

today is the oldest
you've ever been
and the youngest
you'll ever be again

*Aging is an extraordinary process
where you become the person
you always should have been.*

— *David Bowie*

**This book is dedicated to the wonderful residents
of Selfhelp Maspeth Senior Center and to their
dedicated director, Mrs. Maria Dixon.**

*Title (cover) is a quotation attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt



Over the past six months I have been coming to the Selfhelp Maspeth Senior Center almost every week, through a SU-CASA artist residency. I always look forward to it and feel very welcomed by the members. From the very beginning I knew that I wanted to do a project that has to do with the members' stories, narratives and experiences, because more than anything, elders love to talk and share stories. The seniors whom I worked with are mostly Maspeth residents but some of them come from other parts of Queens. I have met Irish, Chinese, Italian, Indonesian, Polish and Taiwanese residents, from all walks of life, financial backgrounds, and education. Our meetings took place in the cafeteria around a table or in the English classroom on the second floor. We would talk, do role-playing, write, draw and interact with one another. In the company of the seniors I experienced time differently. It moved very slowly and it was very soothing — the minute I walked through the door, the hassle and the bustle of daily life was left outside and I would find myself, amidst people who are less agitated and more at peace. Here I was experiencing, within myself, greater tranquility and acceptance.

Watching these seniors, some of them close to a hundred years of life, some unable to see, many of them smiling and upbeat, I've learned some valuable lessons. Throughout our conversations and interactions I discovered that the seniors have a unique perspective and possess not only wisdom, but also strength, resilience and compassion. Besides having wise things to say and being great listeners, it seemed they had figured out what's important in life and they were able to boil it down to the essence: relationships, love, well being and gratitude. While many of the seniors commented about the way things used to be and how today's society has a fractured sense of community and family, they seemed to recreate these lost values at the center. Watching them nurturing one another, bringing each other meals, helping with wheel chairs and even doctor visits, I was encouraged to see how supportive they were of each other.

This book serves as a vehicle for some of the voices I heard at the center. As a way to protect everyone's privacy I chose not to include names or individual member's portraits and to respect their wish to remain anonymous.

Deborah Wasserman
SU-CASA 2018 Artist in Residence, Selfhelp Maspeth Senior Center

That was then and this is now . . .

Our childhood was very happy. We thought it was great. We didn't know any better. Our neighborhoods were safe and everybody looked after everyone. All the doors were open so grandmothers and neighbors could watch each other's kids. Whoever was around kept an eye on the children and it wasn't "my child" or "your child." There was more feeling that we are all raising the children together and sharing that responsibility.

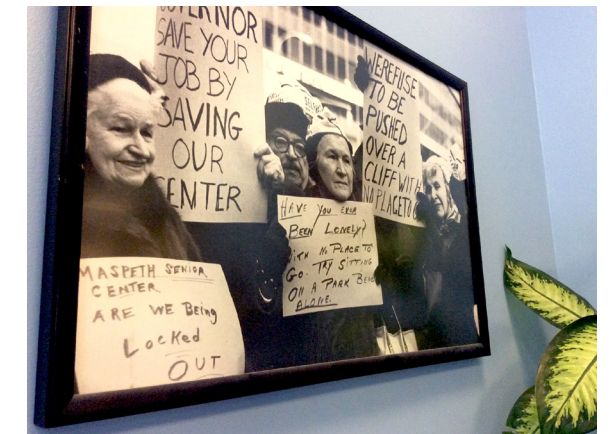
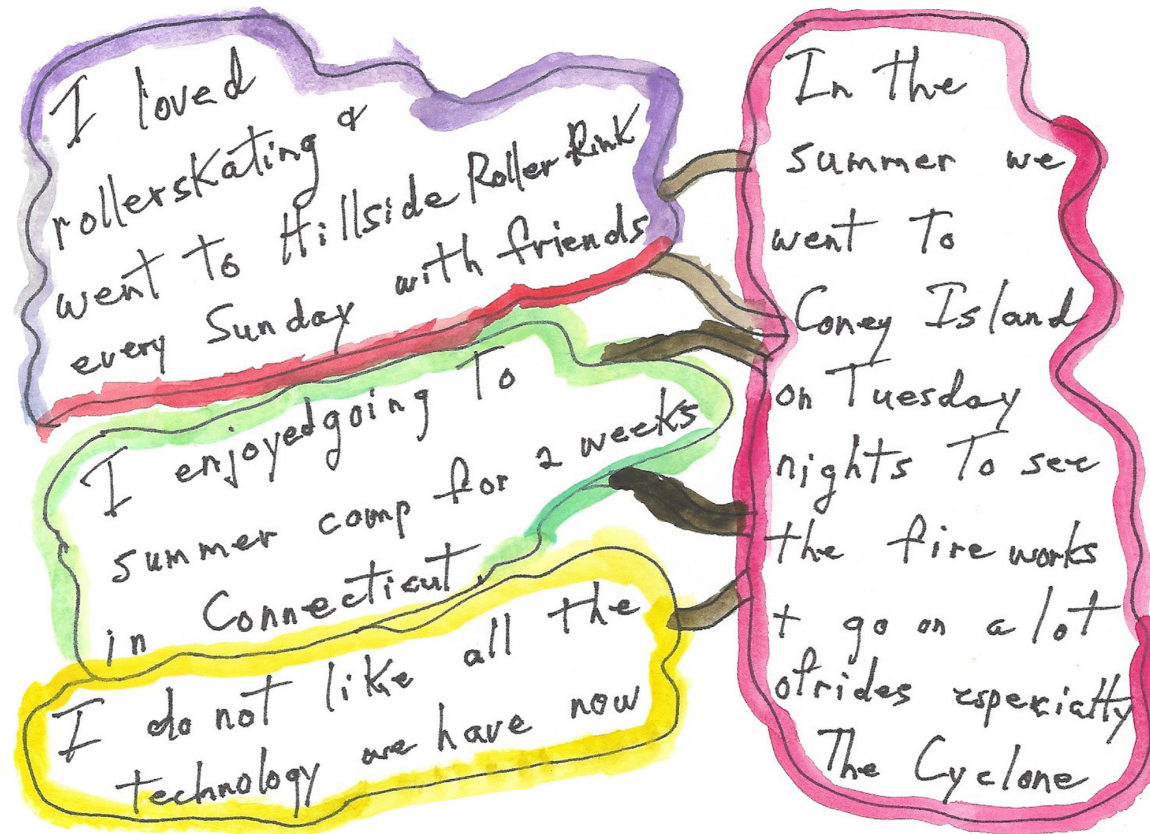
In our childhood there weren't any activities or play dates. We were too poor for private lessons. I went to a Catholic school and we learned everything there: needlework, learning how to cook, how to dance. The school was much more enriching. They taught us instruments, even showed us pictures and images of famous paintings. On Saturdays we used to go to the museums in New York City and see the paintings in real life. Teachers were very active with the kids at school. It wasn't just a job for them.

It was such a different lifestyle. For example, we used to go to Jone's beach together as a big group from our neighborhood in large cars or someone's truck. We brought some food and water. No one said, "I brought this, this is my food." Everything was shared. No one was saying this is mine, this is my family's. The entire block shared their stuff.

There was no TV so we used to spend a lot more time together as a family and a community. We had radio programs. We used to listen to them every night. The Shadow series for example. We used to play games like Monopoly and card games. Families didn't spend their nights in front of the TV. We used to listen to classical radio and Carnegie Hall and the HIT PARADE.

Mothers were always on the go. Every evening they were cleaning, ironing, making lunches. When it was raining they used to hang the laundry in the kitchen. I still remember that, laundry hanging in between pots and pans and the stored food. Quite a scene!

We lived together as a tribe, all of us in one building and all the doors were open. Aunt on the second floor, grandparents on the first floor, sister-in-law next door, everyone together in one building, everyone connected. If we needed anything like flour, eggs, sugar, etc. We would go into a neighboring apartment and take whatever we needed. It was one large communal space, so different from the way people live now, each one to themselves.



I have wonderful memories from my childhood. Many of them stem from the fact that we didn't have much wealth and luxuries. For example, when I was a child, no one had air conditioning so we sat outside every night, doors open, conversing with neighbors on the stoop. The streets were like an extension of our home. We felt very safe. We used to sleep on the fire escape to get away from our hot apartments, parents and children sleeping on the fire escape because it was cooler. Can you imagine?



We had no hot water but rather an old fashioned coal stove. We used to have to heat the water in order to take a shower. That was a long, arduous process. When a child was sick my mom used to put a brick in the oven warm it up and bring it to the child's bed to place it next to their feet as a way to keep them warm throughout the night. Same for a frying pan. My mom used to heat our cast iron pan, wrap it in newspaper and place it on the child's chest to warm it up.

When we were sick there were no pills. We used home remedies for everything, simply utilized whatever was around. If you had ear pain you would put olive oil in your ear. We used rock salt, fish oil, garlic, fennel, castor oil, baking soda, whatever was available. We didn't run to the doctor or the pharmacies with every little thing. The mothers were very resourceful and knew all kinds of tricks. My mom used treat a cold with onion! She would cut onion, put it in the children's socks overnight and that was supposed to take the fever away. No Tylenol, no Advil, none of that.

Growing up as a young man, I received very little from my parents. They were poor and had no resources. Today, my daughter has everything: an apartment, a TV, a car. I gave her everything because I was in a position to do so. In my era it was unheard of. Having our parents give you all the financial support? You were supposed to fend for yourself and build your future with your own hands.

A generation ago there was no such thing children living with the parents past their twenties, especially when it came to women. An unmarried young woman in her thirties living with her parents would have been considered an old maid. Today it's so different. Children live with their parents for much longer and they are in no rush to leave as it's so hard out there.

In my day it was easy to get a job. If you lost a job or didn't like it, you could get a new one quite easily, within a day or two. Today young people have such a hard time finding jobs and keeping them. The job market is so different and it's almost impossible to get a pension. I don't know how these young people will ever be able to have security and retirement as we did.

When I was young it was common to buy land or a house or an apartment. The down payment was reasonable and then you just paid your mortgage for years to come and maybe had a tenant that would pay half of it. In today's reality you can't afford to buy real estate and pay mortgage in large cities like NYC. It's practically impossible unless you have a very high paying job. This is affecting families in major ways. Many many people experience great insecurity these days.



In my childhood exercising was unheard of and quite frankly unnecessary. Our parents used to do so much manual work that was their form of exercise. We didn't have washers and dryers. The mothers had a full day of work from the morning they got up till they went to sleep. Washing and drying laundry using their own hands and hanging it between the buildings. Parents walked us to school, they walked to shopping, they walked to work.

Our immune system was better because we didn't have any processed food. The food was delicious. Much more wholesome. The truck used to come and bring milk and vegetables. It was all fresh and no hormones and preservatives. We didn't start eating any kind of junk food or exercise til the children were much older.

In my time there were no girls' basketball teams, no sports activities for girls, none of that. We were on the streets playing with our neighbors, running around all day. There were eight families in each building and three girls on the block. We never had activities or after school like today's children. We made our own games.



Living then was better as we felt safer. If anyone was hurt people would come and help you. There was more feeling of community. We were connected and doing things together. We could count on one another. This is something you don't have these days...

When I was young growing up in China everything was different. My experience of the environment was opposite. The air was fresh and clean and the fruits and vegetables tasted much better. I felt that nature was really natural! Today with the hot house and everything processed, all vegetables and fruits taste less good. They actually taste like nothing, maybe like plastic.

At this moment technology is very advanced but it's not for me. I prefer the old way, the old fashioned way, as it used to be before technology. My father is a hundred and two and he lives very simply, sleeps a lot, doesn't drink and doesn't complain and we pray every day when we wake up and go to sleep. Simple life, no devices, gratitude. That's how it used to be.

I noticed many children today don't read books and don't want to learn or read more. They are on devices all day and all night. They write in abbreviation and their speech is completely inspired by texting. We had no devices. We had to make things up, entertain ourselves, create games, keep ourselves busy.



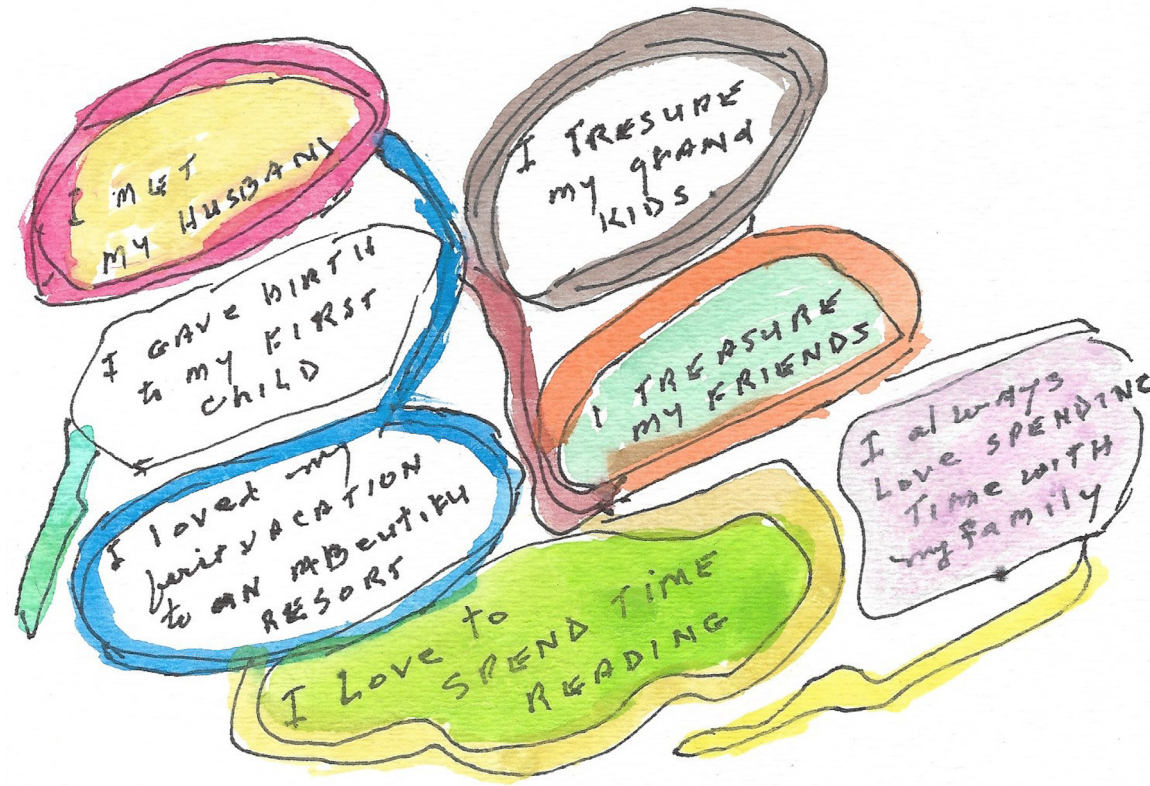
Life / Work

When I went to Singapore I saw all these elder people working as taxi drivers, cleaning jobs, etc. And they are all working and earning very well. There was a bill, a new law introduced in Singapore, changing the retirement age and allowing older people to keep working as long as they wish. I think it's a fantastic law.

I never worked and never wished to work outside of home. My husband told me, "You will never have to work as long as I'm around." And I loved it.

I always worked. Worked as an accountant, then I worked in catering. My husband understood that I needed my own money so he was never opposed to my working. It was a great feeling to have my own money. We went a few times to Vegas and had the best time, spending the money I had earned! I felt equal to my husband.

My wife was very pretty and she loved pampering herself. She was in charge of the money at home. She paid the bills and controlled all the spending. She used to go to expensive department stores and buy herself beautiful, luxurious things. I worked. When I asked her for money, though, for my own expenses or if I wished to buy something for myself, she would never give it to me, just keep it for herself.



Family / Children / Nursing Home

I would not live with my children. I prefer to be independent. We, the seniors, watch after one another. Look at this man. He has two children. He lives alone and they don't show up, they don't help him. I come from time to time and take care of him, take him to the hospital. I know it sounds lonely but I prefer to be independent than to rely on family members that don't show up.

I want to tell you a story about a Taiwanese woman who raised a son as a single mother alone, sent him to study in America and once he graduated and got married, she wished to come and visit but he refused. Instead, he sent her a check for thirty thousand dollars and said, "That's the amount you spent on raising me and my education, that's how I repay you for all your spending and hard work, Mom." She was heartbroken and wanted to kill herself. She was depressed for a long time and felt like she lost her son. At some point she gathered herself together and decided to take the money and travel overseas. After traveling extensively, she sent him a last letter telling him she used up all the money to travel around the world and she learned something from this experience: To release him, let go and never expect anything back from him. It was a hard lesson that goes against her tradition and even against her feelings for her son, but she understood that he already became American. He already changed his values and traditions and adopted the American way of treating parents.

I would never go to a nursing home as I don't believe in the quality of care. Many of the workers in these homes don't really care about the older people. If they have a resident that doesn't get visitors or if they see a person who is lonely they care even less. They may pretend to take care of someone who seems to have a family but overall people at nursing homes are careless and often abusive.

If you want to give money to your children don't give them all you have. You must keep and reserve money for yourself.

People need people. Because I live alone and I'm by myself, I cry every single night. Living by yourself is not healthy. You get yourself depressed, you think sad thoughts and then you start crying.

Living with the daughter-in-law. Well, it's nice, but they make me work a lot. I have a few grand children and the parents go to work and I have to take care of them. It's like I moved in to become a nanny.

According to the Chinese tradition, if I want to get married and have children, you know they will take care of you when you're old. No nursing homes in China. Children who later become adults repay their parents for all their hard work by helping them out when they age.

I will tell you a story about an aging father who ended up moving in with his son. In less than a year the daughter-in-law started abusing him. The son sided with his wife and finally they kicked the dad out of the house and the dad became a beggar in the city.

In my tradition we also believe that when the parents age, it is our duty as their children to support them and help them out. I did the same with my parents. I moved away and worked far away from them so I can earn well and send them a portion of my earnings. That's how I took care of them. In America it's different.

I would have liked to have many children to give them my love. You can always choose, change and create a career but being a mother is forever. What gives me strength these days is knowing that I have a daughter. My daughter is everything to me. She's my life. She comes every day, visits me and takes care of me. We talk. If anything ever happened to her (she's seventy) and she would disappear from my life, I would kill myself. At my age (eighty nine) life is not worth living without her.

I am so grateful to my husband and for everything he has given me and my family. This is why I feel like I have so much! I never told that to anybody but on the day he died I thought that I would kill myself. Glad I didn't. Time heals.

I see my children every day. Seeing them makes me happy. Irish women are very independent and strong they are the matriarchs of the family. Irish women are smart enough to let the husband think he's the boss but basically she's the boss.

Why so many parents in the United States like to have grandparents living with them. It's because in America everyone works and is busy and children cannot take care of their parents. So it's convenient for them to have the parents living with them.

I don't want to live with my grandchildren and their parents in Florida as children today are not respectful. They get very bad influence from television and their friends. They act and speak rudely and are disrespectful of their parents and grandparents. Why should I want that every day? Once a year or twice a year during a visit it's OK, but every day? No way.



Best (and worst) moments of my life

The night we found out my father didn't have cancer was the best moment of my life. The worst day: when they told us, the next day, that they have made a mistake in reporting to us and the cancer was in fact severe and had spread substantially.

When I had my first child it was ecstatic. It was something I never experienced! I thought it was going to be my worst moment, all the pain and the long labor. But once they give you that child to hold everything leaves you and you feel so incredible, so happy and complete!

The worst moment when my husband passed away while he was driving a car. I still think about him, all the time and every day. I never got remarried. Losing him was the biggest tragedy of my life.

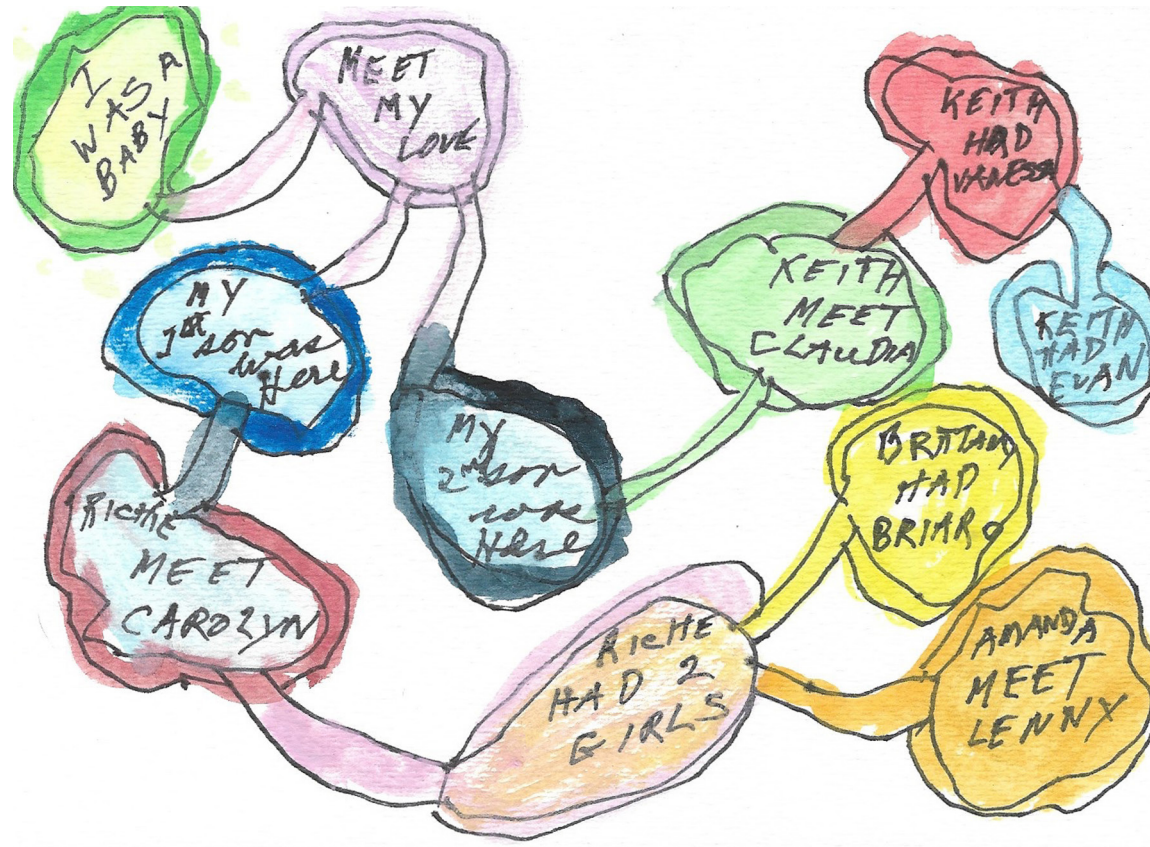
A year ago I had a stroke and I was in the hospital for two months straight, being miserable, fearing death. That was the worst moment of my life. The best moment was on my honeymoon, during my second marriage. We traveled to a few states, including San Francisco, me and my new husband, and I loved it. We had a great time together!

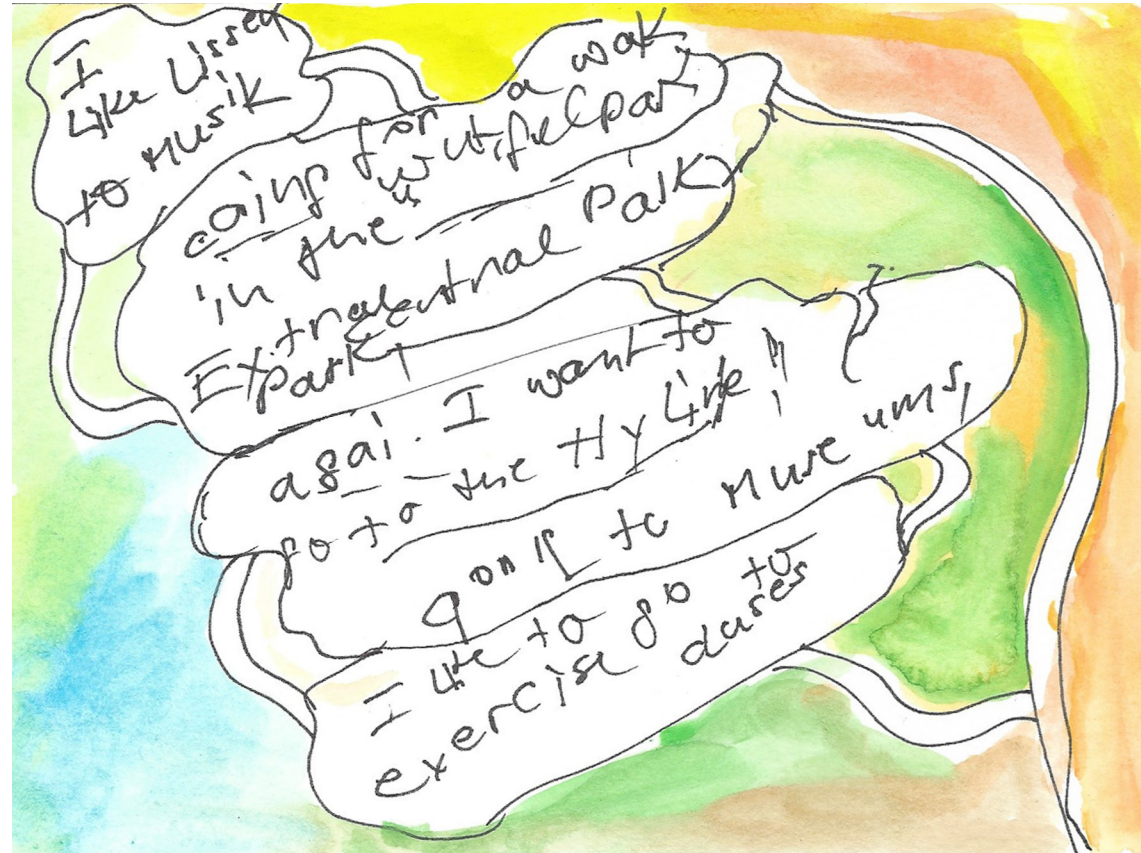
Worst day of my life was when I fell on the street and broke my arm. There was a construction site on the street, I tripped on a stone and fell on the concrete. The pain was unbearable! Best moment of my life was when I received \$90,000 after suing the city for this mishap. It's interesting how the best moment and the worst moment are tied to one another.

Best moment of my life was when my first child was born. I was so excited and thrilled to be a mother! The falling of the Twin Towers, 9/11, was the worst moment of my life. I was home when I heard that my son, who is a fireman, went to the area with his unit. Thank god nothing happened to him, he came out all right. The tragic part was that three of his friends died while trying to offer support and rescue.

When I got married I cried all the time in the church. It was a beautiful day, 1965, in a church in Italy. And I went back to Italy. It was an experience because I didn't know him well. I was a girl in Italy and I married him after 6 months. It was true love. We are still married.

I got married at twenty one. My best moment was my miracle boy. I had a hard time getting pregnant, it wasn't happening, I was thirty two. That was my first child. He was a month late. He was supposed to be born in December and he was born in January. It didn't happen until a month later. They took x-rays and he was in place. They were saying it was going to be a big baby. His head was caught in my pelvis and he was born with a pointy head and jaundice. They didn't show him to me for two days and then I cried in my sleep and a little nurse came there and spoke to the head nurse and she brought in the baby. "This is your son." That was the best moment of my life. My family came to see me and I couldn't show them the baby. Everyone was reassuring me he's alive and well but I didn't see him. The hospital was hiding him because his head was funny. I had an emergency cesarean because they didn't know why he wasn't coming.





On Forgiveness

Do not hold a grudge because once you do, you keep it inside yourself. Of course you get hurt in life but time passes and time heals and your wounds eventually close.

I've been hurt a lot of time and it used to eat me up but this no longer happens. I've learned. Now I take a deep breath and try to move on right away.

Holding a grudge causes harm to you more than to the person you're holding a grudge against. As I age I find out that what used to matter is not important anymore, so why shall I care now? I've taught myself not to care too much because I know that later it won't matter.

It's hard to forgive when you get very hurt and I'm not there yet. I cannot forgive or forget.

I have a sister-in-law who decided to go against the rest of the family. I have not seen her in years but I know that if I did, I would say, "Hello." Have I forgiven her? Well, probably, but I didn't think she has forgiven us. So we are separated this way. No one is forgetting or forgiving.

I can't be angry with anyone for a long time. Of course I get angry with my son, for example, and sometimes want to punch him but it's gone the next day. Forgive them and surrender and pray for them.

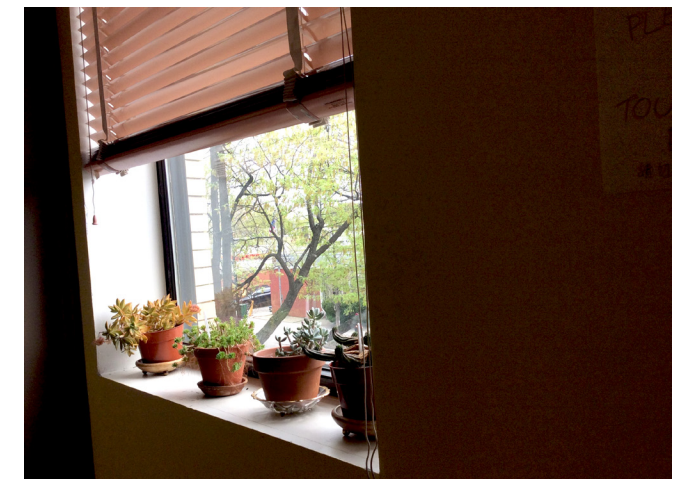
There is a woman who hurt me badly. I don't think about her, I don't see her and I don't want to see her, but it's hard to forget. Sometimes I pray for her too. I don't understand why she did what she did. I find it hard to move to forgiveness. It's a long and hard process.

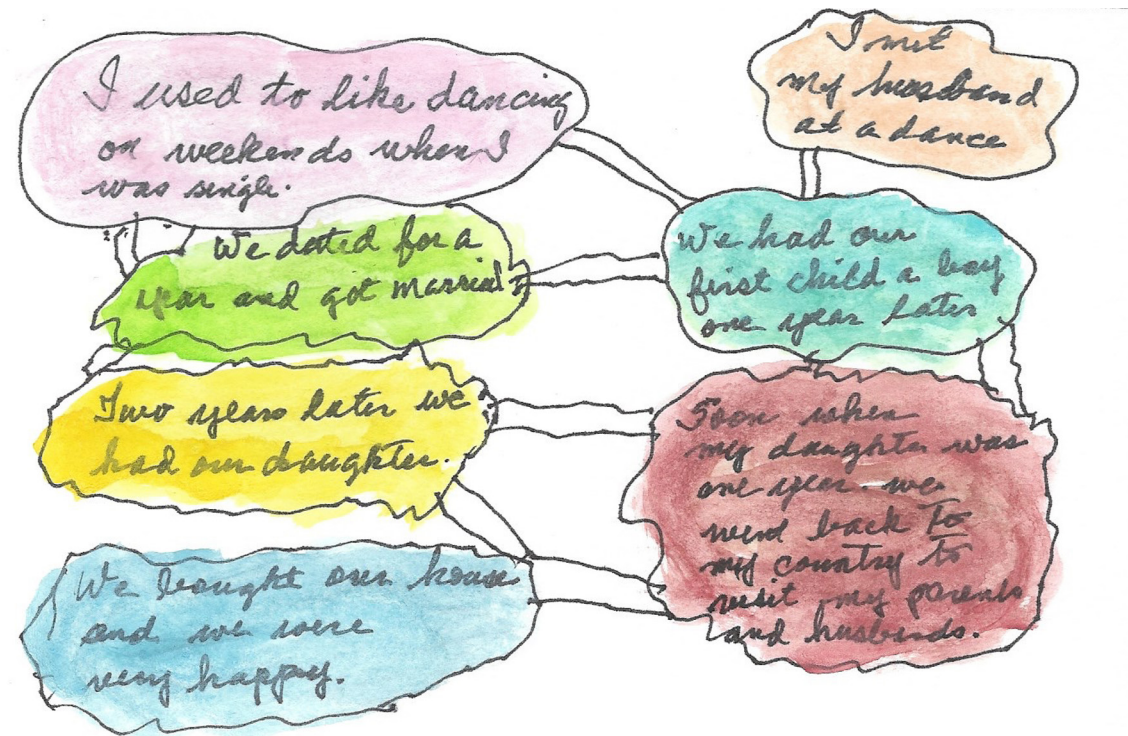
To get into heaven you have to forgive but you may not always forget. How can you forgive if you still remember?

Even if they apologize later it's hard to forgive, often impossible. We need more than that.

When the other person passes away it's hard as you may have not forgiven them but now you can't see them and ask, "Why?"

You have to release things, you have let go, and you cannot hold grudges, especially not against your children.





On Departure

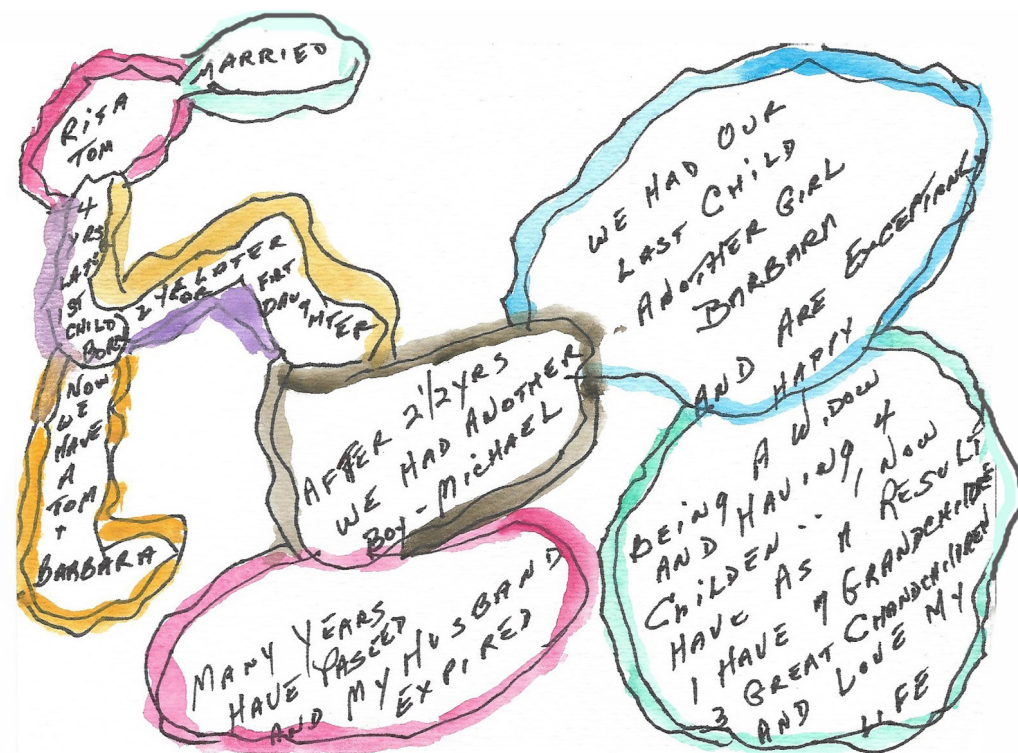
Am I afraid of death? Not at all. I'm peaceful about it and I don't buy into the idea of heaven and hell and the way it's preached as a strategy to squeeze people into a certain behavior. According to my Buddhist tradition, life is suffering and death in many ways is a relief.

I'm going to choose my dying day. If I am not able to take care of myself and walk, and do basic things, I want to end my life by myself. My wife understands that. We talked about it many times and she agreed. She is older than me, she's not feeling well, and she feels the same way. She doesn't want to live helplessly.

I see a lot of people, especially old people crossing the street on a red light. It's almost as if they don't care about preserving their lives, as if they are saying, "Kill me if you want to." That's a form of suicide too.

Have you heard of the Forest of Death in Japan? It's a place that people go to take their own life. There was also a very cruel tradition in Japan that family members who could not support the elders and feed them would take them to a mountain or a forest and leave them there to die.





The one important lesson I've learned and want to share

Live life to the fullest and make the most out of every day. Life is so fleeting.

Treat people around you how you want to be treated.

Eat more chocolate and don't feel guilty about it!

Be grateful for your life. I've been sick so many times, in intensive care, in a coma. Be grateful for being alive and healthy.

Don't take life seriously. Don't sweat the small stuff.

Have a good sense of humor and that carries you through.

Don't count on anyone. Count on yourself and then the rest will come.

You teach other people how to treat you. That's my big take on life.

Stay positive, think positive, help others, do good and feel good about yourself.

Never hold a grudge. Laugh every day, love every day and appreciate life.

If you have something nice don't just store it in the cupboard. Use it!

Live your life to the fullest! I feel like I did it all.

The older you get the more you start to believe things are not that important as they seem on the surface and usually there is a solution to everything especially if you stay calm.



Don't be afraid of anything.



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SU-CASA is a community arts engagement program that places artists and organizations in residence at senior centers across the city. This initiative seeks to connect artists with seniors in senior centers and positively impact the well-being of seniors through arts-based activities. SU-CASA is a collaboration among the New York City Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging and the City's five local arts councils. This program is supported by public funds from the New York City Council in partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Department for the Aging.



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Selfhelp Maspeth Senior Center
69-61 Grand Avenue
Maspeth NY 11378

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I was very happy & very relaxing when I was in the water.

very successful

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