

- Well thank you very much, Mary. I wanted to get some background information from you first. So if you could say your name.

- Mary Ferrel Bednarowski.

- Thank you, and are you lay or clergy?

- I am a laywoman, a Roman Catholic laywomen.

- Yes, thank you very much.

- There is no other kind.

- Really. (laughs) Good point. Where and when were you born, Mary?

- I was born in Green Bay, Wisconsin in 1942.

- Really?

- Yeah.

- Okay, Green Bay.

- Mm-hm.

- Where did you go to school, graduate or divinity school?

- I went to graduate school at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in English. And we moved to St. Louis. And I spent a semester in the PhD program in English at St. Louis University. And then we moved to Minneapolis. And the Jesuit who was my advisor at St. Louis University said when I asked, would you write me a reference letter? He said, "Oh don't go in to the English Department. "You'll never come out again. "Go into American Studies." He had his PhD in American Studies. That was best advice anybody ever gave me.

- What did he mean by you'll never come out again?

- I think his sense was that people didn't finish their degrees or enough of them didn't that it was alarming.

- Yes.

- So obedient

(Interviewer laughs) young Catholic thing that I was I said, "Okay Father. And it was perfect for me.

- Why was it perfect for you?

- It was perfect because I had a kind of interdisciplinary inclination that I discovered retrospectively. So I had written my dissertation, my MA thesis and it turned out also my dissertation on 19th century American spiritualism. And I just got very involved. It was the poetry, the MA thesis was the poetry of a spiritualist medium.

- Oh interesting.

- And I just kind of moved away from an interest in the poetry which was pretty derivative, pretty cornball. And just went interested in spiritualists and their crises in faith. And I think, I think appealed to me so much because these were the years of Vatican II, just post Vatican II. And I was undergoing my own crisis of faith. So those Victorian stories made perfect sense to me.

- Of course.

- But again I didn't make the connection immediately. I didn't know why I loved those so much and thought, "Oh I get this." (Interviewer laughs)

- It so often happens that way doesn't it? You understand retrospectively, yeah. So what kind of work or ministry were you doing at the time of Reimagining?

- I was teaching at United Seminary. And I think because I was always trying to maintain my identity at United. As someone who was not in ministry. Even though people would say well teaching is ministry. I was not receptive to that. Even though I knew exactly what they meant. So I did not think of myself as being in ministry although many of students of course were going into ministry and I loved the idea that they were doing it. So you know, just identity crisis after crisis. It was always non-traumatic and clarifying for me so maybe crisis isn't the right word.

- Yeah, yes. And could you say a little bit more about what you taught there and some of what you've written?

- I was hired as an adjunct professor at United in 1976. And director of the MA program, the MARS program, Master of Arts in Religious Studies because my friend Gail Yates who became to director of women's studies at the University of Minnesota had recommended me.

- Okay.

- We had just moved back to Minneapolis this time from Milwaukee. And, we did a lot of moving.

- You did (laughs)?

- Yeah. And I was hired to teach a course at United on women in American religious history. Which I had already taught at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. And it was one of my major, emerging interests even though the resources are pretty scarce in those years. So I ended up at United kind of through a fluke in some ways. Because I'd gone to graduate school with Gail. And because she applied to be director of women's studies. So the dean interviewed me when she recommended me. And we talked about whether it would matter that I was Catholic. We both decided it wouldn't matter it would be interesting. I was sort of, well I was kind of diversity embodied for those years with my American Studies degree.

- Yes.

- The fact that I was Roman Catholic, I was a woman, I had an ethnic last name, I had a secular degree. So I had felt lucky ever since that that happened. And I gradually moved into full time teaching there. And taught courses on religion in American culture. New religions. Women in religion and literature in addition to women in American religious history, religious autobiography, different kinds of literature courses. And then I team taught some of the introductory courses with my MDiv oriented colleagues. Theological method, religious studies method. I had a very good time there.

- It sounds like it, it really does.

- And I acquired, you know if you're in Catholic school for 16 years from first grade through graduate school, you do have a theological education. Even if it not named as such. And so I acquired another one, a different kind at United just through being there. So I'm a bit of a theological hybrid I would say. And grateful that I've had those experiences.

- Yes, yeah. And I'm sure it's good for United, too worked out well.

- Oh I would just love to think that.

(both laugh)

- How and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- You know I noticed that question as I was looking through the questions you sent me and I was thinking when did I think in terms of feminist theology? And I think it was probably in the early years at United. I was long since interested in women in American religious history. And being at United began to make me think about the theological creativity of women. And there was the overlap with new religions because so many of them have women leaders or they gave women opportunities for leadership that were not possible in the established traditions. And it took me a long time to think of nuns as women in American religious history. But I began to catch on to that reality too that they were actors, agents in the history of religion and culture in America. So I would say that was in the '70s I became more consciously aware that this was theological

work of a different and more creative kind. With a different entry point, the gender issues was a different entry point. Into the study of theology.

- Well thank you, that's really helpful. Should we move to Reimagining?

- Sure. And could you say some about your relationship to the Reimagining community, what roles you played?

- You know I was thinking that over too and I, the details are a little fuzzier than I would have assumed. But I remember going to one of the big planning meetings. I think I only went to one of those. But Sally Hill asked if I would be on the planning committee for Thursday night, for the opening night. Sue Seid Martin, Madeleine Sue Martin was also in that committee, Pam Jurne was on that committee, Karen Diamond, did you ever run into her?

- No.

- She was a Presbyterian clergy woman. I think she was at central Presbyterian at St. Paul then she moved to New York. So she wasn't living here when the actual first 1993 Reimagining occurred. She was back for it. So she was not a part of all of that planning. But Sally, and Sue, and Pam, and I met it seems like forever. (interviewer laughs) And it was, we probably met for the first time, it might have been as early as 1989.

- Wow.

- But certainly 1990. And I was thinking, "We're meeting now by the conference?" "You know, 1993, good grief." But that conference. I'm sure you've heard this from other people. There was not a unanimous sense of what shape it would even take.

- Right!

- And I remember one discussion early on, might this just be a gathering of 50 women? Because Sally's idea was to bring together some of the theologians that we had all been reading for, I don't know, mutual enlightenment. And so it began to grow from something pretty small and focused into this great big thing. And I can't remember by what time in the history of the planning it became apparent that there were going to be a lot of people there rather than 100 or 200, so I was on that committee, and I think that was kind of my major function. And I would hear about all the other committees that were meeting. And because Madeleine Sue Martin was on our committee, I knew a lot about the ritual committee.

- Yes.

- It seems to me, this is the way I remember it, that little Thursday night planning committee involved ritual. Then I think I became fairly clear that there needed to be a rituals committee. And maybe there was one from the beginning. I don't remember.

- Sure.

- But Sue kept meeting with us. I remember one time being in Sue's house and listening to lost of different kinds of music, trying to decide what would be the appropriate music for the whole conference and especially for Thursday night. And then I, someone must have asked me. I can't remember who asked me. Maybe the people in that committee, if I would give a presentation on the opening night. And I was very honored to be asked and terrified at the thought of it.

- Why terrified?

- Well, it just seemed kind of overwhelming. And Bernice Rain was going to be one of the other speakers.

- Did I back up for just one minute? How did you know Sally Hill?

- Sally is a United graduate, but she had graduated before I got there.

- Okay.

- And it seems to me that in the, probably in the early '80s, I was on the local faith and order committee for the greater Minneapolis Consul of Churches.

- Okay.

- And she was on that committee also. In fact, I think she sat that committee and the one in St. Paul as well in the Minnesota Consul of Churches. And I'm pretty sure at that time I got to know her.

- Yeah.

- And just enjoyed her a lot.

- Yes.

- I just liked her.

- Yes.

- So when she asked me to do things, I would say yes. (interviewer laughs)

- Oh. How would you describe that process? It was several years.

- Oh yes.

- Yes.

- It really was.

- What was that process like?

- Because I was part of such a small committee, it was a wonderful process. We really mulled a million things over. I don't remember any kind of difficulties other than trying to do it all and beginning to realize how big it was going to be. Hmm, I'm not quite sure what else to say about that.

- Yeah, that's helpful. I would like to know what was it like, do you remember what it was like when you actually gave that opening presentation at the conference?

- Yeah, I do. I was, of course, a wreck. I think that was a normal response.

- Yes.

- It felt like a heavy responsibility, but usually, I'm running kind of close to the deadline, but I had that thing ready to go three or four weeks ago and I had several people read it. But I do remember the format, some kind of a see-through podium and our instructions were to move this way, and that way, and that way so we addressed all of the corners of the room. And do you know, Mary? You must know, Mary Kay Mettinger.

- Yes, I do, yes.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yes.

- And at one point, I can still remember the way that I was looking out and I saw Mary Kay's smiling face and I thought, "Oh, I feel better now." (both laugh) It was one of those grounding moments.

- Yes.

- But I also remember that Marlene White Rabbit Halimal was rubbing my shoulders before it was my turn.

- Really?

- That was, I never make puns on purpose. It just happened to be by accident, but it was a touching moment. (interviewer laughs) Because my speech was ready

- Yes.

- And because other people had looked at it, and because we were busy that day. I don't know what we were all doing. I remember being at the convention center. I don't think we were putting up crepe paper, but it was that kind of stuff.

- Right.

- By the time the moment came, even though I had stage fright in that instant, I had spent the day having a pretty good time.

- Oh, I'm glad.

- With the rest of the gang.

- Now I don't know if you remember this, but I was listening to your presentation and I was struck by the fact that you, early on, said something along the lines of, "We've been waiting "for this for a very long time."

- Yeah.

- Something like that. And the room just exploded with applause and you said something like, "I only have 20 minutes," or something. Did you remember how that felt? Did you expect that kind of reaction?

- No, no.

- Yeah.

- I didn't, but very quickly I knew that it was a receptive audience

- Yes.

- And I didn't, I didn't have anything to worry about. I just had to do my best.

- Yes.

- Because people wanted it to go well, the whole thing.

- Yes.

- Not just my presentation, but the whole thing.

- Yes.

- People were excited to be there.

- Yes.

- It really was a festive spirit. It was so damn much fun. It really, really was.

- Do you have some other favorite memories from that conference?

- I remember the, what was the controversial litany?

- Milk and honey.

- Yeah.

- The milk and honey.

- Yes, yes.

- And the nectar between the thighs.

- Yes (laughs).

- I remember thinking, "Oh, my goodness!"

(interviewer laughs) And I looked up and it's Kay Vanderbort is somebody you probably would have known. I had been on a women's interfaith Holocaust tour together.

- Oh!

- Kate Vanderbort and Mary Kay Mettinger, so that was how I knew some of the women who were there. The wisdom ways who run the web center women. And I remember just kind of looking up and seeing Kay Vanderbort's eyes and we just thought, "Whoa!" (interviewer laughs) That was a moment that I especially liked.

- Yes, yes.

- I liked it Bernice Johnson Righton burst into song.

- Yes.

- I enjoyed that a lot. I was so startled. I thought, "Oh my gosh, how wonderful and why not?" The sweet honey and the rock, the concert.

- Yes.

- Pam Splay and all of that, that spontaneous dancing at the end. I wonder. I have no idea what that music was, but I'd love to hear that again. Must be somewhere.

- It is!

- Something must be recorded on something.

- It's digitized.

- Oh!

- We have it!

- That's fun to know.

- Yes, yes.

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- Now after '93, you were involved in other ways,

- Yeah.

- Other conferences.

- I don't remember missing any of the conferences. I spoke again in 1998 and I am trying to think. I think Pam Jurne and I, Sally and I, I can't quite remember. In 2003, the last meeting.

- Yes.

- We invited two younger women, Claire Bishop and, and, Rachel.

- Rachel Gaffron?

- Yeah.

- Yes.

- To speak.

- Yes.

- And they then wrote a book of essays about younger women and feminism and it just seemed it was time to hear other voices, to hear younger voices. So I remember being at, some of the middle ones run together.

- Sure.

- I'm trying to think of the one where Mary Daily and

- Rebecca Walker.

- Rebecca Walker got into

- Yes.

- A little tiff over generations.

- Yes. What do you remember about that?

- I just remember thinking, "Probably inevitable, "but a shame."

- Yes, yeah.

- And it made me laugh to read Madeleine Albright saying, "There's a special place in hell for women "who don't support each other (laughs)."

- Right!

- And I guess that just popped into my mind as you were asking me about that moment.

- Yes. Yeah.

- I just said, "Oh my gosh, "we have so much work to do."

- Right.

- What are we doing together? But there was one, I think it was 1998 where some young women of color were on the stage talking about how excluded they felt and I remember how much work went into trying to make it more inclusive and how defeated we felt. Not only defeated, but that feeling like, "Oh my gosh, we just don't know how to do this."

- Yes.

- And feeling sad about that.

- Yeah.

- Thinking okay, we keep at it.

- Yes. You know, that has been a recurring theme

- Yeah.

- As one of the challenges.

- Yeah.

- Do you have any thoughts on why it never really, there was always an effort to have diverse speakers, but the audience tended not to be the group. Do you have ideas on why it remained pretty much a white organization?

- Oh, I have a few thoughts about that, I guess. Part of it, one of the challenges in different communities and even though I throw up my hands and say, "Oh, my gosh!" when people say it's a luxury to be a white feminist, I can't even go on about all of that and all of the complexities of it, other than to acknowledge that at some levels, that's true and at other levels, it isn't, that there's other work that needs to be done. In communities of color, that seems to be more important. I think that might be another reason. I'm not certain why the pattern persists, but it's certainly an historical pattern. It's nothing new.

- Right. Yeah, yeah. That's helpful. The backlash. Now I know you're aware of it. It sounds like it didn't affect you directly.

- No, it didn't.

- Yeah.

- Other than, you know, my compassion for my friends who were. Sally acknowledged feeling a depression after all of that, and I think it's in the Reimagining book that Nancy Berniking and Pam Jurne edited where she said that when she, as overwhelmed as she felt like that, when she, by that, when she realized the extent to which gay and lesbian people at that time, we didn't have quite so many initials, I guess, by then. I'm trying to remember. Anyway, the pain they had suffered and yet they persisted in the church. She said something to the effect that she knew she just better get over this. I didn't see it coming, which is laughable. (interviewer laughs) I mean, it's ludicrous and it's awful, but it's that point about history. We lose our

history. I know enough about women and American religious history. I should have known enough to have anticipated that, but we just, it felt to me so harmless. And I don't mean harmless in effect, but how could anybody not see that this was a revitalization of the churches? A demonstration of the resilience and the depth of Christianity, not something that was going to threaten it.

- Yeah.

- I was deeply shocked (laughs).

- You weren't the only one!

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- But I should have known better.

- Well, and already you started to answer this question, but how do you account for it? The backlash.

- Well, you can look at historical patterns and one of my favorite moments in research in my very early days of doing research on the subject, I was putting together a speech in something like 1974, I think, in Milwaukee on women in American religious history, and I was desperately searching for sources because there really weren't very many things that pulled it all together.

- Wow.

- So I looked at Gerda Lerner's book, Women in American History, and when I looked up religion in the index, it said see dissent.

- Really?

- And I just pulled together all of the work I had done on women like Mary Baker Eddy, or Mother Ann Lee, or Helen of Blavatsky, or Ellen White. All of the women leaders of alternative religions that some people call cults. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh. There is that pattern." So the fear of women's theological creativity, that is always seems dissenting, and it is! I mean, it has to be up to a point. You have to dissent in order to say we deserve to be heard. More than deserve. We have lots to contribute. How could you not want to hear how women experience their religious traditions?

- If I remember correctly in your book, you talk about dissenting and conserving as well.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yeah.

- I think that is exactly what is going on, or at least one of the things that's going on.

- Yeah.

- And I'm especially interested in how people use their early religious formations in creative ways.

- Say some more about that.

- Well, I have been, for many years, collecting stories that people tell about moments of insight, or moments of, I used to call them lump-in-the-throat stories, but people find that a little sentimental. It can be

- Yeah.

- A little bit sentimental, but kind of where the brain and the heart meet in the throat.

- Yes.

- And you have a physical response that tells you you know something deeply, and it's both intellectual and emotional.

- Yes.

- And I like those stories where people will say I realized that the Eucharist is deeply meaningful to me, even though I could no longer participate, et cetera, et cetera. I would find some alternative Eucharist to go to, feminist Eucharist, or no matter what we say about the Bible, there is a depth to it that we don't want to give up on. And here's a story about the moment where I realized that. Those sorts of stories.

- Yes.

- Or, maybe Meinrad Craighead is a good example. The Litany of a Great River. Have you ever looked at that?

- No, I know her. I don't know that, yeah.

- Well, it's a lovely book, has her paintings and it has litanies that are kind of natural, litanies do natural phenomena-like, like a river, or mountains, or some such thing. And she talks about how, as a young Catholic girl, the rhythm of the litany became part of her body wisdom. So the form of the litany shows up in her later work, which is not a traditional litany. It's not a litany of the saints. It's not the litany of the blessed virgin or the sacred heart.

- Yes.

- A different kind of litany, but the form is there, the rhythm is there. And where did that come from? That early religious training that still moves her deeply and that she draws on, even though she said she's no, she said she can't leave the church. There's no way she could leave it, but she's not in the institution.

- Yes.

- I haven't heard much about her lately, but I think she's still alive.

- Yeah, yeah. Why do you think that intrigues you so much?

- Because I've always, that's an interesting question that I ask myself. I think because I have moved back and forth in terms of my relationship to Catholicism. I was just profoundly formed by that tradition. I have a Catholic mind, I think, Catholic psyche, but I'm mad as hell about lots of things. But the rituals still move me. I spend time with people who act in powerfully just and merciful ways out of their devotion to that tradition, again, wherever they stand in relation to it. And intellectually, I just find it very interesting the extent to which early, early religious ideas can shape later intellectual work. Have you ever run across John Caputo?

- No.

- This is a non-woman, but he taught at Syracuse. Villanova for many years in Syracuse and he writes deconstructionist things. He popularized Derrida

- Okay.

- Insofar as that's possible. (interviewer laughs) But grew up in an Italian Catholic household, was a Christian brother for a while and then married and had kids. But he has just very interesting things to say about what's still there even though he's an atheist. I think of him as an atheist. Maybe he's an agnostic. I can't remember which A-word he uses.

- Right.

- But he certainly is not a traditional theist in any way at all, but is not at all winning to discount the social justice work of religious believers and he has moved definitions for God. He said God does that exist, God insists. The idea of God is powerful enough to move people to, whatever is behind that, whatever multiple things are behind that traditional word, God, something is going on there. Right. But relay it back to Reimagining. There was both a dissent and a conserving at the same time, would you say?

- Sure, I think people were taking the symbols and the rituals, the teachings, the scriptures of the tradition very, very seriously. So the dissent, it seems to me, was from the narrowness of the understanding of all of that that makes up Christianity. The inability to recognize that if you don't hear from half the members, or if you're afraid of them or suspicious of them, or condescending toward them, that's not a good thing. The

obvious.

- Yeah, yeah.

- So it wasn't just the dissent and conservation. It was also, I think, expansion. So people saying things like, this sounds pretty obvious, but saying things like, this, whatever the this might be, could mean more than one thing, or it could mean something other than what we thought it did for centuries or insisted it did, or questions like, or this could mean many things all at the same time and it deepens. I really should have some antecedent here for my pronouns.

(interviewer laughs) I seem to be saying it and them, and they a lot. But to discover that deepens the tradition and broadens it. It doesn't threaten it. (women laugh)

- And I think you're already, in a certain sense, doing this, but I'll still ask this. How would you define Reimagining?

- Well, I think Reimagining, just the process of it, or even saying such a thing as Reimagining exists, it requires the acknowledgement that all of these things were imagined in the first place and that to imagine them is part of creative human work and therefore, if they have been imagined, they can be reimagined and we can see things in new ways. We don't have to be so damn scared of it all the time, which leads me to questions like, what is theology for? Is it to just hold it all together as tightly as possible so nothing can ooze out? Or is it always to be opening up to more and more without losing sight of some thing that's still familiar to the community. I think you can't get so far out ahead of the community that they no longer recognize what you're talking about. Although, some people do that it and it eventually benefits the community. You can probably tell I'm an abstract thinker. (women laugh)

- Well, I'm enjoying this. This is wonderful.

- How kind of you.

- (laughs) No, it's true. There were, of course, critics who claimed that's exactly what Reimagining did, that went so far outside the boundary that they didn't recognize it, but.

- Yeah, and I think the boundaries are broader, I think they're more porous. As we are saying these days. And I've always thought, I think this about literature when, let's say, poets or fiction writers use material that's recognizably part of a tradition. In this case, Christianity or more specifically, Catholicism, that those symbols can go on journeys far beyond the boundaries of traditional doctrine and they make their way back transformed and, I think, more powerful. And again, more resilient. I keep using the word resilient, I like that word.

- It's good, it is! Do you remember? Getting concrete here for a minute (laughs). This has been wonderful, though.

- I don't get that.

- Don't worry, we'll get abstract again. I promise you. Do you remember? Were you part of the formation of the community after the conference? Do you remember why it happened and how it happened?

- Well, the sounds a little goofy and a little crass in some ways, but there was money leftover. (interviewer laughs) I remember, this wasn't my specific responsibility, but I certainly heard about the worries, would we make enough money to come out even and if we didn't, where would it come from? And there was money left over once it concluded. And I think part of it was just thinking, now what should we do with that? That is my memory of it, anyway.

- Sure, yeah.

- So one of the ideas was to have a newsletter that Nancy and Pam edited. And I remember going to, I think they were editorial meetings for the Reimagining newsletter.

- Do you remember anything about those meetings? What that was like? What they were trying to do?

- I remember talking about themes for particular issues. Who would contribute, what would be in it, essays, reviews. It's a pretty general memory.

- Yeah.

- I don't remember a particular moment

- Sure.

- Where some crisis was resolved or emerged.

- Yes, yeah.

- But it seemed to me that, it was just kind of fun figuring out how to make this work.

- Yeah, yeah. And it did, it went on for 10 years (laughs).

- Yeah.

- Okay, here is a more abstract question.

- Okay, oh, good. (women laugh)

- How did feminist theology affect the structure and functioning of the community?

- Well, I think there was so much effort to be egalitarian, but I think sometimes that had gotten away.

- Say some more about that, how?

- Well, I don't know much about it personally because I was on that small committee.

- Right.

- So it wasn't a problem with my small committee,

- Yeah.

- But just sort of grapevine stuff about how to proceed, should there be collaborative leadership, should there be one or two acknowledged leaders and some lament that here we were, doing the best we could to be egalitarian and it was taking a damn long time

- (laughs) yes!

- To make things happen.

- Right.

- But I don't remember specific incidents. I never found myself in a situation where I had to say, okay, I vote for this way of going forward, but not for that way of going forward.

- And other than egalitarian, were there other ways you thought that they tried to do it in a feminist way?

- There were certainly, I suppose this is related to egalitarianism, but I'm concerned that every voice be heard, which also can be cumbersome and time-consuming. So the ideals, the ideals were tough to live out often. And what was your experience with that? Have you heard about that since?

- Absolutely.

- Yeah.

- Exactly that thing, yes.

- Yeah.

- Yes. And there came a point when you just had to get things done. You're planning a conference (laughs).

- Somebody had to make it.

- Right, exactly. Exactly, yeah.

- And I think at one point, there was some, I don't think it was acrimony, but maybe different perceptions of the role that ritual would play. And I had always thought to myself that the Reimagining conference, the idea of it, was the gift of primarily the Protestant women to the community. But the ritualizing of it was the gift of Catholic women, and I always liked that, but I think there were some discussions, again, this was grapevine information for me, about how much ritual there should be at the later conferences, was that important, as important, as the presentations.

- When you say it was the gift of the Catholic women, Sue Side Martin and Madelin Sue Martin was huge.

- Yeah.

- In planning it.

- Oh, she was.

- Absolutely informative.

- Yeah, she was.

- Did that continue to be the case that, do you happen to know that Catholic women were really involved in the ritual planning?

- I don't think it was only Catholic women, but my retrospective perception is that there were a lot of Catholic women had gone there

- Yes, yes.

- In the ritual, partly through Sue's connections.

- Yes, yeah.

- And I can't remember what year Sue died.

- I don't remember that either, actually.

- It now seems like kind of a long time ago.

- Yeah, yes.

- Maybe as long as 10 years?

- Yeah.

- I think she was dead by 2003?

- I think that's right because already in one of the quarterly publications it was mentioning that she was ill, so. And that was around 200, 2001, maybe.

- Yeah. And she was sick the whole time. She had, what was that called? I can't remember. Some rare disease that attacked the soft tissues.

- Oh, my goodness. I didn't know that.

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- And I think most people with that disease had lung issues and she didn't have so much lung issues, but I know that her tear ducts dried up, her salivary glands. It was a really tough kind of a total body bad thing that she had.

- And she had this for years?

- Yeah, she did.

- Wow.

- Yeah, she certainly had it when I met her and I think I, I don't think I knew her before we started these planning meetings. I think that's how I met her.

- She's not someone I knew, but I know from hearing from other people, she was so loved and respected.

- Oh, my gosh! And she was a tough cookie. She had very, very high standards for how you plan ritual. It's not an off the cuff kind of thing.

- Yes.

- You plan. What is this for, what are we trying to accomplish? She just was a lovely person. Loves of fun, but also demanding of herself and the people who worked with her,

- Yes.

- Which I admired.

- Yes. And lead to really good results (laughs).

- Oh yeah.

- One of the things I found in the archives is her description of ritual and her philosophy behind it

- Oh, okay.

- And it's very, it's a really important thing to find.

- Oh! I would think so, yes.

- Yeah, yeah. We have kind of talked some about this, about the challenges. You have mentioned some. Are there any others that you would think of or challenges that the community faced and how they addressed them?

- Well, I think the fact that the community went out of existence, at least briefly in 2003.

- Yeah.

- Suggests that this was one very intense moment in history, and it's hard to know how to maintain that kind of intensity, and I think the, for me anyway, the fact that it persisted as long as it did was a surprise because I don't, again, there was the leftover money

- Right (laughs).

- That somebody needed to do something with, I guess. Or we had the chance to. But I don't think there was much sense that I remember. Maybe I just wasn't aware of it, that this would go on. My assumption was that this was one big bang up thing and then that was it. So how do you carry on? Do you carry on? How do you carry on? Why do you carry on? And I think that why question got pretty big

- Yes.

- By the time. Were you part of the, what would you call it? The dissolution?

- I was. I was on the,

- Dissolution?

- I know, yes, yes.

- The waning.

- (laughs) I was, I was on the coordinating council then.

- Oh.

- Yeah. And it was, people were very tired and it was a volunteer organization.

- Yeah, yeah.

- And just lack of funds, lack of energy, all of that.

- Yeah.

- Just finally, it was a grassroots for 10 years. Then it just.

- Yeah.

- Had to move on.

- Yeah.

- Yeah, yeah.

- But how interesting that it's rising again.

- Exactly.

- Yeah.

- Yeah, yeah. Significance. What aspects of Reimagining were most significant to you and why?

- Let me think about that for a second.

- Sure.

- I think there was something very moving and significant about the fact that this phrase always sounds condescending and boy, I sure don't mean it that way. Ordinary church women really put this together, and the academic women were involved. Everybody was, yes. But everybody was mixed up together.

- Yeah.

- And I didn't have a sense that. Any human community has hierarchies of various kinds, but I thought there was a pretty powerful sense that everybody had things to contribute and the volunteers were so astute and so filled with energy and so much fun, and so creative. I think just that is something to point to. What good things happen when lots of different kinds of women and the few good men come together

- Yes.

- To plan something. I love that.

- Yeah.

- And I remember Mary Hunt writing after that she didn't know where all that backlash had come from because for her, you know, as wonderful as it was, it was just another women's theological conference, no different than many she had been to.

- Right.

- So why, at that moment, at that time, did this one draw so much attention?

- And I guess the Presbyterian laymen was part of that, but why? Sally used to speculate that it had to do with issues of sexuality that were so acrimonious at that moment in the history of the Presbyterian Church USA, so maybe that was a kind of lightning rod. The goddess, the milk and honey that somehow really got people going. So I think there were specific things going on there that made it significant in terms of the adversarial atmosphere that followed it.

- Yes.

- But you know, adversarial stances towards women's theology, as we already discussed, is not new.

- Huh-uh, no.

- So why did it coalesce around that conference? I don't know.

- Yeah. Yeah.

- I remember reading something. I think it was newsletter from the laymen or something. A guy whose work I had admired at Princeton. Diagonies Ellen, he was a philosopher. I used to read his stuff and pretty interesting. He made a couple of comments on the presentation I had given and some pretty barbed critiques of what I had said. And so I looked at what I had said and the very next sentence, I qualified what I

had said in a way that would have responded to him. And I thought, "Did you not read the next sentence?" "Or did you not want to see that?"

- Yes.

- "Or did you not care? "Did you just want to make your case?" I was kind of disillusioned by that.

- Yes, yeah.

- So there are feminist theologians who have been so used to controversy for so long that that's exactly what they would expect, but I hadn't had much of that in my life. I just didn't do the kind of work that stirred up a lot of controversy.

- Yes.

- So, I thought, "Oh!"

(interviewer laughs) That's terrible! I am deeply shocked. I was deeply shocked.

- Yes, yeah. Well, I'm curious. Did your involvement in Reimagining in any way change your perspective either on feminist theology or on the church?

- I don't think so.

- Yeah.

- I mean, it probably confirmed my commitment to women's theological creativity.

- Yeah.

- And it confirmed my experience that it's going to be a long, hard road, that it always has been, it always will be, that we do lose our history and we have to regain it, some sense of our history.

- Yes.

- And when I would teach courses on women in American religious history and we would look at earlier centuries like Soriana. Do you know of her?

- I don't.

- She's a Mexican. Famous Mexican, seventeenth century writer.

- Oh, yes I do know her! Yes, I do, yes. Took me a minute.

- She had some very funny things to say, but she suffered a lot because she was an intellectual.

- Yes.

- And there wasn't much encouragement for that, and she got into trouble with the bishop. And one of her famous, maybe her most famous writing is called La Respuesta, the Response to the Bishop of Pueblo and she talks about the fact that, oh, she says if Aristotle had cooked more, if he'd spent more time in the kitchen, how did the rest of that go? (interviewer laughs)
It was very funny.

- Yes!

- And right on, but how difficult it was for her

- Yes.

- To lead a life of the intellect in the circumstances in which she found herself, but she was in a convent, so she had more opportunity than most.

- Yes.

- But when she cited Biblical passages and at first, my students would say, "Oh, that's so familiar!" And then, "Oh." (interviewer laughs) "All those years ago." Same Biblical passages, same arguments, same suffering.

- Yes. Same Biblical passages and arguments about women's?

- About women in the role of women and women needing to keep silence.

- Right, right.

- So you look at Anne Hutchinson, who probably was a pain in the butt in many ways in her community.

- Yes.

- Or Anne Bradstreet, or, you know, you go through every century and there it all is again. You think oh my gosh.

- Well, I can't resist asking. Do you feel like, is it just the same thing again and again? Is there progress? Have we gotten anywhere?

- I am ambivalent about that.

- Say some more about that.

- I guess that I was so idealistic 40 years ago, but I just thought this is so obvious. Of course it will all change, and it hasn't. It has changed some, but it's changed slowly. It goes backward and forward, just all the stuff about Hillary and young voters. And then, when I get discouraged, I think, "Okay toots," (interviewer laughs) we have our moments in history, we do what we can, we say what we can, and that's all we can do, is keep at it.

- So you call yourself toots?

- I do.

- I like that (laughs).

- On occasion, yeah. When I need to give myself little talking to.

- Pep talk?

- Yeah.

- That's good.

- Yeah.

- I may have to try that.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yes. I'm sorry, I was listening to the rest of what you said, but that really, I enjoyed that. (interviewer laughs)

- Well, thank you.

- Do you think that Reimagining made specific contributions to Christian theology and, or liturgy?

- Hmm, I guess I'd have to give that a little bit more thought also.

- Sure.

- I think it offered a powerful example of what's possible and a place to take off from.

- Yeah.

- Pointing to the significance of ritual and holding communities together.

- Yeah.

- I thought that was the role of ritual in Reimagining. It held some pretty diverse components together and I just love that about it. I think that's the major purpose of ritual, and then ritual gets us off our butts. I'm very interested, probably because I'm Catholic and the social justice aspects of liturgy and ritual. I always like it when I come across some mentioning of Reimagining in a book of some kind in American religious history texts. I think, "Oh, for heaven's sake! "It's not gone."

- Right, it's part of the history. Yes.

- Yeah.

- I just want to go back for a minute. Could you give an example of how the rituals serve to bring the different parts of the community together?

- I think this is pretty simplistic. I think when people sing together and dance together, they feel like they're together.

- Yeah.

- So there was kind of that right in the moment and the songs that we sang, that we would sing again at the other, that just evoked the whole magnificent spectacle of it!

- Yes.

- I think that was a big deal.

- Yeah.

- And probably, some little sense that there are a variety of ways to live out your feminist ideals, that it's not just talking and writing, it's singing, it's dancing, it's being together. And I like that. I like the way they work together.

- Yeah.

- And I am never too drawn to the head, heart dichotomy. I do think that in every idea, there is a lot of emotion. And in every emotion, there are a lot of ideas if you want to emphasize that aspect. Why did we? How would we articulate the insights that came out of those feelings? What underlay those feelings of

hopefulness and joy? And then, some of the more esoteric aspects of feminist theology come out of people's emotional lives as well as their intellectual lives.

- Yes.

- So I like it all mashed together, and then I like to take it apart, and then I like to put it (interviewer laughs) together again!

- That lump in the throat.

- Yeah, exactly.

- Yes.

- For me, that's a pretty powerful image.

- I could see why. Yeah.

- Yeah.

- As we're ending, this is wonderful. Can we look toward the future? And what do you think is the greatest legacy of the Reimagining community?

- Well I would repeat that since a lot of people, a lot of women, mostly women, who came from very different parts of church life but also overlapping parts of church life brought this off in a particular moment in history in a region of the country that, perhaps, isn't always given quite as much credit as I think it deserves for progressive thought.

- Yes. Yeah, it happened here.

- Yeah. I love that.

- Yeah, yes.

- A little regional pride.

- Yes (laughs)! What would you say Reimagining means today? What does Reimagining look like today?

- Hmm, I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. I mean, it's still a powerful memory, I think, for many people.

- Yes.

- So it can be still then, because it's a powerful memory, a jumping off place for more, which is obviously happening.

- Right.

- And I'm surprised that it's happening and I'm thrilled that it's happening.

- What do you think as you look at the churches today? What needs to be reimagined? Is it the same things?

- Well, I think about Pope Francis who was a non-woman,

- Yes.

- But what are we here for has to be reimagined, and gender has to be one of the categorizes that's reimagined along with that broader question, what is the church for and how do we all fit into it? Which gets me back to my question of, what is theology for? Is it a static category, or is a dynamic and creative category of inquiry?

- Yes.

- Is it proscriptive or is it evocative and forward looking, and ever opening up, but still grounded in the tradition? I think I've lost track of where I was going with that. (interviewer laughs)

- Reimagining for today.

- Oh, that's right, that's right. Why was I holding for it on that?

- I don't know. Well, I liked what you just said, so that's fine (laughs).

- Oh, thank you. You're very kind.

- Okay. Last specific question.

- Yeah?

- Very specific. Do you have recommendations for what should be included in the Reimagining website who would benefit from it? How could people find out about it, any of those things. And suggestions you might have.

- Well, I suppose there are a lot of vehicles, denominational newspapers, or The National Catholic Reporter or the Christian Century Common Wheel, all of those places that anybody in this group could think of.

- Yeah.

- I think it would be pretty interesting to have a feature that includes the sighting of Reimagining in other historical, American religious history textbooks or something. So I know that Anne Brody has mentioned it and one of the books that's she's. Do you know Anne Brody?

- I don't, no.

- Anne taught at Macalester and she taught at Carlton. First Carlton and then Macalester. And for many years, probably 20 years, she's been the director of women in religion program at Harvard Divinity School.

- Oh.

- And she wrote her first book on spiritualist mediums as people who promoted progressive politics. So I've always, I've known her for years and years.

- Yes.

- And what the heck, it's a smaller book, it's part of an Oxford series, but it's about women and I know that she mentions Reimagining, so that's just one of many. Phillip Jankens, who was writing about, gosh, I reviewed the book. It was something about new religions. He said, do you know his work? He's at, I think, Penn State. He's written I don't know, 500,000 books or something, but in this particular book on new religions that came out probably 2001 or 2, I wrote a review of it. And I think he probably has a lot of graduate students doing research and some of the facts were not right and a fact about Reimagining was not right, like, its origins, but he did mention it in this book. So those are two that I can think of, and I think there are quite a few more. I wonder if I.

- There's a book, Her Story, it has a paragraph about Reimagining as well.

- Oh! Okay.

- So yeah, exactly.

- Yeah.

- That's interesting.

- I think those would be

- Yes.

- It would be good to say here is how this first event anyway

- Yes.

- Is being remembered and preserved in memory.

- That's a great idea, yes.

- And that would be kind of fun for me to see.

- Yeah.

- In fact, I 'll look around a little bit.

- That would be wonderful, Mary. Anything you could send me would be great because I have found several places

- Yeah.

- Where it appears and I'm welcoming more. That's right.

- Yeah, yeah. It doesn't turn up just in textbooks.

- Yes.

- So often I think in American religious history textbooks, there will be one chapter on women.

- Yes.

- And that about gender, as if men are not gendered.

- Right?

- I think here's our gender chapter and it's about women and now we're done.

- Right.

- That always bugs me.

- Yes (laughs).

- And I think that persists. Maybe it's not as bad as it used to be, but it persists.

- Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to add?

- I'm never good at this question because I always think no. (women laugh) But I will certainly contact you if I have a sudden inspiration.

- Wonderful. This has been delightful.

- Oh, it was lots of fun for me.

- And I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

- Oh, my goodness. It's wonderful that you're doing this work.

- It's a lot of fun,

- What?

- I can tell you that much.