saying “CIA.”

Gradually, it became clear that they really were serious, as they kept distributing this, and the question was whether to answer it or not. Everybody kind of agreed that it was important not to answer it, because it was completely obscure and underground, and if I answered it, it would get in the press itself.

The painful part of it was that it was accusing me of subverting what I cared about the most, which was the women's movement, or of somehow being there for some other purpose.

WHITE: And on what context? What was the information that made them think that you were a CIA agent?

STEINEM: Well, supposing they really thought this, which I'm not 100 percent sure of, the point of logic, if it had any logic, was that I had gone to two [International] Communist Youth Festivals, one in Vienna and one in Helsinki, with a group of students and young people. You know, I had encouraged students and young people to go to these festivals with an organization that was, indeed, partly funded by foundations that got money from the CIA.

The CIA, at that point, was funding labor unions, the National Student Association, *Encounter* magazine, you know, all kinds of things. The NSA — the National Student Association — people had told me that part of this was money coming from the government. I

thought it was great. I was completely naïve, but I had just come from India, where the government funded student organizations, and the same was true in England. I thought it was wonderful that somebody in the government thought that this was important. That was dumb on my part, in retrospect, but that's what I felt at the time.

So it had that much of reality, or what you might call reality. You know, I think to be an agent, you have to be trained, you have to be given orders, you have to — none of that ever happened. So they carried it forward in time and were saying that, because *Ms.* magazine was not as radical as they thought it should be, that therefore this was a whole effort to somehow subvert the women's movement.

It was extremely painful — very, very painful — and I spent one whole summer trying to figure out how to survive this. I knew I shouldn't respond to it. Everybody told me not to respond to it, but ultimately I did respond to it because movement people wanted to know what the facts were. It was a mistake to respond to it, because then it got in the press, in the above-ground press.

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Now, anything is possible here, so I really don't know the answer. Some people said, Oh, this is COINTELPRO [Counter Intelligence Program], which was a part of the FBI that accused movement people of being government agents in order to disqualify them. I don't really think that, but some people think that's where it came from.

Other people think that, because the leader of this little group of — I don't know — four people, or something, was a woman named Kathie Sarachild who felt very strongly — You know, we were once going to have a whole convention of people who had invented the women's movement at various — Anyway, that she had invented consciousness-raising, and she had, you know, I'm sure, played an important role. At a certain point, *Ms.* magazine was going to do a book about consciousness-raising. So Ellen Willis, who was then working as an editor there, knew Kathie Sarachild and said, "We should get her to write it because she feels this was —" I said okay. So she put together lots and lots of articles and brought them in, in a brown paper box.

In any case, it really wasn't publishable, and it was all in New York, and it was all white folks. It seemed very limited. Someone had to tell her that this was not publishable. So I asked Ellen Willis, who had recommended her and was her friend, and Ellen said, "I can't, because I am her friend. You have to do it." And I do remember that the moment I said, "We can't publish this, but you don't have to return the advance. If you can get it published somewhere else, then give us the money back, but otherwise you don't have to." The fact that she couldn't get it published someplace else must have made it worse, I guess.

So maybe that was the reason that she built up a — I don't know. Or maybe they really believed it, I don't know. I really don't have a way of knowing. It was extremely painful just because it was accusing me of betraying what I care about the most. It was probably

painful out of all proportion. Our French contributing editor, I remember her saying to me, in her wonderful French accent, “This is of no importance.” But it was painful, it was painful.

It’s interesting, because these festivals that I went to, these Communist youth festivals, have played such an interesting — It just shows you how one event can be so different, because in and of themselves, going there was about, I would say, 80 percent idealism and 20 percent student prank. It was kind of crazy. You know, we were making newspapers that were parodies of the Soviet newspapers. The Soviets printed the newspaper, reporting what would happen at the festival before the festival happened. So we were doing student parodies of this newspaper.

WHITE: Like the *Onion* sort of thing now, with the satire and –

STEINEM: “UNESCO Supports Communist Youth Festival,” and then the article, “Harry Unesco —,” you know? (laughs) So it was partly idealism, because I had wanted to go to one of these festivals when I was in India. It was held in the Soviet Union, but the Indian students I was going with couldn’t get visas because it was a Communist festival. I really thought it was important that people meet like this. So it was partly idealism and partly silliness. That was in the late ’50s.

Then it turned into pain, you know, with these accusations. And by now, it’s made me understand something else, which is that, in the absence of this event in my life, I might — given my idealism and so on — I might have been too judgmental of other people. This cured me. It made me understand that things can be misunderstood, can be used, that you should not be quick to judge on the basis of some particular thing, to judge a whole person. So by now, I think — Actually, I’m not sure that I’m glad that it happened, I haven’t quite got there yet, but I see its usefulness. It did help me.

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WHITE: And how interesting, as I understand it, that both Angela Davis and Alice Walker were at that Helsinki festival. I don’t think you all crossed paths.

STEINEM: No, because I was with a press office. I wasn’t a delegate. I wasn’t inside the festival, so I didn’t get to meet them. I wish I had.

WHITE: All right, well, happy to hear that the experience was useful for you. Did you feel that you had adequate support? Did you feel that it really did compromise what others thought about you for a while? And were there some people who actually believed that you might have been a CIA agent? And what made you finally decide to respond?

STEINEM: One of the painful things that happened was that Ellen Willis, who is an extremely intelligent, good writer, an interesting critic, and so on, she knew it wasn’t true, but she was worried enough about her friend and

her radical credentials that she quit the magazine and wrote something about it as if it were quitting on principle. That really hurt my feelings because it was so dishonest. I mean, she had just asked to be put on the permanent payroll. You know, that was a kind of betrayal that got to me.

I don't think there was any other personal betrayal that was a problem, but it was just the out-there aspect of it, that somebody who doesn't know you might — All this time, people have been telling me, You're crazy, it didn't matter, why are you —? So it may be that I just felt it disproportionately, I don't know.

WHITE: So your message to future organizers on conflict, controversy, distortion, quick judgment, smear campaigns — because there are purposeful smear campaigns. Would you tell them, Expect this to come with the territory of being an organizer? Go to the archives, listen to my story, so you can learn the history on this stuff? What would you say to them to help them address this issue?

STEINEM: I tell them to read Alice's poetry. She addresses it wonderfully. What's the poem? You have done this for the people, that for the people, but the people will condemn you. (laughs)

WHITE: Exactly. "Be Nobody's Darling." Expect nothing, live frugally on surprise.

STEINEM: Yes. I think it would be helpful if they expected it, because I didn't. I thought good intentions would be perceived as good intentions.  
And also because I had got into it — I hope that the organizers now will be choosing this with an understanding and an ability to look at what has happened to other people. I didn't do that; it kind of chose me, and I kept saying, No, I'm not going to do this, I'm going to go home and write. I kept trying to back out of it, so I didn't go through a real time of adult assessment of what this kind of life meant. Maybe that's the reason it was more painful than was reasonable; because I certainly have been, if anything, over-rewarded altogether for the work I've done. So why do I feel this? I think I just wasn't ready for it.

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WHITE: So how is it you think it happened? You said you sort of reluctantly went into this movement. You wanted to be at home and be a writer, and look at what has happened.

STEINEM: I know.

WHITE: How do you process it and put it all together? Some have referred to you, having seen you and listened to you, as this sort of reluctant icon. Did you ever want to just quit and go home and do something else?

STEINEM: Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

WHITE: What stopped you from quitting?

STEINEM: Actually, the magazine, mostly, for 30 years stopped me, because I knew that I would damage the magazine if I didn't continue to help it, raise money for it, publicize — Because, you know, it's a very tough thing to keep a magazine going. Otherwise, if it hadn't been for the magazine, I would have gone home, definitely.

But I'm a member of an accidental generation, in a way, because this is true of women who were part of this period of change: who started out life, in most cases, married, with kids, and then something happened. They realized that they could follow their dream, or they fell in love with a woman. I don't know, something happened.

WHITE: They went to be a carpenter.

STEINEM: Or their husband beat them up, and they realized this was wrong, unlike previous generations who put up with it. I resemble my generation in that way. It was accidental and often reluctant and had the virtue, I suppose, of spontaneity, but wasn't planned. I think younger women now plan: Where do I want to be in five years? Where do I want to be in ten years? That's a remarkable, remarkable difference.

I once wrote a little essay about time as the only reliable measure of class, because I was so struck by this sense of, could you plan your life? Could you not? That it is true, in a general way, that families of inherited wealth, or well-to-do people, powerful people, plan for generations forward, and poor people plan for Saturday night because that's the longest you can imagine controlling. By that measure, even the wives in those powerful families are probably lower class, because they think they can't plan the demands of their husbands, the demands of their children. This is what's going to control their lives. Now, finally, we're producing generations of women who actually do plan. It's a big change.

WHITE: Yeah. So, accidentally, you know, in this life, following a dream that may be — you know, obviously you hadn't planned it. It reminds me of what you wrote about the 1972 — I believe it was — presidential candidacy of the pioneering black congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. I believe it was you who wrote that her candidacy forever took off the "White Males Only" sign in the national imagination of the presidency.

So here we are, in 2007, looking at a scenario where we have a black man, Barack Obama, and a white woman, Hillary Clinton, contending for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. What are your thoughts on that? Did you ever think you'd live to see it? What should we take from it? What should we be considering in terms of the choices that we make? What do you have to say about this whole scenario, and do you feel you that contributed to it in any way?

STEINEM:

I hope I contributed to it, yes. And I am a little surprised, because what I feared would happen was kind of the Clarence Thomas syndrome, or the Margaret Thatcher syndrome. That is, someone who doesn't represent the group is picked from the group to be the first whatever it is, or to have a position of power, and it takes the heart out of the group, really. I mean, Margaret Thatcher really damaged the women's movement in England. You know, that Clarence Thomas goes against the majority views of his own community is hurtful. To have somebody who looks like you and behaves like them is painful, and that's what I worried about happening.

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But these two people, they really do, in a general good way, represent the majority views of their community and the majority views of the country. I think we're very lucky that these two people have emerged. My concern now, just at this moment — because we're sitting here in election season — is that they not be egged on by the press into attacking each other, which I think they've done a pretty good job of resisting. For instance, when Barack Obama was accused of having gone to an Islamic school, a radical Islamic school, and that somehow this information had come from Hillary Clinton's camp, they immediately put an end to that. It didn't come from Hillary Clinton's camp, it came from the right wing. He didn't go to that school. So that to me was an example of resistance to the divide-and-conquer tactic.

I wrote an article, an op-ed page thing in the *New York Times*, trying to say this. You know, This is a coalition. We moved forward as long as the abolitionist and suffragist movements were in coalition, working for universal adult suffrage. We got stopped when Negro males got the vote first, which I think was a fairly conscious tactic to give the vote to the smallest segment and divide the movement. Then racist white women said, Oh well, you need white women's vote to counteract this uneducated vote, and the whole thing started to fall apart. We need to be careful not to do that again.

So I was writing about this as a coalition of Clinton and Obama and saying, Therefore, when people ask me, reporters ask me if I'm supporting Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, I say yes. Yes, one or the other would be great.

I do intend now, having watched the debates and listened and read and all of that, I do think it's important to support Hillary Clinton, on my part at least, because she's had so much more experience. It would be a little, I think, crazy not to support her. We've never before had the opportunity to have somebody who had eight years of on-the-job training. And she doesn't have the problem of proving her masculinity, and she doesn't seem to need to feel she needs to do that twice as much, you know, as sometimes happens.

I hope Barack Obama would be the next presidential candidate, but if he's the candidate, that's great. You know, I'd be happy to work for him too, and I think that's the coalition that it takes. Gunner Myrdal always said that, as he put it, women and Negroes. I mean, that's a kind of crazy way of putting categories, as if — but anyway.

WHITE: Because there are women Negroes, case in point right here.

STEINEM: That's the way he put it, that this parallel was the deepest truth of American life: that from the moment that slaves arrived and were given the legal status of wives in the law; and, more deeply, because these two groups were the cheap labor pool on which the country ran — either totally unpaid labor at home or slave labor in the fields or low-salaried labor now — that it was a coalition and it should be a coalition. I think there are deeper reasons for this kind of coalition, too, that he didn't talk about. But in any case, these two candidates represent that to me, so I feel good about them.

WHITE: And on the deeper reasons for the coalition, you have long been — and I feel personally — not nearly acknowledged enough for your longstanding alliances with black women in particular, black people in general. You know, your relationship with Alice Walker, your advocacy for Shirley Chisholm, your advocacy for Angela Davis, your wanting, as you shared with me, at one point to take Coretta Scott King — may she rest in peace — out salsa dancing.

25:00

STEINEM: Right, right.

WHITE: You know, your speaking engagements with black women. I mean, it seems to me, unlike most other white women of your generation, meaning coming from the '50s, you were able to build these connections for real. You know, black women don't consider you, like, a phony. You're not a pretender. There are a lot of white women who cross paths in our lives, and it is a universal — in my experience — understanding that Gloria Steinem is the real deal, a real sister.

STEINEM: That means a lot to me, to hear that, because I know how hard it is to take that leap.

WHITE: I can't speak for all black women. I can speak for myself and the black women who I know who, as you know, were some of your longstanding friends. Why do you think you've been able to do what you've done?

And also, I think that this is an issue with young feminists. There's always this concern of, you know, we want to be more diverse, we want to have black women friends, we want the Rainbow Coalition. But there is fear, trembling, often a sense of, you know, I can't do this, I'm not going to be accepted, I'm not good enough, the black women are so cool, and we're going to be kicked to the curb, our white privilege might spring out. There are all of those issues that keep women of color, you know, in the twenty-first century, afraid and distant from each other. You were always able to cross that divide. I'm sure that it hasn't been easy, you know. That there were trouble spots

along the way. How did you do it and what advice do you have for the young women?

STEINEM: As you're saying that, I'm trying to think, because it isn't as if I didn't — I mean, I grew up with all the same bullshit. Well, not quite. I didn't have parents who were racist, I didn't. I didn't start out underground in that way. They didn't have black friends, but they — except maybe musicians that came through my father's summer resort or something — but they weren't racist, so I am grateful to them for that.

And I did start out very self-conscious about race. I started out in two ways, which I think are quite common. One is very self-conscious. And the other was that I identified with anybody who was having a hard time, without realizing that it was because women were having a hard time, you know. I mean sort of something in me that identified. But that's not so good either because it supposes that black people are only having a hard time and not having a good time.

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: So I think that what was very helpful to me is first, what you were asking me about yesterday, which was accidentally getting a job in which I was the only white person. It was partly that I was the only white person, but also because I had a good time. You know, we put blankets down when it rained, and danced.

WHITE: Played bid whist.

STEINEM: Played bid whist, right. And I learned how to do bones, you know, that little kids — you know?

WHITE: Right.

STEINEM: I was never very good at it, but anyway. So, I think that was the beginning of the answer in a way; which is that you learn, that I had a chance to learn that I wasn't doing something for someone else. I was doing it for me, too. If you think you're doing something for somebody else, you expect gratitude, which is a terrible burden.

The combination of that and also, living in India, where there's every gorgeous skin color in the world there all the time. They still had lots of caste problems, and lots of problems, but at least everybody's present. So that when I came home, I suddenly realized how segregated the country was just visually. As I kept saying, you could go snow blind here. I got mad on my behalf. How dare people tell me who my friends can be and where I can live and what I can do? So I think that helps a lot, so that it's not about giving to somebody or feeling guilty. You get radicalized on your own behalf. Who are they to tell me?

And then there's something else, too, that I don't even know if it makes sense, and of course it's not always true. It feels to me like

30:00

there's a warmth that I feel in African American culture, African cultures, Native American cultures, that I don't feel so much in many European American. Or if I do, it comes with a certain amount of restriction; you know, Italian culture, for example. It feels to me like being closer to the original cultures, which I've come to be so curious about and have so many of the answers we're still looking for. It feels like there's a warmth there, so I've always felt some weird feeling of coming home, even though it makes no sense.

Wilma and I talk about this. We've decided that there's cellular memory. And because we lived, all of us, human beings lived a different way, a more communal way, for almost all of the time we've been on earth — just the last 5,000 years we've invented all this hierarchical stuff — that we still have a cellular memory for it. We're thinking of writing this book together, each chapter of which is the characteristic of an original — worldwide — of original cultures worldwide, and the cultures are still there, enormously sophisticated and all of that. And we're calling it "Homesick," because I think we're all homesick. I don't know what my tribe is; I've lost my tribe. I belong to the Europeans who lost their tribes first, but I think there's a point of unity back there somewhere in our DNA.

WHITE: So would you suggest to the young organizers coming to the organizing school, if they are white women, that they go spend time in a culture in which they would be the minority?

STEINEM: Yeah. I think that's very, very helpful, just at the empathy level, because then you understand what it's like to be the one and only, and so on. Even though it cannot be the same, because you come from what is a more powerful group; so I'm not saying it's the same, but it does have some of the personal — You know, because you get to be, as an individual, representative of a whole group, which is insane, but you come to understand what it feels like. No, I think that would be very helpful.

I think understanding the importance of personal relationships. So the question really is, Who do you go to the movies with? Who do you buy shoes with, go shopping with? Who are your friends? Because that's the way people come together.

There were two groups in New York that were trying to come together. One, I think, was a big Jewish organization, and the other was [National Coalition of] 100 Black Women. They did have common cause, and they wanted to, but it wasn't happening. So they asked a friend of mine, who's a feminist conflict resolution expert (chuckles) — which she became by running two women's groups — what to do because it just wasn't happening. And she said, "Well, do your presidents know each other?" And they said, "Well, no, not really." And she said, "Well, tell them to have lunch once a week, once every couple of weeks, for a few months, and it will happen." And it did. So, you know, as long as we're regarding each other as groups — well, we

have to acknowledge, of course, that we're treated as groups, but still — and not individuals.

You know, I've had some really fearful experiences which turned out great, so I would just say just do it. For instance, Dorothy Pitman Hughes, who was my first speaking partner — I wrote about something to do with our speaking together. We were traveling in Lumpkin, Georgia, I think, and we had given her mother a poster in which God was a black woman — that was it — and she put it on her wall. She loved this poster. And I wrote about that in a book, and her sister took exception to that. I've forgotten exactly why, but maybe just permission, I don't know, to write it. I'm not sure. And was furious and was writing me letters and was going to sue and carrying on. And I was — just my heart sank. I thought, Dorothy will have to side with her sister, because it's her sister, and it will destroy our friendship, but I just don't see how she can do anything else, you know. And she did. She said, "Listen, my sister sued me once." (laughs) The same sister had sued her about something else. This is a very litigious sister, you know? She stood up to her and said, "That's crazy, and I gave permission for her to print this, and it's okay." I just wept. I mean, I was so grateful to her.

WHITE: You thought you were going to be forsaken.

STEINEM: Right, absolutely. So the fear is in all of us, it's deep. It doesn't go away, but the more you trust each other and the more you just are friends and support each other, the more reward you get. I mean, I've gotten the hugest possible rewards.

WHITE: Do you think other white women feminists — your peers — are they envious of you because you have all these great friendships with black women?

STEINEM: That's an interesting question. I don't know. I'm not sure. Maybe. I think maybe some are. Others just view it as a convenience. They can call me up when they know they need a speaker, and so forth.

WHITE: Oh, I see.

STEINEM: I mean in a good way. At least one gets mad at me because she thinks I'm being politically correct. She doesn't understand.

WHITE: She thinks it's a device, it's not really from your heart, it's just cool to have black friends.

STEINEM: No, it's not that. We had a particular falling out, I think, over the O. J. Simpson case. Who knows, but I thought O. J. Simpson was guilty too, but I was saying to her, you know, "But if you consider all the other jury verdicts." I mean, this is part of the price of racism because now a

guilty man will go free because so many innocent people were convicted beforehand.

WHITE: A balance.

STEINEM: Right. And she got pissed at me about that. Anyway, the fun part is that then you can serve as a little bridge. You can bring people together who actually like each other but might not have otherwise known each other. So I enjoy doing that.

WHITE: Well, talk a little bit about your invitation to Coretta Scott King to go salsa dancing — how that came about, and what kind of bridge building you were doing there.

STEINEM: I was interviewing her. I didn't know her very well. I never did know her very well, but I was interviewing her for a television show, and it was an hour-long interview. She just seemed sad to me, not only because of the horror that happened to her husband, but what had happened to her before that. She was talking about how she never knew where her husband was. She would see him on television: she was home with sick children, there he was. I began to see how tough her life had been. And I think she said, you know, she never went dancing in those years. I said, "Well, do you still like to?" "Oh yes," she said. So we had this long plot in which I was going to get her a special wig and disguise, and we were going to go dancing when she came to New York. And I regret to say it never happened.

40:00

WHITE: Wow. Some of the other interesting, memorable — in your long career as a journalist — interviews with people or interactions. Otto Preminger, the film director, is on record in your files, in a letter I read, saying that your piece on Nixon was the best magazine article he'd ever read.

STEINEM: You told me that. I didn't even know that. You see?

WHITE: It's in your files.

STEINEM: I'm very impressed.

WHITE: So who were some of the other interviews and people you've crossed paths with?

STEINEM: Let's see. I interviewed Truman Capote twice. He seemed to me to be a person who had gotten far from himself, in a way, because his early fiction — maybe it was just because I loved it so much, but he seemed much more likely to identify with ordinary people. Then he got into this kind of very high society atmosphere, and it seemed to change him. But he was such a self-willed, gifted person.

He was convinced that he could remember dialogue completely, you know, so he didn't have to take notes. (laughs) So when I was writing one of these interviews — and maybe both, I can't remember — because I had agreed to submit the quotes to him, I felt free to do this: I made up his quotes, some of them. Not out of any malevolence, but just because I needed a transition. You know, you get to the point where you need a transition. So if you get the speech pattern in your ear, you know, you can kind of understand what they would have said. So I did that, and I always felt very accomplished that I managed to make it up well enough so he really thought he said it.

WHITE: Oh my goodness.

STEINEM: But that was interesting. He didn't do to me what he did to lots of other women, which was to advise them to marry rich men. He never did that to me, and I was very grateful to him for that. He gave his huge party — big black and white ball, famous party — and his big rule was that, because he had only a certain amount of space, that he invited you but you couldn't invite your companion.

WHITE: No extras.

STEINEM: No extras, right. I said to him, "I will not come without" — it felt disloyal to me, you know, the man that I was seeing then, Herb Sargent — "I will not come without him." So he let me do it. So we had this kind of slight relationship that was interesting.

James Baldwin I interviewed when he was just about to open *Blues for Mister Charlie*. He was so smart and so full of agony, too. I haven't read the interview in a very long time.

WHITE: Who did you write it for?

STEINEM: For *Vogue*, which then published these long interviews. You know, he was so ugly in the aesthetic sense that he became beautiful in some way. He had this extraordinarily scrunched up face and odd nose. And I remember looking at him and thinking, If you read one page of him, you can never again look at any little kid and think they're poor, they're ugly, they're never going to make it. I mean, there may be a James Baldwin looking out from those eyes. He was just really, really an extraordinary force. You felt like you were in a room with some magnetic force.

Margot Fonteyn — I remember interviewing her, and she was just — As somebody said about her, "She could dance between the raindrops," and you kind of had that feeling when you were with her. I didn't feel like I knew her inside. I felt as if she had devoted her life so much to dancing that she almost just was pure dance, you know? That was interesting.

45:00

Gosh, who else? I mean, I've been lucky enough to interview lots of interesting people. George McGovern is such a good person. In some ways he's the best of American politics because he's idealistic, a farm kid, just dresses terribly (laughs), was not at all slick, and just came up. He was a bomber pilot, I think, in World War II, and then went home to divinity school. I mean, it made him permanently antiwar. So he was the first person to say that the Vietnam War was wrong — literally the first person to stand up, in his maiden speech on the floor of the Senate, and say, "This war will haunt us in every corner of the revolutionary globe."

[John Kenneth] Galbraith was a friend, kind of an uncle figure, and wonderfully witty and smart. I think of him when I'm rewriting because he always said he rewrote everything five times, and on the fifth time, he put in spontaneity.

WHITE: (laughs) That's a good thing to remember. Yeah, put in the spontaneity later.

STEINEM: Right. And in my case, because I get entranced by what I'm reporting on or interested in, and I forget to put myself in as a narrative, a string that people can –

WHITE: As a voice.

STEINEM: Right. So I have to go back and do that always, so I always think of him. He was really a wonderful man.

Robert Kennedy was so unphony that he couldn't repeat things he'd already said unless he thought that the person didn't know them. So I used to have to bring somebody along who was unconvinced, because otherwise he would say, "Why are you asking me that? You know that." I would say, "But I need a quote." But he couldn't do it, so you had to bring somebody along.

WHITE: Somebody new, a fresh face.

STEINEM: Somebody new who he needed to convince; or he knew that person didn't know, and then you would get the quote. But he really was an authentic person, unlike — I never interviewed Jack Kennedy, but it seemed unlike Jack Kennedy, who seemed much more slick.

WHITE: Were you friends, colleagues, with Jackie Kennedy Onassis? And if so, any comments about her life?

STEINEM: Well, I knew her a little bit. I wouldn't say very much. I interviewed her once for *Ms.* We did a brief interview with her, but it was the only interview she had done since the White House. It had been many years since her husband's assassination. I think because I was interviewing her about her own work as an editor — she was a very good book

editor, and she went to work doing that when she could have lived a very different life, and did her own mimeographing and answered her own phones. So I wrote about that.

She was frustrating to me because I couldn't get her to do what I wanted her to do, which was to use her persona to become an activist. But then I thought, Well, I'm just trying to use her like everybody else. She has a perfect right to be a private person. So I stopped trying to do that, but in the beginning, I was trying to get her to come to the Houston [National] Women's Conference [in 1977] and endorse the equal rights amendment. And then I realized that she just didn't want to lead a public life.

WHITE: You had a vision for Jackie O that she didn't have for herself.

STEINEM: Right. But she was very smart and entertaining. Entertaining is a poor word. Insightful just to talk to, and a great sense of proportion. Somebody asked her, when the president was still alive, what his favorite song was, and she said "Hail to the Chief." (laughs) I remember her describing to me how her young cousin was marrying a much older man, and she realized that this young cousin didn't know anything about douching. Then she got in the bathtub to demonstrate how you did this. I thought, This is definitely a girlfriend. (laughs)

WHITE: Oh yeah, definitely, wow. So all of these interviews, out there doing it — you've written countless articles and books. And at this juncture, there are two biographies that have been written of you, two full-fledged biographies [in addition to] juvenile biographies. What's your assessment of the quote-unquote major works, the two books that have been written about you thus far?

50:00

STEINEM: What are the two? There's Carolyn's. [Carolyn Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem*]

WHITE: There's Carolyn, and then there's the one by Sydney. [Sydney Ladenson Stern, *Gloria Steinem: Her Passions, Politics, and Mystique*].

STEINEM: Oh, that seems to me to be so wrongheaded that I — yeah.

WHITE: What's wrongheaded about it? So the people who might cross paths with it will know.

STEINEM: It was from such a small publisher. Nobody's ever even asked me about it.

WHITE: Well, I've read it.

STEINEM: You read it?

WHITE: Yes.

STEINEM: Partly it was a very unpleasant experience because, I have to say, mostly — I mean, I find some way of connecting with people, but I could never connect with her.

WHITE: So you knew she was doing this book, you agreed to be interviewed?

STEINEM: Well, she said, essentially, that she was going to do it anyway, and for this very sensational publisher, but if I agreed to do some interviews, that I could fact-check the result, and so I did agree. She had gone to my lawyer and literary agent in the first place, so we agreed that I would do some interviews. Then she sent the page proofs to booksellers, and so on, without fact-checking, without any of it. And so we sent her a lawyer's letter, and then I went back and fact-checked. A lot of the facts are wrong, but it wasn't so much the facts as it was the motivation, I think, that was frustrating that she got wrong. But it just disappeared without a trace anyway. I mean, nobody's ever even asked me about it, I don't think.

I liked Carolyn Heilbrun so much, and I really liked her book, *Writing a Woman's Life*, in which she kind of posits that women become ourselves after fifty, because then the feminine role is diminished, and we can become who we were before we were nine or so. I liked her very much, and I liked her work, and I was very honored that she would even think about writing a biography of me.

WHITE: *Education of a Woman.*

STEINEM: Right, right. It was a little bit a mismatch because everyone she had written about before was dead. (laughs) So she was a scholar, and she was accustomed to reading and, you know. We did interviews, but the thing I regret is that I could never, ever, ever — no matter how much I tried to persuade her, make it attractive — get her to come on the road with me. She kept saying, "Well, I've heard you speak." I said, "No, no, no, but the point is not that so much as the people who are there." I didn't insist enough.

In retrospect, I wish I had insisted much more. I felt as if I was sort of submitting myself to her like a physician, and I shouldn't try to influence her too much; that she was the biographer, so I didn't insist that she come on the road. Now I'm haunted by it because I think if she had come on the road with me, she would have seen how much her work meant to women.

WHITE: That's true.

STEINEM: And maybe she wouldn't have felt so isolated, or whatever the feelings were that led up to her suicide later. So I regret that.

WHITE: And how did you come to learn of her suicide? Did you have any contact with her after the book was published? Did you have a book party? Were you able to celebrate with her? What was your relationship post-publication? And then how did you hear that your biographer had committed suicide?

STEINEM: She stopped teaching. She quit teaching at Columbia kind of on principle. She felt she was being used to make it appear that they had more women than they really had. She left, I think, on principle. That was her main social/work avenue with other people. It was very hard to get her out of her apartment otherwise. So she would kind of complain that nobody asked her to go X or Y, and so I would ask her to go to the movies or come to a benefit. She would always say, "Oh, I never go anyplace you have to get dressed up." As other people have confirmed to me, it was just very hard to get her out of the house, and I fear that she got more and more isolated.

55:00

What else happened, I'm just not sure. I mean, she would get activated sometimes. I remember she got activated about Anita Hill. I remember her calling me up and saying, "We have to get this woman a lawyer. We have to help this woman." Or the National Endowment for the Arts. She was lobbying for someone to become a member of it and enlisting me. So she would get on the phone, but she was difficult to get out into the world.

WHITE: And so, when you found out that she decided to check out voluntarily?

STEINEM: Well, I should say that she had been discussing it for years — I mean, writing about it and discussing it. She had always said that when she felt it wasn't interesting anymore — life wasn't interesting anymore — she would check out, and it was a matter of principle that you had this right.

Well, I agree that you have this right, but it didn't seem to me — She had such an interesting life, you know, that I didn't anticipate her judgment that it wasn't interesting. In retrospect, I see that she was probably getting more isolated without her teaching job, which was this connection.

But you know, I don't think we know. Her journals have been left here. She left her journals to the Sophia Smith Collection. They're embargoed for quite a number of years to come, all bound up in Scotch tape, so perhaps one day we will learn what her reasons were. And as someone said to me, you know, she was a mystery writer. (laughs)

WHITE: That about says it all, doesn't it? I take it you have no plans of retiring. Is that correct? I mean, how do you envision your coming years?

STEINEM: Retirement is one of those things that I just am completely bollixed by. I came back here to a reunion. I had been asked to facilitate a

discussion with a bunch of my classmates. I thought I was all ready for this discussion. It turned out they were discussing retiring. I had never thought about that, but, of course, if you have a job –

WHITE: Which you don't have.

STEINEM: Right. It took me quite by surprise. So I just don't think that way. I don't think in terms of job or retirement. It's projects and what needs doing and what you want to do, and trying to write more so that I don't lie on my deathbed saying, "But —" (laughs) "Wait —"

It's interesting that the word *still* has entered people's sentences when they talk to me, more than it used to. "Oh, you're still doing —" (laughs)

WHITE: That surprises you. Is there anything that you aren't still doing that you used to do? Is there a reason that you're still able to do — travel as much as you do, speak as much as you do, be out there? What advice would you have for organizers to keep going the way you've been going here at 73?

STEINEM: Because I want to write more, I am trying to travel less. And so I concocted a letter which announces an 18-month sabbatical — having gone to Hedgebrook, to our mutual writers' colony — in the hope that this would help the person-and-a-half in my office and me say no to things, because I am not good at saying no. I start to envision what it could be — Although as a general rule, I try never to do anything that someone else could do. So I suggest someone else. But sometimes it's easier for me to make the phone call and reach someone for a particular purpose. But I am traveling less and hopefully writing more.

The pattern of life that is a frequent pattern hasn't been mine. That is, marriage, children, job, retirement. I just haven't had that experience, so the whole idea that there are weekends — I tend to know it's Sunday because the *Times* gets bigger. (laughs) I don't think about vacation in those terms. I've missed a certain framework that — which strikes me as neither good nor bad. It just is, and I guess I just want people to know that there's a choice. They don't have to have that framework if they'd rather not, or they can.

WHITE: What do you do for fun? You don't go on vacation but –

VIDEOGRAPHER: I need to change tapes.

END TAPE 5

60:00

## TAPE 6

WHITE: So let's go back, let's make it clear. So this Sydney woman [Sydney Ladensohn Stern] told you to your face that she was going to make her career off of your back — meaning writing this biography unauthorized — without your cooperation. Well, you did agree to — you know, you had some interviews with her.

STEINEM: Well, she made it clear that she was going to do it anyway, and so the bargain was that I could check facts if I gave her some interviews.

WHITE: Now — and I pose this question as one who's written a biography of Alice Walker. If she said she was going to do this anyway, and she already said this — what I consider — outrageous statement, she was going to make her career off the back of you —

STEINEM: She didn't say off the back, because that's not a Scarsdale phrase, but something like that. (laughs)

WHITE: What prevented you from calling all of your friends and allies and saying, "This Sydney woman shows up, don't say a word"?

STEINEM: Well, it's hard to do that if you are yourself a journalist, because you start to feel you shouldn't be utterly unavailable. So what I did say to my friends is, "It's 100 percent up to you. Don't feel that I have any stake in this. Don't feel you have to take the time. If, for some reason, you want to take the time, fine." I just tried to leave it open. The angering part was, having made this agreement in writing, that she would let me see the manuscript and check facts at least, she put out the manuscript to the book buyers at the chains and so on, without my ever having seen it.

Actually, now that you say that — and here's the solidarity-of-women story — there was, at this publisher, which was a very disreputable publisher, really, had different [imprints], and I've forgotten the one. Wasn't it Lyle Stuart or something?

WHITE: I don't know.

STEINEM: Anyway, they had different [imprints], but the publisher itself was not a very reputable publisher. There was a young woman — I don't know how old — working as a secretary, I imagine, who was so outraged by Sydney's conversations with the editor about whatever — you know, We said we'd check the facts but we don't have to, or whatever it was — that she sent me Sydney's letters to her editor. She sneaked them out to me. I don't know, they may be here [in the Sophia Smith Collection]. Because in solidarity, she felt that this was really unfair, what was going on.

WHITE: So you have evidence of her lie and deceit and betrayal.

STEINEM: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if it's lie and deceit. It's probably just snide to her, just disparaging me in her letters to her editors. I don't really remember what it was. I was more touched that this woman kind of risked her job to be supportive.

WHITE: An ally on the inside.

STEINEM: Mm hmm.

WHITE: Has it made you wary of future biographers? Have people approached you since these two books have been published?

STEINEM: No, no one else has approached me.

WHITE: Have you ever considered writing one yourself, an autobiography? I mean your works, extant work, clearly delve into your life. I know you've got a lot of things on your plate. Do you feel there's something that only you could, you know?

STEINEM: Yes, I do, of course I do, but I can't quite imagine — An autobiography seems to me, “And then I did, and then I —” It seems so boring. (laughs) I have the same problem about looking backward. I have to find some reason. Maybe I could write a memoir that had essays about certain high points, making certain points. I can imagine doing that, but I can't imagine doing a chronological — You know, I have all the same problems of not thinking about the past. I'd rather move forward.

However, of course we all do autobiography and memoir in what we write anyway. So this book that I'm writing about being on the road for 35 years is personal, just as *Revolution from Within* and other essays have been personal, too. It seems to me more fun and interesting, and fun to write certainly, to take one of your experiences and see how it makes a particular overall — it serves as another purpose than just to do chronology.

5:00

WHITE: What was your motivation, impetus, and the impact on you and the reader, do you think, of your book on Marilyn Monroe? How did that come about?

STEINEM: That came about (laughs) in a typically atypical way, which was that the publisher who had published the first book, *Outrageous Acts*, had access to unpublished photographs of Marilyn Monroe, and asked me if I would write text to go with them. It happened that we also owed that publisher a lot of money, because we had used my book as a subscription premium and then not had the money to fully pay for those copies. So in order to pay the debt, and also because, like many women, I think, I had always had a kind of rescue fantasy about Marilyn

Monroe, in the sense that, had there been a women's movement, would she still be alive? So many things about her were like exaggerated versions of many women's experiences: being sexually abused as a child; being abandoned by her mom — a single mom; abandoned first by her father; and certainly being treated as an object more than a person in many ways, especially before she became famous, but even afterward. So if she had felt less alone in those experiences, would she have been able to survive?

So I was also fascinated, but if it hadn't been for paying the debt and the photographs, I probably wouldn't have done it. I would have contented myself with a brief essay that I did for *Ms.* magazine about her.

WHITE: And so what was the process like, to write the narrative for all of these photos? How long did it take? Was it cathartic for you in any way? Did you identify personally with Marilyn?

STEINEM: No, I did. I remember doing it over one whole summer, maybe longer than that, reading everything I could find about her, and especially quotes. Talking to people who actually knew her. I had some guidance from her PR agent, Pat Newcomb, who probably knows more than anyone about her life and the circumstances of her death, but has, on principle, never talked to reporters. So I would just send her material and say, "Just tell me if I'm going off the track." She was helpful.

I would find myself getting angry on her behalf. For instance, I read writing about Marilyn Monroe by Norman Mailer, who disbelieved her childhood abuse. Why? Because her first husband, whom she married when she was very young — I think 16 or 17 — said that she was a virgin, so she couldn't have been sexually abused when she was a child. This, first of all, believes the husband. Secondly, doesn't know anything about the nature of childhood sexual abuse, which is often oral; you know, the kids are too little. It just was so unthinking and so disregarding of her own words that it made me angry on her behalf.

I got angry at Arthur Miller on her behalf because after her death, a reporter said to Arthur Miller, "Do you think that," — because he, Miller, had just remarried, and I think his wife was pregnant. Marilyn Monroe had always wanted to have children and been unable to have children. So the reporter said to Arthur Miller, "Do you think that had anything to do with her depression?" Arthur Miller said back, "No, no, no. She always knew there was nothing wrong with me."

So I suppose, although I never identified with her, because I don't feel — I feel I have much more agency in my life than I think she did, and I certainly was never, ever objectified to the degree that she was. I wasn't abused. I didn't really feel that she was a surrogate for me in any sense, but I felt like her champion, just trying to write something that might make her better understood.

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WHITE: Did you accomplish that with that book?

- STEINEM: Yes, I think so, I think so. I mean it wasn't — not to say that she was a victim. She also had a lot of amazing resilience, and I'm sure she was difficult. I can see that she would have been very difficult to have as a friend, you know, very demanding and very frustrating in a lot of ways. But later on, I met the son of her psychiatrist in Hollywood. She had lived with his family for a period of time, when this son was — I don't know how old — a teenager, perhaps. I asked him, because it was already too late then, but if he — Or I guess he came up to — Now I can't remember how it happened, but anyway, he said it sounded like her; that that was the person he remembered. So that meant a lot to me. I mean, I think they'd had a relationship.
- WHITE: Because I missed it before when we had to change the tape, what do you do for fun? All the hard-working organizers out there burning the midnight oil, that want to have, you know —
- STEINEM: I have to say that organizing is fun. I mean it's not like it's divisible: work and not work. That's part of having a job. If you don't have a job, it's kind of all mixed up in there. You know, you're working with people you like. To this day, old *Ms.* editors — we all have dinner together and finish each others' sentences, and so on. I was about to say I like to go dancing, but I can't really say that because I don't do it enough. I mean, I do love to go dancing, but I don't do it enough to really count. I love to go to the movies, I love to go to the theater. I love, just as oddly, just to do errands. You know, just to walk around the streets and do little things, go to my favorite place for a chai latte, and have dinner with friends. I love to go see Alice. I love to go see Wilma. We're always trying, the three of us, to get together someplace, and every once in a while — rarely — we do.
- WHITE: How do you cope with this notion of walking through the streets freely like everyone else? You don't have bodyguards. I was watching the throngs of well-wishers and admirers after your presentation yesterday. I've heard people say to you, "You've changed my life," and have this kind of star response to you. How do you cope with that? How does that feel? Are you ever hesitant to go outside because you think you might be identified, and in that particular moment when you're meditating on whatever? Do you want to maintain some private space? How do you negotiate that?
- STEINEM: That's interesting. No, I never don't go out because I think I'm going to be recognized, no. And I don't feel like I can't go out looking however it is that I look because, fortunately, the women's movement allows you to look however you look. (laughs) I'm not a movie person or something. So that doesn't cross my mind. And I also think I'm lucky that the well-known, whatever part, didn't come until I was pretty old. I think it's much more difficult if it comes when you're in your teens or

15:00

your twenties, and you really, then, are never quite sure whether the response is to you or to the image of you. I mean, I was already well into my thirties, so it was kind of clear to me that if people suddenly were either nice or not nice in a different way, that that was because of something that wasn't internal.

Mostly I would say the other good thing about this kind of recognition is that it has content. If you're an actor, recognized for roles that aren't you, I can imagine it's quite disorienting. But because it has content, the people who approach me are, like, picking up a conversation that already exists. They already know this long conversation, and so they want to tell me something that they think would interest me, or they want to tell me how their lives have changed. I don't know, just all kinds of things, and it's really interesting. It's a little like an instant friendship. It's like you can skip over the first six weeks of lunches and have this kind of intense exchange because you know you share a set of hopes and interests.

So I often wish, as I do with audiences, that I'd been able to write down the stories that people tell me. Because I realize, too, that they are responding to a movement, a whole change. It's not personal. It's not not personal, but it's because I symbolize something to them. That if I weren't part of the movement and I was the same person, I wouldn't be getting the same response. I'm not crazy enough to think that it's about me personally, but because we both care about the same things, and it makes a place to have a connection.

WHITE: What do you symbolize to yourself?

STEINEM: To myself? Well, of course I'm not a symbol to myself. I'm somebody who needs to pick up their dry cleaning, you know? I mean, actually, I was thinking about it, because when you said — What was it that you said the other day, that I should do a collection of political essays?

WHITE: I said I would love to read, all in one bound volume, your journalism. I think it would be very useful to emerging, aspiring journalists. Certainly, when I was at Columbia Journalism School, I would have loved to have had that. I took a class on cultural reporting, I think it was, and there was no text. We had a wonderful teacher, a black woman teacher, Phyllis Garland, but there was no text. I — in just a quick, cursory review of your articles in the Sophia Smith Collection — I thought, Oh, this would be a great teaching tool. I can see the use of it, you know, the early essays. All those people that you just said earlier that you interviewed, and how you crafted your work, what you leave with the reader about them. I read a profile you did of Paul Newman. I think I can honestly say that — you know, neither pro nor con on Paul Newman. I know he does the salad dressing thing, but I would never have been inclined, I think, to read a full article about Paul Newman, respectfully, had I not crossed paths with the piece that you wrote on Paul Newman.

STEINEM: That was really a long time ago, too. Well, but my point is, that when you said that, that was a kind of revelation to me. I don't think that my view of myself and other people's view of me is all that consonant, for better or worse.

WHITE: All that consonant?

STEINEM: Yeah, all that parallel, or whatever. I suppose there is this Russian doll thing, where your child self is there and then the — so you can hit the child self at any moment. It's part of the reason I'm so grateful for friends, and I think we serve that purpose for each other, because we help each other become the best of ourselves, while we internally are feeling like the incompetent child. The friend sees the competent adult and says, "Well, why don't you do —" I felt that when you said that. "Oh, I've never thought of that."

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WHITE: So you get the sort of affirmation of the parts of yourself that you don't touch, experience, realize through outside.

STEINEM: I experience them, but I experience them when they're necessary. I think — perhaps this is generational too, and it's certainly gendered — which is that I'm more likely to respond than initiate. So in a situation, I know I can do certain things and be good at certain things, but I need the situation to initiate it from me. I don't necessarily have the confidence to think I can do it.

It's true in a lot of ways, isn't it? Deadline writing is a little bit like that too, that you can't make your own deadlines, and it's part of the problem with writing at length and book writing. It is very gendered. It is very generational, that you can meet emergencies. I'm really good in emergencies. I'm not too good in everyday life when I have to make the schedule myself. Someone once accused me of being a foul-weathered friend. (laughs)

WHITE: Only around when there's a crisis. When things are going good, there's no sign of Gloria. When there's bad news —

STEINEM: I don't have to worry about that, which is stupid, and I hope I'm getting better about that. It takes a lot of forms, and I can see that it's the same — Certain, you know, probably childhood, too, that I responded to emergencies, and I was very good at doing that, and I got to be very good at that, but I didn't initiate necessarily.

WHITE: You've spoken earlier about that, of being there with your mother, who was in need. How did it feel to always have to be the one to respond? That must have been hard for you. You're your mother's primary caretaker from — what? — about age ten until sixteen. Is that correct?

STEINEM: Mm hmm.

WHITE: So where did little Gloria go?

STEINEM: Sometimes it was very frightening, really, that feeling of your stomach dropping out and your skin getting cold prickles. Just very frightening. And that occasionally gets touched again, so I remember what that was like.

Sometimes it was just learning how to detach and function, even though — how shall I say it? I couldn't allow myself to feel what she was feeling, I think, or to really identify with what she was experiencing. So, in many ways, she became someone to take care of, more than my mother, and it was only after she had been in the mental hospital in Baltimore for a while, and I really started to realize emotionally, this is my mother. You know, look at her and look at her in a real visceral way. Because I tended to survive by acting, I don't think I really understood how deep this all went until I was maybe 50, really. Sometimes the signs of it were so obvious that I can't believe I didn't understand them.

WHITE: For instance?

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STEINEM: Well, the most mundane thing was that, of course, as an organizer, you're always going to motels and hotel rooms, and whatever, and they often leave the radio on in the hotel room. I would always leap across the room and turn it off because it was so depressing to me to hear that sound. I just thought it was depressing, objectively depressing, to hear the radio in a hotel room. I didn't stop to wonder why the sound of the television didn't depress me, why the radio in a car didn't depress me. It took me all those years to realize that that was the only sound in the apartment with my mother. A little obvious, but it took me a long time to understand.

The interesting thing was, having realized that, I thought, All right. So when I was at home, I, for the first time, turned on the radio in the apartment, and, like, the universe came through with this great reward, which was a man talking about his book about — I can't remember the title of it. It was about the alliance between runaway and freed slaves in Florida and the Seminole Indians, and that they had ruled the whole state of Florida for 30 years, which I had no idea, as a coalition. It was fascinating. It was literally as if the universe said, Okay, we're going to make sure you come back to this.

WHITE: Right. Affirm you for making the leap toward healing. And so what was it about becoming 50 that you think that provided for you to begin to examine this? You said you didn't understand it until then.

STEINEM: Well, I got to a place where I couldn't go forward in the old way. I was so, so exhausted from all the years of our trying to keep the magazine

going, and traveling, and so on. I was diagnosed with breast cancer, which turned out to be very minor, and it was 20 years ago and has never recurred. But still, if the word *cancer* enters your life, it's big. I had managed to have an affair with the wrong man. I mean, the first time in my life I ever actually kind of fell in love with someone I didn't like. (laughs) I think mainly because I was so tired, I was just looking for somebody who didn't need to be taken care of. So all these things converged, and I got what was probably the closest that I had ever been in my life to being depressed, which I can only describe as the world turning to black and white instead of color. Just nothing interested me, nothing excited me.

And out of that kind of hitting bottom, then, you know, you have to sort of try to figure out why. And I did, actually, for the first time in my life, go to a therapist, which I had never done. She was older and wiser, and had a great gift for not just saying what must have been totally obvious, but waiting for me to figure it out. (laughs) So there were at least a couple of years there when I began to really look internally. *Revolution from Within*, as a book, is part of that, was sort of the coming-out-of-it part of that.

WHITE:

Did you never, with Suzanne being nine years older — So you're 50, she's 59. Did you ever discuss with her, like, Well, what are your feelings about how we were raised? And are you having any symptoms? What's happening in your life that might be related to our mother's illness?

STEINEM:

No, that's interesting, because no, I never did. Now partly that's because, in a way, she almost had different parents, being that much older. She remembers, until she was six at least, a very orderly, prosperous — she took naps, you know — kind of childhood. Because that was taken away from her at six, when my mother went into a nervous breakdown, into a sanatorium — this was before I was born — my sister has spent her life looking for that lost security, and has chosen a very secure life: six kids, a house in the suburbs, inventing things to do at Christmas and Easter, the birthday cakes for Jesus, you know, just all kinds of traditions and security.

So we've had a very different response, and sometimes I realize over again, a different circumstance, and therefore a different response. And we're also quite different people. Sometimes I understand how different. For instance, I took her back to her 50th high school reunion in Michigan, and therefore we were driving around the lake, Clark Lake, where we used to live. She said something about an event of those years, and I said to her, "Well, but of course by that time mother was very crazy." There was this silence, and she said, "You know, this is the first time I've ever thought of her as crazy." Because she, having experienced her as a competent, responsible mother for the first six years of her life, really kept that image and kind of denied the other.

30:00

WHITE: She kept that imprint.

STEINEM: I think in a lot of ways it was harder on her. I suspect it's harder to have something in your childhood and lose it, than it is to kind of make do in a consistent way.

WHITE: Which is what you did. Well, I know that you said that you're aspiring to write a book about heaven, the concepts of heaven –

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: – where this whole notion came from, the greater reward and the great beyond. Have you given any thoughts to where you'll be when you aren't in this form? You know, we're all moving in that direction. One day we won't be here in this form.

STEINEM: Well, certainly, I give a lot of thought. I wouldn't say a lot of thought, but a fairly constant consciousness that time is short. I was just in Houston for The Progressive Forum. They were celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Houston Women's Conference. Thirty years doesn't seem that long ago. Thirty years from now, even with my ambition to live to 100, I won't be here.

When I was addressing the Smith students at this last commencement, I thought about it too, because I was also trying to take them into the future, and I won't be with them. And I said that at the end, "And I won't be with you, but I will." It's a growing consciousness of the little time that is left, which I hope will make me less profligate with time than I have been.

When it comes to death, however, I don't imagine a consciousness or a life after death. I more imagine becoming part of some physical cycle of life, of atoms or of ashes or of something. As my mother always used to say, matter is never destroyed, it just changes forms. I don't know what that means, but I don't imagine a continuation of consciousness, much less a continuation of a recognizable life, like heaven or hell or an afterlife or an astral being peering down at all of you here. I don't imagine that.

WHITE: You have said that you'd like your funeral to be a fundraiser. Is that serious? And if so –

STEINEM: Yeah, but voluntary. I don't want people to have to pay. (laughter)

WHITE: A voluntary donation at Gloria Steinem's funeral.

STEINEM: Right, right, right.

WHITE: Have you put things in place? Are you going to put things in place?

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STEINEM: I haven't, but I think about it. I think I will. I was listening to one of Jennifer Berezan's chants and thinking, you know, I'd like to have that played. I think it's the one that, "She carries me, she carries me to the other shore."

No. I have to go home and redo my will actually, since David's death, so I have thought about it to that degree. I've left my apartment for the use — at least as long as it can be supported by whatever income there is from writing or whatever — for feminists, male or female, who come from other countries and need to stay in New York. I find I enjoy being in the rooms where someone lived, it has a kind of nice intimacy. But the truth is, I just don't want to think about moving, even after I'm dead. (laughs) I can't imagine packing up all that stuff.

WHITE: So just leave everything the way it is. Welcome to Gloria's. Everything's here except for Gloria.

STEINEM: Right, right.

WHITE: That's nice.

STEINEM: This summer — I don't know if I said this to you or not — but this summer, Amy Richards, who has been — you know, we've been working together for a really long time, about a dozen years or more. She grew tired of the fact that the apartment — which she knows well because we lived there together for a while — has everything coming into it and much too little going out, and has not been painted or anything in 20 years. So while I was gone for two months, she undertook to do this. Weren't we talking about this?

WHITE: You mentioned that, yes.

STEINEM: So that did make me think, Well, she would have to do it after I died anyways. (laughs)

WHITE: So it's all spruced up and ready for the international visitors.

STEINEM: Right. So, you know, I do think about this. There was one project that I want to do and decided there probably wasn't enough money in my estate, so I left it for a project for everybody else to do. (laughs)

WHITE: Gloria's leaving us homework. And what's that?

STEINEM: Well, if you walk in the park, as I often do, you have to face the fact that there's Welsh poets and English generals, and there are no women and there are no people of color.

WHITE: Central Park.

STEINEM: Forget it. In fact, in all of Manhattan, there are only three statues of women. One is Joan of Arc on the Hudson, one is Alice in Wonderland, and one is a new one of Eleanor Roosevelt, and that's it. I mean that's it in the women department. In terms of men of color, I'm not sure. It may be, you know, farther uptown there are some. But anyway, there are no women.

I once investigated what was necessary to get permission to do a statue in the park, so I think I have an idea of the process and how you get approval. You have to have a trust fund to look after it and all of that, and so I thought we should have a statue of Sojourner Truth in the park. This was her turf partly, and I found a sculptor who had done some work, done some statues of her. So anyway, I left this.

WHITE: You left directives for those of us who might still be around.

STEINEM: Yeah, I left a project.

WHITE: Okay. Well, thank you for that. Is there anything else you would like to add? I do believe that I'm fresh out of questions, and it's been wonderful.

STEINEM: Gosh, it's so hard. Did I tell you that the *New York Times* called me up? Did I tell you this?

WHITE: I don't know.

STEINEM: They called me up to do an interview for my obit. I have to do it next week. (laughs)

WHITE: Really?

STEINEM: Yes, right. Actually, it got postponed, and I thought, Well, good, that means I won't die — I don't know what to say in that either.

WHITE: So you just get a call, This is the *New York Times*. We're preparing your obituary, and we'd like to interview you.

STEINEM: Right.

WHITE: Wow!

STEINEM: She was very nice about it. She was as tactful as possibly she could be about it.

I suspect that, as much as I might myself — and maybe this is comfort because it's not taking responsibility for doing this — but as much as I myself might say, "Here's what I want you to remember, and here's what I hope my life has meant," or "Here's what I think is helpful," that what we each take from each other's lives is what we need

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to take, and that is not predictable. So I will just say that I hope something in this mass of atoms here kind of connects with ongoing atoms and helps them blossom. I don't know if that's a mixed metaphor, but anyway, helps them.

WHITE: Thank you. Thank you, sister.

STEINEM: Oh, thank you. I just have to live up to your — Your vision of me makes me better, so I just will try to live up to it.

WHITE: Well, it's already done. It's already done, and this is part of the gift. This has been a wonderful experience for me as a journalist; as a rolling piece of matter; as a descendent of people forbidden — on the penalty of death — to learn how to read or write; as someone who fell accidentally into journalism, to have been able to do this. To be invited by your alma mater to do this is wonderful. So thank you all.

STEINEM: Now I get to turn the tables. I get to interview you someday.

WHITE: Okay, excellent.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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