

TWENTY-FIVE

Retirement in Two Voices

Evelyn Torton Beck

Deborah S. Rosenfelt

This dialogue took place over many hours in November 2013, but it also springs from long informal conversations over the past few years. We have edited it for coherence and clarity. At the start of this writing, Evelyn Torton Beck was eighty, and Deborah S. Rosenfelt was seventy. Evi retired at age sixty-nine from the Women's Studies Department at the University of Maryland, which she had chaired for nine years. Debby is still working full-time in the same department, but is retiring in 2015. As other writers on the subject of women's retirement have demonstrated, anticipating and experiencing retirement evoke a wide range of responses; the anxieties of and opportunities for professional, middle-class women are substantially different from those encountered by less privileged women, but even among feminist academics like us, the gamut of emotions can include dread and depression as well as relief, excitement, and new or renewed forms of creativity and fulfillment. Our dialogue reflects such differences, deriving from our different situations as well as our different temperaments: while Evi has now been retired for more than a decade and draws on that experience, Debby is looking with a tincture of anxiety toward the unknown.

Both of us feel extremely fortunate to have been able to combine our careers and our intellectual and political passions. We were part of the founding of women's studies, which in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a totally new field of inquiry,

often embattled, often the site of internal controversy, but almost always interesting. We were also lucky in that we managed to stay in the academy and achieve some support and recognition for our work, in spite of having shifted from the traditional areas of study in which we trained (comparative literature and English, respectively), while many others who tried to make this same shift were marginalized or evicted from their institutions.

D: One of the reasons I've wanted to have this dialogue is that I have many questions I've wanted to ask you. You started training as a therapist more than a decade before you retired. How did you know, what made you decide, that when you retired, you wanted to have a second career?

E: Well, I couldn't really say that I *decided* on a second career. I was just drawn to study psychology, and I retired in order to finish my psychology dissertation. I had continued to work at Maryland in order to pay tuition at the Fielding Graduate University, a non-campus based limited residency school, but the longer I worked, the longer it took me. I would never have finished while I was working full-time. I had stepped down as chair of women's studies when I decided that I was definitely going to stay at Fielding.

D: So how did you decide to go from feminist studies in literature and the arts to psychology?

E: The shift was so much a process that I couldn't even say that I planned anything that I'm doing today, like teaching sacred circle dance. It all evolved. When I started at Fielding, I wasn't thinking of retiring at all. I was just about sixty. I always had passionate interests, and one of these was psychotherapy, because it had helped me deal with the difficulties of my early life, especially the traumas of the Holocaust: as a child living under the Nazis in Vienna, my father's incarceration in concentration camps, the murder of close family members, our escape to Italy and finally to the United States. As a result, my family life was very chaotic emotionally, very difficult. I honestly think therapy saved my sanity, especially when I was a depressed young mother at twenty-three without a focus for my own life. My first therapist, a heterosexual Jewish man, was incredibly helpful by encouraging me to get out of the house, get a job, or go back to school. Things I learned from him are still useful to me today. In later years, I got very interested in the process on

a more theoretical level. Perhaps I should add that I did a year of Jungian therapy to prepare for retirement.

D: I didn't know that. I didn't have therapy at the same point in my life, and I didn't have children until I adopted at forty-four. But I did marry young, at nineteen, and I was similarly depressed. I knew right away that it was a mistake, and I knew that when I was strong enough, I would leave my husband—which I did, six years later, while I was in graduate school. I've never thought about being anything but an academic. Was it a conscious decision on your part to become a therapist when you retired?

E: Not really, that came much, much later. I had first thought of changing careers when I finished my Ph.D. in comparative literature and could not get a job. That was traumatic. I lived in Madison, Wisconsin, and had no mentoring and no idea even how to apply for jobs. Because I was married and had children, I applied only within a commuting area of Madison. My dissertation had a Jewish theme, which didn't help me in the job market. Being an "older woman" (I was in my late thirties), I was considered the wrong age and gender. When I couldn't get a job, I actually had decided to become a clinical social worker. But finally I used my contacts in Yiddish literature strategically to get a job as a visiting professor at the University of Maryland in comparative literature. The second year I commuted weekly by plane from Madison and ran our household from afar.

D: How did you get back to Wisconsin?

E: That, too, is a story. I applied for a position in comparative literature in my area of expertise, but they did not even interview me, even though my book had been published by then (Beck, *Kafka*). They offered the job to a male graduate student who had not even completed his doctorate! My dissertation advisor knew about this and encouraged me to file a complaint. When I won, I was offered a joint appointment in comparative literature and German. Later I helped create women's studies at Wisconsin and taught there for twelve years. I eventually came back to the University of Maryland to chair women's studies.

D: Which you did for nine years, until you became immersed in the program in clinical psychology at Fielding. Did psychology displace your interest in women's studies?

- E: No, quite the opposite. I was excited to bring the perspectives of each discipline to the other, and my women's studies classes became even more interdisciplinary.
- D: So it was mostly the administrative part of women's studies that you felt you didn't want to continue to do?
- E: Yeah, I mean I had never loved it. . . .
- D: I don't love it either! (*laughter*). Chairing women's studies at Cal State Long Beach and then at San Francisco State felt more like doing political organizing than like administrative work. But administrators can do good things. Didn't Claire [Moses], who followed you as chair, make it possible for you as a faculty member to continue to teach as you did your internship for Fielding?
- E: Yes, she did.
- D: That does suggest one of the ways that feminists in academia can support each other as we age: by letting people have the space to develop new or nascent interests and passions. I would really hope that happens for me as I come closer to retirement. I find the preretirement experience very complicated because, on one hand, as I'm nearing retirement, I am assumed to have a less intense investment in the department—and I *would* appreciate a slightly lighter workload. On the other hand, I absolutely don't want people to treat me as somebody with a foot out the door. I want to participate and to receive the same recognition and respect in terms of what I have to say. I don't want to be discounted. I find it a difficult balancing act, and I think such flexibility is getting more difficult, if not impossible. Rather than generosity, there's a sense that the institution is trying to wring the most labor out of each individual in the system.
- E: What you've just pointed to is really important—the lack of institutional support that would allay some of the anxieties the loss of position may bring, and the fragility of the ego as one nears retirement. Of course they're not unrelated. Helping people make transitions and cultivate new interests is essential.
- D: I went recently to a retirement seminar, which is run by the money people, TIAA-CREF and Fidelity, but sponsored by the university. The room was packed, and I looked around and I thought, I've known some of these gray-haired folks for a really long time, we're all seated in the same room, but nobody has made an effort to put us in contact with each other to figure

out the emotional or intellectual dimensions of retirement. The financial, yes, and that's a huge worry for many of us. But the kinds of transitions that you are talking about—there is absolutely no place for that discussion.

Recently, I tried to start something that would connect retiring faculty, and I contacted what I thought were appropriate campus offices, but each one sent me back to the other. Apparently, nobody wants to touch this more personal and social dimension of retirement.

You seem to have done incredibly well. I am feeling anxious, and it's partly financial, because I don't know if, as a single mother raising a child, I saved enough money. But the money is a relatively small part of my concern, compared to my sense that I would like to stay intellectually active and socially connected. I don't really know how I will maintain that sense of being part of an intellectual community. I'm impressed that you not only stayed intellectually active but did a time-consuming and challenging Ph.D. program, completing another dissertation and building another set of professional relationships. Then of course you changed fields yet again and did something totally different—poetry therapy and now sacred circle dance. Is your engagement with those related to Cohen's work on "creative aging"?

E: No, that came later. First I focused only on the healing power of art, which had also been my psychology dissertation topic. Even though I was close to sixty when I started at Fielding, and in my seventies when I finished, I didn't at that time think about aging as an issue. I felt energetic and focused on the future. But later, after I was introduced to Cohen's research demonstrating the positive impact of creativity on aging, I began to make the connections, especially when I found a longitudinal study showing that of all physical activities, dancing is most strongly correlated with staving off dementia (Verghese et al.). After that, I brought dancing and poetry to conferences on positive aging and poetry therapy.

D: It seems that one of your strengths is seeing openings for bringing different interests together. It's my perception that as people get older and near retirement, they develop certain passions—your passion for dance, for example, or the passion of another academic friend of mine for the tango, so she

can dance while perfecting her Spanish. My own is [horse] riding, specifically dressage. It's making me work more years because it's expensive, but I feel that it helps keep me sane and healthy. It's a kind of discipline of the body, of athletic expression, that I've really never had before. I've always liked to move in some way—walking, swimming—but I've never had a serious sport. It's challenging, and it does fuel my sometimes flagging energies. Still, it's not the answer to my wish for intellectual and political engagement. Once I tried to start a riding program at a juvenile detention center for girls, but the state never approved it.

E: But your riding has a ripple effect on those around you. Because it energizes and gives you a sense of well-being, you exude that into the world. It also connects you to another community; these are essential components of positive aging that help keep us mentally fit, something we academics worry about a lot.

D: Absolutely. And speaking of physical well-being, you are eighty and still teaching dance.

E: Yeah, sometimes I ask myself if I should still be doing it. Some of the people I teach are not even forty. But then I think, why not? I love it. I worry that younger people might devalue me, so I don't always share my age. But when I do, they are very positive and say it's important for them to have role models. Our aging is so different from that of previous generations. We are lucky that so many of us are remaining vibrant into old age.

D: Evi, it's not that I disagree with what you're saying, but I believe it's also important to acknowledge that we've had some exceptionally good luck (*knocking on wood*) physically. At eighty you have the ability to dance. At seventy I have the ability to ride, and I feel incredibly blessed. "Role model," yes, but "role model" with a big "thank you" to the powers that be, because I don't know how much of a role model I could be if I hadn't aged with a certain physical capacity. My 101-year-old mother (who died this year) used to remind me that it takes courage and inner strength to maintain your self and your relationships as your body begins to say, "No."

E: Well, that's true. Funny you should mention offering thanks, because in my study of aging and spirituality, I came across gratitude practice, in which you ask yourself, "What am I grateful for today?" (Richmond) No two people will respond

alike. But giving thanks keeps alive engagement and passion for life. I can't tell you how often I hear young people wonder if they can change or start something new, because they are already fifty-five! I cannot fathom what they are thinking! People's beliefs constrain them. Aging well is partly a belief system. If you believe there are no constraints because of what the numbers say, then you just go ahead and do things.

D: But again that's partly an issue of privilege. It's having enough money and the good health to do it. Still, I see your point. I worry that when I retire, I'm going to become a couch potato—I already have such tendencies. I'm also worried about isolation and loneliness. To have community seems really important to me. But it is not always obvious how to do that. I want to figure out how I can continue to participate in the university community after I retire, and I'm beginning to talk to other recent retirees about how that might happen—maybe even organize a support group.

E: Our discussion really makes me wonder, what is a community? After eighteen years in a women's studies community, I am only in close touch with you and Claire. I have a Jewish lesbian community, but mostly we get together on Jewish holidays. So this whole notion of who is your community and who you can really call upon is vexing.

D: Speaking of community, this past year I had a strange experience at the annual National Women's Studies Association conference. When Bonnie [Thornton Dill] was chairing a plenary, she asked if there was anyone in the audience who had been involved in the 1977 founding conference. When three of us raised our hands, she asked us come up on stage. Everybody applauded, and it felt good, but it also felt really weird. And I'll tell you why. It's as if people were actually applauding because we are really old, just visual icons of NWSA history. Those feelings of marginalization or "otherness" are new for me, and I suppose that newness is a measure of prior privilege.

E: Yes, that's why it's important to remain active and visible. I have always loved teaching, partly because you can choose to teach what you love, but, and this is important, I just realized that teaching also makes me visible. I matter—because I'm a teacher, and if I'm honest, I think that mattering is part of the impulse. This makes me think of Schlossberg's work on marginality and mattering and her work on retirement, helpful

- resources. So when I go to dance camps and conferences, I like to teach there, I like to be somebody who has a role.
- D: Right. I guess that's part of my anxiety for when I retire. What will be my role? What will be my place?
- E: Yes, that's really important. These questions are central to a really great anthology, *Women Confronting Retirement*, one of the first to give voice to women's experiences (Bauer-Maglin and Radosh). But there was something else I wanted to mention. The American University is part of a national adult education program where peers teach each other [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, OLLI]. Maybe it's too early for you to make up your mind about what you're going to be doing a few years from now, but if you let it be a process, what you're drawn to may emerge more clearly, perhaps surprisingly.
- D: Well, it may. It's a strange thing to be near retirement, because we have worked so hard for so long it's difficult to imagine just stopping. Partly I really look forward to it, because I do get tired. I think, "Oh, I can sleep in." But (as you may have noticed by now) I also have anxieties! It's not an existential crisis but more in-the-back-of-the-mind questions: "Okay, so now what?" Those feelings of being a little marginalized—occasionally, I feel them at work, especially now that the department knows that I'm retiring in two years. I was advised to take a don't-tell-anybody stance. But there's no way you can *not* tell, because people in the department are doing long-range planning. Now that people know, they even make comments in meetings. When we were trying to decide a tenure case recently, somebody said something like, "Well, if you vote for this person you're not going to be the one experiencing the consequences."
- E: But it's important not to start pulling back and to keep in mind that you bring wisdom and experience.
- D: I think that's true. People certainly call on me to step in, and I am consulted a lot behind the scenes. And I do have a sense of my own authority at work. Then, too, there are ways in which I will be happy to leave the university as it is today, because it's not the same university as the one I entered. It's much more like a corporation.
- E: To be honest, Debby, there is a part of me that still has not fully accepted that I am retired. I have never completely lost the sense that I'm working, that I have things to do. I still

- don't read a novel in the daytime. I wait until I'm in bed and my daytime work is done. Of course when I taught literature, reading novels was work, complete with underlining and marginal notes! (*laughter*) There are times when existential issues—mortality and life's meaning—arise in ways they didn't when I was working full-time. I probably didn't have time for them.
- D: Do you think about a legacy—as a feminist writer and thinker?
- E: The only time I think about a legacy is when I worry about what I should do with my papers. Which to keep, which to throw away? Is anyone going to be interested in them? Should I put them in a Jewish archive or a lesbian one? And now I'm thinking about everything differently because my partner Lee [Knefelkamp] just retired from Columbia Teacher's College (after twenty-plus years of commuting), and now I am part of a retired couple, so I feel more "retired" than I was before! When I retired, I retired into two years of finishing my dissertation, which was just like being on sabbatical. (*laughter*). . . . You know, still thinking about the role model thing—I could be a good one or a bad one, because I haven't reached a place of just "being." One of the things I like about the dance, is that in it, I am most fully present, like you with your riding. On the other hand, I have not given up "doing." Some say a good goal for aging is to accept just "being," but I don't think I'm there.
- D: Do you want to be?
- E: Not really. But I'm there more than I ever was before. At this age you revisit stages of your life. When I didn't yet have a career, I was just floating and had no sense of purpose. So I worry: could retirement become a version of that? I surely don't have answers. All I know is that it's a continuing process which you meet every day in a different way. You know, I've been studying theories of aging and found that there are conceptual differences between "positive, successful, and conscious aging." I also discovered two excellent online newsletters that summarize research on positive aspects of aging (*Positive Aging* [Gergen] and *Human Values in Aging* [Moody]). One of the things that Cohen demonstrated in his research is that those who keep active in the arts are not only happier but have better physical health and fewer doctor visits.
- D: And you've been painting. You have a lot of creative outlets.
- E: I've actually written more easily and with greater passion since I retired. I hadn't expected that, but the kind of

- writing women's studies encouraged, in which the academic is both personal and political, made it possible. I felt good about writing my intellectual autobiography for Ginsberg's anthology (2008).
- D: Well, I can agree with that. I don't want to do the kind of academic, cultural theory that felt so *de rigueur* for a long time. That demand, I think, silenced me to some extent, though I wrote one essay in which I tried to work through the encounter with postmodernism (Rosenfelt) and I've written others since unconstrained by those concerns. But the project I'm working on now is going to be different—a memoir and oral history about the urban commune in which I lived throughout most of the 1970s. It will definitely carry over into my retirement—so I shouldn't say I have no plans!
- E: It will be liberating. You can write whatever you want!
- D: I wonder if collective living in the 1970s will be of interest to anybody now! But I care about the topic, and the project is expanding to include the social history of some of the groups and organizations to which we belonged. Working on it is obviously connected to my search for community now, though I didn't realize that when I started the project. I'd like to share space someday again with other like-minded people as I did back then.
- E: And working collaboratively, as we are now, and as we did on the Kovács essay (Beck and Rosenfelt) is such an enlivening process. I was going to say one more thing—when I was talking about women and aging in this study group I'm in . . .
- D: You're in a study group, too? (*laughter*)
- E: Yeah, and we were talking about the need for support groups around aging, the way we had consciousness-raising groups in the early years of feminism.
- D: That's what I want. I want a support group. And I want there to be a feminist blog on aging—but I want someone else to do it! I've been happy recently to see a lot of pretty decent films about older people—*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Amour*, *Nebraska*, several documentaries. And I do believe that creativity is important to positive aging, but I also think it's critical to recognize that there are some real limitations on us as we age, and that we should not ignore this reality. I worry about how I'll handle the limitations, but I also think of these as challenges, or “struggles,” that I share with others and perhaps can

address jointly with them, in a way that feels purposeful and can give meaning to my life. I suppose that as a leftist feminist I still believe in struggle more than in acceptance.

- E: I understand what you're saying, but I have found myself searching for other life strategies; for example, I've tried to practice “loving kindness” toward myself and others. I found Brach's book *Radical Acceptance* really helpful. I try to be at peace with myself.
- D: That's so non-Jewish, Evi. (*laughter*)
- E: I guess I've become a Jew Bu|ddhist| or whatever they call it. Breathe. Stay grounded. Keep curiosity alive, remain flexible, explore spirituality. Many believe that people who have some spiritual dimension to their lives are more content.
- D: I think that's probably true, but I don't think I've ever had that dimension, though I do feel a need to spend time with the rhythms of the natural world. I think that's probably as close as I come to “spirituality.”
- E: That's what Mary Oliver's poetry does; she sees prayer in nature.
- D: I met her last summer in Provincetown. Talk about community!
- E: They have a community where she lives on Cape Cod? They look out for each other?
- D: They absolutely do. They bring each other food. They drop by to see if you're okay, or just to talk. They have their own apartments or houses, sometimes in the same building. I liked that model, though for most this is a summer community only.
- E: I know you're wondering whether you should continue to live in your beautiful house alone, or whether to find a way of living in a physical community.
- D: I'd like to be in some kind of physical community again, but it's going to take some inventiveness and labor to make this next stage of life be what I want it to be. I have a friend who has moved into a retirement home and finds a sense of community there, but I don't feel ready for that yet.
- E: Lee and I have not discussed our next step either. Maybe other people would prepare more.
- D: Perhaps that's another stage, and we're not quite there yet.
- E: Or are not willing to be. You really don't know when the right time is, because that's the sort of thing, well, I guess, you choose it or it chooses you.
- D: Yeah. But now I do know it's the right time to stop! (*laughter*)

Postscript

January 2016, two years after our dialogue.

Contrary to the anxiety I expressed in our dialogue, I'm enjoying retirement with an almost embarrassing gusto! I find the release from stress to be an unexpected blessing: the stress of increasing degrees of surveillance, reporting, paperwork; of shepherding younger faculty toward promotion in an increasingly competitive environment; of adapting to ever-changing teaching technologies; and of responding to the changes within women's studies itself. I still serve on some student committees, and I remain connected to the life of my department in various ways, but it was definitely time to move on. I am working on my memoir/oral history about collective living, doing some volunteer work (erratically), and finding more time to spend with friends and family. I know that the next years will be challenging in many ways, not least in refashioning a selfhood that no longer depends on my identity as a university professor. So many question marks—I'm not even sure where, ultimately, I will choose to live. But somehow the anxiety has evaporated, to be replaced by a sense of contentment, even of anticipation. Such a welcome surprise!

—Deborah Rosenfelt

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